PAST MASTERS 151

Robert E Howard
Zane Grey
F Scott Fitzgerald
E M Delafield
Malcolm Jameson
H de Vere Stracpoole
Peter Cheyney
T F Powys

and more

PAST MASTERS 151

Produced and Edited by Terry Walker from short stories in magazines, newspapers and other sources, and all in the Life + 70 years public domain.

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Gilbert Parker

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Sir Horatio Gilbert Parker, 1862-1932

AS Sherry and I left the theatre in Mexico City one night, we met a blind beggar tapping his way home. Sherry stopped him.

"Good evening," he said over the blind man's shoulder.

"Good evening, señor," was the reply. "You are late."

"Si, señor," and the blind man pushed a hand down in his coat pocket.

"He's got his fist on the rhino," said Sherry to me in English. "He's not quite sure whether we're footpads or not—poor devil."

"How much has he got?" asked I.

"Perhaps four or five dollars. Good business, eh? Got it in big money mostly, too— had it changed at some cafe."

The blind man was nervous, seemed not to understand us. He made as if to move on. Sherry and I, to reassure him, put a few reals into his hand—not without an object, for I asked Sherry to make him talk on. A policeman sauntered near with his large lantern— a superior sort of Dogberry, but very young, as are most of the policemen in Mexico, save the Rurales, that splendid company of highwaymen whom Diaz bought over from being bandits to be the guardians of the peace. This one eyed us meaningly, but Sherry gave him a reassuring nod, and our talk went on, while the blind man was fingering the money we had just given him. Presently Sherry said to him: "I'm Bingham Sherry," adding some other particulars— "and you're all right. I've a friend here who wants to talk with you. Come along; we'll take you home— confound the garlic, what a breath he's got!"

For a moment the blind man seemed to hesitate, then he raised his head quickly, as if looking into Sherry's face; a light came over it, and he said, repeating Sherry's name: "Si, señor; si, si, señor. I know you now. You sit in the right-hand corner of the little back-room at the Cafe Manrique, where you come to drink chocolate. Is it not?"

"That's where I sit," said Sherry. "And now, be gad, I believe I remember you. Are you Becodar?"

"Si, señor."

"Well, I'm damned!" Then, turning tome: "Lots of these fellows look so much alike that I didn't recognise this one. He's a character. Had a queer history. I'll get him to tell it."

We walked on, one on either side, Sherry using his hat to wave away the smell of garlic. Presently he said "Where've you been to-night, Becodar?"

"I have paid my respects to the Maison Dore, to the Cafe de la Concordia, to the Cafe Iturbide, señor."

"And how did paying your respects pay you, Becodar?"

"The noble courtesy of these cafes, and the great consideration of the hidalgos there assembled rendered to me five pesos and a trifle, señor."

"The poor ye have always with you. He that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord. Becodar has large transactions with Providence, *mio amigo*," said Sherry.

The beggar turned his sightless eyes to us, as though he would understand these English words. Sherry, seeing, said: "We were saying, Becodar, that the blessed saints know how to take care of a blind man, lest, having no boot, he stub his toe against a stone."

Off came Becodar's hat. He tapped the wall. "Where am I, señor?" he asked.

Sherry told him. "Ah!" he said, "the church of Saint Joseph is near." Then he crossed himself and seemed to hurry his steps. Presently he stood still. We were beside the church. Against the door, in a niche, was a figure of the Virgin in stone. He got to his knees and prayed fast. And yet as he prayed I saw his hand go to his pocket, and it fumbled and felt the money there.

"Begad, he's counting it all," said Sherry, "and now he's giving thanks for the exact amount, adding his distinguished consideration that the sum is by three reals greater than any day since Lent began. He promises to bring some flowers to-morrow for the shrine, and he also swears to go a pilgrimage to a church of Mary at Guadaloupe, and to be a kind compadre— By Jove, there you are! He's a compadre— a blind compadre!"

A little while afterwards we were in Becodar's house— a low adobe but of two rooms with a red light burning over the door, to guard against the plague.

It had a table hanging like a lid from the wall, a stone for making tortillas, a mortar for grinding red peppers, a crucifix on the wall, a short sword, a huge pistol, a pair of rusty stirrups, and several chairs. The chairs seemed to be systematically placed, and it was quite wonderful to see how the beggar twisted in and out among them without stumbling. I could not understand this, unless it was that he wished to practise moving about deftly, that he might be at least disadvantage in the cafes and public resorts. He never once stirred them, and I was presently surprised to see that they were all fastened to the floor. Sherry seemed as astonished as I. From this strangeness I came to another. Looking up at the walls I saw set in the timber a number of holes cleanly bored. And in one of the last of these holes was a peg. Again my eyes shifted. From a nail in one corner of the room hung a red and white *zarap*e, a bridle, one of those graceless bits which would wrench the mouth of the wildest horse to agony, and a sombrero. Something in these things fascinated me. I got up and examined them, while the blind man was in the other room. Turning them over I saw that the *zarape* was pierced with holes-bullet holes. I saw also that it was stained a deeper red than its own. I turned away, questioning Sherry. He came and looked, but said nothing, lifting a hand in deprecation. As we stood so, Becodar appeared again in the doorway, bearing an olla of pulque and some tortilla sandwiches, made of salad and shreds of meat, flavoured with garlic. He paused, his face turned towards us, with an understanding look. His instinct was remarkable. He did not speak, but came and placed the things he carried near the chairs where we had sat.

Presently I saw some writing on the adobe wall. The look of it showed the hand of youth, its bold carelessness, a boy. Some of it I set down soon afterwards, and it ran in this fashion: "The most good old compadre! But I'd like another real." Again: "One media for a banderilla, two reals for the bull-fight, five centavos for the sweet oranges, and nothing for dulces. I threw a cigar at the toreador. It was no good, but the toreador was a king. Good-night, compadre the blind, who begs." Again: "If I knew where it was I'd take a real. *Carambo*! No, I wouldn't. I'll ask him. I'll give him the new sword-stick that my cousin the Rurales gave me. He doesn't need it now he's not a bandit. I'm stuffed, and my head swims. It's the pulque. *Sabe Dios*!" Again: "Compadre, the most miraculous, that goes tapping your stick along the wall, and jingles the silver in your pocket, whither do you wander? Have you forgotten that I am going to the cock-fight, and want a real? What is a cock-fight without a real? Compadre the brave, who stumbles along and never falls, I am sitting on your doorstep, and I am writing on your wall— if I had as much money as you I'd go to every bull-fight. I'd keep a fighting-cock myself." And once again: "If I was blind I'd have money out of the cafes, but I couldn't see my bulls toss the

horses. I'll be a bandit, and when I'm old, and if Diaz doesn't put me against the wall and prod holes in me like Gonzales, they'll take me in the Rurales, same as Gerado."

"Who is it writes on the wall, Becodar?" asked Sherry of our host, as, on his knees, he poured out pulque for us.

The old man turned musingly, and made motions of writing, a pleased look in his face. "Ah, señor, he who so writes is Bernal— I am his compadre. He has his mother now, but no father, no father." He smiled. "You have never seen so bold and enterprising, never so handsome a boy. He can throw the lasso and use the lariat, and ride— *sabe Dios*, he can ride! His cousin Gerado the Rurales taught him. I do well by him as I may, who have other things to think on. But I do well by him."

"What became of his father, Becodar? Dead?" asked Sherry.

The beggar crossed himself. "Altogether, señor. And such a funeral had he, with the car all draped, and even the mutes with the gold braid on their black. I will tell you how it was. We were great friends, Bernal's father and me, and when the boy was born, I said, I will be compadre to him. ('Godfather, or co-father,' interposed Sherry to me.) I had my sight then, señors, out of the exalted mercy of the Saints. Ah, those were great times, when I had my eyes, and no grey hairs, and could wear my sword, and ride my horses. There was work to do then, with sword and horses. It was revolution here and rebellion there, and bandits everywhere. Ah, well, it is no matter; I was speaking of the boy and his father and myself, the compadre. We were all great friends. But you know the way of men. One day he and I— Santiago, Bernal's father— had been drinking mescal. We quarrelled— I know not why. It is not well nor right for a padre and a compadre to fight— there is trouble in Heaven over that. But there is a way; and we did it as others have done. We took off our sombreros, and put our compadreship on the ground under them. That was all right— it was hid there under the hat. Then we stood up and fought— such a fight— for half an hour. Then he cut me in the thigh— a great gash— and I caught him in the neck the same. We both came to the ground then, the fight was over, and we were, of course, good friends again. I dragged myself over to him as he lay there, and lifted his head and sopped the blood at his neck with my scarf. I did not think that he was hurt so bad. But he said: 'I am gone, my Becodar. I haven't got five minutes in me. Put on your compadreship quick.' I snatched up the sombrero and put it on, and his I tucked under his head. So that we were compadres again. Ah, señor, señor! Soon he drew my cheek down to his and said: 'Adios, compadre: Bernal is thine now. While your eyes see, and your foot travels, let him not want a friend. Adios!' That was the end of him. They had

me in Balim for a year, and then I came out to the boy; and since then for twelve years he has not suffered."

At this point he offered us the pulque and the sandwiches, and I took both, eating and enjoying as well as I could. Sherry groaned, but took the pulque, refusing the sandwiches almost violently.

"How did you lose your sight, Becodar?" asked Sherry presently.

Becodar sat perfectly still for a moment, and then said in a low voice: "I will tell you. I will make the story short. Gentle God, what a thing it was! I was for Gonzales then— a loyal gentleman, he called me— I, a gentleman! But that was his way. I was more of a spy for him. Well, I found out that a revolution was to happen, so I gave the word to Gonzales, and with the soldiers came to Puebla. The leaders were captured in a house, brought out, and without trial were set against a wall. I can remember it so well— so well! The light was streaming from an open door upon the wall. They were brought out, taken across the road and stood against a wall. I was standing a distance away, for at the moment I was sorry, though, to be sure, señor, it was for the cause of the country then, I thought. As I stood there looking, the light that streamed from the doorway fell straight upon a man standing against that wall. It was my brother— Alphonso, my brother. I shrieked and ran forward, but the rifles spat out at the moment, and the five men fell. Alphonso— ah, I thank the Virgin every day! he did not know. His zarape hangs there on the wall, his sombrero, his sword, and his stirrups."

Sherry shifted nervously in his seat. "There's stuff for you, *amigo*," he said to me. "Makes you chilly, doesn't it? Shot his own brother— amounts to same thing, doesn't it? All right, Becodar, we're both sorry, and will pray for his departed spirit; go ahead, Becodar."

The beggar kept pulling at a piece of black ribbon which was tied to the arm of the chair in which he now sat. "Señors, after that I became a revolutionist— that was the only way to make it up to my brother, except by masses— I gave candles for every day in the year. One day they were all in my house here, sitting just where you sit in those chairs. Our leader was Castodilian, the bandit with the long yellow hair. We had a keg of powder which we were going to distribute. All at once Gonzales's soldiers burst in. There was a fight, we were overpowered, and Castodilian dropped his cigar— he had kept it in his mouth all the time— in the powder-keg. It killed most of us. I lost my eyes. Gonzales forgave me, if I would promise to be a revolutionist no more. What was there to do? I took the solemn oath at the grave of my mother; and so— and so, señors."

Sherry had listened with a quizzical intentness, now and again cocking his head at some dramatic bit, and when Becodar paused he suddenly leaned over

and thrust a dollar into the ever-waiting hand. Becodar gave a great sign of pleasure, and fumbled again with the money in his pocket. Then, after a moment, it shifted to the bit of ribbon that hung from the chair: "See, señors," he said. "I tied this ribbon to the chair all those years ago."

My eyes were on the peg and the holes in the wall. Sherry questioned him. "Why do you spike the wall with the little red peg, Becodar?"

"The Little Red Peg, señor? Ah! It is not wonderful you notice that. There are eight bullet-holes in that *zarape*"— he pointed to the wall—"there are eight holes in the wall for the Little Red Peg. Well, of the eight men who fired on my brother, two are left, as you may see. The others are all gone, this way or that." Sherry shrugged a shoulder. "There are two left, eh, Becodar? How will they die, and when?" Becodar was motionless as a stone for a moment. Then he said softly: "I do not know quite how or when. But one drinks much mescal, and the other has a taste for quarrel. He will get in trouble with the Rurales, and then good-bye to him! Four others on furlough got in trouble with the Rurales, and that was the end. They were taken at different times for some fault— by Gerado's company— Gerado, my cousin. Camping at night, they tried to escape. There is the Law of Fire, señors, as you know. If a man thinks his guard sleeps, and makes a run for it, they do not chase— they fire; and if he escapes unhurt, good; he is not troubled. But the Rurales are fine shots!"

"You mean," said Sherry, "that the Rurales— your Gerado, for one— pretended to sleep— to be careless. The fellows made a rush for it and were dropped? Eh, Becodar, of the Little Red Peg?"

Becodar shrugged a shoulder gently. "Ah, señor, who can tell? My Gerado is a sure shot."

"Egad," said Sherry, "who'd have thought it? It looks like a sweet little vendetta, doesn't it? A blind beggar, too, with his Gerado to help the thing along.

" 'With his Gerado!' Sounds like a Gatling, or a bomb, or a diabolical machine, doesn't it? And yet they talk of this country being Americanised! You can't Americanise a country with a real history. Well, Becodar, that's four. What of the other two that left for Kingdom Come?"

Becodar smiled pensively. He seemed to be enduring a kind of joy, or else making light of a kind of sorrow. "Ah, those two! They were camping in a valley; they were escorting a small party of people who had come to look at ruins— Diaz was President then. Well, a party of Aztecs on the other side of the river began firing across, not as if doing or meaning any harm. By-and-bye the shot came rattling through the tent of the two. One got up, and yelled across to them to stop, but a chance bullet brought him down, and then by

some great mistake a lot of bullets came through the tent, and the other soldier was killed. It was all a mistake, of course."

"Yes," cynically said Sherry. "The Aztecs got rattled, and then the bullets rattled. And what was done to the Aztecs?"

"Señor, what could be done? They meant no harm, as you can see."

"Of course, of course; but you put the Little Red Peg down two holes just the same, eh, my Becodar— with your Gerado. I smell a great man in your Gerado, Becodar. Your bandit turned soldier is a notable gentleman— gentlemen all his tribe.... You see," Sherry added to me, "the country was infested with bandits— some big names in this land had bandit for their titles one time or another. Well, along came Diaz, a great man. He said to the bandits: 'How much do you make a year at your trade?' They told him.

" 'Then,' said he, 'I'll give you as much a month and clothe you. You'll furnish your own horses and keep them, and hold the country in order. Put down the banditti, be my boundary-riders, my gentlemen guards, and we will all love you and cherish you.' And 'it was so,' as Scripture says. And this Gerado can serve our good compadre here, and the Little Red Peg in the wall keeps tally."

"What shall you do with Bernal the boy when he grows up?" added Sherry presently.

"There is the question for my mind, señor," he answered. "He would be a toreador— already has he served the matador in the ring, though I did not know it, foolish boy! But I would have him in the Rurales." Here he fetched out and handed us a bottle of mescal. Sherry lifted his glass.

"To the day when the Little Red Peg goes no farther!" he said. We drank.

"To the blind compadre and the boy!" I added, and we drank again.

A moment afterwards in the silent street I looked back. The door was shut, and the wee scarlet light was burning over it. I fell to thinking of the Little Red Peg in the wall.

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2: Jack's as Good as His Master

Sumner Locke

1881-1917

Weekly Times (Melbourne) 4 Dec 1915

Sumner Locke

FOUR TIMES the new dam had been held up for want of cement, and Marlow had, with insistent doggedness, approached John Varne, the boss, and let fly a few red-hot hints about the kind of year they might expect if a big drought set upon the land and there was a shortage of water.

As Marlow was only the overseer, and as John Varne was a man who carried about with him nine fine, fat opinions as to his management of the station, the first resentment showed up when Marlow said pretty hotly that he would not take his money for the job, and neither would the men, unless there was a job to work on. No cement means no work, and, as a special regiment of good laborers had been engaged to carry on the building of a huge dam in the first five-mile radius of tne home paddocks, it wasn't an easy job to sit by hour after hour, sometimes in the rain, just waiting for Providence or John Varne to attend to things.

The boss snowed a line of even teeth, that were cleaned night and morning and after meals, whether there was a snortage of water or not, and, with some special expressions of contempt for the apparent hurry of the overseer, stepped into the diningroom of the nouse to join his people. What he said about that cement was nothing very important, but what he said about Marlow following him about like a dog, when his meal was already on the table, was a joke well upholstered with a side line in a cheap philosophy which Varne turned on specially for the benefit of two ladies visiting his sister and waiting in the room.

Marlow had broken away in a fury of impatience, and somebody in a lounge chair, yawning beautifully in the clear country air, asked the meaning of the discussion.

"These fellows," said Varne, easily, again showing his piano-key teeth in a kind of trial smile, "get cold feet about things the very minute I take an hour off. Anyone would think that they were building a town hall to hold their socialistic meetings in, instead of a dam. Marlow has been after me every time I leave my room, and I shall be forced to run a line of barbed wire round my house soon, to avoid the contact with his temper."

The young lady lounging with her feet up laughed crisply.

"Has he got a temper? He looks like a good-natured bear to me. You know the sort— never roused unless there is a reason."

"I might admit the reason," said Varne taking his place after the ladies had sat down, "only it does not do in my position, with several hundred men under me to let one of them think he knows best The only successful way to run a concern with laborers, is to absolutely crush any idea that Jack is as good as his master and by well, in this country one has to do that or go under. My experience has taught me that when the men want a thing and make a complaint every ten minutes about not getting it the only thing is— to keep them waiting." He laughed and carved a huge round of beef, the ladies for the most part admiring him.

But the little girl who thought the overseer perhaps worth fighting for, still kept up the thing.

"But, isn't it something about cement and the building of the dam? We were over looking at it last week, and someone said they would just about finish it by the Judgment Day."

Varne smiled into her face.

"And a few of them would like to spin it out till then, no doubt. A lazy lot of rotters mostly that stamp of man is. You can't hurry them, and all the time they want to hustle me. I will teach Marlow a lesson. He is too self-confident by far. It's only the importance of his position that makes him ferret round and worry over that cement."

As a matter of fact John Varne had only just taken up the run a short time. He had come from the old country with a supply of cash, bought extensively, laid out a neat homestead with acetylene gas plant, and every convenience, and asked his friends up every month or so to applaud his doings. The matter of the dam was only one of the things that might have been a point in the direction of failure. Varne had been told that in that part of the country you only had to drop the sheep down like grass seed and they would sprout wool as thick and long as that on an island nigger's scalp, but he had not taken Into consideration that there might be birds of prey about waiting to devour the seed. In this instance there were more than birds about— there were

congested opinions and arguments such as might lead to the downfall of things indirectly in a very short time.

It was true that Varne had sent a man down to telephone through for some hundred bags more of cement, but the man had been a kind of non-commissioned chap on the job, and had stayed at the refreshment half-way shanty; and cement was not in his mind at all.

Marlow began to haunt the house at last when two more days had gone, and the man had been sitting idly smoking about the dam, and the carting of earth and sediments had been all finished. He didn't care a cent about whether the dam was finished now or not, but he hated to be beaten by John Varne. He meant to get that cement up in another day or so, even if he had to drag Varne by the ears to the town and make him hoist it on his back. With such a mood on him the overseer stamped right into the diningroom just as the visitors had finished late dinner one night. The ladies were specially dressed in low-cut sleeveless bodices; and for a minute he seemed to be suffocating, as if he had stepped into a church without washing his hands.

The little girl, who had upheld the work of the dam earlier in the week, began to show a lively interest. She sat forward with her bright eyes well set on Mariow, who was powerfully big and took up such a lot of the space between the table and the door.

John Varne was pleasantly happy. He had opened up some wine to celebrate something he had had on his mind for a period of the ladies' visit. That something began and ended with the little girl so enthusiastically watching things.

Varne saw the overseer stare right at his guest, and then noticed him turn livid. The girl had deliberately smiled, and he had taken it as a laugh against him. Varne, however, was furious at the entrance.

"There is a tradesmen's entrance at the back," he said, with some force, really absurd. "I object to talking business in presence of my guests. Kindly wait outside till I have finished my dinner."

But the blood of a thousand years dominated this injustice, and Marlow calmly removed a chair near, him and sat down.

"About that cement," he began. "You will get that cement when I am ready, not before."

"Not before... then every man leaves tonight... They are sick of fooling and there are other jobs along the line."

Varne turned in his chair and crossed his black cloth legs. He smiled that easy smile to assure his guests that he would see this thing through in his own optimistic fashion. He would not admit the importance of the overseer.

"Other jobs," he said. "If the men leave tonight on your authority, they leave without half their pay."

"I think not," said Marlow, and his eyes burned at the sudden clasping of the small hands that the girl was trying to keep still. She had never seen such magnificent strength of purpose as this working man carried in his face and she oould scarcely sit silent while the affair took different turns.

"I think not— besides, pay doesn't matter when it comes to a crisis like this. There has been a kind of unsettled feeling among most of them for weeks, but your contract held 'em like a dog holds a bone." His eyes turned like electric globes on the boss. "Yes, a kind of unsettled feeling to go down and sign on for the front."

Very carefully Varne shifted his legs. He put his polished boots down on the floor with scarce a sound.

"Of course, I should never dream of stopping any of the men going to the fight if they want to," he said; "but— it isn't time yet. Britain has not called for more men and when that time comes I trust the dam will be through."

Marlow rose, laughing.

"Your dam won't be through unless you go down tonight, or send me, and see that the cement is sent up first chance. We've made a working committee and an executive out there in the huts, and we are determined. You get that cement through by the day after tomorrow, Mr Varne, or the pick of us men goes to the town to sign on for the front. Maybe you did not notice in reading your weekly papers that the names of recruits were being as much sought after as the lambs mustered after a good season?"

To Varne this was a direct insult, and he jumped to his feet. With almost shaking hands he gripped the table, and the little girl watching gripped her teeth too, and breathed shortly and quickly.

"I know this— that, for months past you have been trying to teach me that Jack is as good as his master. Now I will show you. No man shall leave his job or break his contract unless I give him leave. You can go if you want to now— we don't want riots and labor agitators on my run."

Marlow swept his hand through his hair.

"I intend to go, and to take the pick of the men with me. You can sue for your contract, but you will find it does not hold water, or ink when the matter of the delay and the cement business comes to light. As for Jack being as good as his master—well, I never thought about it, but as you've mentioned the subject I will keep it in memory. There might he occasion to prove that sometimes he is; if not, perhaps, better."

He strode rapidly away, and that night he and a small army of dam builders went down to the town to sign on for the front.

THE *QUEEN ELIZABETH* was vomiting great bursts of booming shell intermittently from the rear as three battalions of men marched up the ridge to the left, right and centre from the beach. As they gained the heights of the peninsula they met In spreading lines and advanced like a great crawling body, swarming the ridge in preparation for a magnificent dash over and down the descent.

Immediately the first line of swinging brown men tipped the skyline edge of the range a perfect curtain of perpetual shrapnel seemed to drop between them and the opposite hill. The line went down man after man almost as if the wind had blown them over, and the second and third quick on their heels, struck the blasting rain of shot as if the storm of stinging lead was working up to a furious deluge of death blows.

The other lines, rushing behind, surged over the ridge and over the bodies of their brothers, helter skelter, almost individually, scarce waiting an order to "charge" or retreat, and scurrying away down the slope to gain the advantage point of the hidden devils the other side. While the men beat on in the face of the storming death, some dropping in their companions' tracks and some weirdly laughing with a kind of unsuppressed hysteria born of absolute grit and determination to get across and defy the enemy, the booming of the big war ship way out thundered dully over the whole country, punctuated right through with the insistent battering of field guns and the heavier artillery In between.

The lines of brown men no longer advanced methodically, but stormed down the slope like scurrying rabbits hither and thither, widening and diverging, stumbling, jumping and hurling forcefully on in the fierce draught of the pelting bullets and slashing shrapnel. Down into the valley and up the side of the second hill they went with the impetus that Is born of strength of iron minds and the force of sheer determination....Up ...up. . . up.... with, hearts thumping and beating out each breath with as much fierceness as the great war vessel was throwing out shells up.... with the position ahead of them seeming to retreat like a mirage and the distance widening back so that it almost appeared as if that chancing body of reckless Australians would never do it in the time. From the point of the first ridge to the second, down those slopes, in between and on the face of the steep wall opposite, the earth was dotted by those that had fallen, some half sitting up with disabled limbs, others huddled down like beaten dogs, crouched together or apart waiting the stretchers and the Red Cross saviours that might or might not be in time to relieve them.

The last inquisitive gleam of a blood red sunset caught the advancing men nearly at the top of the second ridge and a darting sudden zigzag of flashing light cut over everything as the fixed bayonets threw back the reflected sunset.

The curtain of shot was lifted gradually, and many men lay on the stage of life and death, inanimate to the applause of deafening shouting fellow comrades who were taking the last scene through. The raining, beating rifle fire began to lessen, dropping off gradually as that army of brown men ripped through the scrub and fought tooth and nail and bayonet and stock for the last shred of honor and prestige. Like the turning off a streaming tap of bullets, the battle began to grow less, with just an occasional rip-zipp of a sniper hidden somewhere, and taking a last chance, and the boom-plunk of the great shells lobbing right away inland as the *Queen Elizabeth* kept on her dominating note of warning.

From the huddled mass of inanimate men one dilapidated khaki figure struggled to sit up and take a last breath with his face set towards a little sloop of a moon just tipping the blood-stained ridge with a silver trickle. He seemed to be the only living breathing entity in that small heap, and he knew that he, too, was setting his feet into the long, long way that his comrades had taken. But out of the blank darkness he had been plunged into, something of a dreadful loneliness began to ache through him. something fiercer than the pain of his sightlessness. He retained his hold on the ground long enough to call out weakly, and his voice just reached across the others... sleeping.

"Is— there anyone near me?"

Private Marlow, wounded in the head, heard the voice, and recognised it, though he could not crawl towards where the lonely man crouched.

He answered as well as he could.

"Yes— I seem to know your voice. "Who is it?"

"Varne, John Varne— fourteenth battalion. I came out with the reinforcements only a day or so ago and— I'm blind already. Could you come up a bit? I don't— like— going— out— alone."

Private Marlow tried to move towards the man who had once been his boss on the Queensland run but fell back Into his former position.

"No good," he said, "try and crawl to where you hear me speaking."

The blind man managed to do this in stages, and by sheer persuasion of the voice of the overseer.

When he touched the hand outstretched to receive him, he clung like a child

"Who is it?"

"Marlow— you remember."

It was almost as if the overseer was trying to laugh, though he held the blind man in his arms soothingly.

"We are— both— going out." Marlow spoke again.

"Yes— and I am not quite sure— about it, Marlow."

The overseer gripped the blind man's hand firmer.

"It's all right, Varne... we are going together... you know list of honor, and... all that kind of thing... you've nothing to fear... you've done your best... Then," he added, faintly... we... both stand... the same... chance... up there."

The blind man just repeated this clinging to his comrade.

"Same chance up there. Do you— really think so?"

He coughed a little, rather uneasily, "I fancy there is something up against me— something big. I got wiped out so quickly... besides...."

Marlow struggled to comfort his comrade.

"Don't you fret, Varne. A man goes out of this thing much the same as he comes into it, you know... with the best in him uppermost... hold on to me and perhaps we may slip out together."

LATER, when the stretcher-bearers gathered in the brave men who had sacrificed their lives so earnestly, so readily, one of the division remarked, with, some fervor: "You remember how things were out in Q. ... the old argument about Jack being as good as his master. And now here they are brothers in arms... one common grave..."

For Varne and Marlow had started out on the one road hand in hand as men who had gone to reap their reward, according to their deeds. And, the same grave in Galllpoli, with its headpiece of wood, told the tale and settled that old argument for good.

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3: A Convict's Story

Anonymous

Armidale Express, 21 Aug 1888

I AM now thirty-five years of age. I am not going to tell you my real name, nor where I was born, because my family and connections are very respectable people, and I don't care to bring public disgrace upon them.

I am best known to the detectives, police, and my pals as " Planter Jim," and so as "Planter Jim" I wish to figure in what I am about to relate.

It is not necessary for the purpose of my narration that I should name the exact locality where my last adventures took place. If you know, you don't need to be told; if you don't know, the information would do you no good; and, therefore, it will be sufficient for me to say that it was in an inland town in a very thriving part of the country.

In travelling about the country, on a prospecting tour, I came to the place in question, and found, among other things, that it contained a flourishing bank, standing on a small plot of ground, entirely disconnected with any other structure, and enclosed on three sides with an iron railing.

Some casual remarks and enquiries, judiciously made, revealed the fact that it contained a burglar-proof vault, and consequently had immense treasures stored within its stronghold.

In fact, it was regarded as a place so secure in every way against intruders as not even to need the services of a night watchman, and this belief in its impregnability pleased me very much, because of the increased safety we should have in "working the plant"

"Well," I said to myself, "I am going to find my way into that vault, and if I succeed in getting off clear I shall have money enough to sport with the best for a good long time."

I may as well tell you here, even at the risk of being thought egotistical, that when I was out and abroad I always dressed in the most fashionable style, looked, talked, and acted like a gentleman, and never failed to find standing in the best society, especially at all the watering places and summer resorts which I frequented.

The first thing, after, having settled in my mind that that treasure vault was to be penetrated, was to devise the means to accomplish this purpose.

In the first place, it was absolutely necessary that we should work under cover— and under cover for a long time— for it was no slight undertaking to penetrate a hard, cemented stone wall of several feet in thickness, with immense castings of iron and steel to be cut out and removed i before we

could reach the treasure; and all this to be done by men unseen and unknown in the community, in the dead hours of the night, whilst honest citizens were peacefully resting from the toils of the day.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, accord ing to the light in which the matter is viewed, the nearest building to the bank was a grocer's shop kept by man who had not been over prosperous in his business, and who was willing to sell out the same at a reasonable figure.

In the course of the next two weeks the establishment I speak of changed owners, and Moses Glapham, a quiet, honest, thrifty-looking individual, had put out his sign, and become a staid, sober, church-going citizen of the thriving town, ever ready and anxious to sell any thing.

You may possibly think that a shop, open all tbe week days, to all kinds of customers from early in the morning till 9 or 10 at night, was not exactly the place for working burglars to visit and remain in for weeks and months together; but it was just because nobody, not even the lynx-eyed police, had the least suspicion of anything of the kind being covered in there, that this particular establishment became one of the most perfect " blinds" we could have chosen.

Where so many came and went, a stranger, even if seen, was not liable to undue notice and set gossips whispering of something unduly strange.

Great care was taken that strangers should not be seen there.

Our boys, disguised as farmers, me chanics, or common labourers, my worthy self among the number, dropped in singly at different times, and were then cared for inside, and kept concealed in apart ments arranged specially for our use.

All our tools were brought to the place in boxes of merchandise, and, therefore, attracted no suspicious notice.

The distance from our starting point, the cellar of our shop, to the outside of the bank, was only a little over a hundred feet; but to tunnel this out in the night, entirely underground, arch it and wall it, and make it secure— to smuggle in the things we needed, and get rid of the dirt and rubbish we did not want— was a slow and discouraging undertaking, which re quired a good deal of nerve and pluck, and the incentive of a fortune to be reached in the end, to keep our fellows down to the laborious work.

And then, when this was all done, after the nicest engineering calculations and months of toil, we were only fairly ready to begin the task of piercing a vault which had been constructed with all the solidity, care, and skill of the best mechanism which money could procure.

In fact, there were times when even I, the proprietor of the whole affair, felt like abandoning the awful task; and better for me, perhaps, if I had.

But our money was running short, and where should we get a fresh supply if not here? And what could men like us do in such a world as this without money? And so we still continued to work on, for weeks and months, and gradually bored our way through solid stone and iron plates, till we .came to the last barrier, a casing of the hardest steel, upon which our best tools would make no impression whatever.

Here, then, we were, within a few inches of our coveted prize, and yet seemingly as far away from it as ever.

What was to be done now?

In all our experience we had never before found anything so fearfally resisting! as this plate of steel.

After various experiments and many consultations, it was suggested that we should try the softening process of heat, and a blow pipe was used to direct aud concentrate the most powerful heat upon a given point. After being kept up for a long time, we | found we could make some slight impression with our best tools— a mere scarifying, so to speak— and, though this was tediously slow, we felt encouraged to proceed.

"Continual dropping will wear away a stone" is a maxim as old as the hills; constant heating, chafing, grinding, and robbing gradually thinned a portion of the plate, till at last we began to feel that we were masters of tbe situation.

It was finally announced that the plate had reached that condition when a heavy blow with a heavy hammer would burst it through, and then we paused iu our work to prepare for making good our escape as soon as the great design should be effected.

Our shopkeeper, the only party known in the place, and who would, in consequence, be directly exposed, was forth with sent off to France, to be entirely out of the reach— and an innocent clerk, who was a resident of the town, was left in charge of the establishment— it being out that the owner had gone to London to purchase new goods.

Next we had a covered waggon arranged for carrying off the specie to a certain wood, where it was to be buried until such a time as it might be removed with safety; and good horses were to be stationed near, so that each could mount and take what course he pleased— our rendezvous to be a certain house in the city of London.

These outside matters having been arranged for us by outside partners, whom j we had kept advised of our progress, and there being danger in delay, we fixed upon the following Saturday night for the grand consummation of our hopes, thus leaving Sunday to intervene between the time of robbery and discovery, and over thirty hours in which to make good our flight.

Well, the long-looked-for night came at last— a night favourable to our purpose, being dark and stormy— and though we were men used to controlling our nerves, they were now strung up to that degree of excitement as we stood before the thin, frail barrier which only divided us from a fortune, that we shuddered, blanched, and shook like so many frightened cul prits.

At length the hammer was raised, the signal was given, the blow was struck, and crash through the thin plate of steel the iron was sent, crumbling the cemented layer on.the other side of it, and permit ting our bull's-eye light to flash through into the treasure vault.

So excited were we that it was difficult for anyone to restrain the shout that involuntarily pressed our lips for utterance.

In a few minutes a space was made large enough for each of us to crawl through, and then we entered our haven of treasure, and found that in gold, silver, deposited gems, bank notes, and negotiable bonds we were richer by fully £10,000.

I ought to have been contented with this, and might have got off free, as my companions did; but what will a greedy man do?

There was one large safe which we could only open with powder, and, being an ex pert at that business, I determined, against the advice of my companions, to see the inside of it.

I accordingly prepared for the work, while they were busy in removing the treasure already secured.

It chanced that I was alone in the vault when I set off the fuse, expecting only a concussion; but the report was louder than I anticipated, and the effect was terrible.

The safe door was blown open, and I was left unharmed ; but the shock in some way caused a portion of the tunnel to fall in, and I was secured a prisoner in a living tomb.

The report of the explosion was heard by a watchman in the vicinity, who immediately discovered the caving in of the earth in the street, and gave an alarm which brought crowds of people about the bank.

The rest is soon told.

My companions succeeded in escaping with their booty, but before morning I was arrested in the bank vault.

I am now here, and not until ten years hence, if I live, shall I once more be at liberty.

———————————

4: Derelict

Anonymous

Braidwood Review 22 Aug-1 Sep 1922

This newspaper ran many anonymous short serials clearly purchased from a syndicate. There are a great many stories on record with this title.

A MAN, reeling very slightly, giving rather the effect of graceful swagger, passed across the deck, and the girl, standing above, regarding the steerage passengers with that courteous curiosity bestowed by the decently bred upon strange ways and beings, thought idly: 'What a magnificent animal!'

As if she had spoken and the man heard the words, he stopped, wheeled about, and, rocking a little on his slender feet in their broken shoes, said, gazing directly up at the girl:

'Well, fair lady, and what do you think of the menagerie?'

The girl flushed carnation pink from white throat to brow, and her cousin, who had been talking to a friend and who had turned back to her at the same instant, said clearly:

'What's up, Camilla?'

His keen young eyes roved over the steerage, lighted, of course, on the half-drunken derelict with the magnificent build and insolent, smiling eyes. His face darkened as the blood ran up it under the skin.

'These beggars need a lesson,' he muttered, scowling at the derelict and had disappeared before Camilla could stop him. The derelict still smiled, still waited his answer. Camilla remained perforce, furious at Rupert Keene's lack of control, at the mere idea of any contretemps between him and this man, who, if he seemed a 'beggar who needed a lesson,' yet conveyed somehow definitely an impression of breeding.

Keene appeared, his tall, white-clad figure very conspicuous among the motley crowd, who stared at him and discussed him in a dozen languages. Camilla felt her face burn again; she drew in her breath sharply and called, 'Rupert!'

He nodded to her confidently as he touched the big man on the arm.

Camilla saw him speak, watched his moving lips. A second later she saw him caught up and flung into the sea.

'Damn you!' she heard the big man say, 'you puppy!'

The engines seemed to stop even as the cry, 'Man overboard!' rang out, and as Camilla reached the side she saw a shabby, splendid form flash down in a long dive. It was the derelict, atoning.

Rupert had vanished. A sickening hush had descended on the liner. It was broken by a vast sigh of relief as a glint of white showed for a second on the water. The big man swam towards it with lightning speed.

'Gad, what a swimmer!' a voice said near Camilla. But Rupert had vanished again, and then the derelict's yellow head vanished, too. The sea was clear.

'He's dived for him,' someone murmured.

The hush fell again, to be broken this time by cheer on cheer as the derelict reappeared, holding Rupert. The boat was up to them in a moment; they were aboard in a flash, it seemed. The derelict said composedly, a little breathlessly, as he wrung the water from his shirt-sleeves:

'He's breathing, but it's a near thing. I chucked him in!' and disappeared.

Camilla and Rupert's mother were kneeling beside him; he opened weary eyes after a time.

'He'll do,' said the doctor with satisfaction. 'Carry him down.'

He did 'do.' He was young and fit, and he was up by the evening, a little shaky, rather white, and intensely, bitterly angry.

'By God, I'll teach that bounder!' he kept saying excitedly. 'The captain, is punishing him.'

Mrs. Keene said gently, 'very strictly, I hear. But there is some excuse, Rupert darling, for he was drunk, it seems. He is generally, I hear. So sad! And they say he is English and decently born. Imagine! And so young, too, and really quite nice looking. His name is Warrender. I asked.'

'Whatever for?' young Rupert jerked out irritably.

'Well, dearest, he did in a way save your life,' his mother said nervously.

'After trying to take it,' Rupert said roughly; then added: 'I went to speak to the brute because he was looking at Camilla.'

His eyes sought her face now, anxiously, eagerly, but Camilla was staring out of the port-hole abstractedly. She left the cabin a moment later, and Rupert sighed.

On the cool deck, under a sky which looked like a pool of stars, she lay back in a long chair and thought. The image of the derelict (sober now probably) would not leave her; she kept on seeing, first, that insolent and yet attractive smile, hearing that leisurely voice, and then seeing the derelict's tall figure, lean and lithe, his face still wearing a careless smile, as he had stood on the deck and declared that he had 'chucked' the man overboard himself whose life he had risked his own to rescue.

Now he was in irons, and, of course, judged by the standards of her people, the world she lived in and lived by, it was quite fitting he should be. And he was a drunkard, too, and he had been insolent to her.

She rose and paced up and down, a shadowy, slender figure in white. Above the steerage deck she halted. It was very late. There was peace there, for a wonder. And out of the peace a voice rose easily, splendidly, the voice of the derelict, singing a love song from ' the 'Indian Love Lyrics.'

Camilla stood very still, and her I heart beat to the words. The song ended, there was a pause, and then the voice, the note of whimsicality which had been there in the sunlit morning still in it, said:

'Hell! how hot it is!' and, after another pause: 'Gad! for a smoke!'

Camilla had a sense of humor, and the impulse of a woman who has been stirred. She ceased to analyse her actions or question them; instead she ran lightly down into the steerage, and with difficulty discovered Warrender's prison cabin. She stood beside the port-hole and called his name. He came to the port-hole at once.

'Here are some cigarettes,' she said stiffly, feeling unutterably self-conscious and suddenly foolish. A lone hand was extended.

'I say, this is good of you!' Warrender exclaimed. 'Did you hear my impious complainings?'

Camilla could see his face dimly, but she knew very distinctly that he smiled, for in the darkness his teeth flashed very whitely.

'Where were you?' Warrender ran on. He lit a cigarette, and the smell of it, keen and poignant, blew towards her.

'You must have been near or you couldn't have heard. And I am not sure that this part of the boat is at all a fitting place for you. If your fire-eating young cousin discovers you here he may do something really drastic. How is he now, by the way, Miss Weston?'

'He is better, thanks,' Camilla said desperately, aware that she should have snubbed this man after his reference to Rupert. She turned to leave.

'Oh, I say, don't go!' Warrender pleaded in an attractive voice. 'Stay out a little while,' like the daffodils in Herrick's poem, now you have come! It's the only one nice thing, you coming, the only nice thing that has happened on this beastly voyage.'

To make conversation, Camilla asked: 'Where are you going?'

'That's what I'm wondering,' he replied lightly. 'I've had to shunt it because of— er— a divergence of opinion between myself and my people, and I want to find some sort of work, something to do with horses. It's all I can do. I understand them.' He hesitated, then added: 'You're the lady of the famous Texas ranch, aren't you? I wonder could you give me a job?'

And Camilla, the color racing up through her smooth white throat to her face, said:

'You can travel direct to El Toleda from New York and see the overseer there, Mr. Roberts. Tell him I ask him to give you work. You saved my cousin's life. I am glad to be able to help you.'

She reached the stairway breathlessly. She had not even waited for Warrender's expression of thanks.

What had she done? She felt furious with herself, and yet, in a way, she was glad she had acted so. After all the man had saved Rupert, and, anyway, she might never see him again. The ranch where she reigned alone with a staid duenna was so large that she herself scarcely knew certain parts of it

And the Keenes need never know. Besides, sheer humanity demanded that a helping hand be held out to the fallen and unfortunate, and Mrs. Keene had stated that Warrender was a hopeless drunkard. It was a degrading vice, and an unforgivable one to a fastidious woman.

Camilla did not go near the steerage again during the ships run; indeed, they berthed in New York Harbor a day later, and she was able to then laugh at her quixotic generosity of the night before. She forgot Warrender in the rush and excitement of settling down in the Keenes' New York home, only to have him recalled to her vividly by the evening papers, which, published a glowing account of Rupert's rescue, and described Warrender as 'a blonde giant of magnificent physique and looks, and a cynical expression.'

'Damn the fellow!' Rupert snorted. Camilla glanced at his flushed, angry face, thought of her promise to Warrender, and decided she would remain in New York until such time as Rupert should have taken up his life again there definitely, and was unlikely to feel suddenly that a trip to El Toleda would amuse him. Even now she could not quite determine why she had told Warrender be could apply to Roberts, her chief overseer, for work. He had been so handsome.

She felt furious again with herself as that reason entered her mind. Was she, after four seasons packed with those experiences only possible to an heiress and beautiful woman, was she so callow, so impressionable still, that the way a man's head was put on his shoulders, a certain attractiveness of voice and smile, should sway her so easily?

She resolutely dismissed all thoughts of Warrender, and New York distractions helped her to do so.

IT WAS NOT until six months later that she set out for her own home. She reached Toleda late at night, and, after greeting old Mrs. Calder, went straight to her own room and the ministrations of her maid.

As she sat down before her look an envelope caught her attention. It was addressed in very black, small handwriting to herself, and was marked 'Urgent.' Beside it a crystal vase stood holding two gorgeous sprays of orange blossom.

'Forbidden to touch the letters or flowers, Miss, I was,' Camilla's Irish maid told her aggrievedly. 'They're to be left just so,' Mrs. Trawe said, and came in but a minute ago to see if I'd touched 'em, Miss.'

Mrs. Trawe was the housekeeper. Camilla laughed, thought of Rupert or Nevil Squire, on whom she had meditated much and often in the last weeks, and who was coming with the Keenes to visit her later on.

The letter enclosed was signed 'Charles Warrender,' and she read it through very swiftly, and then, all at once, her heart beat furiously.

She rose and went out to the balcony, and let the cool, faintly scented mountain air pour down on her. She felt as if her own heart were suffocating her, she was so angry. Warrender had ceased to exist, and had lashed her pride that he should have existed for her even whilst he had first done so. And now— to have this letter!

She read it through again; it had no formal beginning, and merely broke into a statement.

'I have waited day by day, hour after hour almost, for your return. At last you are coming. For six months I have lived to greet you, and I can do so frankly. For your sake I decided to pull up, and I have done so. If I had not, this letter would never have been written, nor should I have stayed to meet your eyes. Camilla, I believe there is such a thing as love at last. I believed it when I first saw your face. God alone knows the real reason why you came to the prison cabin that night; pity, I suppose, humanness— or else that thing for which I pray but have no right to hope. But I do hope. I dare to, and I dare, too, to ask you this: Will you marry me and let me work on for you? I will serve you in love with my soul, and work for you in honor and fairness with my body. I love you, and have loved you till I seem possessed of but that one thought, one feeling.— Charles Warrender.

She crumpled the letter in her hands. It was an insolence without parallel. She quivered with the storm of anger it had raised in her. To be judged so by such a man! To have given him the chance so to judge by that insane visit to the cabin! Her own self-scorn was intolerable. The maid came on to the balcony.

'There's a man asking if there's an answer to the letter, Miss,' she said.

'What man?' Camilla asked.

'One of the colored workers, Miss.'

'Tell him to take this message to the man who sent him: "Miss Weston begs to say there is no answer to the letter, nor will there ever be one." You understand— use those words exactly.'

The maid repeated them and vanished quietly.

Camilla, before her mirror, tore the letter into tiny fragments; then, with a-vicious little laugh, snapped on her pearls, gave one look at her face, which had a flame blossom on either cheek, and went down to dine.

For a week she did not ride far from the house, nor ask if Warrender were still in her employ. Then, abruptly, without any previous mention of his name, Roberts said, as he rose to leave one evening after delivering a report:

'Oh, Miss Weston, that was a fine worker, you sent to us — Warrender.'

'Your find him good— and trustworthy?' Camilla asked, her eyes studying Roberts' grizzled old face.

'Fine!' he repeated enthusiastically. 'I knew his story, of course, an' it don't matter, anyway, but anyone could see he's a thoroughbred, an' I always did say, Miss Camilla, an' always shall, that it's' the racehorse, even if he's broken-winded or got a permanent sprain, who'll keep on his feet the longest and do the toughest work the best! Beat a dray-horse at any endurance any day. An' Warrender struck me like that at first. He used to look ghastly, sort of tormented, an' he'd eat nothin', but he'd work. I tell you he'd do three men's jobs in a day. An' finally he picked up, an' now he's all of a man again— fine chap if ever there was one.'

'A paragon, in fact,' Camilla commented coolly.

'Just about. He's under me— sub to me— and he's got the hang of things wonderfully for a man who's never done a day's work before an' lived soft so long. Well, good morning, miss. I'll be up Friday again with the next report.'

When he had gone Camilla left the pleasant workroom and went to her own boudoir, a spacious, white-walled, white-floored place, with a multitude of shaded windows, and soft cool cushions and flowers everywhere where flowers could go. She sat down on a wide sofa and took up a book. Old Mrs. Calder dozed peacefully in a low chair; the only sound was the silvery chime of a small French clock.

A step sounded, firm and light, and Charles Warrender, in conventional dinner kit, came in through the open window. He walked straight up to Camilla.

'You never sent or wrote, so I came for my answer,' he said gently.

He stood beside the couch, one fine lean hand resting on the silken covering, the other thrust into the pocket of his jacket.

Camilla rose and faced him, and as she did so he smiled at her.

'It is love, Camilla, you know,' he said; 'and love when its real is rare. For only love pulls a man out of vice and despair an devil. Love of you 'did that for me. I don't come to you now a suppliant for help. I've done so well here, I believe I could help, you in a thousand ways. I've studied the ranch, and realise new possibilities for it I know you haven't answered my letter, and perhaps I

was a fool to send it, but,' he shrugged his shoulders slightly, 'I could not help myself. I believed so in this love that means you and me—'

He stopped and looked at her.

'Won't you— won't you say anything to me?'

'I sent you my answer,' Camilla flashed.

His eyes, tender a moment before, grew keen and hard.

'Is it pride keeping you back?'

He made a sudden step forward and caught her to him, and said passionately in a half-muffled voice: 'You've got to love me, I love you so frantically. Love as I feel it wasn't made to be felt alone. And you came to the cabin that night. You gave me my chance here. You weren't so proud then. I saw you look at me—'

She thrust him away.

'How dare you!' she whispered, her breath almost gone. 'How dare you! I came to you out of pity, as one gives alms to a beggar in the gutter.'

He laughed suddenly, his eyes brilliant, his face devilish.

'Oh, like that, I see!'

He stood before her, staring at her, and she gazed back at him as if mesmerised by his burnt face with its glint of fire-blueness in the eyes. A thought thudded to and fro in her mind: 'How good-looking he is! How good-looking he is!'

In another second, with another little low laugh, he had turned on his heel and was gone.

IT WAS only the next morning that Roberts said briskly to her: 'I suppose there's no reason why Warrender, that new chap I spoke to you of, who's made so good, should not buy the Cintra Corner? He came round about it late last night, and I've got the deeds ready. All that lot but Cintra's sold now.'

Last night!

Camilla's lips curled in a bitter sneer. So he had gone straight from her to buy land. If he could not run the estate he meant to make on it some way, at any rate!

She said contemptuously: 'Oh, of course I will sign,' and wrote her name below Charles Warrender's.

And a day later there was a wild rumor that gold had been found in the Cintra Corner.

Camilla listened to a neighboring rancher's excited report calmly, but when he had gone she ordered her horse, telephoned for the overseer in that district to have another waiting for her in the afternoon and rode out to visit Cintra. Duped in her own house, old Roberts fooled, and Charles Warrender jeering in

triumph! She urged her mare to the gallop despite the heat; she felt she needed pace, violence of movement .

It was high noon, almost unbearably hot, when she reached Cintra Valley. It stretched away before her, undulating and lovely, the sunshine filling it with a golden, dancing haze. A figure moved like a shadow beside the tiny hut near the river.

Camilla guided her horse down the slope. Whatever she felt about Warrender, she had to acknowledge that he was the only man who possessed a grace of movement which made him distinguishable wherever he happened to be.

His back was towards her; he was using some instrument, it seemed to her. Doubtless he was testing the gold discovery.

He turned suddenly and saw her and stood still. Camilla rode up to him.

'So I hear one must congratulate you,' she said, the 'edge' of her voice so definite as to make any words almost an insult.

'Oh, you've heard the news?' Warrender said lightly.

'Yes. You are clever indeed. No wonder you have taken such an interest in my property.'

He bowed slightly. 'Each for himself, isn't it? Unless— until love enters in, but you don't believe in love, do you? And now, do you know, I think I'll ride back with you.'

He called, and his horse, which had been grazing in the shade, came at once. Camilla felt an irritated, added stab of anger at this sign of trust— a man whom animals loved.

'I have no intention of riding home with you,' she said frigidly. 'Indeed, I propose to rest in the hut for a little while and wait till it is cooler.'

'I am sorry you cannot do that,' Warrender said tranquilly, 'but there are certain indications of a landslide.'

Camilla merely rode forward and entered the cabin. After a moment's hesitation Warrender followed her.

'You need not stay,' Camilla said.

Warrender, leaning against the door, made no answer for a moment, then he said: 'Oh, I'd just as soon be buried with you as anyone else. But I'm dashed sorry for the horses, poor beautiful devils.'

'You seem very nervous,' Camilla said scornfully, 'but I suppose you fear for your newly-acquired treasure.'

'Oh, I am certainly avaricious,' Warrender agreed, 'but why this scarcely veiled contempt? Have I done anything that is not legal?'

'Oh, nothing; you have carefully avoided that danger. Doubtless you were nervous about it, too. But don't you think it was rather— well, showy and

indiscreet of you to state you had found gold the day after your purchase of the land?'

He leaned forward and looked hard at Camilla.

'Gad! you think I knew!' he said,

His face went white under his tan, and just then to a sound like muffled thunder the little Hut began to shake as a tree does in a tempest. Warrender, steadying himself with difficulty, crossed the floor and dragged a little drawer from the table. He tossed a paper to Camilla, watched her read it, and then, laughing under his breath, went to the door. The thunder had ceased, but the hut still rocked.

The door had jammed. Camilla, the paper crushed in her hands, said: 'Where— where are you going?'

Warrender looked over his shoulder.

'Into danger, I hope.' he said sardonically. 'I can stick that; but not a mean woman. I'd told you I loved you, and you thought I'd been tricking you all the while! God, what sort of a mind has a woman like you got? Directly I saw the gold quartz I telephoned Roberts and tore up my claim.'

He stared at her with unbelievably hard eyes.

'You'll be safe here, which is all that matters to your sort, I should think,' he said contemptuously. You had better walk up the hill when you have recovered a bit, the slide's over. I shan't come back for you.'

The door slammed; jammed again. He was gone. She tore to the door, and, failing to open it, smashed the window and escaped that way.

'Charles,' she called, running, stumbling after him. He did not turn. She called again, and this time he heard. He turned, and she saw his hard face with its sullen eyes.

'You needn't come,' she said pitifully. 'Oh, Charles, you needn't— but let me come to you. You were right. I did love you, but I was too mean to sacrifice my pride. I was afraid of the greatest loveliness in the world.'

He caught hold of her fiercely, closely, and looked deep into her eyes, then, satisfied at last, kissed her lips.

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5: Caught in the Next

Lawrence William Pedrose

fl. 1915-1931

Top-Notch Magazine 13 May 1928

1. In Search of Poachers.

WITH his oars muffled with a pair of wool socks, Johnston rowed silently up the murky Duwamish, following a course midway between deep shadows which indicated the shore lines. It was nearing dawn, and a mist rose from the estuary in tiny spirals that spread and blended a few feet overhead, forming a thin fog which seemed to blanket the wide valley. Behind the oarsman a faint, milky glow reared like a ghostly palisade, marking the harbor lights on the Seattle water front.

The rower came to a bend in the waterway and skirted a field of marsh grass as dense as a wheat field. The silken rustle of the current as it slipped along the planking of the boat was broken by a light thumping sound, and he glanced overside. A line of discus-shaped cork floats extended out some hundred feet from the shore and pointed downstream at an angle of forty-five degrees.

As his craft slid over the obstruction, the man heard a bell-like note which sounded at some distance back in the grass. He paused and listened for a moment, suspiciously, then reassured, continued on. A few rods farther along, he discovered a score of other seines, also identified by lines of bobbing floats. He pulled up one, cautiously, and found several large silvery fish hanging by the gills off the coarse web.

There was a break in the mist. The light in the waterway was becoming brighter. Johnston glanced toward the eastern horizon. The gray chargers of dawn were advancing over a distant range of white mountains. He looked about him. A stone's throw upstream was a dense thicket of willows. He rowed round the cluster of nets and found an old ditch which penetrated the thicket. Donning his boots, he pulled his boat deep into the willows,

From across the marsh came the call of a loon, answered by a similar cry from a short distance upstream. Day was breaking fast now. Johnston donned a blanket-lined canvas parka and thrust into the pockets of the voluminous garment two pairs of handcuffs and an automatic pistol. Next he unrolled a tarpaulin and spread it over the boat. Then having made sure his retreat was safe from discovery, he sat down on the gunwale of the craft, silent, watchful.

A soft, splashing sound up the blind ditch told of industrious muskrats setting out on their hunt for breakfast. A purling of the water, black with silt of

glacial streams which flowed into the Duwamish, revealed that the long winter outrun of the tide had begun.

A faint rumble, instantly detected by the waiting man, heralded the approach of footsteps on the bog. Then, as the owners of the trudging feet drew near, he could hear the suck of boots and the swish of oilskins. Peering from his hiding place, he discerned several figures that loomed strangely large and bulky above the waist-high marsh grass, magnified out of all sense of proportion by the mist hugging the field. He counted the men. There were ten of them, all dark foreigners.

"Whew, what a hard-boiled-looking bunch!" he muttered, fingering his pistol. "I bet they'd split a man as quickly as a fish. Steady, Dave, old boy, if you don't want to feed the sharks this morning !"

The men, with the exception of one, advanced boldly to the bank of the waterway. The little man was peering, ferret-like, up and down the stream.

"I hear de bell on my shore line," he said suspiciously. "I think some one been here."

"Aw, go on," chided another. "A muskrat trips over the rope and you begin to see ghosts. Take it from me, the game wardens are snoozin' in their warm beds this time of the morning."

Each fisherman took hold of a net and began hauling it in, hand over hand. Johnston in the thicket waited patiently. He gritted his teeth as he saw the poachers disengage scores of dead fish from the webbing and toss them into a pile.

Some of the fish were as long as a man's leg and bright as a silver dollar, indicating they had just come in from the sea on their migration to spawning grounds in the hills. The poachers were in high spirits and joked as they toiled. They had reason to be good-natured. Each would realize from twenty to thirty dollars from his morning hour's work, the watcher calculated.

When the last of the nets had been hauled in and the fishermen were folding them, preparatory to carrying them away with their catches, Johnston drew his automatic and stole forward. He was upon the busy poachers before they discovered him. At a cry from the one who remained back, they wheeled, saw the weapon leveled from his hip, and slowly put up their hands.

"You're under arrest!" he said. He glanced down the line of scowling faces and recognized one of them. It belonged to a tall, burly fellow who had handsome features and black, curly hair. "You, Jezernic," he said, "take this rope at my feet and tie the other men's hands!"

"Ah, you catch me again, hey, Johnston?" The man smiled starkly as he advanced. "Maybe you got better sense this time. We give you hundre' dollars you forget about this?!"

The officer's lip curled in scorn. The fisherman read rejection of the bribe in the other's face and his dark eyes flashed. He was now quite close. His hand went to his sou'wester in a natural gesture, then he flipped his wrist, the stiff-brimmed, heavy hat struck Johnston across the eyes, and the poacher closed in upon him with a leap.

Instantly the other fishermen sprang forward. Johnston tried to use his gun, but it was torn from his grasp. He struggled in the crushing grip of his powerful captor and managed to free his right arm. Up came his fist, with all his weight behind it, and crashed into Jezernic's jaw.

The ruffian staggered. But as the officer swung again, something wet, heavy and clinging was thrown over him, and he was borne down, helpless in the tangle of a stout gill net. To complete his subjection, the poachers merely rolled him over a few times, and he found himself hopelessly enmeshed in the web.

2. An Angel With a Shotgun

"I THINK we should slit his throat and throw him in the drink!" said the little foreigner callously.

"No, fool!" spoke up another, a pockmarked man with the almond eyes of an Oriental. "The better way would be to heave him into the water, net and all. When they find him, they will think he fell overboard while trying to lift the net and got tangled in the web!"

Johnston: lay quiet, realizing the pirates were debating how best to dispose of him. He had blundered, and probably would pay for the mistake with his life. He should have contented himself with locating as many seines as possible and returned to town for help in rounding up the gang.

"How do you know there ain't more deputies on the waterway?" queried Jezernic. "If you want to get rid of this bird, do it quick! He's probably got a car over there at the edge of the valley. If we bump him off, we'll have to get rid of the car. See if he's got any keys."

One of the men searched the prisoner, finding easy access to his pockets through the web of the net. Johnston happened- to have a ring of keys with him.

"Hey," cried the searcher, "look, he's got a couple pair of irons. Shall we put them on him, too?" He held up the handcuffs.

"Blockhead!" hissed Jezernic. "Are you itchin' for a rope around your neck? Take the keys off the ring and put it and these irons back in his pockets!"

Johnston realized that at least two of the men were disposed to heave him into the river. He knew argument was futile, and only hoped something would

occur to change the men's plans. If they did throw him in the stream, he had about one chance in a million of escaping. He cautiously worked his right hand under his parka and unhooked a small watch-chain knife fastened to his belt.

If he could hold his breath long enough under water, he might cut through the net before it dragged him to the bottom. And if he failed, there was one thing the poachers had overlooked. That was his boat, concealed in the willows. It would offer a clew to his disappearance and might eventually fasten the crime upon them.

The poachers drew aside and held an animated discussion for a few moments. They seemed to reach an agreement. Johnston, watching the men out of the corners of his eyes, hopefully, felt a sinking sensation as Jezernic and the Oriental-looking man strode toward him with determined steps. The men grasped the net at his head and feet and turned him broadside to the water. But as they swung him off the ground, there was a crash in the willow thicket and a girl's voice rang out:

"Stop— or I'll shoot!"

Johnston heard the click of a weapon being cocked as the poachers let him fall.

"Aw, can it, Marcel," protested Jezernic. "We was just going to carry this guy back in the marsh. We can't leave him here. It's broad daylight and we must be getting our fish home."

The girl came forward.

"How many steelhead did you find?" she asked.

" 'Bout a hundred and twenty. Put that gun down, kiddo!"

Johnston could not repress a smile at Jezernic's nervousness. Twisting on his side, he bent back his head to see what his deliverer looked like. He drew in his breath sharply. She was so small that at first glance he took her to be a child.

Then, as he noted the contour of the body wrapped in an oiled yellow slicker, he realized she was a grown woman. She had an oval face, clear white skin and large, black eyes. In a very businesslike manner she held a repeating shotgun of small bore, its muzzle pointed at Jezernic's midriff.

"Didn't you promise me you wouldn't take any more steelhead?" she demanded crisply.

"Aw, I had to get up my nets," he evaded. "There's a hundred dollars' worth of web there. I meant to give you the money from the fish for a wedding present." He watched her to see what effect the words would have. "You ain't sore, are you, kiddo?"

The girl pointed to Johnston with a gesture of impatience. "Let the other fellows take care of the fish," she instructed. "You pack him up to my house."

"No, you go with the men," countered Jezernic. "I'll turn this guy loose and see that he beats it downstream."

"Do as I tell you!" snapped the girl, and Johnston, with a feeling of relief, saw her thumb caress the safety catch on the gun.

Jezernic grunted savagely, gathered up Johnston, net and all, and slung the burden over his shoulder. For the first time, the deputy realized the tremendous strength of the poacher. With the girl following at his heels, Jezernic struck off across the swamp.

"Don't think I'm going to let you go," hissed the fisherman in Johnston's ear. "That Marcel, my girl, and she ain't no angel. She'll cut your throat quicker'n me!"

Johnston digested this statement, and cold perspiration broke out on his forehead. It appeared as though he was escaping a possible death by drowning only to meet a more terrible fate. That the stunningly pretty girl had saved his life at the river just to torture him, was difficult to believe. Yet, he realized, she was one of the outlaws.

She, like the men, must look upon him the same as on any other minion of the law, as an instrument endeavoring to rob her people of their illicit means of livelihood. She was probably a southern European, a person of quick passions and subtle ideas on revenge.

Very uncomfortable minutes passed for Johnston as he was borne throughs the swamp. Nor did he experience any sense of relief as Jezernic entered an alder grove, turned up a dry slough, swung to the left into another brushy area, and finally came to a small clearing. In the center of the opening stood a low, dilapidated, one-story house which no one in passing would think tenanted.

Johnston, in desperation, was debating his chances of escape if he cut down the giant with his penknife and slashed himself free from the net. If the girl had left him alone with Jezernic on the river bank, that would have been a possible way out. Neither the girl nor the man seemed to know he had a knife concealed in the sleeve of his parka.

If the girl would only leave him with his captor for a moment, he would make the attempt. But she stayed close behind, and he knew she could let daylight through him with her shotgun before he could cut his way out of the net.

Jezernic pushed open a door of the house, entered, and dumped his burden on the floor. Johnston glanced round and noted that the interior of the dwelling was quite habitable. He was lying in the kitchen. Adjoining was a living room fitted with rustic furniture. Everything was neat and clean.

The girl bent over Johnston and her black eyes burned down into his.

"Spy!" she spat at him. She drew back her foot and kicked him in the ribs, and her companion laughed roughly.

Johnston frowned. The jolt in the ribs was not nearly so bad as it appeared. It seemed that the girl was just making a play for the benefit of the fisherman. Taking his cue; he -squirmed as if in great pain and showed his teeth in a well-simulated snarl.

"Go get your fish," said the girl to Jezernic. "TIL take care of this pig. We'll figure out later what to do with him. Give me your knife—and get out!" e

The poacher handed her a heavy clasp knife and left the house, chuckling hugely.

3. The Fight.

THE girl, moving as gracefully as a panther, followed the fisherman to the door. When he had gone out, she closed the door and turned to face Johnston.

"You sneak!" she said in a voice that rose almost to a shriek. "I ought to cut you to ribbons and feed you to the crows! Spy on my people, will you, and get them in jail just because a bunch of fools make a law on fishing one month and change it the next!"

Johnston was startled, unable to believe he had heard right. Then he caught a sound at the front door and smiled. Jezernic, suspicious of the girl, had stolen round the house. He was listening to make sure she was not friendly toward the prisoner. Johnston growled.

"Do you river rats think you can get away with this?' he retorted, making sure his voice carried to the eavesdropper outside. "I suppose you intend to make away with me, but if you do, every one of you will stretch rope!"

The girl laughed at him. It was an eerie laugh, scornful and so genuine Johnston glanced up at her sharply.

Could he be mistaken? he asked himself. Wasn't she playing a part after all? He had heard of women bandits, slips of girls who could be soft and feminine one day and ruthless killers the next.

Her face was a study. If her feelings were not real she had a remarkable gift of pantomime. She had thrown off her oilskin, and her slender body seemed to shake with the intensity of her passion.

"I've longed to get hold of one of you guys!" she hissed. "All my people have been thrown in jail. You have taken away their boats, their fishing gear. Do you wish us to starve?"

"No!" gritted Johnston, now genuinely angry. "I would make you birds go to work! I'd make you earn a decent living! In the fall when fishing is easy, you go out when the salmon are so thick a blind man could catch them with his

bare hands. You make big money. Then in the winter you lay around the streams like slimy river rats and steal the fish that mean other people's daily bread.

"For your own selfish gain, you would destroy all the spawning fish. In a few years there will be no more steelhead. Then you can go back to your countries and live like bourgeois on the earnings of your piracy. Come on, you little foreigner; do your stuff with that sticker if you've got the nerve!"

The girl sprang to his side, and he thought she would pounce down upon him and begin work with her wicked-looking knife. He strained at his bonds in an endeavor to get his own weapon into action, but the blade had caught in his sleeve, where the stout fabric held it securely.

The girl did not strike. He noticed she was listening intently. There was a soft thumping of footsteps that told Jezernic was departing. She glided noiselessly into the adjoining room and peered out a window. Satisfied, she returned to Johnston's side.

He could not repress a shudder as she dropped on one knee and ripped the bonds across his chest with the clasp knife. Back and forth and up and down she slashed, then threw the mutilated web off him, grasped his hand, and assisted him to his feet.

He rose, bewildered. She looked up into his face and her features were wreathed in a smile.

"Don't you think the little foreigner would make a good actress?" she murmured.

As he stared at her, comprehension came to him. She had been playing a part after all. With a sudden, boyish impulse, he grasped her by the shoulders. Her eyes were laughing now. But his were serious.

"Say," he demanded, with a new interest, "what is that hulk Jezernic to you?"

She sobered instantly. A worried look replaced her bantering smile.

"He thinks he is going to marry me," she said angrily. "He went up with my brothers to work in the Alaska canneries last summer. My folks got jobs as watchmen over the winter, and Jezernic came back alone. He's been pestering me ever since. He says if he don't get me, nobody will. He promised yesterday he would not poach any more steelhead, but I was suspicious and followed him down to the river. That's how I happened to be in the thicket. I think Jezernic and the other man were going to drown you when I interfered."

"Would you have shot if they threw me in the water?" demanded Johnston admiringly.

There was a twinkle in the girl's eyes as she replied: "I don't know. I'd see first what you could do with that knife you have in your sleeve. If you couldn't

slash your way out of the net, I'd have made them go in and get you. I can shoot straight, and they know it."

Johnston threw back his head and laughed. "Well," he said, dropping his hands, "the question now is— how to get out of here."

The girl darted to the door and studied the clearing. "Road's clear, but the men will be along soon," she declared. "Come on!" She picked up her shotgun as she went out.

She ran in the direction of the bushes, and Johnston bounded out of the house and followed. She avoided the dry slough and led him by a circuitous route to the ditch in which he had concealed his boat. Swift as a wild fawn, she pressed along the edge of the thicket, and it required all of his speed to keep up with her. They came to the end of the blind ditch without seeing any of the poachers.

"Here's your boat," she whispered, parting the bushes. "I discovered it when I was spying on the men. Oh!"

Her exclamation was caused by a rustle of the willows. Out of the thicket sprang Jezernic, scowling ferociously.

There was murder in the pirate's eyes. He brushed the girl aside with a rough sweep of his arm and faced the deputy. Johnston, startled, calmed his panicky nerves and measured the young giant. With a quick leap backward, he deftly slipped out of the canvas parka, realizing that the heavy garment would impede his movement and he must call upon every ounce of his strength and all the skill and agility he possessed to contest the issue with the poacher.

Jezernic came at him like a great ox, with flailing arms. Johnston drove swiftly for the man's chin and staggered him. A second blow landed on Jezernic's mouth, while two others caught him under the ribs. He went down, heavily, and seemed to shake the marsh. But he was up again like a tiger. Johnston dodged his bull-like rush, and found himself with his back to the waterway. Now the pirate advanced more cautiously, arms tensed and out at his sides, intent on driving the other man into the water.

"Don't let him get you in the river!" screamed the girl. "He's been a deep sea diver and he'll drown you!"

Johnston struck at the surly mask of the giant, one-two-three, and twisted out of a crushing grip. The man grunted and drove out an arm that was like a pile driver. The blow caught Johnston under the shoulder and sent him spinning. With a leap, the giant had him.

"Now you go under!" roared Jezernic, raising the dazed officer above his head.

But as he was about to hurl his victim into the waterway, something hit him with stunning force in the back of the head, and he staggered and fell,

releasing Johnston and clutching at the grass on the bank, The blow had been administered by the girl, who had turned her shotgun end for end and struck him with the steel butt-plate.

Johnston recovered from his daze, got up, and made sure the poacher was not dead, then turned to the girl. She indicated his boat with a gesture and, crossing to it, grasped one of its gunwales. He took the other. The tide had receded several feet, but they launched the craft without any difficulty. As the boat splashed into the water, they heard running footsteps. Jezernic had scrambled-to his feet and was racing for the woods. The officer shouted for him to halt, but he ignored the command. In another moment he was lost from sight among the willows.

The girl held out her hand to Johnston. Her cheeks were warm and the bantering look had returned to her eyes.

"Will you take with you a kind thought for—a little foreigner?" she asked softly.

He ignored the hand and looked down at her sternly, shaking his head. She flushed at the apparent rebuke. The next instant he swept her up in his arms, placed her in the stern sheets of the boat, then climbed aboard himself with a kick that sent the light craft far out in the waterway.

She watched him, puzzled, as he picked up the oars. He bent to the shafts, and the boat fairly leaped down the stream.

Only when she saw they were headed toward the city did the girl divine his purpose. Her eyes met his, he laughed, and she dropped her gaze.

"You are so forceful," she sighed. "Am I to consider myself kidnaped?"

"You may," he returned. She simulated fright, and he rested on his oars and explained. "I have an aunt, a Mrs. Snowdon, who runs a dramatic school uptown. I am going to take you to her as a protégée. She'd love to have you."

The girl's long lashes veiled her eyes. "Whose protégée?" she murmured.

He chuckled. "Hers, of course. But look here— I hold a discovery claim, as mining men say, and I refuse to relinquish that right to any one else."

She nodded acquiescence, and he applied himself again to the oars.

4. A Change of Drama

IT was a foggy night. As Dave Johnston swung up the pavement he thought of that other misty night, nearly six months ago, when he rowed his boat up the silent Duwamish, bent on reaching the poachers' grounds before day broke. He was again keeping a rendezvous, but this night it was not with a menace 'that lurked in the fog.

It was pleasure and not stern duty which caused him to fare forth. He had not seen Marcel since that morning when he took her to his aunt and turned her over to the older woman's care,

Business matters— the settling of an estate which permitted his resignation from his State job— had called him East the next day, and he had returned home only that afternoon. Marcel had written while he was in the East, and so had his aunt. The girl was progressing splendidly with her studies, he was told.

By a coincidence which, however, was not mere happenstance, to-night, his first night home after his long period of absence, was to mark Marcel's initial public appearance.

The Snowdon Little Theater, situated in the quiet residential section on the First Hill, was a modest little place, a mere bandbox of a show house. It had a high rating professionally. It catered to no particular class. It charged no admission. It did not pander to the aesthete, and its clientele came from all walks of life.

Here lovers of drama— the student, the shop girl, the business man, the dock worker, and the scouts from the theatrical agencies, rubbed elbows and reveled in art that was as unostentatious as it was genuine. Out on the "Big Time" circuits of the country were many players who boasted of the Snowdon school as their Alma Mater.

Dave had not written Marcel he would be home to-day. He did not wish to distract her from her work. He arranged for a florist to deliver a beautiful' bouquet of red roses, which was to be presented to her on the stage.

He wanted to be seated in the orchestra circle when she received it and read his card. These whimsical thoughts revolved in his mind as he strode up the misty street, and he whistled to himself a gay little tune.

When he neared the theater, he caught up with a group of four men who appeared to be bent on the same destination as himself. They were big fellows, roughly dressed. Boots and sou'westers identified them as fishermen.

He attached. no particular significance to their presence until they entered the milky glow of the theater's illuminated lobby and paused to read a small electric sign on the marquee. Emblazoned there were the words:

Marcel Del Rio
The Poachers

He caught the profile then of one of the men and gave a start as he recognized it. It belonged to Jezernic, the outlaw.

Johnston held back until the fishermen had entered the theater, then quickly followed. There were only two hundred seats in the building, and most of these were occupied. The fishermen selected vacant chairs near the stage, and Dave seated himself a few rows behind them. A concealed orchestra was playing an overture.

In a few moments the room was darkened. The curtain was raised to the dulcet strains of a Hungarian gypsy song, and Dave straightened in his chair as he beheld a hazy moonlit scene.

It was of a marsh beside a river, fringed with dark woods. His interest quickened as he recognized the setting. It was a clever duplication of the Duwamish. He had witnessed many plays on that little stage, but none that had held him with the fascination this one exerted over him.

Then a finger of light reached out from the balcony and came to rest in an ivory circle at the edge of the stage. He felt a thrill. That was his aunt's ingenious way of introducing her embryo stars, and she used the device only when she had a pet attraction to offer.

A murmur of expectancy from the audience, then Marcel stepped into the spotlight, smiling shyly, and was greeted by vociferous applause. She was dressed as Dave had first seen her, in a snug yellow oilskin and boots, and with a sou'wester set jauntily on her head. Her color was heightened by make-up, but this served only to enhance her Slavic beauty.

The applause sank, then swelled again as a messenger boy darted down the aisle and passed over the footlights to the girl a huge bouquet of red roses. She picked a card from the fragrant sheaf of nodding buds, and gave a start of surprise and pleasure as she read the name of her admirer. Her dark eyes opened wide, and she appeared a bit confused as she bowed and withdrew into the shadows.

The curtain was lowered, then raised again, and the play got under way. Dave, enthralled, saw three uncouth fishermen appear and presently begin to haul in a net with its harvest of silver fish. He saw a passable likeness of himself step out of the bushes and hold up the poachers at the point of a pistol.

Again was enacted the incident with Jezernic, and the officer, after scorning the outlaw's bribe, was tricked, overpowered, and wrapped in the illicit net. The poachers decided to heave him into the river, entangled in the web.

But at the crucial moment the girl appeared, shotgun in hand, and defeated their plans. The. scene ended with the „girl compelling her countryman to shoulder the prisoner and carry him to her house.

Scene Two was the kitchen of the girl's home. The actual happening in which Johnston had played the victim was given in detail. Jezernic's part was

also portrayed faithfully, but the scene was dominated by the acting of the girl. She was superb.

Dave leaned forward in his chair, spellbound. He heard his own words, defying the outlaws, repeated, and he felt he once more was the man lying there on the kitchen floor, helplessly enmeshed in the net, so realistic was it all. His denunciation of the poachers for destroying the spawning fish brought a ripple of applause from the audience. Then when the girl, after a tense moment of uncertainty, slashed her prisoner free it brought down the house. He watched the curtain fall on the second scene with real reluctance.

Scene Three was the river bank again. The girl and the escaping officer came out of the woods, but as they were about to pull the hidden boat from the thicket, Jezernic appeared. There was brilliant word play for a moment, then began the fight between the men.

It was compelling in its dramatic unfolding, so real in action and in its high points of suspense that Dave felt perspiration break out on his body. All too suddenly the battle ended with the girl striking down her countryman as he was about to heave into the stream the defeated officer.

At this point alone was there a deviation from the true happening. The officer turned to the girl and asked why she had struck down a man of her own people to aid an alien. She faced the audience with shining eyes and proudly raised her head.

"I did it," she said bravely and with the proper dramatic tempo, "because— because I love you!"

Thunderous applause marked the curtain. Dave, in something of a daze, did not wait for the curtain call. He sprang to his feet and dashed from the building. Round to the rear entrance he darted. He bounded into the wings just as Marcel, flushed with triumph, returned from a second curtain call. He confronted her suddenly and captured her hands.

"You didn't stick to the original lines," he charged. "Why did you change them?"

She looked up at him with a timid smile. "I didn't— until that moment," she confessed, swaying toward him. "Maybe— the roses— had something to do—"

She didn't finish. She did not have a chance to. But what does it matter, when his arms closed about her, what she was going to say?

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6: The Pearl that Came Home

H. de Vere Stacpoole

1863-1951

The Popular Magazine 20 May 1927

H. de Vere Stacpoole

THE OTHER DAY in London the Southern Star, one of the largest and certainly the most beautiful of the world's diamonds, was put up for auction and "failed to realize any price." I forget what the bidding went to, nor does the amount matter beyond the statement that it was absurdly small.

The stone was too big— too big to be worn in an ordinary way. Big diamonds are out of fashion, and this everlasting crystal, holding in it the beauty and soul of sunrise, was turned down.

This is not a treatise on jewelry, else, leaving the Southern Star aside, I would quote many instances of lovely gems neglected, left in obscurity by taste, and only picked up at the dictates of fashion or vice versa. The black pearl, that was worth little till the Empress Eugenie made it sought after, the drop pearl that was worth much, till women gave up wearing drop earrings, the opal that went out of favor less on account of superstition than fad; a list as long as the list of poets, painters, writers and sculptors, the intrinsic beauty of whose work was worth nothing till revealed by the eyes of some critic-seer.

THE Sulu archipelago, lying to the north of Borneo, contains over a hundred small islands, and the most beautiful pearls in the world have come from here. There is something in the water of the tropic seas that lends color to the coral and special beauty to the pearl, and of all the seas, the Sea of Sulu is most highly charged with this dynamic something that finds expression in beauty.

It was in 1882, when the Sultan of Sulu was fighting the Spaniards, the same sultan who sold his rights in the great bird-nest caves to the North Borneo Company, that Fleming, who had got hold of an old proa and the

service of a Sulu man, whose name sounded like Nakardike, was fishing for pearls— illicitly. He had come in through the southern Sibutu passage and worked up as far as Cagayan Sulu, and it was amid the tiny islets north of here and in view of the palms of Cagayan that he was doing his fishing. Now, if you will look at the charts or at any large map, you will see that Sulu waters are almost as much inclosed as Tidal Basin. Five-hundred miles by five hundred miles, they are hedged from the south China Sea by Palawan, from the Celebes Sea by Sibuguey and all the islands to Tawi-Tawi, from the Pacific by the Philippines— a vast blue basin, where the shark shared kingdom with an emperor who impaled men for pearling without a permit. These facts did not in the least disturb Fleming in his fishing.

WAR proas might break the horizon any moment, or a boat of Spaniards come along, men worse than the men of Sulu. It did not matter; it was all in the day's work. No law ran in these seas to save a lawless man from extreme punishment. It did not matter, for only in the lawless seas could Fleming do his job, which was plunder in all its forms, from opium smuggling to barratry. Broken in his last deal with the customs, he had come down to the Celebes and with the profit of a lucky gamble at Mendao bought the fishing proa and provisions for three men for four months; also, the services of Nakardike and a Malay boy, Achmat.

A week ago, here, within sight of Cagayan, they had struck oyster ground and coach-whip fucus in six-fathom water, taking in six days three hundred pair of shells and ten pearls; six of the pearls were almost worthless, the others, at the prices ruling in those days, varying in value from five to twenty pounds apiece.

This evening, an hour before sunset, Fleming came on the great find.

Opening the last oyster of the take, a thing nearly as big as a soup plate, he saw a bulge on the flesh near the hinge of the shell; dividing the muscle, he squeezed gently and, like a great white bubble, out came a pearl. It was enormous— big as a pigeon's egg nearly, weighing, maybe, a hundred grains and absolutely round, luminous, and perfect.

Holding it in the palm of his wet and dirty hand, Fleming looked at it. Behind him Nakardike, naked as the new moon and dripping from his last dive, stood gazing down at it; Achmat, squatting on the deck near 'by, gazed, too, and at the *kriss* which Nakardike had picked up from the deck, where lay his loin cloth and betel box.

A passing gull cried out at them, the only sound breaking the silence of that sea, stretching in the sunset toward the palms of Cagayan and the Sibutu passage.

Here was all Fleming wanted. He was up in pearls.

He had gained his knowledge from Chi Loo, the opium middleman, who dealt in pearls as well as opium, and who dwelt in Hankow. It was Chi Loo who had given him the tip about Sulu waters. This thing would be worth, maybe, five thousand pounds in the open market. But, as Fleming looked at it, after the first realization of its value, he did not see it— or only as the nucleus of a crowded picture, wherein figured Chi Loo, to whom he would offer it for sale, the bars of Hankow and Formosa, where he would cut a dash— games, champagne and dancing.

Nakardike, looking down, saw the Sultan of Sulu, who impaled men for illicit pearling. Saw also a house on stilts, near the Itang River, where he could live in comfort with a brown wife and unlimited credit at the traders' station; saw, also, that the moment had come.

Unknown to Fleming stood the terrible fact that this expedition, though paid for by him, was entirely Nakardike's.

Nakardike was not the person to risk the anger of the sultan for a few dollars— a month's wages. He had come with a cut-and-dried plan to be put in operation directly the pearl takings were worth the trouble of seizing, and not a moment later, seeing the danger of lingering in these prohibited waters. The moment had come, and the blow of the *kriss* that nearly severed Fleming's head left nothing to be desired in the way of vigor and directness.

Nakardike seized the pearl, pouched it, and helped Achmat to throw the body overboard.

Now, the Spaniards at that time had several gunboats lying by their fortified settlement, Jalo, and the smallest of these, the *Seville*, a hundred-ton tin pot, with a beam engine and a swivel gun, steering eight knots and captained by the gay young spark, Lieutenant Alvarez, was cruising one fine morning between Laparan Island and Cape Sandakan, when the lookout sighted a proa.

Alvarez was down below playing the guitar and smoking. He came on deck. The fools on the proa had altered their course, which was as good as saying "Chase me," and the *Seville* asked nothing better. She was proud of her speed, and she was aching to fire her gun. She did. She fired it twice, in fact, after the proa had hauled her wind and surrendered.

Nakardike and Achmat received the boarders with outstretched hands spread wide open and palms up. They were innocent men, fishers who had lost their gear, natives of Timbu Mata, who had no grudge against the Spanish or leanings toward the sultan or his troops.

"Just so," said Alvarez, who could talk the Sulu lingo. "And that?" He pointed with his toe at a *bajak* lying in the port scuppers.

A *bajak* is an oyster rake made in the likeness of a hayrake and of very heavy wood; it has a heavy stone lashed to its under part to make it run true; it is a thing quite distinctive, for there is nothing else like it born of the sea, and Nakardike, like a fool, had never thought of heaving it overboard. Men do stupid things like that, especially men of the type of Nakardike and his assistant, Achmat, for Providence has ordained that murder shall always have for its shadow stupidity, and stupidity— what is it, but sister to the callousness that permits men to commit murder? Something is always overlooked.

There was also an oyster shell forgotten; there was also a stain on the deck that much scraping had not removed. A stain on the deck was nothing. It might be shark blood or what not. But why the scraping?

Now, Alvarez, though only a lieutenant in the Spanish navy, on duty at Jalo, was a man of parts. He could reason, using facts as counters of thought, and that is the most difficult thing in the world; also, he was thorough.

What followed now was most curious. Nakardike, put through the third degree and the Spanish torture of the tarred rope, handed up the pearls, all save the great one, and, had Alvarez been another man, he would have departed with the loot, satisfied with a good morning's work. But he was Alvarez, and, taking Nakardike below into the dog hole of a cabin, he felt his head like a phrenologist— finding not only the bump of acquisitiveness, but a lump which was the pearl tied up in a bit of fish skin and bound in the hair, so that Alvarez had to cut it loose with his pocketknife.

He had guessed instinctively that Nakardike was holding some of the pearls back, and he had glimpsed the little lump beneath the hair, but he never expected anything like this.

Here was fortune. Guitars, girls, bull fights, pleasure in Seville, or, better, Paris— Paris! Paris— that was the place of all places. In five beats of a pendulum, such is the power of mind, he had mapped and colored his future. He put the pearl in his pocket; no one had seen it. It was a secret between himself and the man of Sulu. The secret had to be sealed.

He brought Nakardike on deck.

Now this bloodhound of a man had not only scented hidden loot, but also he was convinced in his mind that a white man had been boss of the proa and had been murdered for the sake of the pearl. Two things told him of this— the stain on the deck and an old shoe lying in a corner of the dog hole below.

Did he accuse Nakardike? Not a bit. He ordered his men to unshackle the halyard of the big sail and put the rope round Achmat's neck.

He knew that if murder had been committed, both men were in the business. There was no accusation. If murder had been committed, Achmat would think that Nakardike had confessed down below, putting the blame on

him— Achmat — and would try to escape by a counter accusation. It was beautifully reasoned and swiftly done, and the result justified the reasoning.

Achmat confessed everything, accusing Nakardike, who confessed everything, accusing Achmat.

Alvarez hanged them both and made a target of the proa, at five hundred yards, sinking her at the sixth shot.

THEN he went back to Jalo, and reported a naval affair, in which he multiplied the proa by six; handed over the small pearls, said nothing about the great one, and settled down to brood and make plans for the future. His cleverness had brought him to an impasse. Up to this he had been careless and happy; now, with fortune in his waistcoat pocket, he was discontented.

All the fun in the world was waiting for him, and he was tied to Jalo. He was on war service and could not resign his position; he could not disclose his treasure; he could not sell the thing in the East. He had long, casual talks with Ah Wong, a Chinese trader who supplied Jalo with provisions, and Ah Wong, who knew everything about everything saleable, gave it as his opinion that for the sale of jewels London or Paris was the only market; unless, indeed, one could get hold of one of the native princes of India.

But all this talk was no use to Alvarez. He was tied to Jalo and the Sea of Sulu. There was no escape for another five years, at least, and he could not wait.

One day he was ordered to take the Seville on a scouting expedition to the Borneo coast near Maraop. He ran her through the Sibutu passage and piled her on a charted reef near the entrance to Darvel Bay.

The boat he escaped in ran to Timbu Matu. Here he and his men turned pirates— they were pirates, anyway— licensed up to this, unlicensed now.

This piracy business was not his intention. His intention was to get to Europe with the pearl and the small amount of money he had taken with him from Jalo, but he was more or less in the hands of his men. These ruffians, seizing a big proa and killing the owners, were like jinn he had evoked, and he had to go with them and be parcel of their doings; and he was a bit of a jinni himself.

Powerfully armed for those days and waters— they had taken rifles and ammunition before leaving the Seville— they were a match for anything they were likely to meet. But the business was frankly rotten. The small vessels they met could only supply them with provisions or tobacco. Once they got a bag of dollars, and once some tins of Canton opium. There was nothing in it but the gamble and the satisfaction of the plunder instinct, and all the time Alvarez, though steadily degrading, kept tight to his pearl and his dreams of Europe.

He was the only one of the lot who knew anything of navigation, and past Laut he began to edge them west into the Java Sea. They had kicked off their clothes with their civilization. Naked and brown, wearing loin cloths and with long hair, more terrible than the men of Sulu, they were an affront to the spirit of the white man. And Alvarez was not the least terrible; the pearl that had led him to all this he had secreted in his long hair, following the hint given him by Nakardike, and the money he had brought with him from Jalo-he had hidden beneath a plank below, against the time when he might be able to use it.

One day off Banks, they sighted a small brig coming east, and the brig, sighting the proa, altered her course; they chased, reckoning on the small size of the prey and its timidity.

When the two vessels were within a mile of one another, the wind failed and fell to a dead calm, and the proa putting out her sweeps crawled like a venomous brown beetle across the glassy swell toward its victim.

The brig was the *Itang*, Captain Schmerder, Dutch owned and making to Batavia from Calcutta, with a cargo of cotton goods. The proa came right alongside of her, and Alvarez and his ruffians boarded her. They had killed the captain and half the crew and driven the rest below, closing the hatch on them, when—

Around the shoulder of far-off Gasper Island came the *Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft*, the new Dutch gunboat on the Batavia station, firing up for all she was worth and with her crew rushing to stations.

It is funny to think that all these vigorous happenings had been, so to speak, lying, *perdu* in a quiet old oyster of the Sulu Sea, to be fished up and set free by Alvarez; yet so it was, and, with the pearl which was the core of them in his hair and fighting to the bitter end, he was killed with all his men, on May 16, 1882, in the last battle with pirates that took place in the Java seas.

Now, what happened to the pearl, and who discovered it in his hair and managed to secrete it and bring it to Amsterdam and sell it for eight hundred pounds— a wretched price— to a jeweler of the Heeren Graght? I am not going to say. To be honest, I don't know.

It is enough to know that the Amsterdam diamond merchant sold it for twice the amount to a jeweler of the Rue de la Paix in Paris, who sold it to Prince Muroff, who gave it to Margaret Stein at a luncheon at the Café de Paris, who, wishing to emulate Cleopatra, called for a glass of vinegar to dissolve it in. Learning its value from the prince, she put it in her pocket, instead.

It was in a little red-morocco case and undrilled as yet, and she took it home and forgot it. That seems to you impossible, which proves that you do not know the mentality of Margaret Stein and her tribe. Stolen by Rosalie, her

maid, it passed into the possession of Monsieur Bourgeois, at a price which permitted Rosalie to set up a bonnet shop in the Rue du Mont Thabor, and if you had passed that shop with a friend and said to him, "Look, that business came out of an oyster that lived in the sea of Sulu," he would not have believed you, nor would he have believed the same statement made concerning the new café which Monsieur Bourgeois opened that same year in the Rue St. Honoré.

In those times, just as all good defunct Americans go to Paris, all good jewels went at last to Russia—or nearly all,

The pearl came to Russia. It had been badly drilled in Paris, a thousandth part of an inch out of the true, so it wouldn't hang properly if strung on a necklace; it had to be worn by itself on a thin chain. When Princess Anakoff opened the little box on her birthday, she cried: "Oh, what a size!" Then, when she heard of the drilling and that it could not be made the foundation of a new necklace, she pouted, made a scene, and the prince, who was a minister of state, flew into "one of his tempers," tried to throw the thing out of the window, broke a vase, and went off to attend to his official duties in a condition of mind that left its small, but ineradicable, mark on the future history of Russia.

The pearl was locked away with other discarded jewels. It had been the innocent cause of a lot of dark work. It had killed Alvarez and his men; it had incited the spirit of thievery in the hearts of more than a few, and now it was out of harm's way, or out of men's way, which amounts to the same thing. Out of harm's way and securely locked up in a safe made by Borodinski— the Griffiths of Russia— and in the company of some musty old documents, the title deeds of houses in Paris and Vienna, and some miniatures of the early Anakoffs done by Poushkin.

Also, there was a watch by Lépine, a few jade ornaments, and a huge turquoise that had come across the Urals in a Tartar's cap in the time of Attila.

Wonderful stories that turquoise could have told, had it possessed memory and a tongue. Possessing neither, it was dumb— as was the pearl.

Years passed.

ONCE the door of the safe was flung open, and a madly laughing woman seized the documents and flung them about on the floor. Then with one of them she struck a bearded man on the face, who, in a rage, struck at her and missed, while another man, pale and thin and dressed in black and seeming moved by sudden fury, drew an ivory-handled revolver from his breast pocket and shot the bearded man. The latter fell, face down, on the floor, flinging up his arms as he fell.

Then the documents were shot back into the safe and the smoking revolver with them, and the door was shut, and the pearl and its companions found themselves in darkness and silence again, after this momentary glimpse of the strange world that surrounded them.

For a long time nothing happened— how long, who knows?— years— during which the documents were evidently uncalled for, like the jewels. .And then one night the doors of the safe flew open to the beating of drums and cries and shrieks and flare of torches from the street, on which the room opened, and a white-haired woman was gathering everything in a pillow case— documents, pearl, jade ornaments, and all.

NEXT thing, after many weeks, a blaze of light, and the pearl was in the hand of Ben Oued, the jeweler of Constantinople. Then in a few weeks it was in London, in the office of Romanes, the dealer, and a thick-nosed elderly man, with a flower in his coat, was saying:

"I would like to buy something for my wife—something of character. Diamonds— no; she has all she wants. Ah, let us look at that pearl— badly pierced, worth very little!"

"Pearls are jumping every day, Mr. Gunderman," said Romanes, filling a glass with water and putting the pearl in the water, where it instantly and almost completely vanished from sight, thus proving its worth. Then he weighed it in a little scales, then he put it back on its chain.

"How much?" asked Gunderman and concluded the purchase of the pearl.

Two hours later the new purchaser came back to the Savoy Hotel, where he was staying. Mrs. Gunderman was having afternoon tea at a little table in the dance room. She was stout and florid, and when he gave her his present, and she opened the box and saw the great pearl on its little chain, she thought from its size that it was false; also, it was on a two-penny-half-penny-looking little chain.

"Its platinum," said he, referring to the chain. Then he told her the price he had paid, and she lost her temper. She had set her mind lately on emeralds, she had said nothing on the matter to him, but subconsciously and half consciously she had been turning toward emeralds. And now this thing which did not appeal to her at all— and at such a price!

He told her that pearls were increasing in value— that they were jumping every day. But the activity of pearls did not interest her. She said not a word about emeralds, but she frankly told him he had been "done." She had to say something nasty, and unconsciously she said the thing that would hurt the most, reflecting as it did on his business capacity.

The accusation of doing a man— within the limits of the law— would have been something of a compliment, but to accuse him of being done— well

Flying into a temper, he left her and sought solace in the American bar.

Then, when they came down to dinner at half past seven, he found she was wearing the pearl as a sort of make-up to him. He had recovered his temper, and, as he sat opposite to her during the meal, his eyes traveled about the room.

"You don't know how well that pearl looks, Sarah," said he. "It's a new idea wearing one strung like that. Look at all those women and their pearl necklaces, and not one genuine, I bet. You see, they make them now so good you can't tell the difference. But that thing tells itself for genuine at once, because no one would wear an imitation alone like that."

"I suppose so," said she, without disclosing the fact that she had quite made up her mind to get him to sell the thing and purchase the emeralds she now acutely longed for.

"I must get it insured to-morrow," he went on. "It will go in with the rest of your things at Lloyds." He took a gold cigarette case from his pocket and gave her a cigarette, then he lit up, and a little later they stepped into their limousine and were driven a hundred yards away to the Strand Theater.

Here, under the influence of the genius of Berry, they forgot everything for a couple of hours, returning to the Savoy and their suite, where Julius Gunderman was just in the act of pouring himself out a whisky and soda, when his eyes became fixed on his wife.

"Where's the pearl?" he asked.

It was gone. The platinum chain was there, but the pearl was gone. Everything was there, even the little platinum wire that had pierced the thing. The wire had broken, that was all.

Like demented creatures they ran about the room searching the carpet, under the chairs, everywhere. He examined her dress, shaking out the folds. Nothing!

Bidding her stay where she was, lest by some chance it might be stuck somewhere in her clothes, he came out in the corridor, hunting along to the elevator, rang for the elevator, searched its floor, and came down in it. Then he burst out of it, like a bombshell, calling to the attendants to help in the search.

"A pearl— a big round pearl. I gave a large sum for it to-day. It's gone. One hundred pounds to whoever finds it!"

But it was not to be found. Out in Savoy Court you might have seen men who seemed to be hunting for mushrooms by lamplight— a quest that would have been just as fruitful. It was gone— and it was not insured.

HE was thirteen years and some months old, but Patrick Sweeny did not look it. He had been stunted by environment and heredity. Patrick at the moment was coming to the end of a perfect day. He had played truant from school, earned sixpence by taking a message for a shady looking man to a shady public house, which message had. caused two other shady-looking gentlemen to arise and go forth in a hurry, only to fall into the arms of the police— fished for sharks with a bent pin, until he had been ordered away by the police from the landing stage near Cleopatra's Needle; seen a corpse being brought ashore at Westminster Bridge, received, after an hour's vigil outside the tobacco shop, close to Charing Cross underground station, two cigarette cards, one telling the history of the Gloire de Dijon rose and the other the history of the Discobolus, both illustrated; stuffed himself with gumdrops and two chocolates and seen a dog run over.

That was all mixed and good and brought him to lighting-up time and the news of the day exhibited by the newspaper sky signs. Here he learned that Trojan had won at Kempton Park, and that Mussolini had sent a message to the League of Nations, and that Lloyd George was suffering from a chill at Churt.

Divided between Fleet Street and the West, he chose the latter and was rewarded by a taxicab accident at Piccadilly Circus.

Theater— turning-out time found him now in the Strand, and, coming along by the Strand Theater, the eyes that took in everything in heaven and earth and on the pavement saw a big white bead, which was promptly pouched, also a cigarette end that lay a little farther on, which he stuck in his mouth and lit with a moldy old match.

Then came the thought of home and Cassidy's Rents.

Cassidy's Rents were not closed for the night; in fact, when Patrick arrived, Billy Meehan, a person of his own age, was just arriving home from the opera —at least, from in front of the opera house in Covent Garden, where he had had no luck; and Pat's mother had only just gone to bed in the room which his father, his mother, himself and little Noreen called their home.

The door was on the latch, for they are all honest people there. Anyhow, there's nothing to steal. The elders in bed were asleep and snoring, like two people chloroformed and taking the anesthetic badly. But Noreen, eleven years old, in the rag bed on the floor near the window, was not asleep.

A wee white face showed in the moonlight. She was half sitting up on her elbow. She had been waiting for Pat, for he generally brought her something. As he took off his old boots, before getting into bed beside her, fully dressed as he was, the whisper came in the moonlight: "What 'a' ye got me?" Her demand

was followed by the answer: "Cards— and them." He put the dirty paper bag holding three last gumdrops in her hand. Then he remembered the bead and handed it to her.

It made her forget the gumdrops.

It looked beautiful in the moonlight. It was like a little vague lamp, and it held the sick child. For she was very sick, so that she forgot to ask for the cards. And Pat forgot them, too, for -he was in bed beside her now, snuggling down under the old quilt, and almost at once he was sleeping a sleep that many a rich man would have bought at a pound a minute.

Not only did the bead look like nothing else, but it felt like nothing else, so smooth and friendly and warm. She noticed the little hole in it and guessed it was meant to put on a string; but she did not want it on a string; she only wanted to hold this lovely bead and look at it and turn it about and feel it.

Then the fear came to her that Pat would want it back. Pat was that sort; though good-hearted enough, he had taken back several things he had given her.

She fell asleep with it in her hand, and it was there when she awoke in the morning, her father gone to work, her mother scolding Pat who was pulling on his boots, and the sun shining through the dirty window.

It looked even more beautiful when she had a peep at it in the daylight, when her mother's back was turned. Some days later when Mrs. Sweeny asked her:

"What are you hidin' under the pillow, Noreen?"

"Nothin', mummy. It's only an old bead Pat give me, but don't tell him, or he'll be wantin' it back," said Noreen.

And I doubt if Mrs. Sweeny would have taken it from her had she thought it of value, for Noreen was "going out." And when some days later she was gone, far, let us hope, from Cassidy's Rents, her grubby little hand was holding something tight— her last plaything, which nobody tried to take from her— and rightly, had they only known, for she was the only person who had loved the thing for its beauty and for itself.

Yet all the same, true to the history of gems, it was tragic— this wealth in the hand of one who had died from *tabes mesenterica*— which is one of the many Latin names doctors give to poverty.

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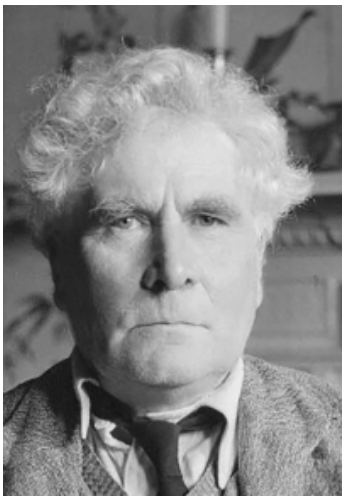
7: The Key of the Field

T. F. Powys

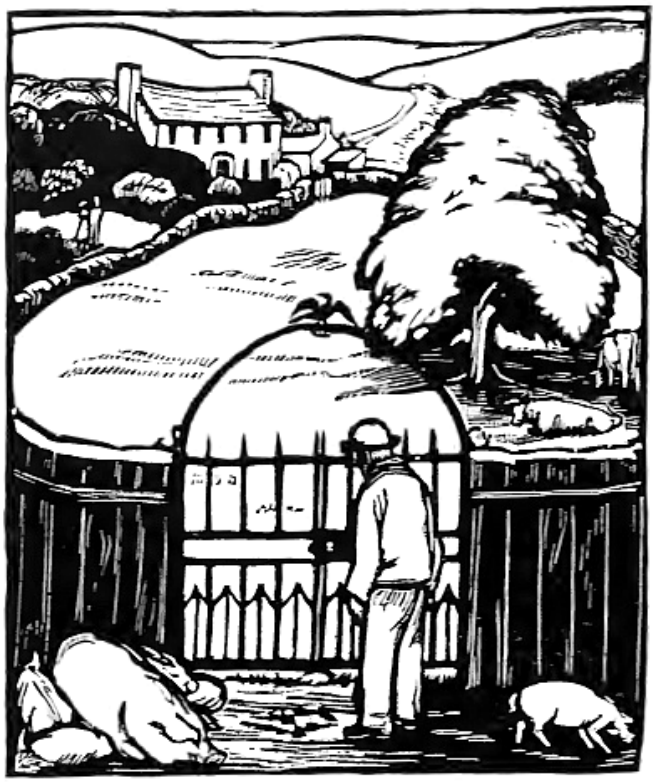
1875-1953

William Jackson (Books) Ltd, 1930



Theodore Francis Powys

Published as a chap-book containing just this story, a foreword by Sylvia Townsend Warner, and a woodcut illustration by R. A Garnett (1891-1940). The foreword is still in copyright.



Woodcut by Rachel Alice Garnett

UNCLE TIDDY stood in the road watching the leaves. The leaves spun around him in the wind, for the October frosts had turned them yellow, and the November blasts had shaken them from the trees.

Uncle Tiddy watched the leaves anxiously. He believed they were speaking to him. The yellow leaves were driven here and there; there was no rest for them, for one gust followed another to whirl them about.

Uncle Tiddy remained still and watched the leaves. The wind grew quiet and the driven leaves settled down into the shape of a key. Uncle Tiddy rejoiced. He believed that, one day, he would possess again the key of the field....

The field belonged to Squire Jar of Madder Hall. There was no better field in the whole world than this field.

The field consisted of twelve acres of the richest pasture. The grass grew luxuriously, and in the middle of the field there was a fine oak-tree that gave a welcome shelter to the cows during the hot summer weather.

The field had once— so Neddy, one of the oldest residents in Madder, used to say— been a portion of the Squire's garden, but the Squire— a worthy man who did not wish to keep all the best of everything for himself— built a low wall, and separated the new field from his old garden, hoping that the field would give to one or other of his tenants a lasting happiness.

But, for all the Squire's generosity— he dearly loves those who live upon his lands— Mr. Jar was a man who did not like to be too closely looked upon. And, so in order to prevent any other than his chosen tenants from walking too near his pleasure-garden where the choicest fruits and flowers grew, and where his friends were entertained all the year round, the Squire enclosed the field with high palings— the same that are used by noblemen for their deer parks— and also had a strong iron gate built, that was locked by a massive key.

The first tenant of the field, to whom the Squire's steward— a learned man, though somewhat old— handed the key, was Uncle Tiddy.

Uncle Tiddy was a proper man for the field, for, besides being a good husbandman, he was never a one to pry into other people's doings. Also his wife was dead, which may have been a reason— other than Uncle Tiddy's honesty— for choosing him as a tenant. For Squire Jar, as all people know, is a little afraid of women.

He had no objection, however, to Uncle Tiddy's niece, Lily, who was hardly more than a child, being between sixteen and seventeen years old— a girl who could dance and run as well as the best, and could skip better, since she was six years old, than any other maid in the village.

If Lily had a fault— and she was so well-grown and comely a girl that anyone might expect her to wish to be a wanton, it was that her heart was responsive to the slightest touch of love, though she seemed kinder to her Uncle than to any other man.

Who then should have been more happy than Uncle Tiddy with kind Lily to tend him, with the Squire's favour, and with the key of the field in his possession?

But even with a field so well worth having, Uncle Tiddy failed to prosper in his business, and old Grandmother Trott, his near neighbour, told a sad story about him, in which she said that Uncle Tiddy was little better than a sinner— indeed, she believed him to be one.

Grandmother Trott lived with her son John— a widower— and her two grandsons, that were as good as grown men, and ever since the new field was made, the garden hedge removed, palings and a gate set up, this family had envied Uncle Tiddy and desired, with all their hearts, to take the key from him and so to have the field.

Even before Uncle Tiddy had the key, the Trotts had hated the Tiddys, and only because the Tiddys had always been looked upon by others as honest, harmless folk, who kept a few good cows, while the Trotts had been but lean farmers, keeping only a sow or two and a few sickly hens, though now, by thieving management— for they stole the corn from Squire Jar's granary— they grew every day more prosperous, while Uncle Tiddy became every day poorer.

Seeing how affairs were going with Uncle Tiddy, old Grandmother Trott began to be merry, though sometimes she could be glum enough, and she would tell people— even affirming that she had heard the Squire's steward say the very words— that in the long run the good are sure to prosper, but that every sinner will one day or other lose all that he has.

"There be always ways and means to get the better of a man like Uncle Tiddy," Grandmother Trott told her son John: "and we have only to mind what we do say, and the field will be ours."

" 'Tis a field," replied John Trott, "that be too good for Tiddy, for how can his few cows feed off all the rich grass, and they be old too. 'Tis a sin and wickedness that so good a field should be his. I have often seen that when all the grounds elsewhere be burnt by a hot sun as hard as a biscuit, Tiddy's field be still green and flourishing, so that they few cows 'e do still have be always lying down."

"Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Trott angrily, "they do lie down, while ours be walking all day to get a bellyful, or else raging with tail on end to rid them of stinging flies."

Neither was it only the goodness of the grass that pleased the Trotts and made them wish for the field. They wished also to be spoken of as trusted people, as a family that was highly thought of by the Squire and his steward, so that at any holiday gathering they might hear folk tell one another: "'Tis they Trotts who have the best field."

Grandmother Trott was an ill-favoured woman. She moved uncomfortably, hunching up her shoulders as if she were always creeping in under low doorways.

One would have thought that, if the Squire's steward heard any tale of hers repeated to him, he would have doubted her words, but alas! now that he was grown old and his eyesight dim, he was known to listen to all the tittle-tattle of the village, which no just steward ought to do, though he would still speak to the people exactly as the Squire had spoken to him.

One Sunday in May, when all things abroad were lovely and shining under a generous sun, Grandmother Trott found her two grandsons at play at tosspenny in the back parlour at the farm, and went in to them with her head sunk as usual between her shoulders.

"Ah ha!" she said, with a smirking sneer, "ain't there no soft and young maids in the lanes for 'ee to tousle and tread, that thee must stay biding here like two worm-eating moles? Lily Tiddy be just tripped into wood to see what flowers she can spy. Thee be pretty men to toss a penny in a parlour! When I were young, a lusty fellow would throw a girl down time you do look at one, and take good heed that Miss did never rise same as she fell."

George Trott swore loudly. He put his winnings into his pocket and went out.

George was a big handsome fellow, and he hadn't to whisper many words to Lily under the shade of the big trees where she was picking the bluebells, before she willingly permitted him to enjoy her.

As soon as George began to boast at home about what he had done, Grandmother Trott decided what she should do. In a week or two she was noticed walking down the village, as if something pained her. "Maybe 'tis me back," she said, and waited beside the well until Uncle Tiddy went by on his way to the field.

"Look," she said to Mrs. Lugg, who washed the steward's silk hood that he wore on state occasions, and so was in his confidence, "look, there do go Uncle Tiddy! Why, though 'tis summer weather, 'is topcoat be buttoned to 'is chin. That's a-telling folk that he has sins to hide. He don't look happy neither; 'e be got poor and 'tis 'is evil wickedness that won't let 'e thrive."

Mrs. Trott laughed. She thrust out her head at Mrs. Lugg and laughed again.

"'Twouldn't do," she whispered, putting her mouth near to Mrs. Lugg's ear, "'twouldn't do for Steward to hear what pranks Uncle Tiddy be up to. Uncle Tiddy baint no honest liver. No one don't never hear him curse and swear at thik little cunning wench who do bide wi' 'e. No, no, 'tis all loving words and gifts from Uncle Tiddy to she. 'E don't never strike maiden with milking-stool, as a decent man will sometimes.— 'Tis too loving they be for righteous living."

Lily was both kind and loving— as Grandmother Trott seemed to guess— she was also very simple and innocent, and one evening when George met her in the wood, he begged so hard to be shown one peep of the Squire's pretty flowers over the wall, that Lily, wishing well to one who had pleased her, unlocked the gate and let him into the field...

It was now that Grandmother Trott began to talk indeed. Whenever she went to the well— and the act of pulling up the water suited her stooping shoulders— there would be sure to be someone for her to talk to, and this is how she began—

"Good folk baint honoured these days," she said. "They others do hide wickedness under a thin covering. Some have what they should never have had if Squire Jar knew all. Uncle Tiddy be a loving one to 'is kith and kin, and when a sort of work be begun at home 'tis continued abroad. Squire were deceived in his good man, but Steward, though 'e be near blind, do pry more closely into what be a-doing."

Mrs. Trott had not been talking long about Uncle Tiddy before the Squire's steward heard from Mrs. Lugg what was being said, and told the Squire that Uncle Tiddy permitted the gate of the field to be unlocked and that Lily brought men into the field to look at the Squire's garden.

This the Squire, himself, was aware of, for once, when reading beside the pond of water-lilies and watching some pretty children at play, he knew that someone had watched him.

When Squire Jar heard the truth, he was very angry, and said that he did not like to have his quiet, nor yet his rompings and gay jollity, to be watched by rude strangers— for Squire Jar can be merry at times, as well as grave— and thus it came about that the key of the field was taken from Uncle Tiddy and given to John Trott.

That was a joyful day for John Trott when he received the key of the field.

Mr. Jar's trusted steward, who always wore the white robes of his office when anything important was to be done, delivered the key with his own hands to John Trott, in the sight of all people. He also told him— as was proper he should— the Squire's commands, but he hemmed and coughed a little when he said that Uncle Tiddy had disobeyed them in certain matters, for the steward had already forgotten what Uncle Tiddy had done.

As soon as he had finished with his talk, John Trott replied briskly: "I will never"— he swore on oath— "look over the Squire's wall. I swear it. I have no wish to watch the Squire, whether he be merry or sad, nor yet to see how his young friends disport themselves. What others do is no business of mine; my only desire is that my family should prosper, and that I should make a fair and honest profit at my trade."

The reply pleased the steward, who shook John by the hand, and they ate and drank together as the custom is upon such an occasion....

Nature works apace, and when Lily walked out one Sunday, she was carrying a baby, and the people— as people will, all the world over— nodded and gossiped.

"Ah, yes," said Mrs. Sly, the wife of Nicholas, "many's the time that I've seen Uncle Tiddy taking in the clothes frozen stiff in winter time for thik lazy maid. And the mats too, that be only straw woons, I've seen 'e shaking. Who does not know that one kindness do lead to another in people's homes?"

Uncle Tiddy was too proud a man to deny these evil tales, though he knew that he was being talked about, but, since he had been deprived of the field, he hardly cared what happened to him.

Troubles do not sleep like quiet, well-pastured cows, and poverty— when once it gets hold— rarely lets go again. Soon Uncle Tiddy had nothing left— no cows, nor even any little pigs, nor cock nor hen. He had always spent more money than he should, and so when the evil days overtook him, he had no savings put away, and Lily was forced to work as a day-servant at the house of the steward.

But, though Uncle Tiddy was now so poor a man as to be obliged to live upon the small wages that Lily brought to him, the Trotts still hated and still wished to torment him.

"There is no trusting to Squire Jar," Grandmother Trott said crossly, "and though the good steward makes all things seem easy to us, both here and hereafter, yet that cursed Squire— a man who reaps where he has never sown— may suddenly break into our house, like a thief, and take away the key of the field and give it back again to Uncle Tiddy. Only look how Tiddy troubles us and annoys our brave children. He is forever standing before the iron gate that leads into the field. He looks through the bars as though the field were still his own, and waits only for the key in order to go in. I have watched him more than once, and he looks so lovingly into the field, as if he tried to draw the field into his own body, and so to deprive us of it."

Grandmother Trott spoke the truth, for Uncle Tiddy would be always looking through the gate into the field. Any way that he took— for he went out

of a morning whether the rain fell or the sun shone— would always bring him to the locked gate of the field.

"You do not know," he would say to Lily in the evening— for they were alone again, Lily's baby having died of the smallpox: "You do not know, Lily, how much I long to possess again the key of the field. Will the iron gate be locked against me for ever?"

And Lily would then try, with all the kindness that was in her heart, to console him for the loss.

"Do not sorrow overmuch," she said, one evening, "for though the steward seems to command all here, he does not always know his master's mind. And besides, though the key of the field has been given to the Trotts, yet 'tis said that the Squire always keeps a master key at the Manor House, with which he can open, whenever he chooses, any gate upon his land."

"But the Squire passed me on the hill today, and he turned his face away from me," groaned Uncle Tiddy, "and unless I can take the key of the field from the Trotts I shall never get in."

"Alas!" replied Lily, "I know well enough that the Squire leaves everything now-a-days to his steward, an old man who only thinks of the fine house he lives in, the rich clothes he wears, and the ring upon his finger. Besides that, he drinks too much wine. Since I have been a servant within his doors, I have learned to know his ways, and he is a man very easy to deceive. My fellow-servants are always cheating him in one way or another and they never get found out, for now he grows so blind that he hardly knows the night from the day."

"Oh, but I long for the field," said Uncle Tiddy, sadly, "though I do not want it now for any worldly profit that it gives, I only wish to get again the peace and joy of that field, so green and safe it used to be, so freed from loud noises— a place where only the sound of gentle laughter and the happy voices of the Squire's guests are ever heard."

"I don't suppose," said Lily, in a low tone, "that any of us poor village people could ever get invited into the Squire's garden."

Uncle Tiddy shook his head.

"No, we cannot go there," he replied, "but we may get into the field if we find the key. It's a field to delight in, a rich pasture. I remember how I used to lie under the oak, while my quiet cows fed near by. I would lie so still that my very life and being seemed to leave me, for the holy stillness of the field entered into me and I lost myself in it. The air was so very still and I lay so contentedly that I hardly knew myself to be alive."

"But do not go, I beg you," said Lily, "always to the gate of the field, for the Trotts are greedy people and are suspicious of what you do. They think that

you envy their large red and white cows that feed in the field, and who's to tell that they might not suddenly swing open the gate and crush you?"

Uncle Tiddy hung his head and said no more.

Grandmother Trott had noticed him going to the gate, and she feared that, if the Squire saw him there, he might be let through, and so she wished to harm him again, hoping that he might die of sorrow.

"Surely," she said to her grandsons, "thee baint the ones to let a silly maid stay happy when once she be fallen? Where a hedge be broke 'tis easy climbing, and a second mowing be the greatest pleasure. To her again, my fine boys!"

This time it was James who was sent to do the mischief, and very willingly he went to it. He lay among some tall bushes in wait for Lily, who had to pass along a dark lane on her way home. Seeing her come hurrying by, he laid hold of her and, by means of a blow or two with his fist, he forced her to yield herself to his pleasure.

Lily wept much, but she did not tell her uncle what had happened, and in a few months' time a merry word went about the village that Uncle Tiddy had been at work again, and people said that another child was to be born in his house— which happened as was foretold, only Lily died in childbed and the babe died, too.

Uncle Tiddy was brought before the Squire's steward upon an incestuous charge, for James Trott swore to having seen the act committed beside the field gate before the sun was risen. "Many a time," he said, "he had seen it done." But the steward who was the chief magistrate in those parts, being a little put out at the necessity of going to the court, had forgotten to drink his bottle that morning, and so could see and hear a little more clearly than usual. This being so, Master Steward had a word or two to say to James Trott, and Uncle Tiddy was allowed to go home.

Lily was buried with her child in a grave near to where her first baby was laid, and Uncle Tiddy lived alone, and his wants were relieved by the parish, by order of the Squire's steward.

But even now, though anyone would have thought that they had got the better of him and that he was put down, never to arise, the Trotts would not let Uncle Tiddy alone.— A newborn calf of theirs happened to die in the field— owing to neglect, for the Trotts took no thought of their beasts when they needed help— and so when this calf died they wished to blame someone for their fault. They blamed Uncle Tiddy, for Grandmother Trott had seen him look through the gate and bewitch the cows. "He wrote words in the dust," she said, "and then cast the dirt through the gate at the cows. Who can tell what will happen in the future?" cried Grandmother Trott, "for, as long as Uncle

Tiddy do live 'e may one day reach hold of the key. We be all fools to trust to Squire Jar, for Squire baint never out— except now and again he walks upon Madder Hill. He never looks after his affairs, he is always enjoying himself in his own garden, and there baint no trusting a man who do sit brooding at home. Uncle Tiddy be the one to watch what we be about, and one day, when my son do take a glass wi' Steward, 'e may let fall the key. Folks do tell how Steward do tipple it finely now, and that 'e don't know right from wrong when 'e be drunk. And, maybe, if Uncle Tiddy did steal the key, Steward might think it were his own to hold. We mustn't let Uncle Tiddy have no rest till 'e be dead."

Grandmother Trott found Mrs. Lugg and Mrs. Sly beside the well, where they were come to draw water. Mrs. Sly had a swollen foot that she was showing to Mrs. Lugg.

"I have something to say to 'ee," said Grandmother Trott, after admiring Mrs. Sly's foot, and speaking in a whisper: "Uncle Tiddy, now 'e baint got nothing to do have begun to talk against Squire Jar. He do say that 'taint 'e alone who have been merry wi' a young maid. 'E do say Squire 'imself have a-done it. Uncle Tiddy do curse and swear how 'tis true what 'e do say. Why, bless us all, 'e did stand beside Farmer Told's barn— where the echo do shout and talk— and damn 'imself to hell if his words weren't true, naming even the village where the maid did live. He said— and swore to it— that Squire did come at his girl in the night time and overshadowed her with his black cloak that be like a raven's wings...."

The people now began to believe all that Grandmother Trott had to say against Uncle Tiddy, though at first they had not believed her. Uncle Tiddy had been kind to many of them, but even those whom he had once befriended now turned against him, because they knew that he had nothing left to give. The people even forgot how they had once loved Lily, who used to be so merry and playful, and would please even old people by her goodness, for she would talk with old Nicholas Sly, who had a wen as big as a walnut upon his forehead, and was so ugly and foul a man that all the children ran away from him.

Uncle Tiddy was now unable to go out in the daytime, for he could not bear to be treated rudely. Sometimes the village brats would throw dirt after him and spit upon him, so that he was forced to remain indoors until darkness came.

But when the sun went down behind Madder Hill, and the kind darkness of night brought solace to unhappy man, then Uncle Tiddy would go abroad and search diligently for the key of the field.

Perhaps he might have given up all hope of finding it, and used an old cart-rope to end his torment, had it not been that, in loitering by the field gate upon a very still night when all the village was asleep, he thought he heard a

voice that he knew well singing some pretty lullaby over the field and in the Squire's garden. The voice he was sure was Lily's and Uncle Tiddy fancied, as he listened, that infant voices joined in her songs. The sound of their strange singing— though Uncle Tiddy only heard it that once— made him the more eager to get into the field, for he believed that, if he lay down to sleep there, the sound of those voices might come to him again.

And so Uncle Tiddy used to cover himself with a large cloak, and when each evening came, he would set out to search for the key.

The autumn leaves, when they whirled about him and then lay still and silent, told him that the key existed for which he looked. High up in the heavens, upon clear nights, he saw the key— a key of shining stars. Once, when he stood upon the low cliffs and looked into the sea— the waters being all still— he thought he saw, lying very deep in the sea, the key of the field.

At first when Uncle Tiddy began his search, he used to look in the village and usually he would go to the gate itself, hoping that one of the Trotts might have dropped the key when they locked the gate.

After searching for a few nights Uncle Tiddy's troubles and sorrows seemed lighter for him to bear. He even supposed himself to be happier than he had been in the old days, only excepting, of course, those pleasant hours when he used to lay him down to rest in the shelter of the locked field. For, even when Lily had been alive to love him, his troubles and anxieties had often been hard. He had always feared for Lily, knowing how loving she was, and that, for this very reason, she was more likely to become a prey to the spoiler.

In other ways, too, besides the fears he had for Lily, he used to be troubled. He could never understand how the Squire— whom he always believed to be a good man— could allow a steward, who had seldom his ears open to anything but lies, to rule his fine estate. Uncle Tiddy always thought it a very strange thing that this Squire who owned so many acres of land, should not have found a way— other than the crude methods of his sottish steward who, more often than not, would use the whipping post as a cure— to protect the simple, the loving, and the kind from horrid outrage.

But now that Uncle Tiddy sought the key so assiduously, his feelings were different. He looked only to the field for comfort.

"Oh," he would cry out, starting up hurriedly when the darkness drew near, "oh, that I might find the key! Then would I unlock the gate and, full of joy, enter the field. I would lie down there, but not as I used to lie, for I would never wish as I used to do to return again to the village, for I have no hope now left, outside the field...."

After a month or two Uncle Tiddy was not content to look only in the village for the key. He thought that he might find it further away.

Ever since John Trott had possessed the key, that cunning man had prospered finely. The Trotts had even done so well that they had bought land. They owned a large down of near a hundred acres of goodish pasture, that lay behind Madder Hill. And so, Uncle Tiddy thought it not unlikely that while John was looking to his affairs upon the hill, the key might fall out of his pocket and be lost, for Grandmother Trott was too lazy a gossip ever to mend a broken coat.

Besides that chance, there was also the likelihood that one of the sons of John Trott might have the key of the field in his keeping when he walked out upon a Sunday with his young girl, and, indeed, there was hardly a Madder girl that the two young men did not try to lead into evil ways. So Uncle Tiddy thought it not unlikely that, in the excitement of their naughtiness, one or other of them might let fall the key.

As Uncle Tiddy walked about by night, searching carefully upon the hill, often kneeling upon his knees to be nearer to the ground, a curious fancy would sometimes come to him that Lily, whom he had ever loved as a good man loves a child, moved beside him and helped him to look for the key....

As time went on the Trotts— as was proper they should— grew richer and richer, for what the young men spent upon drink or women— they even went into the steward's own house in search of their dainties— they easily made up, or else their father did for them, by cheating someone poorer than themselves in a cunning deal.

Uncle Tiddy was glad that they prospered, for, caring nothing now for any possession in the whole world other than the key of the field, he thought that the Trotts— in order to be rid of his importunity— might yield him that, because having so much land they scarcely seemed to give a thought to the field.

They even began to despise and to hate it, saying that it was too small and too mean, a place of too narrow a compass to yield a man any profit. And besides, being too near the Squire's garden, they could not drink or sing or lecher there as in other grounds.

One evening, about twilight, when the barn owls flutter along the hedgerows, Uncle Tiddy went out, and meeting John Trott, he asked him boldly for the key of the field.

John Trott only laughed loudly and went home laughing, leaving Uncle Tiddy to continue his search for the key. So great now was Uncle Tiddy's hurry and excitement to find what he sought, that he hardly allowed himself time to eat or to sleep. In the day-time he would lie upon his bed and plan in his mind which field to go to when the evening came. If ever he did happen to drop off into a little sleep, a dream would come to him, in which he held the key in his

hand, and he would walk along always with a gay step to unlock the gate, though more than once in the dream the key turned in the lock damnable hard.

He had sunk one evening, a little before the time of his going out, into a restless slumber, when all at once he leapt up— the time being near to midnight— out of a strange dream, and putting his cloak over him, he went out into the night.

Uncle Tiddy did not take the path to the downs as he had so often done of late, but turned along the village street and passed the Inn without looking at the ground. This was curious, for he used always to look there when he went by, expecting that John Trott might easily have dropped the key when he walked a little tipsily out of the Inn gate.

But Uncle Tiddy did not hesitate now nor yet look at all; he walked boldly, as if he knew what to do.

Presently he came to the churchyard gate. He opened it and went in.

The time of year was winter. Mournful clouds hung low, while behind them, hidden as by a thick cloak, was the moon. Uncle Tiddy knew the way. He found Lily's grave and knelt beside it.

And now Uncle Tiddy bethought him of one of the rights that belong to those who are born upon Squire Jar's land. For everyone so born is entitled to call boldly upon the Squire for one gift, in the name of a loving one, but that gift must be the last. Uncle Tiddy would not have ventured upon using this right— for he knew the Squire's rules— had he not first asked the steward for the key. But the steward, as Grandmother Trott had foretold, had come to believe the evil stories that were told about Uncle Tiddy, and so, when he asked for the key, wishing only to walk in the field for a little, the steward looked grimly at him and, with an ugly oath, told him he would be locked out for ever.

"'Tis the Squire's own words," said the steward, "for without are dogs and sorcerers and whoremongers and murderers—"

Uncle Tiddy was about to call upon the Squire for the key when his faith failed him. "Suppose," he thought, "that the Squire is a hard man, suppose that were I to call there would be none to answer."

Uncle Tiddy wept bitterly. He wished a thousand times that he had never been born. Despair held him fast and would have killed him, only that Uncle Tiddy, scarce knowing what he did in his agony, cried out to the Squire for the key, and then lay down as though he were dead.

For a long while he lay there until he knew that Squire Jar had entered the churchyard and was standing beside him.

"I never refuse to anyone a harmless wish," said the Squire. "I was walking to-night under the trees in my garden when I heard you call to me for the key of the field."

Uncle Tiddy endeavoured to rise to greet the Squire, but despair had so trod him down that he could not move.

Then the Squire held out his hand to him and raised him up.

"You have asked me for the key," said the Squire, kindly: "do you wish to remain in the field when you have unlocked the gate?"

"Yes, for ever," replied Uncle Tiddy, "and I require only the smallest space where a man can lie. I wish to forget."

"Do you wish to forget Lily?" asked the Squire in a very low tone.

"Where she is, I will be," said Uncle Tiddy, "for we have loved much."

"Then it's true that you have sinned," said the Squire.

"If to love is to sin, then we have sinned," replied Uncle Tiddy.

The Squire was silent.

"Give me the key," cried Uncle Tiddy, "do not refuse me the key."

"I give you mine own," said the Squire, and he handed to Uncle Tiddy a key of gold. "I will go with you," said the Squire, "for John Trott may oppose your entrance into the field."

The Squire and Uncle Tiddy left the churchyard. On the way to the field Mr. Jar talked of the crops and how well he remembered the good hay that Uncle Tiddy had made in former days and how he had sold it to the steward for his master's stables.

They reached the gate of the field and found no one there to prevent their entering, and Uncle Tiddy— having the master key in his hand— easily unlocked the gate and let himself into the field, where, thinking that the Squire had left him, he lay down to sleep. He lay very still and thought that he slept soundly— so soundly that he might have slept for a thousand years. But whether or no he had really slept, he was not sure. He looked up and saw that the Squire was still beside him and the winter's night was the same.

"Come," said Squire Jar, gently raising Uncle Tiddy from the grass: "come, we will walk through the field— but do you not hear anything?"

"I hear someone singing," replied Uncle Tiddy. "The voice is Lily's; she is singing to her babies in your garden."

Then Uncle Tiddy grew sad. But he still walked with the Squire, until he came to where he remembered the wall had been.

"Look," said the Squire, "for my garden is beautiful, even in winter. The flowers shine like precious stones; the walks are green, and the air is mild and sweet. You have been my tenant for a season: you will now be my guest for ever."

"We are in your garden," cried Uncle Tiddy, gladly. "But where is the Wall?"
"You unlocked the gate of the field with my key," replied the Squire.

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8: XYZ 666. A Comedy

E. Everett-Green

Evelyn Ward Everett-Green, 1856-1932
Western Mail (Perth, Aust) 16 Feb 1907

I couln't find an earlier British publication of this short story by the prolific Victorian and Edwardian novelist Miss Everett-Green. In the first few years of the 20th century "furious driving" by well-heeled but thoughtless men was a hot topic: just think of Toad of Toad Hall in Wind in the Willows*.*

"YOU HOUNDS! You curs! You unspeakable brutes!"

The cry escaped from the lips of the cyclist, who was skimming quietly down a long hill in the rear of a motor-car. He was keeping well behind to be out of the sickly and offensive odour which followed in its train; but the lie of the land upon this hill slope enabled him to see the road a long way ahead of him hedges and trees being alike bare; for the winter was at its deadest, Christmas being indeed close at hand.

A small governess car, drawn by a sturdy little pony had been coming up the hill; it had only one occupant, and that a lady. At the approaching of the motor-car the pony showed signs of fright, and the girl held up a warning and imploring hand. To the indignation of the cyclist, the warning signal was utterly disregarded, the car swept down upon the affrighted little animal and its solitary driver; next instant he saw the girl's body projected in a parabolic curve and shot out over the hedge into the field below, whilst the pony and cart were left mixed up in a ditch and hedge, the pony struggling furiously in his bonds and lashing out wildly.

The car sped on with never a look be-hind at the catastrophe it had wrought; and the hot blood of the cyclist boiled in his veins.

"You want stringing up in a row— the whole lot of you!" spoke he between his shut teeth, as he let his machine skim faster. He had a strong rim brake, and as he approached the scene of the catastrophe he judiciously applied it, and leaped lightly to the ground.

The pony winnied at sight of him, and ceased its struggles.

''All right, little chap; I'll come to you next: but I must see to your mistress first," and the active athlete leaped the hedge, and landed in the field below at the side of the girl. She was just opening her eyes. She gazed up at the sky overhead, and then at the stranger bending over her. He saw that in spite of the dishevelment of the accident she was a very pretty girl, and daintily dressed withal. As her pale lips strove to frame a question, he slipped out his

little pocket flask, and poured into the cup some of the stimulant he always carried when touring, in case of mishap or a wetting.

"Drink this; you'll be better then." He helped her to a sitting posture, relieved that no wince of pain betrayed itself. She swallowed the potion, choked over it; and the colour began to come back into her face.

"Oh, I remember now. That motor-car! Tommy does so hate them. He's a little naughty too; for he is not really frightened now, but he will make a fuss, and I am not a very good driver. Hilda can make him pass them, but I can't. I hope he isn't hurt. Let me go and see."

"The point is, are you hurt? Let me help you up. No bones broken? That's all right. Never mind the mud, that will all brush off when it's dry. Are you sure you're able to stand?"

"Quite sure. I think I'm only shak-en and bruised a little. My shoulder feels as if it had had a bang. I dare say I shall be stiff to-morrow. But really I'm not hurt. Did I come flying right away down here?"

"You did. I saw you. Oh, those motor-men! I was just longing for the power to erect a Haman's gallows and make an example of half a dozen of them—beginning with the fellow in that car!"

A little tremulous laugh broke from the girl.

"You are like Sir Ralph Marjoribanks. He hates them so. He will

hate them worse than ever after this. I wonder if Hilda will—"

She stopped short, and the cyclist looked at her with sudden and fresh interest.

"Are you from Banksbrook Hall, then?"

"Yes; I am Hilda Marjoribanks' great friend; and I teach the little children, too. You know; there are two families. Hilda is the first wife's only child—"

She stopped suddenly, putting her

hand to her head.

"'Please forgive my chatter. You seemed so like a friend—"

"I hope I may soon be ranked as one. I am on my way to Banksbrook Hall."

"Are you? Oh! I am so glad. Will you please tell me your name? I suppose you are one of the invited guests?"

"Yes. I sent on my belongings and I came on my wheel, as the weather was so pleasant. My name is Paul Anstruther."

The girl flushed from brow to chin, and her face shone.

"Are you; how interesting. I thought Mr. Anstruther would be so much older. I do like your books so much. I know it sounds fearfully banal to say it to your face; but I can't help it. They fascinate me; and the one just out, *The Dreamer in the Garden*. I couldn't go to bed till I had finished it!"

The man laughed and moved to the pony. Paul was a wiry fellow, of some two-and-thirty summers, with a keen clever face and a very resolute cast of countenance. The way he handled the pony showed him no novice with the equine race; and he understood all the straps of the harness as well as any stableman could have done. Very soon the small steed was released, and the cart pulled forth, thick in mud, and with the door twisted half-off, but otherwise not seriously injured.

'"Now," he said, "since we both seem bent upon the same destination, and nothing has been vitally injured, suppose I deposit my cycle in the hedge and drive you back. Unless you had some other object in view of great importance."

"No, no. I was taking a parcel up to a cottage over the hill crest; but I see a cart coming, and its owner will deliver it for me. Let me wheel your cycle downhill to a cottage at the foot, and you take care of Tommy. Then we will drive back together, if you will be so good. I don't feel like driving myself any more to-day."

This programme was carried out, and at the foot of the hill both got into the little cart, and Tommy started at a brisk trot.

"I say," suddenly spoke Paul, "you've hurt your wrist. See how it's swelling. You didn't tell me that—"

"I did not quite know at first. But I don't suppose it's anything to matter. I can get it bound up at home—''

"Do we pass a doctor's on the way?"

"Why— yes; Mr. Darrel's house is on our way; but—"

"Darrel— Darrel? Do you mean Dare Darrel—?"

"Yes— yes; that is his name. Do you know him?"

"Used to fag for him at school— meet him sometimes in Town. Dare Devil we used to call him at school. Fine fellow, and lots of brains as well as pluck—"

"Oh, hasn't he, hasn't he? That's just what everybody says. He is sure to make his way. What does it matter his not having a lot of money? Hilda doesn't care a straw; and she has enough—"

The girl stopped short again, colouring vividly. It must have been the shaking she had had which made her so ridiculous. Fancy babbling like that to a stranger! And yet he seemed more like a friend than a stranger already.

Dare Darrel came out to meet them at the gate. He looked at the wrist, whilst eagerly acknowledging Paul's presence.

"Oh, what's the matter?'' cried a clear sweet voice; and a girl in fawn cloth and rich sables came skimming towards them. There was another ele-ment instantly and imperatively forced upon Paul's consciousness, as Hilda Marjoribanks and Dare Darrel bent ov-er the swollen wrist and she helped him

to adjust the cold water bandage, which was what he recommended for the present.

"You dine with us to-night, don't you, Mr. Darrel, so you can see how your patient progresses then."

It was Hilda who drove off with her companion when the bandage was adjusted. Paul and Dare stood looking after the pair: and Paul laid a hand upon his one-time comrade's shoulder and said:

"I'm a reader of situations: and that little golden-haired Angela—didn't Miss Marjoribanks call her Angela?— let several cats out of bags. Sets the wind in that quarter?"

"I worship the ground she treads on," Dare answered gravely. "I believe that is not a great secret in this neighbourhood. But her father has other ideas for her. There is the son of an old friend— it has been his scheme from their childhood. He calls it an engagement. Hilda says she never engaged herself, never had the chance of a say in the matter. Still it's regarded as a *fait accompli*. But I'm not sure—"

"Exactly. The modern daughter does not marry at her father's bidding— not if her heart is elsewhere engaged?"

The young daughter flushed very slightly as he answered:

'That is not a point upon which I can invite discussion."

He took his friend into his house— a comfortable one enough— for he had some private means. They smoked a pipe, together, and Paul asked who was the suitor favoured by Sir Ralph for his daughter's hand.

"A fellow called Hector Bute. I've seen him once or twice—"

"So have I— at clubs. He's got the sobriquet there of 'hectoring brute.' Shall I name this to Sir Ralph?"

Dare grinned a little in appreciation and then looked grim.

"To tell the truth, I don't think Sir Ralph knows much about the fellow. Old Bute was his best friend— a fine man by all accounts, and the thing was patched up between them. It goes on because Sir Ralph's built that way; and so far has heard nothing against this Hector— except that he drives a motor-car, and drives recklessly. He hates the cars like poison: but that's scarcely enough to make him break off the supposed engagement, though Hilda— Miss Marjoribanks, I mean— does try to work the oracle that way. Jove! how time flies! I must be getting into my togs. I've a visit to pay on my way—"

Paul started up and made his way rapidly in the direction of the Hall, and was quickly hurrying into dinner dress by the light of a roaring fire and many wax candles. An old-world charm still hung over Banksbrook Hall, where electric light, hot water radiators, bridge-playing, and gambling over billiards were alike taboo.

The house was full, and the drawing room seemed crowded when he got down. It was with pleasure that he found himself walking across the slippery oak floor of the hall with Angela on his arm. She seemed like a friend in the midst of strangers; though he knew Lady Marjoribanks a little, and had been pleased to accept her invitation.

Hilda was opposite to him, between Darrel and the man who had taken her in. When a slight pause occurred dur-ing the course of the dinner, her voice was heard speaking to her father—ask-ing him whether he had heard of the brutal outrage which had occurred that very afternoon.

Angela was called upon to tell her tale—all the table listening—comment-ing. Sir Ralph's face grew purple with suppressed fury.

"My dear, I hope you took that man's number. He shall—"

"I'm so sorry, but I couldn't. He went too fast, and I was frightened. I knew you'd ask me. I tried to see; but—"

"Did you see the faces of the men?"

"Indeed I didn't. They had on those goggle masks."

Sir Ralph's hand upon the table made the glasses leap and ring.

"It's a scandal such things are allowed— men masked like brigands and behaving like brutes."

"I know the number, Sir Ralph," spoke a clear voice from beside Angela. "I was inflating my tyre when they passed, and I followed them down the hill and saw everything. The car carried the board XYZ666."

There was a little burst of laughter from some present, and Sir Ralph's grim face relaxed to a sort of smile.

"A most appropriate number for sucha driver. Well, he shall hear something from me one of these days. We will find out who he is; and lenient as magistrates are in nine cases out of ten, I think that if there be justice to be had for the suffering public, this is a case to make an example of somebody."

Paul looked at Hilda, and saw that her face was oddly flushed. A curious shining was in her eyes. She said quietly to her father.

"To-morrow, you know, Mr. Bute will come here on his motor-car. I know he has letters something like that. Perhaps he will know who is the owner of 666."

And in his heart Paul Anstruther (who was a reader of faces) said—

"That girl knows something that she will not say— yet."

THE NEXT DAY was a gay one at Banks-brook Hall. There were opportunities for tête-à-tête talks. Paul and Angela had a fashion of drifting together, exchanging ideas, and watching other people; and soon found

themselves down by the side of lake, where an overflow upon an adjacent meadow had made skating practicable after only one night's hard frost.

"Look at them!" cried Angela, "aren't they splendid!"

She spoke of Hilda and the doctor, who together were gliding over the shining surface of the ice, with grace and dexterity that evoked admiration from all who saw them.

"Is that young Bute come?" asked Sir Ralph, who was short-sighted, hurrying up to watch.

"No, it's Darrel," answered Paul, "fine fellow Darrel. I've known him ever since we were boys together. Sure of making a name in his profession; and a gentleman to his finger-tips— which in these days is saying something."

"Yes, yes; he's a good fellow enough," answered the baronet a little uneasily. "Hilda, my dear, suppose you take off your skates now, and come with me to the house. I expect Hec-tor to arrive every minute now; and they seem so busy there that there will be no one to welcome him."

"Oh, that would be a pity!" cried Hilda, with suddenly shining eyes. "I particularly want to be there to welcome Mr. Bute—a nd his motor-car when he arrives. Come, Daddy, let us go, and shall we all go together?"

She looked at Paul and Angela, and then swept a quick glance at Dare. They followed her, and Sir Ralph, with his hand on Angela's shoulder, spoke rather fiercely.

"I've been writing to The '*Times* to-day. I wish every father and every landowner in the kingdom would join hands against this intolerable nuisance which is becoming the bane and misery of life to all dwellers in the country. I've written to the police, too, giving the identification plate number. We'll prosecute— never fear. That fellow shall be punished—"

Hilda looked back over her shoulder, her eyes shining.

''Yes. Daddy, he shall be punished," she said, "and you shall punish him yourself. It will be splendid! Come on, I think I hear the sound of a motor-car coming up the park."

Then Hilda turned to Paul Anstruther and brought him to her side by a quick flashing glance.

"Would you recognise the driver of that car again?"

"I should know his motoring-coat— and his voice anywhere. He was talking loud as he passed me. I could also see that his face was broad and red, and his left ear rather abnormally large; I don't think I should be at fault."

They walked rapidly across the short grass of the park, which the frost had rendered crisply dry. There was no mistaking the sound—or the smell—of the car gliding up towards the house. Sir Ralph waved his stick, and the owner of

the car stopped it and sprang out, doffing his hat with great show of cordial bonhomie, and calling out in a rather thick and raucous voice.

"Good day, Sir Ralph, good day, ladies! Fine seasonable weather this." And as he spoke the last word his eyes (from which the goggles had been removed) fixed themselves significantly upon Hilda's face.

"That's the fellow," spoke Paul in a low voice. "I'd know him anywhere."

"How do, Hector?" called back the baronet, holding out a cordial hand. "Glad to have you safe and sound. Never trust those new-fangled things, you know; always breaking down or smashing up, or—" he drew his breath sharply for a moment, and then added, "We wanted you specially to-day. As tomorrow is Sunday, we're keeping all our jollity for to-night. Ah— ha! my boy; you take me. There's one toast I want to drink at dinner. You've a few hours before you yet— make the most of them!"

These last words were spoken low, and the broad, red face of the motorist glowed and kindled. His eyes fastened upon Hilda's slender grace and vivid beauty with something of gloating glee. Dare Darrel saw the look and his blood boiled. Paul saw it, too, and he chuckled inwardly. His glance then flew towards Angela, who carried one hand in a sling; her face was a little pale; but her eyes as they met his were dancing.

"You have not come far to-day, I think, Mr. Bute," spoke Hilda as they made their way towards the car standing panting in the sweep.

"Right you are, my lady," he answered in his jocular and breezy fashion, "though I don't know how you knew. I've been touring round a bit here; spent last night at the Waterman's. They wanted to keep me, but I knew a trick worth two of that!" If he did not wink he went near it.

"I'm glad you have come," she said, with an odd little inflection in her voice. "Perhaps you will be able to help my father. He has a question he wants to ask you. I believe you will be able to answer it. Daddy, have you spoken yet to Mr. Bute about that out-rage of yesterday?"

"Motor hooliganism, I call it: but the ruffian, whoever he was, will find himself in the wrong box this time! That little girl yonder might have been killed— might have broken her neck. If she hadn't been as light as a bit of thistledown she must have done so. I'd have had it brought in wilful murder then. A few of those ruffians want hanging— as we all know. That your car— well, I hope they are ugly enough! What's your number? you don't keep your plate very clean. XYZ— that's it! Good! Must be same district; perhaps you know the fellow—" Sir Ralph came to a sudden stop. He was short-sighted. He had to approach the car closely before he could read the whole inscription, "XYZ666—"

Something in his tone of voice caused Mr. Bute to break into an uneasy laugh.

"Mark of the Beast don't they call it— his number or something. I've been chaffed about that before; but I tell 'em it ain't no doin' of mine. Have to take what's given you—"

He stopped suddenly. Sir Ralph wheeled upon him with eyes that glow-ed and flashed beneath their busy brows.

"Is that your car, sir?" he asked in a voice of thunder.

"Why, certainly, why not?"

"And you were driving it yesterday afternoon?"

The man hesitated; he saw the trap about to close upon him. He had not troubled to give the frightened pony and its girl driver a second thought since he had swept by, ignoring the signal of distress. "Never look behind," was his motto, and he lived up to it. Would a lie save him? If it would he would not scruple to tell one. But even as he hesitated a cool incisive voice cut across the pregnant silence.

"I can answer that question, Sir Ralph. It was this— gentleman— who was driving this car yesterday; and who, after being the cause of what might easily have been a fatal accident, swept away without so much as looking back."

"Mr. Bute," spoke another voice very quietly— a woman's this time— "you did me the honour to inform me not very long since that you wished to marry me, and would come again for your answer. I will give it you now. I refuse utterly to have anything further to do with you. I never wish to see you again. I am sorry to say this to my father's friend—"

"My dear, I am equally sorry to say it; but after a revelation such as Mr. Bute has made of his true nature, he can never be received here as a friend again—"

The man's face was crimson— purple— with anger, fury, thwarted ambition (for Hilda's fortune was larger than she knew, and her birth high)— and humiliation. He sprang upon his car, and shouted in his raucous voice:

"Then I'll be off, sir. I'll go back to the Watermans, who want me. I've had enough of insult for one day; you'll not find me darkening your doors again in a hurry!"

"I am sorry to have to speed the parting guest," answered Sir Ralph, whose face was stern and cold. "But you will find more congenial compan-ions elsewhere. I am thankful that my daughter has understood your true na-

ture before—"

But the car was gone, shooting forward, leaving its evil odour behind it. Hilda grasped her father's arm.

"Daddy, I never could have married him. It is not the motor-car that has changed him— it was always in him before. But he kept it from you. O, how thankful I am you have seen what I always knew was there! And now come and talk to me, Daddy. I have something particular to say to you," and she walked him off with a compelling hand upon his arm, and Angela's eyes shone like stars as she turned them towards Paul.

THAT NIGHT the revels went right merrily. When the time-honoured toasts had been drunk with with acclamation, Sir Ralph rose, and informed the company that he had still another in reserve.

"Some of you perhaps hare guessed. Some of you have been asked here to take part in the rejoicings which I hope will attend the betrothal of my dear daughter Hilda. I have approved and sanctioned her engagement to a man who will, I believe, become an orna-ment to his profusion and a shining light in the world of science. I ask you to drink to the life and happiness of my daughter Hilda, and Mr. Dare Darrel!"

Angela turned up Paul with glowing eyes.

"Didn't I tell you?— didn't I tell you?"

"And so Miss Marjoribanks owes her happiness to the brutality of a motor ruffian! We must be more lenient to them in the future then!"

"She caught Sir Ralph just in the very nick of time!" answered Angela laughing. "And Hilda is his idol!"

LATE that evening, when the bells were pealing through the frosty night, Paul gravitated again towards Angela. She was standing alone in a window recess. He had only known her for two days; and hitherto he had been very doubtful of the existence of love at first sight: but he was not doubtful now.

As the bells pealed across the sleeping land, he sought her hand and held it fast in his, and bent down gently over her.

"Angela."

She looked up quickly: and having so looked did not turn her eyes away.

"I want something to-night— as well as Dare Darrel! Shall I have to wait as long for my happiness?"

It was half an hour before they emerged from their recess; and then sud-denly they came face to face with Hilda. Angela had her arms about her friend's neck. Paul could not hear a word she said; but Hilda looked at him with happy eyes and held out her hand.

"I suppose it is almost superfluous to wish you every happiness!"

Angela's laugh, tremulous with joy rippled softly forth.

"I wonder what sort of a time poor Mr. Bute is having!"

Spoke Paul in his crisp dry fashion. "Doubtless he is enjoying it in his own way. Let us wish him well; for much of our present happiness we owe in a roundabout, back-handed fashion to him!"

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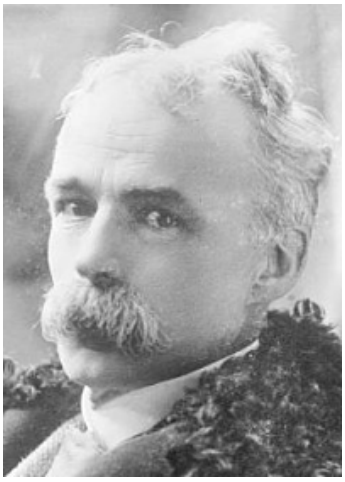
9: Convicted by Camera

Julian Hawthorne

1846-1934

Sunday Times (Perth) 7 Feb 1904



Julian Hawthorne

GILES PARSLOE and I had spent four months at a mining camp on the Gua River, near Florence, in Southern Arizona. We had had tolerable luck, I suppose. Between us there may have been the value of six or seven thousand dollars. But the vein began to "peter out"; at least we thought so. Perhaps the heat and the monotony of our surroundings may have had some influence on onr opinion. At all events, we made up our minds to push on westward, to the junction of the Gua and the Colorado, at Toma City. The railroad had not been put through at that time, and the region was as remote as it was desolate. Not that we minded that; the romance of youth was still strong in us; we were but two or three years out of college. But we wanted variety as well as remoteness, and believed, as all men are apt to do, that the true Eldorado lay beneath the horizon,

There was a sociable, agreeable fellow in the camp, Dick Stapers by name, with whom, more than with any of the others, we had found it . agreeable to fraternise. He was some years our elder, and had been well educated, knew something of the classics and of English literature, and was fond of enriching his conversation with quotations from ancient and recent poetry. He was also weil acquainted with the Life of the plains, and gaye us not a few useful hints. On the other hand, it must be confessed that he was not a particularly industrious or successful miner. He seemed unable to take advantage of his knowledge and experience; but, being gifted with a winning tongue, he contrived to live along in fair comfort, especially as he was a first-class poker

player. His presence made the place less lonely and monotonous, and for that reason noone thought of grudging Dick a pull at his whisky flask, or even a handful of dust now and then. There was no other standard whereby to measure the value of social cheerfulness.

Giles and I were, therefore, anything but put out when Dick proposed to accompany us on our journey. In the first place, he knew the route, and, secondly, he would be a grand resource at the camp fire. So we accepted his suggestion with cordiality, gave him a good mustang, and, one fine morning, we all three rode forth with the sun on our backs.

A mule carried our camp equipage; and Giles, as the steadiest and stoutest of the party, was entrusted with the larger part of our "dust". There was about four hundred pounds' weight in all, of which he carried two and a half hundred, and I the remainder. Giles and I were each armed with a rifle and a revolver ; Dick was unarmed; but, as he said, "Nobody will want to shoot me, and I don't want to shoot anybody."

A few miles below the camp there was a ford which we crossed, keeping thenceforth on the southern bank of the stream. The sun glared down at us as if it had nothing else to attend to. I felt as if something were pricking me in the base of the skull, and Gils plodded doggedly along with his head down and a constant succession of drops running down his nose and falling on the pommel of his saddle. Dick alone appeared lightsome and comfortable. He had a jest for every mishap and a remedy for every ill; and when Giles asked him, with some | exasperation, where the deuce he got his spirits from he replied with a verse from Campion :

Good thought his only friends,
His wealth a well-spent age,
The earth his sober inn,
And quiet pilgrimage.

In short, he was incorrigibly jolly and even hilarious. And when, after a hard day's journey, and innumerable petty contrarities, we dismounted at length, to camp in the bend of a stream, I heard him murmur to himself, as he kindled the fire for supper, "*Post tot naufragia portus*." (After so many shipwrecks a harbor.)

"Now boys," he said, socially, as we squatted round the remains of our meal, an hour later, "this is going to be a tough transit, and we've got to scratch our best to make it. Those two nags of yours have all they want to do to carry you and the guns. The mule is pretty well fixed with the tent and the kettles. But something's got to be done with that 400 pounds' weight of dust. If you two carry it you'll be on foot in two days! If I carry it— the fact is I believe I

shall watch my chance to cut and run with it. The mule remains; she can stand a good deal, and I believe she can stand that 400 pounds. But, not to run it too close, here's my proposition; I'll pack the tent on my crupper— my rapacity don't extend to tents— and'that will give the mule a chance. How does that strike you?"

We talked over it, and finally agreed that Dick's plan was prudent and expedient.

After a sound nights sleep— Gile's and I using the bags of dust for pillows— we arose betimes, breakfasted, and packed up our traps, Dick being very active in assisting.

The mule took the alteration in her load quite good humouredly, and Dick rigged the tent on his saddle in such a way that so far from incommoding him, it gave him a support to rest his back against. On the route he rode in advance, followed by Giles, who was followed by the mule, while I brought up the rear. More beat and perspiration, more weariness of flesh, more unquenchable, or rather fire-proof, gaiety, on the part of Dick.

When we halted at noon we made a discovery.

Through all my vicissitudes I had carried with me a camera, capable of taking a four by five picture, without the use of a stand or other cumbersome implements. I had brought a hundred prepared plates along with me, most of which had already been decorated with such scraps of Western scenes as had seemed to me most characteristic or amusing. I valued the collection prodigiously. It was the only journal I had, and was full of associations; and now, just as I was looking forward to a speedy return to civilisation, I discovered that my camera and plates were missing.. I had left them at our last night's sleeping-ground.

I at once announced my determina-tion to go back and get my camera. Giles shook his big head. Dick soberly declared that would be little short of madness. He pointed out that it might have dropped off anywhere on the route and either tumbled into the river or fallen under a sage bush, or otherwise hidden itself after the manner of such things. Again, I should wear out my horse by doubling the distance we had already travelled that day; and, finally, what was the use of a lot of amateur photographs, anyway! But I still held to my purpose, and began to strap the saddle on my devoted mustang.

"Well," said Dick at length, "I'll tell you what we'll do. There is a nice olump of trees about six miles further on, and, if you are fixed in your wild insanity, Giles and I will go forward easily, and wait for you there. It will be a good place to spend the night in, and will give you a good chance for a rest when you come back. But I tell you frankly, I never expect to see you again. *'Iterum,*

iterumque monebo'— but, as you please! Your epitaph shall be, 'Died of a camera'!"

"Good-bye, old man; you're an idiot!" was Giles' farewell.

And with that I touched my heels to the mustang's flank and cantered slowly off on the return trail.

Three hours rather leisurely travelling brought me to the site of our camp. Nothing was to be seen of the camera. As all our luggage had been kept together in one place, it ought to have been immediately visible. I was puzzled by this, and racked my brain for a solution. While I was debating the question, a snake glided out of a hole in the ground and wriggled off towards a neighboring clump of bushes. Mechanically I drew my revolver and fired at him. The bullet struck him in the thickest part of the body. I walked up to him and put bim out of pain, and caught sight of a corner of my camera protruding from beneath a neighboring shrub. I picked it up, strapped it to my belt, and, after allowing my horse half an-hour's rest, re-saddled and re-mounted and set out towards the West once more.

But all the while I was thinking, "How did the camera get there?" It was 20 paces at least from the camp. It could not have got there by accident. At last I came to the conclusion that Dick must have hidden it there for fun, and then forgotten all about it; and when I had discovered the loss, and showed such concern at it, he had held his tongue for fear of a row. That was the best explanation I could devise ; and it was not a very satis-factory one after all.

I rode on and on during the broiling afternoon. I was glad to have recovered my camera, but I was not in a very good humor, and, being alone, my thoughts took a gloomy tarn, and I lost myself in gloomy memories and forebodings. At length I roused myself to find that the region I was in was strange to me. I had certainly not passed through it with the others. I looked at my watch. It was four hours since I had set out on my return. I must, therefore, have already passed our noon resting-place. But on the other hand, I must bo near the grove of trees that Dick had mentioned as our night-halt. I rode on for nearly another hour, and came to a fork in the river.

Which way had the others gone? I searched along the back of the left braneh, but found no trail. I forded the stream and searched on the other side. Half an hours labor brought me on the hoof-marks of the two mustangs and the mule. To my surprise, after proceeding along the bank for a mile or two, they turned off to the right and disappeared toward the north-west, right across the great alkali desert of Yuma. It was incomprehensible, but I had no choice but to follow.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon, but the sun was nearly three hours high. The air was perfectly still; the sky was of a dull hue, inclining to coppery

at the horizon. The white surface of the alkali glittered on every side, dazzling my eyes. My horse was jaded; I began to feel grave apprehensions. Could it be that I had mistaken some other trail for theirs. I cast my eyes on the ground. No trail was visible. I had lost it, and was myself lost!

For a moment my heart failed me. Then manning myself, I bore on my left rein, and began to ride in a great circle. In twent minutes I struck a trail-it was my own. Well, I would try a larger circle still.

Just as I started my mustang raised his head, snorted and neighed. In-voluntarily I glanced up. What I saw sent a shock of superstitious terror to my heart.

In the empty air above my head, at a distance in front of me of apparently half a mile, I saw Giles, Dick and the mule jogging slowly along side by side. The figures were distinct and perfectly recognisable, and, as I say, seemed to be moving on the empty air. I passed my hand over my eyes and looked again. There was no mistake. But this assurance had the effect of restoring my equanimity. If what I saw waa not a mere hallu-cination of my brain, there was only one thing it could be. It was an extraordinarily perfect mirage. The figure phantoms that J saw were the magnified reflections upon the atmos-phere of their real ftesh-and-blood prototypes. But, as the latter wore nowhere visible, they could not be at a less distance than twenty miles. If I took the bearings and rode on I should overtake them in time.

The spectacle was so wonderful, however, that involuntarily I thought of my camera. Was it possible to photograph a mirage? At any rate I would try. Quickly unstrapping the instrument I pointed it towards the apparition and awaited a favorable moment to pull the catch. Just then Dick drew rein and stopped as if to adjust his stirrup. The mule and Giles kept on.

Suddenly Dick arose erect in the saddle, drew and levelled a revolver, and fired. Giles threw up his hands, reeled, and fell from his horse. At the same moment, and involuntarily, I flashed the lens. And then, like the vanishing of a soap bubble, the whole spectral seene disappeared, and I was alone in the desert

At half-past seven I came upon Giles' body. Luckily there was life in it. The bullet had struck his head and glanced, stunning him and making an ugly wound, but not seriously injuring him. He explained to me afterwards that Dick had assured him that by taking a "short cut" across the desert they would strike the liver at the mythical "clump of trees" he had foretold. Later Dick had borrowed his revolver to shoot at a rabbit and had kept it. Evidently he had planned from the beginning to murder one or both of us and to get off with the gold.

Two pieces of rare good luck befell Giles and me at this moment of our need. First, Giles' horse came quietly up out of the darkness and allowed himself to be caught, being, probably, too much discouraged to travel by himself. In the second place, we succeeded that night in reaching a small stream, and with some timber growing beside it. It undoubtedly saved both our lives.

The next morning, riding along the stream, we stumbled upon Dick's trail, and followed it north west by west for thirty miles to Mineral City, on the Colorado. Here we communicated with the Sheriff, Tom York, who arrested Dick just as he was leaving town with five thousand dollars in greenbacks on his person.

He denied everything; but when confronted by Giles, whom he supposed to be dead, he blanched a little; and when I produced my photograph (which I had meanwhile developed) he was overcome by sheer amazement and confessed his guilt. Dick was a clever fellow; but I never told him the secret of that photograph, and it is a mystery to him to this day. The last I saw of him he was looking out of the grated window of Mineral City Gaol.

"Well, good-bye, Dick," said I. "You have a chance to test your philosophy:

'Good thoughts your only friends;
Your wealth a well-spent age;
The gaol your sober inn—' "

"All right, my boy," he interrupted, grinning. "You have got the edge on me, and I'm not the man to complain. It isn't my fault that I was born, but, being born, the rest came of itself. 'Myself am all my foes,' as the poet hath it. Only; if I had known the capacities of that camera of yours, I'd have chucked it into the river instead of into the bush. Good-bye, my boy, and put your money into a letter of credit."

Dick was a good fellow in his way.

10: Love with a Gun

Peter Cheyney

1896-1951

Illustrated March 4 1939

Mail (Adelaide) 13 May 1939

Reginald Evelyn Peter Southouse-Cheyney

'EDDIE' is not really his name, but so far as I know (and this goes for the G-men, too), 'Eddie' is the only real, dyed-in-the-wool gangster of the 1929 hooch-running, hijacking, shop-blasting, racketeering period who ever showed a profit on crime. He got away with it because he gave it best.

However, I must be careful what I say about this, because his wife, Gerda— who is a friend of mine— is inclined to get a little ritzy with people who try to take a quiet poke at Eddie, and I don't want to get my ears slapped back— even by post!

IN 1929 Chicago was as wide-open as a town which had won medals for prohibition-dodging ever since the United States went dry could be. The mobs, politicians, free-lance gunmen, and, I regret to say, some of the policemen (both great and small) were all linked together in one big mix-up of crime. So that authority sometimes found it difficult to sort itself out. There were, however, a large percentage of police officers who had never taken graft and who sometimes, to, their own disadvantage, did their duty.

Among these was Police Captain Nils Olinsen, a six-foot, blue-eyed, two-fisted specimen of humanity whose parental background had been a Swedish father and an Irish mother— which is a background good enough for anybody— especially in Chicago.

After the Purple Mob carried out a little wholesale execution one evening on the North Side (which, by the way, is a nice part of the city and doesn't like wholesale murder), Olinsen went out and arrested someone who was so well

in with everyone in local politics, from the cheapest ward-heeler to the most expensive big-time civic grafter, that he had, in the past, enjoyed complete immunity from police interference. This in itself should indicate that Olinsen— who was a man of fifty— still had his nerve. But the nerve served no good purpose.

THE next morning the gentleman responsible for the killings was out on bail, and Olinsen had received an official memo politely informing him that he was transferred to a police precinct right away on the other side of the North Clark street area— a precinct where nothing ever happened and a still ambitious police captain might sit all day and twiddle his thumbs without ever a chance of further promotion.

This process (they called it 'sending to Siberia') was a neat method used by mob-interested politicians for 'toning down' too enthusiastic police officers. Usually it broke their hearts in a month. In this case it did not. Olinsen grinned when he read the memo, and went over to his new precincts. He took with him two detectives (also transferred for tneir part in the arrest) named Yates and Shansy.

On their way Shansy— who was an Irishman— said he had bought a couple of new 'patience' games that they could use over in the new office; that they had got to make the time pass somehow! Three months afterwards fate decided to take a hand, and a gentleman by the name of Anselmo Perruqui 'moved in' on the North Clark street district.

PERRUQUI had been in the liquor business. He had, it was estimated, 'bumped off' in the process of making his money as many, if not more, competitors than most of his predecessors. This fact in itself marked him out as a big shot. But Perruqui, whose ambition was still unsatisfied, decided to expand, and to begin operations among the dyeing and cleaning factories that abounded on the North Clark street side. Having settled in, Anselmo Perruqui proceeded to send his emissaries round the district politely inviting the more important dyers and cleaners to become members of his 'protective association.'

Such individuals as were inclined to hesitate were informed smilingly that it would be a good thing for them to make up their minds quickly, otherwise somebody might throw a 'pineapple' into the dye works— a 'pineapple' being a neat and handy-sized bomb which was then very popular with most of the boys who carried out blasting operations on reluctant subscribers.

It is an unfortunate fact that the majority of the dyeing and cleaning potentates in the district came to the conclusion that they would rather pay

Perruqui and not have their shops bombed or their lorries hi-jacked and the contents burned all except one obstinate individual, Jake Sharman, of Sharman Cleaners Incorporated ('We Dye to Please You'), who was very rude to the Perruqui envoy.

The sad result was that three days afterwards some ill-intentioned person threw a 'pineapple' through the open doorway of Sharman's biggest shop in Barrell street. The place was wrecked, and, foaming at the mouth, Jake telephoned through to Nils Olinsen and asked whether there were any police in the district and if so what were they doing.

Nils moved quickly. He wanted to get an open and shut case against the actual bomb-thrower. Yates and Shansy were unknown in the area, and within one hour of Sharman's telephone call they were out and about in the pool-rooms and speakeasies with which the district was — and still is — honeycombed.

SHANSY was the lucky one. Within twenty-four hours he had got a line on the 'pineapple' expert, and within another twelve he was able to report to Olinsen that the thrower of the bomb was an individual of twenty-five years of age, who was extremely good looking, very popular with the girls, and who rejoiced in the name of 'Eddie'— nobody seeming to know what his other name was. Shansy was also able to report that Eddie was a fairly recent recruit to Perruqui's bomb squad, and had lived in the North Clark street area most of his life.

Olinsen grunted, and ordered Shansy to bring in the bomber, with the result that forty-eight hours afterwards Shansy appeared at the precinct with Eddie, whose face was wreathed in a charming andxinnocent smile, which told pf his complete astonishment at being suspected of anything at all.

With a well-chewed cigar sticking out of the corner of his mouth Olinsen sat behind his desk in a tilted back chair, and regarded Eddie with a certain disgust. 'So you're the clever boy who blasted out the Sharman shop-front, hey?' he said. 'I suppose you've got an alibi?'

'SURE,' said Eddie casually. 'The Sharman shop was blasted at 11 o'clock Tuesday morning. Well, right then I was over at Seegar's Pool Hall on Twelfth, an' there are about forty guys who was in there at the time can tell you so.' His smile became more disarming than ever.

'I know,' said Olinsen. 'I know all about it. You had your alibi fixed before you did the job. Perruqui looked after that, and you're standing on the fact that even if somebody did see you on the job they haven't got the nerve to go into

the witness box and say so. They'd be too well 'looked after' by some of your friends.'

He looked Eddie over from top to toe.

'You're a nice-lookin' fella,' he said, 'for a lousy punk. A kid. You've got good shoulders, strong arms an' legs, an' a sweet smile. I suppose the girls go for you. I know all about you. You haven't got a police record because you've only just joined up with Perruqui. I wish you had!'

He threw the stub of his cigar into the waste basket. 'You're a cheap punk— one of the results of prohibition,' he went on. 'You're a dumb kid an' you reckon its only mugs that work for a living. You think that you can draw down a couple of hundred dollars a week from Perruqui an' that everything will be jake forever.'

He paused for the moment, but Eddie didn't say anything.

'I know how you mugs get into the rackets,' he continued. 'I haven't been a policeman for twenty-five years for nothin'. You start off as kids pinching apples off street stands, an' then you go into the newspaper business and stand on street corners tipping off smalltime yeggs when a copper's coming their way.

'After a bit you grow up, an' the only thing you want to do is to join up with a mob. You end up in Sing Sing, in the electric chair, or in the morgue. I wonder which of the three things is goin' to happen to you.'

Eddie's smile grew wider. Olinsen thought he was a damn good-looking kid.

'I wouldn't know,' said Eddie. 'You know everything. You tell me!'

The police captain wrinkled his brows in disgust.

'Get out of here,' he said. 'I've nothing that I can hold you on. I know you blasted Sharman's place an' so do you, but I can't prove it, and you know I can't.

'But I'm warning you. The next time I get something on you— I don't care what it is— I'll get one of my boys to take you up an alley an' let you loose. He can do a little pistol practice on you while you're runnin'. Now scram!'

Eddie tipped his hat and smiled sweetly.

'You're the boss,' he said. 'Thank you for havin' me round. It's been so nice!'

He walked out of Olinsen's office with a light and airy step. Outside in the corridor Shansy awaited him.

'Come on, punk,' said Shansy. 'Get goin'. I don't like you cheap mobsters. One of these days I'm goin' to send you a coupla visitin' cards outa the end of my gun!'

But Eddie was not listening. Through the swing doors at the entrance end of the corridor came a girl. She was twenty-two years of age, and she was the

sort of girl who made you give a gasp when you looked at her. She was an ashblonde, with a lovely face, a lovely figure, and everything that goes with it.

'Boy!' murmured Eddie. 'Can you see what I see?'

'Keep moving, louse,' growled Shansy. 'An' don't look at Miss Olinsen that way. You ain't fit to look at any decent dame.'

Eddie said nothing, but he appeared to be thinking deeply. Then he grinned at Shansy and got out.

FOUR days afterwards a carload of Perruqui's henchmen stuck up a branch bank not half a mile from the precinct. They killed a cashier and wounded two customers.

This time there was evidence. The getaway car was found and a witness came forward who was prepared to swear to the identity of one of the mobsters. Quite obviously it was a Perruqui job, and Olinsen went after Perruqui with both hands. And that night he raided two 'speaks' where Perruqui's boys used to hang out, and collected six of them in a patrol wagon. The day afterwards Yates picked up Perruqui's 'chief of staff' on Walnut avenue, and shot him dead when he attempted a getaway.

Perruqui began to get very annoyed with Olinsen.

The next afternoon Gerda Olinsen left home to visit her father at the precinct. She did not arrive. At 6 o'clock in the evening Olinsen and his wife began to worry. At 8 o'clock they realised that they had something to worry about.

AN anonymous telephone call came through to the precinct and the caller said that if Olinsen wanted to see his daughter again— alive— maybe he'd like to lay off being so active and to accept bail for the six Perruqui mobsters that he had in the can. Perruqui had snatched Gerda.

It was next morning that Shansy remembered Eddie's remark about Gerda on the day that Olinsen had had him picked up for questioning.

'He's the punk who's behind this.' said Shansy. 'I reckon that when you started in on Perruqui this so-an'-so told the big shot about seein' Gerda round here, and suggested that snatchin' her would just about even off the book.'

He scratched his head.

'What are you goin' to do about it?' he asked.

Olinsen thought for a moment. He looked very grim. Then: 'I think you're right, Shansy,' he said. 'That kid's behind this snatch. Get every man in the precinct out lookin' for Eddie. Cover every joint he's ever been seen in, an' when you've found him just don't do a thing. Just let me know. I'd like to deal with him personally.'

'O.K.,' said Shansy.

He hoped that Olinsen would get Eddie before something happened to Gerda. But nothing was heard of Gerda.

THREE weeks afterwards Shansy got a line on Eddie. And that afternoon he telephoned through to Olinsen, whose hair had gone a little greyer, that Eddie was living at the Altimira Hotel on Green street at Sloane; that he had a suite on the third floor at the back, No. 264B, and that he was in the hotel right then.

'O.K., Shansy, thanks a lot. Just come in, will you? I'll handle this.'

Then he put his service pistol in its holster and took a cab to the Altimira. He went straight into the lift, up to the third floor, and along the corridor to 264B. The door was locked, but that didn't worry Olinsen. He drew his pistol and shot the lock off. Then he stepped into the room. On the other side of the room, behind a desk, sat Eddie, writing a letter. He put his hand into the desk drawer as Olinsen came in.

'Take your hand out of that drawer,' said Olinsen. 'Put both your hands on the table. Maybe you remember a little talk I had with you not so long ago. I told you that guys like you always ended up in Sing Sing, in the electric chair, or in the morgue. Remember?'

'Well, you're goin' to the morgue. But before you go I'd like to know where my daughter Gerda is, an' if you're wise you'll come across, because, as you probably know, there are two ways of shooting a mobster— a quick way an' a slow way. If you don't talk I'll give it to you where it'll hurt most an' take longest.'

EDDIE didn't say anything. He had the same wide-awake smile across his thin, handsome face. He was just about to say something when Olinsen saw the smile disappear from Eddie's face. He saw, too, that Eddie was looking beyond him at the door behind Olinsen's back.

Olinsen grinned. It was an old trick to try and make the man holdr ing the gun look behind him? He didn't fall for it. He just jerked up his pistol so that it covered Eddie. And in that split second Eddie's hand went into the drawer again and re-appeared holding a nasty-looking snub-nosed .38 revolver. Olinsen squeezed the trigger, and Eddie slumped over the desk, but as he did so the police captain noticed that his eyes were still on the door.

Olinsen looked behind him. Perruqui stood on the doorway. He had a gun in his hand, and he was in the act of raising it when Eddie, slumped over the desk, fired first Olinsen thought it was for him. But he was wrong. Eddie's shot

hit Perruqui squarely between the eyes. The big shot just crumpled and flopped on to the floor.

Olinsen put up his gun and went over to Eddie, who was still grinning vaguely.

'I don't get this,' said Olinsen. 'What's it mean?'

'You listen to me,' said Eddie. 'Because I don't feel like a long conversation. Perruqui snatched Gerda an' I expect he'd given her the works before now, but didn't sorta like the idea. I saw her the day you gave me that long spiel about mobsters, an' your sermon an' her eyes sorta matched up— if you get me.

'O.K. Well, I snatched her off Perruqui. She's locked in the end room of this suite. I kept her there because I knew he was lookin' for me— and her. She's O.K.'

He managed a rather feeble grin.

'An' you can telephone for an ambulance,' he said. 'I need a little attention. Not that I'm goin' to die, because everybody knows you damn coppers can't shoot straight!' He flopped over the desk.

ON the day that Olinsen told Yates and Shansy that he'd given permission to Gerda to marry Eddie, both those boys nearly died of heart disease. They spent the evening drinking double highballs and talking about whether crime didn't really pay and how the hell was it right that a punk like Eddie should get away with a girl like Gerda? What they didn't realise, of course, was that Eddie wasn't really a crook. He only thought he was.

And I am finishing on this note because, as I have already told you, I do not want to get my ears slapped by Gerda— even by post!

———————

11: The Appeal

E. M. Delafield

1890-1943

Eve 9 April 1924

Edmée Elizabeth Monica Dashwood

THIS ISN'T a story. It's an attempt at reconstruction.

Given my knowledge of the principals— Mary Jarvis and her mother, Mrs. St. Luth— I think I can do it. Mary Jarvis was my mother, and Mrs. St. Luth, of course, my grandmother. Thank God, I'm a modern, and can look at them impersonally— judge each on her own merits, as it were.

My mother and my grandmother made scenes as other women make jumpers. It was their form of self-expression. I imagine— although I never knew for certain— that it was my father's inability to maintain himself *a la hauteur* in the perennial melodrama that was my mother's idea of life, that led to my grandmother being invited to live with them.

She came when I, their only child, had barely reached the stage of exchanging my baby frills for first knickerbockers. (I am certain, although I don't remember it, that my mother wept and said she felt that she had lost her baby for ever.)

Already my parents were unhappy together. Mary— I call her so here for convenience, but she would never have tolerated it in reality— Mary, although really affectionate and impressionable, was fundamentally insincere, with herself and with everybody else. She lived entirely on the emotional plane, and when genuine emotions were not forthcoming she faked them by instinct. Her mother, who belonged to the same type, although with more strength of character and far less capacity for affection, had always played up to her. They

had their violent disputes and violent reconciliations neither could have been happy without— but they did respect one another's poses.

But my father never played up.

He couldn't. Worse still, if he could have done so he wouldn't— on principle.

Again I can't remember, but I can imagine, almost to the point of certainty, short and searing passages between my parents.

'Robert, I want you not to ask me to play the piano tonight.' (He so seldom gave her an opening that she had to force them.)

'Off colour.?'

'It isn't that. I heard to-day that Mrs. Thorndyke's child is dead. It— it upset me.'

'But you didn't know the child.'

'I know Katherine Thorndyke.'

'You've met her once or twice, I remember. And didn't we hear that if the poor child had lived it must have been an idiot?'

Probably, at that stage, my mother burst into tears. She'd been heading for that, of course— although she didn't know it consciously. But my father did, and had made her aware that he did in a rather brutal fashion.

That was the way they reacted on one another.

It was better after grandmother came. Curiously enough, my father liked her, although she and Mary had so many of the same characteristics. But I think he regarded her as a sort of lightning conductor.

For Mary herself, however, it was different. Like so many people who manufacture continual unhappiness for themselves, she had a frantic craving for happiness and an irrational conviction that happiness was her due.

She told me herself, long afterwards, that she never had any thought of infidelity towards my father, nor did she ever meet any man who could or would have caused her to break her marriage vows. But— and this she didn't tell me; it's part of the reconstruction ~ she was constantly obsessed by a vague and romantic expectation of some such encounter. I imagine that she could not believe the world to have been created without a special application to her yearnings.

And then, undoubtedly, the nervous wear and tear that she imposed upon herself and upon us all, told on her spirits. Her scenes with grandmother, although they may have served as a safety valve, were too frequent. They may also have served to throw into painful contrast her husband's stolid opposition to any form of emotional stimulus.

However that may be, grandmother had formed part of our household for rather less than a year when Mary suddenly ran away.

It was, I suppose, the only dramatic thing that she could think of in a wet and dreary February, and I have no doubt at all that she did it on impulse. That is to say, she gave herself time to write an immensely long letter to my father - in which, perhaps, she set forth that view of herself which he never gave her adequate opportunity for putting into words— but she gave herself no time to pack up her things. She simply took her dressing-case, and I am sure that that was mostly filled with photographs in folding frames, and packets of letters tied up with ribbon, and little manuals of devotion heavily underscored in several places. Then she walked out of the house and to the station, and eventually got to Assisi. And they traced her there almost at once, partly because she took no pains to cover up her tracks, and partly because my grandmother— who understood the processes of her mind— found a copy of a *Life of St. Francis* on the drawing-room sofa, face downwards, with one page all blistered, as though tears had fallen upon it.

My father, for his part, found the long letter that no doubt told him how little he had understood a sensitive nature, and possibly to what point their life together had become intolerable.

And this had the strange effect of making him resolve, and declare aloud, that nothing would induce him to try and get her back again. There must have been a stormy scene between him and grandmother, w^ho had all the conventionally moral instincts of her day, and was genuinely shocked and disturbed at her daughter's abrupt and violent casting off of her obvious responsibilities.

'For the child's sake, at least, Robert... she must have repeated many times.

(Neither she nor my mother ever understood the futility of repeating, again and again, words which had already failed of their appeal.)

'A child whose mother can leave him at three years old is better without her.'

'It was madness, Robert, but you know she's not a wicked woman— my poor Mary. If you go and bring her back now no one will ever know what has happened, and you can start a new life together and try again.'

'It would be useless.'

'Don't, don't say that.' The tears must have been pouring down her old face by that time. 'Oh, Robert, give her another chance. This will have been a lesson to her— won't you forgive her and take her back?'

Well, in the end she prevailed to a certain extent— that is to say, my father would not seek out the culprit himself, but he would allow grandmother to do so, and if she brought Mary home again properly repentant he would not refuse to receive her and give her the 'chance' of starting their married life afresh. 'For the boy's sake.'

My grandmother must have repeated that phrase a hundred times at least, and it was certainly her *piece de resistance* in the scene at Assisi with Mary.

I've had a version of that scene from each one of them, and, on the whole, the accounts tally, although, of course, each viewed it— as they viewed everything— exclusively from the personal angle.

My mother saw only a young, beautiful, misunderstood woman, goaded to frenzy in the grip of an uncongenial marriage, taking a desperate step in search of freedom. And then, even stronger and more touching in her relinquishment, finding the courage for love of her child, to return to the house of bondage.

And my grandmother, with equal inevitability, saw only a sorrow-worn woman, no longer young (but infinitely interesting), courageously undertaking a solitary journey on a mission that should restore its sanctity to a shattered home. And even as her urgent plea had shaken Robert's defences, so her eloquence, her boundless influence and unfaltering understanding, must prevail with the slighter, more trivial, personality of her daughter. The achievement of persuading Mary to return to her husband and child was, my grandmother told me, the ultimate justification of her existence in her own eyes.

As a matter of fact, I doubt if she, any more than the rest of us, felt her existence to be in any need of justification whatsoever— but she was addicted to phrases, and this one at least served as an indication to the magnitude of her effort.

For Mary did not capitulate without a struggle. And it is in the details of that struggle that my reconstruction work comes in, for although each of the protagonists has quoted to me whole sentences, and even speeches, of brilliant oratory from herself and inadequate rejoinder from the other, I do not believe either of them. Accuracy, with that type, can never co-exist with emotion— and emotion, real or imaginary, is never absent.

But this, I imagine, is more or less what took place in the sitting-room of the tiny *albergo* at Assisi.

TVe come to fetch you home, my child. You shall never hear one word of reproach— Robert only wants to begin again a new life.'

'Never, mother. It's impossible. I've borne too much. I can't ever go back to it. I must live my own life.'

(Probably Mary had been reading *The Doll's House*. People were discovering Ibsen in those days.)

'Mary, it's not five years since you and Robert were married, in the little country church at home, by our dear old Vicar, who held you at the font when I took you, a tiny baby, to be christened.'

It may have been at this stage that Mary began to cry. Anyway, I'm certain that my grandmother did. Any allusions, however irrelevant, to little country churches at home, and Mary as a tiny baby, were always apt to bring the tears to her eyes— and I'm sure that neither of them had thought for an instant of steadying their nerves by sitting down to a solid meal. So that tears must have been easier even than usual.

'Robert doesn't understand me— he never will.'

'Darling, don't you remember your early days together? The little things— little jokes and allusions and happinesses shared together? Does one ever forget?'

'No' Mary sobbed. 'But I can't go back to him.'

I think that here, if my grandmother gave her a chance, she probably did make one— or part of one— of the speeches that she long afterwards quoted to me.

She was intensely unhappy. Robert did not understand her, and she could not live in an unsympathetic atmosphere. She should go mad. All that she had ever asked of life was peace, beautiful surroundings, and the ideal companion.... If she went back to Robert now, after having found courage to make the break, it would be a repetition of the misery that had broken her heart during the past three years.

(The hearts of my mother and grandmother both suffered innumerable breakages throughout their lives, neither of them ever seeming alive to the physiological absurdity of the expression.)

'It's braver to stay away than to go back and try and patch up something that can never be anything but a failure,' quavered Mary, with a momentary flash of insight.

But, of course, grandmother couldn't leave it at that. She had the justification of her own existence to think of, for one thing. I am quite sure that a fortuitous street musician rendering 'Santa Lucia' or 'Silver Threads Amongst the Gold' in the distance would have broken down Mary's frail barrier of honest thought and have materially assisted my grandmother to her victory. Accessories were so absolutely essential to them both.

But, so far as I know, grandmother had to win on points, as it were, and received no extraneous help in the shape of sentimental appeals from without.

She made her supreme effort.

'For the boy's sake, Mary... your little, little boy. Is he to be motherless?'

'Wouldn't Robert let me have him?'

'No, my dear. How could he? I myself— the mother that bore you, Mary— I couldn't think it right that a woman who had deliberately deserted her husband and home should have the care of a little innocent child.'

'Oh, my baby!'

She sobbed and cried, but she had not yet capitulated. Grandmother, however, had gauged pretty accurately the force of the baby-*motif*.

'Before I came away, on my long, lonely journey,' she said slowly, 'I went up to the nursery, to say good-bye to Bobbie. He had on his blue overall— the one you embroidered for him last summer, Mary— was it only last summer?— and he was playing with his engine, on the nursery floor, his dear, round face was so solemn...'

'Oh, don't— don't—'

But grandmother, the tears streaming from her eyes, relentlessly continued: 'Darling, his big blue eyes looked up at me, and his little voice asked: "*Where's Mummie*?" ' Did grandmother's— even grandmother's— conscience misgive her at the quotation? That it was verbally correct, I have no doubt— but what of the intonation?

My grandmother's poignant rendering of *'Where's Mummie*?' no doubt contained all the pathetic appeal of bewildered and deserted childhood throughout the ages...

But mine— the original *Where's Mummie*?'I have no recollection of it, of course, but I do remember myself at four years old— a stolid, rather cynical, child, utterly independent by temperament, and reacting strongly even then against a perpetually emotional atmosphere. And one knows the way in which small children utter those conventional inquiries which they unconsciously know to be expected of them... the soft, impersonal indifference of the tone, the immediate re-absorption, without waiting for a reply, in the engrossing occupation of the moment...

Mary held out for a little while longer, but the heart went out of her resistance after the pitiful sound of that 'Where's Mummie?' as my grandmother rendered it.

She gave in— 'for the boy's sake.'

And my grandmother had justified her existence.

They travelled home together, and Mary averted an anticlimax by quite a real nervous breakdown, that overtook her after she got home, before my father had had time to forgive her in so many words.

So they began again— literally.

It wasn't, in fact, possible for them to be happy together, and they never were so. I grew up in the midst of scenes, tears, and intermittent periods of reconciliation. There was no stability about my childhood, and no reality. Undoubtedly I was the victim— far more so than my father, who presently sought and found consolation elsewhere, or than Mary, whom he thus provided with a perfectly legitimate grievance that lasted her until he died

fifteen years later. After that, she was able gradually to forget that there had ever been unhappiness between them, and to assume the identity of a heartbroken widow.

Mrs. St. Luth, my grandmother, lived to be very old. 'But useless old woman though I am, God gave me the opportunity of justifying my existence when He let me bring a mother home to her little child...'

I wonder.

Thank God, I'm a modern.

_____

12: The Dragon Smelter

Albert Dorrington

1871-1953

Sunday Times (Perth, WA) 15 Aug 1909

National Advocate (Bathurst) 10 Aug 1912 (untitled and uncredited)

Albert Dorrington

CAPTAIN HAYES was awakened by the sudden banging of oars under the schooner's side. Slipping from his bunk, he reached the deck in time to meet a half naked white man clambering up the gangway. In a flash Hayes recognised the figure of his boatswain, Tom Emery, who had deserted from the schooner only a month before.

The binnacle revealed the newcomer's ragged appearance, the mosquito-bitten face, the half-healed cuts on the reef-torn hands and feat, that spoke of labour and privations among the Chinese mining camps of North Queensland.

Hayes was awaiting a cargo of pearl-shell from the luggers in the offing, and the boatswain's desertion had threatened to interfere with his sailing arrangements. His anger and indignation evaporated at sight of Emery's appearance. He put out his hand impulsively, and gripped the shaking, toil-hardened fingers.

With a single exception, Emery's experiences ashore had been similar to those of others who had deserted their ships in the hope of finding gold. He had found employment at a big mining camp in the hills. During his labours the boatswain had become suspicious of the large quantities of gold escorted from the working of a big Chinese syndicate near by.

One night he shadowed the coolie escort from the mine to the door of a small temple situated at the head of a gully about a mile from the camp. Two Chinaman took charge of the gold blocks, and, according to Emery, the whole consignment of metal was afterwards riveted to the feet of an iron dragon that stood on the altar within the shrine.

Hayes heard Emery's story with misgivings, although, from experience gathered in Queensland, he was aware that Chinamen, when forced to safe-guard newly-won gold, adopt the most unthinkable methods of concealment.

For a long time he paced the schooner's deck in silence, while the thought of so much wealth lying within reach filled him with tigerish impatience.

"Those two Chinamen," he muttered, "would wake the blamed Continent if they sighted us inside their joss house."

"Try 'em with a suckin'-pig, Cap'n," suggested Emery. "A pig has been known to bluff a Chinky where a gun only fooled the show."

A glimmering of Emery's idea filtered gradually through the buccaneer's mind. And after one or two inquiries concerning the pig's whereabouts, he agreed finally to accompany him the following night to the temple at the head of the gully.

The piglet, obtained from an old fisherman near the pier head, was secured in a sack and conveyed by Emery in the direction of the Chinese temple. Hayes followed leisurely in the rear.

The bush-track skirted the big Mongolian mining camp, where the stunted box-trees shut out the vast stretches of spinifex country beyond. A splinter of light pricked the masses of shadow near the temple entrance.

''Keep to the back of the shrine," whispered the boatswain, "and give me a leg-up to the roof, Cap'n."

The piglet had been gagged and muffled to prevent it squealing, and as Emery gained the flat roof he pulled the sack after him, and approached the skylight on all fours.

Hayes stood in the shadows and waited. Behind in the masses of hill and jungle shade, flared the coolie camp-fires; a shout or signal of any kind from the two Chinamen within the temple would bring a pack about his heels.

An unmistakable sound came from the roof, followed by the boatswain's hoarse-mutterings; then sharp squeals echoed in rapid succession as if the released pig had struck the altar in its descent through the skylight. Round and round the sacred precincts it ran, filling the hot silence with shrill protests. A clattering of sandalled feet was heard in the temple doorway; voices charged with anger and surprise reached Hayes as the two guardians of the shrine dashed towards the altar and seized the rioting intruder. Leaving the door ajar, they ambled towards an enclosed compound on the western side of the temple. Here they paused to inspect the noisy invader. Shang Wah, chief guardian of the shrine, held the pig at arm's length, while a dreamful ecstasy over-clouded his eyes.

"Our prayers have been heard at last, Wing Poo," he said in his musical Nankingese. "Only last night I dreamed of such a thing, and it has come even before our cooking fires are out."

The buccaneer crawled forward and slipped through the open door into the temple. A smell of burning roots and oils assailed him; the strange odour of

flame-chastened offerings lingered in the darkness. At the altar he paused, and glared at the dragon's outline perched on its castings of gold. Taking a jemmy from his pocket, he worked it under the massive blocks of metal until the woodwork cracked and split under the tremendous leverage. The dragon tilted suddenly and leaned on its side. With almost superhuman strength the buccaneer hauled it to his shoulder, and staggered with it to the open door of the shrine.

For a moment he stared from the doorway at the backs of the two chattering Celestials in the compound, then lounged into the shelter of the bush.

Emery was beside him in a flash, and together they bore the unwieldy iron monster down a deep side track, where the stiff kangaroo grass lacerated their ankles at every stride. It was soon evident to both men that they were wandering in an opposite direction to the schooner. A small stone building shone suddenly through the darkness: scattered around it were heaps of broken mineral ore and tailings. A quantity of scrapped mining machinery littered the ground. Peering inside the deserted building, Hayes saw that it had once been used as a smelting house. A small brick furnace stood opposite the door, further examination revealed an iron ladle lying on top of some fluxing ore.

The two men panted in the darkness as though the hurried journey across the sandhills had told on their strength. Several miles of rough ground had yet to be crossed before the schooner was reached. It was long past midnight and the dawn would be upon them long before the inlet was sighted. Once the darkness lifted their chances, of eluding the scattered bands of Chinese fossickers were extremely small. A hue and cry would be raised at sight of two white men hauling their sacred dragon towards the creek.

Striking a match cautiously, Hayes examined the massive blocks of gold which had been screwed and riveted to the feet of the iron-monster. It would take a bullock drayy to shift it through the sand-hills," he said shortly."

"And if we leave it here until to-morrow night some of those black trackers at the Chinese camp will ferret it out."

"Smelt it in the crucible," suggested Emery. "The gold'll run to the bottom of the pot; the iron part can be thrown away."

"What then?" demanded Hayes, whose knowledge of smelting work was limited.

"Run off the gold into bars with the ladle. We can carry 'em to the schooner easy enough. We don't want the blamed dragon, Cap'n. The gold'll come away from its claws easy enough once the fire's started."

"There's a lot of sense being warmed out of your head to-night, Emery," laughed Hayes as he heaved the mass of gold and iron into the furnace.

A heap of coke stood near the furnace, and with some dry wood from a stack outside the boatswain soon had a draught-fed fire roaring up the wide bricked flue. Hayes regarded the glowing fire with interest, then turned to the stooping boatswain hurriedly.

"You'd better make your way to the schooner and bring back a couple of sacks. We can leave here at daybreak and nobody will be the wiser."

Throwing a final armful of coke into the furnace, Emery departed noiselessly in the direction of the creek. Hayes watched him across the low-lying hills, then closed the smelting door to prevent the red light of the furnace from reflecting on the white quartz heaps outside. The coke burned fiercely under the circular-shaped crucible, and the buccaneer soon witnessed the swift fluxation of metal as, one by one, the heated gold blocks fell away from the mass of iron which held them. Drawing the cumbersome dragon from the furnace, he cast it into a far corner of the smelting house.

For several seconds he was overcome by an irresistible desire to stir the glowing orange-hued mass lying at the bottom of the crucible. Never before had he seen molten gold flow and splash from the basin-like rim of a three-foot ladle. Like a child fascinated, he allowed the fluid gold to drip and spill back into the crucible until it emitted a trickling, purling sound delightful to the ear.

It occurred to him suddenly that it would be an easy matter to run the metal into a shallow trench scooped out of the floor. The earth would make an excellent mould for the gold bars.

Stooping near the door, he listened, with his shoulder against the panel, scarce daring to breathe. Something was pressing the door from the out-side, and for a fraction of time he allowed it to open about the fifth of an inch. A naked Chinaman was standing outside, and the light rays from the furnace flashed suddenly in his eyes. Swift as a panther, Hayes reached for his throat and missed, the pig-tailed head ducked nimbly and vanished.

The furnace rays illumined the white heaps of quartz outside while Hayes searched wrathfully for a glimpse of the spying intruder. The ghostly silence of the ti-tree and thorn-bush scrub gave no hint of the Chinaman's whereabouts. A far-off shouting turned him sharply in the direction of the coolie camp fires. All along the hip of the range streamed a procession of small lamps, held aloft by scores of naked figures reconnoitring in his direction.

There was no lock to the smelting house door: no weapon worthy of the name to stave off, even for a second, the first rush of the coolie mob. The

lanterns dipped and vanished suddenly, as though the near bush had engulfed them.

"They're coming— the air is thick with them. I guess I have no business to be caught in a place like this."

Hayes fell back to the door of the smelting-house.

A shrill, wailing sound came from the near ti-tree, a sobbing noise that resembled the first rush of a dingo pack, it broke, suddenly from the scrub, and with it a score of lean-hipped Mongolians, dancing in their rage, flashing their mine-lamps over the glittering quartz heaps in front of the smelting-house.

"Now .... Johnny boys, don't be in a blamed hurry. Guess you'll let me fight long enough to warm the soles of my feet."

What followed happened in the fall of an eye. A dozen coolies burled themselves at the swiftly-slammed door. Hayes held his back to it with the strength of a Titan, while fist and knives hammered and smote from the outside. The din was terrific. Nothing could withstand the fierce impacts, the irresistible weight of twenty Chinamen flung ram-like at the rough hewn panels.

The buccaneer gasped under the strain, jammed his feet into the earth, buttressed the quaking door with arms and shoulder until it rattled and splintered about his ears. Then his eye fell on the molten metal in the glowing crucible, the long-handled ladle resting against the wall. A single leap took him across the smelting-house to the red door of the furnace. Snatching up the iron ladle he pivoted nimbly and faced the inrushing mob of coolies.

Four of their leaders fell head first through the suddenly opened door, checking for a moment the wolf-like rush of the mob. The problem of effective resistance appeared incredibly simple the moment the crowd of bronzed hued bodies tumbled in a heap before him. A plunge of the iron ladle into the crucible brought up a brimming mass of molten metal that was emptied in a blinding wave over the struggling group in the doorway.

A second helping from the glowing crucible was executed even more deftly, for Hayes saw that by tossing the fluid gold in the air, it scattered in a tortuous stream over their naked backs and. shoulders. Up and out he cast the flesh-eating metal, plying his ladle with laughter and savage grunts. He saw it shoot like quick-silver over the pig-tailed heads and shoulders, streaming in learning pools about the unprotected feet and ankles.

"Guess you've bit the big gold-cure!" he shouted suddenly. "Guaranteed to do away with a Sunday thirst or—" He turned with his brimming ladle up-lifted and found the smelting-house deserted.

A couple of scalded Chinamen dragged themselves through the doorway, where the fast-pooling metal lay in shining gouts of red about the door.

Outside the frantic mob withdrew to the shelter of a sand hill and discussed the situation. The shoulders and the limbs of the front and middle rank men were covered with metal scalds. Many of the others bore traces of the terrible baptism of gold; their faces and bodies disfigured where the yellow fire had sealed and spilled over them.

From the furnace lit house came the jeering laughter of the white barbarian. They could see him standing beside the crucible, the flare and sweat of battle upon his face.

"The dog has skinned us with our metal," snarled a Tonquinese coolie from the rear. "Let us fight him another way."

They gathered in a bunch near the smelting-house door armed with stones picked from the pile at hand. Hayes, stooping beside the furnace, knew that they would batter him to pulp the moment he tried to leave the building.

One of the leaders advanced within a few feet of the door, arid dropped a heavy short-fused dynamite cartridge near the threshold. Retreating nimbly, he rejoined his comrades, and took his stand beside the pile of broken stones.

The buccaneer leaned forward half-hypnotised, and stared at the slow burning fuse, the carbon-like flame that ate its way slowly towards the cartridge. He knew what would happen j the moment the fire reached the metal cartridge-ease, for he had seen rocks and hills rent asunder by smaller charges of dynamite. The smelting-house would fail about his ears as surely as though a five-inch shell had struck it. There was only one exit, and that was by way of the coolie stone-heaps.

Hayes rested out the long-handled ladle and contemplated the changing colour of the fire that bit its way surely and swiftly down to the cartridge-cap. He noted how the white glow turned from saffron to violet. The fuse-end began to smoke dully, then emitted a murderous red spark that interested him vastly. He almost felt the coming impact, the thunderous shock of earth and stone that would engulf him.

With a glance at the mob half-concealed behind their stone-heap, he leaped out, snatched up the smoking cartridge, and cast it in their midst. Its swift passage through the air seemed to quicken the last throbbing spark; a deafening roar smothered the howls of dismay that went up from the close-packed coolies. A blade-white flame seemed to eat the darkness about them, splitting the stone-heap in fifty directions; the sobbing roar of it shook the smelting-house to its foundations.

Hayes peeped out and the bitter fumes of dynamite blew back in his face. Several indistinct forms moved from the scattered stone-heap, moaning, calling to each other in supplicating voices. Drops of rain fell at his feet; he glanced skyward, instinctively.

At that moment a long arm shot out from the near ti-tree— a jagged stone struck him full on the brow. Staggering forward, he pitched over and lay almost in the doorway of the smelting house. A couple of big-chested coolies crept from the scrub-shadows and stood over him critically.

"The stone is better than the knife, Chung Lee. He will not melt or steal our gold again. Look how he has played with it!"

The speaker pointed to the gold-fretted floor of the house, where the ruddy patches of metal lay in hardened heaps and cakes of curious design. Grasping the ladle, he dipped it into the crucible and poured the fluid gold in short bars over the floor.

"Let us do what the barbarian would have done," he said, hurriedly, "and escape to the coast. The men who fight get the blows and the scalds. We who know better get the beautiful gold." He paused, with the brimming ladle of metal poised in the air reflectively, and glanced at the motionless figure stretched near the door.

"For what he he's done, Chung Lee, let us fill his mouth with burning gold; let us pour it down his great throat until it reaches his heart... the dog defiled our gods."

Chung Lee placed a fierce restraining hand on the uplifted ladle.

"Gold is hard enough to win, Foo Yen, without pouring it into the mouth of the *yanjen*. Let us hurry; others are coming."

Three bars of gold were run on the earthen floor, and the last dregs scraped from the furnace. Not a scrap of metal remained in the smelting-house when they emerged laden from hip to shoulder with bullion. They passed the sprawling, motionless shapes of their comrades in silence, and hurried north in the direction of Port Darwin.

When Emery returned, three hours later, he found Hayes sitting inside the smelting-house with his hands pressed over his eyes. The boatswain's glance wandered from the empty crucible to the huddle of coolies outside.

"It's been a drawn fight, Cap n." he ventured dismally. "Everybody's got a headache, it seems."

Hayes rose with an effort, his lips puckering a trifle maliciously.

"A man wants two heads to fight Chinamen with, Emery. The one I've got is always stopping pieces of flying iron."

They returned through the sandhills and gullies to the schooner.

13: When Kean Funked

Erle Cox

1873-1950

Australasian (Melbourne) 15 March 1924

Erle Cox

BECAUSE Holcroft spent most of his time on a sofa, his remarkable circle of friends used his smoking-room as a club. Two or three at least would drop in every evening, and sometimes as many as a dozen would be spread out in Holcroft's easy chairs, exchanging anecdotes of the unconventional domestic policies of little-known nations, and hair-raising stories of the underworld of international diplomacy.

They told their yarns in slow even voices, and with little emphasis or adornment, and what was more amazing than the stories themselves was that they were all true.

In Holcroft's smoking-room were discussed the lives and deeds of international celebrities in detail that would never appear in any obituary notice or biography. There I heard the true story of the now almost forgotten Dogger Bank incident, from one who had taken part in it. I heard the rotund, innocent Macrae tell without a smile on his face why certain great oil concessions were cancelled, and his part in the matter, to an audience that rocked with mirth.

Most of Holcroft's friends were men who had done the actual work, taking their lives in their hands, for which statesmen at home and in Europe had received the credit and rewards. They had gone alone into strange places, and, escaping by miracles themselves, had seen men die horribly. All ordinary emotions seemed to have burnt out of them. To them, the amazing was commonplace, and what would stir a normal man to the depths left them unmoved and cold.

It followed, naturally that they viewed life from unusual angles. Because they had lived and worked in outlandish places and among savage men, they

were strangely "woman-shy." Their ideas of woman dated back to the early nineties, and she of the third decade of this century was something beyond their comprehension, Rossiter, who had lived five years in Moscow with a price on his head, and thought little of it, was stricken dumb one day when I introduced him to Kitty Carew, and apparently suffered agonies until he excused himself awkwardly and fled. Kitty was certainly rather overpowering, but few men wished to fly from her presence; indeed the effect of her personality was usually the reverse.

One night at Holcroft's I heard Kean raging against the progress of science and all its works, and the lunacy of a French *confrère* who had introduced it into their peculiar brand of diplomacy. The incident concerned the involved policies of some native state near Chitral, and the iniquities of one Nazim El-Mulk, its ruler, whom, for some reason, both England and France wished to remove from his throne during the war. In that part of the world, it appeared from Kean, a natural death was so unusual as to excite comment, assassination was a dignified profession, and treachery was regarded as a virtue (especially if successful).

Kean's idea of handling the situation was to finance a rather less blackguardly aspirant to the throne to get rid of Nazim El-Mulk by one of the orthodox local revolutionary methods. However, the Frenchman had brought with him a gaudy brass clock, the base of which was filled with high explosives. This he insisted on presenting to the simple ruler, who accepted it with childish gratitude.

"I knew he'd make a mess of things, and, by Jove! he did," said Kean, and went on to explain how one of El-Mulk's lady-loves saw the clock immediately, and persuaded him to give it to her. That night, instead of blowing Nazim El-Mulk to Jehennum, his harem and its inhabitants were spread thin over about five acres of ground by French science, and the infuriated monarch chased the two of them into Siberia, from where they had a little Hades of a time in making their way to Manchuria and comparative safety. I sympathised with Kean's conservatism, and agreed solemnly that old and tried methods were the best. It would scarcely have been safe to express any other opinion, for Kean saw nothing abnormal in the incident beyond his confrere's departure from established custom.

The emotion known as fear was the least likely to affect any of them. They had seen others die and a violent-death as a termination of their work was always at their elbow while the work lasted. Now it was all over and; they had come here; a little coterie, living on half pay or on what they had saved during their hectic careers, to settle down and dwell in peace— a crew with chilled

steel nerves, and granite courage. Being a class apart, they lived apart, and mixed only with their kind.

As a friend of Holcroft's I had been accepted by them as part of the scheme of things, and gradually they came to discuss subjects before me where they would have been dumb in the presence of a stranger.

One night I had pulled my chair up to Holcroft's sofa, and was yarning quietly with him while half a dozen of the others talked spasmodically and filled the room with thick blue clouds of tobacco smoke. The reason why Holcroft stuck to his sofa was that his legs were in New Guinea. In an interval of other work he had undertaken to collect bugs and butterflies for one of the Rothschilds, and a raiding party of natives, also collectors of a kind, had added Holcroft to their bag. He was not killed immediately, he explained, because they wanted him to keep "fresh," which he would not have done after death, very long, in that climate. But so that he should not escape they fractured both his legs with clubs. This necessitated their carrying him, of course, so they suspended him by wrists and ankles from a bamboo pole which they carried over their shoulders. When he talks about the episode at all, he will say that he was not often conscious during the two days he was being carried to his culinary destination, but he I could still remember every resting-place, for his bearers used to throw the pole from their shoulders as though he had been a bunch of bananas.

Holcroft is somewhat of a Germanophile, because it was a survey party of Germans who fell in with his captors, and with true Teutonic thoroughness shot them down to the last man. "Now we," he would say, "would have let them all escape rather than plug one who was innocent, while the Germans , laid out the whole lot rather than let a guilty one escape. The natives understand the Huns, but they think we are all cracked."

As we talked, occasional snatches of what the others were saying drifted to us through the smoke. Heavy-handed banter, and now and again a chuckle of laughter. Presently I noticed Kean's voice without actually hearing what he was saying, but from their silence the others were apparently deeply interested. Then the words, "I don't mind admitting that I was in a perspiring funk," made Holcroft straighten up in his cushions and me turn in my chair.

Kean was leaning back his thin leathery length in his seat, and speaking slowly. "It was the most beastly hole I was ever in in my life. I had completely lost my bearings, and knew I should never find my way out alone. Reminded me of a time when I was getting snakes for Jamrach's in Borneo in '93, and a gang of Dyaks had chased me into one of those old ruined temples away in the mountains, full of dark corridors and vaults, and I was in it for two hours before I got clear. The jolly place seemed to carry about two cobras to the square

yard, and I cursed myself a good deal for an idiot for not staying to have it out with the Dyaks in the open with my rifle. Anyhow this was worse. I was thrashing round like an alligator on a hook, wondering what was going to happen next, when I lifted a curtain and turned into a big dim room. It was light enough though to see what I had stumbled against as. I crossed the threshold—" He paused and bent forward towards the listening group. "It was half the body of a woman. The eyes were staring, up at me from the floor— just glazed, staring, empty eyes, and the lips were drawn back from the teeth in a grin."

'"Phew! Jim, cut out the beastly details," broke in Rossiter. "Had she been a white woman?"

"Yes," replied Kean, "she was white— except where she was red," he added significantly. Then he went on, "and the arms were missing too. There was just the head with its wide staring eyes and the upper part of the trunk lying at my feet. That about finished me. I was feeling pretty pale before, and it only needed that to break my nerve— that and the grisly silence of the place Just put me in a perspiring funk. I didn't know which way to turn, and anyhow I couldn't have moved if I did, because my knees had gone. Then as I looked up I saw the inhabitants of the Sheol, just as one of them looked up and saw me.

"Women no less! Four of them, all dressed in long black robes, and they had another in a chair practising some of their devilish work on her. Then the four of them turned and stared at me. Gad! Never in my life did I see anything more baleful and malignant than those faces. I couldn't see their victim properly, and I was glad of it; I had seen too much of their work already. I felt as if some were rubbing my backbone with a chunk of ice. It wouldn't have been so bad if I'd had any means of defence, but I stood there as helpless as a child and watched the high-priestess come at me. She was a tall, gaunt woman, and her face— you remember Kipling's line, 'White and stale as a bone'— it fitted her like an old glove. Except for that, she reminded me of a black panther ready to strike. There was the same stealthy feline poise of body, and the same remorseless glare in the eyes. I'd have given a pension to be back in the old temple with the cobras; they would have been friendly in comparison. She walked— no, glided— to within a foot of me, and stared right into my face; it was only then my eye caught the gleam of steel in her hand. I wanted to explain, but couldn't, and stood there shivering and waiting for her to speak. Then it came.

"The haberdashery department is on the first floor; this is the millinery department. There is the lift," and she pointed to a door behind her with her scissors; and, by Jove! I nearly fainted when I tumbled into it."

14: The Family Tree

Irvin S. Cobb

1876-1944

The Saturday Evening Post, 24 March 1917

Irvin Shrewsbury Cobb

THE FAMILY TREE of the Van Nicht family was not the sort of family tree you think I mean, although they had one of that variety too. This was a real tree. It was an elm— the biggest elm and the broadest and the most majestic elm in the entire state, and in the times of its leafage cast the densest shade of any elm to be found anywhere, probably. For more than one hundred years the Van Nicht family had lived in its shadow. That was the principal trouble with them— they did live in the shadow. I'll come to that later.

Every consequential visitor to Schuylerville was taken to see the Van Nicht elm. It was a necessary detail of his tour about town. Either before or after he had viewed the new ten-story skyscraper of the Seaboard National Bank, and the site for the projected Civic Center, and the monument to Schuyler County's defenders of the Union— 1861-'65— with a dropsical bronze figure of a booted and whiskered infantryman on top of the tall column, and the Henrietta Wing Memorial Library, and the rest of it, they took him and they showed him the Van Nicht elm. So doing, it was incumbent upon them to escort him through a street which was beginning to wear that vacillating, uncertain look any street wears while trying to make up its mind whether to keep on being a quiet residential byway in an old-fashioned town or to turn itself into an important thoroughfare of a thriving industrial center. You know the kind of street I aim to picture— with here an impudent young garage showing its shining morning face of red brick in a side yard where there used to be an orchard, and there a new apartment building which has shouldered its way into a line of ancient dwellings and is driving its cast-iron cornices, like rude elbows, into the clapboarded short ribs of its neighbors upon either side.

At the far, upper end of that street, upon the poll of a gentle eminence, uplifted the Van Nicht elm. It was for sundry months of the year a splendid vast umbrella, green in the spring and summer and yellow in the fall; and in the winter presented itself against the sky line as a great skeleton shape, without a blemish upon it, except for a scar in the bark close down to the earth to show where once there might have been a fissure in its mighty bole. No grass, or at least mighty little grass, grew within the circle of its brandishing limbs. It was as though the roots of the tree sucked up all the nourishment that the soil might hold, leaving none for the humble grass to thrive upon.

It was in the winter that the house, which stood almost directly under the tree, was most clearly revealed as a square, ugly domicile of gray stone, a story and a half in height, lidded over by a hip roof of weathered shingles; with a deeply recessed front door, like a pursed and proper mouth, and, above it, a row of queer little longitudinal windows, half hidden below the overhang of the gables and suggesting so many slitted eyes peering out from beneath a lowering brow. You saw, too, the mold that had formed in streaky splotches upon the stonework of the walls and the green rime of age and dampness that had overspread the curled shingles and the peeling paint, turning to minute scales upon the woodwork of the window casings and the door frames. Also you saw one great crooked bough which stretched across the roof like a menacing black arm, forever threatening to descend and crush its rafters in. This was in winter; in summertime the leaves almost completely hid the house, so that one who halted outside the decrepit fence, with its snaggled and broken panels, must needs stoop low to perceive its outlines at all.

The carriage or the automobile bearing the prominent guest and the chairman of the local reception committee would halt at the end of the street.

"That," the chairman would say, pointing up grade, "is the Van Nicht elm. Possibly you've heard about it? Round here we call it the Van Nicht family tree. It is said to be the largest elm in this part of the country. In fact, I doubt whether there are any larger than this one, even up in New England. And that's the famous old Van Nicht homestead there, just back of it.

"Its got a history. When Colonel Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht came here right after the Revolutionary War— he was a colonel in the Revolution, you know— he built the house, placing it just behind the tree. The tree must've grown considerably since then, but the house yonder hasn't changed but mighty little all these years. It's the oldest building in Schuyler County. As a matter of fact, the town, with this house for a starter, sort of grew up down here on the flat lands below. The old colonel raised a family here and died here. So did his son and his grandson. They were rich people once— the richest people in the county at one time.

"Why all the land from here clear down to Ossibaw Street— that's six blocks south— used to be included in the Van Nicht estate. It was a farm then, of course, and by all accounts a fine one. But each generation sold off some of the original grant, until all that's left now is that house, with the tree and about an acre of ground more or less. And I guess it's pretty well covered with mortgages."

This, in substance, was what the guide would tell the distinguished stranger. This, in substance, was what was told to young Olcott on the day after he arrived in Schuylerville to take over the editorial management of the Schuylerville *News-Ledger*. Mayor T. J. McGlynn was showing him the principal points of interest— so the mayor had put it, when he called that morning with his own car at the Hotel Brainard, where Olcott was stopping, and invited the young man to go for a tour of inspection of the city, as a sort of introductory and preparatory course in local education prior to his assuming his new duties.

While the worthy mayor was uttering his descriptive remarks Olcott bent his head and squinted past the thick shield of limbs and leaves. He saw that the door of the house, which was closed, somehow had the look of about always being closed, and that most of the windows were barred with thick shutters.

"Appears rather deserted, doesn't it?" said the newcomer, striving to show a proper appreciation of the courtesy that was being visited upon him. "There isn't anyone living there at present, is there?"

"Sure there is," said Mayor McGlynn. "Old Mr. Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht, 4th, who's the present head of the family, and his two old-maid sisters, Miss Rachael and Miss Harriet— they all live there together. Miss Rachael is considerably older than Miss Harriet, but they're both regular old maids— guess they always will be. The brother never married, either— couldn't find anybody good enough to share the name, I suppose. Anyhow he's never married. And besides I guess it keeps him pretty busy living up to the job of being the head of the oldest family in this end of the state. That's about all he ever has done."

"Then he isn't in any regular business or any profession?"

"Business!" Mayor McGlynn snorted. "I should say not! All any one of the Van Nichts has ever done since anybody can remember was just to keep on being a Van Nicht and upholding the traditions and the honors of the Van Nichts— and this one is like all his breed. The poorer he gets the more pompous and the more important acting he gets— that's the funny part of it."

"Apparently not a very lucrative calling, judging by the general aspect of the ancestral manor," said Olcott, who was beginning now to be interested. "How do they manage to live?"

"Lord knows," said the mayor. "How do the sparrows manage to live? I guess there're times when they need a load of coal and a market basket full of victuals to help tide 'em over a hard spell, but naturally nobody would dare to offer to help them. They're proud as Lucifer themselves, and the town is kind of proud of 'em. They're institutions with us, as you might say."

McGlynn, who, as Olcott was to learn later, was a product of new industrial and new political conditions in the community, spoke with the half-begrudged admiration which the self-made so often have for the ancestor-made.

"We ain't got so very many of the real aristocrats in this section any more, what with all this new blood pouring in since our boom started up; and even if they are as poor as Job's turkey, these Van Nichts still count for a good deal round here. Money ain't everything anyway, is it?... Well, Mr. Olcott, if you've seen enough here, we'll turn round and go see something else." He addressed his chauffeur: "Jim, suppose you take us by the new hosiery mills next. I want Mr. Olcott to see one of the most prosperous manufacturing plants in the state. Employs nine hundred hands, Mr. Olcott, and hasn't been in operation but a little more than three years. That's the way this town is humping itself. You didn't make any mistake, coming here."

As the car swung about, Olcott gave the Van Nicht place a backward scrutiny over his shoulder and was impressed by its appearance into saying this:

"It strikes me as having a mighty unhealthy air about it. I'd say offhand it was a first-rate breeding spot for malaria and rheumatism. I wonder why they don't trim up that big old tree and give the sunshine and the light a chance to get in under it."

"For heaven's sake and your own, don't you suggest that to the old boy when you meet him," said McGlynn with a grin. "He'd as soon think of cutting off his own leg as to touch a leaf on the family tree. It's sacred to him. It represents all the glory of his breed and he venerates it, the same as some people venerate an altar in a church."

"Then you think I will be likely to meet him? I'd like to— from what you tell me, he must be rather a unique personality."

"Yes, he's all of that— unique, I mean. And you're pretty sure to meet him before you've been in town many months. He seems to regard it as his duty to call on certain people, after they've been here a given length of time, and extend to them the freedom of the town that his illustrious great-granddaddy founded. If you're specially lucky— or specially unlucky— he may even invite you to call on him, although that's an honor that doesn't come to very many, even among the older residents. The Van Nichts are mighty exclusive and it isn't often that anybody sees what the inside of their house looks like— let

alone a stranger.... Say, Jim, after we've seen the hosiery mills, run us on out past the County Feeble-Minded and Insane Asylum. Mr. Olcott will enjoy that!"

WITHIN a month's time from this time, Mayor McGlynn's prophecy was to come true. On a morning in the early part of the summer '01 Olcott sat behind his desk in his office adjoining the city room on the second floor of the *News-Ledger* building, when his office boy announced a gentleman calling to see Mr. Olcott personally.

"See who it is, will you, please, Morgan?" said Olcott to his assistant. Morgan had arrived less than a week before, having been sent on by the syndicate which owned a chain of papers, the *News-Ledger* included, to serve under the new managing editor. The syndicate had a cheery little way of shuffling the cards at frequent intervals and dealing out fresh executives for the six or eight dailies under its control and ownership.

"I'm busy as the dickens," added Olcott as Morgan got up to obey; "so if it's a pest that's outside, give him the soft answer and steer him off!"

In a minute Morgan was back with a cryptic grin on his face.

"You'd better see him— he's worth seeing, all right," said Morgan.

"Who is it?" asked Olcott.

"It's somebody right out of a book," answered Morgan; "somebody giving the name of Something Something Van Nicht. I didn't catch all the first name— I was too busy sizing up its proprietor. Says he must see you privately and in person. I gather from his manner that if you don't see him this paper will never be quite the same again. And honestly, Olcott, he's worth seeing."

"I think I know who it is," said Olcott, "and I'll see him. Boy, show the gentleman in!"

"I'll go myself," said Morgan. "This is a thing that ought to be done in style."

Olcott reared back in his chair, waiting. The door opened and Morgan's voice was heard making formal and sonorous announcement: "Mr. Van Nicht." And Olcott, looking over his desk top, saw, framed in the doorway, a figure at once picturesque and pitiable.

The first thing, almost, to catch his eye was a broad black stock collar— the first stock collar Olcott had ever seen worn by a man in daytime. Above it was a long, close-shaven, old face, with a bloodless and unwholesome pallor to it, framed in long, white hair, and surmounted by a broad-brimmed, tall-crowned soft hat which had once been black and now was gangrenous with age. Below it a pair of sloping shoulders merging into a thin, meager body tightly cased in a rusty frock coat, and below the coat skirts in turn a pair of amazingly thin and rickety legs, ending in slender, well-polish-ed boots with high heels. In an instantaneous appraisal of the queer figure Olcott comprehended these details

and, in that same flicker of time, noted that the triangle of limp linen showing in the V of the close-buttoned lapels had a fragile, yellowish look like old ivory, that all the outer garments were threadbare and shiny in the seams, and that the stock collar was decayed to a greenish tinge along its edges. Although the weather was warm, the stranger wore a pair of gray cotton gloves.

"Good morning," said Olcott, mechanically putting a ceremonious and formal emphasis into the words and getting on his feet.

"Good morning, sir, to you," returned the visitor in a voice of surprising volume, considering that it issued from so slight a frame. "You are Mr. Olcott?"

"Yes, that's my name." And Olcott took a step forward, extending his hand.

"Mine, sir, is Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht, 4th." The speaker paused midway of the floor to remove one glove and to shift it and his cane to the left hand. Advancing, with a slight limp, he gave to Olcott a set of fingers that were dry and chilly and fleshless. Almost it was like clasping the articulated bones of a skeleton's hand.

"I have come personally, sir, to pay my respects and, as one representing the— ah— the old régime of our people, to bid you welcome to our midst."

"Thank you very much," said Olcott, a bit amused inwardly, and a bit impressed also by the air of moldy grandeur which the other diffused. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Van Nicht?"

"I shall be able to tarry but a short while." The big voice boomed out of the little dried-up body as the old man took the chair which Olcott had indicated. He took only part of it. He poised himself on the forward edge of its seat, holding his spine very erect and dramatising his posture with a stiff and stately investure.

Olcott caught himself telling himself Morgan had been right: This personage was not really flesh and blood, but something out of a book— an embodied bit of fiction. Why even his language had the stilted shaping of the characters in most of these old-timey classical novels.

"He wasn't really born at all," Olcott thought. "Dickens wrote him and then Cruikshank drew him and now here he is, miraculously preserved to posterity. But Charlotte Brontë endowed him with his conversation." What Olcott said— aloud— was something fatuous and commonplace touching on the state of the weather.

"I have yet other motives in presenting myself today, in this, your sanctum," stated Mr. Van Nicht. "First of all, I wish to congratulate you upon what to me appears to be a very gratifying stroke of journalistic enterprise which has come to light in the columns of your valued organ since your advent into the community and for which, therefore, I assume you are responsible."

"Well," said Olcott, "we try to get out a reasonably live sheet."

"Pardon me," said Mr. Van Nicht, "but I do not refer to the aspect of your news columns. I am speaking with reference to a feature lately appearing in your Sunday edition, in what I believe is known as your magazine section. I have observed that, beginning two weeks ago, you inaugurated a department devoted to the genealogies of divers of our older and more distinguished American families. As I recall, the subjects of your first two articles were the Adams family, of Massachusetts, and the Lee family, of Virginia. It may interest you to know, sir— I trust indeed that it may please you to know— that I, personally, am most highly pleased that you should seek to inculcate in the minds of our people, through the medium of your columns, a knowledge of those strains of blood to which our nation is particularly indebted for much of its culture, much of its social development, many of its gentler and more graceful influences. It is a most worthy movement indeed, a most commendable undertaking. I repeat, sir, that I congratulate you upon it."

"Thank you," said Olcott. "This coming Sunday we are going to run a yarn about the Gordon family, of Georgia, and after that I believe come the Clays, of Kentucky."

"Quite so, quite so," said Mr. Van Nicht. "The names you have mentioned are names that are permanently embalmed in the written annals of our national life. But may I ask, sir, whether you have taken any steps as yet to incorporate into your series an epitome of the achievements of the family of which I have the honor to be the head— the Van Nicht family?"

"Well, you see," explained Olcott apologetically, "these articles are not written here in the office. They are sent to us in proof sheets as a part of our regular feature service, and we run 'em just as they come to us. Probably— probably"— he hesitated a moment over the job of phrasing tactfully his white lie— "probably a story on your family genealogy will be coming along pretty soon."

"Doubtlessly so, doubtlessly so." The assent was guilelessly emphatic. "In any such symposium, in any such compendium, my family, beyond peradventure, will have its proper place in due season. Nevertheless, foreseeing that in the hands of a stranger the facts and the dates might unintentionally be confused or wrongly set down, I have taken upon myself the obligation of preparing an accurate account of the life and work of my illustrious, heroic and noble ancestor, Colonel Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht, together with a more or less elaborate résumé of the lives of his descendants up to and including the present generation. This article is now completed. In fact I have it upon my person." Carefully he undid the top button of his coat and reached for an inner breast pocket. "I shall be most pleased to accord you

my full permission for its insertion in an early issue of your publication." He spoke with the air of one bestowing a gift of great value.

Olcott's practiced eye appraised the probable length of the manuscript which this volunteer contributor was hauling forth from his bosom and, inside himself, Olcott groaned. There appeared to be a considerable number of sheets of foolscap, all closely written over in a fine, close hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Van Nicht, thank you very much," said Olcott, searching his soul for excuses. "But I'm afraid we aren't able to pay much for this sort of matter. What I mean to say is we are not in a position to invest very heavily in outside offerings. Er— you see most of our specials— in fact practically all of them except those written here in the office by the staff— come to us as part of a regular syndicate arrangement."

Here Mr. Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht, 4th, attained the physically impossible. He erected his spine straighter than before and stiffened his body a mite stiffer than it had been.

"Pray do not misunderstand me, sir," he stated solemnly. "I crave no honorarium for this work. I expect none. I have considered it a duty incumbent upon me to prepare it, and I regard it as a pleasure to tender it to you, gratis."

"But— I'd like to be able to offer a little something anyway—"

"One moment, if you please! Kindly hear me out! With me, sir, this has been a labor of love. Moreover, I should look upon it as an impropriety to accept remuneration for such work. To me it would savor of the mercenary— would be as though I sought to capitalize into dollars and cents the reputation of my own people and my own stock. I trust you get my viewpoint?"

"Oh, yes, indeed"— Olcott was slightly flustered— "very creditable of you, I'm sure. Er— is it very long?"

"No longer than a proper appreciation of the topic demands." The old gentleman spoke with firmness. "Also you may rely absolutely upon the trustworthiness and the accuracy of all the facts, as herein recited. I had access to the papers left by my own revered grandfather, Judge Cecilius Van Nicht, 2d, son and namesake of the founder of our line, locally. I may tell you, too, that in preparing this compilation I was assisted by my sister, Miss Rachael Van Nicht, a lady of wide reading and no small degree of intellectual attainment, although leading a life much aloof from the world— in fact, almost a cloistered life."

He arose, opened out the sheaf of folded sheets, pressed them flat with a caressing hand and laid them down in front of Olcott. He spoke now with authority, almost in the tone of a superior giving instructions regarding a delicate matter to an underling:

"I feel warranted in the assumption that you will not find it necessary to alter or curtail my statements in any particular. I have had some previous

experience in literary endeavors. In all modesty I may say that I am no novice. A signed article from my pen, entitled The Influence of the Holland— Dutch Strain Upon American Public Life, From Peter Stuyvesant to Theodore Roosevelt, was published some years since in the *New York Evening Post*, afterward becoming the subject of editorial comment in the *Springfield Republican*, the *Hartford Courant* and the *Boston Transcript*. At present I am engaged in a brief history of one of our earlier presidents, the Honorable Martin Van Buren. I have the honor to bid you a very good day, sir."

OLCOTT ran the story in his next Sunday issue but one. It stretched the full length of two columns and invaded a third. It was tiresome and long-winded. It was as prosy as prosy could be. To make room for it a smartly done special on the commercial awakening of Schuyler County was crowded out. Olcott's judgment told him he did a sinful thing, but he ran it. He went further than that. Into the editorial page he slipped a paragraph directing attention to "Mr. Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht's timely and interesting article, appearing elsewhere in this number."

He had his reward, though, in the comments of sundry ones of his local subscribers. From these comments, made to him by letter and by word of mouth, he sensed something of the attitude of the community toward the Van Nicht family. As he figured, this sentiment was a compound of several things. It appeared to embody a gentle intolerance for the shell of social exclusiveness in which the present bearers of the name had walled themselves up, together with a sympathy for their poverty and their self-imposed state of lonely and neglected aloofness, and still further down, underlying these emotions and tincturing them, an understanding and an admiration for the importance of this old family as an old family— an admiration which was genuine and avowed on the part of some, and just as genuine but more or less reluctantly bestowed on the part of others. It was as Mayor McGlynn had informed Olcott on their first meeting. The Van Nichts were not so much individuals, having a share in the life of this thriving, striving, overgrown town, as they were historical fixtures and traditional assets. Collectively, they constituted something to be proud of and sorry for.

Soon, too, he had further reward. One afternoon a small and grimy boy invaded his room, without knocking, and laid a note upon his desk.

"Old guy downstairs, with long hair and a gimpy leg, handed me this yere and gimme fi' cents to fetch it up here to you," stated the messenger.

The note was from Mr. Van Nicht, as a glance at the superscription told Olcott before he opened the envelope. In formal terms Olcott was thanked for giving the writer's offering such prominence in the pages of his valuable paper

and was invited, formally, to call upon the undersigned at his place of residence, in order that undersigned might more fully express to Mr. Olcott his sincere appreciation.

On the whole, Olcott was glad of the opportunity to view the inside of that gloomy old house under the big tree out at the end of Putnam Street. He wanted to see more of Mr. Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht, and to see something of the other two dwellers beneath that ancient roof. Olcott had dreams of some day writing a novel; some day when he had the time. Most newspaper men do have such dreams; or else it is a play they are going to write. Meanwhile, pending the coming of that day, he was storing up material for it in his mind. Assuredly the bleached-out, pale, old recluse in the black stock would make copy. Probably his sisters would be types also, and they might make copy too. Olcott answered the note, accepting the invitation for that same evening.

It was a night of crystal-clear moonlight, and Olcott walked up Putnam Street through an alchemistic radiance which was like a path for a Puck to dance along. But the shimmering aisle broke off short, when he had turned in at the broken gate and had come to the edge of the shade of the Van Nicht elm. Under there the shadow lay so thick and dense that, as he groped through it to the small entry porch, finding the way by the feel of his feet upon the irregular, flagged walk, he had the conviction that he might reach out with his hands and gather up folds of the darkness in his arms, like ells of black velvet. The faint glow which came through a curtained front window of the unseen house was like a phosphorescent smear, plastered against a formless background, and only served to make the adjacent darkness darker still. If the moonlight yonder was a fit place for the fairies to trip it, this particular spot, he thought, must be reserved for ghosts to stalk in.

Fumbling with his hands, he searched out the heavy door knocker. Its resounding thump against its heel plate, as he dropped it back in place, made him jump. At once the door opened. Centered in the oblong of dulled light which came from an oil lamp burning upon a table, behind and within, appeared the slender, warped figure of Mr. Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht, 4th. With much ceremony the head of the house bowed the guest in past the portals.

Almost the first object to catch Olcott's eye, as he stepped in, was a portrait which, with its heavy frame, filled up a considerable portion of the wall space across the back breadth of the square hallway into which he had entered. Excepting for this picture and the table with the oil lamp upon it and a tall hat-tree, the hall was quite bare.

Plainly pleased that the younger man's attention had been caught by the painted square of canvas, Mr. Van Nicht promptly turned up the wick of the light, and then Olcott, looking closer, saw staring down at him the close-set

black eyes and the heavy-jowled, foreign-looking face of an old man, dressed in such garb as we associate with our conceptions of Thomas Jefferson and the elder Adams.

"My famous forbear, sir," stated Olcott's host, with a great weight of vanity in his words, "the original bearer of the name which I, as his great-grandson, have the honor, likewise, of bearing. To me, sir, it has ever been a source of deep regret that there is no likeness extant depicting him in his uniform as a regimental commander in the Continental armies. If any such likeness existed, it was destroyed prior to the colonel's removal to this place, following the close of the struggle for Independence. This portrait was executed in the later years of the original's life— presumably about the year 1798, by order of his son, who was my grandfather. It was the son who enlarged this house, by the addition of a wing at the rear, and to him also we are indebted for the written records of his father's gallant performances on the field of honor, as well as for the accounts of his many worthy achievements in the lines of civic endeavor. Naturally this portrait and those records are our most precious possessions and our greatest heritages.

"The first Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht was by all accounts a great scholar but not a practiced scribe. The second of the name was both. Hence our great debt to him— a debt which I may say is one in which this community itself shares."

"I'm sure of it," said Olcott.

"And now, sir, if you will be so good, kindly step this way," said Mr. Van Nicht. "The light, I fear, is rather indifferent. This house has never been wired for electricity, nor was it ever equipped with gas pipes. I prefer to use lights more in keeping with its antiquity and its general character."

His tone indicated that he did not in the least hold with the vulgarized and common utilities of the present. He led the way diagonally across the hall to a side door and ushered Olcott into what evidently was the chief living room of the house. It was a large, square room, very badly lighted with candles. It was cluttered, as Olcott instantly perceived, with a jumble of dingy-appearing antique furnishings, and it contained two women who, at his appearance, rose from their seats upon either side of the wide and empty fireplace. Simultaneously his nose informed him' that this room was heavy with a pent, dampish taint.

He decided that what it mainly needed was air and sunshine, and plenty of both.

"My two sisters," introduced Mr. Van Nicht. "Miss Rachael Van Nicht, Mr. Olcott. Miss Harriet Van Nicht, Mr. Olcott."

Neither of the two ladies offered her hand to him. They bowed primly, and Olcott bowed back and, already feeling almost as uncomfortable as though he

had invaded the privacy of a family group of resident shades in their resident vault, he sat down in a musty-smelling armchair near the elder sister.

Considered as such, the conversation which followed was not unqualifiedly a success. The brother bore the burden of it, which meant that at once it took on a stiff and an unnatural and an artificial coloring. It was dead talk, stuffed with big words, and strung with wires. There were semioccasional interpolations by Olcott, who continued to feel most decidedly out of place. Once in a while Miss Rachael Van Nicht slid a brief remark into the grooves which her brother channelled out. Since he was called upon to say so little, Olcott was the better off for an opportunity to study this lady as he sat there.

His first look at her had told him she was of the same warp and texture as her brother; somewhat skimpier in the pattern, but identical in the fabric. Olcott decided though that there was this difference: If the brother had stepped out of Dickens, the sister had escaped from between the hasped lids of an old daguerreotype frame. Her plain frock of some harsh, dead-colored stuff— her best frock, his intuition told him— the big cameo pin at her throat, the homely arrangement of her gray hair, her hands, wasted and withered-looking as they lay on her lap, even her voice, which was lugubriously subdued and flat— all these things helped out the illusion. Of the other sister, sitting two-thirds of the way across the wide room from him, he saw but little and he heard less. The poor light, and the distance and the deep chair in which she had sunk herself, combined to blot her out as a personality and to efface her from the picture. She scarcely uttered a word.

As Olcott had expected beforehand, the talk dealt, in the main, with the Van Nicht family, which is another way of saying that it went back of and behind, and far beyond, all that might be current and timely and pertinent to the hour. There was no substance to it, for it dealt with what had no substance. As he stayed on, making brave pretense of being interested, he was aware of an interrupting, vaguely irritating sound at his rear and partly to one side of him. Patently the sound was coming from without. It was like a sustained and steady scratching, and it had to do, he figured, with one of the window openings. He took a glance over his shoulder, but he couldn't make out the cause; the window was too heavily shrouded in faded, thick curtains of a sad, dark-green aspect. The thing got on his nerves, it persisted so. Finally he was moved to mention it.

"I beg your pardon," he said, taking advantage of a pause, "but isn't somebody or something fumbling at the window outside?"

"It is a bough of the family elm," explained Mr. Van Nicht. "One of the lower boughs has grown forward and downward, until it touches the side of the house. When stirred by the breeze it creates the sound which you hear."

Internally Olcott shivered. Now that the explanation had been vouchsafed the noise made him think of ghostly fingers tapping at the glass panes— as though the spirit of the tree craved admittance to the dismal circle of these human creatures who shared with it the tribal glory.

"Don't you find it very annoying?" he asked innocently. "I should think you would prune the limb back." He halted then, realizing that his tongue had slipped. There was a little silence, which became edged and iced with a sudden hostility.

"No human hand has ever touched the tree to denude it of any part of its majestic beauty," stated Mr. Van Nicht with a frigid intonation. "Whilst any of this household survives to protect it, no human hand ever shall."

From the elder sister came a murmur of assent.

The conversation had sagged and languished before; after this it sank to a still lower level and gradually froze to death. After possibly ten minutes more of the longest and bleakest minutes he ever recalled having weathered, Olcott, being mentally chilled through, got up and, making a show of expressing a counterfeit pleasure of having been accorded this opportunity of meeting those present, said really he must be going now.

In their places Miss Rachael Van Nicht and her brother rose, standing stiff as stalagmites, and he knew he was not forgiven. It was the younger sister who showed him out, preceding him silently, as he betook himself from the presence of the remaining two.

Close up, in the better light of the hall, Olcott for the first time perceived that Miss Harriet Van Nicht was not so very old. In fact, she was not old at all. He had assumed somehow that she must be sered and soured and elderly, or at least that she must be middle-aged. With this establishment he could not associate any guise of youth as belonging. But he perceived how wrong he had been. Miss Harriet Van Nicht most assuredly was not old. She could not be past thirty, perhaps she was not more than twenty-five or six. It was the plain and ugly gown she wore, a dun-colored, sleazy, shabby gown, which had given her, when viewed from a distance, the aspect of age— that and the unbecoming way in which she wore her hair slicked back from her forehead and drawn up from round her ears. She had fine eyes, as now he saw, with a plaintive light in them, and finely arched brows and a delicate oval of a face; and she was small and dainty of figure. He could tell that, too, despite the fit of the ungraceful frock.

At the outer door, which she held ajar for his passage, she spoke, and instantly he was moved by a certain wistfulness in her tones.

"It was a pleasure to have you come to see us, Mr. Olcott," she said, and he thought she meant it too. "We see so few visitors, living here as we do.

Sometimes I think it might be better for us if we kept more in touch with people who live in the outside world and know something of it."

"Thank you, Miss Van Nicht," said Olcott, warming. "I'm afraid, though, I made a rather unfortunate suggestion about the tree. Really, I'm very sorry."

Her face took on a gravity; almost a condemning expression came into it. And when she answered him it was in a different voice.

"A stranger could not understand how we regard the Van Nicht elm," she said. "No stranger could understand! Good night, Mr. Olcott."

At the last she had made him feel that he was a stranger. And she had not shaken hands with him either, nor had she asked him to call again.

He made his way out, through the black magic of the tree's midnight gloom, into the pure white chemistry of the moonlight; and having reached the open, he looked back. Except for that faint luminous blotch, like smeared phosphorus, showing through the blackness from beyond the giant tree, nothing testified that a habitation of living beings might be tucked away in that drear hiding place. He shrugged his shoulders as though to shake a load off them and, as he swung down the silvered street in the flawless night, his thoughts thawed out. He decided that assuredly two of the Van Nichts must go into the book which some day, when time served, he meant to write.

They belonged in a book— those two poor, pale, sapless creatures, enduring a grinding poverty for the sake of a vain idolatry; those joint inheritors of a worthless and burdensome fetish, deliberately preferring the shadow of a moldy past for the substance of the present day. Why, the thing smacked of the Oriental. It wasn't fit and sane for white people— this Mongolian ancestor-worship which shut the door and drew the blind to every healthy and vigorous impulse and every beneficent impulse. Going along alone, Olcott worked himself into quite a brisk little fury of impatience and disgust.

He had it right— they belonged in a book, those two older Van Nichts, not in real life. And into a book they should go— into his book. But the younger girl, now. It was a pitiable life she must lead, hived up there in that musty old house under that terrific big tree with those two grim and touchy hermits. On her account he resented it. He tried to picture her in some more favorable setting. He succeeded fairly well too. Possibly, though, that was because Olcott had the gift of a brisk imagination. At times, during the days which followed, the vision of Harriet Van Nicht, translated out of her present decayed environment, persisted in his thoughts. He wondered why it did persist.

Nearly a month went by, during which he saw no member of that weird household. One day he encountered upon the street the brother and went up to him and, rather against the latter's inclination, engaged him in small talk. It didn't take long to prove that Mr. Van Nicht had very little small talk in stock;

also that his one-time air of distant and punctilious regard for the newspaper man had entirely vanished. Mr. Van Nicht was courteous enough, with an aloof and stand-away courteousness, but he was not cordial. Presently Olcott found himself speaking, from a rather defensive attitude, of his own ancestry. He came of good New England stock— a circumstance which he rarely mentioned in company, but which now, rather to his own surprise, he found himself expounding at some length. Afterward he told himself that he had been merely casting about for a subject which might prove congenial to Mr. Van Nicht and had, by chance, hit on that one.

If such were the care, the expedient failed. It did not in the least serve to establish them upon a common footing. The old gentleman listened, but he refused to warm up; and when he bade Olcott good day and limped off, he left Olcott profoundly impressed with the conviction that Mr. Van Nicht did not propose to suffer any element of familiarity to enter into their acquaintanceship. Feeling abashed, as though he had been rebuked after some subtle fashion for presumption and forwardness, Olcott dropped into the handiest bar and had a drink all by himself— something he rarely did. But this time he felt that the social instinct of his system required a tonic and a bracer.

Within the next day or two chance gave him opportunity for still further insight into the estimation in which he was held by other members of the Van Nicht family. This happened shortly before the close of a cool and showery July afternoon. Leaving his desk, he took advantage of a lull in the rain to go for a solitary stroll before dinner. He was briskly traversing a side street, well out of the business district, when suddenly the downpour started afresh. He pulled up the collar of his light raincoat and turned back to hurry to the Hotel Brainard, where he lived. Going in the opposite direction a woman pedestrian, under an umbrella, met him; she was heading right into the slanting sheets of rain. In a sidelong glance he recognized the profile of the passer, and instantly he had faced about and was alongside of her, lifting his soaked hat.

"How d'you do, Miss Van Nicht?" he was saying. "I'm afraid you'll make poor headway against this rainstorm. Won't you let me see you safely home?"

It was the younger Miss Van Nicht. Her greeting of him and her smile made him feel that for the moment at least he would not be altogether an unwelcome companion. As he fell in beside her, catching step with her and taking the umbrella out of her hands, he noted with a small throb of pity that her cheap dark skirt was dripping and that the shoes she wore must be insufficient protection, with their thin soles and their worn uppers, against wet weather. He noted sundry other things about her: Seen by daylight she was pretty— undeniably pretty. The dampness had twisted little curls in her primly

bestowed hair, and the exertion of her struggle against the storm had put a becoming flush in her cheeks.

"I was out on an errand for my sister," she said. "I thought I could get home between showers, but this one caught me. And my umbrella— I'm afraid it is leaky."

Undeniably it was. Already the palm of Olcott's hand was sopping where water, seeping through open seams along the rusted ribs, had run down the handle. Each new gust, drumming upon the decrepit cloth, threatened to make a total wreck of what was already but little better than the venerable ruin of an umbrella.

"You must permit me to see you home then," he said. He glanced up and down, hoping to see a cab or a taxi. But there was no hireable vehicle in sight and the street cars did not run through this street. "I'm afraid, though, that we'll have to go afoot."

"And I'm afraid that I am taking you out of your way," she said. "You were going in the opposite direction, weren't you, when you met me?"

"I wasn't going anywhere in particular," he lied gallantly; "personally I rather like to take a walk when it's raining."

For a bit after this neither of them spoke, for the wind all at once blew with nearly the intensity of a small hurricane, buffeting thick rain spray into their faces and spattering it up about their feet. She seemed so small— so defenseless almost, bending forward to brace herself against its rude impetuosity. He was mighty glad it was his hand which clasped her arm, guiding and helping her along; mighty glad it was he who held the leaky old umbrella in front of her and with it fended off some part of the rain from her. They had traveled a block or two so, in company, when the summer storm broke off even more abruptly than it had started. There was an especially violent spatter of especially large drops, and then the wind gave one farewell wrench at the umbrella and was gone, tearing on its way.

In another half minute the setting sun was doing its best to shine out through a welter of shredding black clouds. There were wide patches of blue in the sky when they turned into Putnam Street and came within sight of the Van Nicht elm, rising as a great, green balloon at the head of it. By now they were chatting upon the basis— almost— of a seasoned acquaintanceship. Olcott found himself talking about his work. When a young man tells a young woman about his work, and is himself interested as he tells it, it is quite frequently a sign that he is beginning to be interested in something besides his work, whether he realizes it yet or not. And in Miss Van Nicht he was pleased to discern what he took to be a sympathetic understanding, as well as a happy aptness and alertness in the framing of her replies. It hardly seemed possible

that this was the second time they had exchanged words. Rather it was as though they had known each other for a considerable period; so he told himself.

But as, side by side, they turned in at the rickety gate of the ancestral dooryard and came under the shadow of the ancestral tree, her manner, her attitude, her voice, all about her seemed to undergo a change. Her pace quickened for these last few steps, and she cast a furtive, almost an apprehensive glance toward the hooded windows of the house.

"I'm afraid I am late— my sister and my brother will be worrying about me," she said a little nervously. "And I am sorry to have put you to all this trouble on my account."

"Trouble, Miss Van Nicht? Why, it was—"

"I shan't ask you in," she said, breaking in on him. "I know you will want to be getting back to the hotel and putting on dry clothes. Good-by, Mr. Olcott, and thank you very much."

And with that she had left him, and she was hurrying up the porch steps, and she was gone, without a backward look to where he stood, puzzled and decidedly taken aback, in the middle of the seamed flags of the walk.

He was nearly at the gate when he discovered that he had failed to return her umbrella to her; so he went back and knocked at the door. It was the elder sister who answered. She opened the door a scant foot.

"How do you do, sir?" she said austerely.

"I forgot to give your sister her umbrella," explained Olcott.

"So I perceive," she replied, speaking through the slit with a kind of sharp impatience, and she took it from him. "'Thank you! We are most grateful to you for your thoughtfulness."

She waited then, as if for him to speak, providing he had anything to say— her posture and her expression meanwhile most forcibly interpreting the attitude in which he must understand that he stood here. It was plain enough to be sensed. She resented— they all resented— his reappearance in any rôle at the threshold of their home. She was profoundly out of temper with him and all that might pertain and appertain to him. So naturally there was nothing for him to say except "Good evening," and he said it.

"Good evening," she said, and as he bowed and backed away she closed the door.

Outside the fence he halted and looked about him, then he looked back over the gapped and broken palings. Everywhere else the little world of Putnam Street had a washed, cleansed aspect; everywhere else nearly the sun slid its flattened rays along the refreshed and moistened sod and touched the wayside weeds with pure gold; but none of its beams slanted over the side hill

and found a way beneath the interlaced, widespread bulk of the family tree. He saw how forlornly the lower boughs, under their load of rain water, drooped almost to the earth, and how the naked soil round about the vast trunk of it was guttered with muddy, yellow furrows where little torrents had coursed down the slope, and how poisonously vivid was the mold upon the trunk. The triangular scar in its lower bark showed as a livid greenish patch. Still farther back in the shadow the outlines of the old gray house half emerged, revealing dimly a space of streaked walls and the sodden, warped shingles upon one outjutting gable of the peaked roof.

"It's not an honest elm," thought Olcott to himself in a little impotent rage. "It's a cursed devil tree, a upas tree, overshadowing and blighting everything pleasant and wholesome that might grow near it. Bats and owls and snails belong back there— not human beings. There ought to be a vigilance committee formed to chop it down and blast its roots out of the ground with dynamite. Oh, damn!"

In his pocket he had a letter from the presiding deity of the organisation that owned the string of papers of which the paper he edited was a part. In that letter he was invited to consider the proposition of surrendering his present berth with the Schuylerville News-Ledger and going off to Europe, as special war correspondent for the syndicate. He had been considering the project for two days now. All of a sudden he made up his mind to accept. While the heat of his petulance and disappointment was still upon him, he went that same evening and wired his acceptance to headquarters. Two days later, with his credentials in his pocket and a weight of sullen resentment against certain animate and inanimate objects in his heart, he was aboard a train out of Schuylerville, bound for New York, and thereafter, by steamer, for foreign parts.

He was away, concerned with trenches, gas bombs, field hospitals and the quotable opinions of sundry high and mighty men of war-craft and statecraft, for upwards of a year. It was a most remarkably busy year, and the job in hand claimed jealous sovereignty of his eyes, his legs and his brain, while it lasted.

He came back, having delivered the goods to the satisfaction of his employers, to find himself promoted to a general supervision of the editorial direction of the papers in his syndicate, with a thumping good salary and a roving commission. He willed it that the first week of his incumbency in his new duties should carry him to Schuylerville. In his old office, which looked much the same as it had looked when he occupied it, he found young Morgan, his former assistant, also looking much the same, barring that now Morgan was in full charge and giving orders instead of taking them. Authority nearly always works a change in a man; it had in this case.

"Say, Olcott," said Morgan after the talk between them had ebbed and flowed along a little while, "you remember that old geezer, Van Nicht, don't you? You know, the old boy who wrote the long piece about his family, and you ran it?"

"Certainly I do," said Olcott. "Why— what of him?"

Instead of answering him directly, Morgan put another question:

"And of course you remember the old Van Nicht house, under that big, whopping elm tree, out at the end of Putnam Street, where he used to live with those two freakish sisters of his?"

"Where he used to live? Doesn't he— don't they— live there now?"

"Nope— tree's gone and so is the house."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"Gone out of existence— vamoosed. Here's what happened, and it's a peach of a tale too: One night about six months ago there came up a hard thunderstorm— lots of lightning and gobs of thunder, not to mention rain and wind a plenty. In the midst of it a bolt hit the Van Nicht elm— ker-flewie— and just naturally tore it into flinders. When I saw it myself the next day it was converted from a landmark into the biggest whisk broom in the world. The neighbors were saying that it rained splinters round there for ten minutes after the bolt struck. I guess they didn't exaggerate much at that, because—"

"Was the house struck too? Was anybody hurt?" Olcott cut in on him.

"No, the house escaped somehow— had a few shingles ripped off the roof, and some of its windows smashed in by flying scraps; that was all. And nobody about the place suffered anything worse than a stunning. But the fright killed the older sister— Miss Rachael. Anyhow, that's what the doctors think. She didn't have a mark on her, but she died in about an hour, without ever speaking. I guess it was just as well, too, that she did. If she had survived the first shock I judge the second one would just about have finished her."

"The second shock? You don't mean the lightning?"

"No, no!" Morgan hastened to explain.

"Lightning never plays a return date— never has need to, I take it. I mean the shock of what happened after daylight next morning.

"That was the queerest part of the whole thing— that was what made a really big story out of it. We ran two columns about it ourselves, and the A. P. carried it for more than a column.

"After the storm had died down and it got light enough to see, some of the neighbors were prowling round the place sizing up the damage. Right in the heart of the stump of the elm, which was split wide open— the stump, I mean— they found a funny-looking old copper box buried in what must have been a rotted-out place at one time, maybe ninety or a hundred years ago. But

the hollow had grown up, and nobody ever had suspected that the tree wasn't solid as iron all the way through, until the lightning came along and just naturally reached a fiery finger down through all that hardwood and probed the old box out of its cache and, without so much as melting a hinge on it, heaved it up into sight, where the first fellow that happened along afterward would be sure to see it. Well, right off they thought of buried treasure, but being honest they called old Van Nicht out of the house, and in his presence they opened her up— the box I mean— and then, lo and behold, they found out that all these years this town had been worshipping a false god!

"Yes, sir, the great and only original Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht was a rank fake. He was as bogus as a lead nickel. There were papers in the box to prove what nobody, and least of all his own flesh and blood, ever suspected before. He wasn't a hero of the Revolution. He wasn't a colonel under George Washington. He wasn't of Holland-Dutch stock. His name wasn't even Van Nicht. His real name was Jake Nix— that's what it was, Nix— and he was just a plain, everyday Hessian soldier— a mercenary bought up, along with the other Hessians, and sent over here by King George to fight against the cause of liberty, instead of for it.

"As near as we can figure it out, he changed his name after the war ended, before he moved here to live, and then after he died— or anyhow when he was an old man— his son, the second Cecilius Jacob, concocted the fairy tale about his father's distinguished services and all the rest of it. The son was the one, it seems, who capitalized the false reputation of the old man. He lived on it, and all the Van Nichts who came after him lived on it too— only they were innocent of practicing any deception on the community at large, and the second Van Nicht wasn't. It certainly put the laugh on this town, not to mention the local aristocracy, and the D.A.R.'s and the Colonial Dames and the rest of the blue bloods generally, when the news spread that morning.

"Oh, there couldn't be any doubt about it! The proofs were all right there and dozens of reliable witnesses saw them— letters and papers and the record of old Nix's services in the British army. In fact there was only one phase of the affair that has remained unexplained and a mystery. I mean the presence of the papers in the tree. Nobody can figure out why the son didn't destroy them, when he was creating such a swell fiction character out of his revered parent. One theory is that he didn't know of their existence at all— that the old man, for reasons best known to himself, hid them there in that copper box and that then the tree healed up over the hole and sealed the box in, with nobody but him any the wiser, and nobody ever suspecting anything out of the way, but just taking everything for granted. Why, it was exactly as if the old Nix had come out of the grave after lying there for a century or more, to produce the

truth and shame his own offspring, and incidentally scare one of his descendants plumb to death."

"What a tragedy!" said Olcott. But his main thought when he said it was not for the dead sister but for the living.

"You said it," affirmed Morgan. "That's exactly what it was— a tragedy, with a good deal of serio-comedy relief to it. Only there wasn't anything very comical about the figure the old man Van Nicht cut when he came walking into this office here about half past ten o'clock that day, with a ragged piece of crêpe tied round his old high hat. Olcott, you never in your life saw a man as badly broken up as he was. All his vanity, all his bumptiousness was gone— he was just a poor, old, shabby, broken-spirited man. I'd already gotten a tip on the story and I'd sent one of my boys out to find him and get his tale, but it seemed he'd told the reporter he preferred to make a personal statement for publication. And so here he was with his statement all carefully written out and he asked me to print it, insisting that it ought to be given as wide circulation as possible. I'll dig it up for you out of the files in a minute and let you see it.

"Yes, sir, he'd sat down alongside his sister's dead body and written it. He called it A Confession and an Apology, and I ran it that way, just as he'd written it. It wasn't very long, but it was mighty pitiful, when you took everything into consideration. He begged the pardon of the public for unwittingly practicing a deceit upon it all through his life— for living a lie, was the way he phrased it— and he signed it 'Jacob Nix, heretofore erroneously known as Cecilius Jacob Van Nicht, 4th.' That signature was what especially got me when I read it— it made me feel that the old boy was literally stripping his soul naked before the ridicule of this town and the ridicule of the whole country. A pretty manly, straightforward thing, I called it, and I liked him better for having done it than I ever had liked him before.

"Well, I told him I would run the card for him and I did run it, and likewise I toned down the story we carried about the exposure too. I'm fairly well calloused, I guess, but I didn't want to bruise the old man and his sister any more than I could help doing. But, of course, I didn't speak to him about that part of it. I did try, in a clumsy sort of way, to express my sympathy for him. I guess I made a fairly sad hash of it, though. There didn't seem to be any words to fit the situation. Or, if there were, I couldn't think of them for the moment. I remember I mumbled something about letting bygones be bygones and not taking it too much to heart and all that sort of thing.

"He thanked me, and then, as he started to go, he stopped and asked me whether by any chance I knew of any opening— any possible job for a person of his age and limitations. I remember his words: 'It is high time that I was

casting about to find honorable employment, no matter how humble. I have been trading with a spurious currency for too long. I have spent my life in the imposition of a monumental deceit upon this long-suffering community. I intend now, sir, to go to work to earn a living with my own hands and upon my own merits. I wish to atone for the rôle I have played.'

"It may have been imagination, but I thought there was a kind of faint hopeful gleam in his eye as he looked at me and said this; and he seemed to flinch a little bit when I broke the news to him that we didn't have any vacancies on the staff at present. I sort of gathered that he rather fancied he had literary gifts. Literary gifts? Can't you just see that poor, forlorn old scout piking round soliciting want ads at twenty cents a line or trying to cover petty assignments on the news end? I told him, though, I'd be on the lookout for something for him, and he thanked me mighty ceremoniously and limped out, leaving me all choked up. Two days later, after the funeral, he telephoned in to ask me not to trouble myself on his account, because he had already established a connection with another concern which he hoped would turn out to be mutually advantageous and personally lucrative; or words to that effect.

"So I did a little private investigating that evening and I found out where the old chap had connected. You see I was interested. A live wire named Garrison, who owned the state rights for selling the World's Great Classics of Prose and Poetry on subscriptions, had landed here about a week before. You know the kind of truck this fellow Garrison was peddling? Forty large, hard, heavy volumes, five dollars down and a dollar a month as long as you live; no blacksmith's fireside complete without the full set; should be in every library; so much for the full calf bindings; so much for the half leather; give your little ones a chance to acquire an education at a trifling cost; come early and avoid the rush of those seeking to take advantage of this unparalleled opportunity; price positively due to advance at the end of a limited period; see also our great clubbing offer in conjunction with Bunkem's Illustrated Magazine— all that sort of guff.

"Well, Garrison had opened up headquarters here. He'd brought some of his agents with him— experts at conning the simple peasantry and the sturdy yeomanry into signing on the dotted line A and paying down the first installment as a binder; but he needed some home talent to fill out his crew, and he advertised with us for volunteers. Old Van Nicht— Nix, I mean— had heard about it, and he had applied for a job as canvasser, and Garrison had taken him on, not on salary, of course, but agreeing to pay him a commission on all his sales. That was what I found out that night."

Before Olcott's eyes rose a vision of a dried-up, bleak-eyed old man limping from doorstep to doorstep, enduring the rebuffs of fretful housewives and the

insolence of annoyed householders— a failure, and a hopeless, predestined failure, at that.

"Too bad, wasn't it?" he said.

"What's too bad?" asked Morgan.

"About that poor old man turning book agent at his age, with his lack of experience with the ways of the world."

"Save your pity for somebody that needs it," said Morgan, grinning. "That old boy doesn't. Why, Olcott, he was a hit from the first minute. This fellow Garrison was telling me about him only last week. All that stately dignity, all that Sir Walter Raleigh courtesy stuff, all that faculty for using the biggest possible words in stock, was worth money to the old chap when he put it to use. It impressed the simple-minded rustic and the merry villager. It got him a hearing where one of these gabby young canvassers with a striped vest and a line of patter memorised out of a book would be apt to fail. Why, he's the sensation of the book-agent game in these parts. They sick him on to all the difficult prospects out in the country, and he makes good nine times out of ten. He's got four counties in his territory, with all expenses paid, and last month his commissions— so Garrison told me— amounted to a hundred and forty dollars, and this month he's liable to do even better. What's more, according to Garrison, the old scout likes the work and isn't ashamed of it. So what do you know about that?"

As Morgan paused, Olcott asked the question which from the first of this recital had been shaping itself in the back part of his head: "The other sister— what became of her?" He tried to put a casual tone into his inquiry.

"You mean Miss Harriet? Well, say, in her case the transformation was almost as great as it was in her brother's. She came right out of her shell, too— in fact, she seemed downright glad of a chance to come out of it and quit being a recluse. She let it be noised about that she was in the market for any work that she could do, and a lot of people who felt sorry for her, including Mayor McGlynn, who's a pretty good chap, interested themselves in her behalf. Right off, the school board appointed her a substitute teacher in one of the lower grammar grades at the Hawthorne School, out here on West Frobisher Street. She didn't lose any time in delivering the goods either. Say, there must have been mighty good blood in that family, once it got a real chance to circulate. The kiddies in her classes all liked her from the start, and the other teachers and the principal liked her, too, and when the fall term begins in October she goes on as a regular.

"On top of that, when she'd got a little color in her cheeks and had frizzed her hair out round her face, and when she'd used up her first month's pay in buying herself some good black clothes, it dawned on the town all of a sudden

that she was a mighty good-looking, bright, sweet little woman instead of a dowdy, sour old maid. They say she never had a sweetheart before in her life— that no man ever had looked at her the second time; at least that's the current gossip. Be that as it may, she can't complain on that score any more, even if she is still in mourning for her sister."

"How do you know all this?" demanded Olcott suspiciously. "Are you paying her attentions yourself?"

"Who, me? Lord, man, no! I'm merely an innocent bystander. You see, we live at the same boarding house, take our meals at the same table in fact, and I get a chance to see what's going on. She came there to board— it's Mrs. Gale's house— as soon as she moved out of the historic but mildewed homestead, which was about a month after the night of the storm. The New Diamond Auto Company— that's a concern formed since you left— bought the property and tore down the old house, after blasting the stump of the family tree out of the ground with giant powder; they're putting up their assembling plant on the site. After the mortgage was satisfied and the back taxes had been paid up, there was mighty little left for the two heirs; but about that time Miss Harriet got her job of teaching and she came to Mrs. Gale's to live, and that's where I first met her. Two or three spry young fellows round town are calling on her in the evenings— nearly every night there's some fellow in the parlor, all spruced up and highly perfumed, waiting to see her— not to mention one or two of the unmarried men boarders."

"Morgan," said Olcott briskly, "do me a favor! Take me along with you to dinner tonight at your boarding place, will you?"

"Tired of hotels, eh?" asked Morgan. "Well, Mrs. Gale has good home cooking and I'd be glad to have you come."

"That's it," said Olcott; "I'm tired of hotel life."

"You're on," said Morgan.

"Yes," said Olcott, "I am— but you're not on— at least not yet."

But Morgan didn't hear that, because Olcott said it to himself.

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15: Lilies of Life

Malcolm Jameson

1891-1945

Astounding Feb 1945

Malcolm Routh Jameson

THE test tube dropped to the floor with a crash. A wisp of acrid vapor trailed up from it.

Parks, ignoring it and gripping the edge of the table, moaned, "Something's happened to my schedule— this isn't due for an hour yet—"

He broke off, shivering.

Maxwell looked sharply at him from where he sat, and then glanced at the clock. It was only two. Their next shots were due at three o'clock. But there was no doubt that Parks was working himself into a seizure. Already his hands were twitching and jumping convulsively, and the telltale tics of the deadly Venusian swamp jitters were commencing to go to work. Parks's face was no longer his own, but a travesty of a human countenance— a wildly leering, alternately staring and squinting, mask of agony.

With a sigh, Maxwell rose and pushed back his chair. If Parks was going that way, so would he, soon. Unhurriedly he walked to the medicine cabinet and took out two shiny syringes. He filled them both from their supply of ampules. Paracobrine was not much good, but it was the best men knew. Then he laid them by the "wailing wall"— an iron railing firmly secured to heavy stanchions—and went to where the now whimpering Parks huddled on his stool.

"Come on, old man," he said gently, "let's get it over with."

Parks allowed himself to be led to the place, and long practice did the rest. By the time Maxwell had the needle in and the plunger thrust home, Parks was gripping the rail as if he meant to squeeze it flat. Maxwell took a deep breath.

It was his turn. He rolled up his sleeve and forced the amber liquid into his own veins.

For five interminable minutes the two men clung there, writhing and sobbing as the fiery stuff coursed through their bodies— molten iron, searing acid, soul-destroying agony. And then it passed. Fingers relaxed their deathlike hold, muscles untensed, and their gasping again became breathing.

"I... won't go... through... this... again—" began Parks through clenched teeth, "I—"

"Oh, yes you will," said Maxwell grimly. "We always say that... everybody says it... but still we go on. You know the alternatives don't you?"

"I know them," said Parks dully. Without paracobrine the jitters became a permanent condition, not a recurrent one, and one that ended necessarily in madness. The other course was the rope, or the jump from a high place, or a swifter poison.

"All right, let's get back to work then. What was in that tube?"

"Experiment eleven-o-four. It doesn't matter now. I used the last of the snooker bark. We haven't the stuff to duplicate it with. Not unless Hoskins smuggles in another supply."

"Forget it, then. Let's have a look in the ward. Maybe eleven-o-three did the trick."

Parks followed silently, gradually pulling himself back into his normal self. Next time he would know enough to advance the clock. Paracobrine was no fun, but it was less hard to take in a calm mood then after the attack had begun.

The ward brought the usual disappointment. The monkey in the victim cage was gibbering hideously in his last convulsions. Within a minute it would be as dead as the limp piles of inoculated guinea pigs in the pens beyond. The last try at the formula had not worked. Two thirds of the human race would have to go on suffering for a while, for a better answer to the swamp jitters than paracobrine was not yet invented.

Maxwell looked at the other cages. There were still some monkeys and guinea pigs, and there were a few other combinations yet to try. Men in vital research must be resilient. A thousand or so failures was nothing. It is a part of the business.

"I think," he started to say, "that we had best—"

"I'll get the door," Parks interrupted, as a discreet tapping broke in on them. "Sounds like Hoskins."

IT WAS HOSKINS, Hoskins the interplanetary smuggler. He carried a heavy satchel and wore a sour grin.

"Bad news, fellows," he said, setting down his bag. "No more stuff out of Venus from now on. They've trebled the off-planet patrol and tightened up on port inspection. Tony was pinched, and his ship and the stuff for you with it. They threw him in the clink, of course, and burned the cargo. That means you won't get any more snooker bark, or gizzle bugs, twangi-twangi, melons, or any other of that stuff. Shan Dhee has chucked his job, which leaves me without a buyer. I'm going out of business. Sorry."

"There's nothing for us?" asked Parks, aghast. He clung fiercely to his theory that the specific for the jitters would be found only in some organic product of Venus, where the disease originated. It would be there, if anywhere, that the virus's natural enemies would have evolved. But lately other Venusian maladies had been turning up, and the quarantine authorities must have ordered a stricter embargo. Without smuggled organics, his and Maxwell's hands would be tied.

"I've got this stuff," said Hoskins, opening the bag. "It's not the sort you usually order, but I happen to have it on hand and want to close it out. It's loot Shan Dhee got out of a Tombov temple he once robbed. It ought to go to a museum, but the stuff's hot and they ask too many questions. Could you use it?"

He dug into the bag and came up with a figurine. It was a piece of the curious coffee-colored semi-jade regarded as a sacred stone by the savage Tombovs, and, considered as Tombov work, was extraordinarily well executed. Its subject was a rotund, jolly old Tombov godlet, sitting comfortably on a throne with his pudgy hands clasped across his belly. About his neck hung a rope of what appeared to be large pearls, and he was crowned with a chaplet of swamp lilies. Lily plants grew all about the throne, and there the jade had been cunningly colored green by the application of a kind of lacquer— the pale-yellow lilies being similarly tinted.

"Shan Dhee says it is the Tombov God of Health, and the temple was the big one in Angra Swamp where the Angra tribes hold their orgies."

"Ugh!" shuddered Parks. Those who had seen them reported the Tombov ritual was not a pretty thing to watch. "No, it's no good to us."

"I don't know," said Maxwell slowly. "God of Health, you say? M-m-m. Come to think of it, most Tombovs are immune to the jitters, or were until our pioneers went there. Maybe we ought to study it. How much?"

"Nothing, to you," said Hoskins. "You've been good customers. Take it for cumshaw. But I'll have to ask money for these."

He dug again into the bag and came out with a double handful of beautiful, iridescent spherelets. They were each about the size of a golf ball, and looked for all the world like so many soap bubbles—thin, fragile, and shimmering. Yet

when Maxwell examined one he found it to be exceedingly hard, though almost weightless, and it appeared to be made of the toughest imaginable crystal.

"What are they?"

"Gems, I guess," shrugged Hoskins. "They came out of the temple, too. Shan Dhee said they hung around the neck of the big idol like a necklace— roped together with wisps of grass. See, the little idol wears a replica of it."

Maxwell considered the jewels, frowning. Hoskins added that the price would be a thousand for the lot. That was a lot of money, but what was money to men doomed to a lingering, fearful death? The baubles were somehow linked to the Tombov health rites, and the wild Tombov— though a filthy beast— was notoriously healthy. It was only the civilized ones who withered and died. It was doubtful that the gems themselves had any therapeutic value, but they came out of a temple. Therefore they were symbolic of something or other, a possible clue to the real secret.

Maxwell hauled a drawer open and swept the glistening spheres into it.

"Make out a check, Parks. I'm going to play a hunch."

PARKS, still dazed from his premature seizure, nodded dumbly. And after Hoskins had gone, they took out the spheres again and huddled over them. Then they divided up the work and went at it.

Tests were applied, with results that were largely negative. The iridescent balls were acidproof, shatterproof, and exceedingly hard. But Maxwell managed to saw one in half, and found it empty, though as the saw first bit through the thin shell there was a sharp hissing as trapped inner gases escaped into the room. Parks was quick to catch a sample of the foul-smelling stuff, only to be baffled by the analysis. The organic gases of Venus have most complex molecular structures.

"Hey," yelled Maxwell a little later, taking his eye away from the microscope. "I have some of that sawdust here. It isn't crystalline at all. It's definitely a cellular structure. These balls are certainly not minerals, but they are not plant or animal tissue, either— not as we know them. They're just—"

"Just Venusian," Parks completed for him, sighing. Anything that lived on Venus was a headache to the investigator. There was no perceptible borderline between flora and fauna, and there were times when both encroached into the mineral zone. Venusian life cycles made those of such devious transformations as the human tapeworm on Earth seem as bleakly simple as the reproductive processes of the amoeba. Parks knew of a sort of aquatic ant, to name just one, that was fertilized by clinging to the skin of eels, and which then crawled ashore and laid its eggs, the eggs subsequently growing up into

masses of moss. Weird, featherless birds ate that moss and developed intestinal parasites. Those, upon deserting their host, became crawling ants, sprouted wings, and then took off for the ocean. It was merely the usual Venusian complicated symbiotic setup: the ants being somehow necessary to the survival of the eels, and, in their later forms, to the birds, both as food and as digestive enzymes. Scientists who attempted to follow through lost themselves in a maze of still other ramifications.

Maxwell and Parks stared at one another.

"There's only one thing to do," said Maxwell. "Hoskins can't bring any more stuff to us; we'll have to go to it. I want to know why wild Tombovs don't have jitters, and why lilies are sacred to them, and what these things are. We're going to Venus."

Their arrival at Port Angra was not a cheerful occasion. Their arms and legs were puffed and aching from scores of prophylactic shots. Moreover, they had had to sign away most of their civil rights. Despite all precautions, white men rarely could remain more than three months on Venus without picking up one or more virulent infections, any of which would prevent his ever returning to sanitary Earth. People therefore went there at their own risk, absolving in advance the government and all others concerned.

There was also nothing reassuring about their fellow passengers. A few were desperate scientists like themselves, stragglers in the procession that had been going by for years. Others were missionaries, gone to relieve brothers whose three months were about up. For similar reasons there were relief quarantine-enforcement officers along, and representatives of the Radioactive Syndicate, come to take their turn at keeping the uranium mines going. Most regarded their assignments with unalloyed distaste.

They came down in the inevitable sticky, yellow, hot mist and landed in a clearing made in a lush jungle. Awaiting them was a pathetic sight— rows and rows of grounded palanquins with the weathered and mildewing white and red insignia of the Red Cross. In litters lay the men they were coming to relieve, mere wrecks of what they had been a few short weeks before. For not a few of them, their coming to the port was no more than a hopeless gesture. Whether they were accepted for the passage home would depend upon the doctors.

"This is some place," growled Parks.

"When the jitters hit you again," reminded Maxwell grimly, "it won't matter. Any place you happen to be in will be that."

He studied the ranks of tamed Tombovs standing patiently beside the grounded chairs. They were the bearers, the helots of this hole. They stood gaunt and shivering, for they were sick men, too, sicker even than the whites. It was thought profitable to keep Earthmen alive by periodic doses of

paracobrine, but a waste of good drugs when it came to natives. The swamps were full of them, and the promise of tobacco— the one nonnative commodity valued by the savages— always filled up the ranks again. As Maxwell looked, one of the chair bearers jerked into violent convulsions and fell writhing and howling to the muddy ground. No one noticed. It was too routine. Tomorrow, maybe, the scavengers would attend to it.

The Tombov was remarkably humanoid, grotesquely so, more so than the great apes of Earth. The salient difference was in the feet, huge splayed pedals that served as mudshoes, distributing the body weight over a larger area so that the Tombov could walk safely on the thin crust that topped the viscous mire of the swamplands. They were ducklike feet, mostly membrane spread between long, tapering toes.

The port captain came up and called litters for the new arrivals, one each for the men, and additional ones for their equipment. Then he barked out an order in the harsh Tombov tongue, and the bearers picked up their loads and went on splashing away.

Despite the poor visibility, Maxwell found it an interesting ride. There was a feeling of luxuriousness in being carried along over impossibly sloppy ground on the bare shoulders of a half-dozen jogging slaves. And he was interested and at the same time appalled at the riot of vegetation he glimpsed on all sides. There was an infinitude of species of every kind of living thing, an overwhelming field for scientific study. With human mortality rates what they were, man would probably never know much about Venusian life forms. For the animals, if they were animals, that peered out from time to time were as weird and incredible as the fantastic flowering lianas, smoking bushes, and trees that gave off metallic, cracked-bell, clanking sounds.

His momentary sense of well-being abruptly departed from him as their caravan hove into a clearing and moved past a low mud wall. Over the group of buildings beyond the wall flew the drab banner of the U.M.— United Missions. He saw the corrals into which newly arrived Tombovs were being herded preparatory to their being "processed" for the slave market. For since Earthmen could not work and survive in that vile climate, they had to have natives as the beasts of burden. It was natives who dug the uranium, who did the building and the hauling. And heathen Tombovs would not do. They were too intractable.

Maxwell thought cynically of the conversion statistics, of the thousands run through the salvation mills each year. It was not basically an evangelical proposition. It was an economic necessity. For all Earthmen, whatever their faith, agreed on one point—the Tombov in the raw was a lazy, lascivious, irresponsible rascal. The wild native was a chronic liar, a congenital thief, and

what displeased him he was prone to kill out of hand, and his means of doing it were rarely nice. He saw no point in working, for natural food was on every hand. He was tough; therefore physical punishment meant nothing. His philosophy was virtually nil, so he was deaf to abstract appeal. In short, to be useful, he had to be Christianized.

A TURN OF the road put behind them the mission and its hateful appendage—the labor mart. Ahead were the first straggling huts of An-gra. They passed the inevitable dispensary, with its white-coated attendants and wailing wall. Then they stopped beyond at a low building whose sign read:

BUREAU OF RESEARCH COORDINATION

The doctor in charge was a haggard, sallow man with woebegone eyes. His hopeless expression did not change while Maxwell was outlining his theory. When he stopped, the doctor shook his head.

"A chimera," he said, "a waste of work. Others have come to Venus with the notion that it was something the Tombovs ate or drank that made them immune to jitters. Every item of their diet has been analyzed many times, even the foul fen air they breathe. The results were always negative. Nor is there any appreciable difference between Tombov blood types and ours, or their vitamin reactions. We think now that the so-called Tombov immunity is due to nothing more mysterious than natural selection. The ones now in the swamps are descendants of those who simply could not be killed by the disease, and therefore have great resistance."

"Nonsense," said Maxwell, nettled by the negativeness of the man. "What becomes of their natural resistance when they are converted? Baptism has no effects on antibodies. Did it ever occur to you that there may be something they do at their secret rites which makes the difference?"

"Religion," said the doctor stiffly, "is a subject I never discuss, and the less said about the abominable rites of the swamp savages the better. I assure you, sir, if you knew the Tombov as well as we here do—"

Maxwell snorted and turned away.

"Let's go, Parks. It's the 'old China hand' story all over again. When a scientist lets himself be blinded by prejudice, he isn't a scientist any more."

At the dispensary they asked the whereabouts of Hoskins' former scout, Shan Dhee. According to Hoskins, Shan Dhee was a convert who backslid after living with the whites a while, and turned native again. It was because he had promptly contracted the jitters and had had sense enough to run away. The result of being apostate from both camps was that he became a sort of pariah,

tolerated, but distrusted, by both races. Yet he served well as a go-between because he was the one heathen Tombov who knew the ways of Earthmen and spoke their language, though Hoskins warned it would be in a variety of code.

"Shan Dhee?" said the interne, lifting an eyebrow in surprise that a respectable person should inquire about one so shifty and disreputable. "Why, in jail, probably. If not, you'll find him hanging around one of the dives down at the Edge, loaded to the gills with zankra. Take my advice and have a patrolman go along, if you have to see him. When a convert goes bad, he's *bad*."

"Oh, we'll manage," said Maxwell. The anti-Tombov prejudice seemed well distributed. He was still inclined to rely on Hoskins' recommendation.

THE ZANKRA joint was not a savory place. It was dark and dirty and very, very smelly. Its patrons, white men who couldn't stand the gaff and had been barred from going home by reason of their condition, lay all about on dirty mats. They were dead to the world, even if their muscles did occasionally knot up in spasmodic twitchings. This was the way they chose to ease their doom— they had gone the zankra route. For zankra, though not a cure for anything, brought blissful anesthesia, being as it was a natural elixir— a blend of protomezyl alcohol and a number of potent alkaloids. It was cheap, too, since the gourds of which it was the juice could be had for a copper coin or so. A gourd of it was just being broached as Maxwell and Parks walked in. They saw a native squat by the door and jab a hole in the fruit so he could insert a sucking quill.

"We're Mr. Hoskins' friends," Maxwell said to him. "Where can we find Shan Dhee?"

The Tombov studied him shiftily. There was some hesitation, and then,

"Me Shan Dhee."

Maxwell had also been studying him. He was gratified to note that the fellow seemed to be magnificently healthy. There was none of the residual tremor that persists even after paracobrine shots. Yet Shan Dhee's shoulders and arms bore mute testimony that he had been a fitters' victim at one time. They were covered with the scars of self-inflicted bites, usually a sure sign of an untreated case. The scars were very old and confirmed, in a way, what Maxwell wanted to believe. The man had evidently been cured— a thing believed to be impossible. But how? By his reversion to his former pagan practices?

Shan Dhee turned out to be a poor subject. It was bad enough that he spoke the barbarous pidgin brought by the first missionaries, but he was also suspicious, stubborn, and evasive. By Maxwell's questions Shan Dhee at once

divined that Maxwell knew that he had once robbed a temple, and he knew that if other Tombovs ever found that out he was sure to die horribly.

"No know what lily flower good for," he would say, averting his eyes. "Tombov no eat. Tombov wear. Lily flower no good Earthfel-low. Kankilona come out of lily flower. Earthfellow kankilona no like. Earthfellow priestfellow say kankilona horres... horrejwous monster. Earthfellow priestfellow wantchee kill all kankilona. Kankilona die, Tombov die. Die no good for Tombov. More better Earthfellow no see kankilona."

That was that. No amount of questioning could elicit more. They had to guess at what sort of "horrendous monster" a kankilona might be. On Venus it could be anything from an ambulatory flytrap to a fire-breathing dragon. All that was clear was that there was a relation between the lilies and the monsters, that the missionaries did not approve of them, and that the monsters were somehow necessary to Tombov well-being.

Questions as to the iridescent, gas-filled spheres brought little that was comprehensible, though much later it did come to have meaning. Shan Dhee tried desperately to duck the question, for evidently he had lied about them to Hoskins.

"Littily shiny balls no gems," he confessed at last. "Littily shiny ball no good at all. Littily shiny ball one day pretty... six, eight, day more ... no more littily shiny ball. All gone. Maybeso litilly shiny ball papa-papa-fellow kankilona."

"He's lying," said Parks. "We've got eighteen of 'em at home in our vault. We studied 'em a lot longer than a week, and none of them vanished. I'd call 'em pretty permanent."

Shan Dhee refused to amplify. Maxwell noted the hinted link to the mysterious kankilona but let it pass and went straight to the purpose of his call. Would Shan Dhee fix it so they could attend a Tombov orgy?

Shan Dhee's reaction was close to terror. Tombov temples were strictly taboo to Earthmen at all times. They were even taboo to Tombovs, including the priesthood, except during the days of actual festival. The Tombovs would hardly dare slaughter the Earthmen if they were found desecrating the place— the Tombovs had learned that hard lesson long before— but what they would do to Shan Dhee was too dreadful to think about. Shan Dhee would steal, smuggle, even murder for them— if enough tobacco was to be had— but not that.

"Don't Tombov priests like tobacco, too?" Maxwell asked softly.

It was a lucky question. It rang the bell. Shan Dhee reconsidered. He sipped zankra and made calculations on his fingers. In the end he yielded.

"Maybeso can do," he admitted uneasily. "Maybeso Tombov priest-fellow letchee Shan Dhee hidum Earthfellow godhouse-side, but priest-fellow no likee

Earthfellow in Tombov godhouse. Earthfellow no likee see Tombov eatchee kankilona. Earthfellow get sick. Earthfellow pukum. Earthfellow get mad. Earthfellow smashee Tombov godhouse. Earthfellow in godhouse no good. More better Earthfellow hidee outside."

Both investigators promised faithfully they would watch unseen. They would be the soul of discretion. And they would pay any reasonable price. They were not scoffers or reformers. They wanted only to know the secret of Tombov health. Shan Dhee relaxed. He even grinned a crooked grin.

"Tombov priestfellow more better Earthfellow priestfellow. Tombov wantchee long life now, swampside. Tombov no wantchee long life bimebye, Heavenside. Heavenside no good. Too far. Swampside more better."

Parks and Maxwell smiled. After all, they couldn't blame the poor devil. How could the warped missionary doctrine preached them be any solace for hard labor and suffering? Better good health now, and let them take their chances on Heaven. So they argued no further, but tolled up the quantities of tobacco Shan Dhee said would be required.

It took three weeks of dreary slogging over slimy mud, sometimes proceeding by dugout canoe, before they came to the place of the Festival of Long Life. Shan Dhee showed them the markers that set off the sacred areas. Until they were removed three days later, it was forbidden for ordinary Tombovs to pass them. But Shan Dhee shot the clumsy craft ahead. His coming had been arranged. He directed the canoe past the tripods of saplings with their warning plumed skulls. The sluggish lagoon narrowed. Presently they came in between two lily fields. Shan Dhee explained that there were only a few places where such lilies grew and that the penalty for taking one off holy ground was death.

Maxwell studied the plants with interest but saw little to distinguish them from the Terran variety except their great size and yellow color. And then he was startled to see monstrous hairy creatures crawling around among them. For a long time he got only glimpses, and then he saw one entire. It was a sort of giant tarantula— a horror of mottled silky hair hanging from a bulbous, palpitating body as large as a basketball. There seemed to be a score of arching legs, each hairy and clawed at the tip. There were ugly, knifelike fangs, too, from which a greenish poison drooled. A cluster of luminous eyes were set above them, glaring venomously in shifting reds and violets.

"Kankilona," said Shan Dhee.

Parks shuddered. It was upsetting even to look on one. Had Shan Dhee said that the Tombovs ate them?

The lagoon shoaled and narrowed. In a moment Shan Dhee drove the dugout nose up onto a muddy bank. It was the island hummock of the temple

grounds. They climbed out and dragged the canoe into the underbrush and hid it under broad leaves. Then they gathered up their baggage and went up onto the hummock.

It was a glade surrounded by heavy cypress, and under the trees were hundreds of little huts. In the distance stood the temple— an astonishing structure of gray stone, astonishing because the nearest solid ground was more than a hundred miles away. Only stubborn devotion could have carried those massive stones to where they were. But the temple's great portal was closed and barred. The whole place was deserted.

Shan Dhee disregarded everything until he could build their hiding place. It was a two-roomed hut he made for them, considerably apart from any other. As a tolerated outcast Shan Dhee said he was permitted to attend the festival, but he must keep his distance from the truly faithful. As it happened, his status was most convenient, for the two Earthmen could live in the rear, watching the show through peepholes, while Shan Dhee sat stolidly in the doorway, sure that no wild Tombov would venture near an untouchable. Shan Dhee said they could see all there was to see from there until the night of the culmination of the revels. By then the Tombovs would be blind drunk and would not notice if they were being spied on from the darkness outside the temple door.

Maxwell and Parks laid out their gear. There were their food pellets and their store of tobacco twists that must be given to the priests. There was also their scientific paraphernalia— beakers and test tubes and reaction chemicals, and their all-purpose spectrographs camera. But the most essential item was their supply of precious paracobrine, for Parks was slipping fast and needed shots at hourly intervals. They stowed that safely and settled down to wait.

The subsequent week was not especially instructive, nor was it entertaining. During the first days the Tombovs began straggling in, filthy with swamp mud encrusted on them. They brought their women and children with them, and a tremendous number of zankra gourds. Each family settled into its own hut and then proceeded to the tribal reunion. The affair was much like barbaric gatherings anywhere in the Solar System— attended by the monotonous banging on tom-toms, by wild, uninhibited dancing, by gorgings with food and drink. There were scenes of reckless drunkenness, but until the beginning of the fifth day it was essentially a social gathering. It was not until the fifth day that the priests showed up.

The activities thereafter took on a different tinge. No longer did the Tombov braves lie around in drunken stupor until mid-afternoon. They were put to work. And their women were put to work.

They went out into the swamp, paddling along on their splayed, webbed feet. The men carried curious nets made of twisted small lianas. The boys

trailed them, bearing roomy cages made of a sort of wicker. For the women's part, their job seemed to be the gathering of lilies. They stripped the plants methodically, taking blooms and leaves alike, leaving little more than pulpy stubble behind. It was not until evening came and the men came back that Maxwell knew what they had gone for. They returned triumphantly with scores upon scores of captured kankilonas, the trapped arachnids ululating horribly in protest at their restricted movement. The priests opened the temple doors long enough to receive the spiders, and then closed them again.

THAT WENT on for three days more, but as the swamps were stripped of their leafy covering and crawling monsters, Maxwell made an astounding discovery. For a few minutes one day the sun came through— a rarity on cloudy Venus— and as it did a miracle seemed to happen. The dull mud flats became beds of scintillating fire. What he had bought from Hoskins as jewels lay thick everywhere. They were as numerous as the dead leaves of fall. Then the clouds took over again and the glow died.

"What do you make of it?" asked Parks, who was looking on in wonder. "Could they be lily seed?"

"Hardly," said Maxwell. "They are too light and airy. Seeds have to sink into the soil to germinate. Those things won't even sink in water."

At last the final day of the festival came. Men and women dressed themselves in gala garments made from lilies. There were chaplets and leis, garlands and leafy headdresses. And they were drinking zankra in colossal doses. All afternoon there was unrestrained dancing, and toward dark the drunken choruses became a bedlam of hideous howling. Then the temple doors were thrown open wide and torches lit inside.

"Pretty soon you Hoskins friendfellow see kankilona feast," remarked Shan Dhee. He looked worried, as if repenting the deal. "No letchee priestfellow catchee looksee," he warned. Maxwell and Parks repeated their promise.

It was near midnight when they decided the worshipers were so drunk that nothing would matter. Maxwell and Parks stole out of their hut and across the glade, being careful not to step on the many Tombovs who had already passed out. They stopped close to the great door and looked in. The orgy was at its height. They saw now how the feast was conducted. Two acolytes would hand up a squirming kankilona, stripped of its legs. The high priest would receive it and then defang it with two swift jerks. The slimy fangs he would hurl into a basket at the foot of the chief idol; the carcass he would throw to the yelling celebrants. There would be a scramble for it, then a howl of disappointment as the unlucky ones watched the Favored sink his teeth into the soft venom sac of the mangled tarantula.

Parks gripped Maxwell's arms.

"I... I've got to go back to the hut," he gasped.

"What's the matter?" asked Maxwell sharply. "Can't you take it? We're not squeamish missionaries."

"T-that's not it. I forgot my shot. See how I'm jumping? But you stick around. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Maxwell let him go. It was routine, more or less, and he did not want to miss any unexpected feature of the rites before him. He watched Parks disappear into the dark, and then started to turn his gaze back to the orgies.

He did not complete the movement. A surprisingly strong arm encircled him, and a husky knee entwined and gripped his. He knew from the wide flat foot that it was a Tombov that assailed him. Then there was a mocking voice in his ear— it was Shan Dhee's voice, and Shan Dhee was crazy drunk. His breath stank of zankra, and worse.

"Earthfellow wantchee long life, huh?" he taunted. "Okeh, okeh. Earthfellow catchee long life. Earthfellow catchee kankilona juice."

Maxwell felt himself being bent irresistibly backward, to the peals of the maddened Tombov's maniacal laughter. A disgusting gob of hairy, mushing something was slapped down on his face. He could not get his breath. He struggled and tried to cry out. It was what Shan Dhee wanted him to do. His teeth broke the tender membrane of the kankilona's venom sac. There was a gush of indescribably nauseating oily stuff. It stung his cheeks and shoulders. Maxwell felt utterly defiled and ashamed. He wanted to die then and there. And then something happened to him.

In one swift instant all the nausea and revulsion was swept away. In its place there was heavenly exhilaration, an exaltation that exceeded any ecstasy he had ever known. He was no longer a sick man; would never be one again. He was strong, well— a champion among champions. Life was wonderful. It had to be expressed. Maxwell cut loose with a war whoop that shook the glade. Then things went madly round and round. Lights flared up and faded. The howling within the temple died, dwindling into an infinitude of distance. After that, Maxwell did not remember.

HE AWOKE in what he thought must be the gray dawn of the morning after. He was lying face down in the muck outside the temple door. He lay very still for a moment, wondering when the inescapable headache would begin to rack him, for after the heady intoxication he now faintly remembered, it was unthinkable that there would not be one— and a super one at that. But there was no headache. There was no foul taste in the mouth. Maxwell had to admit he felt fine, which, under the circumstances, was humiliating. He wondered if

he was altogether sane. He started gingerly to get up, expecting to find himself full of Charley horses. There weren't any. He was fit as a fiddle. He quit worrying and arose briskly, but promptly regretted it. His head thumped into something, and there was a crash. He stood amazed and aghast at what fell. It was three long sticks of wood lashed together and tied with a bunch of plumes. A skull lay grinning at him from the wreckage. During the night someone had erected that dire symbol over him— the warning that he was taboo— under a curse!

Maxwell shot a glance at the temple. Its doors were closed and barred. It was that way also in the glade. The huts were empty, the celebrants gone. The festival was over. Now everything was taboo. Maxwell's wrist watch said it was late afternoon. He had slept more than the night.

Then his heart jumped as he belatedly remembered Parks. Parks said he would come back. Where was he? Had Shan Dhee assaulted him, too? Maxwell looked around, but there was no sign of him. He started off across the glade in great strides.

Before the hut he was brought to an abrupt stop. Another taboo tripod stood there. But there was more besides. On a stake nearby there was the grinning, newly severed head of a Tombov, and scattered about the foot of the stake were freshly picked bones— near-human bones. The head was Shan Dhee's head. It meant that Shan Dee had transgressed somehow, and Shan Dhee had paid the penalty. It was ominous. Maxwell feared to think of what he might find inside.

WHAT WAS inside was bad enough. Both rooms were a shambles of smashed possessions. Most of the scientific equipment was hopelessly ruined, and food pellets were mixed indiscriminately with spilled chemicals. Every scrap of tobacco was gone. But far worse, the whole interior reeked of paracobrine. Shattered ampules and broken syringes explained that readily enough. The looters, Nazi-like, had destroyed what they did not value themselves.

At the moment none of that bothered Maxwell overmuch. It was Parks he wanted to find. And find him he did, half hidden beneath a pile of torn clothes. Maxwell uncovered him and knelt beside him, staring at him in bitter dejection. He felt like a murderer, for Parks had never been keen about this wild-goose expedition. It was Maxwell who insisted on playing the hunch. Now Parks's tense face had a deathly pallor, and the few weak tremors were eloquent of the complete exhaustion that must follow a night and day of uncontrolled convulsions. Parks had been late for his shot and must have fallen, out of control. Maxwell should have foreseen that, and returned with

him. Now it was too late. There was no more paracobrine. By morning Parks would be dead.

Maxwell sat for minutes, torturing himself. Then, of a sudden, a great light dawned on him. Why, he himself had missed at least two shots, and he felt fine! Unbelieving, he stretched out his arm. There was not so much as a hint of a tremor. What... why...

In another instant Maxwell was outside, ransacking abandoned huts. In a little while it would be deep twilight, and he had no time to lose. In the third hut he found a kankilona net. In another a broken cage, which he speedily repaired. Then he set off for the swamp's edge.

Maxwell quickly discovered that catching wily kankilonas alive was work that required men in gangs. The first several he spotted eluded him. The fourth one squared off and circled, warily fighting back. Maxwell was in no mood to quibble. Did kankilona venom lose its potency when the spider died? He couldn't know. But he knew he had to have some— of any strength— and quickly. He hurled his knife into the monster and watched it die. Then, lacking any kind of container, he tore off part of his shirt and dipped it into the dripping poison. He ran back to Parks with that.

"Open your mouth, old man," he coaxed, but there was no response. Maxwell pried the jaws apart and blocked them. Then, drop by drop, he wrung nauseous oil out of the rag. Parks winced and tried to avert his head, but he was too weak. He gulped the stuff down, perforce. Maxwell fed it all, then waited.

The reaction was mercifully quick. Within seconds, Parks's almost imperceptible breathing deepened and his absent pulse returned. Slowly the iron-set neck muscles softened, the face relaxed, and there was a show of warming pink. In a little while Parks was sleeping peacefully. Maxwell examined him carefully from head to foot. There were no tremors. Not any. Maxwell heaved a big sigh of relief. Then he lit a torch. He had to do something about retrieving those food pellets.

Miraculous as the new-found remedy was, Parks's convalescence was slow, either because he was so far gone in the beginning or because the venom was not strictly fresh. His complete recovery was a matter of weeks, not hours or days, and in that time Maxwell had the opportunity to observe many things.

He kept a sharp watch on the swamp. He wanted to see what happened to the crystalline spheres which Shan Dhee had said would vanish after a while. He put on mudshoes and gathered a few and stored them in the hut. Then he maintained a vigil at the hummock's edge.

Nothing whatever happened for almost a week, and when it did happen, it happened at night. It was by the purest chance that Maxwell couldn't go to

sleep and walked out into the glade for more air. It was then he saw the shimmering violet light that seemed to pervade the entire swamp area. It was as if the mud flats were a bed of smoldering anthracite dimly lit by flickering bluish flame. Maxwell went back to the hut for the torch and mudshoes. Then he investigated.

What he discovered was a horde of sluggish crawlers, creatures not too distantly related to the queer Australian platypus. Many were feeding noisily on the lily stubble, but most just lay, as if entranced, staring at the crystalline spherelets. It was the light of their violet eyes that furnished the illumination, a fact that did not astonish Maxwell. The majority of Venusian fauna had luminous eyes. What did bowl him over was what the light did to the shimmering balls. They shrank and shrank. They dwindled to mere pellets, hard and relatively heavy. Then they were no more. There were only bubbles to mark the spot where they had sunk into the mire. Maxwell pocketed several of the shrunken balls just before they disappeared.

The next day he dissected one. It was now obviously a seed, perhaps a lily seed. It was one more curious example of the deviousness of Nature. Apparently in its first state it was infertile and therefore of a shape and weight which would keep it on the marsh surface. Then, perhaps by symbiotic impulse, the platypus creatures were attracted to it, gazed upon it with their violet rays, and somehow fertilized it. Whereupon it planted itself by gravity.

Maxwell followed through on that theory. That night he went into the swamp differently armed. He carried a bundle of dry sticks and the spectrographic camera. He recorded the exact composition of the violet light and noted the duration of exposure. Then he marked a number of the bubbly places with his sticks. If lilies came up there, the spheres were lily seeds.

The next day he reversed his camera, making it a projector. He duplicated the platyputian light and shed it on the crystalline balls he first retrieved. They did shrink into seed. He had at least one bit of positive proof. Then he planted them at a marked spot.

SLOWLY PARKS IMPROVED. For several days Maxwell sought and found more spiders, but each day they grew scarcer. There came a day when there were none at all. The festival apparently had been timed to coincide with their greatest density. When would the new crop of them come, and from where? Maxwell thought about that, and began the study of the small pile of carcasses piled outside the hut. He hoped to learn something about the reproduction methods of the kankilona.

All but one of his dissections were negative. In that one he found an object that definitely jolted him. It was obviously an egg. But the kankilona egg was

one of those crystalline balls! He now had one more link in its life cycle. He would have to wait for the rest of it to

He had to wait for another reason. Parks was gaining, but he would not be able to travel under his own steam for some time to come. On the way back they would not have the assistance of Shan Dhee. Maxwell wondered whether the angry priests had left them the canoe. He dashed off worriedly to investigate.

The dugout was safe where they had left it. Maxwell eased it into the water and tried it out. And while he was learning the trick of handling it, he paddled it part way down the lagoon. He backed water vigorously as he neared the tripod taboo signs that marked the boundary of the lily reservation. Just beyond, there was an encampment of Tombov braves. It was a troubling discovery.

But a moment later he was a little bit relieved. A Tombov had spotted him just as he sighted them, and for a long minute both men stared at each other. Other Tombovs got up and looked, stolidly inexpressive. They made no outcry or hostile gesture, and as Maxwell turned the dugout about and headed back toward the temple clearing, the savages sat down again, as if the incident was closed.

It was Parks who guessed the purpose of the outpost. He was strong enough to talk, then, and was following Maxwell's theories with great interest.

"This kankilona business is the Tombov's big secret. They know by now how selfish the Earthman is and how ruthlessly and wastefully he exploits. They don't want to kill us— if they had, they would have done it the night they left. But they are not going to let us get back to Angra with a live spider, or its egg, or any other thing they value. If we leave here alive, it will have to be barehanded."

"I get it," said Maxwell gloomily. "They know, as you and I do, that if our race learned about spider venom, swarms of humans would invade these swamps and exterminate the genus in a single season. There just aren't enough kankilona. They would go the way of the bison and the dodo. And then we would be in a fix."

"Right," agreed Parks. "What we ought to do, of course, is analyze that poison and see what ingredient makes it work. But our stuff is smashed. If we can't take back a specimen of it, all this has gone for nothing."

"We'll see," said Maxwell.

MEANTIME lily plants were sprouting where the ball-seeds had sunk. Soon the plants would be maturing. Then it would be time for another festival. They wanted to leave before that came, and they *had* to leave for a still more urgent reason. If they did not get back to Angra soon, their stay would overstretch the

six-month time limit. Nothing would convince stupid quarantine officials that they weren't crawling with every variety of Venusian virus.

The first lilies were well in bloom the day they climbed into the dugout for the trip back. Maxwell shunted the canoe over close to a stand of the flowers and plucked one. It was a very curious blossom, lacking both stamen and pistil. It was a sexless plant. But he observed a fatty swelling in one of the lush petals. He slit it open and laid bare a small tumor. He cut into that. Dozens of tiny black objects scuttered out, like ants from a disturbed hill. They were baby kankilona!

"Well, that's that," said Maxwell, dropping the torn lily into the lagoon. "Now we have the whole story. Lilies beget spiders, spiders lay eggs, friend platypus comes along, and the egg becomes a lily seed. That is where we came in."

"And," supplemented Parks, "kankilonas are health-giving, so after they have laid their eggs, the Tombovs come and eat them. The so-called temple jewels, I suppose, are simply a reserve seed crop in case of a drought."

"Drought on Venus," laughed Maxwell. "You're crazy." But he got the idea.

At the edge of the lily swamp the Tombovs looked them over. They were grave and silent and offered no violence, but they were thorough. Their search of the boat revealed no contraband. A surly chieftain waved in the general direction of Angra. Maxwell dipped his paddle in and thrust the dugout ahead.

"It's tough," remarked Parks regretfully, "but at least you and I are cured. On another trip we may have better luck."

"We're not cured," said Maxwell grimly. "Our cases are arrested, that's all. The Tombovs do this twice a year, you know. But we have succeeded better than you know. The proof of it is here."

He tapped the notebook where he had noted the spectrum of the platypus gaze.

"At home," he said, "we have a lot of kankilona eggs, and we know how to activate them. We can start in a properly humidified hothouse for our first few batches. After that we'll expand. The world need never know that what they're taking is a distillation of kankilona poison. They'll probably label it Nixijit, or something cute like that."

"Oh, well," said Parks irrelevantly, "I suppose the Congo valley won't be so bad."

"Nothing is ever as bad as it seems," said Maxwell.

A month later he made the same observation in a different form. They were on the homebound liner and were among the few well enough to sit up and enjoy the lounge. A pest of a missionary came over and dropped into a seat beside him.

"It's great to be getting back to God's footstool," he wheezed. "What a cross I've had to bear working with those beastly Tombovs. Ugh! A race of brutes, steeped in the vilest superstitions and practicing the most abominable rites. Our own primitives had some horrible customs, but the Tombov culture hasn't a single redeeming feature."

"Oh," said Maxwell, screwing up one eye and smiling faintly, "I wouldn't say *that*."

16: Babylon Revisited

F. Scott Fitzgerald

1896-1940

Saturday Evening Post, 21 Feb 1931

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald

"AND WHERE'S Mr. Campbell?" Charlie asked.

"Gone to Switzerland. Mr. Campbell's a pretty sick man, Mr. Wales."

"I'm sorry to hear that. And George Hardt?" Charlie inquired.

"Back in America, gone to work."

"And where is the Snow Bird?"

"He was in here last week. Anyway, his friend, Mr. Schaeffer, is in Paris."

Two familiar names from the long list of a year and a half ago. Charlie scribbled an address in his notebook and tore out the page.

"If you see Mr. Schaeffer, give him this," he said. "It's my brother-in-law's address. I haven't settled on a hotel yet."

He was not really disappointed to find Paris was so empty. But the stillness in the Ritz bar was strange and portentous. It was not an American bar any more— he felt polite in it, and not as if he owned it. It had gone back into France. He felt the stillness from the moment he got out of the taxi and saw the doorman, usually in a frenzy of activity at this hour, gossiping with a chasseur by the servants' entrance.

Passing through the corridor, he heard only a single, bored voice in the once-clamorous women's room. When he turned into the bar he travelled the twenty feet of green carpet with his eyes fixed straight ahead by old habit; and then, with his foot firmly on the rail, he turned and surveyed the room, encountering only a single pair of eyes that fluttered up from a newspaper in the corner. Charlie asked for the head barman, Paul, who in the latter days of the bull market had come to work in his own custom-built car— disembarking,

however, with due nicety at the nearest corner. But Paul was at his country house today and Alix giving him information.

"No, no more," Charlie said, "I'm going slow these days."

Alix congratulated him: "You were going pretty strong a couple of years ago."

"I'll stick to it all right," Charlie assured him. "I've stuck to it for over a year and a half now."

"How do you find conditions in America?"

"I haven't been to America for months. I'm in business in Prague, representing a couple of concerns there. They don't know about me down there."

Alix smiled.

"Remember the night of George Hardt's bachelor dinner here?" said Charlie. "By the way, what's become of Claude Fessenden?"

Alix lowered his voice confidentially: "He's in Paris, but he doesn't come here any more. Paul doesn't allow it. He ran up a bill of thirty thousand francs, charging all his drinks and his lunches, and usually his dinner, for more than a year. And when Paul finally told him he had to pay, he gave him a bad check."

Alix shook his head sadly.

"I don't understand it, such a dandy fellow. Now he's all bloated up—" He made a plump apple of his hands.

Charlie watched a group of strident queens installing themselves in a corner.

"Nothing affects them," he thought. "Stocks rise and fall, people loaf or work, but they go on forever." The place oppressed him. He called for the dice and shook with Alix for the drink.

"Here for long, Mr. Wales?"

"I'm here for four or five days to see my little girl."

"Oh-h! You have a little girl?"

Outside, the fire-red, gas-blue, ghost-green signs shone smokily through the tranquil rain. It was late afternoon and the streets were in movement; the *bistros* gleamed. At the corner of the Boulevard des Capucines he took a taxi. The Place de la Concorde moved by in pink majesty; they crossed the logical Seine, and Charlie felt the sudden provincial quality of the Left Bank.

Charlie directed his taxi to the Avenue de l'Opera, which was out of his way. But he wanted to see the blue hour spread over the magnificent façade, and imagine that the cab horns, playing endlessly the first few bars of *La Plus que Lent*, were the trumpets of the Second Empire. They were closing the iron grill in front of Brentano's Book-store, and people were already at dinner behind the trim little bourgeois hedge of Duval's. He had never eaten at a

really cheap restaurant in Paris. Five-course dinner, four francs fifty, eighteen cents, wine included. For some odd reason he wished that he had.

As they rolled on to the Left Bank and he felt its sudden provincialism, he thought, "I spoiled this city for myself. I didn't realize it, but the days came along one after another, and then two years were gone, and everything was gone, and I was gone."

He was thirty-five, and good to look at. The Irish mobility of his face was sobered by a deep wrinkle between his eyes. As he rang his brother-in-law's bell in the Rue Palatine, the wrinkle deepened till it pulled down his brows; he felt a cramping sensation in his belly. From behind the maid who opened the door darted a lovely little girl of nine who shrieked "Daddy!" and flew up, struggling like a fish, into his arms. She pulled his head around by one ear and set her cheek against his.

"My old pie," he said.

"Oh, daddy, daddy, daddy, daddy, dads, dads, dads!"

She drew him into the salon, where the family waited, a boy and girl his daughter's age, his sister-in-law and her husband. He greeted Marion with his voice pitched carefully to avoid either feigned enthusiasm or dislike, but her response was more frankly tepid, though she minimized her expression of unalterable distrust by directing her regard toward his child. The two men clasped hands in a friendly way and Lincoln Peters rested his for a moment on Charlie's shoulder.

The room was warm and comfortably American. The three children moved intimately about, playing through the yellow oblongs that led to other rooms; the cheer of six o'clock spoke in the eager smacks of the fire and the sounds of French activity in the kitchen. But Charlie did not relax; his heart sat up rigidly in his body and he drew confidence from his daughter, who from time to time came close to him, holding in her arms the doll he had brought.

"Really extremely well," he declared in answer to Lincoln's question. "There's a lot of business there that isn't moving at all, but we're doing even better than ever. In fact, damn well. I'm bringing my sister over from America next month to keep house for me. My income last year was bigger than it was when I had money. You see, the Czechs—"

His boasting was for a specific purpose; but after a moment, seeing a faint restiveness in Lincoln's eye, he changed the subject:

"Those are fine children of yours, well brought up, good manners."

"We think Honoria's a great little girl too."

Marion Peters came back from the kitchen. She was a tall woman with worried eyes, who had once possessed a fresh American loveliness. Charlie had never been sensitive to it and was always surprised when people spoke of how

pretty she had been. From the first there had been an instinctive antipathy between them.

"Well, how do you find Honoria?" she asked.

"Wonderful. I was astonished how much she's grown in ten months. All the children are looking well."

"We haven't had a doctor for a year. How do you like being back in Paris?"

"It seems very funny to see so few Americans around."

"I'm delighted," Marion said vehemently. "Now at least you can go into a store without their assuming you're a millionaire. We've suffered like everybody, but on the whole it's a good deal pleasanter."

"But it was nice while it lasted," Charlie said. "We were a sort of royalty, almost infallible, with a sort of magic around us. In the bar this afternoon"—he stumbled, seeing his mistake—"there wasn't a man I knew."

She looked at him keenly. "I should think you'd have had enough of bars."

"I only stayed a minute. I take one drink every afternoon, and no more."

"Don't you want a cocktail before dinner?" Lincoln asked.

"I take only one drink every afternoon, and I've had that."

"I hope you keep to it," said Marion.

Her dislike was evident in the coldness with which she spoke, but Charlie only smiled; he had larger plans. Her very aggressiveness gave him an advantage, and he knew enough to wait. He wanted them to initiate the discussion of what they knew had brought him to Paris.

At dinner he couldn't decide whether Honoria was most like him or her mother. Fortunate if she didn't combine the traits of both that had brought them to disaster. A great wave of protectiveness went over him. He thought he knew what to do for her. He believed in character; he wanted to jump back a whole generation and trust in character again as the eternally valuable element. Everything wore out.

He left soon after dinner, but not to go home. He was curious to see Paris by night with clearer and more judicious eyes than those of other days. He bought a *strapontin* for the Casino and watched Josephine Baker go through her chocolate arabesques.

After an hour he left and strolled toward Montmartre, up the Rue Pigalle into the Place Blanche. The rain had stopped and there were a few people in evening clothes disembarking from taxis in front of cabarets, and *cocottes* prowling singly or in pairs, and many Negroes. He passed a lighted door from which issued music, and stopped with the sense of familiarity; it was Bricktop's, where he had parted with so many hours and so much money. A few doors farther on he found another ancient rendezvous and incautiously put his head inside. Immediately an eager orchestra burst into sound, a pair of

professional dancers leaped to their feet and a maître d'hôtel swooped toward him, crying, "Crowd just arriving, sir!" But he withdrew quickly.

"You have to be damn drunk," he thought.

Zelli's was closed, the bleak and sinister cheap hotels surrounding it were dark; up in the Rue Blanche there was more light and a local, colloquial French crowd. The Poet's Cave had disappeared, but the two great mouths of the Café of Heaven and the Café of Hell still yawned— even devoured, as he watched, the meager contents of a tourist bus— a German, a Japanese, and an American couple who glanced at him with frightened eyes.

So much for the effort and ingenuity of Montmartre. All the catering to vice and waste was on an utterly childish scale, and he suddenly realized the meaning of the word "dissipate"— to dissipate into thin air; to make nothing out of something. In the little hours of the night every move from place to place was an enormous human jump, an increase of paying for the privilege of slower and slower motion.

He remembered thousand-franc notes given to an orchestra for playing a single number, hundred-franc notes tossed to a doorman for calling a cab.

But it hadn't been given for nothing.

It had been given, even the most wildly squandered sum, as an offering to destiny that he might not remember the things most worth remembering, the things that now he would always remember— his child taken from his control, his wife escaped to a grave in Vermont.

In the glare of a brasserie a woman spoke to him. He bought her some eggs and coffee, and then, eluding her encouraging stare, gave her a twenty-franc note and took a taxi to his hotel.

ii

HE WOKE upon a fine fall day— football weather. The depression of yesterday was gone and he liked the people on the streets. At noon he sat opposite Honoria at Le Grand Vatel, the only restaurant he could think of not reminiscent of champagne dinners and long luncheons that began at two and ended in a blurred and vague twilight.

"Now, how about vegetables? Oughtn't you to have some vegetables?"

"Well, yes."

"Here's *épinards* and *chou-fleur* and carrots and *haricots*."

"I'd like *chou-fleur*."

"Wouldn't you like to have two vegetables?"

"I usually only have one at lunch."

The waiter was pretending to be inordinately fond of children. "*Qu'elle est mignonne la petite? Elle parle exactement comme une Française*."

"How about dessert? Shall we wait and see?"

The waiter disappeared. Honoria looked at her father expectantly.

"What are we going to do?"

"First, we're going to that toy store in the Rue Saint-Honoré and buy you anything you like. And then we're going to the vaudeville at the Empire."

She hesitated. "I like it about the vaudeville, but not the toy store."

"Why not?"

"Well, you brought me this doll." She had it with her. "And I've got lots of things. And we're not rich any more, are we?"

"We never were. But today you are to have anything you want."

"All right," she agreed resignedly.

When there had been her mother and a French nurse he had been inclined to be strict; now he extended himself, reached out for a new tolerance; he must be both parents to her and not shut any of her out of communication.

"I want to get to know you," he said gravely. "First let me introduce myself. My name is Charles J. Wales, of Prague."

"Oh, daddy!" her voice cracked with laughter.

"And who are you, please?" he persisted, and she accepted a role immediately: "Honoria Wales, Rue Palatine, Paris."

"Married or single?"

"No, not married. Single."

He indicated the doll. "But I see you have a child, madame."

Unwilling to disinherit it, she took it to her heart and thought quickly: "Yes, I've been married, but I'm not married now. My husband is dead."

He went on quickly, "And the child's name?"

"Simone. That's after my best friend at school."

"I'm very pleased that you're doing so well at school."

"I'm third this month," she boasted. "Elsie"— that was her cousin— "is only about eighteenth, and Richard is about at the bottom."

"You like Richard and Elsie, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. I like Richard quite well and I like her all right."

Cautiously and casually he asked: "And Aunt Marion and Uncle Lincoln— which do you like best?"

"Oh, Uncle Lincoln, I guess."

He was increasingly aware of her presence. As they came in, a murmur of "...adorable" followed them, and now the people at the next table bent all their silences upon her, staring as if she were something no more conscious than a flower.

"Why don't I live with you?" she asked suddenly. "Because mamma's dead?"

"You must stay here and learn more French. It would have been hard for daddy to take care of you so well."

"I don't really need much taking care of any more. I do everything for myself."

Going out of the restaurant, a man and a woman unexpectedly hailed him.

"Well, the old Wales!"

"Hello there, Lorraine.... Dunc."

Sudden ghosts out of the past: Duncan Schaeffer, a friend from college. Lorraine Quarrles, a lovely, pale blonde of thirty; one of a crowd who had helped them make months into days in the lavish times of three years ago.

"My husband couldn't come this year," she said, in answer to his question. "We're poor as hell. So he gave me two hundred a month and told me I could do my worst on that.... This your little girl?"

"What about coming back and sitting down?" Duncan asked.

"Can't do it." He was glad for an excuse. As always, he felt Lorraine's passionate, provocative attraction, but his own rhythm was different now.

"Well, how about dinner?" she asked.

"I'm not free. Give me your address and let me call you."

"Charlie, I believe you're sober," she said judicially. "I honestly believe he's sober, Dunc. Pinch him and see if he's sober."

Charlie indicated Honoria with his head. They both laughed.

"What's your address?" said Duncan sceptically.

He hesitated, unwilling to give the name of his hotel.

"I'm not settled yet. I'd better call you. We're going to see the vaudeville at the Empire."

"There! That's what I want to do," Lorraine said. "I want to see some clowns and acrobats and jugglers. That's just what we'll do, Dunc."

"We've got to do an errand first," said Charlie. "Perhaps we'll see you there."

"All right, you snob.... Good-by, beautiful little girl."

"Good-by."

Honoria bobbed politely.

Somehow, an unwelcome encounter. They liked him because he was functioning, because he was serious; they wanted to see him, because he was stronger than they were now, because they wanted to draw a certain sustenance from his strength.

At the Empire, Honoria proudly refused to sit upon her father's folded coat. She was already an individual with a code of her own, and Charlie was more

and more absorbed by the desire of putting a little of himself into her before she crystallized utterly. It was hopeless to try to know her in so short a time.

Between the acts they came upon Duncan and Lorraine in the lobby where the band was playing.

"Have a drink?"

"All right, but not up at the bar. We'll take a table."

"The perfect father."

Listening abstractedly to Lorraine, Charlie watched Honoria's eyes leave their table, and he followed them wistfully about the room, wondering what they saw. He met her glance and she smiled.

"I liked that lemonade," she said.

What had she said? What had he expected? Going home in a taxi afterward, he pulled her over until her head rested against his chest.

"Darling, do you ever think about your mother?"

"Yes, sometimes," she answered vaguely.

"I don't want you to forget her. Have you got a picture of her?"

"Yes, I think so. Anyhow, Aunt Marion has. Why don't you want me to forget her?"

"She loved you very much."

"I loved her too."

They were silent for a moment.

"Daddy, I want to come and live with you," she said suddenly.

His heart leaped; he had wanted it to come like this.

"Aren't you perfectly happy?"

"Yes, but I love you better than anybody. And you love me better than anybody, don't you, now that mummy's dead?"

"Of course I do. But you won't always like me best, honey. You'll grow up and meet somebody your own age and go marry him and forget you ever had a daddy."

"Yes, that's true," she agreed tranquilly.

He didn't go in. He was coming back at nine o'clock and he wanted to keep himself fresh and new for the thing he must say then.

"When you're safe inside, just show yourself in that window."

"All right. Good-by, dads, dads, dads, dads."

He waited in the dark street until she appeared, all warm and glowing, in the window above and kissed her fingers out into the night.

THEY WERE waiting. Marion sat behind the coffee service in a dignified black dinner dress that just faintly suggested mourning. Lincoln was walking up and down with the animation of one who had already been talking. They were as anxious as he was to get into the question. He opened it almost immediately:

"I suppose you know what I want to see you about— why I really came to Paris."

Marion played with the black stars on her necklace and frowned.

"I'm awfully anxious to have a home," he continued. "And I'm awfully anxious to have Honoria in it. I appreciate your taking in Honoria for her mother's sake, but things have changed now"— he hesitated and then continued more forcibly —"changed radically with me, and I want to ask you to reconsider the matter. It would be silly for me to deny that about three years ago I was acting badly—"

Marion looked up at him with hard eyes.

"—but all that's over. As I told you, I haven't had more than a drink a day for over a year, and I take that drink deliberately, so that the idea of alcohol won't get too big in my imagination. You see the idea?"

"No," said Marion succinctly.

"It's a sort of stunt I set myself. It keeps the matter in proportion."

"I get you," said Lincoln. "You don't want to admit it's got any attraction for you."

"Something like that. Sometimes I forget and don't take it. But I try to take it. Anyhow, I couldn't afford to drink in my position. The people I represent are more than satisfied with what I've done, and I'm bringing my sister over from Burlington to keep house for me, and I want awfully to have Honoria too. You know that even when her mother and I weren't getting along well we never let anything that happened touch Honoria. I know she's fond of me and I know I'm able to take care of her and— well, there you are. How do you feel about it?"

He knew that now he would have to take a beating. It would last an hour or two hours, and it would be difficult, but if he modulated his inevitable resentment to the chastened attitude of the reformed sinner, he might win his point in the end.

Keep your temper, he told himself. You don't want to be justified. You want Honoria.

Lincoln spoke first: "We've been talking it over ever since we got your letter last month. We're happy to have Honoria here. She's a dear little thing, and we're glad to be able to help her, but of course that isn't the question—"

Marion interrupted suddenly. "How long are you going to stay sober, Charlie?" she asked.

"Permanently, I hope."

"How can anybody count on that?"

"You know I never did drink heavily until I gave up business and came over here with nothing to do. Then Helen and I began to run around with—"

"Please leave Helen out of it. I can't bear to hear you talk about her like that."

He stared at her grimly; he had never been certain how fond of each other the sisters were in life.

"My drinking only lasted about a year and a half— from the time we came over until I— collapsed."

"It was time enough."

"It was time enough," he agreed.

"My duty is entirely to Helen," she said. "I try to think what she would have wanted me to do. Frankly, from the night you did that terrible thing you haven't really existed for me. I can't help that. She was my sister."

"Yes."

"When she was dying she asked me to look out for Honoria. If you hadn't been in a sanitarium then, it might have helped matters."

He had no answer.

"I'll never in my life be able to forget the morning when Helen knocked at my door, soaked to the skin and shivering, and said you'd locked her out."

Charlie gripped the sides of the chair. This was more difficult than he expected; he wanted to launch out into a long expostulation and explanation, but he only said: "The night I locked her out—" and she interrupted, "I don't feel up to going over that again."

After a moment's silence Lincoln said: "We're getting off the subject. You want Marion to set aside her legal guardianship and give you Honoria. I think the main point for her is whether she has confidence in you or not."

"I don't blame Marion," Charlie said slowly, "but I think she can have entire confidence in me. I had a good record up to three years ago. Of course, it's within human possibilities I might go wrong any time. But if we wait much longer I'll lose Honoria's childhood and my chance for a home." He shook his head, "I'll simply lose her, don't you see?"

"Yes, I see," said Lincoln.

"Why didn't you think of all this before?" Marion asked.

"I suppose I did, from time to time, but Helen and I were getting along badly. When I consented to the guardianship, I was flat on my back in a sanitarium and the market had cleaned me out. I knew I'd acted badly, and I thought if it would bring any peace to Helen, I'd agree to anything. But now it's different. I'm functioning, I'm behaving damn well, so far as—"

"Please don't swear at me," Marion said.

He looked at her, startled. With each remark the force of her dislike became more and more apparent. She had built up all her fear of life into one wall and faced it toward him. This trivial reproof was possibly the result of some trouble with the cook several hours before. Charlie became increasingly alarmed at leaving Honoria in this atmosphere of hostility against himself; sooner or later it would come out, in a word here, a shake of the head there, and some of that distrust would be irrevocably implanted in Honoria. But he pulled his temper down out of his face and shut it up inside him; he had won a point, for Lincoln realized the absurdity of Marion's remark and asked her lightly since when she had objected to the word "damn."

"Another thing," Charlie said: "I'm able to give her certain advantages now. I'm going to take a French governess to Prague with me. I've got a lease on a new apartment—"

He stopped, realizing that he was blundering. They couldn't be expected to accept with equanimity the fact that his income was again twice as large as their own.

"I suppose you can give her more luxuries than we can," said Marion. "When you were throwing away money we were living along watching every ten francs.... I suppose you'll start doing it again."

"Oh, no," he said. "I've learned. I worked hard for ten years, you know—until I got lucky in the market, like so many people. Terribly lucky. It didn't seem any use working any more, so I quit. It won't happen again."

There was a long silence. All of them felt their nerves straining, and for the first time in a year Charlie wanted a drink. He was sure now that Lincoln Peters wanted him to have his child.

Marion shuddered suddenly; part of her saw that Charlie's feet were planted on the earth now, and her own maternal feeling recognized the naturalness of his desire; but she had lived for a long time with a prejudice— a prejudice founded on a curious disbelief in her sister's happiness, and which, in the shock of one terrible night, had turned to hatred for him. It had all happened at a point in her life where the discouragement of ill health and adverse circumstances made it necessary for her to believe in tangible villainy and a tangible villain.

"I can't help what I think!" she cried out suddenly. "How much you were responsible for Helen's death, I don't know. It's something you'll have to square with your own conscience."

An electric current of agony surged through him; for a moment he was almost on his feet, an unuttered sound echoing in his throat. He hung on to himself for a moment, another moment.

"Hold on there," said Lincoln uncomfortably. "I never thought you were responsible for that."

"Helen died of heart trouble," Charlie said dully.

"Yes, heart trouble." Marion spoke as if the phrase had another meaning for her.

Then, in the flatness that followed her outburst, she saw him plainly and she knew he had somehow arrived at control over the situation. Glancing at her husband, she found no help from him, and as abruptly as if it were a matter of no importance, she threw up the sponge.

"Do what you like!" she cried, springing up from her chair. "She's your child. I'm not the person to stand in your way. I think if it were my child I'd rather see her—" She managed to check herself. "You two decide it. I can't stand this. I'm sick. I'm going to bed."

She hurried from the room; after a moment Lincoln said:

"This has been a hard day for her. You know how strongly she feels—" His voice was almost apologetic: "When a woman gets an idea in her head."

"Of course."

"It's going to be all right. I think she sees now that you— can provide for the child, and so we can't very well stand in your way or Honoria's way."

"Thank you, Lincoln."

"I'd better go along and see how she is."

"I'm going."

He was still trembling when he reached the street, but a walk down the Rue Bonaparte to the quais set him up, and as he crossed the Seine, fresh and new by the quai lamps, he felt exultant. But back in his room he couldn't sleep. The image of Helen haunted him. Helen whom he had loved so until they had senselessly begun to abuse each other's love, tear it into shreds. On that terrible February night that Marion remembered so vividly, a slow quarrel had gone on for hours. There was a scene at the Florida, and then he attempted to take her home, and then she kissed young Webb at a table; after that there was what she had hysterically said. When he arrived home alone he turned the key in the lock in wild anger. How could he know she would arrive an hour later alone, that there would be a snowstorm in which she wandered about in slippers, too confused to find a taxi? Then the aftermath, her escaping pneumonia by a miracle, and all the attendant horror. They were "reconciled," but that was the beginning of the end, and Marion, who had seen with her own eyes and who imagined it to be one of many scenes from her sister's martyrdom, never forgot.

Going over it again brought Helen nearer, and in the white, soft light that steals upon half sleep near morning he found himself talking to her again. She

said that he was perfectly right about Honoria and that she wanted Honoria to be with him. She said she was glad he was being good and doing better. She said a lot of other things— very friendly things— but she was in a swing in a white dress, and swinging faster and faster all the time, so that at the end he could not hear clearly all that she said.

iv

HE WOKE up feeling happy. The door of the world was open again. He made plans, vistas, futures for Honoria and himself, but suddenly he grew sad, remembering all the plans he and Helen had made. She had not planned to die. The present was the thing— work to do and someone to love. But not to love too much, for he knew the injury that a father can do to a daughter or a mother to a son by attaching them too closely: afterward, out in the world, the child would seek in the marriage partner the same blind tenderness and, failing probably to find it, turn against love and life.

It was another bright, crisp day. He called Lincoln Peters at the bank where he worked and asked if he could count on taking Honoria when he left for Prague. Lincoln agreed that there was no reason for delay. One thing— the legal guardianship. Marion wanted to retain that a while longer. She was upset by the whole matter, and it would oil things if she felt that the situation was still in her control for another year. Charlie agreed, wanting only the tangible, visible child.

Then the question of a governess. Charlie sat in a gloomy agency and talked to a cross Béarnaise and to a buxom Breton peasant, neither of whom he could have endured. There were others whom he would see tomorrow.

He lunched with Lincoln Peters at Griffons, trying to keep down his exultation.

"There's nothing quite like your own child," Lincoln said. "But you understand how Marion feels too."

"She's forgotten how hard I worked for seven years there," Charlie said. "She just remembers one night."

"There's another thing." Lincoln hesitated. "While you and Helen were tearing around Europe throwing money away, we were just getting along. I didn't touch any of the prosperity because I never got ahead enough to carry anything but my insurance. I think Marion felt there was some kind of injustice in it — you not even working toward the end, and getting richer and richer."

"It went just as quick as it came," said Charlie.

"Yes, a lot of it stayed in the hands of *chasseurs* and saxophone players and *maîtres d'hôtel*— well, the big party's over now. I just said that to explain

Marion's feeling about those crazy years. If you drop in about six o'clock tonight before Marion's too tired, we'll settle the details on the spot."

Back at his hotel, Charlie found a pneumatique that had been redirected from the Ritz bar where Charlie had left his address for the purpose of finding a certain man.

Dear Charlie:

You were so strange when we saw you the other day that I wondered if I did something to offend you. If so, I'm not conscious of it. In fact, I have thought about you too much for the last year, and it's always been in the back of my mind that I might see you if I came over here. We did have such good times that crazy spring, like the night you and I stole the butcher's tricycle, and the time we tried to call on the president and you had the old derby rim and the wire cane. Everybody seems so old lately, but I don't feel old a bit. Couldn't we get together some time today for old time's sake? I've got a vile hang-over for the moment, but will be feeling better this afternoon and will look for you about five in the sweat-shop at the Ritz.

Always devotedly,

Lorraine.

His first feeling was one of awe that he had actually, in his mature years, stolen a tricycle and pedalled Lorraine all over the Étoile between the small hours and dawn. In retrospect it was a nightmare. Locking out Helen didn't fit in with any other act of his life, but the tricycle incident did — it was one of many. How many weeks or months of dissipation to arrive at that condition of utter irresponsibility?

He tried to picture how Lorraine had appeared to him then— very attractive; Helen was unhappy about it, though she said nothing. Yesterday, in the restaurant, Lorraine had seemed trite, blurred, worn away. He emphatically did not want to see her, and he was glad Alix had not given away his hotel address. It was a relief to think, instead, of Honoria, to think of Sundays spent with her and of saying good morning to her and of knowing she was there in his house at night, drawing her breath in the darkness.

At five he took a taxi and bought presents for all the Peters— a piquant cloth doll, a box of Roman soldiers, flowers for Marion, big linen handkerchiefs for Lincoln.

He saw, when he arrived in the apartment, that Marion had accepted the inevitable. She greeted him now as though he were a recalcitrant member of the family, rather than a menacing outsider. Honoria had been told she was going; Charlie was glad to see that her tact made her conceal her excessive happiness. Only on his lap did she whisper her delight and the question "When?" before she slipped away with the other children.

He and Marion were alone for a minute in the room, and on an impulse he spoke out boldly:

"Family quarrels are bitter things. They don't go according to any rules. They're not like aches or wounds; they're more like splits in the skin that won't heal because there's not enough material. I wish you and I could be on better terms."

"Some things are hard to forget," she answered. "It's a question of confidence." There was no answer to this and presently she asked, "When do you propose to take her?"

"As soon as I can get a governess. I hoped the day after tomorrow."

"That's impossible. I've got to get her things in shape. Not before Saturday."

He yielded. Coming back into the room, Lincoln offered him a drink.

"I'll take my daily whisky," he said.

It was warm here, it was a home, people together by a fire. The children felt very safe and important; the mother and father were serious, watchful. They had things to do for the children more important than his visit here. A spoonful of medicine was, after all, more important than the strained relations between Marion and himself. They were not dull people, but they were very much in the grip of life and circumstances. He wondered if he couldn't do something to get Lincoln out of his rut at the bank.

A long peal at the door-bell; the bonne à tout faire passed through and went down the corridor. The door opened upon another long ring, and then voices, and the three in the salon looked up expectantly; Lincoln moved to bring the corridor within his range of vision, and Marion rose. Then the maid came back along the corridor, closely followed by the voices, which developed under the light into Duncan Schaeffer and Lorraine Quarrles.

They were gay, they were hilarious, they were roaring with laughter. For a moment Charlie was astounded; unable to understand how they ferreted out the Peters' address.

"Ah-h-h!" Duncan wagged his finger roguishly at Charlie. "Ah-h-h!"

They both slid down another cascade of laughter. Anxious and at a loss, Charlie shook hands with them quickly and presented them to Lincoln and Marion. Marion nodded, scarcely speaking. She had drawn back a step toward the fire; her little girl stood beside her, and Marion put an arm about her shoulder.

With growing annoyance at the intrusion, Charlie waited for them to explain themselves. After some concentration Duncan said:

"We came to invite you out to dinner. Lorraine and I insist that all this shishi, cagy business 'bout your address got to stop."

Charlie came closer to them, as if to force them backward down the corridor.

"Sorry, but I can't. Tell me where you'll be and I'll phone you in half an hour."

This made no impression. Lorraine sat down suddenly on the side of a chair, and focussing her eyes on Richard, cried, "Oh, what a nice little boy! Come here, little boy." Richard glanced at his mother, but did not move. With a perceptible shrug of her shoulders, Lorraine turned back to Charlie:

"Come and dine. Sure your cousins won' mine. See you so sel'om. Or solemn."

"I can't," said Charlie sharply. "You two have dinner and I'll phone you."

Her voice became suddenly unpleasant. "All right, we'll go. But I remember once when you hammered on my door at four A.M. I was enough of a good sport to give you a drink. Come on, Dunc."

Still in slow motion, with blurred, angry faces, with uncertain feet, they retired along the corridor.

"Good night," Charlie said.

"Good night!" responded Lorraine emphatically.

When he went back into the salon Marion had not moved, only now her son was standing in the circle of her other arm. Lincoln was still swinging Honoria back and forth like a pendulum from side to side.

"What an outrage!" Charlie broke out. "What an absolute outrage!" Neither of them answered. Charlie dropped into an armchair, picked up his drink, set it down again and said:

"People I haven't seen for two years having the colossal nerve—"

He broke off. Marion had made the sound "Oh!" in one swift, furious breath, turned her body from him with a jerk and left the room.

Lincoln set down Honoria carefully.

"You children go in and start your soup," he said, and when they obeyed, he said to Charlie:

"Marion's not well and she can't stand shocks. That kind of people make her really physically sick."

"I didn't tell them to come here. They wormed your name out of somebody. They deliberately—"

"Well, it's too bad. It doesn't help matters. Excuse me a minute."

Left alone, Charlie sat tense in his chair. In the next room he could hear the children eating, talking in monosyllables, already oblivious to the scene between their elders. He heard a murmur of conversation from a farther room and then the ticking bell of a telephone receiver picked up, and in a panic he moved to the other side of the room and out of earshot.

In a minute Lincoln came back. "Look here, Charlie. I think we'd better call off dinner for tonight. Marion's in bad shape."

"Is she angry with me?"

"Sort of," he said, almost roughly. "She's not strong and—"

"You mean she's changed her mind about Honoria?"

"She's pretty bitter right now. I don't know. You phone me at the bank tomorrow."

"I wish you'd explain to her I never dreamed these people would come here. I'm just as sore as you are."

"I couldn't explain anything to her now."

Charlie got up. He took his coat and hat and started down the corridor. Then he opened the door of the dining room and said in a strange voice, "Good night, children."

Honoria rose and ran around the table to hug him.

"Good night, sweetheart," he said vaguely, and then trying to make his voice more tender, trying to conciliate something, "Good night, dear children."

v

CHARLIE WENT directly to the Ritz bar with the furious idea of finding Lorraine and Duncan, but they were not there, and he realized that in any case there was nothing he could do. He had not touched his drink at the Peters', and now he ordered a whisky-and-soda. Paul came over to say hello.

"It's a great change," he said sadly. "We do about half the business we did. So many fellows I hear about back in the States lost everything, maybe not in the first crash, but then in the second. Your friend George Hardt lost every cent, I hear. Are you back in the States?"

"No, I'm in business in Prague."

"I heard that you lost a lot in the crash."

"I did," and he added grimly, "but I lost everything I wanted in the boom."

"Selling short."

"Something like that."

Again the memory of those days swept over him like a nightmare — the people they had met travelling; then people who couldn't add a row of figures or speak a coherent sentence. The little man Helen had consented to dance with at the ship's party, who had insulted her ten feet from the table; the women and girls carried screaming with drink or drugs out of public places—

—The men who locked their wives out in the snow, because the snow of twenty-nine wasn't real snow. If you didn't want it to be snow, you just paid some money.

He went to the phone and called the Peters' apartment; Lincoln answered.

"I called up because this thing is on my mind. Has Marion said anything definite?"

"Marion's sick," Lincoln answered shortly. "I know this thing isn't altogether your fault, but I can't have her go to pieces about it. I'm afraid we'll have to let it slide for six months; I can't take the chance of working her up to this state again."

"I see."

"I'm sorry, Charlie."

He went back to his table. His whisky glass was empty, but he shook his head when Alix looked at it questioningly. There wasn't much he could do now except send Honoria some things; he would send her a lot of things tomorrow. He thought rather angrily that this was just money— he had given so many people money....

"No, no more," he said to another waiter. "What do I owe you?"

He would come back some day; they couldn't make him pay forever. But he wanted his child, and nothing was much good now, beside that fact. He wasn't young any more, with a lot of nice thoughts and dreams to have by himself. He was absolutely sure Helen wouldn't have wanted him to be so alone.

17: The Green Mamba

Edgar Wallace

1875-1932

Flynn's, 14 March 1925

Collected in: *The Mind of Mr J G Reeder*, 1925

Edgar Wallace

THE spirit of exploration has ruined more promising careers than drink, gambling or the smiles of women. Generally speaking, the beaten tracks of life are the safest, and few men have adventured into the uncharted spaces in search of easy money who have not regarded the discovery of the old hard road whence they strayed as the greatest of their achievements.

Mo Liski held an assured position in his world, and one acquired by the strenuous and even violent exercise of his many qualities. He might have gone on until the end of the chapter, only he fell for an outside proposition, and, moreover, handicapped himself with a private feud, which had its beginning in an affair wholly remote from his normal operations.

There was a Moorish grafter named El Rahbut, who had made several visits to England, travelling by the banana boats which make the round trip from London River to Funchal Bay, Las Palmas, Tangier and Oporto. He was a very ordinary, yellow-faced Moor, pock-marked and undersized, and he spoke English, having in his youth fallen into the hands of a well-meaning American missionary. This man Rahbut was useful to Mo because quite a lot of German drugs are shipped via Trieste to the Levant, and many a crate of oranges has been landed in the Pool that had, squeezed in their golden interiors, little metal cylinders containing smuggled saccharine, heroin, cocaine, hydrochlorate and divers other noxious medicaments.

Rahbut brought such things from time to time, was paid fairly and was satisfied. One day, in the saloon bar of 'The Four Jolly Seamen,' he told Mo of a great steal. It had been carried out by a group of Anghera thieves working in Fez, and the loot was no less than the Emeralds of Suliman, the most treasured possession of Morocco. Not even Abdul Aziz in his most impecunious days had dared to remove them from the Mosque of Omar; the Anghera men being what they were, broke into the holy house, killed two guardians of the treasure, and had got away with the nine green stones of the great king. Thereafter arose an outcry which was heard from the bazaars of Calcutta to the mean streets of Marsi-Karsi. But the men of Anghera were superior to the voice of public opinion and they did no more than seek a buyer. El Rahbut, being a notorious bad character, came into the matter, and this was the tale he told to Mo Liski at 'The Four Jolly Seamen' one foggy October night.

'There is a million pesetas profit in this for you and me, Mr. Good Man,' said Rahbut (all Europeans who paid on the nail were 'Mr. Good Man' to El Rahbut). 'There is also death for me if this thing becomes known.'

Mo listened, smoothing his chin with a hand that sparkled and flashed dazzlingly. He was keen on ornamentation. It was a little outside his line, but the newspapers had stated the bald value of the stolen property, and his blood was on fire at the prospect of earning half a million so easily. That Scotland Yard and every police head-quarters in the world were on the look-out for the nine stones of Suliman did not greatly disturb him. He knew the subterranean way down which a polished stone might slide; and if the worst came to the worst, there was a reward of £5,000 for the recovery of the jewels.

'I'll think it over; where is the stuff?'

'Here,' said Rahbut, to the other's surprise. 'In ten-twenty minutes I could lay them on your hands, Mr. Good Man.'

Here seemed a straightforward piece of negotiation; it was doubly unfortunate that at that very period he should find himself mixed up in an affair which promised no profit whatever— the feud of Marylou Plessy, which was to become his because of his high regard for the lady.

When a woman is bad, she is usually very bad indeed, and Marylou Plessy was an extremely malignant woman. She was rather tall and handsome, with black sleek hair, boyishly shingled, and a heavy black fringe that covered a forehead of some distinction.

Mr. Reeder saw her once: he was at the Central Criminal Court giving evidence against Bartholomew Xavier Plessy, an ingenious Frenchman who discovered a new way of making old money. His forgeries were well-nigh undetectable, but Mr. Reeder was no ordinary man. He not only detected them, but he traced the printer, and that was why Bartholomew Xavier faced

an unimpassioned judge, who told him in a hushed voice how very wrong it was to debase the currency; how it struck at the very roots of our commercial and industrial life. This the debonair man in the dock did not resent. He knew all about it. It was the judge's curt postscript which made him wince.

'You will be kept in penal servitude for twenty years.'

That Marylou loved the man is open to question. The probabilities are that she did not; but she hated Mr. Reeder, and she hated him not because he had brought her man to his undoing, but because, in the course of his evidence, he had used the phrase 'the woman with whom the prisoner is associated.' And Mr. John Reeder could have put her beside Plessy in the dock had he so wished: she knew this too and loathed him for his mercifulness.

Mrs. Plessy had a large flat in Portland Street. It was in a block which was the joint property of herself and her husband, for their graft had been on the grand scale, and Mr. Plessy owned race-horses before he owned a number in Parkhurst Convict Establishment. And here Marylou entertained lavishly.

A few months after her husband went to prison, she dined tete-a-tete with Mo Liski, the biggest of the gang leaders and an uncrowned emperor of the underworld. He was a small, dapper man who wore pince-nez and looked rather like a member of one of the learned professions. Yet he ruled the Strafas and the Sullivans and the Birklows, and his word was law on a dozen race-tracks, in a score of spieling clubs and innumerable establishments less liable to police supervision. People opposing him were incontinently 'coshed'—rival leaders more or less paid tribute and walked warily at that. He levied toll upon bookmakers and was immune from police interference by reason of their two failures to convict him.

Since there are white specks on the blackest coat, he had this redeeming feature, that Marylou Plessy was his ideal woman, and it is creditable in a thief to possess ideals, however unworthily they may be disposed.

He listened intently to Marylou's views, playing with his thin watchguard, his eyes on the embroidery of the tablecloth. But though he loved her, his native caution held him to reason.

'That's all right, Marylou,' he said. 'I dare say I could get Reeder, but what is going to happen then? There will be a squeak louder than a bus brake! And he's dangerous. I never worry about the regular busies, but this old feller is in the Public Prosecutor's office, and he wasn't put there because he's silly. And just now I've got one of the biggest deals on that I've ever touched. Can't you "do" him yourself? You're a clever woman: I don't know a cleverer.'

'Of course, if you're scared of Reeder— !' she said contemptuously, and a tolerant smile twisted his thin lips.

'Me? Don't be silly, dearie! Show him a point yourself. If you can't get him, let me know. Scared of him! Listen! That old bird would lose his feathers and be skinned for the pot before you could say "Mo Liski" if I wanted!'

In the Public Prosecutor's office they had no doubt about Mr. Reeder's ability to take care of himself, and when Chief Inspector Pyne came over from the Yard to report that Marylou had been in conference with the most dangerous man in London, the Assistant Prosecutor grinned his amusement.

'No— Reeder wants no protection. I'll tell him if you like, but he probably knows all about it. What are you people doing about the Liski crowd?'

Pyne pulled a long face.

'We've had Liski twice, but well organised perjury has saved him. The Assistant Commissioner doesn't want him again till we get him with the blood on his hands, so to speak. He's dangerous.'

The Assistant Prosecutor nodded.

'So is Reeder,' he said ominously. 'That man is a genial mamba! Never seen a mamba? He's a nice black snake, and you're dead two seconds after he strikes!'

The chief inspector's smile was one of incredulity.

'He never impressed me that way— rabbit, yes, but snake, no!'

Later in the morning a messenger brought Mr. Reeder to the chief's office, and he arrived with that ineffable air of apology and diffidence which gave the uninitiated such an altogether wrong idea of his calibre. He listened with closed eyes whilst his superior told him of the meeting between Liski and Marylou.

'Yes, sir,' he sighed, when the narrative came to an end. 'I have heard rumours. Liski? He is the person who associates with unlawful characters? In other days and under more favourable conditions he would have been the leader of a Florentine faction. An interesting man. With interesting friends.'

'I hope your interest remains impersonal,' warned the lawyer, and Mr. Reeder sighed again, opened his mouth to speak, hesitated, and then: 'Doesn't the continued freedom of Mr. Liski cast— um— a reflection upon our department, sir?' he asked.

His chief looked up: it was an inspiration which made him say:

'Get him!'

Mr. Reeder nodded very slowly.

'I have often thought that it would be a good idea,' he said. His gaze deepened in melancholy. 'Liski has many acquaintances of a curious character,' he said at last. 'Dutchmen, Russians, Jewish persons— he knows a Moor.'

The chief looked up quickly.

'A Moor— you're thinking of the Nine Emeralds? My dear man, there are hundreds of Moors in London and thousands in Paris.'

'And millions in Morocco,' murmured Mr. Reeder. 'I only mention the Moor in passing, sir. As regards my friend Mrs. Plessy— I hope only for the best.'

And he melted from the room.

The greater part of a month passed before he showed any apparent interest in the case. He spent odd hours wandering in the neighbourhood of Lambeth, and on one occasion he was seen in the members' enclosure at Hurst Park race-track— but he spoke to nobody, and nobody spoke to him.

One night Mr. Reeder came dreamily back to his well-ordered house in Brockley Road, and found waiting on his table a small flat box which had arrived, his housekeeper told him, by post that afternoon. The label was addressed in typewritten characters 'John Reeder, Esq.' and the postmark was Central London.

He cut the thin ribbon which tied it, stripped first the brown paper and then the silver tissue, and exposed a satiny lid, which he lifted daintily. There, under a layer of paper shavings, were roll upon roll of luscious confectionery. Chocolate, with or without dainty extras, had an appeal for Mr. Reeder, and he took up a small globule garnished with crystallised violets and examined it admiringly.

His housekeeper came in at that moment with his tea-tray and set it down on the table. Mr. Reeder looked over his large glasses.

'Do you like chocolates, Mrs. Kerrel?' he asked plaintively.

'Why, yes, sir,' the elderly lady beamed. 'So do I,' said Mr. Reeder. 'So do I!' and he shook his head regretfully, as he replaced the chocolate carefully in the box. 'Unfortunately,' he went on, 'my doctor— a very excellent man— has forbidden me all sorts of confectionery until they have been submitted to the rigorous test of the public analyst.'

Mrs. Kerrel was a slow thinker, but a study of current advertisement columns in the daily newspaper had enlarged to a very considerable extent her scientific knowledge.

'To see if there is any vitamines in them, sir?' she suggested.

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

'No, I hardly think so,' he said gently. 'Vitamines are my sole diet. I can spend a whole evening with no other company than a pair of these interesting little fellows, and take no ill from them. Thank you, Mrs. Kerrel.'

When she had gone, he replaced the layer of shavings with punctilious care, closed down the lid, and as carefully re-wrapped the parcel. When it was finished he addressed the package to a department at Scotland Yard, took from a small box a label printed redly 'Poison.' When this was done, he

scribbled a note to the gentleman affected, and addressed himself to his muffins and his large teacup.

It was a quarter-past six in the evening when he had unwrapped the chocolates. It was exactly a quarter-past eleven, as he turned out the lights preparatory to going to bed, that he said aloud:

'Marylou Plessy— dear me!'

Here began the war.

This was Wednesday evening; on Friday morning the toilet of Marylou Plessy was interrupted by the arrival of two men who were waiting for her when she came into the sitting-room in her negligee. They talked about fingerprints found on chocolates and other such matters.

Half an hour later a dazed woman sat in the cells at Harlboro Street and listened to an inspector's recital of her offence. At the following sessions she went down for two years on a charge of 'conveying by post to John Reeder a poisonous substance, to wit aconite, with intent to murder.'

To the last Mo Liski sat in court, his drawn haggard face testifying to the strength of his affection for the woman in the dock. After she disappeared from the dock he went outside into the big, windy hall, and there and then made his first mistake.

Mr. Reeder was putting on his woollen gloves when the dapper man strode up to him.

'Name of Reeder?'

'That is my name, sir.'

Mr. Reeder surveyed him benevolently over his glasses. He had the expectant air of one who has steeled himself to receive congratulations.

'Mine is Mo Liski. You've sent down a friend of mine—'

'Mrs. Plessy?'

'Yes— you know! Reeder, I'm going to get you for that!'

Instantly somebody behind him caught his arm in a vice and swung him round. It was a City detective.

'Take a walk with me,' he said.

Mo went white. Remember that he owed the strength of his position to the fact that never once had he been convicted: the register did not bear his name.

'What's the charge?' he asked huskily. 'Intimidation of a Crown witness and using threatening language,' said the officer.

Mo came up before the Aldermen at the Guildhall the next morning and was sent to prison for three weeks, and Mr. Reeder, who knew the threat would come and was ready to counter with the traditional swiftness of the mamba, felt that he had scored a point. The gang leader was, in the parlance of the law, 'a convicted person.'

'I don't think anything will happen until he comes out,' he said to Pyne, when he was offered police protection. 'He will find a great deal of satisfaction in arranging the details of my— um— "bashing," and I feel sure that he will postpone action until he is free. I had better have that protection until he comes out—'

'After he comes out, you mean?'

'Until he comes out,' insisted Mr. Reeder carefully. 'After— well— um— I'd rather like to be unhampered by— um— police protection.'

Mo Liski came to his liberty with all his senses alert. The cat-caution which had, with only one break, kept him clear of trouble, dominated his every plan. Cold-bloodedly he cursed himself for jeopardising his emerald deal, and his first step was to get into touch with El Rahbut.

But there was a maddening new factor in his life: the bitter consciousness of his fallibility and the fear that the men he had ruled so completely might, in consequence, attempt to break away from their allegiance. There was something more than sentiment behind this fear. Mo drew close on fifteen thousand a year from his racecourse and club-house victims alone. There were pickings on the side: his 'crowd' largely controlled a continental drug traffic worth thousands a year. Which may read romantic and imaginative, but was true. Not all the 'bunce' came to Mo and his men. There were pickings for the carrion fowl as well as for the wolves.

He must fix Reeder. That was the first move. And fix him so that there was no recoil. To beat him up one night would be an easy matter, but that would look too much like carrying into execution the threat which had put him behind bars. Obviously some ingenuity was called for; some exquisite punishment more poignant than the shock of clubs.

Men of Mr. Liski's peculiar calling do not meet their lieutenants in dark cellars, nor do they wear cloaks or masks to disguise their identities. The big six who controlled the interests serving Mo Liski came together on the night of his release, and the gathering was at a Soho restaurant, where a private dining-room was engaged in the ordinary way.

'I'm glad nobody touched him whilst I was away,' said Mo with a little smile. 'I'd like to manage this game myself. I've been doing some thinking whilst I was in bird, and there's a good way to deal with him.'

'He had two coppers with him all the time, or I'd have coshed him for you, Mo,' said Teddy Alfield, his chief of staff.

'And I'd have coshed you, Teddy,' said Mr. Liski ominously. 'I left orders that he wasn't to be touched, didn't I? What do you mean by "you'd have coshed him"?'

Alfield, a big-shouldered man whose speciality was the 'knocking-off' of unattended motor-cars, grew incoherent.

'You stick to your job,' snarled Mo. 'I'll fix Reeder. He's got a girl in Brockley; a young woman who is always going about with him— Belman's her name and she lives nearly opposite his house. We don't want to beat him up— yet. What we want to do is to get him out of his job, and that's easy. They fired a man in the Home Office last week because he was found at the "95" Club after drinking hours.'

He outlined a simple plan.

Margaret Belman left her office one evening and, walking to the corner of Westminster Bridge and the Embankment, looked around for Mr. Reeder. Usually, if his business permitted, he was to be found hereabouts, though of late the meetings had been very few, and when she had seen him he was usually in the company of two glum men who seated themselves on either side of him.

She let one car pass, and had decided to catch the second which was coming slowly along the Embankment, when a parcel dropped at her feet. She looked round to see a pretty, well-dressed woman swaying with closed eyes, and had just time to catch her by the arm before she half collapsed. With her arm round the woman's waist she assisted her to a seat providentially placed hereabouts.

'I'm so sorry— thank you ever so much. I wonder if you would call me a taxi?' gasped the fainting lady.

She spoke with a slightly foreign accent, and had the indefinable manner of a great lady; so Margaret thought.

Beckoning a cab, she assisted the woman to enter.

'Would you like me to go home with you?' asked the sympathetic girl.

'It would be good of you,' murmured the lady, 'but I fear to inconvenience you— it was so silly of me. My address is 105, Great Claridge Street.'

She recovered sufficiently on the journey to tell Margaret that she was Madame Lemaire, and that she was the widow of a French banker. The beautiful appointments of the big house in the most fashionable part of Mayfair suggested that Madame Lemaire was a woman of some wealth. A butler opened the door, a liveried footman brought in the tea which Madame insisted on the girl taking with her.

'You are too good. I cannot be thankful enough to you, mademoiselle. I must know you better. Will you come one night to dinner? Shall we say Thursday?'

Margaret Belman hesitated. She was human enough to be impressed by the luxury other surroundings, and this dainty lady had the appeal of refinement and charm which is so difficult to resist.

'We will dine tete-a-tete, and after— some people may come for dancing. Perhaps you have a friend you would like to come?'

Margaret smiled and shook her head. Curiously enough, the word 'friend' suggested only the rather awkward figure of Mr. Reeder, and somehow she could not imagine Mr. Reeder in this setting.

When she came out into the street and the butler had closed the door behind her, she had the first shock of the day. The object of her thoughts was standing on the opposite side of the road, a furled umbrella hooked to his arm.

'Why, Mr. Reeder!' she greeted him.

'You had seven minutes to spare,' he said, looking at his big-faced watch. 'I gave you half an hour— you were exactly twenty-three minutes and a few odd seconds.'

'Did you know I was there?' she asked unnecessarily.

'Yes— I followed you. I do not like Mrs. Annie Feltham— she calls herself Madame something or other. It is not a nice club.'

'Club!' she gasped.

Mr. Reeder nodded.

'They call it the Muffin Club. Curious name— curious members. It is not nice.'

She asked no further questions, but allowed herself to be escorted to Brockley, wondering just why Madame had picked upon her as a likely recruit to the gaieties of Mayfair.

And now occurred the succession of incidents which at first had so puzzled Mr. Liski. He was a busy man, and almost regretted that he had not postponed putting his plan of operation into movement. That he had failed in one respect he discovered when by accident, as it seemed, he met Mr. Reeder face to face in Piccadilly.

'Good morning, Liski,' said Mr. Reeder, almost apologetically. 'I was so sorry for that unfortunate contretemps, but believe me, I bear no malice. And whilst I realise that in all probability you do not share my sentiments, I have no other wish than to live on the friendliest terms with you.'

Liski looked at him sharply. The old man was getting scared, he thought. There was almost a tremble in his anxious voice when he put forward the olive branch.

'That's all right, Mr. Reeder,' said Mo, with his most charming smile. 'I don't bear any malice either. After all, it was a silly thing to say, and you have your duty to do.'

He went on in this strain, stringing platitude to platitude, and Mr. Reeder listened with evidence of growing relief.

'The world is full of sin and trouble,' he said, shaking his head sadly; 'both in high and low places vice is triumphant, and virtue thrust, like the daisies, underfoot. You don't keep chickens, do you, Mr. Liski?'

Mo Liski shook his head.

'What a pity!' sighed Mr. Reeder. 'There is so much one can learn from the domestic fowl! They are an object lesson to the unlawful. I often wonder why the Prison Commissioners do not allow the convicts at Dartmoor to engage in this harmless and instructive hobby. I was saying to Mr. Pyne early this morning, when they raided the Muffin Club— what a quaint title it has—'

'Raided the Muffin Club?' said Mo quickly. 'What do you mean? I've heard nothing about that.'

'You wouldn't. That kind of institution would hardly appeal to you. Only we thought it was best to raid the place, though in doing so I fear I have incurred the displeasure of a young lady friend of mine who was invited to dinner there to-morrow night. As I say, chickens—'

Now Mo Liski knew that his plan had miscarried. Yet he was puzzled by the man's attitude.

'Perhaps you would like to come down and see my Buff Orpingtons, Mr. Liski? I live in Brockley.' Reeder removed his glasses and glared owlishly at his companion. 'Say at nine o'clock to-night; there is so much to talk about. At the same time, it would add to the comfort of all concerned if you did not arrive— um— conspicuously: do you understand what I mean? I should not like the people of my office, for example, to know.'

A slow smile dawned on Liski's face. It was his faith that all men had their price, whether it was paid in cash or terror; and this invitation to a secret conference was in a sense a tribute to the power he wielded.

At nine o'clock he came to Brockley, half hoping that Mr. Reeder would go a little farther along the road which leads to compromise. But, strangely enough, the elderly detective talked of nothing but chickens. He sat on one side of the table, his hands clasped on the cloth, his voice vibrant with pride as he spoke of the breed that he was introducing to the English fowl-house, and, bored to extinction, Mo waited.

'There is something I wanted to say to you, but I fear that I must postpone that until another meeting,' said Mr. Reeder, as he helped his visitor on with his coat. 'I will walk with you to the corner of Lewisham High Road: the place is full of bad characters, and I shouldn't like to feel that I had endangered your well-being by bringing you to this lowly spot.'

Now, if there is one place in the world which is highly respectable and free from the footpads which infest wealthier neighbourhoods, it is Brockley Road. Liski submitted to the company of his host, and walked to the church at the end of the road.

'Good-bye, Mr. Liski,' said Reeder earnestly. 'I shall never forget this pleasant meeting. You have been of the greatest help and assistance to me. You may be sure that neither I nor the department I have the honour to represent will ever forget you.'

Liski went back to town, a frankly bewildered man. In the early hours of the morning the police arrested his chief lieutenant, Teddy Alfield, and charged him with a motor-car robbery which had been committed three months before.

That was the first of the inexplicable happenings. The second came when Liski, returning to his flat off Portland Place, was suddenly confronted by the awkward figure of the detective.

'Is that Liski?' Mr. Reeder peered forward in the darkness. 'I'm so glad I've found you. I've been looking for you all day. I fear I horribly misled you the other evening when I was telling you that Leghorns are unsuitable for sandy soil. Now on the contrary—'

'Look here, Mr. Reeder, what's the game?' demanded the other brusquely.

'The game?' asked Reeder in a pained tone.

'I don't want to know anything about chickens. If you've got anything to tell me worth while, drop me a line and I'll come to your office, or you can come to mine.'

He brushed past the man from the Public Prosecutor's Department and slammed the door of his flat behind him. Within two hours a squad from Scotland Yard descended upon the house of Harry Merton, took Harry and his wife from their respective beds, and charged them with the unlawful possession of stolen jewellery which had been traced to a safe deposit.

A week later, Liski, returning from a vital interview with El Rahbut, heard plodding steps overtaking him, and turned to meet the pained eye of Mr. Reeder.

'How providential meeting you!' said Reeder fervently. 'No, no, I do not wish to speak about chickens, though I am hurt a little by your indifference to this noble and productive bird.'

'Then what in hell do you want?' snapped Liski. 'I don't want anything to do with you, Reeder, and the sooner you get that into your system the better. I don't wish to discuss fowls, horses—'

'Wait!' Mr. Reeder bent forward and lowered his voice. 'Is it not possible for you and me to meet together and exchange confidences?'

Mo Liski smiled slowly.

'Oh, you're coming to it at last, eh? All right. I'll meet you anywhere you please.'

'Shall we say in the Mall near the Artillery statue, to-morrow night at ten? I don't think we shall be seen there.'

Liski nodded shortly and went on, still wondering what the man had to tell him. At four o'clock he was wakened by the telephone ringing furiously, and learnt, to his horror, that O'Hara, the most trustworthy of his gang leaders, had been arrested and charged with a year-old burglary. It was Carter, one of the minor leaders, who brought the news.

'What's the idea, Liski?' And there was a note of suspicion in the voice of his subordinate which made Liski's jaw drop.

'What do you mean— what's the idea? Come round and see me. I don't want to talk over the phone.'

Carter arrived half an hour later, a scowling, suspicious man.

'Now what do you want to say?' asked Mo, when they were alone.

'All I've got to say is this,' growled Carter; 'a week ago you're seen talking to old Reeder in Lewisham Road, and the same night Teddy Alfield is pinched. You're spotted having a quiet talk with this old dog, and the same night another of the gang goes west. Last night I saw you with my own eyes having a confidential chat with Reeder— and now O'Hara's gone!'

Mo looked at him incredulously.

'Well, and what about it?' he asked.

'Nothing— except that it's a queer coincidence, that's all,' said Carter, his lip curling. 'The boys have been talking about it: they don't like it, and you can't blame them.'

Liski sat pinching his lip, a far-away look in his eyes. It was true, though the coincidence had not struck him before. So that was the old devil's game! He was undermining his authority, arousing a wave of suspicion which, if it were not checked, would sweep him from his position.

'All right, Carter,' he said, in a surprisingly mild tone. 'It never hit me that way before. Now I'll tell you, and you can tell the other boys just what has happened.'

In a few words he explained Mr. Reeder's invitations.

'And you can tell 'em from me that I'm meeting the old fellow to-morrow night, and I'm going to give him something to remember me by.'

The thing was clear to him now, as he sat, after the man's departure, going over the events of the past week. The three men who had been arrested had been under police suspicion for a long time, and Mo knew that not even he

could have saved them. The arrests had been made by arrangement with Scotland Yard to suit the convenience of the artful Mr. Reeder.

'I'll "artful" him!' said Mo, and spent the rest of the day making his preparations.

At ten o'clock that night he passed under the Admiralty Arch. A yellow mist covered the park, a drizzle of rain was falling, and save for the cars that came at odd intervals towards the palace, there was no sign of life.

He walked steadily past the Memorial, waiting for Mr. Reeder. Ten o'clock struck and a quarter past, but there was no sign of the detective.

'He's smelt a rat,' said Mo Liski between his teeth, and replaced the short life-preserver he had carried in his pocket.

IT WAS at eleven o'clock that a patrolling police-constable fell over a groaning something that lay across the sidewalk, and, flashing his electric lamp upon the still figure, saw the carved handle of a Moorish knife before he recognised the pain-distorted face of the stricken Mo Liski.

'I don't quite understand how it all came about,' said Pyne thoughtfully. (He had been called into consultation from head-quarters.) 'Why are you so sure it was the Moor Rahbut?'

'I am not sure,' Mr. Reeder hastened to correct the mistaken impression. 'I mentioned Rahbut because I had seen him in the afternoon and searched his lodgings for the emeralds— which I am perfectly sure are still in Morocco, sir.' He addressed his chief. 'Mr. Rahbut was quite a reasonable man, remembering that he is a stranger to our methods.'

'Did you mention Mo Liski at all, Mr. Reeder?' asked the Assistant Public Prosecutor.

Mr. Reeder scratched his chin.

'I think I did— yes, I'm pretty certain that I told him that I had an appointment with Mr. Liski at ten o'clock. I may even have said where the appointment was to be kept. I can't remember exactly how the subject of Liski came up. Possibly I may have tried to bluff this indigenous native— "Bluff" is a vulgar word, but it will convey what I mean— into the belief that unless he gave me more information about the emeralds, I should be compelled to consult one who knew so many secrets. Possibly I did say that. Mr. Liski will be a long time in hospital, I hear? That is a pity. I should never forgive myself if my incautious words resulted in poor Mr. Liski being taken to the hospital— alive!'

When he had gone, the chief looked at Inspector Pyne. Pyne smiled.

'What is the name of that dangerous reptile, sir?' asked the inspector. ' "Mamba," isn't it? I must remember that.'

18: The Treasurer's Report

Robert Benchley

1889-1945

First published in 1930. Collected in *Robert Benchley Beside Himself*, 1943

Charles Robert Benchley

Robert Benchley was a movie actor, humourist, and comedian. This was a popular performance, delivered in a diffident, parsonic manner

Author's Note

ABOUT EIGHT years ago (eight, to be exact) I was made a member of a committee to plan a little Sunday night entertainment for some newspapermen who wanted to act. The committee was supposed to meet at a certain time, each member with some suggestions for sketches or song-numbers. (In order to get out of this morass of pussy-footing which I have got myself into, I will come right out and say that the 'certain time" at which the committee was to meet was 8 P. M. on Sunday night.) At 7:15 P. M. I suddenly realized that I had no suggestions to offer for the entertainment.

As all the other members of the committee were conscientious workers, I felt considerably abashed. But as they were also charming and indulgent fellows, I knew that they would take my dereliction in good part if I could only take their minds off the business of the meeting and possibly put them in good humor with a comical story or a card-trick. So, on the way up in the taxi, I decided to make believe, when they called on me for my contribution, that I had misunderstood the purpose of the committee-meeting and had come prepared to account for the year's expenditures. These I jotted down on the back of an old shirt.

As is always the case with such elaborate trickery, my plan to escape censure by diverting the minds of the committee fell flat. They listened to my temporizing report and voted me a droll chap, but then they said: "And now

what are your suggestions for the entertainment?" As I had to confess that I had none, it was agreed that, *faute de mieux*, I should elaborate the report I had just offered and perhaps acquire some skill in its delivery, and give that as my share of the Sunday night entertainment. At this moment my entire life changed its course.

I guess that no one ever got so sick of a thing as I, and all my friends, have grown of this Treasurer's Report. I did it every night and two matinees a week for nine months in the Third Music Box Revue. Following that, I did it for ten weeks in vaudeville around the country, I did it at banquets and teas, at friends' houses and in my own house, and finally went to Hollywood and made a talking movie of it. In fact, I have inflicted it on the public in every conceivable way except over the radio and dropping it from airplanes. But I have never written it. I have been able to throw myself into a sort of trance while delivering it, so that the horrible monotony of the thing made no impression on my nerve cells, but to sit down and put the threadbare words on paper has always seemed just a little too much to bear.

I am writing it out now more as a release than anything else. Perhaps, in accordance with Freudian theories, if I rid myself of this thing which has been skulking in the back of my mind for eight years, I shall be a normal man again. No one has to read it. I hope that no one does, for it doesn't read at all well. All I want to do is get it on paper and out of the way. I feel better already, just from having told all this. And please let's never bring the matter up again.

———————

THE REPORT IS delivered by an Assistant Treasurer who has been called in to pinch-hit for the regular Treasurer who is ill. He is not a very good public-speaker, this assistant, but after a few minutes of confusion is caught up by the spell of his own oratory and is hard to stop.

I shall take but a very few moments of your time this evening, for I realize that you would much rather be listening to this interesting entertainment than to a dry financial statement... but I am reminded of a story— which you have probably all of you heard.

It seems that there were these two Irishmen walking down the street when they came to a— oh, I should have said in the first place that the parrot which was hanging out in *front* of the store— or rather belonging to one of these two fellows— the *first* Irishman, that is— was— well, anyway, this parrot—

(*After a slight cogitation, he realizes that, for all practical purposes, the story is as good as lost; so he abandons it entirely and, stepping forward, drops his facile, story-telling manner and assumes a quite spurious businesslike air.*)

Now, in connection with reading this report, there are one or two points which Dr. Murnie wanted brought up in connection with it, and he has asked me to bring them up in connec— to bring them up.

In the first place, there is the question of the work which we are trying to do up there at our little place at Silver Lake, a work which we feel not only fills a very definite need in the community but also fills a very definite need—er— in the community. I don?t think that many members of the Society realize just how big the work is that we are trying to do up there. For instance, I don't think that it is generally known that most of our boys are between the age of fourteen. We feel that, by taking the boy at this age, we can get closer to his real nature— for a boy *has* a very real nature, you may be sure— and bring him into closer touch not only with the school, the parents, and with each other, but also with the town in which they live, the country to whose flag they pay allegiance, and to the— ah— (*trailing ing off*) town in which they live.

Now the fourth point which Dr. Murnie wanted brought up was that in connection with the installation of the new furnace last Fall. There seems to have been considerable talk going around about this not having been done quite as economically as it might— have— been— done, when, as a matter of fact, the whole thing was done just as economically as possible— in fact, even more so. I have here a report of the Furnace Committee, showing just how the whole thing was handled from start to finish.

(*Reads from report, with considerable initial difficulty with the stiff covers.*)

Bids were submitted by the following firms of furnace contractors, with a clause stating that if we did not engage a firm to do the work for us we should pay them nothing for submitting the bids. This clause alone saved us a great deal of money.

The following firms, then, submitted bids:

Merkle, Wybigant Co., the Eureka Dust Bin and Shaker Co., The Elite Furnace Shop, and Harris, Birnbauer and Harris. The bid of Merkle, Wybigant being the lowest, Harris Birnbauer were selected to do the job.

(*Here a page is evidently missing from the report, and a hurried search is carried on through all the pages, without result.*)

Well, that pretty well clears up that end of the work. Those of you who contributed so generously last year to the floating hospital have probably wondered what became of the money. I was speaking on this subject only last week at our up-town branch, and, after the meeting, a dear little old lady, dressed all in lavender, came up on the platform, and, laying her hand on my arm, said: "Mr. So-and-So (calling me by name) Mr. So-and-So, what the hell did you do with all the money we gave you last year?" Well, I just laughed and pushed her off the platform, but it has occurred to the committee that perhaps

some of you, like that little old lady, would be interested in knowing the disposition of the funds.

Now, Mr. Rossiter, unfortunately our treasurer—or rather Mr. Rossiter our *treasurer, unfortunately* is confined at his home tonight with a bad head-cold and I have been asked (*he hears someone whispering at him from the wings, but decides to ignore it*) and I have been asked if I would (*the whisperer will not be denied, so he goes over to the entrance and receives a brief message, returning beaming and laughing to himself*). Well, the joke seems to be on me! Mr. Rossiter has *pneumonia*!

Following, then, is a summary of the Treasurer's Report:

(*Reads, in a very businesslike manner.*)

During the year 1929— and by that is meant 1928— the Choral Society received the following in donations:

B. L. G— $500

G. K. M— $500

Lottie and Nellie W.—$500

In memory of a happy summer at Rye Beach— $10

Proceeds of a sale of coats and hats left in the boat-house— $4.55

And then the junior League gave a performance of "Pinafore" for the benefit of the Fund, which, unfortunately, resulted in a deficit of $300

Then, from dues and charges— $2,354.75

And, following the installation of the new furnace, a saving in coal amounting to $374.75— which made Dr. Murnie very happy, you may be sure.

Making a total of receipts amounting to— $3,645.75

This is all, of course, reckoned as of June.

In the matter of expenditures, the Club has not been so fortunate. There was the unsettled condition of business, and the late Spring, to contend with, resulting in the following— er— rather discouraging figures, I am afraid. Expenditures $23,574.85

Then there was a loss, owing to—several things— $3,326.70

Car-fare —$4,452.25

And then, Mrs. Rawlins' expense account, when she went down to see the work they are doing in Baltimore, came to $256.50, but I am sure that you will all agree that it was worth it to find out— er— what they are doing in Baltimore.

And then, under the general head of Odds and Ends— $2,537.50

Making a total disbursement of (hurriedly)— $416,546.75 or a net deficit of— ah— several thousand dollars.

Now, these figures bring us down only to October. In October my sister was married, and the house was all torn up, and in the general confusion we lost

track of the figures for May and August. All those wishing the *approximate* figures for May and August, however, may obtain them from me in the vestry after the dinner, where I will be with pledge cards for those of you who wish to subscribe over and above your annual dues, and I hope that each and every one of you here tonight will look deep into his heart and (*archly*) into his pocketbook, and see if he can not find it there to help us to put this thing over with a bang (*accompanied by a wholly ineffectual gesture representing a bang*) and to help and make this just the biggest and best year the Armenians have ever had..... I thank you.

(*Exits, bumping into proscenium*)

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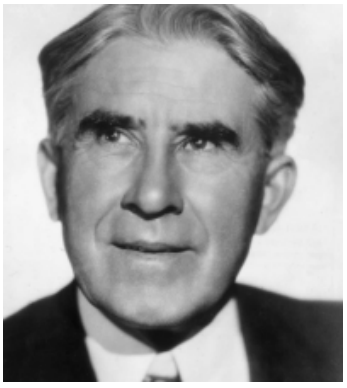
19: The Rubber Hunter

Zane Grey

1872-1939

The Popular Magazine 15 June 1911



Zane Grey

IQUITOS was a magnet for wanderers and a safe hiding place for men who must turn their faces from civilization. Rubber drew adventurers and criminals to this Peruvian frontier town as gold lured them to the Klondike.

Among the motley crowd of rubber hunters boarding the *Amazonas* for the up-river trip was a Spaniard, upon whom all eyes were trained. At the end of the gangplank, Captain Valdez stopped him and tried to send him back. The rubber hunter, however, appeared to be a man whom it would be impossible to turn aside.

"There's my passage," he shouted. "I'm going aboard."

No one in Iquitos knew him by any other name than Manuel. He headed the list of outlaw rubber hunters, and was suspected of being a slave hunter as well. Beyond the Andes was a government which, if it knew aught of the slave traffic, had no power on that remote frontier. Valdez and the other boat owners, however, had leagued themselves together and taken the law into their own hands, for the outlaws destroyed the rubber trees instead of tapping them, which was the legitimate work, and thus threatened to ruin the rubber industry. Moreover, the slave dealers alienated the Indians, and so made them hostile.

Captain Valdez now looked doubtfully at Manuel. The Spaniard was of unusual stature; his cavernous eyes glowed from under shaggy brows; his thin beard, never shaven, showed the hard lines of his set jaw. In that crowd of desperate men he stood out conspicuously. He had made and squandered more money than any six rubber hunters on the river; he drank *chicha* and had a passion for games of chance; he had fought and killed his men.

"I'm going aboard," he repeated, pushing past Valdez.

"One more trip, then, Manuel," said the captain slowly. "We're going to shut down on you outlaws."

"They're all outlaws. Every man who has nerve enough to go as far as the Pachitier is an outlaw. Valdez, do you think I'm a slaver?"

"You're suspected— among others," replied the captain warily.

"I never hunted slaves," bellowed Manuel, waving his brawny arms. "I never needed to sell slaves. I always found cowcha more than any man on the river."

"Manuel, I'll take you on your word. But listen— if you are ever caught with Indians, you'll get the chain gang or be sent adrift down the Amazon."

"Valdez, I'll take my last trip on those terms," returned Manuel. "I'm going far— I'll come in rich."

Soon after that the *Amazonas* cast off. She was a stern-wheeler with two decks— an old craft as rough-looking as her cargo of human freight. On the upper deck were the pilot house, the captain's quarters, and a small, first-class cabin, which was unoccupied. The twenty-four passengers on board traveled second-class, down on the lower deck. Forward it was open, and here the crew and passengers slept, some in hammocks and the rest sprawled on the floor. Then came the machinery. Wood was the fuel used, and stops were made along the river when a fresh supply was needed.

Aft was the dining saloon, a gloomy hole, narrow and about twelve feet long, with benches running on two sides. At meal times, the table was lowered from the ceiling by a crude device of ropes and pulleys.

The night of the departure this saloon was a spectacle. The little room, with its dim, smelly lamp and blue haze of smoke, seemed weirdly set between the vast reaches of the black river. The passengers crowded there, smoking, drinking, gambling. These hunters, when they got together, spoke in very loud tones, for in the primeval silence and solitude of the Amazonian wilderness they grew unaccustomed to the sound of their own voices. Many languages were spoken, but Spanish was the one that gave them general intercourse.

It was a muggy night, and the stuffy saloon reeked with the odors of tobacco and perspiration and the fumes of *chicha*. The unkempt passengers sat coatless, many of them shirtless, each one adding to the din around the gambling board.

Presently the door of the saloon was filled by the form of a powerful man. From his white face and blond hair he might have been taken for an Englishman. The several gambling groups boisterously invited him to play. He had a weary, hunted look that did not change when he began to gamble. He

played indifferently, spoke seldom, and lost at every turn of the cards. There appeared to be no limit to his ill luck or to his supply of money.

Players were attracted from other groups. The game, the stakes, the din, the flow of *chicha*— all increased as the night wore on.

Like the turn of the tide, the silent man's luck changed. After nearly every play he raked in the stakes. Darker grew those dark faces about the board, and meaning glances glittered. A knife gleamed low behind the winner's back, clutched in a lean hand of one of the gamesters. Murder might have been done then, but a big arm swept the gamester off his feet and flung him out of the door, where he disappeared in the blackness.

"Fair play!" roared Manuel, his eyes glowing like phosphorus in the dark. The sudden silence let in the chug of machinery, the splashing of the paddle wheel, the swishing of water. Every eye watched the giant Spaniard. Then the game recommenced, and, under Manuel's burning eyes, continued on into the night.

At last he flipped a gold piece on the table and ordered *chicha* for all.

"Men, drink to Manuel's last trip up the river," he said. "I'm coming in rich."

"Rubber or Indians?" sarcastically queried a weasel-featured Spaniard.

"Bustos, you lie in your question," replied Manuel hotly. "You can't make a slave hunter of me. I'm after rubber. I'll bring in canoes full of rubber."

Most of the outlaws, when they could not find a profitable rubber forest, turned their energies to capturing Indian children and selling them into slavery in the Amazonian settlements.

"Manuel, where will you strike out?" asked one.

"For the headwaters of the Palcazu. Who'll go with me?"

Few rubber hunters besides Manuel had ever been beyond the junction of the Pachitea and the Ucayali; and the Palcazu headed up in the foothills of the Andes. Little was known of the river, more than that it marked the territory of the Cashibos, a mysterious tribe of cannibals. None of the men manifested a desire to become Manuel's partner. He leered scornfully at them, and cursed them for a pack of cowards.

After that night he had little to do with his fellow passengers, used tobacco sparingly, drank not at all, and retreated sullenly within himself. Manuel never went into the jungle out of condition.

The *Amazonas* turned into the Ucayali, and day and night steamed up that thousand-mile river, stopping often for fuel, and here and there to let off the rubber hunters. All of them bade Manuel good-by with a jocund finality. At La Boca, which was the mouth of the Pachitea and the end of Captain Valdez's run, there were only three passengers left of the original twenty-four—Bustos,

Manuel, and the stranger who seemed to have nothing in common with the rubber hunters.

"Manuel," said Bustos, "you've heard what the Palcazu is— fatal midday sun, the death dews, the man-eating Cashibos. You'll never come in. *Adios!*"

Then Captain Valdez interrogated Manuel.

"Is it true you are going out to the Palcazu?"

"Yes, captain."

"That looks bad, Manuel. We know Indians swarm up there— the Chunchus of the Pachitea, and farther out the Cashibos. We've never heard of rubber there."

"Would I go alone into a cannibal country if I hunted slaves?"

"What you couldn't do has yet not been proven. Remember, Manuel—if we catch you with Indian children, it's the chain gang or the Amazon."

Manuel, cursing low, lifted his pack and went down the gangplank. As he stepped upon the dock a man accosted him.

"Do you still want a partner?"

The question was put by the blond passenger. Manuel looked at him keenly for the first time, discovering a man as powerfully built as himself, whose gray eyes had a shadow, and about whom there was a hint of recklessness.

"You're not a rubber hunter?" asked Manuel.

"No."

"Why do you want to go with me? You heard what kind of a country it is along the Palcazu?"

"Yes, I heard. That's why I want to go."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Manuel curiously. "*Señor*, what shall I call you?"

"It's no matter."

"Very well, it shall be *Señor*."

Manuel carried his pack to a grove of palms bordering the river, where there was a fleet of canoes. Capmas Indians lounged in the shade, waiting for such opportunity to trade as he presented. Evidently Manuel was a close trader, for the willing Indians hauled up several canoes, from which he selected one. For a canoe, its proportions were immense; it had been hollowed from the trunk of a tree, was fifty feet long, three wide, and as many deep.

"*Señor*, I'm starting," said Manuel, throwing his pack into the canoe.

"Let's be off, then," replied *Señor*.

"But—you still want to go?"

"Yes."

"I've taken out strangers to these parts—and they never came back."

"That's my chance."

"*Señor*, up the Pachitea the breeze seldom blows. It's hot. Sand flies humming all day long— mosquitoes thicker than smoke— creeping insects— spiders, snakes, crocodiles, poison dews, and fevers— and the Cashibos. If we get back at all, it will be with tons of rubber. I ask no questions. I, too, have gone into the jungle and kept my secret. *Señor*, do you go?"

Señor silently offered his hand; and these two, outlaw and wanderer, so different in blood and the fortunes of life, exchanged the look that binds men in the wilderness. Whereupon Manuel gave one of the eighteen-foot, wide-bladed paddles to his companion, and, pushing the canoe off the sand, began to pole upstream close to the bank. None but the silent Campas Indians saw their departure, and soon they, and the grove of palms, and the thatched huts disappeared behind a green bend of the river.

The Pachitea, with its smooth current, steamed under the sun. The voyagers kept close to the shady side. The method of propelling the canoe permitted only one to work at a time. Beginning at the bow, he sunk his paddle to the bottom, and, holding it firmly imbedded, he walked the length of the canoe. When he completed his walk to the stern, his companion had passed to the bow. Thus the momentum of their canoe did not slacken, and they made fast time.

Gradually the strip of shade under the full-foliaged bank receded until the sun burned down upon them. When the tangled balls of snakes melted off the branches, and the water smoked and the paddles were too hot to handle, Manuel shoved the canoe into the shade of overhanging vines. It was a time when all living things, except the heat-born sand flies, hid from the direct rays of the midday sun. While the Spaniard draped a net over the bow of the canoe these sand flies hummed by like bullets. Then Manuel motioned his comrade to crawl with him under cover, and there they slept away those hours wherein action was forbidden.

About the middle of the afternoon they awoke to resume their journey; leisurely at first, and then, as the sun declined, with more energy. Fish and crocodiles rippled the surface of the river, and innumerable wild fowl skimmed its green width.

Toward sunset Manuel beached on a sandy bank, where there was a grove of *siteka* trees. He had gone into the jungle at this point and brought out rubber. The camp site was now waist deep in vegetation, which Manuel mowed down with his machete. Then he built two fires of damp leaves and wood, so they would smoke and somewhat lessen the scourge of mosquitoes. After that he carried up the charcoal box from the canoe and cooked the evening meal.

Manuel found it good to unseal the fountain of speech, that always went dry when he was alone in the jungle. It took him a little while to realize that he did all the talking, that Señor was a silent man who replied only to a direct question, and then mostly in monosyllables. Slowly this dawned upon the voluble Spaniard, and slowly he froze into the silence natural to him in the wilderness.

They finished the meal, eating under their head nets, and then sat a while over the smoky fires, with the splash of fish and the incessant whining hum of mosquitoes in their ears. When the stars came out, lightening the ebony darkness, they manned the canoe again, and for long hours poled up the misty gloom of the river.

In the morning they resumed travel, slept through the sweltering noon, and went on in the night. At the end of the fifth day's advance, Manuel pointed out the mouth of a small tributary.

"So far I've been. Beyond here all is strange to me. White men from Lima have come down the river; but of those who have gone up farther than this, none have ever returned."

What a light flashed from the eyes of his partner! Manuel was slow to see anything singular in men. But this served to focus his mind on the strangest companion with whom he had ever traveled.

Señor was exceedingly strong and implacably tireless; a perfect fiend for action. He minded not the toil, nor the flies, nor the mosquitoes, nor the heat; nothing concerned him except standing still. Señor never lagged, never shirked his part of the labor, never stole the bigger share of food, which was more than remarkable in the partner of a rubber hunter.

So Manuel passed through stages of attention, from a vague stirring of interest to respect and admiration, and from these to wonder and liking, emotions long dormant within him. The result was for him to become absorbed in covert observation of his strange comrade.

Señor ate little, and appeared to force that. He slept only a few hours every day, and his slumbers were restless, broken by turning and mumbling. Sometimes Manuel awakened to find him pacing the canoe or along a sandy strip of shore. All the hot hours of their toil he bent his broad shoulders to the paddle, wet with sweat. Indeed, he invited the torture of the sun and flies. His white face, that Manuel likened to a woman's, was burned red and bitten black and streaked with blood.

When Manuel told him to take the gun and kill wild fowl, he reached instinctively for it with the action of a man used to sport, and then he drew back and let his companion do the shooting. He never struck at one of the

thousands of snakes, or slapped at one of the millions of flies, or crushed one of the millions of flies, or one of the billions of mosquitoes.

When Manuel called to Señor, as was frequently necessary in the management of the canoe, he would start as if recalled from engrossing thought. Then he would work like an ox, so that it began to be vexatious for Manuel to find himself doing the lesser share. Slowly he realized Señor's intensity, the burning in him, the tremendous driving power that appeared to have no definite end.

For years Manuel had been wandering in wild places, and, as the men with whom he came in contact were brutal and callous, answering only to savage impulses, so the evil in him, the worst of him, had risen to meet its like. But with this man of shadowed eye Manuel felt the flux and reflux of old forces, dim shades drawn from old memories, the painful resurrection of dead good, the rising of the phantom of what had once been the best in him.

The days passed, and the Pachitea narrowed and grew swifter, and its green color took on a tinge of blue.

"A-ha!" cried Manuel. "The Palcazu is blue. We must be near the mouth. Listen."

Above the hum of the sand flies rose a rumble, like low thunder, only a long, unending roll. It was the roar of rapids. The men leaned on their paddles and trudged the length of the canoe, steadily gliding upstream, covering the interminable reaches, winding the serpentine bends. The rumble lulled and swelled, and then, as they turned a bend, burst upon their ears with clear thunder. The Palcazu entered the larger river by splitting round a rocky island. On one side tumbled a current that raced across the Pachitea to buffet a stony bluff. On the other side sloped a long incline of beautiful blue-green water, shining like painted glass.

Manuel poled up the left shore as far as possible, then leaped out to wade at the bow. Señor waded at the stern, and thus they strove against the current. It was shallow, but so swift that it made progress laboriously slow, and it climbed in thin sheets up the limbs of the travelers. Foot by foot they ascended the rapid, at last to surmount it and beach the canoe in a rocky shore.

"Water from the Andes!" exclaimed Manuel. "It's years since I felt such water. Here's a bad place to float a canoe full of rubber."

"You'll have jolly sport shooting this rapid," replied Señor.

"We're entering Cashibos country now. We must eat fish— no firing the guns."

Wild cane grew thick on the bank; groves of the white sitekas led to the dark forest where the giant capirona trees stood out, their tall trunks bare and

crimson against the green; and beyond ranged densely wooded hills to far distant purple outline of mountains or clouds.

"There's cowcha here, but not enough," said Manuel.

They rested, as usual during the blistering noon hours, then faced up the Palcazu. Before them stretched a tropical scene. The blue water reflected the blue sky and the white clouds, and the hanging vines and leaning orchid-tufted, creeper-covered trees. Green parrots hung back downward from the branches, feeding on pods; macaws of gaudy plumage wheeled overhead; herons of many hues took to lumbering flight before the canoe.

The placid stretch of river gave place to a succession of rapids, up which the men had to wade. A downpour of rain joined forces with the stubborn current in hindering progress. The supplies had to be covered with palm leaves; stops had to be made to bail out the canoe; at times the rain was a blinding sheet. Then the clouds passed over and the sun shone hot. The rocks were coated with a slime so slippery that sure footing was impossible.

Manuel found hard wading; and Señor, unaccustomed to such locomotion, slid over the rocks and fell often. The air was humid and heavy, difficult to breathe; the trees smoked and the river steamed. Another chute, a mill race steep as the ingenuity of the voyagers, put them to tremendous exertions. They mounted it and rested at the head, eyes down the glancing descent.

"What jolly sport you'll have shooting that one!" exclaimed Señor; and he laughed for the first time; not mirthfully, rather with a note that rang close to envy.

Manuel gazed loweringly from under his shaggy brows. This was the second time Señor had spoken of the return trip. Manuel's sharpening wits divined a subtle import— Señor's consciousness that for himself there would be no return. The thing fixed itself on Manuel's mind and would not be shaken. Blunt and caustic as he was, something withheld his speech; he asked only himself, and knew the answer. Señor was another of those men who plunge into the unbroken fastnesses of a wild country to leave no trace. Wanderers were old comrades to Manuel. He had met them going down to the sea and treading the trails; and he knew there had been reasons why they had left the comforts of home, the haunts of men, the lips of women. Derelicts on the drifting currents had once been stately ships; wanderers in the wilds had once swung with free stride on sunny streets.

"He's only another ruined man," muttered Manuel, under his breath. "He's going to hide. After a while he will slink out of the jungle to become like all the others— like me!"

But Manuel found his mind working differently from its old habit; the bitterness that his speech expressed could not dispel a yearning which was new to him.

While making camp on a shelf of shore he was absorbed in his new thoughts, forgetting to curse the mosquitoes and ants.

When the men finished their meal, twilight had shaded to dusk. Owing to the many rapids, travel by night had become impossible. Manuel drooped over one smoky fire and Señor sat by another. After sunset there never was any real silence in the jungle. This hour was, nevertheless, remarkably quiet. It wore, shaded, blackened, into wild, lonely night. The remoteness of that spot seemed to dwell in the sultry air, in the luminous fog shrouding the river, in the moving gloom under the black trees, in the odor of decaying vegetable life.

Manuel nodded and his shoulders sagged. Presently Señor raised his head, as if startled.

"Listen!" he whispered, touching his comrade's arm.

Then in the semidarkness they listened. Señor raised his head net above his ears.

"There! Hear it?" he breathed low. "What on earth— or in hell? What is it?"

"I hear nothing," replied Manuel.

Señor straightened his tall form and stood with clenched hands.

"If that was fancy— then—" He muttered deep in his chest. All at once he swayed to one side. And became strung in the attitude of listening. "Again! Hear it! Listen!"

Out of the weird darkness wailed a soft, sad note, to be followed by another, lower, sweeter, and then another still fainter.

"I hear nothing," repeated Manuel. This time, out of curiosity and indefinable portent, he lied.

"No! You're sure?" asked Señor huskily. He placed a shaking hand on Manuel. "You heard no cry— like— like—" He drew up sharply. "Perhaps I only thought I heard something—I'm fanciful at times."

He stirred the camp fire and renewed it with dry sticks. Evidently he wanted light. A slight blaze flickered up, intensifying the somber dusk. A vampire bat wheeled in the lighted circle. Manuel watched his companion, studying the face, somehow still white through the swollen fly blotches and scorch of sun, marveling at its expression. What had Señor imagined he had heard?

Again the falling note! Clearer than the clearest bell, sweeter than the saddest music, wailed out of a succession of melancholy, descending tones, to linger mournfully, to hold the last note in exquisite suspense, to hush away,

and leave its phantom echo in the charged air. A woman, dying in agony and glad to die, not from disease or violence, but from unutterable woe, might have wailed out that last note to the last beat of a broken heart.

Señor gripped Manuel's arm.

"You heard that— you heard it? Tell me!"

"Oh, is that what you meant? Surely I heard it," replied Manuel. "That's only the Perde-alma."

"Perde-alma?" echoed Señor.

"Bird of the Lost Soul. Sounded like a woman, didn't it? We rubber hunters like his song. The Indians believe he sings only when death is near. But that signifies nothing. For above the Pachitea life and death are one. Life is here, and a step there is death! Perde-alma sings seldom. I was years on the river before I heard him."

"Bird of the Lost Soul! A bird! Manuel, I did not think that cry came from any living thing."

He spoke no more, and paced to and fro in the waning camp-fire glow, oblivious to the web of mosquitoes settling on his unprotected head.

Manuel pondered over the circumstance till his sleepy mind refused to revolve another idea. In the night he awoke and knew from the feeling of his unrested body that he had not slept long. He had been awakened by his comrade talking in troubled slumber.

"Lost soul— wandering— never to return! Yes! Yes! But oh let me forget! Her face! Her voice! Could I have forgotten if I had killed her? Driven, always driven— never to find— never—"

So Señor cried aloud, and murmured low, and mumbled incoherently, till at last, when the black night wore gray, he lay silent.

"A woman!" thought Manuel. "So a woman drove him across the seas to the Palcazu. Driven— driven! How mad men are!"

Señor had turned his face from his world, to drift with the eddying stream of wanderers who follow no path and find no peace, to be forgotten, to end in evil, to die forlorn—all for a woman.

In the darkness of this Peruvian forest, Señor lay amid the crawling vermin unconsciously muttering of a woman. Night spoke aloud thoughts deep hidden by day. Señor had a sailor's eye, a soldier's mien; he had not shrunk from the racking toil, the maddening insects, the blood-boiling heat; he was both strong and brave; yet he was so haunted by a woman that he trembled to hear the fancied voice of his ghost of love in the wailing note of a jungle bird. That note was the echo of his haunting pain. Señor's secret was a woman.

Manuel understood now why he had been inexplicably drawn to this man. A ghost had risen out of his own dead years. It rolled back time for Manuel,

lifting from the depths a submerged memory, that, like a long-sunken bell, rang the muffled music of its past.

Out of the gray jungle gloom glided the wraith of one he had loved long ago. She recalled sunny Spain— a grassy hill over the blue bay— love— home— dark in his inner eye. And the faint jungle murmuring resembled a voice. Thus after absence of years, Manuel's ghost of love and life had come to him again. It had its resurrection in the agony of his comrade. For Manuel there was only that intangible feeling, the sweetness of remembered pain. Life had no more shocks to deal him, he thought; that keen ache in the breastbone, that poignant pang could never again be his. Manuel was life worn. He felt an immunity from further affliction, and consciousness of age crept across the line of years.

How different from other mornings in the past was the breaking of this gray dawn! The mist was as hard to breathe, the humidity as oppressive, the sun as hot, and the singing spiteful, invisible, winged demons stung with the same teeth of poisoned fire— all the hardship of jungle travel was as before, yet it seemed immeasurably lessened.

For many years Manuel had slaved up these smoky rivers, sometimes with men who hated him, and whom he learned to hate. But no man could have hated Señor. In these enterprises of lonely peril, where men were chained together in the wilderness, with life strained to the last notch, there could be no middle course of feeling. A man must either hate his companion and want to kill him, or love him and fight to save him.

So Manuel loved Señor, and laughed at the great white wonder of it, lightening it all; and once again the sealed fountain of his speech broke and flowed. Back in the settlement *chicha* had always loosed Manuel's tongue, liberated wild mirth, incited fierce passions; here in the jungle the divining of another's pain, such as had seared him years before, pierced to the deeps of his soul, and brought forth kind words that came haltingly through lips long grimly set to curse.

In the beginning of that new kinship, Señor looked in amaze upon his changed comrade, and asked if he had fever. Manuel shook his shaggy head. Señor then fell silent; but he listened, he had to listen, and, listening, forgot himself. A new spirit fused the relation of these men.

"Señor, we are hunters," said Manuel. "I for gold that I do not want and shall easily find, you for—"

"Peace, Manuel, peace, that I ceaselessly want, but will never find."

Onward the voyagers poled and waded up the blue Palcazu. The broken waters held them to five miles a day. Only giants could have made even so many. The slimy rocks over which floundered the hydra-headed balls of snakes,

the stench of hot ponds behind the bars, the rush of current to be fought inch by inch, the torrents of rain, the bailing of the canoe, the merciless heat, and the everwhirling, steel-colored bands of venomous flies—these made day a hell, rest a time of pain, sleep a nightmare; but the hunters, one grim, the other gay, strengthened with the slow advance.

Often Manuel climbed the banks, to return saying there was cowcha, more than he had seen, yet still not enough. They must go higher, to richer soil. They camped where sunset overtook them. As they sat over the smoky fires or fished in the river or lay side by side under the tent, Manuel talked. He had gone over the vast fund of his wilderness knowledge, experience in that sun-festered world, stories of river and jungle, of fights and fevers. Circling back on his seafaring life, as castaway, mariner, smuggler, he dredged memory of the happenings of those years till he reached the catastrophe that had made him a wanderer.

"What made me a caucho outlaw?" he queried, whipping his big hand through the flying swarm about his face. "A woman! What sends most wandering men down the false trails of the world? What drove you, comrade? Perhaps a woman! *Quien sabe?* I loved a girl. She had eyes like night— lips of fire— she was as sweet as life. See my hand tremble! Señor, it was years ago— five, maybe ten, I don't remember— what are years? We were married, and had a cottage on a grassy hill above the bay, where the wind blew, and we could see the white ripples creeping up the sand. Then a sailor came from over the sea; a naval man, Señor, of your country. He had seen the world; he could fascinate women— and women change their love. She walked with me along the beach in the twilight. The wind tossed her hair. I repeated gossip, accused her of loving this man I had never seen. She acknowledged her love; proudly, I thought bravely; surely without shame. Señor, with these same hands I forced her to her knees, stifled her cry— and slowly, slowly watched the great staring eyes grow fixed and awful— the lips fall wide—"

"You strangled her?" burst from Señor in passionate force.

"I was a fiend," went on the Spaniard. "I felt nothing except that her love had changed. I fled over the seas. For long my mind was dark, but clearness came, and with it truth. How I knew it I can't say—these things abide in mystery— but my girl was innocent. Then hell gaped for me. Burning days— endless nights under the hateful stars— no rest— her last cry, like the Perde-alma, Señor— her great, wide eyes— the beat, the beat, the eternal beat of pain, made him you see a thing of iron and stone.

"What was left, Señor? Only a wild life. You see the wanderer with crimes on him thick as his gray hairs. Ah! What I might have done— might have been! I see that in your eyes. What a man might have been! Holy Mercy! A braver

part no man ever had chance to play. I could have left her free. I would not have heard the hound of remorse ever baying my trail. I could have hidden like a stricken deer, and died alone. But I was a blind coward. Men see differently after years go by. What is love? What is this thing that makes one woman all of life to a man? Constant or fickle, she is fair to him. Bound or free, she answers to nameless force."

"Where did you—all this happen?" asked Señor hurriedly and low.

"It was at Malaga, on the Mediterranean."

Señor stalked off into the gloom, whispering.

Manuel did not notice his comrade's agitation; he was in the rude grip of unfamiliar emotions. His story had been a deliberate lie, yet it contained truth enough to recall the old feeling out of its grave. He thought he had divined Señor's secret, his sacrifice, the motive behind his wandering in a God-forsaken land. He believed it was to leave a woman free and to forget. He felt the man's burning regret that he had not spilled blood in vengeance. So he had lied, had made himself a murderer, that by a somber contrast Señor might see in forgiveness and mercy the nobler part.

Deep in Manuel's bitter soul he knew how he had lied— for that woman of his youth had not been innocent; he had not harmed her, and he had left her free. Señor would believe his fabricated tragedy, and, looking on this hulk of a man, this wandering wretch, haunted by what he might have been, and, thanking God for his clean hands, might yet see the darkness illumined.

More days the hunters poled and pulled up the Palcazu, to enter, at length, the mouth of a deep estuary coming in from the north.

This water was a blue-green reflection of sky and foliage. It was a beautiful lane, winding between laced and fringed, woven and flowered walls. The heavy perfume of overluxuriance was sickening. Life was manifold. The estuary dimpled and swelled and splashed— everywhere were movements and sounds of water creatures. Gorgeous parrots screeched from the trailing vines; monkeys chattered from the swishing branches. Myriads of bright-plumaged birds, flitting from bank to bank, gave the effect of a many-colored net stretched above the water. Dreamy music seemed to soar in the rich, thick atmosphere.

The estuary widened presently into a narrow, oval lake, with a sandy shore on the north. Crocodiles basked in the sun, and, as Manuel turned the canoe shoreward, they raised themselves on stumpy legs, jaws wide, grotesque and hideous, and lunged for the water.

"Cayman! I never saw so many," exclaimed Manuel, striking right and left with his paddle. "Where I find caymans, there's always cowcha. Señor, I believe here is the place."

They ascended the bank, and threaded a maze of wild cane rising to higher ground. The soil was a rich alluvial. Manuel dug into it with his hands, as if, indeed, he expected to find gold there. The ridge they mounted was not thickly forested. Manuel made two discoveries—they were on the borderland of the eastern Andes, and all about them were rubber trees. Whether or not Manuel cared for the fortune represented by one hundredth part of the rubber he could see, certain it was that he ran from one tree to another clasping each in a kind of ecstasy.

"Iquitos will go mad," he cried. "A thousand tons of cowcha in sight! It's here. Look at the trees— fifty, sixty feet high! Señor, we shall go in rich, rich, rich!"

They packed the supplies up from the river to escape the sand flies, and built a shack, elevating it slightly on forked sticks to evade the marching ants and creeping insects. Inside the palm-leaf walls they hung the net, fitting it snugly in the cramped space. By clearing away the underbrush and burning the ground bare, they added still more to the utility of their camp site, and, as far as it was possible in that jungle, approached comfort.

A troop of monkeys took refuge in the tops of some palms and set up a resentful chattering; parrots and macaws swelled the unwelcoming chorus; a boa wound away from the spot, shaking a long line of bushes; and an anteater ran off into the *sitekas*.

Manuel caught up his gun, making as if to pursue the beast, then slowly laid the weapon down.

"I'd forgotten. We're in Cashibos country now. I've seen no signs, but we had best be quiet. At that we may have to shoot the jaguars. They stalk a man."

The rubber hunters worked from dawn till the noonday heat, rested through the white, intense hours, resumed their tasks in the afternoon, and continued while the light lasted. The method of honest rubber hunters was to tap a tree in the evening and visit it the next morning to get the juice. This was too slow a process for Manuel—as it took several days for a flow of a few ounces.

He was possessed with exceeding skill in the construction of clay vessels to catch the milky juice and in extracting rubber. He carried water from the river and fashioned large clay repositories, one for so many rubber trees; also he made small vessels and troughs. These baked hard in the sun. Then he cut the trees so the sap would flow freely. They would die; but that was of no moment to the outlaw. He had brought a number of kettles, in which he made a thick steam by heating palm nuts. Taking a stick with a clay mold on the end, he

dipped it first in the milk, and then dried the milk in the stream. From a vessel full of milk, he got one third its weight in rubber.

"Señor," he said proudly, "I can make a hundred pounds of rubber in a day."

It was a toil-filled time, in which the united efforts of Manuel and Señor were given to making an immense cargo of rubber. Swiftly the days passed into weeks, the weeks summed months, and the rainy season was at hand. Soon the rubber hunters must expect a daily deluge, a flooded, sticky forest, intolerable humidity, and sun like an open furnace door.

Manuel awoke from his lust for rubber.

"The canoe won't hold another layer," he said. "She'll be loggy enough now. We can rest and drift clear to Iquitos. How good! We must be starting."

Like a flitting shadow, a strange, sad smile crossed Señor's face. Its meaning haunted Manuel, and recalled the early days of the trip, before the craze for rubber had driven all else from his mind. A wonderful change had come over Señor. He gave all his strength to the gathering of rubber, but no longer with a madness for sheer action. He no longer invited the torture of the stinging pests. He ate like a hungry man, and his sleep was untroubled. Even his silence had undergone change. The inward burning, the intensity of mind forever riveted upon the thing that had been the dividing spear of his life, had given place to austere tranquillity.

Other enlightenment flashed into Manuel's darksome thought. The fancy grew upon him that he had come to be to Señor what Señor was to him. He sensed it, felt it, finally realized it.

Pondering this man's deep influence, he tried to judge what it meant. Something shook his pulse, some power from without; some warm, living thing drew him to Señor. It was more than the intimate bond of men of like caliber, alone in the wilds, facing peril carelessly, dependent upon one another. Too subtle it was for Manuel, too mysterious for his crude reasoning; always it kept aloof, in the fringe of his mind. He floundered in thought, and seemed to go wandering in the realms of imagery, to become lost in memory, where the unreal present mingled with the actual past, through both of which ran Señor's baffling, intangible hold on his heartstrings.

"Maybe I've got a touch of fever," he soliloquized.

Another day went by, and still he hesitated to speak the word for departure. More and more the task grew harder, for added watching, thought, realization, strengthened his conviction that Señor intended to remain alone on the Palcazu. Had the man come to hide in the jungle, to face his soul in the solitude, to forget in the extremes of endurance? Yes, but more! He sought the end— annihilation!

Manuel had never feared to use his tongue, yet now he could not speak. It was midday, and he lay beside Señor in the shack, sheltered from the torrid heat. Usually absolute silence prevailed at this hour. On this day, however, gentle gusts of wind beat the fronds of the palms. What a peculiar sound! It had no similarity to the muffled beating of the heart heard in the ear; yet it suggested that to Manuel, and wrought ominously upon his superstition.

He listened. Sudden, soft gust— gentle beat, beat, beat hastening at the end! Was it the wind? How seldom had he heard wind in the jungle! Was it the fronds of the palms or the beating of his heart or of Señor's? His blood did beat thick in his ears. Then a chill passed over him, a certainty of some calamity about to be, beyond his comprehension; and he wrenched decision out of his wavering will, and swore that he would start down the Palcazu on the morrow, if not with this strange companion, then alone.

Manuel fell into a doze. He awakened presently, and sat up, drowsy and hot. He was alone in the shack. Then a hand protruded under the flap of the netting and plucked at him.

"Hurry! Hurry!" came the hoarse whisper. "Don't speak— don't make a noise!"

Wide awake in a second, Manuel swept aside the flap and straightened up outside. Señor stood very close to him. On the instant, low, whirring sounds caught his ear. From the green wall of cane streaked little things that he took for birds. Bright and swift the glints of light shot through the yellow sunshine. All about him they struck with tiny, pattering thuds and spats. Suddenly the shack appeared to be covered with quivering butterflies. They were gaudy, feathered darts from blowguns of the cannibals.

"Cashibos!" yelled Manuel.

"Run! Run!" cried Señor. He thrust his coat over Manuel and turned him with a violent push. "Run for the river!"

The frenzy of his voice and will served almost to make Manuel act automatically. But he looked back, then stood with suspended breath and leaden feet.

Bronze shadows darted through the interstices of the cane. Then the open sunlight burnished small, naked savages, lean, wild, as agile and bounding as if they were made of the rubber of their jungle home.

Señor jerked Manuel's machete from a log of firewood, and rushed to meet them. His back was covered with gaudy butterfly darts. The sight held Manuel stricken in his tracks. Señor had made his broad body a shield, had stood buffer between his comrade and the poisoned darts of the Cashibos.

Like a swarm of copper bees shining in the sun, the cannibals poured out of the cane, incredibly swift and silent, leveling their blowguns and brandishing their spears.

Señor plunged at them, sweeping the machete. A row of nimble bodies wilted before him, went down as grain before a scythe. Again the blade swept backward, to whistle forward and describe a circle through tumbling, copper-colored bodies.

Rooted in horror, Manuel saw the first spear point come out of Señor's back. Another and another! They slipped out as easily as if coming through water. Señor dropped the machete, and swaying, upheld by spears, he broke that silent fight with a terrible cry. It pealed out, piercingly shrill with pain, horrible in its human note of death, but strange and significant in its ringing triumph. Then he fell, and the Cashibos hurdled his body.

Animal instinct to survive burst the bonds that held Manuel as paralyzed. One leap carried him behind the shack, another into the cane, where he sprang into headlong flight. The cane offered little resistance to his giant bounds. Soon he reached the bank of the river. The canoe was gone. Rows of caymans lay along the beach. So swiftly he leaped down that he beat them into the water. Then, drawing Señor's coat tight around his head and shoulders, he plunged out with powerful strokes.

He had gained the middle of the estuary, when he saw arrowy gleams glance before him. Like hissing hail, a shower of darts struck the water. Then it seemed that gaudy butterflies floated about his face. Diving deep, he swam until compelled to rise for breath.

As he came up, a crocodile rolled menacingly near. Manuel hit it a blow with his fist, and dove again. The coat hindered rapid swimming under water. He rose again to hear the crocodile swirling behind him. Darts splashed big drops on his cheeks, tugged at his head covering, streaked beyond him to skitter along the surface of the estuary.

Reaching shallow water, he crawled into the reeds. White-mouthed snakes struck at him. The bank was low and overhung with rank growths. Manuel scrambled through to the solid ground; and then turned to have a look at his pursuers.

Up and down the sandy beach a hundred or more Cashibos were running. How wild they were, how springy and fleet! How similar to the hungry, whirling sand flies! For a moment the disturbed caymans threshed about in the estuary, holding the cannibals back. Presently several of the most daring waded in above the commotion; then others entered below.

Manuel breasted the dense jungle. Before him rose an apparently impenetrable wall of green. He dove into it, tore through it, leaving a trail of

broken branches, twisted vines, and turned leaves. In places he ran encumbered by clinging creepers; in others he parted the thick growths with his hands and leaped high to separate them. Again he bent low to crawl along the peccary trails.

Despite the obstacles, he went so swiftly that the jungle pests could not get at him; the few which did could not keep their hold, because of the scraping brush. Soon he ran out of a vine-webbed canebrake into a grove of sitekas, rubber trees, and palms. At every bound he sank into the moist earth, still he kept on running. He heard a scattering of animals before him, and saw a blur of flapping birds.

The day seemed to darken. He looked up to see trees branching at a height of two hundred feet, and intermingling their foliage to obscure sun and sky. Here was the dim shade of the great forest of the Amazon tributaries. Sheering off to the right, he ran until the clinging earth clogged his feet.

The forest was like a huge, dim hall full of humming life. Lines of shrieking monkeys hung on the ropelike vines that reached from the ground to green canopy overhead. Birds of paradise sailed like showers of gold through the thick, hazy air. Before him fled boas, peccaries, ant-eaters, spotted cats, and beasts that he could not name.

Manuel chose the oozy ground, for there the underbrush was not higher than his knees. On and on he wallowed through the moist labyrinth of intricate thickets, of aisles lined by the red capironas, of peccary trails worn in the earth, of glades starry with exquisite orchids. A fragrance of nauseous sweetness, like that of rotting jessamine and tuberose, mingled with fetid odor of wet, hot earth, of ripe life and luxuriance. The forest was steeped in a steam from overheat, overmoisture, overgrowth.

The gloom deepened. Somewhere back of Manuel rasped out the cough of a jaguar. He quickened his weary steps, soon to strike rising ground and pass out of the dark forest into groves of *sitekas*. The day was waning. He ascended a ridge, following the patches of open ground where the baked clay shone white. This hard ground would hide his trail from the cannibals, but he had no hope of eluding the jaguars. Still, he could climb out of reach of the hunting cats. It was the little, winged devils, the tiny, creeping fiends that most menaced his life.

He strode on till the shadows warned him of approaching night. Selecting a group of palms with tops interlocking, he climbed one, and perched in the midst of the stems of the leaves. Laboriously he broke stem after stem, bent and laid them crosswise in the middle of the tree. Then he straddled another stem, let his feet hang down, and lay back upon the rude floor he had

constructed. Finally, wrapping head and face in Señor's coat and hiding his hands, he composed himself to rest.

He was dripping wet, hot as fire, pulsating, seething, aching, his whole body inflamed. Gradually the riot of his nerves, the race of hot blood subsided and cooled. Night set in, and the jungle awoke to the hue and cry of its bloody denizens. Mosquitoes swarmed around his perch with a continuous hum not unlike the long, low roll of a drum. Huge bats whizzed to and fro, brushing the palm leaves. Light steps on the hard clay, rustling of brush and snapping of twigs attested to the movement of peccaries. These sounds significantly ceased at the stealthy, padded tread of a jaguar. From distant points came the hungry snarl, the fighting squall, the ominous cough of the jungle cats.

Sometime late in the night Manuel fell asleep. When he awoke the fog clouds were mustering, bulging, mushrooming all in a swirl as they lifted. Like a disk of molten silver, the sun glared through the misty curtain. The drip, drip, drip of dew was all the sound to break the silence. Manuel's cramped muscles made descending to the ground an awkward task.

He estimated that his flight had taken him miles into the interior. Evidently for the time being he had eluded the Cashibos. However, his situation was gravely critical, and he would never be safe until he got clear of Palcazu territory. It was impossible for him to protect himself from the jungle parasites. His instant and inflexible determination was to make his way back to the river, find his canoe, or steal one from the cannibals, and, failing both, lash some logs together and trust to the current.

The rains were due; soon the rivers would be raging floods; he would make fast time. Manuel had no fear of starvation, of the deadly heat, the fatal dews, the rainy-season fever, or of the Cashibos. What he feared was the infernal flies, ticks, ants, mosquitoes— the whole blood-sucking horde. Well he knew that they might bite him blind, poison his blood, drive him mad, actually kill him before he got out of the jungle.

As he was about to start, a small leather pocketbook fell from Señor's coat. Manuel picked it up. He saw again those broad shoulders covered with the gaudy butterfly darts. He drew his breath with a sharp catch. Fingering the little book, unaccountably impelled, he opened it. Inside was a picture.

He looked down into the dark, challenging eyes, the piquant, alluring face of the woman who had been his sweetheart wife!

Manuel smiled dreamily. How clear was the vision! But almost instantly he jerked up his head, hid the picture, and gazed furtively about him, trembling and startled. The glaring jungle was no lying deceit of the fancy.

Slowly he drew forth the picture. Again the proud, dark eyes, the sweet lips, the face arch with girl's willfulness, importunate with woman's charm!

Manuel shifted his straining gaze to Señor's coat.

"Señor! He was the man— that sailor from over the sea— whom she loved at Malaga! What does it all mean? I felt his secret— I lied— I hatched that murderous story to help him. But he knew I did not kill her!"

Manuel pitched high his arms, quivering, riven by the might of the truth.

"He recognized me! He knew me all the time! He saved my life!"

Manuel fell backward and lay motionless, with his hands shutting out the light. An hour passed. At last he arose, half dazed, fighting to understand.

With Señor's coat and the picture before him, he traced the wonderful association between them and him. There were the plain facts, as clear in his sight as the pictured face of the woman who had ruined him, but they were bewildering: he could feel but not comprehend them. They obscured their meaning in mystery, in the inscrutable mystery of human life. He had freed her, had left her to be happy with the man she loved.

Had she betrayed him, too? It was not impossible that a woman who had ceased to love one man would cease to love his successor. Some subtle meaning pervaded the atmosphere of that faded coat, that leather book, that woman's face, with its smile, and by the meaning Manuel knew Señor had suffered the same stunning stroke that had blighted him. Señor had cried out in the night: "Oh God, let me forget!"

It was the same story— hell in the mind, because one day on a woman's face shone that mysterious thing, a light, a smile for him alone, and on the next day it vanished. Fever in the blood, madness to forget, wandering, a hunt for peace, and the wasting years— how he knew them!

Manuel thought of Señor, of his magnificent strength, of the lion in him as he sprang to meet the Cashibos, of the gaudy butterfly darts imbedded in his back, of the glory and pathos of his death. What his life might have been! A strung cord snapped in Manuel's breast; his heart broke. Bitter salt tears flowed for Señor, for himself, for all miserable wretches for all time. In that revealing moment he caught a glimpse of the infinite. He saw the helplessness of man, the unintelligible fatality of chance, motive, power, charm, love— all that made up the complexity of life.

How little it mattered, from the view of what made life significant to him, that he was a rubber hunter, lost in the jungle, hunted by cannibals, tortured by heat, thirst, hunger, vermin! His real life was deep-seated in the richly colored halls of memory; and when he lived at all, it was when he dreamed therein. His outside existence, habits of toil, and debauchery were horrors that he hated. On the outside he was a brutalized rubber hunter, unkempt and unwashed, a coarse clod, given over to gaming and *chicha*. In that inner life he

lived on a windy hill, watching white sails on a blue sea, listening to a woman's voice.

But some change had come that would now affect his exterior life; something beautiful crowned the hideous span of years. His companionship with Señor had softened him, and the tragedy, with its divine communication of truth, was a lightning flash into the black gulf of his soul.

By its light he felt pity for her, for Señor, for himself, for all who lived and loved and suffered. By its light he divined the intricate web and tangle and cross and counter-cross of the instincts and feelings of human nature— all that made love transient in one heart, steadfast in another, fleeting as the shadow of a flitting wing— wonderful, terrible, unquenchable as the burning sun.

By its light he saw woman, the mother of life, the source of love, the fountain of joy, the embodiment of change— nature's tool to further her unfathomable design, forever and ever to lure man by grace and beauty, to win him, to fetter him in unattainable, ever-enthralling desires. By its light he saw himself another man, a long-tried, long-failing man, faithful to his better self at the last.

Manuel set forth toward the river, keeping in the shade of trees, walking cautiously, with suspicious eyes ever on the outlook. He walked all day, covering twice the distance he calculated he had fled inland. When night fell, he went on by the light of the stars until the fog obscured them. The rest of the night he walked round a tree with covered head. In the morning the sun rose on the side he had thought was west. He had become lost in the jungle.

Heretofore panic had always seized him on a like occasion; this time it did not. Taking the direction he thought right, he pressed on till the midday sun boiled his blood. Succulent leaves and the pith of small palms served as food. He moistened his parching mouth with the sap of trees. Lying down, he covered himself with the coat and a pile of brush and slept; then awoke to trudge on, fighting the flies.

He entered the great jungle forest, and sought his back trail, but did not find it. Swampy water allayed his thirst, and a snake served for meat. The jaguars drove him out of the forest. He began to wander in a circle; and that night and the following day and the next were but augmented repetitions of what had gone before.

The rains did not come. The fronds of the palms beat in the still air. Manuel heard in them a knell. Bitten blind, flayed alive by pests, he fell at last with clouded mind. The whizzing wheel of flies circled lower; the armies of marching ants spread over him; the red splotches of ticks on the leaves spilled themselves upon him like quicksilver. He crawled on through the hot bushes. The light of his mind wavered, and he raved of infernal fires. He was rolling in

fire; forked tongues of flame licked at his flesh; red sparks ate into his brain. Down, down under the heated earth, through hot vapors blown by fiery gusts! It was a jungle with underbrush of flame, trees in the image of pillars of fire, screeching red monkeys in service as imps, birds of dazzling coals; and over all and under all and through all a vast humming horde of living embers that bit with white-hot teeth.

As Manuel's reason flickered, ready to go out forever, the rain descended, and it cooled him and washed him clean of insects. It slaked his thirst and soothed his blinded eyes. At length the tropical cloudburst roared away, leaving the jungle drenched. Manuel followed a rushing stream of water that he knew would lead him to the river. In him resurged effort and resistance.

By nightfall he had come to the border of cane. Like an eel through grass, he slipped between the stalks to the river. On the opposite shore faint lights twinkled. At first he took them for fireflies. But dark forms moving across the lights told him he had stumbled upon an encampment of the Cashibos.

The river seemed uneasy, stirring. It was rising fast. By dawn it would be bank full with a swift current. Under the pale stars the water shimmered, steely black in the shade of overhanging shore, dead silver in the center, where the fish swirled and the crocodiles trailed dimpling wakes.

Without hesitation, Manuel stepped into the water, noiselessly sinking himself to his neck. With his ear level with the surface, he subordinated every sense to that of hearing. The river was a sounding board, augmenting the faint jungle sounds. Crossing would be as safe for him then as it would ever be.

Grim as death, Manuel trusted himself to the river. He glided off the shoal without making a ripple, and swam deep with guarded strokes. Fish sported before him; spiders and snakes grazed his cheeks; caymans floated by with knotty snout parting the current, and lines of bubbles bursting with hollow sound betrayed the underwater passage of more of the lazy reptiles.

Once Manuel felt the swirl and heave of water disturbed by a powerful force. A soft river breeze wafted to him the smell of burning wood and the dull roar of distant rapids. He crossed the shimmering space between the shadows of shore. Looking backward, he descried a circle of black snouts lazily closing in upon him. He quickened his strokes. The twinkling lights disappeared. All before him was black. He felt slimy reeds touch his face, and, lowering his feet, found the bottom, and cautiously waded out. Then he crouched down to rest to gather all his wit and strength for the final move.

Toward the bank he could not see his hand before his face; riverward there was a glancing sheen of water that made the gloom opaque. He began to crawl, feeling in the darkness for a canoe. Moving downstream, he worked out

of the marshy sedge to ground worn smooth and hard. It was a landing place for canoes.

He strained his eyes. All about him were shadowy, merging shades without shape. The low murmur of strange voices halted him; he was within hearing of the cannibals. Then in him awoke the stealth and savage spirit of a jaguar stalking prey. Gliding up the trail, he peeped over the bank. Fires flickered back in the blackness, lighting wan circles that were streaked and shadowed by moving, dark forms. With fateful eyes Manuel watched.

Below him a slight splash drew his attention. He fancied it too thin, too hard and dead, to be made by water creature. Again it broke the silence, unnatural to his trained ear. It was the splash of a paddle. Soundless as the shadows about him, Manuel glided down to the edge of the river and lay flat, hugging the sand.

A long, low canoe, black against the background of the river gloom, swept in to the landing gloom, swept in to the landing, grated on the sand, and spread gentle, lapping waves against the beach. A slender form, smooth and wild in outline, stepped out within a yard of Manuel.

Like a specter Manuel loomed up, and his hands closed vise-tight around the neck of the cannibal. He lifted him clear of the ground, and there held him, wrestling, wriggling till fierce struggles ceased in spasmodic convulsions and these subsided in a slow, trembling stretch.

When the body hung limp, Manuel laid it down, and looked up the dim trail leading to the camp of the Cashibos. Upon him was the spell to kill. He saw again the gaudy butterfly darts in Señor's back; he heard again that strange, terrible cry of triumph. Over him surged Señor's grand disdain of life. Almost he yielded to an irresistible impulse to make that the end.

"If I had my machete—" he thought. Then he threw off the insidious thrall, and, stepping into the canoe, picked up the paddle and pushed out into the river. The twinkling lights vanished in the foliage. There was no sound of pursuit; the dreamy jungle hum remained unbroken. He paddled the light canoe swiftly with the current.

The moon rose, whitening the river lane. A breeze bore the boom of the Palcazu in flood. Once upon that river of rapids, Manuel would scorn pursuit. Slackening current told him that backwater had swelled the estuary. Soon his ears filled with the rumbling of waters, and he turned out of the estuary into the sliding, moon-blanched Palcazu.

As he dipped into the glistening channel of the first rapid, the canoe, quivering and vibrating, seemed to lurch into the air. Shock on shock kept the bow leaping. Manuel crouched low in the stern. It took all the strength of his brawny arms to keep the canoe straight. Whirling suck holes raced with him;

frothy waves curled along the gunwales. One rapid led into another, until the Palcazu was a thundering succession of broken waters. It ran wild for freedom. In the plunging inclines, the silver-crested channels, the bulging billows, were the hurry and spirit of the river. The current, splitting on blackheaded stones, hissed its hatred of restraint. Manuel guided the canoe from side to side, glancing along the gulfs, fringing the falls, always abreast of the widest passages.

A haze crept over the moon and thickened to gray fog. Shadows shrouded the river, hanging lower and lower, descending to mingle with the spray. Manuel paddled on while the hours passed.

The fog curtain lightened to the coming of dawn. Manuel evinced no surprise to find himself gazing upon the misty flood of the wide Pachitea. He had run the Palcazu in one night. Paddling ashore, he beached the canoe to bail out water he had shipped in that wild ride.

All night he had felt a balancing of some kind of cargo in the bow. Upon investigating, he found the bottom of the bow covered with palm leaves. These he lifted to discover two naked little savages cowering on a mat of woven reeds.

"Cashibos!" ejaculated Manuel. "Boy and girl. They were in the canoe last night when I strangled that fellow, their father, probably. What's to be done with them?"

The boy was a dark copper color; his hair grew straight down over his low forehead; he was pot-bellied and altogether ugly. The girl was younger, lighter in color, slim and graceful, and pretty in a wild way, like a bronze elf of the jungle.

"What'll I do with them?" repeated Manuel. "I can't kill them, or leave them here to starve or be eaten by jaguars. I'll take them down the Pachitea and turn them over to a Campas tribe."

Having decided, Manuel folded a palm leaf and used it to bail out the canoe. In the bottom he found a bunch of dwarfish bananas and some dried fish. Here was good fortune in the way of food. He arranged the palm leaves across the gunwales, making a sun, rain, and dew shield. Then, pushing off, he paddled into the swollen current.

The blazing sun rose; the sand flies wheeled with the drifting canoe; the afternoon rain poured; night came, with its cloud of singing mosquitoes, its poison dews and fogs.

That day passed, and another like it. Every hour the canoe drifted speedy as the current. The Cashibos children lost their fear of Manuel. The boy jabbered and played; the girl smiled at Manuel, which persuaded him not to

give them to a Campas tribe, but to take them home and care for them himself.

Three more days and nights the canoe drifted. Manuel's strength had returned, but it troubled him to think. Something had happened up the river. He had for his pillow a ragged coat that fascinated him, and which he treasured.

Early the next morning he turned the green bend at La Boca to come abruptly upon the *Amazonas*, lying at the dock. Men shouted from her decks; there was a thudding of bare feet.

"Look! Look!"

"Is it the outlaw?"

"No— no!"

"Yes— yes. Those shoulders and arms— it's he!"

Manuel's blotched face, swollen out of all proportions, was unrecognizable.

Captain Valdez leaned hard over the rail. "Manuel, is it you?"

"Yes, captain."

"Where's your cowcha?"

"Lost, captain, lost! A great rubber forest, captain— I had tons of cowcha— it's lost— all lost!"

"I suppose so," replied Valdez ironically. "That's a fine cargo to pay you— two half-grown Indian kids. The nerve of you, Manuel, dropping into La Boca with slaves."

"Slaves!" echoed from Manuel. His gaze traveled from Valdez's face to the little bronze Cashibos, once more huddling, frightened, in the bow. "Slaves? Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Manuel, you had your choice," went on the captain, "and now you must abide by it. I've caught some of you slave hunters this trip. There's Bustos in irons. Your choice Manuel— the chain gang, or the river?"

"The river for me!" said Manuel. "Only up instead of down!"

"Up! But, Manuel, there's a chance down the Amazon. You—"

The rubber hunter faced up the wide Pachitea. His stentorian cry froze the words upon Captain Valdez's lips. It rolled out, a strange, trenchant call to something beyond the wild, silent river.

"Fever," whispered one of the fettered slave dealers.

"Bitten crazy," said another.

Manuel started the canoe upstream. He did not look back.

Captain and crew and prisoners on the boat thrilled to Bustos's mocking farewell.

"*Adios*, Manuel!"

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20: Sea Curse

Robert E. Howard

1906-1936

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Robert Ervin Howard

And some return by the failing light
And some in the waking dream,
For she hears the heels of the dripping ghosts
That ride the rough roofbeam.
—Kipling

THEY WERE the brawlers and braggarts, the loud boasters and hard drinkers, of Faring town, John Kulrek and his crony Lie-lip Canool. Many a time have I, a tousled-haired lad, stolen to the tavern door to listen to their curses, their profane arguments and wild sea songs; half fearful and half in admiration of these wild rovers. Aye, all the people of Faring town gazed on them with fear and admiration, for they were not like the rest of the Faring men; they were not content to ply their trade along the coasts and among the shark-teeth shoals. No yawls, no skiffs for them! They fared far, farther than any other man in the village, for they shipped on the great sailing-ships that went out on the white tides to brave the restless gray ocean and make ports in strange lands.

Ah, I mind it was swift times in the little sea-coast village of Faring when John Kulrek came home, with his furtive Lie-lip at his side, swaggering down the gang-plank, in his tarry sea-clothes, and the broad leather belt that held his ever-ready dagger; shouting condescending greeting to some favored acquaintance, kissing some maiden who ventured too near; then up the street, roaring some scarcely decent song of the sea. How the cringers and the idlers, the hangers-on, would swarm about the two desperate heroes, flattering and smirking, guffawing hilariously at each nasty jest. For to the tavern loafers and to some of the weaker among the straight-forward villagers, these men with

their wild talk and their brutal deeds, their tales of the Seven Seas and the far countries, these men, I say, were valiant knights, nature's noblemen who dared to be men of blood and brawn.

And all feared them, so that when a man was beaten or a woman insulted, the villagers muttered— and did nothing. And so when Moll Farrell's niece was put to shame by John Kulrek, none dared even to put in words what all thought. Moll had never married, and she and the girl lived alone in a little hut down close to the beach, so close that in high tide the waves came almost to the door.

The people of the village accounted old Moll something of a witch, and she was a grim, gaunt old dame who had little to say to anyone. But she minded her own business, and eked out a slim living by gathering clams, and picking up bits of driftwood.

The girl was a pretty, foolish little thing, vain and easily befooled, else she had never yielded to the shark-like blandishments of John Kulrek.

I mind the day was a cold winter day with a sharp breeze out of the east when the old dame came into the village street shrieking that the girl had vanished. All scattered over the beach and back among the bleak inland hills to search for her— all save John Kulrek and his cronies who sat in the tavern dicing and toping. All the while beyond the shoals, we heard the never-ceasing droning of the heaving, restless grey monster, and in the dim light of the ghostly dawn Moll Farrell's girl came home.

The tides bore her gently across the wet sands and laid her almost at her own door. Virgin-white she was, and her arms were folded across her still bosom; calm was her face, and the gray tides sighed about her slender limbs. Moll Farrell's eyes were stones, yet she stood above her dead girl and spoke no word till John Kulrek and his crony came reeling down from the tavern, their drinking-jacks still in their hands. Drunk was John Kulrek, and the people gave back for him, murder in their souls; so he came and laughed at Moll Farrell across the body of her girl.

"Zounds!" swore John Kulrek; "the wench has drowned herself, Lie-lip!"

Lie-lip laughed, with the twist of his thin mouth. He always hated Moll Farrell, for it was she that had given him the name of Lie-lip.

Then John Kulrek lifted his drinking-jack, swaying on his uncertain legs. "A health to the wench's ghost!" he bellowed, while all stood aghast.

Then Moll Farrell spoke, and the words broke from her in a scream which sent ripples of cold up and down the spines of the throng.

"The curse of the Foul Fiend upon you, John Kulrek!" she screamed. "The curse of God rest upon your vile soul throughout eternity! May you gaze on sights that shall sear the eyes of you and scorch the soul of you! May you die a

bloody death and writhe in hell's flames for a million and a million and yet a million years! I curse you by sea and by land, by earth and by air, by the demons of the oceans and the demons of the swamplands, the fiends of the forests and the goblins of the hills! And you—" her lean finger stabbed at Lie-lip Canool and he started backward, his face paling, "you shall be the death of John Kulrek and he shall be the death of you! You shall bring John Kulrek to the doors of hell and John Kulrek shall bring you to the gallows-tree! I set the seal of death upon your brow, John Kulrek! You shall live in terror and die in horror far out upon the cold grey sea! But the sea that took the soul of innocence to her bosom shall not take you, but shall fling forth your vile carcass to the sands! Aye, John Kulrek—" and she spoke with such a terrible intensity that the drunken mockery on the man's face changed to one of swinish stupidity, "the sea roars for the victim it will not keep! There is snow upon the hills, John Kulrek, and ere it melts your corpse will lie at my feet. And I shall spit upon it and be content."

Kulrek and his crony sailed at dawn for a long voyage, and Moll went back to her hut and her clam gathering. She seemed to grow leaner and more grim than ever and her eyes smoldered with a light not sane. The days glided by and people whispered among themselves that Moll's days were numbered, for she faded to a ghost of a woman; but she went her way, refusing all aid.

That was a short, cold summer and the snow on the barren inland hills never melted; a thing very unusual, which caused much comment among the villagers. At dusk and at dawn Moll would come up on the beach, gaze up at the snow which glittered on the hills, then out to sea with a fierce intensity in her gaze.

Then the days grew shorter, the nights longer and darker, and the cold grey tides came sweeping along the bleak strands, bearing the rain and sleet of the sharp east breezes.

And upon a bleak day a trading-vessel sailed into the bay and anchored. And all the idlers and the wastrels flocked to the wharfs, for that was the ship upon which John Kulrek and Lie-lip Canool had sailed. Down the gang-plank came Lie-lip, more furtive than ever, but John Kulrek was not there.

To shouted queries, Canool shook his head. "Kulrek deserted ship at a port of Sumatra," said he. "He had a row with the skipper, lads; wanted me to desert, too, but no! I had to see you fine lads again, eh, boys?"

Almost cringing was Lie-lip Canool, and suddenly he recoiled as Moll Farrell came through the throng. A moment they stood eyeing each other; then Moll's grim lips bent in a terrible smile.

"There's blood on your hand, Canool!" she lashed out suddenly— so suddenly that Lie-lip started and rubbed his right hand across his left sleeve.

"Stand aside, witch!" he snarled in sudden anger, striding through the crowd which gave back for him. His admirers followed him to the tavern.

Now, I mind that the next day was even colder; grey fogs came drifting out of the east and veiled the sea and the beaches. There would be no sailing that day, and so all the villagers were in their snug houses or matching tales at the tavern. So it came about that Joe, my friend, a lad of my own age, and I, were the ones who saw the first of the strange thing that happened.

Being harum-scarum lads of no wisdom, we were sitting in a small rowboat, floating at the end of the wharfs, each shivering and wishing the other would suggest leaving, there being no reason whatever for our being there, save that it was a good place to build air-castles undisturbed.

Suddenly Joe raised his hand. "Say," he said, "d'ye hear? Who can be out on the bay upon a day like this?"

"Nobody. What d'ye hear?"

"Oars. Or I'm a lubber. Listen."

There was no seeing anything in that fog, and I heard nothing. Yet Joe swore he did, and suddenly his face assumed a strange look.

"Somebody rowing out there, I tell you! The bay is alive with oars from the sound! A score of boats at the least! Ye dolt, can ye not hear?"

Then, as I shook my head, he leaped and began to undo the painter.

"I'm off to see. Name me liar if the bay is not full of boats, all together like a close fleet. Are you with me?"

Yes, I was with him, though I heard nothing. Then out in the greyness we went, and the fog closed behind and before so that we drifted in a vague world of smoke, seeing naught and hearing naught. We were lost in no time, and I cursed Joe for leading us upon a wild goose chase that was like to end with our being swept out to sea. I thought of Moll Farrell's girl and shuddered.

How long we drifted I know not. Minutes faded into hours, hours into centuries. Still Joe swore he heard the oars, now close at hand, now far away, and for hours we followed them, steering our course toward the sound, as the noise grew or receded. This I later thought of, and could not understand.

Then, when my hands were so numb that I could no longer hold the oar, and the forerunning drowsiness of cold and exhaustion was stealing over me, bleak white stars broke through the fog which glided suddenly away, fading like a ghost of smoke, and we found ourselves afloat just outside the mouth of the bay. The waters lay smooth as a pond, all dark green and silver in the starlight, and the cold came crisper than ever. I was swinging the boat about, to put back into the bay, when Joe gave a shout, and for the first time I heard the clack of oar-locks. I glanced over my shoulder and my blood went cold.

A great beaked prow loomed above us, a weird, unfamiliar shape against the stars, and as I caught my breath, sheered sharply and swept by us, with a curious swishing I never heard any other craft make. Joe screamed and backed oars frantically, and the boat walled out of the way just in time; for though the prow had missed us, still otherwise we had died. For from the sides of the ship stood long oars, bank upon bank which swept her along. Though I had never seen such a craft, I knew her for a galley. But what was she doing upon our coasts? They said, the far-farers, that such ships were still in use among the heathens of Barbary; but it was many a long, heaving mile to Barbary, and even so she did not resemble the ships described by those who had sailed far.

We started in pursuit, and this was strange, for though the waters broke about her prow, and she seemed fairly to fly through the waves, yet she was making little speed, and it was no time before we caught up with her. Making our painter fast to a chain far back beyond the reach of the swishing oars, we hailed those on deck. But there came no answer, and at last, conquering our fears, we clambered up the chain and found ourselves upon the strangest deck man has trod for many a long, roaring century.

"This is no Barbary rover!" muttered Joe fearsomely. "Look, how old it seems! Almost ready to fall to pieces. Why, 'tis fairly rotten!"

There was no one on deck, no one at the long sweep with which the craft was steered. We stole to the hold and looked down the stair. Then and there, if ever men were on the verge of insanity, it was we. For there were rowers there, it is true; they sat upon the rowers' benches and drove the creaking oars through the gray waters. *And they that rowed were skeletons!*

Shrieking, we plunged across the deck, to fling ourselves into the sea. But at the rail I tripped upon something and fell headlong, and as I lay, I saw a thing which vanquished my fear of the horrors below for an instant. The thing upon which I had tripped was a human body, and in the dim gray light that was beginning to steal across the eastern waves I saw a dagger hilt standing up between his shoulders. Joe was at the rail, urging me to haste, and together we slid down the chain and cut the painter.

Then we stood off into the bay. Straight on kept the grim galley, and we followed, slowly, wondering. She seemed to be heading straight for the beach beside the wharfs, and as we approached, we saw the wharfs thronged with people. They had missed us, no doubt, and now they stood, there in the early dawn light, struck dumb by the apparition which had come up out of the night and the grim ocean.

Straight on swept the galley, her oars a-swish; then ere she reached the shallow water— crash!— a terrific reverberation shook the bay. Before our eyes the grim craft seemed to melt away; then she vanished, and the green

waters seethed where she had ridden, but there floated no driftwood there, nor did there ever float any ashore. Aye, something floated ashore, but it was grim driftwood!

We made the landing amid a hum of excited conversation that stopped suddenly. Moll Farrell stood before her hut, limned gauntly against the ghostly dawn, her lean hand pointing seaward. And across the sighing wet sands, borne by the grey tide, something came floating; something that the waves dropped at Moll Farrell's feet. And there looked up at us, as we crowded about, a pair of unseeing eyes set in a still, white face. John Kulrek had come home.

Still and grim he lay, rocked by the tide, and as he lurched sideways, all saw the dagger hilt that stood from his back— the dagger all of us had seen a thousand times at the belt of Lie-lip Canool.

"Aye, I killed him!" came Canool's shriek, as he writhed and groveled before our gaze. "At sea on a still night in a drunken brawl I slew him and hurled him overboard! And from the far seas he has followed me—" his voice sank to a hideous whisper, "because— of— the— curse— the— sea— would— not— keep— his— body!"

And the wretch sank down, trembling, the shadow of the gallows already in his eyes.

"Aye!" Strong, deep and exultant was Moll Farrell's voice. "From the hell of lost craft Satan sent a ship of bygone ages! A ship red with gore and stained with the memory of horrid crimes! None other would bear such a vile carcass! The sea has taken vengeance and has given me mine. See now, how I spit upon the face of John Kulrek."

And with a ghastly laugh, she pitched forward, the blood starting to her lips. And the sun came up across the restless sea.

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