PAST MASTERS 196

A. Hyatt Verrill
Max Brand
Harold Mercer
Alice Duer Miller
Harold Bindloss
Don Marquis
Anthony M. Rud
Cleve F. Adams
Alice C. Tomholt

and more

PAST MASTERS 196

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

15 Jan 2025

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Cleve F. Adams

1895-1949

Clues Detective Stories April 1937

One of the Violet McDade-Nevada Alvarado hard-boiled private eye series, with two women P.I.s, and McDade as hard-boiled as they get.

VIOLET McDADE does not take offense easily. On the other hand, though she may look, talk and act like a particularly uncouth dock walloper, she is none the less proud of her sex. So when one of our visitors paused in the office door and said, "Oh, you are women!" in a tone of surprise, if not actual disparagement, she scowled ferociously.

"O' course we're women! But we're the best dicks in Los Angeles, or mebbe the whole world, for all I know!" She glanced ostentatiously at the card on her desk. " 'Vega City Improvement League!' Reformers, hunh?"

The second of the two gentlemen smiled a propitiating smile. "Not exactly reformers, Miss McDade. That is, not in the usual sense. And Mr. Barton and myself are sorry if we— so to speak— got off on the wrong foot. McDade & Alvarado were recommended to us so highly that— well, it was somewhat of a surprise to find you members of the fairer sex."

"And what could be fairer than that?" Violet chuckled, mollified. "So what can Nevada and me do for you?"

The two gentlemen took chairs. The one who had roused Violet's ire was tall, spare, in his middle fifties. Well-groomed, with the grooming that comes only from long habit, iron-gray hair brushed carefully, cold gray eyes beneath finely arched brows, he was every inch the aristocrat. I put him down as a banker. It turned out that he was a judge.

The other fellow was the banker. Fat, almost as fat as Violet McDade, with a pink-skinned, triple-chinned face that somehow, despite the chins, managed to look like a baby's, he was a picture of roly-poly good nature. A little on the baldish side, his thin, sandy hair lay in damp little ringlets atop his enormous head, and eyes as blue, as ingenuous as a child's, regarded us delightedly. He said his name was Cyrus Q. Flagg.

Judge Monette Barton came to the point immediately. "Vega City is having district-attorney trouble. Your own prosecutor, an old friend of mine, recommended your firm as being the most trustworthy private investigators he knew."

Violet looked at me. "Mark one up for the 'cutor," she said. "I'd no idea he was that fond of us."

Judge Barton frowned slightly at the interruption. "We have been a long-suffering lot in Vega City, but crime and corruption finally reached a point where our reputation was being dragged in the dirt. The old district attorney and the police force were almost openly -aligned with criminals. A few of us— the better element— organized the Improvement League, spent a lot of money and eventually ousted the old prosecutor. We elected our own man."

"Swell!" Violet approved. "It ain't often that it works out that way."

"It hasn't worked out." Cyrus Flagg chuckled happily, as if it were all a huge joke. "Fact is, it looks like our money and ideals were a total loss."

JUDGE BARTON said, "Let me finish, please." You could almost imagine the tapping of the gavel in a crowded courtroom, as his cold eyes again rested on Violet's moon face. "The new prosecutor is my personal friend. I hate to believe that he has been reached by the criminal element, yet the facts seem to point that way. Crime is still rampant in Vega City, and indictments, even the petty ones, are all too few. Considine claims he is hampered by insufficient evidence. As an ex-justice I disagree.

"Proving Considine, our own man, corrupt will work a great injury to our cause; will, in fact, enable the old gang to once more take over in full force. We should hate that. I, particularly, because the man has been my friend, and— well, there are other reasons. But if he has double-crossed us, I will go to the governor of the State, if necessary, to see that he is removed."

"Very noble indeed," said Violet. "So you want us to either prove him guilty or innocent, and if innocent, to get him the kind of evidence he needs to function."

Cyrus Flagg nodded. "Judge Barton feels that strangers may uncover more than local talent. Besides, no one knows whom to trust in Vega any more. Pitiful state. Sad." He pursed his babyish mouth, winked at me. "The judge thinks that a man named Shane Fowler is the curse of Vega City. You might look him up and ask him."

Judge Barton clamped his thin lips in a straight, harsh line. "You take this thing too lightly, Cyrus!"

"I'm in it for fifty thousand, my friend, and that's not so darned lightly these days." Flagg yawned behind a pink, pudgy hand. "Heigh-ho, I guess I'm not a born zealot. I've made money in Vega. So have you. But that's neither here nor there, eh? We've been crossed— or think we have— and we must have our r-r-r-revenge. These ladies, I hope, will get it for us."

"Nevada and me can't leave town right now," said Violet. "Were tied up on a insurance fraud, but I can send a man back with you. Twenty-five a day and expenses."

"A good man?"
"One of the best."

WE SENT Tully O'Neill to Vega City. Two days later he came back to us— in a trunk.

It was pretty awful for a while. I mean, you read about these things in the papers, and if you think about them at all, you're only mildly sorry for the people involved. But when it happens to you— when it's actually some one you've known and. liked— well, it really gets you.

Violet and I were dressing for dinner when the bell rang. I heard Bridget go down the hall to answer it; then voices raised in argument. Bridget came back, muttering.

"Man out here with a trunk, You got a trunk coming?"

I said no, we didn't have any trunk coming.

Violet yelled through the communicating door: "Miz Sturtevant was gonna send me something from China. Is it from China, Bridget?"

Bridget said no, it wasn't from China, it was from Sacramento. "But it's addressed to McDade & Alvarado, all right." And hopefully, as a sort of added attraction. "It's prepaid."

Violet waddled into my room attired in a dressing gown which made her look more like a circus elephant than ever. "We better take a look, Nevada. Mebbe Miz Sturtevant didn't go to China." The three of us went down the hall.

THE EXPRESSMAN had the trunk inside by that time, and thrust his metal-sheathed book at us aggressively. The trunk wasn't locked. Violet looked at the shipping label, undid the straps and lifted the lid.

The belligerent express man quietly fainted. Bridget turned green, crossed herself. Then, clapping her hand to her mouth as if she were going to be very sick, she wabbled hurriedly down the hall. And I? Well, I felt the skin on my face begin to tighten and the effect of paralysis crept down into my arms, my legs. I wanted horribly to shriek, yet somehow couldn't. Numb, I watched Violet close the trunk, very gently, as though afraid of waking Tully O'Neill.

I began to laugh hysterically. "Awaken him! With seven slugs in his body?" The next think I knew, Violet was holding me upright with one hand, and slapping me hard with the other. Her rumbling voice gradually drowned out the pounding in my ears. She was saying, over and over again: "Take a brace, Mex. Steady does it. We can take it, kid, and we can dish it out. Just fix your mind on that last part, Nevada. We're gonna dish it out."

Well, she was right. Grieving over Tully O'Neill wasn't going to help him any. The very least we could do was to avenge him. Somehow I got a grip on

myself. Bridget came back with a tumbler of whisky and the three of us managed to bring the express man around. He was a big fellow, but his eyes carefully avoided the trunk, and his teeth sounded like castanets as he tried to answer Violet's questions.

He didn't, he said, know a thing beyond the fact that the trunk had been prepaid to our door. The express agent at the S.P. depot had turned it over to him. He was a regular bonded driver for the company, and it was pretty obvious he hadn't been aware of the trunk's contents.

Violet said, "O. K., fella, you'll hafta stick around till the law gets here. Mebbe Bridget can find you something to eat."

He gagged. "Eat! Me eat? Lady, I ain't never gonna eat another bite as long as I live!" But he followed Bridget docilely enough as she went out to the kitchen.

Violet phoned the district attorney at his home. After that, she turned to me. "Get dressed, Mex, and pack us a coupla bags. We're leavin' for Vega City." She lifted the phone again and called an airport. I paused in the dining room for a quick one, which I needed badly, and I could hear her bellowing: "I don't give a damn how much it costs! I want a plane and I want it ready to go in half an hour!" She pronged the receiver with a bang.

Now that I was out of sight of that damned trunk I was beginning to do a little better. The palsy went out of my legs and I began to pack. And then I began shaking all over again, only this time with wrath.

Somebody, somebody, thought himself so powerful, so impregnable, that he could actually flaunt murder in our face. Was that the idea? A taunt, a sort of dare? Or was it meant as a warning of what would happen to us, if we, too, came to Vega City? The shipping point on the label didn't fool us; it hadn't been meant to fool us. Tully O'Neill had gone to Vega City. He had returned from Vega City, and by what devious route he had reached us made no difference. Or did it? Suppose the trunk had been shipped over the State line via public carrier. That would bring the Federals into the case. I found myself wishing that the Federals were in. But the man, or men had been too smart for that. They'd carted the body over the State line into Sacramento before shipping it.

For a moment I felt an overwhelming sense of fear, of impending disaster. What could two lone women, even granting that one of them was Violet McDade, hope to accomplish in a graft-ridden city, strange to us, yes, and in another State? Maybe our unknown was as powerful, as omnipotent as he thought he was. I shivered a little.

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THE DOORBELL RANG. It was Marx, the district attorney. He had two of his staff with him, and Violet was just closing the lid of the trunk again when I got out to the hall. The three men, hardened as they were, looked a little pale around the gills.

Violet said, "In a way, Marx, you got us into this. Not that I'm blamin' you, but you gotta help us."

She gave him the details of how we'd been retained.

Marx spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "All right, I recommended you to Judge Barton and this fellow, Flagg. But the thing is out of my province now. What do you want me to do?"

"Take charge of O'Neill's body, prosecutor. See that the local law and the papers don't try to make it tough for us to get away. You can communicate with Sacramento, or do any damn thing you please. All I want is some o' the slugs that did for Tully O'Neill, and a hour's start. Can do?"

He nodded gloomily. "Yes, I can promise you that much. But just the same, I think you're making a mistake, Violet. I'd hate to have you and Miss Alvarado come back like"—his eyes went to the trunk— "like that, or not come back at all. I could get in touch with Considine, the district attorney in Vega City—"

"We'll get in touch with Considine ourselves," said Violet grimly. "And how!"

Marx compressed his lips. "Law and order—" he began, then changed his mind at the look on Violet's face, and said instead, "Very well, I'll have the slugs at the airport for you."

He and his men went away, taking the express man and the trunk with them. Five minutes later, when I entered Violet's bedroom I found her tossing a motley collection of clothing into a third bag.

"That isn't at all necessary," I informed her. "I thought of every thing we'd need."

"Mebbe," she said. "Then again, mebbe you didn't." And it turned out later that she was right. I hadn't thought of everything.

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THE CHARTERED PLANE set us down at a small field just outside Vega City; not the regular transport field, but another, a private one whose owner was evidently known to our pilot. There was a border of tall trees surrounding it, a small hangar and machine shop, and up on a little knoll at the far end was a small house, lighted now, and apparently a residence.

Violet told the pilot, "Don't put the ship to bed, fella. We may hafta light outa here in a hurry."

He was a young fellow, with a devil-may-care look about him. He grinned at her. "O.K., Miss McDade, anything you say. And if you need a strong back and a weak mind— well, I've got a weak mind, anyway."

Violet said, "This is our show, fella. You stay under cover with your pal here, and don't stick your neck out."

Before the man could answer, a car's twin headlights picked us out of the darkness. The car itself roared down the slope from the house and came straight across the field as if bent on running us down. The driver and another man piled out of the front seat; from the tonneau came a third. This last was evidently the owner of the field.

He said, "Hello, Ted." Our pilot said hello, and the two other men eyed us from under tugged-down hat brims. They were dicks. You can tell 'em the world over. Their language may vary a bit according to the locale; small personal mannerisms may differ; but they all carry the rubber stamp of their profession.

The driver was a thickset man who mouthed his cigars till they were limp, soggy. He said, "You ladies must've been in a rush to get here, hunh? Mind telling us your business in Vega City?"

"Not at all," said Violet equably. "This here State and 'specially Vega City is noted for quick and easy divorces, and that's what I crave lots of. My old man has been beatin' hell outa me for two or three years now and I'm leavin' him flat."

The other dick edged in closer. He was a finger-snapper. He kept snapping his fingers, sort of punctuating his words, and I didn't for an instant believe that Violet's wild yarn had gone over with him.

"A divorce, eh? And this other lady, is she after a divorce, too?" I could have slapped him.

Violet chuckled. "Nope, she's just a friend o' mine. Kind of a confidential adviser, you might say. So now if you're all through snoopin' in our private business, how's about givin' us a lift into town?"

Our pilot and his friend had been carrying on a low-voiced conversation. They turned to us now.

Ted said: "I'm going to bunk in with Stack Petersen, but we'll be glad to run you into town if you'd rather not—" He broke off, looked at the two detectives.

The one with the cigar said, "Hell, there ain't no need o' that. We'd be delighted to ferry the ladies into Vega, hunh, Wogan?"

Wogan snapped his fingers, "Sure. Fact is, that's what— I mean, yeah, sure we would!"

Violet played dumb. "Gee, that's swell! That's what I call bein' downright hospitable." She waddled over to the plane, yanked out the two bags I'd

packed, came back and tossed them into the police car. And to the pilot ahead, she said, "We'll settle up with you in the morning, Ted. Mebbe my friends will wanta go back with you, but me, I gotta establish residence here accounta bustin' them— now— shackles o' matrimony."

WE GOT INTO the car. The two dicks got into the car. As we roared away, our pilot turned from the plane, shouted something after us. He had our third bag in his hand. Violet waved to him.

"I bet he forgot his toothbrush," she said loudly.

The dicks in the front seat didn't say anything. After a while— ten minutes or so— we drew up before a glittering hotel. The neon sign over the marquee labeled it the Vega Vista.

The driver said, around his tattered cigar, "Well, here we are, ladies. The best is none too good, hunh?"

"Right you are," said Violet, and thanked them both profusely. They made no effort to get out, to help us with our bags. Rather, they seemed in something of a rush to get rid of us now. Six feet five of ebony doorman descended on us, showing double rows of gleaming teeth. He, too, was a finger-snapper. His efforts brought two scurrying bell hops through the revolving doors, and our detective friends left us with grunted good nights.

Violet addressed his magnificence, "Know them birds, admiral?"

"Sho." He grinned. "Sho Ah knows 'em. Dem's dicks fum the district attorney's office."

"Who'd've believed it!" Violet marveled. "And them such accommodatin' gents, too." She suffered the bell hops to take our bags, and we went inside, registered. But we didn't follow the bags up to our rooms. Instead, Violet led the way into the crowded grill and picked out a booth from which we had a clear view of the desk. Presently— we had hardly ordered— our new-found friends, "Cigar-mouther" and "Finger-snapper," came into the lobby and glanced over the register with affected carelessness. Cigar-mouther went away, but his partner didn't. Finger-snapper bought a paper and blended with a clump of palms near the elevator bank. Music drifted to us from the ballroom; immaculate men and beautifully gowned women passed to and fro. The cocktail lounge was doing a nice business and, personally, I'd have liked to augment it. Somehow I couldn't seem to get my mind on food. Violet, as usual, ate like a horse. After a while she put down her third cup of coffee with a gusty sigh of repletion.

"Things," she announced cheerfully, "is pickin' up."

"Are they? What things?"

"Oh, just things. Looks like we ain't got much chance o' workin' under cover in this man's town, hunh?"

"You never had a chance in the first place, you elephant. It isn't only your size that makes you conspicuous. That crazy tale, for instance, about getting a divorce. Why, it wouldn't have fooled a child!"

"Ain't it the truth!" She chuckled. "Even a Vega City dick could tell nobody would ever marry me. But mebbe that there yarn will give them the idea that it's us that's dumb."

"And they wouldn't be far wrong, at that." Landing at an obscure field as we had, and being met by detectives, was pretty conclusive evidence that our every move was being checked. I couldn't see an out of any kind, and I told her so.

"Trouble with you"— she sniffed— "trouble with you, Nevada, is you got no 'magination. Now me, I can 'magine all kinds 'o things— like what would happen if we did the opposite from what we're expected to do."

She beckoned the waiter, paid the check and waved the change away with a lavish gesture. Then, loud enough for all in the grill to hear, "Know who I am, fella? I'm a detective. I'm here to clean up Vega City." She guffawed at his slack jawed amazement. "Yep, ol' Vi'let McDade, the greatest female shamus that ever lived!"

THERE WAS a sudden hush in the room. Somebody laid down a fork and it sounded like the Fourth of July. Then everybody began to talk at once, and I could have yelled, I was so embarrassed. Did I say embarrassed? Lord, I was petrified.

But do you think she stopped with the grill? Not Violet McDade. There was a repeat performance in the lobby. Then, when I was praying for the very floor to open and swallow me, she took my arm and, bowing to right and left like a prima donna of the old school, she led the way to the elevators. The operator had the grace to mask his smirk as a concealed yawn. Otherwise I should have shot him.

In our rooms at last, I unburdened my soul. I gave her my entire repertoire without making a dent in her smug complacency. Finally, worn out by the sound of my own voice, I sank to the bed and buried my face in my hands. What was the use? The harm was done now. Vega City, down to the last street sweeper, knew by this time just who we were and why we were there.

"Sure," she said calmly "Everybody of importance probably knew it anyway. So mebbe the unimportant ones will kinda make it tough on the others. I mean, by puttin' ourselves in the spotlight, mebbe it'll be harder to put us on the spot. The whole damn town'll have a interest in us now."

Well, there was a lot of sense in that remark. There usually is a lot of sense in anything Violet McDade does, but often I'm not bright enough to see it at the time. I apologized, but I still couldn't see our next move.

She said, "Why move? Why not let the other guys do the movin' while you and me just sorta relax and be comfortable?" Suiting action to words, she removed her shoes and sprawled in a groaning chair. "We oughta be havin' visitors 'most any time now."

And again she was right. I'd hardly began to unpack when there came a knock on the door. It was Judge Barton and he was very, very angry indeed. Carefully groomed as usual, perfectly controlled, you could still see the flames leaping behind his cold, gray eyes.

He said, "I am disappointed in you, Miss McDade." He ignored me, spoke only to her. "I was given to understand that you were discreet. That is one of the reasons my committee retained you. Finding you everything but discreet makes it necessary for us to demand your withdrawal from the case, and preferably from Vega City."

Violet studied him as if he were some new kind of worm. "You didn't retain me, Judge Barton— not for twenty-five bucks a day. You hired one of my men, through me. He came to Vega City with you and Cyrus Q. Flagg. He was sent back to us in a trunk— dead." She took one step forward, clutched his arms and shook him. Her face was terrible. "Dead, do you hear? Murdered in your lousy city. And you've got the nerve to demand my withdrawal from the case. Why, for two cents I'd take your whole damn town apart!"

BARTON looked as if he were going to faint. The flame died in his eyes and he tried to speak two or three times before the words finally came. "I didn't know! Believe me, I didn't know, Miss McDade. Flagg and I thought it better if we weren't seen with your man. We gave him everything we knew on the train, then separated. From that time to this we haven't heard a word, either directly or indirectly, concerning O'Neill. I— I am deeply shocked."

There was another knock on the door, and, opening it, I found Cyrus Q. Flagg, pink-skinned, triple-chinned face more baby-like than ever above the broad expanse of dress shirt. He ambled into the room, regarded us all with cherubic good humor.

Judge Barton said, "O'Neill was murdered, Flagg." He passed a lean hand over his eyes as if to clear his vision. "Murdered— in our city."

Flagg bobbed his great head, once, let his naive blue eyes rest on Violet's scowling face. "Tell me about it," he said quietly.

Violet told him. Concluding, she said, "So you can see why I don't give one little damn whether your committee or anybody else likes it. I'm stayin' in town

till I've found O'Neill's killers, or until I'm dragged out in a coffin." Flagg looked at Barton. Barton looked at Flagg. You could almost see them making up their minds.

"I— I guess we were wrong about you," Barton said. "Maybe, under the circumstances, your method is best. We'll have to have a blow-off some time and it might as well be now. Consider yourselves retained by the Vega City Improvement League, to uncover O'Neill's murderer and all the rest of the dirt. All of it. Shall we say a thousand a day?"

Violet said stubbornly, "We're doin' this job for personal reasons and we don't want any Improvement League under our feet. But if we live long enough to do you any good we'll bill you for plenty. So now you can tell us what you told Tully O'Neill."

There wasn't much they could add to what they'd given us in our office back in Los Angeles. It was the current belief that a man named Shane Fowler was the controlling genius behind all of Vega City's rackets. There was no proof of this. It was merely that Shane Fowler had always been a sort of political boss in the county. He had elected the former district attorney.

"And ever since that election things have gone from bad to worse. Gambling, of course, is legal in this State. We have no quarrel with gambling. We are in no sense the old-style, blue-nose reformers. But I believe that gambling is what brought on the present epidemic of crime. Since the governor of Lower California banned gambling we have had a steady influx of men from over the border; men apparently hoping— to use the idiom— to muscle in.

"A score of killings have resulted, and they haven't all been confined to the criminal element. Nearly all of these crimes remain unsolved, despite our electing our own district attorney, Considine. In addition, the furor has brought to light the fact that our city was honeycombed with rackets and vice even before the chiselers moved in from Mexico. Wealthy visitors were fleeced in our supposedly honest casinos; shops were preyed upon. But these, unfortunately, are only rumors. Those victims who might talk, either can't or wont. Our law-enforcement agencies were apparently corrupt, and switching horses hasn't helped us any."

Violet turned to Cyrus Flagg. "About this Considine fella. You're a banker. Has Considine's account been growing?"

"I wouldn't know," Flagg said. "Frank Considine took his account away from us before he was elected. I believe he banks at the Calnevar Trust now. At least, that's the only other bank beside our own First National in Vega City."

"That in itself looks bad," said Barton. "It looks as if Considine intended to go crooked even before he was elected. But aside from the fact that we know Considine was wealthy— didn't need graft— we have no means of checking up

on his financial affairs. Carewe of the Calnevar Trust wouldn't come in with us, said he didn't believe in mixing business with reform. Naturally, we had words, and now he refuses to give us any information whatever."

Violet said, "This Calnevar Trust is a branch, ain't it? Part of a tri-state chain?"

Flagg nodded.

"O. K.," said Violet grumpily. "Anybody asks you, you don't know us from Adam's off ox. We'll be seein' you— mebbe." She ushered them out.

Hardly had the elevator gate clanged shut behind them when there was another knock on the door. We seemed to be very popular all of a sudden. Violet put a pudgy finger to her lips.

"This'll probably be the cops," she whispered. "Stall 'em for a minute." Snatching up her shoes, she vanished through the communicating door which led to her room.

THE KNOCKING on the door grew louder, more insistent. I unlocked it, opened it a crack, and some one gave it a kick. It flew inward, knocking me sprawling. Cigar-mouther and Finger-snapper came in, kicked the door shut behind them. Cigar-mouther pounced on me, jerked my gun from its knee holster. Furious, not at the taking of the gun, but at the way he did it, I slapped his fat face.

Finger-snapper said, "Tsk, tsk, Charlie, she wants to play." He lifted me to my feet, slapped me casually, went on over to Violet's door and looked in, "The fat one is gone, Charlie."

Charlie worried his cigar, rubbed his cheek where I'd hit him. He opened the hall door, looked out, closed it again and came back to stand spraddle-legged, belligerent before me.

"Where's the hippo? We got a warrant for her and you, too."

"On what charges?" I snapped.

"Carrying concealed weapons."

"Why, you poor fools! We've a license to operate in this State. I can show it to you."

"I already got it," said Finger-snapper. He had, too. He'd gone through our bags and tumbled stuff all over the floor. "But we're funny in Vega. We got a little private ordinance says you can operate, but you can't carry a rod without a special permit. We passed the ordinance just a hour ago. Funny, hunh?"

I said it was funny, very. I was literally seething with rage, as furious with Violet as with these two louts who were probably only carrying out orders. The she-devil had left me holding the sack.

Charlie bit his cigar in two, looked at the pieces sadly, chose one and put it back in his mouth. It seemed he couldn't talk without some kind of an impediment. He said, "Well, let's go, Wogan. The boys downstairs will pick up the fat dame."

They let me put on my coat before they led me away.

Everything seemed so unhurried, so inevitable: O'Neill's murder, our own reception to Vega City, and now this almost casual arrest. It was as though everything had been planned years ago, and we were being moved about like inanimate pieces on a chessboard. The finger which moved us was the more terrible for being without identity.

I wondered if it was Frank Considine, the district attorney, or if he, too, was merely another pawn. And if we were to be killed, why didn't they get it over with? The answer to that one seemed obvious. Violet had circumvented the usual spot murder by making us public entities. And landing in the lobby I found that she had outwitted "the boys downstairs," too.

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THE COPPERS were there all right, seven of them. But Violet wasn't. The finger-snapping Wogan cursed sourly, and Charlie almost swallowed the remnants of his cigar. I began to feel better, even giggled a little as recriminations flashed back and forth. The dicks watching the exits had thought Wogan and Charlie had both of us. Wogan and Charlie had fondly imagined Violet in the clutches of the men downstairs.

Wogan said finally, "Take the joint apart. She must still be here. Find her." The seven coppers separated. Wogan and Charlie urged me through a lobby full of staring eyes and out to their car. Three minutes later they sat me down in a hard chair facing a broad, flat-topped desk. On the other side of the desk was Frank Considine, the district attorney.

I'd have known it was he, even without the sign on the door and the salutation of my captors. The name seemed to fit him somehow. He was tall, broad-shouldered, as immaculate as Judge Barton, though a lot younger, and nervous with a sort of unleashed energy. Very keen, very black eyes bored holes in me.

Wogan said, "We slipped up on the other one, chief, but the boys'll bring her in later."

Considine said, "All right, you two wait outside. I'll talk to Miss Alvarado alone."

They went out.

"Now, then," said Considine crisply, "I can guess why you and the— um— large lady are in Vega City." A shadow passed over his face, like a cloud. "I can even guess who sent for you. But it's no go, Miss Alvarado."

"I've heard that before, prosecutor. If it weren't for one thing I'd agree with you, and so would Violet McDade. We are not particularly interested in the problems of Vega City. We never were. But when a man of ours is murdered, and sent back to us in a trunk— well, it becomes a rather personal matter."

He looked startled. "Murdered! You mean one of your operatives was murdered in Vega City?"

I said, wearily, "It's not even a fair act, Considine. You know more about the whole thing than I do, and there's no use pretending you don't. Tully O'Neill was sent here to investigate you. He was killed. We followed up, and were tagged by your own men from the moment we hit town. And now this arrest on a trumped-up charge that is ridiculous on the face of it. You see, it all leads back to you."

He got up, strode to the windows, stood there staring out into the night. I couldn't see his face, but I had an idea his lips were moving, because sounds like smothered curses, or maybe a prayer, came to me faintly over the noise of the traffic.

Presently, still not turning, he said quietly, "You are right about one thing, at least. I did order you picked up when I heard of the ridiculous threats your partner was broadcasting. Vega City doesn't seem to be very healthy for people who insist on stirring up trouble. I can hold you on what you are pleased to call trumped-up charges, or I can give you an escort out of town. Believe it or not, I'm trying to save your life, Miss Alvarado."

A HOARSE VOICE behind me inquired, "And mine, too, Frankie?" He whirled. So did I. It was Violet, very pleased with herself, looking like the cat who has just finished off the last of the goldfish. There was an open door behind her— not the one into the corridor, but another, leading from a darkened office beyond. She said, "Marvelous how I do get around, ain't it?"

Considine looked at her. "It is indeed," he said, and did something with his foot. Immediately an alarm bell sounded out in the hall. The door was flung open and Wogan and the cigar-chewing Charlie dashed in with drawn guns. The darkened office behind Violet was suddenly a blaze of light and the doorway bulged with uniformed cops.

Considine said, "Search her, Wogan," and Wogan snapped his fingers in pleasurable anticipation.

Violet flipped her sleeve guns down, chuckled as the cops closed in on her. "You wouldn't wanna search a lady, gents. It ain't considered— now— cricket.

So I'm gonna save you the grief o' tryin'." She released the two .45s from their spring harness, tossed them to the desk. "That makes me as harmless as a kitten. Or almost as harmless, anyway." She fixed the grim-lipped Considine with a jovial eye.

"Between the time your boys collared my partner, and now, I been doin' a little investigatin', Frankie. I discover that— like they say in books— you're more to be pitied than given the Bronx cheer. I know you've been nolle-prossing cases that should've drawn raps, and I know why you been doin' it. So you wanna play with me, or you want I should spill what I know to certain other parties?"

He said, "I don't know what you are talking about, Miss McDade. Any cases I've nolle-prossed have been because of lack of evidence. But I admit the conditions make your presence here at this time a little inconvenient. As I just told Miss Alvarado, I can have you locked up. Would you prefer that to leaving town under escort?"

She scowled. "I think you're makin' a mistake, Considine— a big mistake, mebbe bigger'n the one you made a long time ago. But if you insist— well, Nevada and me'll take a powder."

His dark eyes searched her moon face. "That is very wise of you, I'm sure." Fingering the guns on his desk he added, "I'll just keep these for a day or two. If you'll leave your address, I'll have them shipped down to Los Angeles—"

"Like O'Neill was shipped?"

He went very white, but his eyes remained steady and his voice was without inflection. "I'm— er— sorry about O'Neill, Miss McDade. If you can give me proof that he was killed in Vega City, I'll be glad to make an investigation."

Her placid face, the little green eyes, gave no indication of her anger. Probably I was the only one in the room who knew just how close she was to an explosion. She said, carelessly, "Forget it, Considine. Get the parade started."

And a parade is what it turned out to be, too. A quartet of motor cycles, sirens screaming, cleared traffic ahead of us. Behind us came Considine in an official sedan, and behind him, in a third car, rode what looked like part of the riot squad. The inseparable Wogan and Charlie kept us company. Charlie had acquired a new cigar somewhere, but it was gradually disintegrating.

AS WE WENT, our modest little procession began to grow. It was nearing midnight, but private citizens, in a variety of vehicles, attached themselves to our train and added the encouragement of blaring horns to the din of the sirens. It was like being ridden out of town on a rail,. only— I imagine— not so

uncomfortable. Physically, that is. Mentally, I suffered from a distinct inferiority complex, coupled, paradoxically enough, with a seething rage which mounted in direct proportion to the growth of our entourage.

Violet appeared to take it all as good, clean fun. Knowing her, I wondered a little at that; wondered, too, why she hadn't blasted her way out of Considine's office with her two guns. She could have done it. Despite her three hundred and fifty pounds of awkwardness she's faster than greased lightning at times.

She said, as if reading my mind, "Something about a district attorney— even one that's supposed to be crooked— kinda keeps me from gettin' tough. Mebbe it's the majesty o' the law, hunh?"

"Or maybe," said Charlie around his cigar, "maybe it was me and Wogan."

"I wouldn't argue, fella. You guys kinda fascinate me, at that. If Wogan only chewed cigars, you'd be practically twins."

We drew up at the little airport. Ted, our pilot, and his friend, Stack Petersen, must have heard us coming. They could hardly help it— for they were out and waiting beside the ship. Headlights from the fifty or more cars made the field as light as day, and the occupants of the cars all got out and crowded around the plane as if they'd never seen one before.

I caught a glimpse of Judge Barton and Cyrus Q. Flagg in the background, but they appeared not to notice us. I couldn't blame them— much. And anyway, Violet had told them to stay in the clear. With them were three other important-looking gentlemen, doubtless the rest of the executive committee of the Improvement League.

Frank Considine was making a little farewell speech, and Wogan and Charlie were putting our bags in the plane's cabin. I wondered if they had paid our hotel bill, too, idly, not letting my mind dwell on it too much because, after all, I didn't care if the bill was ever paid. I hated the hotel and everything else in and around Vega City.

Considine concluded his remarks, "I ask you good citizens to bear witness that Miss McDade and Miss Alvarado are leaving Vega City in excellent health. Their public announcement that they intended to clean up the town— presuming that it needs cleaning up— placed them in serious danger. I did not wish to assume responsibility. That is all, I believe."

There was a mild scattering of applause. We were helped into the plane. The door closed. Ted revved the motor into a steady roar and we took the air.

iv

THE SHIP was a four-place, inclosed cabin job, with a glass door into the pilot's compartment. Violet found the third bag, the one she'd packed herself,

tumbled the miscellany it contained out on the floor, and gravely presented me with another gun. It was the duplicate of the little .32 taken away from me by the phlegmatic Cigar-mouther. There were also two spares for her sleeve clips.

I said, "You think of everything, don't you? Usually too late. Has it occurred to you that we're going away from Vega City?"

"But we don't hafta stay away," she said. "We got off to a bad start and stayin' there like we was is just like bumpin' your head against a stone wall. This— now— public departure will mebbe lull somebody to sleep. But they're gonna get woke up. If you think Violet McDade lets anybody push her around 'thout pushin' back, why, you got another think comin'." She got up, waddled forward and spoke to Ted.

We were wheeling now, coming back over the field. The long queue of cars was headed back toward town, looking like an illuminated dragon from above, and over the rim of trees I could see the lake, a gigantic ink spot brooding under a moonless sky. Lake Vega is perhaps thirty miles long by fifteen wide. An imaginary line drawn across its middle marks part of the boundary between California and Nevada. I wished we had never crossed it.

Violet closed the glass door behind Ted. "We'll circle as soon as we cross the lake, go on up to Reno. With a rented car we can make it back to Vega in two or three hours, and with what I found out we can—"

She didn't get a chance to say just what she intended to do. There was a sudden burst of flame from the pilot's cockpit. It blotted Ted from view. The intervening door seemed to melt before my eyes, and with a horrible roar the flames leaped out into the main cabin. A tremendous shudder shook the ship, but I wasn't conscious of any sound. I think I must have been shocked stone deaf.

Violet leaped into that roaring inferno, snatched at an invisible extinguisher. Gaseous fumes choked me, filled the cabin with steaming smoke. Gasping, half blinded, I felt my way along the narrow, tilting aisle. The flames died as swiftly as they had come, and I saw Violet bending over the frightfully twisted, blackened body of our pilot. Ted was dead. I knew it as much from Violet's curses as from the sickening sight of the body.

I thought it was the blistering heat that was making me dizzy, suddenly discovered that our prop was stilled and that we were wabbling downward like a falling leaf, only at crazy speed. Violet was doing something to the controls now; I never knew what, and I don't think she did, either. Just as I realized how immense was the black sea leaping up at us, our right wing crumpled disappeared. Over we went, and ever again, and then Violet— or the gods who

watch over drunks and fools— did the impossible. We flattened our lone wing out on the water, skipped once or twice, tilted and sank.

MAYBE it was the pressure of the air in the cabin that lifted us to the surface again. It didn't seem possible against the dragging weight of the motor, but bounce we did. And in that infinitesimal fraction of a second that we floated on a wing tip Violet got the door open and pushed me through. Then she was beside me, supporting me with a mighty arm and spouting like a whale.

The water was icy, numbing. Somehow I brushed the hair from my eyes, looked for the ship. It was gone. There wasn't even a ripple to show where it has been. Teeth chattering, I began to tread water desperately.

Violet said, "I think there's an island or something 'bout a quarter of a mile off on our port bow. Can you make it, Mex?"

"I d-d-don't remember seeing any island!"

"Well, for crying out loud! Mebbe I should swim over and bring it back just to prove it! Snap out of it, you lug! And if you hafta shed any 'o your clothes, don't lose 'em, The rest are down in Davy Jones' locker, with Ted and the ship."

I thought of Ted as I'd first seen him: laughing, happy-go-lucky Ted, loving life, eager to help us. And now he was a blackened, shriveled corpse at the bottom of a mile-deep lake.

"Yes," I said grimly, "I can make the island even if it isn't there. PI swim the whole length of this damned lake to pay some one for what they've done to us."

"Atta girl, Mex! 'At's the old stuff!" She struck out in a wallowing overhand that nevertheless ate up the distance in astonishing fashion. I was hard put to it to keep up. But there really was an island.

It sat, low on the horizon, like one of those little coral atolls you find in the South Seas. There were perhaps a dozen stunted trees in its half-mile area, nothing else as far as I could make out in the darkness. My knees grated on a shelving, rocky beach. We stood up, waded ashore, and I began to squeeze water out of the bundle I'd made of my shirt and coat.

Violet hissed, "Put your skirt on, you hussy! If I ain't mistook, there's a man over there on the point."

THERE WAS a man. Outlined against the stars, bearded to his waist and wearing something that looked like a monk's robe, he stood shading his eyes with a skinny hand and peering out into the nothingness which was the lake. I donned my soggy skirt hastily. We approached the man, making noise enough, Lord knows, as rocks and loose gravel rolled under our feet.

He gave not the slightest sign that he heard us, and when Violet finally touched his elbow he lowered his hand reluctantly, eyed us as if the island was Seventh and Broadway, and we were merely casual passers-by.

"I seen a comet!" he yelled, and in case we, too, were deaf, he repeated, "I say I seen a comet! Did you see it?"

"Yeah," Violet grunted sourly. "We not only seen it, we was it."

He didn't hear her. "Funny," he muttered. "Funny you didn't see it. I seen it— plain as day."

"It's too bad," Violet said, "it's too damn bad you can't see some other things as plain as day." Then, bellowing loud enough to be heard on the mainland, "You got a boat?"

"Hey? Oh, a boat! No, I don't wanta buy no boats. I got two now. Besides, I'm a hermit."

"And thank Heaven for that," said Violet under her breath. "I'd hate to have you followin' me around." She made a funnel of her ham-like fists, "Look, fella, we ain't sellin' boats. We wanna buy one! Fifty bucks for a boat and a pair o' oars!"

He understood that apparently. A sly look in his pale eyes, he extended a scrawny talon. Violet peeled a fifty from her soggy roll, and he led us, muttering, to a little cove. The fifty-dollar boat was almost submerged; the only reason it wasn't totally so was because the water wasn't deep enough at that point.

We hauled it out, emptied it. The plug was gone from its bottom. Our hermit produced a knife, whittled a foot-long stick and twisted it carelessly into the hole. He went away, returned with a pair of oars. We launched the boat, climbed in and water began to seep in around the plug. The hermit, standing knee-deep, pushed us off.

"This lake," he announced in sepulchral tones, "never gives up its dead. Be careful."

I shivered. Every time Violet bent forward on the oars her fists hit the protruding plug and the seepage was turning into a flood. Teeth chattering, not only with the cold, I pried off a shoe and used it as a hammer, and after that I just sat there in the inch-deep water, holding the plug and pretending I was the little boy at the dike.

Violet rowed manfully on. It dawned on me, suddenly, that there must be other holes in the boat, because the water kept on rising. I resorted to mental arithmetic: depth of boat divided by rise of water per minute equals how many miles at our present rate of speed? I could see lights on the far shore and knew that the answer wasn't going to come out even. I started to bail desperately with my shoe. Violet suggested that I use one of hers because it was so much

larger. I did that. Rowing and bailing, bailing and rowing, we went on toward those distant lights.

The boat sank under us before we quite reached them. Again we were in the water, and swimming, but I took it rather philosophically this time. I'd been in the water all the time anyway, the boat only making it a little more shallow.

WE CRAWLED OUT on a little beach, lay there panting for breath.

Beyond a line of trees was the highway, and the lights we'd seen belonged, apparently, to an auto camp. Presently we got up and swish-swished our way to the office. A little bell rang as we opened the door, and from behind a curtain emerged a man, rubbing sleep-reddened eyes.

He looked at us, didn't say anything. I was beginning to feel that perhaps it was we who were crazy. I've heard that when every one else appears cuckoo it's a good time for a little self-analysis. Still, it did seem that the hermit, and now this fellow, might have evinced a little surprise at a couple of bedraggled, but fully-dressed, mermaids.

Violet got out her dripping roll once more. He understood that, a least—just like the hermit. Cupidity quickened his glance.

"You wanna cabin?"

We said that we did. "With a stove," Violet added. "You go ahead with him, Mex, and get a fire started. I gotta use the phone." She tendered a bill to the man. "Give me a few nickels and dimes, mister, and you can have the rest for the cabin—with stove."

He led me away presently, down the long line of shacks, opened a door and turned on the lights.

"Stove," he said, jerking his thumb toward it. A man of few words, yet one, his gesture told me, who observed a bargain to the very letter. I closed the door on his retreating back.

Violet came in after a time. We disrobed, hung our clothes to dry beside the roaring fire, and enveloped ourselves in blankets. My wrist watch still ticked. It was two o'clock.

"Violet," I said, "you told Considine that you'd found out something about him after leaving me to the clutches of the law. That, I presume, is why he arranged to have an incendiary bomb somewhere near our plane's gas line. Did you really find out something, or was that just a stall?"

She looked up from cleaning her guns. "I found out he was bein' blackmailed into doin' whatever he's been doin'. If you remember, back there in our rooms, Judge Barton and Cyrus Q. Flagg told us Frank Considine had plenty o' jack, but had moved his account from Flagg's bank to the Calnevar Trust. He done this before he was elected district attorney, and I wondered

why. So then I remembers that this Calnevar Trust is a branch of a chain. It happens that one o' the directors in Los Angeles is also a director o' one of our insurance-company clients.

"By usin' long distance I pulled a few wires and got Carewe, the branch manager, to loosen up. Seems Considine really was in the money once— made plenty, both from a hell of a legal practice, and from real estate. But he ain't wealthy no more. 'Cause why? 'Cause from the time he moved his account he's been draggin' down batch after batch— in cash— till he finally ain't got a dime left and even has to mortgage his home.

"This mug has got a swell wife and daughter, see? They're tops in Vega City society, and it's my idea that somebody's got somethin' on him. This somebody squeezes him dry, and then, when he can't pay no more, he's forced to do little favors like nolle-prossing a few cases." She wiped the last slug, slipped it into the clip, and snapped the clip home.

"A tough spot for a district attorney, hunh?"

"Very," I snapped. "I can work up a lot of sympathy for a man who has just done his best to murder me. Did murder our pilot, and probably Tully O'Neill. He bids us a fond public farewell, knowing we won't live out the hour. When something happens to our plane— well, it didn't happen in Vega City, and his skirts are clear. We left there in excellent health. He can prove it. And planes do catch afire from natural causes. He may even have timed it so we were bound to land in the lake."

"Like a comet." She chuckled. "Well, mebbe you're right, Nevada. Funny, you bein' named after the State like that. You reckon that's a— now— good omen?"

I pulled on a stocking with two runs in it. "Of course," I said nastily. "We've had nothing but good luck ever since we crossed the line."

"We're still alive," she pointed out optimistically. "And if that don't surprise somebody, I'll miss my guess."

"Phooey!" I said, thinking of the hermit and the lout who ran the auto court. "Nobody in this whole damned county is ever surprised at anything. It's—it's like trying to make a dent in that lake out there!"

"We got a start," she said doggedly. "I can damn near tell you who put the bomb in the plane and when, but I still don't know who ordered it. Mebbe Flagg and Judge Barton are right. Mebbe we'd better look up this big shot and ex-political boss, Shane Fowler."

"In Heavens name, why?" I demanded. "Aren't you satisfied that Considine is behind every move that's been made? And as for your blackmail theory, I've another that is just as good— or better. He has deliberately stripped his bank

account and turned everything into cash for a quick get-away in case anything ever goes wrong. And how do you like that?"

"I think it's swell." She beamed. "I think you got a great head on you. And you know what else? I think I should've left you out there with that hermit."

Some one knocked at the door. It turned out to be "Stack" Petersen, the owner of the little airport, and Ted's friend. He looked pretty broken up.

He said, "Thank you for calling, Miss McDade. I've started the inquiries you suggested over the phone, and I've got the fastest car in Nevada. Whenever you're ready—"

"Let's go, Mex," said Violet. I spun the cylinder on my little gun, tucked it away above my knee. We went out to the car.

v

I WATCHED young Stack Petersen's face in the rear-vision mirror; it was hard, grim-lipped, and the muscles stood out along his lean jaw as though his teeth were clenched. He drove like a devil. The speedometer needle climbed to seventy, eighty, hovered there for a bit, then crept upward as the great car got its second breath.

Off to our right lay the lake, dark, brooding under the cold stars. And speaking of cold, I was pretty darned cold, myself. This part of Nevada is a mile high, and at two thirty in the morning there is a bite to the air, even in summer time. I think that was the first time I ever envied Violet her shape. Three hundred pounds or so of fat is great insulation against the chills.

We hurtled on, beginning to climb. The black ribbon of asphalt ahead of us seemed to shrink in upon itself. Pine trees—great towering fellows—edged down toward the lake as if bent on pushing us off the cliffs. We were perhaps halfway to Vega City when our headlights picked up an obstruction across the highway. It was a car. Broadside on, it completely filled the narrow gap between the solid rank of trees and the not-so-solid, but equally terrifying, blackness which fell away from the cliffs. We were near enough now to see that the car was empty.

Stack Petersen said, "Looks like a trap, but I don't see how it can have anything to do with us. Shall I hit 'em, or stop?"

"Stop," said Violet. "Probably only a coupla State officers lookin' for contraband fruit."

Tortured tires screamed under swiftly applied brakes. The wheels locked and still we hurtled on. We stopped just in time. The jar sent Violet and me out of our seats— clutching for the robe rail. We were sitting there like anchored dummies, when the two rear doors opened.

"O. K." said Cigar-mouther, "hold it just like you are." He had a gun in his hand and so did the man in the other door. This wasn't the finger-snapping Wogan, but a uniformed cop with a red, beefy face and little, pig eyes.

Stack Petersen sat hunched over the wheel like a graven image of despair.

Violet gave me the nod and we climbed out meek enough. Petersen followed.

Charlie mouthed his piece of cigar "O.K., beer-belly, get your cuffs out."

He leered at Violet while the bracelets snapped the three of us together.

Petersen said, very low, "I'm sorry, Miss McDade. I don't know how this happened."

The beefy-faced cop hit him with his gun. I could almost hear the bone crunch under that cruel blow. Petersen sagged, out cold, maybe dead for all I knew.

Charlie said, "Cliff's high. Lake's deep here. Maybe that'll hold you, huh?"

With a slow deliberation, Petersen's body slid over the cliff. Violet braced her great frame. I. screamed as the weights almost jerked my arms out of their sockets.

For an instant there was silence, except for me stifling a moan.

Then Charlie raised his gun, brought it down in a slashing blow— that never landed. Violet shot him. I saw the cigar in his mouth mushroom as the bullet hit, mushroom and disappear. Beer-belly dropped the handcuffs, snatched at his gun. Violet let him have two slugs square in the chest. He tumbled, lay still.

We got Petersen back on the road, with my sockets still intact, and I looked him over. He was alive. The blow hadn't done for him after all. His eyes opened and he smiled a little. "The Swedes are a hardheaded lot," he said weakly. Fingers explored the back of his head, came away bloody. He sat erect suddenly. "What happened?"

"Charlie had a good memory," I said. "Too good. He remembered our guns had been taken away from us. I guess it never occurred to him that we might have more. He was a little careless."

Violet popped up beside the car. "Beer-belly's dead, but Charlie ain't!" she cried. "Can you beat that? I plugged him right in the teeth and he's still kickin'. Mebbe the cigar was stronger'n it smelled."

We got out, looked at Charlie. Blood welled from under his walrus mustache, and little flakes of soggy tobacco still clung to his lips. We turned him over, saw where the bullet had come out. It wasn't a pretty sight. Violet was propping him against the running board when his puffy eyes opened.

"Guess I'm a goner, hunh?" The words were horribly thick, mushy.

Violet lied to him. "Hell, no," she said. "You'd be O. K. if we'd take you to a doctor. 'Course we couldn't do that, though, unless you spilled the dope first."

A faint hope lighted his pale eyes. He tried to say something and it brought on another hemorrhage.

I was beginning to feel a little sick, but Violet was inexorable. "Look," she said, "I'll do most o' the talkin'. You and Wogan killed my man Tully O'Neill. Right?"

He shook his head.

"Then who did?"

Again he shook his head, no. Words struggled from the blood-frothed lips. "We took him down to Sacramento and shipped him, but we didn't kill him. Shane Fowler pave us a grand apiece for the job."

"And Shane Fowler had you pick us up at the airport, had you plant that bomb in one of our bags when we were deported? Are you sure it wasn't Frank Considine?"

He nodded his head, yes. "Fowler, not Considine," he mumbled. "For Heaven's sake, get me to a doctor now!" And those words were the last Cigar-mouther ever spoke. His gross body arched up in a tremendous shudder; the pale eyes closed. He sank back to the road and his eyes opened. This time they stayed open.

Violet stood up, spoke to Petersen, "You and Nevada see if you can get their car outa the way. I gotta go through this guy's pockets."

We left her to her grisly task, began jockeying the police car back and forth till there was room enough for us to get by. Far down the highway a pair of headlights showed, but they were apart, not like a car's. In the stillness the wail of sirens was remote, yet somehow piercing keen. Motor-cycle cops!

Violet climbed back in the car with a little leather-covered notebook in her fist. We got under way with those menacing headlights less than a quarter of a mile to the rear. Staring back, I saw one of them halt at the spot we'd just left. The other came on. Stack Petersen trod the gas pedal to the floor boards.

AFTER A WHILE it began to dawn on me that the motor cycle was losing ground. Funny, I thought, those things are supposed to do ninety or better. I took a peep over Stack Petersen's shoulder. We were doing a hundred and five. I nearly passed out.

Violet, apparently oblivious to our crazy speed over that twisting, snakelike highway, was trying, in the semi-gloom of the tonneau, to decipher the contents of the little notebook.

She said, "Charlie's memory couldn't have been so good, after all. He had to write some things down. There's enough names and dates and amounts in this thing to hang ninety per cent o' Vega City."

"You mean he actually wrote names?"

"Well, some is only initials, and I don't recognize any of 'em, myself, but a good guesser familiar with the town oughta be able to add two and two. So whadda you think about Frank Considine now?"

"I haven't seen or heard anything to change my mind. Maybe he and Shane Fowler are in it together. Maybe Cigar-mouther was lying."

"Yeah, and mebbe pigs has got wings. Anyway, our next stop is Shane Fowler, though I dunno if he is the answer. Somethin'— a funny little somethin'— keeps whispering in my ear that we've missed the key to this whole business." She raised her voice, called, "Hey, Stack, this guy you got checkin' the hotels and all— is he reliable?"

"Plenty," said Petersen. "He's my twin brother."

"Then how you reckon Cigar-mouther knew we were alive and comin' back? They must have staked out your place, just in case the bomb didn't do a complete job. Figured if anybody came out in one piece they'd probably contact you— which is just what I done— and the minute you start chasin' around at two in the morning, they're hep."

"It's possible," he admitted. "I never thought of that." And then, "Hang on, you two. We're ditching the highway around the next turn."

I closed my eyes. There came a tremendous shudder, but no telltale screech of burning rubber. The car tilted far over on two wheels, swayed sickeningly, settled, bounced over on the opposite wheels, then rocked gradually to a complete stop.

Petersen's calm voice, seeming to come from a long way off, said, "I used to be a race driver before Ted and I took up flying. If the dust settles in time that cop'll go right on past."

I opened my eyes. Our lights were out and we were parked on a dirt road. The little swirl of dust from our skid was swiftly dissipating itself in the breeze from the lake. It was. practically gone when the motor cycle flashed down the highway, whirled by us. Petersen started the motor and we began a slow, tortuous climb up over a ridge. Presently we came to the top, and there beneath us were the lights of Vega City. We dropped down to a parallel highway, crept into town at a modest forty.

vi

THREE O'CLOCK in the morning was apparently only the shank of the evening in Vega. Traffic, though it had thinned a little, was still lively, and cafés, gambling joints and bars were still flourishing. Stack Petersen pointed out Shane Fowler's casino, said, "He may still be there, but his home would be more quiet, don't you think?"

Violet said she thought it would. He went on, came to an exclusive residential section. Petersen indicated the house was sought. It was set far back in perhaps a half acre of ground. There were trees, and a tall hedge, but there was also a light on the first floor.

Violet said, "Roll around the corner and drop us off. Then look up your brother and see if he has found out anything. Well be waiting for you."

The car halted and we got out. Spreading trees shaded the cross street so that you couldn't even see the street light on the corner. We went down an alley, dark as a tunnel, counting the houses till we came to Fowler's.

Violet was only a bulky shadow against the iron gate set in the hedge-covered fence. We went in, crossed a shrub-dotted rear lawn to the side of the house. There was a *porte-cochére*, and under it, a car, lights out but motor purring softly. Without warning a side door opened, letting out a rectangle of pale-yellow light, and framing a man. It was Frank Considine, the district attorney. I had just time enough to see that much before he closed the door behind him, ever so quietly, got in his car and, still not putting on his lights, drifted ghostlike down the drive.

We waited a moment or two. I had the impulse to nudge Violet, whisper an "I told you so," but I throttled it. Crowing over Violet McDade doesn't get you anywhere, even when you're right. She opened the door stealthily, reached in and snapped off the hall light. We stood there listening. Not a sound. I felt her hand fumbling for me, reached out and grasped it. We crossed the hall in total darkness. There was a door farther along, with a crack of light showing under it. Still no sound.

Violet opened the door, stiffened. We were staring at Shane Fowler, all right. Stack Petersen had described him to us. But Shane Fowler wasn't going to help clear up any mystery. He was dead. There was a small, round, bluish hole in his right cheek and a thin trickle of blood made a little river down along his jaw and disappeared inside his collar.

He sat behind the desk, leaning back against the tall chair, eyes fixed in a sort of mild wonder at some spot on the wall near the ceiling. I almost caught myself turning to see what he was looking at. White, well kept hands rested on the jumble of papers before him, as if he himself had been sorting them. But he couldn't have been responsible for the wild disorder of the rest of the room. The wall safe stood open, gaping, and its contents littered the deep-piled rug.

VIOLET closed the door softly. Rounding the desk, she cursed, stared down at the floor beside the dead man as if she couldn't believe the evidence of her own eyes. I, too, stared. It was my little .32— the one Cigar-mouther had taken

from me back there in the hotel— which lay beside the chair. Violet picked the gun up, using the hem of her skirt, and smelled it.

"Yep," she sighed. "A very neat frame. It's been fired recently, and the size o' the hole in his cheek makes it almost unanimous. Added to that, the killer bungles a suicide set-up on purpose. You're supposed to have killed the guy, tried to make it look like he done the Dutch, when even a kid could see he didn't. The bullet ranged up through the top o' his head. He didn't have no time to lay your gun down on the floor and then fold his lily-white hands on the desk. So the cops will see it's murder, and they'll check your gun numbers against your license, which is also in their possession."

"Let's get out of here!" I chattered.

"Not yet, me haughty damsel. Mebbe you really did kill him, for all I know. It'd be just like you." She sighed again, heavily. "Every time I leave you for just one teeny-weeny little minute you get into some kind of a jam."

"You fool!" I cried. "You fat, clumsy elephant! Oh, how I hate you! You know damned well that Frank Considine must have got my gun from Cigar-mouther. He got yours, didn't he? And we saw him leaving here just now, didn't we? Certainly it's a frame, and Frank Considine did it!"

"All right, all right!" she growled. "You don't hafta scream, do you? Mebbe this mug has got servants, or a wife, or somethin'." She cocked her great head in a listening attitude. Apparently we were alone in the house.

I caught her arm, tried to drag her out of the room. She shook me off. "What's a little murder rap in a whole city fulla murders? 'Sides, that motor cop back on the highway has already phoned headquarters about Charlie and beer-belly. We're as safe here as anywhere."

She was on her knees now, shuffling through the mass of papers before the safe. She riffled the stubs of a check book, found two pass books and went through them. I couldn't tell from the expression on her moon face whether she'd found what she was looking for or not, nor from her enigmatic mutter, "Then where did it go?"

I stamped my foot. "I don't care where it went. I know where I am going. That's away from here, and I'm taking my gun with me!"

THERE WAS a sound like somebody snapping his fingers. Wogan stepped from behind the drapes over the French windows. The muzzle of his gun looked like the mouth of a cannon. He stood there, balanced easily, hard eyes sardonic.

"I don't think you're going out, ladies—not under your own power, anyway. They'll probably carry you out." He raised his gun slightly. "Don't make a move, either of you. I'm not making the same mistake Charlie did. Word just reached

me of what happened on the lake road, so I know you've got guns. He didn't. And speaking of frames, how's this one sound? Nobody but me and Charlie knew you had a gun, Miss Alvarado. We just neglected to turn it in. All I've got to do is drill you both and I'm a hero. You killed Shane Fowler; I killed you. Neat?"

"But not gaudy," said Violet, still hunkered on the floor. "But look, Wogan, before you drill us, tell me something. If nobody but you and Charlie had access to Nevada's gun, then it must've been you or Charlie who killed Shane Fowler. Right?"

"Not quite, sheba. I didn't say we were the only ones who had access to the gun. I said we were the only ones who knew the gun was hers. As a matter of fact, neither Charlie nor I killed Fowler." He grinned crookedly, snapped the fingers of his left hand.

I knew my reprieve was over. The gun muzzle was trained directly on me, and he was going to shoot.

"The mystery," he said, "of who did for Shane Fowler will give you something to think about, Miss McDade, on your trip to— well, to wherever it is that you're going." His trigger finger whitened.

Desperate, I flung myself at the desk. His first slug caught me in the leg. It went dead under me and I sprawled forward in a crazy dive. My head crashed into a corner of the desk as I fell. Partially stunned, I waited for the finish while reverberating echoes filled the room. Nothing happened. No more bullets buried themselves in my helpless back. The echoes chased each other out the windows. I sat up, looked for Violet.

She was wiping a smear of blood from her cheek and there was a look of smug satisfaction in her little greenish eyes. Her guns were out of sight. I rolled over, saw Wogan face down by the windows. He wasn't moving.

Violet bent over me. "Where you hit, Mex?"

"It's my leg!" I cried. "He got me in the leg!"

She stuck a pudgy finger through the bullet hole in my skirt, and for the first time I noted there wasn't any blood. "In the leg!" she sneered. "He got you in the gun, you mean. I always wondered why dames carry guns on their legs, and now I know. It's to protect their legs, the most important part of 'em. Stand up, you sissy."

I spat at her. "I can't stand up, you ape! I may not be shot, but my leg is paralyzed."

She lifted me, propped me against the desk and went over and looked at Wogan. "Ol' Finger-snapper couldn't figure, either. He thought he was smarter than Charlie, but he forgot that you can't shoot at two targets at the same

time. Not with one gun, anyway. He just happened to pick the wrong target first."

"Meaning you're faster than I am?"

"Meaning just that," she said placidly. "You're slower with a rod than molasses in January." She took my gun— the planted one— clenched it in Wogan's fist. About one of her own she curled the dead fingers of Shane Fowler. They were stiffening rapidly and I wondered a little about that. She affixed Wogan's .45 to her sleeve harness and surveyed the scene with a critical eye. "Not good," she said, "but mebbe somebody will believe Wogan killed Fowler. Not that I care much."

vii

SOMEBODY was pounding down the stairs now, from the floor above. Closing in on us rapidly like barking dogs, one starting another, sirens lifted their brass-throated voices. Violet scooped me up with a mighty arm, carried me out through the windows. In nothing flat we were back in the Stygian alley, down it and into the sanctuary of Stack Petersen's hurtling demon.

The sirens converged on the house behind us with a strangling sound, a Gargantuan death rattle. We rolled smoothly away from it all. Massaging the numbness from my leg I listened to Violet and Petersen.

"Any luck?" Violet inquired.

"No proof that O'Neill ever landed in Vega City. He didn't register at any of the hotels, either under his own name or an alias. You gave me a good description of him and I passed it on to my brother. A porter at the railroad station thinks he remembers a man like O'Neill getting off the train, but he isn't sure. After all, it was two days ago."

"Unh-hunh," said Violet. "Well, that kinda bears out my theory. Bein' a stranger in town, it looks like Tully O'Neill would have gone to a hotel. Only he didn't— makin' it pretty conclusive that he never got a chance. Well, what did your brother find out from the bank cashier ?"

"No records of deposits in anything like those amounts."

I said, "Is this a secret conference or may I be included? I'm supposed to be a partner in McDade & Alvarado, but I must confess I don't know what you two are talking about."

"Why, the money!" said Violet, surprised. "The dough had to go somewhere, didn't it?"

"What money?" I demanded.

"Never mind," she said irritably. "Let it pass. I'll write it all out for you later." She said to Petersen, "Look, Stack, we gotta work fast. We need a coupla cans o' gas, and some oily or greasy waste. Can do?"

"Sure," he said. "My brother owns a gas station."

"I'm sure glad," said Violet fervently, "that your mother had twins. I don't know what I'd have done without you." She looked at me reflectively, disparagingly. "A lotta help you are."

I could only make gargling noises in my throat.

That bothered her, too. "For Heaven's sake, stop that! You give me the creeps!"

WE PAUSED presently at what I presumed to be the other twin's gas station. It was closed, but it seemed that these Petersen brothers functioned almost as one. Stack had a duplicate key. After a little while we were once more rolling, this time toward the center of town. We ended up at a flat-iron building which was the First National Bank. Two main arteries crossed diagonally at this point and, despite the hour, traffic still ebbed and flowed.

A watchman came out of the main entrance to the bank, descended marble steps 'neath a small neon sign which read: "Safe Deposit Boxes." There was only a dim night light in the bank proper, but apparently the safe-deposit department was kept open all night.

We turned, parked across the street from the bank.

Violet said, "I gotta make a couple or three phone calls. You and Stack keep your eyes open, on account of if that guard goes back in the bank my plan won't work." She waddled down the sidewalk to an all-night drug store.

We waited. I said, "Listen, Stack Petersen, maybe you don't know it, but helping Violet is sometimes like being the tail to a kite. If you'd like to resign, now is the time."

He looked at me. "I'll trail along with Violet McDade. Ted was my friend. Violet got the two who actually placed the bomb, and I believe in her, believe she can get the man who ordered the job done."

I stared out at the traffic. It seemed that death stared back at me from each passing car. I shivered a little. The guard hadn't reappeared by the time Violet got back. She was puffing, in a hurry now.

"Gimme some matches, Stack, and the other stuff."

He said, "What do you want me to do?"

"Stick right where you are— you and Nevada, both. This is my show and if anything happens you two can help me more by bein' on the outside lookin' in. Scram if they pick me up."

I protested. "I'm not going to let you do it!"

"You try to stop me," she said, "and I'll take you apart!" Snatching up a pair of pliers from the front seat, she wadded up a great roll of greasy waste under an arm. Then, a five-gallon can in either fist, she stalked directly across the street to the bank. I lost her for a moment in the shadows of its granite walls. There was a sharp, metallic blow and she reappeared with only one of the cans of gas. Holding it close against the building she wabbled along as if she had all the time in the world.

A man in a dilapidated truck yelled at her, "Hey, lady, your can is leaking!" She paid him no heed, rounded the corner. An ever-widening trail followed her. In a moment she was back, running now, and the next thing I knew, the second can of gas was hurtling through the air, straight at an enormous plate-glass window.

GLASS SHATTERED with a booming sound, lost immediately in the ensuing explosion. A flaring wad had followed the can of gas. There was a tremendous roar and a furnace-like blast which swept upward and out, almost licking the paint from our car. Blistering flames shot skyward as the train of gasoline outside caught fire. The building was an inferno, a thing alive, blazing furiously now.

I saw Violet again. She was in the entrance to the downstairs vaults, waving her arms, and though I couldn't hear her I knew she was bellowing: "Fire! Fire! The bank's on fire!"

Already traffic had stalled on both arteries, was piling itself up into an inextricable jam. People got out of cars, began rushing to and fro. Some one must have turned in the alarm, for sirens and the warning clang of engine bells came to me faintly over the noise from the fire.

The uniformed guard and two frantic clerks came tumbling up from the safe depository. The crowd swallowed them. Violet, shielding her face with an arm, disappeared down the stairs and almost immediately great clouds of blackish smoke began to issue from the entrance.

I missed seeing her completely when she finally emerged, didn't know she was out till she was at my very elbow, panting, sweating, smoke-smudged and altogether disreputable. We watched a hose cart and a pumper crash through the stalled cars, hook in to a plug. As the first nozzle shot its stream against the towering wall of flame, a man dashed around the corner nearest us. The fire lighted up the lean face, the cold gray eyes of Judge Barton.

He saw us, halted as if restrained by some invisible force. "You! I— I thought you had left Vega City!"

"Just temporary, judge," said Violet. "Just a detour, you might say." She gestured toward the depository. "Flames ain't reached the boxes, yet. If you hurried, you might be able to save something from the wreck."

Eyes on the fire, he said, as if he'd scarcely heard her, "What? Oh, my box. Why, there's nothing in it, at present."

Violet looked very disappointed. "Nothing in it, hunh? Well, now, that's too bad. I mean, that's— uh— swell, judge." She stiffened suddenly and I followed her stare. The fire was still doing nobly. They'd found out that water wasn't helping much and were beginning to use chemicals. From the vault stairs, blending with the billowing smoke, a figure emerged— a figure swathed in a great coat, hat tugged low over his eyes and the lower part of his face covered with some kind of a cloth. Something that might have been a steel drawer was clutched in his arms.

Violet leaped into the street. "Hold it, Flagg!" He didn't hold it. He began to run. Violet's guns flashed out, leveled, boomed twice like miniature cannons above the roar of the pumpers.

Flagg stumbled, went to his knees, then his chest. He skidded a little on the wet pavement and the steel drawer made screeching sounds on the sidewalk. Violet scooped up the box, whirled just as Flagg fired. She kicked the gun out of his hand.

Somehow— I hadn't been conscious of running, or even getting out of the car— I was at her side. Judge Barton and Stack Petersen were there, too. And Frank Considine, the district attorney. There were others, of course, literally hundreds of others, but for the moment they didn't seem to count.

CYRUS Q. FLAGG crouched there on the sidewalk, the handkerchief gone from his face, legs twisted under him like a legless pencil peddler. His three chins were a sort of yellowish gray, but he was laughing at us. Even his eyes laughed, and for just a moment I was sorry for him.

"You take a lot of scaring, Violet McDade— and a lot of killing, too. I'm sorry I can't bow." He chuckled happily. "My legs are not quite up to it."

Violet didn't laugh, "You killed O'Neill, didn't you? On the train?"

"Certainly I killed him. I was sending a wire ahead to have him stopped. He came in at the wrong time, so I let him have it right there in my compartment. I dumped him out of the window after a while, and Shane Fowler later had him picked up and shipped back to you. My mistake. I underestimated women."

Violet rifled the manila envelopes in the steel drawer, and the packages of currency.

"Oh, it's all there." Flagg chuckled. The fire seemed to chuckle, too, and it was all rather horrible, like a nightmare. "The money you couldn't find, and the evidence against—"

"Don't say it, Flagg. I've got all the evidence I need. Your cigar-chewing dick kept records, too. Only I don't know why you had to kill your front man, Shane Fowler."

"Poor Shane." Flagg sighed. "Your presence worried him so, and he was beginning to forget that he was only the front man. He was even weighing what I allowed him to keep against what he could have if I disappeared. Very sad case. Very sad."

Violet said, "Ain't it?"

Flagg said, "Isn't it?" and then he brought out the gun from his overcoat pocket. "I'm not a vengeful man, Miss McDade. Still, I should miss you where I'm going. I think I'll take you with me."

It seemed as if we all were paralyzed. Violets two hands were anchored to that damnable drawer. She couldn't drop it in time. No one else seemed to be doing a thing except stand there, and in the fraction of a second before he squeezed the trigger I thought of a million and one things. I thought of Tully O'Neill in the trunk, and of Ted at the bottom of the lake, and of Violet as she would be, lying there on the sidewalk. Something— some reflex within me put my gun in my hand, I shot Cyrus Q. Flagg in the back of the head. Cowardly? Perhaps. But I saved Violet McDade.

I heard her voice, apologetic, but blurred as if with distance, "Thanks, Mex. You can shoot, can't you?" And then I got a look at what my slug had done to Flagg's face. I fainted.

WHEN I finally got around to opening my eyes again, I was between Violet and Frank Considine in the tonneau of the hurtling demon. Judge Barton was up in the seat beside Stack, and the cold wind was fanning my face.

Judge Barton's head was erect, uncompromising.

Violet was saying, "I'd rather it had been you, judge. It always burns me to find out a fat guy is a villain, I kinda liked the way Flagg laughed."

Barton half turned. His face looked bleak, hard, and his voice was the voice on the bench. "Then you didn't know till he came out with the evidence?"

"Nope, I didn't, for a fact. It could've been either of you. Not finding a trace o' Tully O'Neill in Vega, I got to wondering if mebbe he hadn't been stopped before he got here. Which kinda put it up to you or Flagg, you two bein' the only ones who knew he was on the train. 'Course, there was the puzzle of why you two hired us in the first place.

"It dawned on me sudden that mebbe you couldn't help yourselves. Your committee decided to bring in outside talent. You had to do it. Flagg, bein' on the committee, got his money's worth out of inside information, which is why he came along with you to see who was hired. But there was no way o' me knowing which was which, you or him, till I located the dough.

"But the fire! Of course, the damage is small and fully covered by insurance, but was the fire necessary?"

"Look," said Violet, "I don't go around bein' a arsonist just for fun. I kept lookin' for the dough Considine paid out. I couldn't find it, so I guessed it might be in a deposit box. If I'd said we'd got an order to search the boxes, that, in itself, would have tipped our hand, given somebody time to cover. But not knowing how serious this fire was gonna be, or how many visiting firemen might be pawing through his private papers, our man was bound to make a try for the box. I admit I was disappointed when you didn't. Gosh, if you'd only grin a little, or somethin', mebbe a guy could like you!"

CONSIDINE said bitterly, "Judge Barton is probably worried about why I was being blackmailed. He wants to know whom I murdered— if any. Well, show him the envelope with my name on it."

Violet chuckled. "There ain't no more envelope, folks. I left it back there, smolderin' in the fire."

"You what!" The judge was incredulous.

"Yep," said Violet placidly, "it's burned all to hell by now. I was afraid that if I kept it, I'd become a blackmailer, too, and if there's anything I'd hate to be, it's one o' them mugs. Look, judgie, mebbe Considine did something when he was just a kid; mebbe he even took the rap for something he never done at all. He's pulled himself out, ain't he? He's made a name for himself and his family. And with all this evidence he can clean up your lousy town, can't he? Besides," she added slyly, "the reform league can't publicly go back on its own man. So how's about a little smile for Vi'let?"

The cold eyes seemed to soften, the fine, aristocratic mouth to tremble a little as he looked at her sooty face. "In Los Angeles," he said huskily, "I told you Frank Considine was my friend. Smile? I've got all I can do to keep from crying. You are a great woman, Violet McDade. Not only the world's best cleaner-upper, but a soft-hearted old fool. You— you make me feel pretty damned small!"

"Hell"— she chuckled— "oh, hell, judgie, that's just because I'm so big and fat. Like Nevada says, ' 'most anybody is small beside a elephant.' "

———————

2: Too Much Water

Don Marquis

1878-1937

The American Magazine Feb 1935

American humorist, fondly remembered for his "archie and mehitabel" free verse stories

IF YOU want to know how I'm feeling, I'm feeling sad and melancholy, for I have lost my best friend— my best friend, with the possible exception of yourself, Bertie. He was one of your best friends, too, Bertie, and if I have lost him that means you have lost him, for I know you too well to think that you would have anyone for a friend, Bertie, who looks on me with loathing and aversion.

And you can believe it or not, but Freddy Simms told me no longer than an hour ago that he now looked on me with loathing and aversion. He said to me, "Henry Withersbee, I look on you with loathing and aversion; and you have cost me a cool million dollars by last night's work!"

I said, "Why a cool million?"

He replied that I knew what he meant, and he referred to me as a moron; and if that is really a bottle of Scotch by your elbow, Bertie, I will thank you for a spot of it.... There... there... I will put the water in myself.... One reason you and I have lost the friendship of Freddy Simms is because I drank too much water last evening. It makes me uncertain and unsteady, if you get me. I mean, it sloshes about and destroys my balance.

We were sitting at one of these new sidewalk cafés, and everybody within earshot was saying how like Paris it is. I said to Freddy Simms that it was not in the least like Paris. It takes more than a sidewalk and a row of ragged evergreens to make Paris; and Freddy said he did not suppose he would ever see Paris again, now that Aunt Isobel Greene was sore at him.

"WHAT is the matter with Aunt Isobel Greene?" I asked him. "Everything," said Freddy; "and the worst of it is that I have to go and see her tonight."

"Why not go and see her?" I said.

"You would not ask if you had ever been to see her," he said gloomily.

"Can't I go to see her for you?" I said.

You know, Bertie, since we were all three at school together I have been very fond of Freddy Simms, and I would do more, far more, than go to see his Aunt Isobel Greene for him; and that is one thing which makes me so melancholy to think I have lost his friendship. You are the only friend I have left in the world, Bertie.... Thank you, yes; I will have a spot of Scotch. No... no

water, thank you. I am off water for life, and you will not wonder when I tell you why.

Freddy said he would have to go and see her himself, for she had a million dollars which she was going to leave to somebody. And sometimes it was Freddy, and sometimes it was several other people; and they all had to go and see her often so she would know it was disinterested affection for her, and not merely her money they were after.

"I don't see why you should think it is such a terrible job to go and see her, if there is a million dollars in it," I said to him then.

"I am afraid of her," said Freddy candidly. 'I am so much afraid of her that I can't make a good impression on her."

So I said to him to try a new cocktail which I had invented myself, and it would put courage into him. We had several of them. I call it the Withersbee cocktail, after myself, and it is equal parts gin, brandy, rum, and champagne, with some vermouth added; and I am sorry to say that there is a school growing up which puts in a drop or two of absinthe. But this is a schism. There should be no absinthe in a real Withersbee.

AFTER we had had a number of these cocktails, an idea occurred to me; and I said: "Freddy, I will go with you, and see you through this dreadful ordeal." Freddy grasped my hand gratefully, and there were tears in his eyes. He had not at that time turned against me, like a... like a... well, like one of these things people nourish in their bosoms.... No, Bertie, I do not mean a brassiére.... Thank you, I will have a drop of Scotch. ... I mean something you nourish in your bosom, and it turns against you.... No, it is neither a cancer nor a brassiére, Bertie. It is like the thing that Cleopatra killed herself with. . ... No; she did not. I will wager you $20 against $10 that Cleopatra did not kill herself with a brassière. A snake of some sort...

But let us drop the subject of snakes at once, Bertie.

"Where does Aunt Isobel live?" I asked Freddy.

"If she is still alive, she lives in Forest Hills, Long Island," he said. "But it would be just my luck if she were no longer living, and had passed on while she was sore at me for not coming to see her."

"Then," said I, getting to my feet resolutely, for I am a man of action when the fit is on me, "we had better hurry to Forest Hills."

So we went to the Long Island railway station, and were at once confronted by a terrible difficulty. There was a stairway that led up to the street level from the platform where you get on the trains, and when we got there we could not get upon the stairway, because so many people were coming off of it. And

finally, when we did force our way through the crowd, arm in arm, and step upon the stairway, something queer happened.

We found we could not go down it.

We would no sooner attempt to make a descent than we would somehow find ourselves back on the level from which we had started.

For some time I imputed this to the crowd which was coming up, off the stairway, and forcing us off the stairway.

"No," said Freddy; "the fact is that we must be slightly intoxicated. We have had too many of the Withersbee cocktails."

This did not seem reasonable to me, but I am open-minded. I was willing to give the theory consideration.

"If we are intoxicated, Freddy," I said, "it will be the easiest thing in the world to reach the bottom of this stairway. We will simply fall down it."

Believe it or not, we found this impossible also. Every attempt which we made to fall down the stairway resulted in our finding ourselves where we had started from once more. This proved to me conclusively that we were not intoxicated; for I have never experienced any difficulty in falling down a stairway when in that condition.

Finally a man in a uniform, either a railroad official or a policeman, yanked us somewhat brutally to our feet, and asked us if we were cuckoo and did not know that was a moving stairway.

And, indeed, several times I had thought I had seen the stairway move; but I had said nothing to Freddy about seeing it move, as I did not wish to have him think I had imbibed so many cocktails that I saw things move. It developed later that Freddy had also seen it move, but had said nothing to me for a similar reason. So I said to the policeman:

"Then we will never get to the bottom!"

He tried to influence us to take another stairway, which he guaranteed would take us down to the platform where one catches trains for Forest Hills. But by this time were both very suspicious of stairways. So we said, No, thank you; we would go to the street and take a cab, and ride around the building, and go down through the tunnel to the level where one takes the train for places.

But when we got into the cab the driver said it was quite a warm evening, and that gave Freddy a brilliant idea.

"How much," he said, "will it cost to take us on a nice, cool drive to Forest Hills?"

"How much," said the driver, "have you got?"

Freddy put his hand into his pocket, but I clutched his wrist. I did not think it prudent to show large sums of money to strange taxi-drivers. There have

been a good many kidnappings lately, and a lot of taxi-drivers have been mixed up in them. And perhaps this man knew that Freddy was going out to inherit Aunt Isobel Greene's money, and would take him somewhere and hold him for ransom. And me with him.

PRETTY soon we went over a bridge, and on the Long Island side of it I saw a drug store. I think quickly in emergencies, and it occurred to me that it might please Aunt Isobel Greene if we took her a nice present. So I remembered that she was an invalid, and bought a hot-water bag. And I thought, poor, lonely old soul, probably nobody remembers to make her presents very often, so I bought her two more hot water bags.

"Is she getting kind of childish, Freddy?" I asked him.

"Oh, yes," said Freddy.

So I had the man at the soda fountain fill the hot-water bags with lemonade.

"Pink lemonade," I told him; "'it's for a child."

He colored it up for me with strawberry flavoring; and then it occurred to me that it might not keep cool in the hot-water bag; so I bought four large thermos bottles and had them filled with pink lemonade also. I said, "Is she very childish, Freddy?"

"Oh, very," said Freddy; "very, very!"

So I bought Aunt Isobel some little dolls, which jumped about and did queer things when you pulled strings, and a couple of picture-books, and some red-and-white striped sticks of candy, and a false face.

AND then Freddy said he thought that a Withersbee cocktail would do the old lady more good than all the pink lemonade in the world. So we stopped at a barroom in Long Island City, and I told the bartender how to make the Withersbee cocktail. And we poured out all the pink lemonade, and filled the bags with Withersbee cocktail.

We had to sample it several times to make sure that it did not taste of rubber; and we were afraid it did. So we emptied the thermos bottles, at the next place we stopped, and had them filled with cocktails also.

"We can give her what's in the thermos bottles first, dear old lady," I said, "and then, as she begins to improve, she can have what is in the rubber bags."

So, as if by magic, we were in front of her house in Forest Hills, in just a moment more; and then the driver made the discovery that we had spent all our money for presents for Aunt Isobel Greene and did not have any to pay him with.

His name was Joe. He said he would wait and drive us back to town, where we could get some money. So we gave him a rubber bag full of Withersbee cocktails, and then I had an idea that I still think was brilliant.

"Is Aunt Isobel really in her second childhood, Freddy?" I asked.

"Quite— almost beyond it," said Freddy.

So I thought it would be nice to take her the horn from the taxi. Children are fond of noise and romping about. And they like horns. It was one of those horns which squawk when you press a bulb. My hands and arms were so full of other presents for Aunt Isobel that I told Joe to stuff it in my pocket. He stuffed the bulb in one of my hip pockets.

There was quite a long stairway in Aunt Isobel Green's house, and Freddy said we would go right up to the room where Aunt Isobel sat being an invalid and surprise the dear old lady. But after a while I said to Freddy:

"Its a funny thing they would have one in a private house, Freddy."

"What in a private house?" said Freddy.

"Especially in an invalid's house," I said.

"What in an invalid's house?" said Freddie.

"A moving stairway," I said. "Only this one works different. We couldn't get down the other one, and we can't get up this one."

"Well," said Freddy, "I told you Aunt Isobel Greene was childish."

Somewhere, up towards the top of the stairway, we heard people moving about; but they were a long way off, and the stairway kept running in different directions, and it would stop now and then with the most sickening jolts. It was very broad. Hundreds and hundreds of feet broad.

"This stairway," I said to Freddy, "'is going to turn and rend us, if I know anything about stairways."

Up at the top of it somewhere, I heard voices. One of them was a kind of elderly, querulous voice; an old lady's voice. It occurred to me that Aunt Isobel Greene, in her childishness, was probably pretending she was an old lady.

"Oh, by the way," said Freddy, "I forgot to tell you that Aunt Isobel Greene is a Prohibitionist."

"Well," I said, picking up the thermos bottle and rubber hot-water bags, "we have come prepared to cure that, Freddy."

The bottles and bags kept dropping and rolling in every direction.

"But it is serious," said Freddy. "We must not let her know I ever took a drink or that I go about with people who drink."

"Don't you suppose that she could tell by looking at us that we had been drinking?" I said.

"She could tell by looking at you," said Freddy. 'Your face is flushed."

"What can I do about that?" I asked. "It seems to me too late to do anything about that. This is a pretty time to tell me that my face is flushed!'

So Freddy had a very original idea. He said if I put on the false face Aunt Isobel could not see that my face was flushed. And I did so.

"THERE was quite a commotion somewhere up above us, and I thought I could see people peering down the stairs. I do not like idle curiosity, but I kept my temper, for it was foremost in my mind that we were here to make a good impression upon Aunt Isobel. I concentrated on thinking how we could make a good impression. And finally I got it.

"I will tell her that you are a coldwater boy," I said; "and then you are sure of your million. This makes it easy. It is a wonder you never thought of that innocent deception before."

"No; I will tell her that you are one," said Freddy. And then he added, "Sup pose we both be one."

It occurred to me that she might believe it about one of us, but that she would find it hard to believe about both of us. I did not want to ask her to believe something that would only confuse and perturb her, so I said, "Let us sit down here, and think it out."

But when I sat down, there was the terrible squawk of an enraged motorcar. It seemed quite near, and I remembered that we had left the outside door of the house open. It occurred to me that Joe, the taxi-driver, might be chasing us. After all, what did we know about Joe? He was chasing us with his car, to catch and hold us for ransom.

I leaped to my feet, and raced up the stairway. For hours and hours I ran... miles... and then, being very tired, I sat down again. There was another blast from an auto horn, and I realized that Joe was gaining on us, and I leaped to my feet and ran into a big, bright room.

I sat down in a chair, very impolitely, I must admit, before I noticed that there were other people in the room. And as soon as I sat down there was another blast from an auto horn; and I got up again and ran in every direction. But I could not run very fast, for my arms were still full of the presents I had brought for dear old Aunt Isobel Greene. And the false face seemed somehow to hamper my breathing. While I was still running, I heard Freddy introducing me:

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "this is my friend, Mr. Henry Withersbee, who has come along to see me through it. He is a cold-water boy."

I STOPPED running then, for I perceived we had outdistanced Joe, and the danger was over. And I said to an old lady who was sitting propped up with pillows in a chair, "We are both one." And then I said to her, "Do you have parrot disease?" She screamed, and I saw at once that I was on the right track in my hasty diagnosis. I should have been a doctor, Bertie. The question was quite logical. For she had one of those noses that come out a long way, and then bend over. And there was an elderly gentleman who was sitting at a desk, and he had a nose that came out quite a way and bent over. It was quite evident to me that they were turning into parrots— if that is what happens to you when a parrot bites you. I haven't a doubt of it. Because, you know, Bertie, when a mad dog bites you, you begin to bark.... Bertie, if you will just tip a little Scotch from that bottle into the glass ...No; thank you, no water.

Water is what lost me the friendship of Freddy Simms. I can understand how parrots refuse water and begin to bark when they have been bitten by mad dogs.

"This is an outrage!" said Aunt Isobel.

"An outrage!" said the old gentleman, after her, just like a parrot. It seems he was a lawyer, and we learned later that he was drawing up a new will, leaving all of Aunt Isobel's money to Freddy.

"I shall disinherit you!" said Aunt Isobel.

"Disinherit you!'' said the lawyer.

There was no doubt in my mind whatever now that we had come into a veritable nest of parrot disease, and I felt the beginnings of it already. The place was infested. I thought it would be just as well to begin to fight it at once, so I unscrewed the stopper from a hot-water bag to drink a little of the Withersbee cocktail.

But the false face was in the way, so I took it off and gave it to the lawyer.

"If you put this on," I said politely, "you will not look like a parrot. You are making me nervous, looking like a parrot."

But he refused it with some asperity. He was a cross old man.

"I shall leave my money to Miss Simpson!" said Aunt Isobel.

"To Miss Simpson!'' said the parrot with the pen, who was sitting at the desk playing he was a lawyer.

It was then that I noticed Miss Simpson for the first time. I deduced at once that she was Aunt Isobel's nurse. In a uniform. Trained nurse. Believe me or not, she did not look in the least like a parrot. She looked more like a... like... Dee's You know what I mean, Bertie... Garden of Eden, and all that stuff... no, not like a pomegranate. The word I want is paradise.

I WENT right up to the table and picked up a carafe of water, and took a prodigious swig of the stuff. I said to myself that I must get this beautiful young creature out of this place before she succumbs to parrot disease. I am chivalrous, like that, Bertie. And I wanted to prove to her, as a first step, that I was a cold-water boy. Perhaps she would not let me rescue her unless I was a cold-water boy. How did I know but that Miss Simpson had been infected by Aunt Isobel's ideas about Prohibition?

Believe it or not, Bertie, but that terrible drink of water was a mistake. It made me unsteady on my feet. Especially as I took two more large swigs immediately afterwards. I wanted. to show her that the first drink of cold water was no passing fancy, but part of a settled principle of my life.

"Freddy Simms, take this creature away from here, and go, yourself. At once!" said Aunt Isobel.

"At once," said the old lawyer parrot.

Then everybody began to talk at once, and I was practically the only person in the room who maintained any semblance of dignity whatever. I was hurt by the tone of Aunt Isobel's remarks with regard to me. After all the presents I had brought.

So I took the presents and laid them at Miss Simpson's feet, and I said:

"Sweets to the sweet!"

"Thank you, Mr. Withersbee,'' said Miss Simpson; "that is very, very sweet of you; kind and thoughtful. And now don't you think that you had better take Mr. Simms back to town? Miss Greene is scarcely strong enough to enjoy company."

I took another large drink of water, and said to her:

"Miss Simpson, I will take Mr. Simms back to town on one condition."

"And what is that, Mr. Withersbee?"'

"That you accompany us," I said. I bowed when I said it, Bertie.

The bow was a mistake. I had drunk too much water. I was practically waterlogged. Sunk. It was only with the utmost difficulty, that I managed to straighten up again after my bow. People noticed it. I was off my balance.

"Go with them, Helen," said Aunt Isobel to Miss Simpson. "Anything to get rid of them!"

"So your name is Helen," I said. "Mine is Henry, and I am a cold-water boy."

"So am I," said Freddy Simms.

I saw at once what Freddy was trying to do. Now that Helen Simpson was an heiress, he was trying to get on the good side of her, and possibly marry her.

"Freddy," I said to her, "is not really a cold-water boy. He just says that, because I said it. It is one of the early symptoms of parrot disease."

"Yes, Mr. Withersbee,"' said Helen.

We were in the car, as if by magic, going back towards town. I noticed that Freddy was snoring.

"Helen," said I, "you would not consider marrying a man who snored like that, would you?"

"No, Mr. Withersbee," said Helen.

"Then," I said, "let us throw Freddy into the East River as we cross the Fifty-ninth Street bridge. And then we will get married and I will become a doctor, and you will be my favorite nurse, and we will find a cure for parrot disease. We will devote our lives to the service of humanity."

"Yes, Mr. Withersbee,'' said Helen. "And where shall I drop you?"

"The first thing is to drop Freddy," I said. "Into the East River. If he is really a cold-water boy, he should like that. I wish you would call me Henry."

"Yes, Henry," she said.

BUT it seems she did not drop Freddy in the East River, for we found him in the cab when we got to the apartment house where I live, and the elevator man and I put him in my bathtub. The last thing I said to Helen was:

"Remember that you have promised to marry me."

"Yes, Henry," she said; and got into the cab and drove away.

Whether she was merely being tactful, or whether she really intends to marry me, I am at a loss to determine today.

But when Freddy Simms crawled out of my bathtub today, he accused me of a terrible crime. He accused me of planning to marry Helen just to get her money.

He said, "I look upon you with loathing and aversion." He turned on me... like a... what did you say it was? I know very well it is not a brassiére. As if I would marry a beautiful creature like that just for her money! Why, I only met her once.

Thank you, yes... I will have a drop of Scotch.... No water in it. It was water that got me in bad with Aunt Isobel Greene. I can't face her, now. I don't dare to go out there. Bertie, I am, frankly, afraid of Aunt Isobel Greene. And if I can't go out there, how am I to get in touch with Helen Simpson again? And if I never see her again, how am I going to marry her? If I do not marry her, I shall go through life with a broken heart. I am sad, Bertie, very sad. I have lost my best friend, and the only woman I ever loved. And all on account of too much water. I shall never touch the stuff again.

———————————

3: Killer's Price

Mort Lansing

Edwin Truett Long, 1904-1945

Spicy Detective Stories Nov 1936

"Spicy Detective", "Spicy Western", etc, were a family of 1930s pulp magazines in which female protagnists always seem to be losing most of their clothes. Very tame, though. They were later renamed "Speed Detective" etc.

"VACATION, HELL! I snorted, and gave the cabbie the address. Me, Mike Cockrell, private detective in a strange Gulf Coast town for a vacation, and getting called out of bed at the hotel by a dame I never heard of! A hell of a vacation! I paid the cab on Water Street, not far from the docks.

The sign was just one word— "*John's*." I ducked inside, glad to get out of the fog and mist but it was almost as bad inside as out. You could cut the smoke with a knife and the whole low room had a sort of sour, stale beer smell.

A row of booths ran down the wall, opposite the bar, extending a little farther than the mahogany. Where the bar ended, a trellis work partition; back of that, a dance floor. A nickel piano was grinding out a lousy tune and a sailor was dancing with a street girl, cheek to cheek.

About six feet ahead of me a big guy leaned against the bar. His nose spread the width of his face with a couple of finger-deep dents where the bridge used to be. One ear was cauliflowered and his mouth was thick-lipped, snarling. He was the bouncer.

He said, "What do you see, mac?"

I said, "Hell, I don't know, buddie. I never saw anything like it before. Is it you that smells like that?"

By that time a one-eyed bartender was swabbing the bar in front of me. I said, "Rye, and let me see the bottle."

I poured a shot and took a chance, Drizzlepuss, the bouncer, glaring and mouthing.

"Hey," said a new voice, right beside me.

IT was a dame, a little dame, but not too little. Her blonde hair was headed in nine directions, her eyes looked sort of wild and woolly and the enamel on her face showed signs of wear and tear.

One shoulder-strap was down and I got an eyeful of white skin that looked smooth and curvy and warm. She sort of tottered on her feet. With a hand on the bar to steady herself, she said, "Hey, you don't like me, do you, you big bum?"

I'm forty-four years old and I've been round. I've seen a lot of drunken floozies but this one looked a little different. So I only laughed and said, "You got me wrong. I never saw you before in my life."

"No man can laugh at me," she roared and kicked me in the shin. I said, "Ouch?!" and she slapped the hat off my head. Drizzlepuss, the bouncer, guffawed; the one-eyed bartender grinned.

I grabbed her, held her, too damned mad to do anything. But even so, I liked the way she was kicking and squirming; while she was putting on her act, she muttered in my ear.

"It was me who called. Get—" then I missed a few words, caught the next few— "the next booth from the end."

By that time she had pulled away, had her head down on the bar and was sobbing. Drizzlepuss, still guffawing, took her by the arm and led her to a booth. I picked up my hat, brushed the sawdust off it, and poured another shot of rye. So she was the one that called me, hunh? And Margot Sanders was in the next booth from the end! A hell of a joint for a millionaire's daughter to be in!

Drizzlepuss was back, still grinning. "Whyn't you buy your gal friend a drink, mac? She needs it. You know her, don't you?"

I said, "Oh sure— Miss Jack Dempsey. Take her a drink." I tossed a bill on the bar and headed toward the back. Two red lights flickered above two swinging doors at the rear. One door said *Maggie*, the other said *Jiggs*. I slowed by the next to the last booth.

The man was leaning over the table, his back to me. All I could see was patent leather hair and a black suit. But the dame! His hand spanned the table and he had her by the shoulder. A strap of her flame-colored evening gown had slipped low, revealing one rounded shoulder enticingly bare. Her breasts were rising and falling like she was scared. Spots of rouge looked like red circles on a whitewashed wall. Her mouth was half open, her eyes frantic. I almost stopped.

The man sensed something, released his grip, and turned. He was dark, darker than I am, with black eyes, a wisp of a moustache and the smallest mouth I ever saw. Damned if I ever see how he managed to eat. His eyes were like ice.

The girl cowered back in the corner, tugged at the shoulder strap. The man took the cork-tipped cigarette from his mouth, flipped the ashes off, and got up. Without smiling he pulled the curtain on the booth. I walked on across the dirty dance floor. The music had stopped but the sailor and his bim were still dancing, cheek to cheek, bodies moulded together. In the washroom I smoked a cigarette and kept the door open a crack. Then I went back the way I had

come. The bouncer was getting a nickel from the surprised sailor to put in the piano.

AT the bar I heard someone calling “Hey, hey you!” It was the little dame that had kicked my shins. “Mush obliged for the drink. Bring two more and you can sit by me.”

I winked at the bartender, took the bottle and an extra glass and went into the booth. She seated me beside her, not opposite her. I said, “What the hell is this all about? Getting me out of a warm bed at one o’clock with a crazy story about a millionaire’s daughter that’s going to be killed! What—”

She groaned, “We've got to get her out of here! You've got to help me.”

I said as cold as I could, “Maybe you haven’t heard right. I’m Mike Cockrell. Why not call the cops? I don’t work for charity.” I still thought she was a bum.

She leaned over and hoisted a skirt. I haven't missed a sight like that for years— sleek, well filled chiffon, white flesh gleaming above it, disappearing into seductive shadows. I was still gaping when she thrust three bills into my hand. “There’s three hundred on account,” she said and seized my shoulder, pressed against me. Her flesh was warm and firm— but springy. I sort of liked it.

“There'll be more in it for you when you get her out of here. Will you—?”

I’m nervous. When that first scream rang out, I jumped up, upset the whiskey and lit in the sawdust aisle ready for action. I felt the little lady tugging at my arm, shook her off. The curtain of the next to the last booth was bellying and flopping; the screams continued.

Even as I started forward, that curtain flew into the barroom proper, torn from its hangings, and two silk clad legs were waving in the air. I froze. From the tangled curtain came the head and torso of the scared dame and she was still screaming a mile a minute. Her dress had been pulled from her shoulders and bunched against her trembling breasts.

Then in the doorway of the booth Greasehead appeared, an ugly snarl on his face, his fists still doubled. A cigarette dangled from his lips, bobbed up and down when he shouted. “Slap me, will you, you little wench! Slap me!”

I started forward, plenty burnt up. Drizzlepuss, the bouncer, oozed away from the bar, blocked me, and said, “I been waiting for this, grandpa.” He swung and I ducked. He got my hat and that made me sore as hell. Twice in the sawdust and it costing me three ninety-eight !

I was mad anyway and I never was much with my fists. I reached for a gat and, when Drizzlepuss came in again, slapped him hard on the wrist. He yowled, saw the roscoe and turned to beat it, so I tapped him on the sconce and he flopped. Right on my hat.

By that time the brunette was on her feet, covering her breasts with her hands. Greasehead stood there glowering, but in a sort of odd way. He was looking right at my gun as I barged in. “Reach for the lights, punk,” I told him and covered him, and to the girl, “Scram, sister. Out the front way!”

Greasehead started to say something. His right hand moved and I moved too. “Don’t try it, buddie!” I warned.

He grinned, tight-mouthed, said, “Oh!” and began crumpling at the knees. They hit the sawdust first, then his waist, then his chest. Finally he laid his cheek down on the floor, wiggled a couple of times and lay still. What the hell? I stood there like a goof. The one-eyed bartender came running around the bar. The sailor and his girl had finally stopped dancing, were standing around bug-eyed.

One Eye looked up and said, “Hell, he’s dead!”

The sailor said, “Dead!”

I swallowed sort of hard and said, “That’s the first guy I ever scared to death!” I hadn’t squeezed the trigger but there he was!

THEN another scream behind me! I turned and dodged. Drizzlepuss was a tough guy. He could take it. He missed me with the bottle only because the dame screamed. Then the lights went out. Me and Drizzlepuss hit the sawdust. The sailor busted the little bartender and the four of us were rolling on the floor with the dead man.

I finally rolled clear, felt someone tug at my arm, started to crack down and quit just in time. “This way, this way, hurry!” It was the little blonde dame; I knew her voice. We ducked low and out the back door into the alley. The battle by the booth was still going good.

“I’ve got her,” said the blonde. “Got her out and into my car. Hurry, there’s no time to lose!”

“My hat,” I panted. “I got to go back. I just bought that hat. I paid—”

“To hell with it,” she said. “I'll buy you a dozen hats. She’s waiting in the car. ” The car was a black sedan with plenty of chromium. Looked funny as hell knee deep in ashcans. She leaped in, got behind the wheel. I said, “Hey, where's your friend?”

She turned around too, flipped on the dome light. Somebody had been there all right, for the leather upholstery and the floor rug were covered with red, fresh blood. But as far as dames went, the back end of that car was empty as hell.

“We've got to go back, we’ve got to go back! They’ve got her again!” She was shoving me. In the distance I heard a siren, and a split second before had heard humpty nine police whistles.

I said, “Never mind my hat. We better go.” So she opened the door on the other side, stepped on a garbage can and hit the alley. I cussed and went after her. We were almost to the joint when the back door flew open and a guy came running out with a gun. He saw us, pulled up and fired from his hip. I heard it buzz past and *zing* against a brick wall. I gave the little dame a shove that sent her sprawling and cracked a shot at the new guy. He hollered and beat it back into the door. The window upstairs popped up and a guy leaned out with a gun in his hand. I got him— a man knows when he hits the guy that’s shooting at him.

Then I grabbed the dame by the wrist, jerked her up so hard she flopped against me, and started down the alley.

“Halt in the name of the law!” roared the guy in the doorway and blazed. I made the car, jumped in dragging the dame after me. Bullets were landing all around when we made the street. I wheeled that baby into the darkness with a prayer in my heart, and I kept the lights off for ten minutes of alley running. Up and down alleys, across a vacant lot, bumping and thumping and the dame never said a word. Finally I ran it into a dark parking lot that didn’t do business at night. I thought the dame was asleep.

“C'mon,” I said, burned up at the whole screwy affair, “it’s all over but the shouting.” She didn’t answer, her head lolled to one side. Something was wet and sticky on my fingers. Blood, of course. I fumbled inside her dress, found her heart beneath her breast. Thank the Lord she had one that beat. But her shoulder was a mess where a slug had nicked her.

I hated to do it, but I pushed her down on the floorboards and beat it across the street to an all night garage. In five minutes more Peg Martin, the only guy I knew in the whole damned town, showed up with his cab in answer to my call. I did Peg a favor once, shot a guy that was about to gun him out. He pulled the cab across the street and we got the dame into it.

“Sure,” he said, “I know a guy but it will cost you money.” I looked down at the white face of the dame and had to do it. She looked like a fourteen year old kid in spite of the enamel, innocent like a newborn babe. I knew then she wasn’t a tart after all.

I said, “Show me the joint. I got the money.” I couldn’t let her get in trouble.

DOCTOR DENT was about five feet tall and must have weighed four hundred pounds. I didn’t like his looks, but what could I do? He said sure, he had a private sanitarium, this was it. This was a brownstone house out on Edison. Yes, he sometimes took people in and was very discreet about it. Ladies? Sure, what was wrong with the young lady? Accident, eh. What kind? A

little round hole in the shoulder? Fell on a sharp stick? Certainly! To be sure! Five minutes later the little blonde dame was stretched out in a bed looking like a wax doll. Doc Dent was fixing to go to work with a granite-faced old harridan he called Mrs, Taylor as aide. I said, “How long before I can get her out of here?”

He said, “About a week. Less time than that if there is no fever or infection. Your niece has a very clean— er— er— stick wound and a healthy body.”

I said, “Okay, I’ll call in tomorrow.”

He smiled and said, “That will be in advance, Mr.— er— Jones. Four hundred dollars, please, for the first week.”

I nearly passed out. I gave him the three C-notes she’d given me, dug through all my pockets and got together another one. It left me three dollars and seventy-one cents and a good luck piece, a half dime I’ve had for years.

Peg was still waiting. I got in and he looked at me just once, then drove off to a dump he knew and got out. When he came back, he had a quart of rye. I hit it and he hit it. Neither of us said anything. I was thinking what a chump I'd been. Getting mixed up in killings _ and shootings on my vacation and ending up paying a C-note out of my own — pocket on account of a dame I'd never seen before! I didn’t even know her name!

Peg passed the bottle back and I sucked at it, handed it back. He tilted it, coughed and said, “Feel like talking about it?”

I said, “Hell no, I don’t even feel like thinking about it! Pass the bottle.”

The sound of a ripsaw on hard wood and somebody yelling woke me up. It was misty but the sky was a light grey, dawn. The ripsaw was Peg snoring in the front seat; the yelling was a newsboy. I managed to call him, got a paper and unfolded it.

After a while Peg woke up and said, “What the hell are you groaning about?”

I said, “Never mind. It’s these headlines. What’s the quickest way to the river? You're going to lose a pal.”

“Is something wrong, Mike?”

“No, no, I’m just tired of living. Something wrong! I just killed a man, and shot a police lieutenant through the ear! I’m accused of murdering a shyster lawyer named John Lebac that practically ran this town and they’re tying me into the kidnaping of Old Man Sanders’ daughter! Get started!”

He took me back on Ayers Street to he. dingy old Continental where I’d rented a room a few days before. It must have been around six-thirty for the night clerk was still on duty. He grinned and winked and said, “What a man! You look like you had a hard night! And you’re in for more. Your sister’s upstairs in your room. She don’t look much like you, Mr. Cockrell.”

I said, “She’s only my half sister!” and took the stairs two at a time. I listened at my door before putting in the key, but couldn’t hear a thing. I turned the key, and stepped in, gat ready. The curtains were pulled. I left them down, tiptoed through the joint before I went back to the bed. The only person there was a dame— in my bed, sleeping a mile a minute.

She had one arm over her head and her gown had fallen away from the whites curves of her breasts. The blanket outlined a slim waist and flaring hips and she’d kicked the covers aside with one pink tootsy-wootsy. They were half-way up about her thigh on that side. Very nice. But I wasn’t interested in that dame’s legs! Not me. It was her face! There was a half bottle of rye on the dresser and I nearly killed it, grinning in the mirror all the time. “Boy,” I said softly to myself in that mirror, “you get all the breaks. I just can’t believe it.” I spread out the paper to make sure. And there it was in headlines.

POLICE SEARCH FOR DAUGHTER OF MILLIONAIRE. MARGOT SANDERS SNATCHED FROM FAMILY ESTATE SIX DAYS AGO. POLICE JUST NOTIFIED. HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLAR RANSOM ALLEGED TO HAVE BEEN PAID KIDNAPERS. SANDERS GIRL STILL MISSING. MILLIONAIRE TURNS CASE OVER TO POLICE. POSTS TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLAR REWARD.

Lucky! Me, Mike Cockrell with three dollars and sixty-six cents in my pocket and Margot Sanders, worth twenty grand on the hoof in my bed. For the snoozing dame was the one the lawyer, John Lebac, old scared-to-death Greasehead, had smacked last night just before he passed out! Now all I had to do was deliver her C.O.D. I picked up the rye and murdered it.

“Hey, grampa, what the hell you doing to my whiskey?”

I LIKE to dropped the bottle. The dame was sitting up glaring at me. She jumped out of the bed, and headed toward me, thin nightie clinging like wet tissue paper! Pop-eyed, I watched her, hips swinging, her whole body tense, as she advanced determinedly. She snatched the bottle out of my hand, held it to the light, then slapped me— hard.

“You damned hog,” she said, “now you can trot out and get another quart.”

I didn’t want to smack twenty grand— in the puss. I said, “Sure! Sure! Now you get right back in bed, Miss Sanders, and I'll go out for more liquor." She looked at me sort of queer. I was thinking how tough some of these high-toned rich kids are. At the door she stopped me.

“Give me a cigarette, grampa.” Lying on the table was her own cigarettes in an open case. She saw me looking at them, giggled and said, “Mine aren’t healthy, grampa, give me one of yours.”

I lit it for her, and she said, eyes hard like flint, “When you’re getting the liquor, don’t make any phone calls and don’t tell anyone you’ve got company.”

I didn’t say anything. Talking tough she went on, “You see I was in the alley last night. I know who killed Con, the bouncer, and shot Lieutenant Hogan in the ear!”

The blood in the car! I said, “Why didn’t you wait for us? There was blood all over the car and we thought—”

She said, “Hell! I knocked a heel off my slipper and stumbled getting in. Hit my nose on the robe rack and bled like a stuck pig. I saw you and the dame come running my way so I scrammed, didn’t know who you were. Go on and get the whiskey, Grampa.”

To show you what I thought of the dame I spent my last three bucks on a quart of good rye. Back in the room she bummed another of my cigarettes and poured a water glass half full of rye.

She tossed it off, looked startled, choked, and came up smiling. I said, “Miss Sanders, what do you want for breakfast?” By now the gown was gone and she wore a sheer negligee of black chiffon that clung to her as she hugged it tight. Oh yeah, and thin stockings.

She stuck a hand inside the negligee and adjusted the brassiere. She said, “Grampa, I’ve been taking a bottle breakfast for six years. I’m happy. Say, for an old man you're pretty good in a ruckus. That’s what Gladys said. She heard of you in Chicago, tough guy and all that. You really went to bat, didn’t you?”

I said, “Tell me about it. I’m a little mixed up. Who's Gladys?”

The dame took another three-man snort. “Gladys is my girl friend, silly. We knew a jam was coming up and she’d heard you were in town so she called you on the phone and rang you in.”

"How'd she know where I was stayin'?"

"She knows a lot of drunks that work on newspapers. Gladys is a smart kid, she remembers what she hears. Don’t stick to that bottle; mamma wants a drink.” We sat there talking for ten minutes, me itching all over all the time. I was afraid to mention taking her home again, but piped up once more, “How about breakfast, Miss Sanders?”

She laughed and said she wouldn’t go out for a banquet, let alone breakfast.

“Buddy,” she went on, “I sort of like it here. I came here on purpose. And I’m going to stay a while. See?”

I went over and sat down in a chair, watched her pace back and forth: in that negligee that didn’t hide the rippling curves of her at all, marveling at how tough these rich kids can be. She had the bottle in her hand and kept hitting it. That gave me an idea. Pretty soon I thought she’d get woozy and I’d deliver her

and collect. She was getting woozy all right. She flopped down in my lap and put her arms around my neck and began to cry. I patted her and said, “Don’t worry, Miss Sanders; everything is going to be all right now. Take another drink.”

She did. The negligee slipped off one shoulder and she didn’t bother with it. Her eyes were hot and bothered. She was a damned good lap-setter. I’m only forty-four and I got young ideas, I sort of hesitated for her to get up but it didn’t work,

“You aren’t such a bad looking guy, grampa,” she said and pulled my chin up. Before I could dodge, I was kissing twenty thousand dollars worth of loose hot lips. Something inside said, “Don't be a chump, Mike Cockrell!”

I wasn’t.

ABOUT thirty minutes later the whiskey was gone and the dame wasn’t out yet. I was out—out of cigarettes. I walked over to her case, started to get one of hers and she stopped me, hand on my arm. “For the love of God, Mike, - put that fag down.”

Puzzled, I dropped it and she put her arms around my neck again and said, “I'm just beginning to appreciate you, Mike, and I don’t want to lose you!” After a while I managed to pull away and wipe the lipstick off my mouth.

I said, “Listen, Miss Sanders, let me take you home. Your old man and your mother are out there at the house worrying to death. Let me take you, Miss Sanders.”

She said, “What the hell you calling me? You been doing that all morning! I’m Babe Dumont, Mike, and if you want to know I’m the baby that knocked John Lebac over last night. The rat!”

Dumfounded I sat down on the bed. “What are you doing here, then?”

She grinned and said, “You're supposed to be a tough guy, Mike Cockrell. A sort of legalized gunman. I got it on you. Hogan won’t appreciate getting his ear blown off and he'll sock a murder charge on you for killing Con, the bouncer. So what? I got to hole up a few days until my boy friend can get me out of town. John Lebac’s got plenty of mob that would like to find me. But you're going to take care of me or I squawk my head off to the police.”

“What about the Sanders kid?”

“She was in the car in the alley when I got there. I didn’t want any part of a kidnaping so I dumped her behind some garbage cans. I suppose Lebac’s gang got her back.

“Is she the reason you killed John Lebac?”

She grinned. “Naw. What the hell? I killed him for ten grand, baby. I’m working for a little fellow that would like to have John’s place. Understand?”

I started for the door. “Where you going?”

“Damned if I know, any place away from here. I don’t want any of this screwy mixup.” I felt plenty bad, twenty grand having gone up the spout. With my hand on the knob she stopped me.

“Step out that door and I tip off the police. You'll be thrown in the jug here and face the hot squad and even if you beat the rap you ’re a ruined man!”

I said, “Nuts,” and opened the door. I stepped back fast and reached for the ceiling.

The one-eyed bartender slouched in, a roscoe in his hand, followed by a boy friend with an automatic and murder in his dopey eyes. “Keep Cockrell covered, Waldo,” said One Eye and grinned at the woman. “Hello, Babe."

She didn’t say a word.

“Smart, ain’t you,” he went on, “but not smart as me. You see I knew Cockrell from St. Louis, saw him shoot Stony Brooks in a saloon where I was working. He stuck up for you at the joint so I figured it out. And sure enough here you are! Get your clothes on, Babe.”

I said, “Take it easy. What’s this all about?”

“Watch him, Waldo. If he moves, burn him down. What’s it all about? Why nothing, only some of the boys would like to see Babe. She knocked off the boss last night. Don’t you read the newspapers?”

I said, “Nuts. I was there. He dropped dead, scared to death!”

“Guys like John Lebac don’t scare,” said One Eye. “You ought to keep up with things.” He stuck the gun in his coat pocket, pulled out a paper and tapped it with a long finger. “John Lebac didn’t have heart trouble, sap. The autopsy showed he was poisoned. They analyzed the cigarette he was smoking and found sixty-five percent oil of nicotine had been dropped under the cork tip. The dame gave him the cigarette. He smoked Camels. Come on, Babe, get dressed; the boys are waiting.”

Babe shrugged, turned to a little overnight bag that stood on the washstand and pulled out a dress. One Eye started to say something to me and the dame’s voice cracked out.

She said, “Waldo!” Waldo whirled. The little gun she had said spat and Waldo dropped his rod with a surprised look on his face. There was a little blue hole between his eyes. She shot again but One Eye was diving for her, low. He hit her knee-high and they went down, clawing, scratching, rolling over and over on the floor in a welter of long legs and black lace and grey suit.

FOR a minute I watched, then I picked up Waldo’s gun and dove out the window. I made two flights of fire escape in nothing flat and ran like hell - down the alley. Before I hit the street I stuck Waldo’s .32 in the middle of my

back, between waist band and vest. I already had a gat beneath each arm. I grabbed a cab and fifteen minutes later pulled up in front of Doc Dent's. A jig answered the door. I pushed right by. At the end of the hall, Doc Dent, fat as a pig, his little eyes gleaming. He said, "Good morning, Mr.— er— er— Brown."

I said, "I want to go upstairs and see my niece. How is she?"

He said, "She isn't here, Mr.— er— er Jones. You see she felt sufficiently well this morning to leave. She said to tell you this, word for word. *'I said through the booth, not in it*!' "

It sounded screwy. I snapped, "Dent, you're lying. I'm going up." He said, "No you're not, Mr. Smith." So I wopped him on the paunch. It felt like hitting a pillow. He grunted and I socked his middle chin. He dropped like a bed bolster and looked cockeyed. I made the steps.

Sure enough the girl was gone.

Downstairs again. I shook Doc Dent's fat shoulder but his eyes stayed crossed. So I dug in his pocket and came out with a fat wallet. I didn't take it all— just two hundred, figuring that was reasonable.

In the hall the jig was talking on the phone, ashy, wild eyed. He saw me coming and yelled, "Hurry, hurry!" I grabbed the phone, hung it up.

"Who you calling?"

"I— I— I calling my gal fren', mistah. I—" I wopped him for luck. Then I grabbed the Doc's yellow topcoat and a derby off the hall tree and hit the sidewalk. I jumped in the cab and said, "Step on it, mug, any place away from here." As we turned the corner I could hear police sirens.

Screwy as hell, wasn't it? I sank down in the cab and tried to think. All I could think of was the message the little blonde Gladys had left with fat Doc. "*I said through the booth, not in it*." Then I began to get mad. For a private dick with a reputation like mine I was getting pushed around a hell of a lot! And me on vacation !

So I said to the driver, "You know John's place down on Water Street?"

He did. By the time we got there I had on Doc's coat and hat and a pair of cheaters I'd found in the pocket. The hat must have been an eight and a half for it sat on my ears. The coat hit me between my waist and my knees and would have wrapped around three of us.

Another bartender was on duty. He walked up with his dirty rag and I groaned, "What a head, what a head!— Give me a shot, quick."

He grinned, poured a shot and said, "A little of the hair, eh?"

"Whatta night, whatta night," I groaned and slopped the liquor all over the bar.

"You ought to take a shot of salts," He was real sympathetic.

I groaned and said, “Excuse me,” tottered through the joint and hit the door marked *Jiggs*. With the door open a crack I waited a minute.

The bartender went on shining glasses, There was no one else in the saloon. So I wobbled back to the bar, took another drink and groaned. I said, “Is it all right to sit down a little while?” and, before he could answer, I wobbled to the next. booth from the end and slopped down. He started to say something but I laid my head on the table and faked a pass out.

He came over and looked at me. I thought for a minute I was going to have to let him have it but he decided I was just another drunk with a hangover and went back of the bar.

“*I said through the booth, not in it*.”

I began feeling the panel at the back of the booth. With my pocket knife I found a crack along the right edge and slipped the blade up and down. Pretty soon I hit the bolt that held it in place. With my head still down on the table I picked and picked, till at last I heard the bolt slip. It took about half a second to ooze through the open panel.

DARKNESS and a flight of steps, me on tiptoe and a gat in my hand. A long hall with light beneath a door at the end. Now I was at the door, listening. Then something cold poked into my right kidney and a voice said, “Drop the gun.”

I dropped it.

“Open the door and go in.”

I did.

One Eye, the bartender, was sitting at a table counting bills. He said, “Hello, Mike Cockrell. Frisk him, Monk, and tie him up.” Monk frisked me, got the other gun from my armpit and tied my wrists behind me with a piece of rope. He shoved me down in a chair.

On a cot right across from me was the little blonde dame, Gladys, Doc Dent’s patient, tied and gagged. Her eyes were frantic. The big gorilla named Monk walked toward her, reached down and gave her a good pinch and guffawed when she squirmed away.

I said, “Leave her alone, mug.” He grinned and sat down beside her, tearing at her dress.

Wearily, One Eye said, “Leave her alone, Monk. Go on outside, I'll call you. I promised you could have her, didn’t I? We got work to do. We got to bump this mug and the kid.”

Monk went out, glowering at me. Trying to be as calm as possible, I said, “Well, One Eye, I hate to die curious. I’m all in the mud about this. Just who is the dame anyway, and what did you do with Babe?”

One Eye pushed a stack of dough aside.

"What you know won't hurt you. You ain't never going to tell anybody. Babe is still at the hotel, dead, I hope, the slut! I got away the same way you did. This dame here is a wise dame. Her name is Gladys Hastings and she's one of them nosey newspaper reporters. Someway she got a tip on the Sanders' kidnaping and found John Lebac was behind it. So she came down here to the joint and worked up an acquaintance with Babe. That's how she got on the inside. Now she's got to pay for being nosey. The racket's over and I'm all that's left besides Monk."

He grinned, and I knew Monk wouldn't be left long.

"So I'm fixing for the finale, then I'm going to fade." He had the jack—Sanders' hundred and tied in a neat bundle. He hollered,

"Monk!"

Monk came in grinning. "Take the dame in the next room with the kid and bump them both off."

Monk said, "Aw, boss, you told me I could—"

"All right," snapped One Eye. "Fifteen minutes, but that's all." Monk picked the writhing Gladys from the bunk and disappeared in the other room. One Eye grinned and started fooling around with a handbag in the corner. From the other room I heard muffled groans and screams, the coarse laughter of Monk,

BY that time I had Waldo's automatic in my tied hands. I had stuck it between my vest and belt in the back, remember? But I was doing a lot of thinking. Could I get away with it? I had to. I turned it until the muzzle was right against one strand of rope. When the dame hollered once more and Monk laughed, I couldn't wait. I leaned forward and pulled the trigger.

One Eye whirled, tugging at his pocket. His gat hung and I guess that saved my life for I had to pull like hell to loosen the rest of the rope. He shot first but I was diving sideways and he only nicked my shoulder. After I fired again, he wasn't in the picture any more.

I wheeled in time to see Monk coming out of the other room, coming a-blazing. I dropped him with one through the guts and let him have another in the eye for luck, as he was falling.

Gladys Hastings was cowering in the other room, holding a yellow-headed little girl of about twelve years close to her breast. That guy Monk had torn nearly all her clothes off her. When I saw the welts and the fingernail scratches on that white body, I damned near shot Monk again.

Gladys said, "You sap, if you could understand English this wouldn't have happened! Now let's get upstairs."

The bartender had scrammed. There was no one in the saloon. I stood behind the bar and poured a drink while she called her paper and told them to rush a photographer before she called the police.

“Say,” I told her, “call the Continental Hotel and see if the cops found a dead jane in my room. It was your friend, Babe.” Then I told her the story while she dialed the number. She asked and turned with a grin.

“Babe is tough,” she said. “The only person found in the room was a dead thug named Waldo. She must have scrammed like you and One Eye did. Pour me a drink.”

She walked behind the bar. After a while she said, “We'd have made this—last night if you hadn’t been so dumb. I said *through the booth, not in it*.”

I felt pretty good cutting in on that reward and all. I said, “Aw, babe, don’t be mad! I thought you said in the booth, How was I to know? I’m a stranger here!” I reached for her.

After a while she said, “You may be a stranger here but you know your way around, Mike Cockrell.”

I kissed her again, pretty thorough, and said, “That’s sign language in any man’s town, honey.”

She said, “Let’s talk it some more.”

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4: Abandoned

Gordon MacCreagh

1889-1953

Short Stories Dec 1946

THE Fabulous Monster's homecoming problem was different. His real name was Hank Lyncoln, but back there in the Burma hills he had been one of the Hairy Ears, the engineers who did that fabulous job of pushing the Ledo Road through impossible difficulties, and in that shove and scrambled job he had grown a peculiarly monstrous beard. It was accordingly inevitable that the pet name should be given to him by his fellows who were appropriately reading the copy of *Alice Through the Looking Glass* that had come along with a rummage lot of literature sent out by the good ladies of the Grand Rapids Society for Bundles for Something-or-other, The Monster duly came back from that topsy-turvey mission and his problem was appropriately in reverse. He did not come and find his wife married to two other men or his sweethearts stolen by the boys on the spot. On the contrary, he headed back to that Burma-China country of lost mountains and unmapped rivers to steal another man's girl.

What had happened to Hank the Monster was this: On a day of those fabulous days, as he shivered in a quonset hut that hung on the edge of a precipice and experienced the letterless lonesomeness of a man who never wrote any letters himself, he had watched a more fortunate hut buddy pin up a photograph. An honest-to-God photograph it was; nothing clipped out of *Esquire*; though to Hank it seemed that it well might have been. He had got up from his cot and elbowed alongside of the man, elbowed in front of him. For ten minutes he had drunk in the picture, breathed in the essence and the delight of it, and then he had said:

"Joe, you're a good guy and all; but I hope something happens to you like a cliff could fall on you, or six Jap bombers unload all on one spot and you be in its middle; and then I'd go home and marry that girl."

Joe had said, "That girl's good enough to marry a human, not a something horrible out of a book; and it'll do you good to know that she carries nobody but li'l old Joe Baines' picture next her heart like I got hers and it'll do you even better good to know that I ain't gonna have to go home to marry her either, 'cause in right about a month or so she'll be flying the hump to Chungking with a Red Cross unit, and in another or so we'll have shoved this damned pike through to there and I'll let you stand by and bite nails and watch the preacher." That was the tough optimism of these Hairy Ears. Though, of course, it didn't happen quite that way; and worse did happen. The girl duly came and duly a month later a letter came, all hush-hush and duly censored, to say that she was about to fly the m And that was all! After that, blank silence.

The plane was one of the many that were snatched by the devil-godlings of the mountain mists. The Kachin and the Wa hillmen filtered in every now and then, escorting survivors who had landed in their tree tops, and duly collected their hundred-dollar bonus for each delivery. But no Nurse Wilma Hughes was ever with them. Time passed and a rumor came through a native camp follower that a white girl was alive somewhere in the mess of northern mountains. Nobody knew what anybody ever did about it. Hush-hush! Rumors were bad for an army's morale. And more time passed and history was made and the boys were duly sent back as they had been sent there, cogs in the machine, willy-nilly; and the. fabulous Ledo Road was duly written off the books as an expendable war measure and was officially abandoned because the older Lashio Road of earlier thrilling history before the Japs captured it would take care of any over-expensive traffic that would ever crawl the land route from Burma to China.

At the gate of the demobilization center where other men were saying good-bye, Hank said, "Joe, we've got to go and get her."

That was Hank's tough optimism still after it was all over. But Joe said, “Ree-lax, pal. Why can't you let go of what's gone? And all right, all right, I know you raided with Merrill's Marauders before we caught and civilized you— or at all events halfway— and you're bats like all of 'em had to be and you believe the fairy stories told by the natives to squeeze another ten bucks. But what I believe is that Air Force scouted every square foot of Southwest China and if there'd been anybody left to find they'd have found 'em."

So then Hank said, "Joe, you're a good guy and all; but a dish of home ice cream has softened all the feet of your gut.”

"And your head," said Joe, and such of the boys as were settling down to hunt up the lost jobs of Grand Rapids all agreed with him.

Hank accordingly went back alone to hunt for something of less promise even than those jobs.

AND back in Burma again his problem was different, Everything was different. The fantastic looking-glass happenings of the Ledo Road had disappeared into the mists and the country had come back to normal. The wet fogs and the rain and the thin sunshine were there and the mountains towered as steeply as ever and the jungles stretched as endlessly dankly green. But there was no roar of planes overhead, no crunching thunder of bulldozers round the bend, no comforting polyglot clamor of a hundred thousand men of all the nations at work.

The only sign that they had ever been there was the thin white ribbon that had cost a million dollars for every clamorous, calamitous mile of it and now

lay silent and cold as though it had been something dropped from an aeroplane to fall in its haphazard curls and zigzags over the endless hills and to be forgotten.

Though yes, there was one other sign that American men had once been there. There were less myriads of bugs; DDT had killed them in order that Americans might live. But they were coming back, as the jungle was already creeping back to reclaim its mastery. Weeds sprouted man-high in one season; vines ran across the road like green snakes.

Hank stood where he had once been with ten thousand other white men and shivered. He could hear ghosts walk; the ghosts of men and things that he had once known. Long ago, it seemed; years ago, when he had gone out with the gang, careless and young and don't-give-a-damn; and he felt a little creeping lift of hairs along his spine.

He had never felt that way with the gang; what though the planes that swooped low overhead had sometimes been Japanese strafers, though their snipers had crawled in the woods; there had been the massed morale of an army Pepping each other up; there had been noise and movement and hospital units and doctors and every contrivance of modern science to keep a man alive, Different, all very different from standing in a bleak ravine alone; alone with just one shy yellow fawn of a Fantai Burman.

"Do you think, Moung Tha-Dun," Hank asked dubiously, "that this Moung Daw, the old opium smuggler who had the story, may still be alive in this damned jungle? He had an awful infected leg when I had to go away."

"Why will he not be alive, *Thakin* Moung-Sterr?" That was the Burmese rendition of Monster. "Those people who can eat as much of his own drug as that one does, remain protected from all sickness but accident."

"So your people say, so they say; and some of our own docs were becoming interested in the theory, only they didn't dast try it out. So now if he'll only be in that village of his up there."

"He will be"— Moung Tha-Dun was a comfortable believer in lucky fate "— for did we not buy the jade charm from the spell caster as far back as the Hukawng Pass?"

"Yeah, for almost a G.I. price. That old sorcerer hasn't got it into his noggin yet that the golden horde has gone for keeps. Okay then, let's climb."

They could see the village perched on a ledge like a huddle of mud swallow nests; from it one could have thrown a stone down onto them; but it cost them two hours of hard climbing to get to it, And yes, the opium peddler was there, a little befuddled, as always, maddeningly vague, but he clung dreamy-eyed to the rumor that he had sold ten dollars' worth a year ago.

Yes, there was a white girl, She was a queen or a high priestess or something in a village of the Yunnan Kalaws, up North and over the Chinese border— if anybody knew where the border was. She had parachuted from a plane a year ago.

That was all. That was as much as Hank had been able to learn at second hand through Moung Tha-Dun when the inexorable orders had snatched. him away as impersonally as they had sent him. The gang had received the home-going news with all their varied exuberances that the magazines had pictured. Hank had remained haunted by just the one picture and as helpless as any other infinitesimal cog in the machine. Till now he was a free man again. He checked details with the woozy opium dealer.

"Exactly in what month did this happen?"

"In the first month of the rains when the fogs were heavy."

That checked. "And what's this hooey about her being a great white queen? Those people aren't Central African savages."

The smuggler wasn't so definite about that one. Well, if not exactly, a queen, maybe some sort of a prisoner. At all events she couldn't get away.

HANK grated a profane opinion about the ancestry of those apes. “And just how far away in those mountains is this village?”

"One month's journey for a good hill-man."

Hank frowned over a quick calculation. “Hmh! That'll be just about an hour for a plane lost in a fog. One more question, Dreamer, and straight talk now is worth a rupee for every word of it." He took from his pocket the photograph that he had long ago stolen from Joe and with a sudden caution of avoiding leading questions he asked, "Have you ever seen this man before?"

The opium peddler peered at the picture with the unrecognizing stereoscopic gaze of eyes that had never been trained to focus down to writing on flat paper. He said, “Yes, I have seen him often; he used to be here when everybody was here."

Hank's tenseness blew from him with the thin whistle of a deflating balloon. He sagged down to squat as though the ground had been cut from under him. It was an effort to make himself remember that complete illiterates can no more read a picture than they can a printed word. Oh, well, the question had only been a hope anyway. And the other items checked. There was still a hope. To the peddler he said, “That talk was worth nothing at all, unless a beating for trying to befool me."

The man remained dopily apathetic, till presently he stirred to a new thought. "Yet for the same price I will give a straight talk."

"I am still here to listen."

"Listen then. Those far Kalaw tribes have not been tamed by a white army; they will fight to keep their prisoner."

"Oho! Yes, likely enough. That warning is worth rupees." He counted them out. "And I now double them for exact directions of how to get to that village that needs taming."

The peddler went into the detailed photographic description as memorized by a man who could write no notes. Hank listened and took no notes either. Moung Tha-Dun, who neither could write, would remember every twist of the trail and every landmark of gorge and peak.

He ruminated on a chaw of betel nut. "Will *Thakin* Moung-Sterr then organize a raiding gang, as in the old days?"

Hank shook himself out of his own scowling cogitation. "It would take time. Too awful much time. No, we'll go as we used to go against the Japs, you and I, and act according to whatever we may find."

Optimism, more than merely toughness, had been one of the prime requisites of those Marauders.

IN ABOUT a month, then, Hank, as beardedly monstrous as ever in the most harassed days of the Road, and Moung ThaDun, as unerring as a changling child of Pan, pushed out of a stunted scrub-oak and deodar jungle into the edge of that Kalaw village's millet terraces. A thin wind cut through the valley as though deliberately designed to whittle down any brash ambitions. Hank scowled at the bamboo and mud daub huts and said, "If they spot us scouting the layout from behind cover they'll know we're afraid. Better let's barge right up Main Street like I was the big boss. I guess this chicken hawk roost lies too high off the track for the Japs to have been around and preached 'em the superiority of the yellow race.

And that was just what he did with a fine imitation of the blatantly supercilious confidence of a sahib amongst underlings; and as Mongoloid faces scowled resentfully back at the apparition of him he shouted for the head man and in alternate breaths for Wilma Hughes. "Nurse Wilma Hughes! Here's Yanks!"

He knew she was there— or at all events, that some white girl was there; for as they had toiled closer to this robbers' roost other villages had verified the rumor and had added worse to it. They were keeping her there, they said, until her courage would break and she would agree to be the woman of one of the two local "big men"; and they could laugh callously over their simple sense of drama; the one choice, they said, was a warrior and consequently poor, and the other was a rice merchant and consequently rich.

Amongst the quickly gathering crowd in this village Hank thought he could recognize at least the rich rival, for he wore a sheepskin jacket with a Thibetan design embroidered on it and he had felt-soled Chinese shoes. But the man didn't push forward to assert any authority.

And then a hut door opened and a figure dashed out. She was dressed in the remains of a well-patched nurse's uniform and she ran at Hank like a lost lamb and flung her arms around his middle and moaned. Hank hoisted her tight to him and pressed his ferocious beard hard over her lips before she could gasp.

“That's at least one,” he said, "before you can get over being glad to see someone." He held her off to look at her and his strong teeth showed out of the mat. "Yes," he grinned, "you're you all right. I’ve been scared stiff you might turn out to be someone else."

She was able to gasp then, "Where are they? I knew, I always knew a rescue would come."

Hank said, like the story of the N. W. Mountie who went to capture an Indian tribe, "I'm it."

The girl said, “Oh!” and for a moment she sagged in his arms.

“And Moung Tha-Dun here,” Hank totaled up his force. “A plenty good man, ex of Merrill’s crowd.”

AND then a man came running, shoving through the gawping villagers. This one was as poor as all the rest of them; he had no shoes and his coat was a Yunnan double-breasted blouse of cotton. But he had a broad-bladed two-handed Yunnan *dah* and he crowded belligerently close. Hank could smell the rank odor of the butter with which he greased his coat to make it mist proof.

Hank almost made the crowning mistake of all white men. He flipped open his holster and half drew his pistol. Moung ThaDun's Ta chatter saved him from disaster.

“A shooting here, *Thakin*, will be madness; for some guns have found their way up here, too.”

The man with the *dah* demanded aggressively, “Why have you come so far amongst us, White Man?”

So it was not going to be easy. The man should have addressed a sahib as *Thakin*, White Man, meant that the power of prestige that used to dominate the Asiatic brother had worn very thin. Hank said positively:

"I have come to fetch my woman."

The Mongolian minds of the crowd quickly turned to devious evasion. “We are a people here who obey the rules ordered by the Yunnan Saw-Bwa at Cheng-Huang who made an agreement with the white men in a writing about

those who flew over our mountains; for if we did not obey, his soldiers would come and burn up our crops. But many women stealers come with lies and no orders. If we should give this woman up and later would come an order for her, we would be held responsible. How do we know whose is this woman?"

"Ask her." Hank gambled.

She clung to him and hid her frightened face in the beard. "Yes! Yes, a thousand yesses! "

The crowd smiled obliquely. "A white woman could say so just because he happens to be a white man."

Hank gambled again. "She has my picture in her pocket over her heart."

She did not have it there; though it had fondly been there when she had parachuted from that lost flight to Chungking to be a bride. She had it in her hut. She went dubiously slowly to get it. The photograph was a bit worn, but recognizable.

"The louse!" exploded from Hank. The girl stared at him; and then the picture was snatched from her hand by the rival with the two-handed sword. He looked at it. The crowd crowded in to look at it. Their eyes were uncomprehending; they could tell it wasn't a horse and probably not a bird; it was definitely a man; it could be this one. But then again, it might not. Who could tell? Some of the voices began to murmur, "If now he has an authority from the Saw-Bwa—"

Hank made the other white man mistake of taking for granted an authority over a lesser race. "Whosoever's woman she may be, she is a white one, Why did you not immediately bring her in instead of holding her prisoner?"

Minds as oblique as their eyes had their answer. "The price offered was insufficient for so long and so dangerous a journey. But she was never held a prisoner; she was free to go."

The girl sobbed close to Hank's protection. "I wasn't, I wasn't— I mean, I was, but I couldn't. Not alone. And they wouldn't furnish guides, food, nothing. I tried, but the first next village brought me back; they said I— I belonged to my finders. And I could never find out anything about any of the rest of the plane's crew; and— and then they gambled for me an it's only because their women seem to be not entirely slaves that—" She shuddered as confidently close as though the photograph had really been Hank's.

Hank extended his mistake of taking authority for granted. "Very well, I am now here to take this white girl away according to the agreement that the Saw-Bwa of Yunnan signed on a paper with the white men."

The sword man very deliberately agreed with Hank's earlier assumption that Jap influence had not reached this far into isolation to establish the

superiority of the yellow race; and he added to it that neither had white-man influence so done.

“There is no longer any paper,” his voice growled like a dog's seeing a prize bone endangered, “It is all finished. The Saw-Bwa's free from that agreement. There are no longer any white men. Our people return to our own ways of living."

His growl communicated itself to the crowd that had smoldered through the years of foreign interference. Hank's eyes narrowed warily; his arm tensed round the girl as he gauged the thin possibilities of fighting through. It was Moung Tha-Dun's voice that crackled into the electric air.

"Your own way has always been to settle dispute by *panchaye*t, by decision of five elders selected by both sides."

The sword man looked around in hot challenge. But heads nodded; particularly the older ones who saw opportunity to uphold the old traditions.

HANK let a tight breath go. There was hope in a *panchayet*. "For my side," he said quickly. “I choose that rice merchant," and he asked the girl, "and who else?"

For the first time the fear went out of her eyes. "Oh, clever! That was smart of you; he's the influential rival. And then we'll take that old man with the little boy; he's been decent."

The other rival sullenly picked out two men; the village head man would make the deciding fifth.

"All right then," Hank was still in control. "Let them sit aside and confer." He drew the girl to the narrow log bench before her hut. "Keep the li'l old chin up. We'll pull out of this."

Then at last she had time to ask him, "Who are you? You knew Joe's picture. Why isn't he here with you?"

Hank swallowed down at least three explanations and finally the best he could offer was, “Joe’ll tell you when we get back home. What about the rest of your crowd? You say you could find out nothing. They were never brought in either."

"I don't know. The plane was lost in frightful fog. I think the pilot was afraid of crashing a mountain somewhere. They made me jump first. I came down in a rice paddy. Some other people found me first; but then these came along and said it was their paddy and they fought with knives; and then this village brought me here and—and they—" She shivered. "But the women have insisted we have a right to choose."

Hank grunted. “Yeh, it’s the Yunnan tradition; same as Burmese. And they'll decide about us according to *panchayet*.”

It was by tradition, too, that the council of elders was ruled. They did not have much to decide. The head man, with all the solemnity of a foreman of jurors, announced their simple code of the hills.

“It is our tradition that when two men desire a woman they fight for her!"

In a civilized community such an announcement would have fallen like a bombshell with its aftermath of stunned silence. Here there was a silence, not stunned, but speculative, while flat yellow faces looked at each other, at their scowling swordsman, at the fierce-bearded stranger.

The silence was shattered by the whoop and cackle of Moung Tha-Dun who crow aloud:

“This, Thakin Moung-Sterr, for one who has learned all the methods of fighting with the Marauders of Merrill, is a gift from favorable gods."

The girl clutched at Hank's arm, her eyes full of the fear again. "No, Mr.— I don't know who you are; but don't do it. That man has terrorized the whole neighborhood."

The man was grinning, his upturned brows making him look like a print of a Japanese shogun, and he twirled his two-handed weapon in the deft patterns of a drum majorette. He was not nearly as tall as Hank, but as chunky as one of his own oaks and bulging with confidence.

Hank scowled at him, not with ferocity, with disgust over a distasteful job. "My God!" he said. "A duel over a woman! They're plumb medieval" He pushed the girl away. "Easier to fight one man and maybe win free'n to try and fight through the whole village and sure lose. Better if I don't have to kill him; depending on how good he is. All right, you mountain idiots, give me a Sword— or a knife or a stick or something."

Moung Tha-Dun already had it, a commandeered dab; not as long or as heavy as the fighting champion's, a cultivator's tool, but of the same universal design.

The crowd moved away to make space, exactly as in the old days a crowd did for a duel; and exactly as a duellist might have a dagger but it would be gross treachery. to use it, these men with their hard and fast adherence to a medieval code made no reference to Hank's pistol.

But they made clucking noises of amazement and pity at Hank's unorthodox style. He held his weapon, not with two joined hands for devastating swipes, but with one hand at hilt and one at tip of the blade. It was one of the more efficient defenses taught to the Marauders in their intensive training.

The warrior laughed a confident promise to his friends and stepped in with a two-handed swipe at Hank's waistline that would have hewn him in two. Hank, one hand high and the other low, warded its force easily; he slid the upper hand down the hilt to the blade and rapped the hilt smartly across the man's face. The blow must have broken the man's nose, for it gushed blood.

Moung Tha-Dun whooped. "Amma-lé, *Thakin* Moung-Sterr! You cannot afford to play with this man."

Hank grunted, "It may let some of that silly courage out." He could just as easily have made the stroke with the blade end. A dead man leaves vengeful relatives."

THE warrior's courage might well have been silly, but it was courage. He sniffled and choked and gurgled but he rushed in again with a swipe to try to cleave this unorthodox white man from crown to brisket.

Hank slid it off wide handed as before. He growled. "Damn the fool. I'll have to hospitalize him."

The warrior was wary now. He circled and found his opportunity to try the next orthodox attack, at his opponent's knees.

Hank took it this time, both hands on the hilt and he jerked the blade up at the man's hands, It ripped across the lower knuckles, over the upper hand and deep into the forearm. The murderous sword dropped to the ground. The crowd yelped its astonishment louder than did their champion, who stared dully at his wound before he clapped the less-hurt hand over the gash.

Hank dropped his own weapon. He grumbled, "I suppose you clowns know not a damn thing about a tourniquet." Unceremoniously he snatched the rag of turban from the nearest gawping villager; he rolled a pebble in it and knotted it over the spouting artery. Then he went to the girl and took her two hands away from over her eyes.

"Guess we'll be able to go now— if their thin taste of a couple years civilized warfare hasn't ruined these people about their decent code."

The girl shivered close again. "Who are you?" she wondered once more, "Galahad?"

"Naw," Hank growled. "Just a Yank." And he let his growl extend over the crowd, for the first time deliberately ferociously, monstrously out of his. beard that positively bristled. "And if any white man should ever happen along here again, don't you lugs let yourselves forget he's the boss." And he had a war indemnity to add to it. "And we'll need food to start us away; make it eggs, some rice and chickens— and a man to carry them; and yes, a runner to the next village to tell 'em we'll need a hut for overnight." To the girl he explained a topography about which she, out of a plane, knew nothing, "We've got a stiff

month's hike ahead of us before we can get to anything as modern as a bullock cart."

It was towards the end of the month that the girl said, "Hank, you won't talk about Joe; but tell me just one thing about him: when you came away was he well? I mean, not wounded, horribly crippled or something?"

"No," said Hank, "he was okay. He'll tell you all about himself when you meet him."

And when the hike came to an end she said suddenly out of a thoughtfulness of days, "You know, Hank, I don't think I particularly want to meet him."

And when even the bullock cart extension of the hike came to its weary end and they were at Yaw-Pein where safety was assured and there was as much of civilization as a bamboo and daub native hotel, she said:

"At last you can get yourself a shave and become human; and d'you know, Hank Moung-Sterr, I think that, as a human, a girl could like you."

Hank snatched her close and covered her face with the gruesome beard. She gasped, “Oo-oof!” and then she said, “Almost even with the beard— if she had to, if there was no escape.”

Hank grinned like an ogre. "There isn't," he said. “There wasn't since I first saw your picture."

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5: Through the Crater's Rim

A. Hyatt Verrill

1871-1954

Amazing Stories Dec 1926

Vintage "scientifiction" from the Hugo Gernsback era: a lost city, a lost race...

1: Into the Unknown

"I TELL you it's there," declared Lieutenant Hazen decisively. "It may not be a civilized city, but it's no Indian village or native town. It's big— at least a thousand houses— and they're built of stone or something like it and not of thatch."

"You've been dreaming, Hazen," laughed Fenton. "Or else you're just trying to jolly us."

"Do you think I'd hand in an official report of a dream?" retorted the Lieutenant testily. "And it's gospel truth I've been telling you."

"Never mind Fenton," I put in. "He's a born pessimist and skeptic anyhow. How much did you actually see?"

We were seated on the veranda of the Hotel Washington in Colon and the aviator had been relating how, while making a reconnoissance flight over the unexplored and unknown jungles of Darien, he had sighted an isolated, flat topped mountain upon whose summit was a large city— of a thousand houses or more— and without visible pass, road or stream leading to it.

"It was rotten air," Hazen explained in reply to my question. "And I couldn't get lower than 5,000 feet. So I can't say what the people were like. But I could see 'em running about first time I went over and they were looking mightily excited. Then I flew back for a second look and not a soul was in sight— took to cover I expect. But I'll swear the buildings were stone or 'dobe and not palm or thatch."

"Why didn't you land and get acquainted?" enquired Fenton sarcastically.

"There was one spot that looked like a pretty fair landing," replied the aviator. "But the air was bad and the risk too big. How did I know the people weren't hostile? It was right in the Kuna Indian country and even if they were peaceable they might have smashed the plane or I mightn't have been able to take off. I was alone too."

"You say you made an official report of your discovery," I said. "What did the Colonel think about it?"

"Snorted and said he didn't see why in blazes I bothered reporting an Indian village."

"It's mighty interesting," I declared. "I believe you've actually seen the Lost City, Hazen. Balboa heard of it. The Dons spent years hunting for it and every Indian in Darien swears it exists."

"Well, I never heard of it before," said Hazen, "What's the yarn, anyway?"

"According to the Indian story there's a big city on a mountain top somewhere in Darien. They say no one has ever visited it, that it's guarded by evil spirits and that it was there ages before the first Indians."

"If they've never seen it how do they know it's there?" Fenton demanded. "In my opinion it's all bosh. How can there be a 'lost city' in this bally little country and why hasn't someone found it? Why, there are stories of lost cities and hidden cities and such rot in every South and Central American country. Just fairy tales— pure bunk!"

"I know there are lots of such yarns," I admitted. "And most of them I believe are founded on fact. Your South American Indian hasn't enough imagination to make a story out of whole cloth. It's easy to understand why and how such a place might exist for centuries and no one find it. This 'little country' as you call it could hide a hundred cities in its jungles and no one be the wiser. No civilized man has ever yet been through the Kuna country. But I'm going. I'll have a try for that city of Hazen's."

"Well, I wish you luck," said Fenton. "If the Kunas don't slice off the soles of your feet and turn you loose in the bush and if you do find Hazen's pipe dream, just bring me back a souvenir, wiil you ?"

With this parting shot he rose and sauntered off towards the swimming pool.

"Do you really mean to have a go at that place?" asked Hazen as Fenton disappeared.

"I surely do," I declared. "Can you show me the exact spot on the map where you saw the city?"

For the next half hour we pored over the map of Panama and while— owing to the incorrectness of the only available maps— Hazen could not be sure of the exact location of his discovery, still he pointed out a small area within which the strange city was located.

"You're starting on a mighty dangerous trip," he declared as I talked over my plans. "Even if you get by the Kunas and find the place how are you going to get out? The people may kill you or make you a prisoner. If they've been isolated for so long I reckon they won't let any news of 'em leak out."

"Of course there's a risk," I laughed. "That's what makes it so attractive. I'm not worried over the Kunas though. They're not half as bad as theye are painted. I spent three weeks among them two years ago and had no trouble. They may drive me back, but they don't kill people offhand. Getting out will be

the trouble as you say. But I've first got to get in and I'm not making plans to get out until then."

"Lord, but I wish I were going too!" cried Hazen. "Say, I tell you what I'm going to do. I'll borrow that old Curtiss practice boat and fly over there once in a while. If you're there, just wave a white rag for a signal. Maybe the people'll be so darned scared if they see the plane that they'll not trouble you. Might make a good play of it— let 'em think you're responsible for it you know."

"I don't know but that's a mighty good scheme, Hazen," I replied, after a moment's thought. "Let's see. If I get off day after tomorrow I should be in the Kuna country in a week. You might take your first flight ten days from now. But if things go wrong I don't see as you can help me much if you can't land."

"We'll worry over that when the time comes," he said eheerfully. A few days later I was being paddled and poled up the Canazas River with the last outposts of civilization many miles behind and the unknown jungles and the forbidden country of the wild Kunas ahead.

It was with the greatest difficulty that I had been able to secure men to accompany me, for the natives looked with the utmost dread upon the Kuna country and only two, out of the scores I had asked, were willing to tempt fate and risk their lives in the expedition into the unknown.

For two days now we had been within the forbidden district— the area guarded and held by the Kunas and into which no outsider is permitted to enter— and yet we had seen or heard no , signs of Indians. But I was too old a hand and too familiar with the ways of South American Indians to delude myself with the idea that we had not been seen or our presence known, I well knew that, in every likelihood, we had been, watched and our every movement known since the moment we entered the territory. No doubt, sharp black eyes were constantly peering at us from the jungle, while bows and blowguns were ever ready to discharge their missiles of death at any instant. As long as we were not molested or interfered with, however, I gave little heed to this. Moreover, I believed, from my brief acquaintance with the Kunas of two years previously, that they seldom killed a white man until after he had been warned out of their country and tried to return to it.

At night we camped beside the river, making our beds upon the warm dry sand and each day we poled the cayuca up the rapids and deeper into the forest. At last we reached the spot where, according to my calculations, we must strike through the jungle overland to reach the mountain seen by Hazen. Hiding our dugout in the thick brush beside the river we packed the few necessities to be carried with us and started off through the forest.

If Hazen were not mistaken in his calculations, we should reach the vicinity of the mountain in two days' march, even though the going was hard and we were compelled to hew a way with our machetes for miles at a stretch.

But it's one thing to find a mountain top when flying over the sea of jungle and quite another to find that mountain when hidden deep in the forest and surrounded on every side by enormous trees. I realized that we might easily pass within a few hundred yards of the spot and never suspect it and that we might wander for days, searching for the mountain without finding it. It was largely a matter of luck after all. But Hazen had described the surrounding country so minutely, that I had high hopes of success.

By the end of the first day in the bush we had reached rough and hilly country, which promised well, and it was with the expectation of reaching the base of the mountain the following day that we made camp that night. Still we had seen no Indians, no signs of their trails or camps, which did much to calm the fears of my men and which I accounted for on the theory that the Kunas avoided this part of the country through superstitious fears of the lost city and its people.

At daybreak we broke camp and had tramped for perhaps three hours when, without warning, Jose, who was last in line, uttered a terrified cry. Turning quickly I was just in time to see him throw up his hands and fall in a heap with a long arrow quivering in his back. The Kunas were upon us.

Scarcely had the realization come to me when an arrow thudded sharply into a tree by my side and Carlos, with a wild yell of deadly fear, threw down his load and dashed madly away. Not an Indian could be seen. To stand there, a target for their misBiles, was suicidal, and turning, I fled at my utmost speed after Carlos. How we managed to run through that tangled jungle is still a mystery to me, but we made good time, nevertheless. Fear drove us and dodging between the giant trees, leaping fallen trunks, tripping over roots and scrambling over rocks, we sped on.

And now, from behind, we could hear the sounds of the pursuing Indians; their low gutteral cries, the sounds of breaking twigs and branches; constantly they were drawing nearer. I knew that in a few minutes they would be upon us— that at any instant a poisoned blowgun dart or a barbed arrow might bury itself in my body; but still we strove to escape.

Then, just as I felt that the end must be at hand— just as I had decided to turn and sell my life dearly— the forest thinned. Before us sunlight appeared and the next moment we dashed from the jungle into a space free from underbrush but covered with enormous trees draped with gnarled and twisted lianas. The land here rose sharply and, glancing ahead between the trees, I saw the indistinct outlines of a lofty mountain against the sky.

Toiling up the slope, breathing heavily, utterly exhausted, I kept on. Then, as a loud shout sounded from the rear, I turned to see five hideously painted Kunas break from the jungle. But they did not follow. To my utter amazement they halted, gave a quick glance about, and, with a chorus of frightened yells, turned and dashed back into the shelter of the jungle.

But I had scant time to give heed to this. The Kunas' cries were still ringing in my ears when a scream from Carlos drew my attention. Thinking him attacked by savages I rushed towards him, drawing my revolver as I ran.

With bulging, rolling eyes, blanched face and ghastly, terror stricken features he was struggling, fighting madly, with a writhing, coiling gray object which I took for a gigantic snake. Already hla body and legs were bound and helpless in the coils. With his machete he was raining blows upon the quivering awful thing which slowly, menacingly wavered back and forth before him, striving to throw another coil about his body.

And then, as I drew near, my senses reeled, I felt that I was in some awful nightmare. The object, so surely, relentlessly, silently encircling and crushing him was no serpent but a huge liana drooping from the lofty branches of a great tree!

It seemed absolutely incredible, impossible, unbelieveable. But even as I gazed, transfixed with horror, paralyzed by the sight, the vine threw its last coil about the dying man and before my eyes drew the quivering body into the trees above.

Then something touched my leg. With a wild yell of terror I leaped aside. A second vine was writhing and twisting over the ground towards me!

Crazed with unspeakable fear I struck at the thing with my machete. At the blow the vine drew sharply back while from the gash a thick, yellowish, stinking juice oozed forth. Turning, I started to rush from the accursed spot but as I passed the first tree another liana writhed forward in my path.

Utterly bereft of my senses, slashing madly as I ran, yelling like a madman, I dodged from tree to tree, seeking the open spaces, evading by a hair's breadth the fearful, menacing, serpent-like vines, until half-crazy, torn, panting and utterly spent I dashed forth into a clear grassy space.

Before me, rising like a sheer wall against the sky was a huge precipitous cliff of red rock.

Now I knew why the Kunas had not followed us beyond the jungle. They were aware of the man-killing lianas and had left us to a worse death than any they could inflict. I was safe from them I felt sure. But was I any better off? Before me was an impassable mountain side. On either hand and in the rear those awful, blood-thirsty, sinister vines and, lurking in the jungles, were the savage Kunas with their fatal poisoned darts and powerful bows. I was beset

on every side by deadly peril, for I was without food, I had cast aside my gun and even my revolver in my blind, terror-crazed escape from those ghastly living vines, and to remain where I was meant death by starvation or thirst.

But anything was better than this nightmarelike forest. At the thought I glanced with a shudder at the trees and my blood seemed to freeze in my veins.

The forest was approaching me I I could not believe my eyes. Now I felt I must be mad, and fascinated; hypnotized, I gazed, striving my utmost to clear my brain, to make common sense contradict the evidence of my eyes. But it was no delusion. Ponderously, slowly, but steadily the trees were gliding noiselessly up the slope! Their great gnarled roots were creeping and undulating over the ground while the pendant vines writhed and swayed and darted forth in all directions as if feeling their way. And then I saw what had before escaped me. The things were not lianas as I had thought. They were parts of the trees themselves— huge, lithe, flexible tentacles springing from a thick, fleshy livid-hued crown of branches armed with stupendous thorns and which slowly opened and closed like hungry jaws above the huge trunks.

It was monstrous, uncanny, supernatural A hundred yards and more of open ground had stretched between me and the forest when I had flung myself down, but now a scant fifty paces remained. In a few brief moments the fearsome things would be upon me. But I was petrified, incapable of moving hand or foot, too terrified and overwhelmed even to cry out.

Nearer and nearer the ghastly things came. I could hear the pounding of my heart. A cold sweat broke out on my body. I shivered as with ague. Then a long, warty, tentacle darted toward,me and as the loathsome stinking thing touched my hand the spell was broken. With a wild scream I turned and dashed blindly towards the precipice, seeking only to delay, only to avoid for a time the certain awful death to which I was doomed, for the cliff barred all escape and I could go no farther.

2: Amazing Discoveries

A DOZEN leaps and I reached the wall of rock beyond which all retreat was cut off. Close at hand was an outjutting buttress, and thinking that back of this I might hide and thus prolong my life, I raced for it.

Panting, unseeing, I reached the projection, ducked behind it, and to my amazement and unspeakable delight, found myself in a narrow canyon or defile, like a huge cleft in the face of the precipice.

Here was safety for a time. The terrible maneating trees could not enter, and striving only to put a greater distance between myself and the vegetable demons I never slackened my pace as I turned and sped up the canyon.

Narrower and narrower it became. Far above my head the rocky walls leaned inward, shutting out the light until soon it was so dim and shadowy that, through sheer necessity, I was forced to stop running and to pick my way carefully over the masses of rock that strewed the canyon's floor. Presently only a narrow ribbon of sky was visible between the towering walls of the pass. Then this was blotted out and I found myself in the inky blackness of a tunnel— an ancient watercourse— leading into the very bowels of the mountain.

But there was no use in hesitating. Anything was preferable to the cannibal trees, and groping my way I pressed on. Winding and twisting, turning sharply, the passageway led, ever ascending steeply and taxing my exhausted muscles and overwrought system to the utmost. Then, far ahead, I heard the faint sound of dripping, falling water and with joy at thought of burying my aching head in the cold liquid, and of easing my parched, dry throat, I hurried, stumbling, through the tunnel.

At last, I saw a glimmer of light in the distance and in it the sparkle of the water. Before me was the end of the tunnel and sunlight and with a final spurt of speed I rushed towards it. Then, just as I gained the opening, and so suddenly and unexpect edly that he seemed to materialize from thin air, a man rose before me.

Unable to check my speed, too thunderstruck at the apparition to halt, I dashed full into him and together we rolled head over heels upon the ground.

I have said he was a man. But even in that brief second that I glimpsed him, before I bowled him over, I realized that he was unlike any man I or anyone else had ever seen. Barely three feet in height, squat, with enormous head and shoulders, he stood shakily upon the tiniest of bandy legs and half supported his weight by his enormously long muscular arms. Had it not been that he was partly clothed and that his face was hairless, I should have thought him an ape. And now, as I picked myself up and stared at him, my jaws gaped in utter amazement. The fellow was running from me at top speed upon his hands, his feet waving and swaying in the air!

So utterly dumbfounded was I at the sight that I stood there silently gazing after the strange being until he vanished behind a clump of bushes. Then as it dawned upon me that no doubt there were others near, and, that as he had shown no sign of hostility, they were likely peaceable, I hurried after him.

A narrow trail led through the brush and running along this I burst from the shrubbery and came to an abrupt halt, utterly astounded at the sight which

met my eyes. I was standing at the verge of a little rise beyond which stretched an almost circular, level plain several miles in diameter. Massed upon this in long rows, compact groups and huge squares, were hundreds of low, fiat-roofed, stone buildings, while upon a smooth green plot at a little distance, stood a massive truncated pyramid.

Unwittingly I had reached my goal. Before me was the lost city of Darien. Hazen had been right!

But it was not this thought nor the strange city and its buildings that held my fascinated gaze, but the people. Everywhere they swarmed. Upon the streets, the housetops, even on the open land of the plain, they crowded and each and every one an exact counterpart of the one with whom I had collided at the mouth of the tunnel. And, like him too, all were walking or running upon their hands with their feet in air!

All this I saw in the space of a few seconds. Then, to add to my astonishment, I saw that many of the impossible beings actually were carrying burdens in their upraised feet! Some bore baskets, others Jars or pots, others bundles, while one group that was approaching in my direction, held bows and arrows in their toes, and held them most menacingly at that!

It was evident that I had been seen. The excitement of the beings, their gestures and the manner in which they peered towards me from between their arms, left no doubt of it, while the threatening defensive attitude of the bowmen proved that they were ready to attack or defend at a moment's notice.

No doubt, to them, my appearance was as remarkable, as inexplicable and as amazing as they were to me. The greater portion were evidently filled with terror and scurried into their houses, yet many still stood their ground, while a few were so overcome with curiosity and surprise that they dropped feet to earth and rested right side up in order to stare at me more intently.

I realized that it behooved me to do something. To stand there motionless and speechless, gazing at the strange folk while they stared back, would accomplish nothing. But what to do, what move to make? That was a serious question. If I attempted to approach them a shower of arrows might well end my career and my investigations of the place then and there. It was equally useless to retrace my steps, even had I been so minded, for only certain death lay back of me. By some means I must win the confidence or friendship of these outlandish beings if only temporarily. A thousand ideas flashed through my mind.

If only Hazen would appear the creatures of the city might think I had dropped from the sky and so look upon me as a supernatural being. But it was hopeless to expect such a coincidence or to look for him. I had told him to fly

over on the tenth day and this was only the seventh. If only I had retained my revolver the discharge of the weapon, might frighten them into thinking me a god. But my firearms lay somewhere in the demon forest. I had heard no sounds of voices, no shouting, and I wondered if the beings were dumb. Maybe, I thought, if I should speak— should yell— I might impress them. But, on the other hand, the sound of my voice might break the spell and cause them to attack me. A single mistake, the slightest false move, might seal ray doom. I was in a terrible quandary. All my former experiences with savage unknown tribes passed through my mind, and I strove to think of some incident, some little event, which had saved the day in the past and might be put to good use now.

And as I thus pondered I unconsciously reached in my pocket for my pipe, filled it with tobacco and placing it between my lips, struck a match and puffed forth a cloud of smoke. Instantly, from the weird creatures, a low, wailing, sibilant sound arose. The archers dropped their bows and arrows and, with one accord, the people threw themselves grovelling on the ground. Unintentionally I had solved the problem. To these beings I was a firebreathing, awful god!

Realizing this, knowing that when dealing with primitive races full of superstitions one must instantly follow up an advantage, I hesitated no longer. Puffing lustily at my pipe I strode forward and approached the nearest prostrate group. Motionless they buried their faces in the dust, bodies pressed to earth, not daring to look up or even steal a surreptitious glance at the terrible, smokebelching being who towered over them. Never had I seen such a demonstration of abject fear, such utter debasement. It really was pitiful to see them, to view their trembling, panting bodies quivering with nameless terror; terror so great they dared not flee, even though they knew by my footsteps that I was among them, and feared that at any moment an awful doom might descend upon them.

But their very fright defeated my purpose. I had won safety and even adoration perhaps, but there could be no amity, no intercourse, no means of mingling with them, of securing food, of learning anything if they were to remain cowering on the ground. By some means I must win a measure of their confidence, I must prove that I was a friendly beneficent deity and yet I must still be able to impress them with my powers and control them through fear.

It was a delicate matter to accomplish, but it had to be done. Almost at my feet lay one of the archers— a leader or chieftain I thought from the feather ornaments he wore— and stooping, I lifted him gently. At my touch he fairly palpitated with terror, but no frightened scream, no sound save an indrawn snake-like hiss, escaped his lips, and he offered no resistance as I lifted him to a kneeling position.

Hitherto I had had no opportunity to obtain a good view of these people, but now I saw this fellow close at hand I was amazed at his repulsive ugliness. I have seen some rather ugly races, but all of them combined and multiplied a hundredfold would be beauties compared to these dwarfed, topsy-turvy, denizens of the lost city. Almost black, low browed, with tiny, shifty eyes like those of a reptile, with enormous, thick lipped mouths, sharp, fang-like teeth and matted hair, the bowman seemed far more like an ape than like a human being. And then I noticed a most curious thing. He had no ears! Where they should have been were merely round, bare spots covered with light colored thin membrane like the ears of a frog. For an instant I thought it a malformation or an injury. But as I glanced at the others I saw that all were the same. Not one possessed a human ear! All this I took in as I lifted the fellow up. Then as he tremblingly raised his head and eyed me I spoke to him, trying to make my tones gentle and reassuring. But there was no response, no sign of intelligence or understanding in his dull, frightened eyes. There was nothing to do but to fall back on sign language and rapidly I gestured, striving to convey to him that I would do no injury or harm, that I was friendly and that I wished the people to rise.

Slowly a look of comprehension dawned upon his ugly face and then, to prove my friendship, I fished in my pocket, found a. tiny mirror and placed it In his hand. At the expression of utter astonishment that overspread his ugly features as he looked in the glass I roared with laughter. But the mirror won the day. Uttering sharp, strange, hissing sounds, the fellow conveyed the news to his companions and slowly, hesitatingly and with lingering fear still on their faces, the people rose and gazed upon me with strangely mingled awe and curiosity.

Mainly they were men, but scattered among them were many who evidently were women, although all were so uniformly repulsive in features that it was difficult to distinguish the sexes. All too, were clad much alike in single garments of bark-cloth resembling gunnysacks with holes cut at the four corners for legs and arms and an opening for the head.

But while there was no variation in the form or material of the clothing yet some wore ornaments and others did not. Leg and arm bands of woven fibre were common. Many of the men had decorations of bright hued feathers attached to arms or legs or fastened about their waists and many were elaborately tattooed. That such primitive dwarfed, ugly, degenerate creatures could have built the city of stone houses, could have laid out the broad paved streets and could have developed so much of civilization, seemed incredible.

But I had little time to devote to such thoughts. The fellow I had presented with the mirror was hissing at me like a serpent and by signs was trying to

indicate that I was to follow him. So, with the crowd trailing behind us, we started up the road towards the centre of the city.

3: Before the King

TRULY no stranger procession had ever been seen by human eyes. Before me, the chief archer led the way, walking upon his great calloused hands and with his bow grasped firmly in one prehensile foot and his precious mirror in the other. On either side and in the rear were scores of the weird beings hurrying along on their hands, keeping up an incessant hissing sound like escaping steam; black legs and feet waving and gesticulating in air and, at first glance, appearing Like a crowd of headless dwarfs. How I wished that Fenton might have been there to see!

Apparently my actions had been closely watched from the safe retreats of the houses and word passed that I was not to be feared, for as we reached the first buildings, the edges of the roofs and the tiny window slits were lined with curious, ugly faces peering at us. It was then that I noticed that none of the buildings had doors, the walls rising blank to the roofs save for the narrow windows, while ladders, here and there in place, proved that the inhabitants, like the Pueblo Indians, entered and left their dwellings through the roofs.

Now and then as we passed along, some of the more venturesome beings would join the procession, scrambling nimbly down the ladders, sometimes upside down on their hands, often using both hands and feet, but always using hands only as soon as they reached the ground.

How or why they had developed this extraordinary mode of progression puzzled me greatly, for there seemed no scientifically good reason for it. Among tribes who habitually use boats, weak legs and enormously developed shoulders, chests and arms are common, and I could well understand how a race, depending entirely upon water for transportation, might, through generations of inbreeding and isolation, lose the use of legs.

But here was a people who apparently had no conveyances of any kind, who must of necessity travel about to cultivate their crops, who must carry heavy burdens in order to construct their buildings and to whom legs would seem a most important matter, and yet with legs and feet so atrophied and arms so tremendously developed that they walked on their hands and used their feet as auxiliaries. It was a puzzle I longed to solve and that I would have investigated thoroughly had fate permitted me to dwell longer in the strange city. But I am getting ahead of my story.

Presently we reached a large central square surrounded by closely set buildings. Approaching one of these, my guide signalled that I was to follow

him as he swiftly ascended the ladder to the roof. Rather hesitatingly, for I doubted if the frail affair would support my weight, I climbed gingerly up and found myself upon the broad, flat roof. Before me were several dark openings with the ends of ladders projecting from them and down one of these my guide led the way. At the bottom of the ladder I was in a large, obscure room, lit only by the slits of windows high in the walls, and for a moment I could see nothing of my surroundings, although from all sides issued the low hissing sounds that I now knew were the language of these remarkable people. Then, as my eyes became accustomed to the dim light, I saw that a score of beings were squatted about the sides of the room, while, directly before me, on a raised dais or platform, was seated the largest and ugliest individual I had seen.

That he was a ruler, a king or high priest, was evident. In place of the sack-like garment of his people he was clad in a long robe of golden green feathers. Upon his head was a feather crown of the same hue. About his wrists and ankles were golden bands studded with huge uncut emeralds, and a string of the same stones hung upon his chest.

The throne, if such it could be called, was draped with a green and gold rug and everywhere, upon the walls of the chamber, were paintings of strange misshapen, uncouth creatures and human beings all in the same green and yellow tints. Something in the surroundings, in the drawings and the costume of the king, reminded me of the Aztecs or Mayas and while quite distinct from either I felt sure that, in some long past time, these dwellers of the lost city had been influenced by or had been in contact with, these ancient civilizations.

As I stood before the dais my guide prostrated himself before the green robed monarch and then, rising, carried on what appeared to be an animated account of my arrival and the subsequent happenings.

As he spoke, silence fell upon those present and the king listened attentively, glancing now and then at me and regarding me with an expression of combined fear, respect and enmity. I could readily understand what his feelings were. No doubt he was a person of far greater intelligence than his subjects, and while more or less afraid of such a strange being as myself, and superstitious enough to think me supernatural, yet in me he saw a possible usurper of his own power and prominence and, if he had dared, he would have been only too glad to have put me out of the way.

At the end of the archer's narrative the fellow handed his mirror to the king who uttered a sharp exclamatory hiss as he saw his own ugly countenance reflected in it. Forgetting court etiquette and conventions in their curiosity, the others gathered about and as the mirror passed from hand to hand their amazement knew no bounds.

All of these men I now saw were clad in green or green and white and were evidently of high rank, priests or courtiers I took it, but otherwise were as undersized and repulsive as the common people on the streets.

Suddenly I was aroused from my contemplation of the room and its occupants by my guide who came close and by signs ordered me to perform the miracle of smoking. Very ceremoniously and deliberately I drew out my pipe, filled it and struck a match. At the bright flare of the flame king and courtiers uttered a wailing hiss of fear and threw themselves upon the floor. But they were of different stuff from their people, or else the guide had prepared them for the event, for the king soon raised his head, and glancing dubiously at me and finding I had not vanished in fire and smoke, as he no doubt expected, he resumed his sitting posture and in sharp tones ordered his fellows to do likewise.

But despite this it was very evident that he and his friends were in dread of the smoke from my mouth and nose while the tobacco fumes caused them to sputter and cough and choke. This at last was more than even the king could stand, and by signs he made it clear that he wished me to end the demonstration of my fire eating ability. Then he rose, and, to my unbounded surprise, stood erect and stepped forward like an ordinary mortal upon his feet. Here was an extraordinary thing. Was the king of a distinct race or stock or was the use of nether limbs for walking confined to the royal family or to individuals?

It was a fascinating scientific problem to soive. I had no time to give it any consideration, however, for the king was now addressing me in his snakelike dialect and was trying hard to make his meaning clear by signs. For a moment I was at a loss, but presently I grasped his meaning. He was asking whence I had come, and from the frequency with which he pointed upward I judged he thought I had dropped from the sky.

Then a brilliant idea occurred to me as I remembered Hazen's story and his suggestion regarding his return by plane. Pointing upward I made the best imitation of a motor's exhaust that I could manage. There was no doubt that the monarch grasped my meaning. He grinned, nodded and swept his arm in a wide semicircle around his head, evidently to represent the course of the plane when Hazen had flown over the city.

Seemingly satisfied and, I judged, deeply impressed as well, he resumed his seat, gave a few orders to his fellows and summoning my guide spoke a few words to him. Thereupon the archer signalled me to follow and led the way across the room. But I noticed that the king had not returned the mirror.

Ascending the ladder to the roof the fellow hurried across to a second building, scrambled down another ladder and we entered a large room. In one corner swung a large fiber hammock; in the centre was spread a cloth decorated in green and gold, and as we entered two women appeared, each carrying handsome earthenware dishes of food whose savory odors whetted my already ravenous appetite.

Marvelous as it was to see these impossible beings carrying food in their uplifted feet and walking on their hands, yet I had now become somewhat accustomed to the people and I was so famished that I hardly gave the upside down serving maids a second glance.

The food was excellent— consisting of vegetables, some sort of fricasseed game and luscious fruits— and as I ate my guide squatted near and regarded me with the fixed, half adoring, half frightened look that one sees on the face of a strange puppy.

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I judged that he had been appointed my own personal guard or valet— it mattered little which— and I was not sorry, for he seemed a fairly decent specimen of his race and we already had become pretty well accustomed to each other's signs and gestures. Wishing to still further establish myself in his confidence, and feeling rather sorry for him because of the loss of his treasured mirror, I searched my pockets for some other trinket. My possessions however were limited. They consisted of a stub of a lead pencil, a note book, a few coins, my handkerchief, my watch, my pocketknife, a few loose pistol cartridges, my pipe and tobacco and a box of matches. As I drew all these out a sudden fear gripped me. I had barely a dozen matches remaining and my supply of tobacco was perilously low. What would happen when I could no longer produce fire and smoke when called upon to do so?

But I controlled my fears and comforted myself with the thought that possibly, after having felt the effects of tobacco smoke, the king would not soon demand another miracle at my hands and that, before either matches or tobacco was exhausted, something might well happen to solve any problems that might arise. Nevertheless I heartily wished that I had arranged with Hazen

to bring supplies in case they were needed and which he could have easily dropped as he flew over.

It would, I now realized, have proved an extremely impressive thing for the people to have seen me secure my magic from the giant roaring bird in the sky. But I had never of course dreamed of such adventures as I had met and could not possibly have foreseen the need of such things. Just the same I cursed myself for a stupid fool for not having provided for any contingency and especially for not having arranged a series of signals with Hazen. However, I was familiar with wigwagging and decided that, if necessity arose, It would be quite feasible for me to signal to him by means of my handkerchief tied on a stick. Also, I felt a bit easier in my mind from knowing that near the city was a splendid landing place for the plane and that Hazen, if signalled, would unquestionably attempt a descent.

Truly it was not every explorer in a predicament like mine who could count on being able to summon aid from the clouds if worst came to worst or who knew that a friend in an airplane would keep track of his whereabouts. Indeed, I almost chuckled at the thought of being in this long lost city among these incredible folk and yet within two hundred miles of the Canal and civilization and with another American due to hover above— and even communicate with me— within the next three days. It was all so dreamlike, so utterly preposterous that I scarcely could force myself to believe it and, having dined well and feeling desperately tired, I flung myself into the hammock and almost instantly dropped off to sleep.

It was still daylight when I awoke and the room was empty. Ascending the ladder to the roof without meeting anyone, I climbed down the other ladder to the street. Many people were about and while a few, especially the women and children, threw themselves on their faces or scampered into their houses at my approach, yet the majority merely prostrated themselves for a moment and then stood, supporting themselves in their ape-like way, and stared curiously at me. I had gone but a short distance when my valet came hurrying to- my side. But he made no objections to my going where I wished and I was glad to see that my movements were not to be hampered as I was anxious thoroughly to explore the city and its neighborhood. Curious to learn the purpose of the pyramidal structure I had noticed I proceeded in that direction and was soon in a part of the town given over to stalls, shops and markets. There were also several workshops, such as pottery makers', a woodworking shop and a weaver's shop and I spent some time watching the artizans at their work, Somehow, from seeing the people walk upon their hands, I had expected to see them perform their tasks with their feet and it came as something of a surprise to see these fellows using their hands like ordinary mortals.

Beyond this portion of the city the houses were scattered, the outlying buildings were more or leas patched and out of repair and were very evidently the' abode of the poorer classes, although the inhabitants I saw, and who retreated the instant they saw me, were exactly like all the others as far as I could see, both in dress and feature. Passing these huts, I crossed the smooth green field, whicli I now saw was a perfect landing place for the plane. Tethered to stakes and grazing on the grass were a number of animals which, as I first noticed them, I had taken for goats and cattle. But now I discovered that they were all deer and tapirs. It was a great surprise to see these animals domesticated but, after all, it was not remarkable, for I should have known, had I stopped to give the matter thought, that goats, sheep and cattle were unknown to the aboriginal Americans and that this city and its people, who had never been visited and had never communicated with other races, would of necessity be without these well known animals.

Moreover, I knew that the Mayas were supposed to have used tapirs as beasts of burden, and while I was standing there watching the creatures a man approached riding astride a big tapir and driving a second one loaded with bags of charcoal and garden produce. Here then was a partial solution of the manner by which these weak, dwarfed people built their stone houses. For with the powerful elephant-like tapirs— and I noticed all were the giant Baird's tapir which reaches a weight of seven or eight hundred pounds— they could easily haul the blocks of stone from a quarry and by means of tackle and inclined planes, could readily hoist the stones to the tops of the walls.

I had now reached the base of the pyramid and found it a massive structure of the same flinty stone as the other buildings. Running from base to summit was a spiral path or stairway and instantly I knew that it was a sacrificial pyramid exactly like those used by the Aztecs and on which unfortunate beings were killed and sacrificed. This discovery still further confirmed my suspicions that these people were either of Aztec or Maya blood or had been influenced by those races. Filled with curiosity to see the altar on the summit I started up the sloping stairs. I was at first doubtful if my companion would permit this, for the structure was sacred and doubtless only priests of the highest order were permitted upon it. Evidently, however, my guide thought that such a supernatural being or god as myself had every right to invade the most sacred places, and he offered no objection, but prostrated himself at the base of the pyramid as I ascended.

At the summit I found, as I had expected, the sacrificial stone, a huge block elaborately carved in hieroglyphs and with channels to permit the blood to drain off, while, close at hand, was a massive carved stone collar or yoke exactly like those which have been found in Porto Rico and have so long

puzzled scientists. From the blood stains upon this I felt sure it was used to hold down the victim's head and neck, while strong metal staples, set into the t stone, indicated that the man destined for sacrifice was spread-eagled and his ankles and wrists bound fast to the rings.

It was a most interesting spot from a scientific standpoint, but decidedly gruesome, while the stench of putrefied blood and fragments of human flesh clinging to the stones was nauseating and I was glad to retrace my steps and descend to the ground.

From the top of the pyramid I had obtained a fine view of the plain and city and I had noted that the former was surrounded on all sides with steep cliffs, and I realized that the plain was not a fiat topped mountain as I had thought but the crater of an extinct volcano.

I saw no path, pass or opening by which the crater-valley could be entered, but I knew there was the one by which I had arrived. As the sun, here on the mountain top, was still well above the horizon I decided to visit the entrance to the tunnel, for I was anxious to know why the people should leave this avenue open when, on every other side, they were completely cut off from the outer world. Possibly, I thought, they knew of those horrible man-eating trees and trusted to them to guard the city from intruders. Or again, they might keep the entrance guarded, for the fellow I had knocked over as I dashed in had been at the tunnel mouth and for all I knew he might have been an armed guard and was merely so thunderstruck at my precipitate appearance that he forgot his duties and his weapons.

With such thoughts running through my mind I strolled across the plain, past well-tilled gardens and fields, in several of which I saw men ploughing with well made plows drawn by tapirs. Even the farmers stopped their work and prostrated themselves as I passed, and it was evident that word of my celestial origin and supernatural character had gone forth to every inhabitant of the valley.

Following the path, I reached the little rise from which I had first viewed the city and soon came to the spot where I had entered. Imagine my utter surprise when I saw no sign whatever of the opening. I was positive that I had not missed my way. I recognized the clumps of bushes and the forms of the rocks, but there was no dark hole, no aperture in the cliff. Then, as I drew near to the precipice, I made an astounding discovery- Closely fitted into the rock and so like it that it had escaped my attention, was an enormous stone door. How it was operated, whether it was hinged or slid or whether it was pivoted, I could not determine. But that it covered and concealed the entrance to the tunnel I was convinced. Why the people had left the tunnel open as though to clear the way for me, why they should have fitted a door to it, why they should

ever use the tunnel which could bring them only to the death-dealing forest, were problems which I could not solve.

At any rate there was nothing to be gained by staying there and I started back towards the city. Thinking to return by another route, I took a path that led towards the opposite mountain side and presently from ahead, I distinctly heard the sound of metal striking stone.

Oddly enough my mind had been so filled with other matters that I had hardly wondered how these people cut or worked the hard stone. But now that my attention was attracted by the sound my curiosity was aroused and I hurried forward. What metal I wondered, did these people use? For metal I knew it must be from the ringing, clinking noise. Was I about to see hardened bronze tools in actual use or had these marvelous folk discovered the use of iron or steel? So astounding had been all my experiences, so paradoxical and incredible everything I had seen, that I was prepared for almost anything. I, or rather we, soon came to the verge of a deep pit wherein, laboring at great masses of white stone, were scores of workmen. Standing like skeletons among the blocks were derricks; hitched to sledge-like drags loaded with stone were teams of tapirs and on the farther side was a big outjutting ledge from which the stone was being quarried. Hurrying down the steep trail I reached the bottom of the pit to find every man fiat on the ground.

Signalling to my companion that I wished to have the fellows go on with their work, I approached the nearest slab of rock. It was the same fine grained whitish rock of which the city was built, and, lying upon it where they had been dropped by the stone cutters, were several small hammers, chisels and an adze-like tool. That they were not bronze or any alloy of copper I knew at the first glance. Their color was that of tempered steel and they seemed ridiculously small for the purpose of working this hard stone. If these people used steel then I had indeed made a discovery, and intent on this matter I picked up one of the tools to examine it. No sooner had I lifted it that I uttered an involuntary exclamation of surprise. The hammer, although hardly larger than an ordinary tack hammer, weighed fully ten pounds! It was heavier than if made of solid gold. There was only one known metal that could be so heavy and that was platinum. But platinum it could not be, for that metal is softer than gold and would be of no more use for cutting rock than so much lead. The tools, however, were undoubtedly hard— the polished surface of the hammer-head and the chisels, and the unscarred keen edges of the latter, showed this, and, anxious to test their hardness, I held a chisel against the rock and struck it sharply with a hammer.

Once more I cried out in wonder, for the chisel had bitten fully half an inch into the stone! It had cut it as easily as if the rock were cheese!

What marvel was this? What magic lay in these tools ? And then the secret dawned upon me and a moment's examination of the stone confirmed my suspicions. It was not that the tools were so very hard or keen but that the rock was soft— so soft that I could readily cut it with my pocket knife, a wax-like earthy rock which no doubt became hard upon exposure to the air exactly like the coral rock of Bermuda, which may be quarried with saws and even planed, but becomes as hard as limestone after exposure to the elements. Still, the tools were far harder than any metal except tempered steel, and for some time I puzzled over the matter as I watched the workmen, now over their fright and adoration, skilfully cutting and squaring the blocks of stone. It was one more conundrum I could not solve, and it was not until long afterwards, when a careful analysis of the metal was made, that I knew the truth. The metal was an alloy of platinum and iridium— the later one of the hardest of all known metals.

As we left the quarry and made our way toward the city I noticed an immense aqueduct stretching across the land from the apparently solid mountain side just above the quarry. I had given little thought to how the people secured water here in the crater. But it was now apparent that it was brought from some source by the stone conduit. Keenly curious to know whence it came, for I could not imagine how a river, lake or spring could exist on the crater rim, I wished to investigate, but darkness was coming on, I was tired and I deferred further exploration until another day.

Although I suppose I should have been grateful for being able to communicate with the people at all, yet I keenly felt the lack of a common medium of conversation, for the sign language was limited and I could not secure the information I so much desired about many matters that puzzled me.

Nothing further of interest transpired that night. I was supplied with food, I slept soundly and did not awaken until roused by the women with my breakfast. Very soon afterwards I was summoned to the throne room by Zip, as I called my companion, and once more I had to strike a match and smoke my pipe for the king's benefit. This time a second personage of high rank was beside him, a villainous looking hunchbacked dwarf with red, vicious eyes and cruel mouth but who, like the king, walked on his feet. From his elaborately decorated white robes and the mitre-like crown of quetzal feathers on his gray head, I concluded he was a high priest, for in the designs upon his costume and the form of his crown, I saw a decided resemblance to the Aztec priests as shown in the picturegraph of that race. Moreover, the quetzal or resplendant trogon was, I knew, the sacred bird of the Aztecs and Mayas, and while I was aware that it was common in the northern portions of Panama, I had never heard of its occurrence in Darien, a fact which still further confirmed my belief

that these people were of Aztec stock. But if this were the case it was a puzzle as to why they should be so undersized, malformed and physically degenerate, for both the Aztecs and Mayas were powerful, well-formed races. The only solution I could think of was the supposition that isolation and intermarriage through, centuries had brought about such results.

But to return to my audience with the king. I was not all pleased at thus having to use my precious matches and tobacco and I foresaw some very unpleasant developments in store for me 3f the performance was to be of daily occurrence. It was manifest that I must devise some new and startling exhibition of my powers if I were to retain my prestige and my freedom, for I well knew, from past experiences with savage races, and from the character of these potentates, that if I failed to perform miracles, and became, in their eyes, an ordinary mortal, my career would come to an abrupt end.

To be sure, there was the reassuring fact that Hazen would or should appear within the next fortyeight hours, but it was decidedly problematical as to whether I could communicate with him or could receive any aid from the air. However, there was nothing to be done but obey and puff away at my pipe. With the idea of cutting the exhibition short I stepped closer to the throne and blew the smoke towards the faces of the king and the priest. The monarch was soon coughing and spluttering, but he was game, while the priest, to my amazement, sniffed the smoke and seemed to enjoy it. Here was trouble. Evidently he had a natural taste for tobacco and this fact caused me a deal of worry, for if the old rascal took it into his head to acquire the habit and demanded I should let him try a puff at the pipe I would be in a pretty fix indeed.

However, my fears on this score were groundless, and presently the king, who could stand it no longer, signalled for me to depart, which I did most gladly.

I still had it in mind to investigate the water supply, and with Zip— reminding me of an acrobatic clown— beside me, headed for the aqueduct. This I found was of stones, dovetailed together in water tight joints, and built like an open trough and the speed of the water flowing through it proved the supply well above the city's level. It was an easy matter to follow the conduit, for a well-trodden path was beside it, but it was a steep up-grade climb for nearly a mile before I gained the spot where the aqueduct tapped the mountain rim. Here the water gushed from a hole in the solid rock and from its volume I knew it must come from some large reservoir. From where I stood I could look directly down into the quarry and the thought flashed through my mind that if the people continued to quarry in the place for many more years they would undermine and weaken the foundations of the aqueduct.

It was their lookout not mine, however, and still intent on tracing the water to its source I turned up a trail that appeared to lead to the mountain top. In places this was excessively steep and here Zip exhibited a new habit of his people. Dropping his feet he proceeded to climb the path on all fours, his feet first and his prehensile toes grasping every projection and bit of rock to draw him along while his immense, powerful hands supported his weight and pushed him onward, He looked more like a gigantic spider than anything, and not in the least human. Panting and blown I at last gained the sumrnit and looked down upon a lake of dismal black water filling a circular crater about half a mile in diameter. Close by was an aperture in the rock and half-filled with water, and it was evident that this was connected with the outlet below by means of a shaft. Whether this was a natural formation or had been laboriously cut by hand I could not tell, but I was prepared for almost anything by this time and was not greatly surprised to find a cleverly constructed sluice gate arranged above the opening to regulate the flow of water. I had seen similar crater lakes in the extinct volcanoes of the West Indies, but I was surprised that Hazen had not mentioned it. But on second thought I realized that when flying over it, the dark water surrounded by vegetation would hardly be visible and might easily be mistaken for heavy shadow or an empty crater, while the aviator's surprise at the city would fix his attention upon it to the exclusion of all surroundings.

Standing upon the rock ridge several hundred feet above the city I had almost the same view as Hazen had from his plane and I could understand how, at an elevation of 5,000 feet or more, he had been unable to obtain any very accurate idea of the buildings or people. I also realized, with a sinking of my heart, that it would be next to impossible for him to recognize me or to see any signals I might make.

The most prominent spot in the entire valley was the pyramid, for this was isolated upon the green plain and the sun, striking through a gap in the eastern rim of the crater, shone directly upon the altar's summit, thus bringing it out in sharp relief. Indeed, it looked for all the world like a pylon on an aviation field. If I expected to make my presence known to Hazen or to signal to him, my best point of vantage would be the summit of the pyramid and I determined to climb there and await his arrival when he should be due, two days later.

Little did I dream at the time of the conditions under which I would await him upon that gruesome altar.

4: The Sacrifice

BY the time we had descended the mountain and had reached the city it was noon, and going to my quarters I was glad to find an excellent meal. Having finished eating I threw myself into the hammock and despite my scarcity of matches and tobacco, indulged in a smoke. Then, feeling drowsy, I took off my coat, placed it on the floor beside my hammock and closed my eyes.

I awoke refreshed and reached for my coat only to leap from the hammock with a cry of alarm. The coat was gone! Quickly I searched the room, thinking Zip might have placed the garment elsewhere while I slept, but the place was bare. Zip was nowhere to be seen, and even the rug on which meals were served had been removed.

Here was a pretty state of affairs. My coat contained my matches, pipe, tobacco, pocket knife and handkerchief. Without it I was lost, helpless, incapable of maintaining my prestige of position. Death or worse hovered over me. My life depended on regaining my precious garment and its contents. Who could have taken it? What could have been their object? And instantly the truth flashed upon my mind. It was that rascally high priest. He had seen me take pipe, tobacco and matches from my coat pocket. He had watched me narrowly, perhaps had kept his eyes upon me through some hidden peep-hole or opening, and had seen me remove my coat, and while I slept had seized it. Or perhaps he had ordered Zip to secure it for him. It made little difference which, for if it were in his possession he would have me in his power. He could order me to smoke and when I failed he could perform the miracle himself and denounce me as an imposter. My only hope was to regain my possessionsby fair means or foul, and knowing that every second I delayed increased my peril, I rushed to the ladder and across the roofs to the throne room.

From beneath me, as I started to descend, came the sounds of the hissing language in excited tones, and as my head came below the level of the roof my heart sank. The dark air of the room was heavy with tobacco smoke!

The next instant my feet were jerked from beneath me, I was seized, tumbled on the floor, and before I could strike or rise I was bound hand and foot. Dazed, startled and helpless I glanced about. Surrounding me were a dozen of the repulsive dwarfs. Gathered about the sides of the room were crowds of people, and seated upon the throne, puffing great clouds of smoke from my pipe, a wicked leer upon his ugly face, and thoroughly enjoying himself, was the priest, while beside him the king coughed and sneezed and looked very miserable.

All this I took in at a glance. Then I was seized and dragged roughly before the throne. I fully realized my doom was sealed. I was no longer a supernatural being to be feared and adored— my treatment proved that— but merely a

prisoner, an ordinary mortal. Oddly enough, however, I was no longer frightened. My first fears had given place to anger, and I raged and fumed and prayed that the grinning fiend before me might be stricken with all the torturing sickness, which usually follows the beginner's first smoke.

But apparently he was immune to the effects, and as soon as I was dragged before the throne he rose, and pointing at me, addressed the crowd before him. That he was denouncing me as an imposter and at the same time tremendously increasing his own importance was evident by his tones, his gestures and the expression on his black face. Moreover, he had another card to play. Pointing upward and waving his arm and making quite creditable imitation of an airplane's exhaust, he spoke vehemently and then pointed to a man who crouched on the dais.

At first I was at a loss to grasp his meaning, and then, as the trembling creature beside the throne spoke in frightened tones and gesticulated vividly, I realized he was the chap I had bumped into upon my arrival. He had spilled the beans and had informed the old scarecrow of a priest that I had arrived via the tunnel and not from the sky.

I felt sure now that my doom was sealed. But there was nothing I could do or say. There waa one chance in a million that I might be escorted from the valley and turned loose in the tunnel ; but that gave me no comfort, for I knew that hideous certain death awaited me on that slope covered with the devilish man-eating-trees.

The chances, however, were, all in favor of my being tortured and butchered. Strangely enough my greatest regret, the matter which troubled me the most and made me curse my carelessness in removing my coat while I slept, was not that I should be killed— I had faced death too often for that— but the fact that I would be unable to report the wonderful discoveries I had made or give my knowledge of the city and its people to the world. Indeed, my thoughts were so concentrated on this that I gave little attention to the priest, until he stepped forward, and, with a nasty grimace, struck me savagely across the face. Maddened at the blow I lunged forward like a butting ram. My head struck squarely in the pit of his stomach, and with a gasping yell he doubled up and fell sprawling on the dais while the pipe flew from his lips and scattered its contents far and near. Before I could roll to one side, my 'guards seized and pulled me across the room. Despite my plight and the fate in store for me I laughed loudly and heartily as I saw the priest with hands pressed to stomach, eyes rolling wildly and a sickly greenish pallor on his face. The blow plus the tobacco had dune its work. I had evened up the score a bit at any rate.

The next moment I was hauled through a low doorway hidden by draperies, and, bumping like a bag of meal over the rough stones, was pitched

into an inky black cell. Bruised, scratched and bleeding I lay there unable to move or see while the occasional sounds of shuffling footsteps, or rather handsteps, told me a guard was close at hand. For hour after hour I lay motionless, expecting each minute that I would be dragged out to torture or death and wondering dully what form it would take, until at last— numb, exhausted and worn out, I lost consciousness.

I was brought to my senses by being seized and jerked to a sitting posture, and found the cell illuminated by a spluttering torch, while two of the men supported my shoulders and a third held a gourd of water to my lips. My throat was parched and the liquid was most welcome, and a moment later, a fourth man appeared with food. It was evident that the priest had no intention of letting me die of thirst or starvation, and I wondered why he should be so solicitous of my comfort if I were doomed to an early death.

As soon as I had eaten, the guards withdrew, taking the torch, and I was once more left in stygian blackness with my thoughts. I wondered whether it were day or night, but I had no means of judging. It had been the middle of the afternoon when I had missed my coat, and, reasoning that the food served was probably the evening meal, I decided that it was now about sundown. In that case I should probably be put out of the way the next morning. That would be a full twenty-four hours before Hazen was due and I wondered what he would think when he saw no sign of me in the valley— whether he would surmise that I had not reached the city and had been killed by the Kunas, and what he would report to my friends in Colon.

But Colon, friends and Hazen seemed very far away as I thought of them there in that black hole awaiting death at the hands of the strange black dwarfs and, as far as any aid they could give me, was concerned I might as well have been in Mars.

My thoughts were interrupted by my guards reappearing with the torch. Lifting me to my feet they loosened the bonds about my legs and urged me through a small doorway, where I was compelled to bend low to pass, and along a winding, narrow, lowceilinged stone tunnel. That I was on my way to my execution I was sure, and vague thoughts of selling my life dearly and of overpowering my puny guards crossed my mind. But I dismissed such ideas as useless, for even were I to succeed I would be no better off. There were thousands of the tiny men in the city, it was impossible to escape from the valley unseen, and I had not the least idea where the underground passage led. To attempt to escape meant certain death, and there still remained a faint chance, a dim hope that I might yet be spared and merely deported. So, ducking my head and with stooping shoulders, I picked my way along the tunnel by the fitful glare of the flaming torch-

For what seemed miles the way led on and I began to think that the entrance was outside the valley and that I was being led to freedom, when a glimmer of light showed ahead, the floor sloped upward, and, an instant later, I emerged in the open air.

For a moment my eyes were blinded by the light after the darkness of the passage and I could not grasp where I was. I had thought it evening, but my first glance told me it was early morning and I knew the night had passed and another day had come. Then, as I looked about at my surroundings and it dawned upon me where I was, a shudder of horror, a chill of deadly fear swept over me. I was on the summit of the pyramid. The sacrificial altar was within three paces. Beside it stood the fiendish priest and his assistants, and gathered upon the green plain were hordes of people with faces upturned towards me. I was about to be sacrificed, to be bound fast to the bloodstained awful stone, to have my still-beating heart torn from my living body!

Anything were preferable to that and with a sudden bound I strove to gain the altar's edge and hurl myself to certain death. But to no avail. Two of the dwarfs held me fast by the cord which fastened my wrists and I was jerked back to fall heavily upon the stones. Before I could struggle up, four of the priest's assistants sprang forward and, grasping me by legs and shoulders, lifted me and tossed me upon the stinking sacrificial stone. I was helpless, and instantly my ankles were tied fast to the metal staples, the bonds of my wrists were severed, my arms were drawn apart and securely lashed to other staples, the stone collar was placed about my neck forcing my head far back and I waB ready for the glowering priest to wreak his awful vengeance.

Stepping close to the altar he drew a glittering obsidian knife— and even in my terrible predicament I noted this, and realized that he was adhering strictly to Aztec customs— and, raising his arms, he began a wailing, blood-curdling chant. Up from the thousands of throats below came the chanting chorus, rising and falling like a great wave of sound. How long I wondered, would this keep on? How much longer must this agony, this torture of suspense be borne? Why did he not strike his stone dagger into my chest and have it over with?

And then, from some dormant cell in my brain, came the answer. I was to be sacrificed to the sun god, and I remembered that, according to the Aztec religion, the blow could not be struck until the rising sun cast its rays upon the victim's chest above the heart. The priest was awaiting that moment. He was delaying until the sun, still behind the crater's rim, should throw its first rays upon me.

How long would it be? How many minutes must pass before the fatal finger of light pointed to my heart? With a mighty effort I turned my head slightly

towards the east. Above the rugged mountain edge was a blaze of light. Even as I looked with aching eyes a golden beam shot across the valley and flashed blindingly into my faee. It was now only a matter of seconds. The priest raised his knife aloft. The chant from the multitude ceased and over city and valley fell an ominous, awful silence. Upon the sacrificial knife the stm gleamed brilliantly, transforming the glass-like stone to burnished gold. With his free hand the priest tore open my shirt and bared my bosom. I felt that the end had come. I closed my eyes. And then, at the very instant when the knife was about to sweep down, faint and far away, like the hamming of a giant bee, I caught a sound. It was unmistakable unlike anything else in all the world— the exhaust of an airplane's engines!

And my straining ears were not the only ones that heard that note. Over the priest's face swept a look of deadly fear. The poised knife was slowly lowered. He turned trembling towards the west and from the waiting throng below rose a mighty sigh of terror.

A new hope sprang up in my breast. Was it Hazen? He was not due until the next day and it might be only some army plane that would pass far to one aide of the valley. No, the sound was increasing, the plane was approaching. But even were it Hazen would it help me any? Would he see my plight and descend or would he fly too far above the city to note what was taking place ? For a space my life was saved. The fear of that giant, roaring bird would prevent the sacrifice. The priest feared 1 he had made a mistake, that I was a god, that, from the sky, vengeance would swoop upon him and his people for the contemplated butchery. Bat if the plane passed? Or woold his dread of it be greater than his fear of defying the sun god by faffing in the sacrifice?

Now the roar of the motor sounded directly overhead and the next moment I glimpsed the plane speeding across the blue morning sky. Then it was gone. The exhaust grew fainter and fainter.

ALL hope was lost. Whoever it was had flown on, all unsuspecting the awful fate of a fellow man upon that sunlit pyramid.

And now the priest was again towering over me. Once more he raised his knife. I could feel the warm sun beating upon my throat and shoulders. I could feel it creeping slowly but surely downward. The knife quivered in the impatient hand of the priest, I saw his muscles tense themselves for the blow, I caught the grim smile that flitted across his face as he prepared to strike.

An instant more and my palpitating heart would be held aloft for all to see.

But the blow never fell. With a deafening roar, that drowned the mighty shout of terror from the people, the airplane swooped like an eagle from the sky and clove the air within a hundred feet of the altar. With a gurgling cry the

priest flung himself face down, and his knife fell clattering with the Bound of broken glass upon the stones.

Was it Hazen? Would he see me? Would he alight? Was I saved?

The answer was a thunderous, fear maddened cry from below, a swishing whirr as of a gale of wind and a dark shadow sweeping over me.

And then my overwrought senses, my frazzled nerves could stand no more and all went black Before my eyes.

Dimly consciousness came back. I heard the sounds of rushing feet, the panting labored breaths of men, sharp, half uttered exclamations and grunting noises. Then a shrill scream of mortal terror and a deep drawn sigh of relief. Above my wondering eyes a figure suddenly loomed. A weird uncanny figure with strangely smooth and rounded head and great goggling, glassy eyes. With a jerk the stone collar was lifted from my strained neck and as full consciousness came back I gasped. It was Hazen ! By some miracle he was ahead of time !

From somewhere, muffled behind that grotesque mask, came a hoarse: "My God, are you hurt?"

Before I could speak the bonds were slashed from my ankles and wrists. A strong arm raised me and pulled me from the slab.

"For God's sake, hurry!" cried Hazen, as half supporting me he rushed toward the altar stairs. "I've got 'em buffaloed for a minute, but the Lord alone knows how long it'll hold 'em!"

Rapidly as my numbed limbs would permit I rushed down the sloping, spiral way. Half carried by Hazen I raced across the few yards of grass between the base of the pyramid and the plane, and as I did so I caught a fleeting glimpse of a huddled, shapeless, bloodly bundle of green and white. It was all that remained of the priest whom Hazen had hurled from the altar top!

The next moment I was in the plane and Hazea was twirling the propeller. There was a roar as the motor started. Hazen leaped like an acrobat to his seat and slowly the machine moved across the plain.

Everywhere the people wene prostrate, but as the machine Btarted forward one after another glanced up. Ere we had traveled a score of yards the c-reatures were rising and with frightful screams were scattering from our pathway. It was impossible to avoid them. With sickening shoeks the whirring propeller struck one after another. Blood spattered our faces and becrimsoned the windshield and the wings. But uninjured the plane gathered headway; the uneven bumping over the ground ceased; we were traveling smoothly, lifting from the earth.

Then with a strange wild roar the people rushed for us. Racing on their hands they came. Rocks and missiles whizzed about us. An arrow whirred by

my head and struck quivering in a strut. But now we were rising rapidly. We were looking down upon the maddened hosts, their arrows and slingflung stones were striking the under surface of the fuselage and wings. We were safe at last A moment more and we would be above the crater rim.

A sudden exclamation from Hazen startled me. I glanced up. Straight ahead rose the precipitous mountain side above the quarry. To clear it we must ascend far more rapidly than we were doing.

"Must have splintered the blades!" jerked out Hazen. "She's not making it. Can't swing her. Rudder's jammed. Heave out everything you can find. Hurry or we'll smash!"

Before us loomed the ragged, rocky wall. We were rushing to our doom at lightning speed. At Hazen's words I grasped whatever I could find and tossed it over the side. A box of provisions, a roll of tools, a leather jacket, a thermos bottle, canteens, an automatic pistol and a cartridge belt all went. I glanced up. We were rising faster. A few pounds more overboard, a few feet higher and we would be clear. Was there anything else I could throw out? Frantically I searched. I saw a canlike object resting on a frame. Spare gasoline I decided, but fuel was of no value now. With an effort I dragged it out. I lifted it and hurled it over.

With a sudden jerk the plane sprung upward. There was a terrific muffled roar from below and with barely a yard to spare we rose above the crater rim.

"Lord, you must have dropped that old bomb!" cried Hazen. "The concussion jarred the rudder free."

I glanced over the side. Far beneath, a cloud of smoke and dust was drifting slowly aside exposing the aqueduct, broken, smashed and in ruins. Froml the opening in the mountain side a mighty stream of water was roaring in a rushing, tearing torrent. The bomb had landed squarely in the quarry. The aqueduct had fallen, the shock had let loose the gates of the lake and the whole vast crater reservoir was pouring in a mighty flood across the valley.

In a wide arc Hazen swung the plane about. "Poor devils!" he muttered as we soared above the doomed city.

Already the green plain was shimmering with the glint of water. We could see the frantic, frenzied people running and scrambling up their ladders. Again we wheeled and circled far above them and now only the roof tops of the houses were above the flood. Presently these too sank from sight and above the sunlit waters only the sacrificial stone remained

"It's all over!" exclaimed Hazen, and heading northward we sped bejjond the encircling mountain sides.

Beneath us now was forest, and with a shudder I recognized it as that death-dealing, nightmare grove of cannibal trees. Fascinated I gazed down and

suddenly from the mountain side behind us burst a frothing yellow torrent. The pressure of the flood had been too great. The overwhelming waters had forced the stone door of the tunnel by which I had entered that incredible valley. Before my wondering eyes the devastating deluge swept down the slope. I saw the monstrous trees shiver and sway and crash before the irresistible force. They gave way and like matchsticks went tossing, tumbling, bobbing down the hillside.

Higher and higher we rose. The water-filled crater was now but a silvery lake. The slope up which I had fought and raced from the ravenous, blood-sucking trees was bare, red earth scarred deep by the plunging stream that flowed over it. Far to the west gleamed the blue Pacific. Like a vast map Darien was spread below us. Northward we sped. Before us was civilization. Behind us death and destruction. The man-eating trees were a thing of the past. The lost city was lost forever.

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6: The Eagle

Harold Mercer

1882-1952

Sun (Sydney) 4 Aug 1935

LOOKING up and out of my window in a pause in my writing, I saw it— a dark blot, on the clear sky over the distant purple range. It seemed framed exactly in the centre of the window, and something In the unusual size of the flying thing, monstrous even at a distance, held my gaze. Although its flight appeared leisurely, its speed must have been great, for soon it was plain enough for me to see the sweeping of its wings. By this time, fascinated. I was standing by the window to keep a clearer view, as, in its approach. it rose more directly overhead.

Some admiration for the superb strength of the great bird's flight held me. Combined with it, however, was a feeling of foreboding. I have a habit of "thinking-in" to the possible feelings of other living things; and something of the frenzied terror of small animals and birds to which that shadow overhead would be ominous occurred to me. It was almost as though I were one of those small creatures myself; yet there was a fascinated thrill with it, too. A spell was broken when the great bird, leaving a trail of faint sound, beating of wings, passed out of sight overhead.

I returned to my table and the labor of love with which I had been occupied. It was a letter to my brother, somewhere up above the Persian Gulf, where the spirit of adventure had taken him and he had found worth-while work to do. Strongly the thought came into my mind that my brother was like that eagle: Strong, courageous, predatory, and in a way pitiably lonely. Different as were our natures, there had been a remarkably strong attachment between us from earliest infancy, and these letters between us, a continuous correspondence, were its abiding sign. The reflection that the interchange meant more to my strong, adventuring brother than to myself, gave me a kind of pathetic amusement at times. All his life my brother, at the back of his wild defiance's of dangers, had an almost passionate desire for affection, especially my affection. In our childhood, when never a day passed without an exploit on his part that made me angry with a sense of shame, since I dared not follow where he would lead, he would leave his bed and clamber into mine, to sleep with his arm lying over me. It was a remembrance of such things that impelled me to keep up my letters to him. a poignant feeling for the loneliness of the eagle spirit, a sense that my letters to him answered much the same purpose as my company beside him did In the days of our infancy.

His letters were more interesting than mine, which could convey only such humdrum news that may be gathered by a man working in an ordered city and

living in one of its outer suburbs. His teemed with incident and adventure, references to places the very mention of which conjured up visions of romance. Work as an engineer had taken him to Afghanistan, first of all; he had found a hazardous usefulness in the war, which continued, after peace was declared elsewhere, in the constant conflict against Bolshevist agencies steadily pushing their way down amongst the peoples of Asia.

Being in the Secret Service now, his confidences were full of reticences and his descriptions of his own part in adventures sketchy; but my knowledge of his old daring helped me to understand a lot. The letter I had before me told how he had managed to find a way into a secret meeting arranged by Bolshevist agents and, practically unarmed, had held up the leaders and turned them over to the native authorities. He held that the greatest part of the success was in the humiliation he had inflicted, and it was his avid enjoyment of this phase of the adventure that made him tell of it with more detail than usual.

A swish of passing wings had me on my feet again. With a bound I was at the window. The eagle was sailing majestically around in circles of no great altitude, as if surveying the surrounding district, its head turning to left and right as It passed. To follow it In its circling flight I leaned head and shoulders out of the window. It came round with a sweep: and then it seemed to me that it swooped in my direction. Hurriedly I withdrew myself from the window, half closing it as I left it. An uncanny sensation that I was one of those small creatures that might be the bird's natural prey, made me feel an actual fear, a fear of which I was so ashamed that I sat down again at the table, assuring myself that there was something better to be done than watching a bird, however magnificent.

The light in the room was suddenly blotted, a flutter of wings falling on my ears, even as the shadow seemed to fall on my heart. As I leaped to my feet my chair was upset behind me. The bird, monstrous in size at such proximity, was framed in the window, its wings partly spread, and fluttering to maintain the scrambling hold of its talons on the window-sill.

My heart pattered as I stared at my strange visitor. The thing frightened me as much by the strangeness of its arrival there, as by the terrifying strength it represented; most of all by the murderous strength that appeared in the cruel-looking beak. Yet there was no fury in its aspect; it twisted its head from side to side, as if inspecting me. When I could recover sense enough to do so, I yelled, to frighten it away. It remained unmoved. For a moment I calculated what harm that beak, suddenly thrust through .the window glass, could do to me; then, deciding that I could dodge it if the bird made an attack, I approached. The bird gave no hostile signs. I shut the window full down, and retreated quickly.

Uncannily, the bird stayed where he was, scrambling for its perch. Its presence awed me. Apparently I could not drive it away. I left the room, shutting the door after me. It is hard to describe the feeling of terror that had come over me. I heard a swish of wings, as if the bird had deserted its perch, yet I felt a reluctance to go back and see whether it had really gone, or to go into any room where a window might expose me to its sight again, I stood in the hall, listening. There was a curious shuffling at the door, against which something bumped several times; then a rustling of wings, and a fluttering at one or other of the windows. The encircling of the house by the bird, as if seeking an entrance, was weird. I felt like a man besieged by something supernatural.

A sharp report rang out just as the sound of rustling wings came again from the direction of the window of my smoke room, in which I do my writing; with it was the sound as of pebbles thrown sharply against the wall, a sharp, hoarse scream, and a sudden heavy beat of wings.

With a quick forgetfulness of my fears, I rushed into the room again. The bird had gone. I saw it soaring rapidly upwards, but there were little drops of blood on the window-sill. Several neighbors were clustered in my front garden as I went out.

The eagle, high up in the air now, circled around, unwilling to leave; but when that mean little runt Barnes again lifted his shotgun and fired upwards, it made off with powerful sweeps. Relieved as I was at the bird's disappearance, I felt a vague anger in the thought that a man like Barnes, with a lust for killing that is often associated with mean little men, should have held the whip of superior weapons over the noble bird. Rabbits seemed more Barnes's height.

We discussed the singular conduct of the eagle and its magnificent proportions for some time, and then, feeling glad that my wife and family, who would have been badly scared, were away, I shuttered the windows, locked the house, and went away at his invitation to dine with a neighbor, Targett, glad to shake off in company the eerie memories of what had happened. It was whilst, we were dining that an exclamation from one of the children, who was facing the window, sent us pell-mell on to the verandah.

Targett's house, although at a good distance, overlooked my own, and we could plainly see the giant bird, fluttering around the walls like a moth against the flame of a candle, visiting each of the shuttered windows in turn.

"What a curious thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Targett. "Why should it hover round your house in particular, Mr. Matthews?"

"I don't know. It gives me an uncanny feeling," I said. "Of course, the only explanation is that the eagle is a tame one— possibly a pet at some time. There are people who have some queer pets; and seeing me looking out as it

soared round, it may have fancied some resemblance to a lost master. Did anyone who previously lived in my house go in for keeping eagles?"

The Targetts, who had lived in the district longer than I, could remember no such keeper of pets, but this explanation of the weird visit remained in my mind as the only logical one. That sympathy for a lost pet, or one driven away from its home, which, I suppose, we are all inclined to feel, struck me in regard to the eagle, which I remembered had had for me the friendly aspect, in spite of the natural ferocity of its appearance, which a pet shows for the master he knows.

But I was glad to see it fly away as the dusk fell quickly. Androcles's lion may have been all very well to Androcles, but it would have scared the life out of any other man it happened to mistake for its benefactor; and that was how I felt in regard to the eagle.

Although I laughed at the Targetts' invitation to stay the night, and at the revolver Targett offered me, my state of mind is indicated by the fact that, although I am a lover of wide-open windows, the shutters around my house remained closed that night.

I was glad of it when I woke in the morning to the sound of rustlings and scrapings against the shutters of my window and the adjacent walls, With heart pounding curiously, I lay still in bed as the noise passed from my window, but was renewed in other parts of the house. It was only when the sounds had ceased for some time that I had courage to leave my bed, and when I left the house I hurried away from the vicinity as quickly as I could go.

The newspapers had got the story of the strange visitor, and it was all over town. One result was the arrival of my friend Burns, with a business-like big-game rifle and a definite plan of going home with me that afternoon for the prospect of the sport he saw in killing the big bird. It would have been foolishness to refuse, yet I felt a strange reluctance. It seemed to me that I was betraying something that was placing confidence in me— something that, however much I feared it, was a friend.

All the same, Burns was there with his rifle that afternoon, when, after waiting tensely by my smoke room window, we saw the bird majestically approaching against the blue sky. There had been a conflict of emotion within me up to then, an inclination to tell Burns to take himself and his gun away; but a memory of the terror with which the bird had filled me returned, and I was glad he was there. Yet even as Burns lifted the rifle to his shoulder, an insane desire to grasp it from his hands was in me.

Burns has quite a reputation as a marksman at moving targets. It appeared to me that, simultaneously with the sharp report of the rifle, there was a

splatter of feathers below the soaring bird, which seemed a check in its flight and then, with wings fluttering, topple earth-wards.

The sight made me sick, but I found myself beside Burns as we reached the gate. The eagle had fallen some distance away in some scrub, and he was keen to secure it. I let him go, not caring to go with him; and I remembered that I had not inspected my letter-box.

There was a letter in it. My brother was dead.

"The official papers and medals you will find in the postal packet which goes separately from this letter explains how much your brother, who gave his life in the service of the Empire, was valued by the authorities, as well as by those who were his brothers in the service," the letter ran. "Included also in the packet are your letters to him, which he desired should be returned to you in the event of his death. It is fine to think that such affection between brothers as that in which he held you... Did your brother tell you that he learned to believe the doctrine, of the transmigration of souls? If there is any truth in that, your brother's soul will inhabit an eagle. It was as the 'Eagle' that we knew him."

WE HAD BEEN talking about uncanny things; that was Matthews's contribution. Dawson now weighed in:—

"Normal men like everything about them to be normal," he said. "If there is such a thing as a spiritual survival it is only a very foolish spirit who will make mortal survivors uncomfortable through any feeling that it is necessary to continue a companionship after death. I knew a man named Braund, between whom and his wife there existed an unusual warm love. They agreed that if either should die, he or she would return to the other in the spirit form, if it were possible.

"Braund's wife died, and Braund's house became known as being haunted. Braund swore that he had spoken to his dead wife; servants declined to stay in the place and friends kept away. Braund moved to a new house. The old one was burnt down. I believe Braund himself started the fire."

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7: Home Influence

Alice Duer Miller

1874-1942

Harper's Monthly, Jan 1916

"STRANGE that Lola has never married," said her brother as she left the room.

His father's eyes turned to him quickly.

"Strange?" he answered. "I don't see anything strange about it. What man could do as much for her as I do?"

The air of the dining-room was beginning to fill with the smoke from two long, dark cigars, and to lose the perfume of the thick-petaled, white flowers in the center of the table, and of the pyramids of fruit in silver dishes at the ends.

George Varens glanced round the room. It had been elaborately paneled in the year 1880, and hung with dark, blurred pictures in heavy, gold frames. His father had bought the house soon after his marriage and had it done over according to his own ideas. He had never seen any reason for altering anything since. Neither his children, nor his wife during her lifetime, would have thought of suggesting such a thing.

The dining-room had been the scene of many conflicts between the father and son— conflicts from which George liked to tell himself that he had emerged at last triumphant, independent, his own master. If he came back, as he occasionally did, it was as an equal, or at least as the chief of a friendly tribe, ready to offer counsel or alliance. There were no more conflicts. "No," George used to say, ''he knows that I am almost forty years old and the head of an independent business." He never admitted that most of this business had come to him either directly through his father, or indirectly through those who wished to please his father.

A great many people wished to please Oliver Varens, and George himself was among the number. Indeed, his remark about Lola was intended as a compliment, and designed to please. Finding, however, that it had failed, he did not retreat with undignified haste. Both his hands were engaged in plaiting a little paper wrapper that had held a chocolate, and he did not trouble to take his cigar from his mouth as he answered, "Oh, well, most people like to have some sort of life of their own."

"Lola has a life of her own,'' the elder man answered, almost roughly. "She is at the head of my house. I never go on a trip without taking her with me; every wish she has I gratify. She is in my confidence as many people, even you, George, would give a good deal to be; and, I can tell you, I have had some excellent suggestions from Lola. Marry! Not she. Why should she?"

It was plain from the tone of this question that Varens wanted an answer; and equally plam from the expression of George's face that he did not mean to

give one. He sat smoking and looking aloof. He was disgusted to find that he was still rendered acutely uncomfortable by that note of antagonism in his father's voice. His first impulse was to say something conciliatory, but remembering his independent position he contrived to refrain.

In the pause the butler and two foot-men came in with coff'ee and liqueurs— magnifIcent blond young Englishmen, they bent over the little, pale man at the head of the table. Like George, they also were afraid of him.

A casual observer might have found Oliver Varens insignificant in appearance; he was sixty-two and looked older; he was pale, with .sparse, dark hair and a drooping mustache; but all the vigor of his mind and will had gone into a pair of black eyes, intense, but without sparkle; they never varied, never lightened when he smiled, never darkened when he scowled. They were like two little black openings into what many people considered his little black heart.

George took advantage of the interruption made by the entrance of the servants to change the subject.

"Let me say a word about this other matter, father," he said, as soon as they were again alone; and he was now very much the chief of a friendly tribe: "I feel in a position to state— I feel positive that these fellows have evidence that your transactions in the stock took place before the directors' meeting. They even hint at the existence of a letter. But I said to them, 'Gentlemen, if you knew my father as well as I do, you would know that, even were the facts as you assert, there would never have been a letter written; that I'll vouch for.' "

His father allowed this fine sentence to lie unnoticed for a second before he replied: "Thank you, George, for your flattering opinion. I believe, however, that I did write some such letter. You must remember we were not then so conscientious about such matters as we are now."

It was as much his father's easy confession of the act as the act itself which surprised George. He could never bring himself to admit having done anything foolish.

"You really wrote a letter to McCann?" he asked.

His father nodded calmly.

"Bless my soul! But can you trust McCann?"

For the first time that evening Oliver Varens smiled, a slight, painful smile. "Trust," he said. "I know that word only as a noun." He paused. "My boy," he went on, "even in '98 I had a notion that that was an imprudent letter, and two days after I wrote it I destroyed it myself in McCann's office,"

"Of course, a copy may have been made."

"A hundred for all I care. Copies are no use, unless they come out of my own letter-book."

"Then you feel no anxiety?"

His father looked reflectively at the three decanters before him— one brown as liquid mahogany, one green as an emerald, one colorless as ice. He finally chose the last.

"George," he said, as he poured out a glass, "no one has successfully blackmailed me yet. Only two have ever tried it, and one of them is in Sing Sing."

At this recollection he almost smiled again. " However," he added, "it might be worth while for me to go over my letter-file and see what I did say. You can go and talk to your sister."

They rose. George looked at his watch. He wanted to get away to a sale of Chinese porcelains, in which he took a hard, businesslike interest, but he saw he had half an hour to spare and went to the drawing-room.

This room was even more reminiscent of the decorative ideas of the early '80's than the dining-room. George wondered how Lola could bear it.

She was sitting reading, with her long, slender feet stretched out on a foot-stool. She was tall, almost too tall for her weight; her eyes were soft and brown; her dark hair was saved from being commonplace by a uniform tinge in it of purplish red. She was supposed to resemble her dead mother, who had been a beauty. Lola, if there had been some suggestion of force in her movements, a tinge of color in her cheeks, a trace of animation in her expression, would have been a strikingly handsome woman.

George came in with his hands in his pockets and bent over a small, blue vase on a table.

"Where did you get that gem?" he asked, contemptuously.

"Father bought it, I think," she said. "It's a pretty color,"

"It has no value," returned her brother. "Why don't you learn something about these things. I have a man dine with me twice a week, and I tell you he teaches me a lot."

"I'm tired of learning," she answered, impatiently, "I'm always learning and never doing."

"That's better than most of us, who are always doing and never learning."

She sprang up with unusual energy and put both her hands on her brother's shoulders. She was taller than he, in her high heels, "George," she said, "I want you to do something for me. Ask father to give me an allowance of my own."

George laughed uneasily. When he invoked the lightning he preferred to do it for his own benefit.

"You'd be the loser by any such arrangement, my dear girl," he answered, "He'd never give you half, no, not one-tenth what he lets you spend as it is."

"But that's just it. He lets me spend it. I want just once to do something my own way. Why, George, I lead the life of an eight-year-old child. I don't even select my own clothes. After all, I'm his daughter; I have some brains and ability. I feel as if I must use them or die. Can't you understand that, George?"

For an instant her brother honestly tried to understand. When he thought of himself, he knew he would rather die than change places with her. But when he compared her life with other women's, it seemed to him that most of them would envy her— her luxury, her safety, her peace. Some even might envy her close association with such a czar in the financial world as Oliver Varens; but these, he reflected, would be women who had the wit or the wickedness to make something tangible out of such an association.

"I don't see much the matter with your life, Lola,"^he said. "You ought to see the lives some women have to lead. I don't know of anything you couldn't have as things are, if it weren't for your own lack of initiative."

Withdrawing her hands from his shoulders, she flung them in the air.

"Initiative!" she cried. "And how much do you think you'd have, if you had lived as I have? Suppose you still felt strange alone in the street. Suppose you had never bought a railroad ticket for yourself. Suppose you had never been allowed to compete for anything you wanted against other people who wanted it, too? Do you think you'd have developed initiative and strength of character and all the rest of it? No, George, you'd probably be worse than I am."

He decided to give her what comfort he could. "Well," he said, "I can see it might be hard to live in the house with my father— at least it was for me, but then I think he actually disliked me, whereas he worships the ground you walk on, Lola. I don't beheve he could get on without you; honestly, I don't. That must be a satisfaction to you."

"Ask him to do as I say, George."

The room was close, and far off he heard his father's approaching step. There was something oppressive in the air; for an instant George really caught a glimpse of what his sister meant.

"I'll try," he said, and knew he would regret the promise. "I'll try, but if he had ever intended to do it, he'd have done it long ago, without waiting to be pestered by either you or me. And even if he does, I don't know what good it will do you. If you had had the courage and energy and push to get it for yourself, that would have helped; but to have it handed to you because I ask for it for you doesn't seem any great triumph of independence. But I'll ask. I'll ask, if you insist."

She nodded her head briskly. "I do insist," she said, just as her father entered.

In spite of his ancestry, which was largely Scotch and North- of- Ireland, Mr. Varens looked at times almost Chinese in his imperturbability. He looked so now.

He approached his daughter and laid his hand lightly and fondly on her shoulder. "Lola," he said, in his low, even voice, "you understand my filing-system better than I do myself. Go and see if you can put your hand on a letter of mine to McCann about the Western Co., in November, 1898."

When she had gone, he turned to his son. "She would make an excellent secretary, so obedient, so intelligent. I sometimes wish I had had her taught stenography."

"Why didn't you?"

"In my opinion, a profession makes a woman too independent for her own good."

The opportunity seemed too fortunate to let pass, and George took advantage of it. "Lola has just been speaking to me about herself. She doesn't seem content."

His father, who had sat down and crossed his hands and feet, an attitude which had become habitual with him, pulled once at his long cigar before he answered, "Did you ever know a woman who was?"

Try as he would, George could not resist the wish this tone always created in him to join forces with his father, to be one of a pair of Olympians talking over the affairs of an inferior species. He was not a subtle man, not given to splitting hairs ethically; but he was shrewd enough to know that to smile responsively into his father's impassive face would be to betray his sister's cause at the outset. Yet not for the life of him could he have helped so smiling, as he answered :

"Just at present her idea seems to be that a fixed allowance would solve all her problems." More and more clearly as he spoke he saw it was wise to disassociate himself as much as possible from this vicarious petition, "I told her how short-sighted she was, how much more she could count on, as things are now; but you know what a woman is when she gets an idea into her head." From his manner it might have been supposed that he had acted throughout as his father's viceroy.

The elder man smoked on in silence.

"What shall I tell her, sir?"

"Nothing."

"I should like to report something, just to show her that Fve done as she asked me."

At first it seemed as if Mr. Varens would remain unmoved by this appeal to speak, but, in the pause, the door opened and his daughter entered. She made little noise, and the door was behind him, but he was aware of her presence, and, taking his cigar out of his mouth, he said, clearly:

"You may tell her that any expenditures that I approve of her making, I will finance."

"I see. And those you don't approve of—"

"I should not allow her to make in any event."

George, with senses less acute than his father, had not noticed the entrance of his sister, and therefore he took no trouble to conceal his pleasure that the tiresome little incident was definitely closed. "Yes, yes, I see," he said, cheerfully. "Well, I must say that seems perfectly fair."

"Always glad to have your approval, George," murmured his father.

At this Lola came forward. "It's delightful to find you two so well agreed," she said, and her voice actually trembled with the bitterness of her resentment, George stared at her with his round, prominent eyes. Amazement was always his preliminary state of mind whenever any one showed disapproval of his conduct. Afterward he was wont to explain the phenomenon as due to peculiarities in the other person's psychology.

Her father seemed not to notice her excitement. "Did you find the letter, my dear?" he asked, holding out his hand to her.

She shook her head. "No; but I saw the place where it must have been. It's been taken out."

George glanced quickly at the older man. "That's what they have, then."

Varens nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"This letter," said Lola— "was it important?"

She had spoken to her father, but George answered. "Very important, very important indeed," he said. He felt himself excited, and somehow the excitement was not wholly painful. He was prepared to help his father to the uttermost, to stand by him, to work for him, bribe for him if necessary; even— his mind went forward to the uttermost disaster— to go on the stand and perjure himself and go to prison for him; but all the time there would be a certain satisfaction in knowing that the old man had tripped up at last. Aloud he said, rather grandly:

"Oh, well, you know, McCann can be bought."

His father just glanced at him— no more.

"Bought," George went on, "but it must all be made to look pretty. You might have to go as high as fifty thousand dollars invested in some of his wild schemes."

"I might consent even to go on one of his boards," said Varens.

The two men talked long. For some time Lola was a silent auditor, but they did not apparently notice her presence, nor, when she slipped away, did they observe her going. George's porcelain sale had long been over when at last he got up to go. His father went into the hall with him, where a servant was waiting with his hat and coat.

"Miss Varens gone up-stairs?" he asked, carelessly.

''No, sir; Miss Varens went out, just this minute,"

"Went out?" exclaimed George.

"Just now, sir."

"What in the world does that mean?" George demanded, turning to his father.

''Nothing," said Varens. "It's not so," But even as he spoke there was a ring at the bell, and the servant, springing to answer it, admitted Lola, bareheaded, wrapped in a dark cloak.

Her father eyed her; her brother asked, loudly, "Where in Heaven's name have you been?"

She handed her cloak to the servant with a gesture almost defiant as she replied, "Just to post a letter."

Her father was still watching her. "Oh," he said, "we post our own letters nowadays, do we? This is feminism with a vengeance."

George at once caught the note. It was to be mockery, not war.

"*Allons, enfants de la patrie*," he said, and, jamming his hat on his head, he went off whistling the "Marseillaise."

The door shut behind him; the servant began moving about putting things to rights, in obedience to Mr. Varens's order that the house was to be closed; but even in giving these orders he continued to watch his daughter.

"Father," she said, suddenly, "I want to speak to you."

"Not to-night, my dear. I have important matters to consider to-night."

"What I have to say is important, too."

"I fancy to-morrow will do as well. Good night, my dear." He kissed her tenderly. "And, hereafter, let the servants post your letters." With this he twrned toward his study, and she, after an instant of hesitation, went slowly upstairs, as if against her own volition.

All of Varens's real work had been done sitting motionless and in silence alone at his desk. Other men took notes, wrote letters, thought things out as they went about their daily routine; but Varens's custom was simply to sit looking straight ahead of him.

"I must familiarize myself with the situation," was a phrase of his, and by it he meant that he must sit thus alone until his grasp of facts was complete. Then action followed automatically.

He had gone to his study, and was still sitting there at one o'clock that same night. His study was a small room built over the yard. Small as it was, it was bare and almost empty. There were two filing cabinets, a few chairs, and in the center a little table, holding nothing but a telephone. Assuredly Varens's equipment was in his own head.

This room was connected with the rest of the house by only a narrow passage, and along this Varens suddenly became aware that steps were approaching. He listened intently, and his eyes turned to the drawer of the little table, in which he kept a revolver. When the door-handle turned his own hand moved toward the drawer, but when he saw that the newcomer was only Lola, he sat back once more and folded his hands.

"Can't be interrupted to-night, Lola," he said.

Without raising his voice, he had used a certain crispness of enunciation that usually served to vanquish her, but when, looking up, he saw that she was not even flurried by his tone, he recognized immediately that there must be something unusual in the situationLola's own aspect was unusual. Her color was high, her eyes shining. She looked more lovely than he had ever seen her; but it was not this that so surprised him. It was an air at once stern and careless, a sort of hard brightness about her that he had never seen before.

"Has anything happened, Lola?" he asked.

"Yes— no, nothing has happened, except that I must speak to you, father."

"I have already told you twice that I am occupied."

"I can tell you, though, that you are wasting your time. You're thinking how you can get back your letter. Well, I have it."

"Oh, you've found it." He smiled at her kindly, a very different smile from that to which he treated his son. "Good! That saves me some anxiety."

"Some anxiety and fifty thousand dollars."

"Possibly fifty thousand, but that is less important."

"Father, give me that money. It's the only thing I have ever asked you for. You've never given me anything."

"Never given you anything, Lola?" he said. "What do you mean! What have you in the world that I have not given you?"

"I have nothing," she answered. "You've never been willing to give me either the money or the education to get anything for myself. That's just what I mean."

Varens had not the faintest idea what she meant. In a business relation he never would have committed himself to words until he saw the situation a little more clearly, but in a domestic relation it had never occurred to him that such caution could be necessary.

"You must express yourself a little more calmly, Lola, before I can understand you," he said. "Are you complaining of the way I have brought you up and educated you."

"Look at the result."

"The result, my dear, seems to me a very charming woman."

"Charming!" she cried, with real ferocity. "And for whom has my charm been preserved? I never see a man except you. What good has my charm ever done me? The only time any one ever felt it, the only time a man ever did have the courage to penetrate into this house when you weren't here—"

Her father held up his hand to stop her. "One minute," he said. "I have, as it happens, kept track of that young man, not so very young any more, by the way. He is at present assistant traffic manager of a small Southern railroad, earning a salary of thirty-five hundred dollars, and his habits are not temperate. Do you think that would have made you happy?"

"At least I should have lived. I'd have had my own life, my own children—"

"Life! Children!" exclaimed Varens. "I don't like to hear you talk like that. Lola, my daughter! Is this the point of this whole absurd scene— to reproach me with not having allowed you to marry that commonplace drunkard?"

"No," answered Lola, firmly; "no, that's not what I reproach you with. I was never really sure I wanted to marry him, even at the time. But I do reproach you with having brought me up to be so timid, so dependent, so ignorant, that if I had wanted to marry a poor man, or to do anything else that required courage and self-reliance, it would have been impossible. That's what has been tyrannical, father. That's where I never had a chance,"

"I have always believed," he answered, "that for a small number of women marriage was not necessary. I had supposed you were one of these. Perhaps I have paid you too high a compliment."

"It's not marriage only. It's everything. You wouldn't let me go to college. You wouldn't let me go to the Pacific with Miss Comans, hunting shells. You wouldn't let me do any settlement work. You would not even let me go to school."

"At home you had the undivided attention of the best teachers."

"But do you suppose they did not find out quickly enough that you didn't care whether I learned anything or not? They soon saw that you would take me off to Florida or Italy in the middle of my winter's work, if it suited your pleasure. There were no examinations, no competition, no tests, no inquiry. One of those Frenchwomen and I used to do nothing but read novels together, and such novels! If I had been a boy— if it had been a question of George, you would have wanted to be sure that you were getting your money's worth— that he was really working. It would have been thought bad for his character to

be idle, and he would have been offered incentives to work. I was always offered incentives not to work."

Her father laughed. "I think, my dear," he said, "we may safely leave the rest of this indictment till the morning."

"Father, will you give me that money?"

"I will not."

"You would have given it to that blackmailer."

"Only if there had been no other way."

She struck her hand on the table.

"Well, there is no other way," she said. "I have your letter, and I will only give it back for fifty thousand dollars!"

There was a pause of several seconds, during which, as Varens intended, the dramatic quality of her last words a good deal evaporated.

Then he said, pleasantly: "Sometime you must get me to tell you how blackmailing is really done. The attempt and not the deed is particularly disastrous. For instance, what could be more childish than for you, physically weaker than I am, and unarmed, to come to me alone at this hour and tell me you have on your person a paper that I am willing to give a large sum of money to obtain?"

"It is not on my person."

"In your room is about the same thing. I have only to lock you in here and make a thorough search of the house. Nothing could be easier than that, you know."

"It is not in the house."

Now, for the first time perhaps in all her life, she had his full, concentrated attention,

"Where is it?"

"It was that I went out to post."

"You mean it's already out of your hands?"

"No," She explained carefully. "It is in an envelope directed to the editor of a newspaper, and I inclosed it to a friend of mine with instructions to hold it until half-past ten to-morrow morning, and then to mail it unless I telephoned to the contrary."

"Why did you name half-past ten?"

"To give you time to get to the bank."

Something seemed to vibrate in the air as Oliver Varens began to think.

"This is not your own scheme," he said, bending on her the full intensity of his gaze. "Some one has suggested this?"

She nodded.

"Who? George?"

"You yourself father. Isn't it just what you did in the Crawford case? Remember, you've always told me about your successes."

It was true. His memory went back to a hundred indiscretions, too far from mutual to be called confidences. He had sometimes felt the need of recounting his triumphs, and only to his daughter had he felt safe in doing so.

"I have trusted you too much, Lola," he said, forgetting that earlier in the evening he had disclaimed any knowledge of such a verb.

"No, father, you have despised me too much."

Presently he said: "Suppose for the sake of argument I should write you a check for this money, would that content you? Would you then give me the letter and end this matter at once?"

She shook her head. "That was just what Crawford tried to do. You explained to me yourself how he could have stopped payment on the check as soon as the documents were in his hands."

"What is your programme, then?"

"That you meet me at the bank at ten to-morrow morning with the money in cash."

"Let us talk business," he said, as if everything that went before had been mere folly. "Suppose that you should actually put this through, our relations would be severed for ever. You, who seem to have followed my career more closely than I had imagined, will believe me when I say that I do not readily forgive. If you do this, you will never get anything more from me, during my life or after my death. You cannot possibly live on the income from fifty thousand dollars; even the principal would not last very long as you have been accustomed to live. What then? You would starve."

"I'm starving now."

For the first time Varens showed signs of anger. "What damned nonsense!" he said. "Starving! Eating three meals a day cooked by a French cook, enjoying every luxury, and why? Only because you are my daughter. If you're not my daughter you're nothing, nothing, nothing."

"Perhaps," she said, "but I want to know what I am— even that." She stood up. "At ten to-morrow."

He held out his hand. "One moment, Lola."

A silence fell. He knew he had one more card to play; he might still make an appeal to her affection. If he could do that, she would yield; but could he do it? From the moment that she rebelled against him something very like hatred for her had stirred within him, making such an appeal difficult. But in the silence he bent his own stiff nature.

''Lola," he said, "since your mother's death you have been the only creature in the world whom I have loved, and I have loved you deeply."

Watching her, he saw a muscle in her throat twitch, then her whole chin trembled, then she burst into tears. "Oh, father," she said, "I am so sorry, so very sorry."

Beneath his triumph he was almost sorry himself to see the quick collapse of so formidable a fabric. He sprang up, and, coming round the table, he put his arm about her. "It's all over, my dear," he said; "we will never speak or think of it again."

She wept silently for a second or two more before she could speak. Then she said: "Oh, father, don't be silly. I mean I'm so sorry to hurt you like this, but I intend to do just what I said."

And at this she sobbed aloud.

He stepped back from her, and she went to the door.

"Good night, father," she said.

"Good night," he answered mechanically.

He was still sitting at his desk when the housemaid came in with her dustpan and broom. She gave a little scream and hurried away, for the orders were strict that Mr. Varens was never to be disturbed in his study.

But she need not have gone, for Varens' work was done. The night had been long, but not unfruitful; he had familiarized himself with the situation, had analyzed it and summed it up.

"The trouble was," he said as he rose, that I ought always to have borne in mind that she is after all my daughter."

8: Doctor Quogs

Anonymous

Gnowangerup Star and Tambellup-Ongerup Gazette, 29 March 1924

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them as we will.
—Shakespeare.

"ARE MATCHES made in heaven?" queried Quogs.

"Parlour matches?" queried I.

"Matrimonial," quoth Quogs.

"It's a solemn question," quoth I.

"Solemn nonsense!" exclaimed Quogs. "If marriage is predestined, then every intermediate step is likewise fore-ordained. Think you Heaven presides over the billing and cooing of every moonstruck Jack and Jill, or that it meddles with the mating of Tom, Dick or Harry with Nannie, Susannah or Jemima? Absurd! Ridiculous!"

Now Quogs— Doctor Quincy Quogs— was arguing from a viewpoint altogether personal. He was an engaged man, having just succeeded after a long and doubtful courtship in winning one of the fairest Ballarat belles; and this success so elated him that he was unwilling to allow even Heaven a share in bringing about his betrothal and prospective union with the wealthy and charming Miss Pentlove. Besides Quogs was a scientist, newly hatched, and we all know how apt exclusive study of physical phenomena is to limit a man's philosophic views to ordinary causes. This may be straining a point, but I see no other reason why Dr Quogs, boldly ignoring his catechism, should have peremptorily denied marriage to be of celestial appointment.

The doctor was a homely man, sedate, rather dull at times; not at all what is called a ladies' man. What Miss Fentlove could see in him nobody could imagine. And his name! What woman in her everyday senses could calmly contemplate her self as a possible Mrs. Quincy Quogs! That consideration alone should have inspired Quogs with a humble belief that Heaven helped him.

Self-sufficiency often errs. In diagnosing his own case, Dr. Quogs failed to include Aunt Peggy. Aunt Peggy was a family relic. She was a Pentlove pensioner-at-large, but mostly a fixture in the Pentlove mansion on St. James street. A kinder hearted, gentler mannered old lady never lived, nor one less .likely to interfere in private matters. Nevertheless she was fate's chosen instrument in upsetting her niece's matrimonial arrangements and nearly breaking her heart.

The affair was booming. All things seemed delightfully propitious. The victorious suitor was about to interview the lady's father and inform him of his intention to assume forthwith the responsibilities and obligations of a son-in-law. Quogs was happy; his betrothed was happy; and on the morrow Mr. Pentlove was to be made happy or miserable as he might choose or refuse to become a father-in-law.

It was a stormy wintry night.

Scene, the Pentlove parlour, Miss Pentlove impatiently expecting her lover. Aunt Peggy vis-a-vis patiently stitching away on a piece of embroidery of antediluvian design and longevity. The door-bell rings. Miss Pentlove assumes a graceful attitude, while Aunt Peggy-thoughtful soul disappears through a side door while Dr. Quogs enters from the hall, radiant with happiness, his countenance aglow with the eagerness with which, on wings of love, he has flown to Cupid's bower— to wit, that cosy parlour, on St James street.

It was fate's hour.

Among Aunt Peggy's inseparable belongings was an immense crimson pincushion, always garnished with pins and needles in bristling array, gorgeous to behold. Now, it happened that in her hasty exit from the parlour the good dame left, this domestic *cheval de frise* behind her, lying in wait among the cushions of a sleepy-hollow rocking, chair, invitingly placed before the fire. And as fate would have it Quogs, in love's fond dreamings lost, flopped himself right down into this fate trap. Had a fiery-fanged dragon seized him from behind he could not have bounced up more quickly. Poor fellow! he did not know what had befallen him, nor did he stop to investigate; but with unseemly haste and words of wrath he rushed out into the hall, the crimson pincushion in hot pursuit, still hanging to his coat-tail.

It was impossible! Miss Pentlove could not witness the high-kicking performances of her betrothed unmoved. With a startled "Oh, my!" she rose from her chair, sank back tittering— giggling— then crammed her handkerchief into her mouth; but failed withal to stifle her unseemly mirth. After a little she ventured to taVve a- sly peep into the hall. Suddenly her countenance, changed. Her lover was gone— hat, overcoat, umbrella. He had got rid of the pincushion, however. There it lay on the hall floor, smiling in malicious glee, as much as to say, "I did it; Isn't it a capital joke."

Joke indeed. A joke that severed two fond hearts.

Miss Pentlove little thought she had lost her lover. A week passed; he came not. Then in anxious doubt she went to her aunt, begging her to write to the offended gentleman; take the blame upon herself; make some sort of apology. But Aunt Peggy utterly refused tp be brought into what she called "that abominable pincushion affair." So Miss Pentlove still waited, vainly hoping to

see her lover's return. And Quogs waited waiting for that letter of regret and apology which never came. Wounded canity blinded him. He got the idea that he had been shamefully treated, that for her own amusement Miss Pentlove had befooled him, and was still laughing over the mishap. Her silence seemed cruel neglect. He did not consider how impossible it was for a young latyi the pink of propriety, to show overmuch curiosity concerning the later experiences of a gentleman whom she had last seen rushing from her presence with her aunt's pincushion dancing a jig on the flying skirts of his dress coat.

In fact, Quogs was altogether wrong. He should have treated the affair lightly. A timely note to his lady-love stating that though confined to his easy-chair, fortified with pillows and bolsters, and breathing an atmosphere of arnica and other pain-assuaging medicaments, he still adored her, would doubtless have set matters right. But this he wouldn't do. What he did was to write a letter full of thinly-veiled accusations and reproaches.

This settled it. Miss Pentlove resented the implied ultimatum and made no reply to the ill-advised communication. So they drifted apart.

SOME MEN'S life-paths meander; Quog's zigzagged. He had made the mistake of his life, but didn't realize it. He fully felt himself facing fate, yet didn't see it was fate in the shape of his own wrong-headedness. His crossed love seemed to bewilder. He tried to practice his profession, but failed. He rushed into wild speculations, and lost his money. He waited for something to turn up, nothing turned up; things didn't even get on the tilt. At last he gave it up, packed his trunk and disappeared.

And the woman he weakly deserted— what of her ?

She suffered keenly, yet, womanlike silently bore her wrong. She even sought excuses for her runaway lover. She blamed her aunt for refusing to write and explain matters; she blamed her father's outspoken joy over the broken engagement; blamed herself for thoughtlessly laughing at the accident which drove her betrothed in pain and shame from her side; blamed everybody, save the real culprit— stupid, obstinate Quogs. And when at last he left the city and went she knew not where, then the dread heart-sickness of hope deferred seized her and she fell into a state of melancholy which alarmed her friends.

The family physician advised change, of air and scene. When summer came her father took the sick girl to a farmhouse in Tasmania, and there away in the solitudes the ravelled strands of fate's net were again caught up; or was it only a curious coincidence that within ten miles of the farm Dr. Quincy Quogs, after many changes of fortune, had settled down to a country practice and the loneliness of loveless bachelorhood?

Strange how strangely some things sometimes happen.

One bright morning Mr. Pentlove joined a party going on a fishing excursion. During the day he wandered away from his friends, and finding a cool, shady spot upstream, comfortably seated himself, threw his line, had a bite, and was in the act of landing his fish, when suddenly the bank gave way under his feet, and down he went plump into the water, half-buried beneath an avalanche of earth, up-turned roots and bushes.

Now, mark the providence! Who should be riding along the road near by but Quogs! He saw the accident; saw the fisherman floundering in the mud; leaped from his horse, rushed to the rescue, and as the engulfed gentleman's head bobbed up from out the mortar-like mass, seized him by the hair and dragged him ashore. Quogs it was, who while the rescued gentleman spit and spluttered, ejecting much mud and dirty water from his mouth, wiped the poor man's begrimed face, and then— well the recognition was mutual.

And then? Well, then in due time a marriage. What else could follow? Who could refuse to welcome as a son-in-law one's rescuer from sudden death?

So there are accidents and accidents, but all of fate, albeit, Dr. Quogs still maintains the contrary.

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9: The Ceaseless Loom

Alice C. Tomholt

1887-1949

Weekly Times (Melbourne), 2 June 1917

"Life weaves upon a ceaseless loom
Her threads of gold and darkling gray.
The shuttles empty and refill
(Does never the pattern go astray?)"

JIM DROVE DOWN to the station to meet her. He drove disinterestedly; he had grown tired of meeting helps who stayed only a month or two with his sister and himself, and scurried away from the loneliness and from Sarah's nagging tongue.

Bracken Farm was a tiny, struggling place when his parents died and left it quite unconditionally to him. But he had put the whole of the surplus money into it, and it had flourished amazingly.

He was a big fellow, clean of limb and mind. The sun had tanned his plain, strong-featured face a dull brick color, and his great hands were hard, horney and stained with toil. But a poet's soul throbbed somewhere within his big body— a soul which clashed repeatedly with the other narrower, meaner soul of his sister. She was more than ten years his senior, and was always grumbling at the loneliness and unsociability of the place. But he loved the mysterious silent wonder of the tree-clad hills which almost encircled the farm. And the scent of gum and wattle was a thing of joy to him.

He was a few minutes late when he arrived at the station. The morning train was puffing fussily around the curve in the line, and the new girl was waiting beside her dress basket on the deserted platform, a small straight figure, shivering a little in her shabby brown coat as the chill September wind whipped about her.

The first things he noticed about her were that she held her head high, with a pitiful little air of defiance or pride, and that her blue eyes were hard and glittering in the paleness of her face, as if tears had frozen behind them. She greeted him distantly, but driving toward the farm, later, thawed a little beneath the beauty of the scenery, which they passed. She gave a soft, low cry of delight when she saw the creeks fringed each side with wattles, all splendid and golden in their spring glory. And he slackened the horse's pace as they passed it, with grateful gladness at her caring for things as he cared. Even in the spring the other helps had passed that well beloved spot without comment.

Sarah greeted them on arrival at the farm with the abrupt, chill manner which repelled all those with whom she came in contact, and which was the main cause of her living; her life unloving and unloved. She was a hard task-mistress, a cantankerous, fussy woman, with a host of chronic grumbles and imaginary aches. And many times during the following weeks Jim noticed the new girl's eyes darken with hurt and rebellion. But she set her mouth and stayed on. And he wondered.

But early one evening, on his return for tea, when the shadows were falling like silent, grey ghosts over the hills, he came upon her lying face downward on the long grass at the bottom of the orchard, sobbing her heart out.

He laid down the great bunch of gum and late wattle which he had brought for her from beyond the forty acre paddock, and leant over her and touched her shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he asked awkwardly as she turned startled blue eyes up toward him. "Are you tired of things up here? All the other girls got tired; we couldn't keep one of them. I'm mighty glad that you stay, but I often wonder why you do."

A weary expression crossed her face. She sat up and dried her eyes with a hand that trembled.

"Stay?" she echoed, with a bitter little laugh. "You don't understand."

And, rising to her feet, she left him with the gum and wattle which he had gathered for her.

He did all in his power to lessen her toil and brighten the dullness of her life after that; helped her, much to Sarah's disapproval, with many little tasks in the kitchen, and brought her bunches of wildflowers, and books and sweets occasionally from the township. Each day she seemed to grow paler and more weary of life, but the hard blueness of her eyes began to soften in his company. Several times, while they were all sitting over the fire in the kitchen of an evening, he found her watching him with; grave scrutiny. And his breath, hurried in his throat.

He had never cared for any of the other girls in Kallara as he cared for her. After their frank chasing of him as an eligible *parti*, and their rather boisterous Joy of life, there was something decidedly attractive about her quiet and sometimes wistful aloofness.

But she was a mystery, as Sarah too frequently reminded him. She never received or wrote any letters, and seemed to desire absolutely no communication with the outside world. Sarah said repeatedly that she didn't like it, and that it was not usual for a girl of her age to have no friends to write to her from the city from which she had come. But he went on his easy man-way, content with the restful congeniality of her presence in his home. Each

day his need of her company became greater. And Sarah watched them with jealous eyes. No woman would usurp her place on the farm— if she could prevent it.

ONE EVENING Jim took her for a ride over the hills. The warmth and gladness of approaching summer was in the air, and the night was still and fragrant with the breath of many flowers hidden in the wild young growth of tree and scrub. She was very quiet, even quieter and paler than usual, but her eyes glowed softly in the fading light with an unusual glimmer of happiness and content. The silence and mystery of the great hills had become as precious to her as to him, binding them closer together in sympathy and understanding.

The air was fresh and crisp. She had taken off her hat as they rode slowly onward, and her brown hair was soft and loose about her forehead as they sat astride their horses, watching the great white moon rise gloriously beyond the distant mountains.

Looking at her, a silent, still little figure, all aglow with the moonlight, his need rose strongly within him. He drew his horse closer to her, and put an arm lightly about her waist.

But she appeared not to notice the movement, and turned to him presently with tears lying thick on her lashes.

"Everything about the world is so beautiful." she breathed softly. "It is so restful and— pitiful. But the people—"

A little sobbing shudder smothered her voice in her throat, and she turned her horse's head homewards.

THE NEXT morning she was ill, too ill to get up. And at dinner time Sarah greeted him with wet lips and eyes gleaming malevolently in the sallow thinness of her face.

"It's a fine help you've taken such a mighty fancy to!" she snapped acidly. And, before he had time to respond, a torrent of merciless denunciation tumbled from her lips.

The abruptness of it all stunned him. All that he could gather from the jumbled flow of language was that Nell was leaving them next day— ill or not!

"But why? Why?" he stammered helplessly, flinging his hat on to the couch beneath the open kitchen window.

A sneer made hideous Sarah's face. Her judgment was the wholly unpitying and inhumane judgment of one whose loveless path had never been scorched with the fires of temptation.

"Can't you guess?" she snapped sharply, flushing dully at what she considered his deliberate density. "Can't you guess why she came and hid

herself up here, in our strange house, leaving no address for anyone to write to her or find her? Are you such a blind fool that you can't understand?"

He stared at her for a moment as she stood with sunburnt arms akimbo beside the dinner-table, a fierce kind of gratification in her pale eyes. Then slowly, the dark blood receded- from his face.

For a tense moment all that could be heard in the kitchen was the singing of the kettle on the highly-polished stove, and the soft rustle of honeysuckle leaves outside the window. Then:

"Lord," he said slowly, "how cruel you so-called good women are to your own!"

And leaving the dished-up dinner untouched, he snatched up his hat and strode out of the house.

He walked as he had never walked before, forgetting the work he had left unfinished, on the home paddock, feeling nothing, but the dull, aching pain of a deep wound, and fighting the fiercest battle that he had ever fought within himself.

It was growing dark when he returned to the house; but his eyes were | clearer and calmer. He had fought a bitter fight with the hereditary Puritanism within him— and had won.

Sarah met him on the front verandah, her face white and scared.

"She's gone," she said slowly, in response to the sullen question in his eyes. "And she hasn't taken her basket— or anything."

He caught hold of her shoulders and shook her with sudden mad passion.

"God!"— he breathed fiercely; "did you send her?"

Sarah began to whimper. She had never seen him roused like this, and it filled her with vague premonitions of coming calamity to her comfortable position with him.

"No! No!" she cried weakly. "I knew nothing about her going, until I found her note saying she wouldn't worry us any more."

He flung her from him.

"You've had something to do with it," he returned harshly. "And when I find her, you leave this place. You're my sister, but I don't want to ever see you again!"

And he strode down to the gate leading on to the road.

Two hours later he found her with the aid of the rising moon. She was standing close to the edge of the creek that was swollen after the heavy rains, and was rushing, hurrying, tumbling, between its now bloomless fringe of wattles. Her face was very pale and set in the whiteness of the moonlight, her eyes gleaming with the tense tragedy of one who faces death. And a little low cry, half joy, half anguish, escaped her when she saw him.

"Why did you come?" she asked faintly as he reached her side. "Go and leave me. Your sister told me that you— knew. It was that which hurt, which made me too much of a coward to— go on."

He stood before her, his breath hurrying, and speechless with relief at his finding of her. And she laughed— a piteous low little laugh of utter weariness.

"Men like you put women up on pedestals," she said slowly. "You put me up on one; didn't you, Jim? ...and I— tumbled?"

His voice broke from him with a certain merciful quality of tenderness that made her catch at her breath.

"Yes, you did tumble," he said, honestly; "but only for a while before I quite understood. Then I put you up again."

For a breathless moment she stared at him. A restless sparrow chirped in the tree above them, and the creek rushed joyously on its way. Then she laid her two hands on his shoulders, a great hope and a great fear struggling for mastery in her eyes.

"Don't you know— everything?" she breathed faintly, a sudden sob breaking at the back of her throat.

His arms closed about her like a blessed haven for her bewildered young soul.

"Yes," he replied, "I do know, and I want to shelter you, Nell— with my name— with my love for you."

Hope entirely eliminated fear from her eyes. She looked steadily up at him for a moment, and then at the creek. A sudden shudder shook her. She covered her face with her hands, sobbing weakly.

She knew that she, like another woman of long ago, had found a sanctuary from the cruelty of people.

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10: The Mushroom Gatherers

Harold Bindloss

1866-1945

Townsville Daily Bulletin 2 Oct 1926

British writer Bindloss is most noted for his novels set on the Canadian frontier. But he had a wider scope, as this story shows.

DAY HAD NOT LONG BROKEN and thin mist floated about the sands at the river mouth. Blurred trees rolled down to the water, and on the other side the level marsh melted in the haze. The tide went up channel and John Rigg, smoking his pipe on board the old shooting punt, allowed the current to carry him along. Since he last used a gun on Langside marsh, eight years had gone, and he had landed at Plymouth but a week ago.

The lawyers had occupied his time, but at length all was filed. The bleak old house at Beckfoot was his and he felt entitled to take a holiday. He ought to fund some widgeon in Mossband creek and perhaps a snipe in the deep marsh ditches. He mused about his dreary boyhood and the inheritance he had not thought to get after he rebelled against his grandfather's stern rule.

The old fellow was a market gardener, who laboring late and early, had bought two farms. His son and his son's wife had paid; sometimes young John pictured his father's moody sullenness and his tired mother's lined face.

The hard old man had outlived both, hut when his mother went John had had enough. His career in New Zealand was marked by ups and downs, but he had inherited something of old John's quality and on the whole he had prospered. He Imagined that unless he had done so he would not have got Beckfoot. Moreover, he had got the Garth, the cottage and three or four acres sandwiched in between the farms, that, old John had coveted and had at last secured. John, however, did not yet know much about it, except that the recent tenant would not pay the rent and the Garth was now to let.

Half an hour since he had passed the spot. The whitewashed cottage glimmered under dark ash trees, the fence was broken, weeds choked the garden, and all was desolate.

John remembered Lane; the sober, cheerful fellow who cultivated the few acres before John Rigg bought the land. When the boy was bullied at home he took refuge at the Garth and Mrs. Lane was kind. Moreover, he remembered Jessie Lane, a bright ambitious girl, who, when he left Beckfoot had gone to teach at the village school.

In a raw, boyish way, he was Jessie's lover, but he wrote from New Zealand, she did not reply. Well, old John had got rid of Lane, and Mrs. Lane

kept a cottage shop. John did not know if she would care to see him, but he meant to look her up.

Somebody called. The voice was a woman's voice and John looked round . On the bank, twenty yards off, two figures cut the sky. Mist drifted about them and their shapes were indistinct, but he saw they carried baskets and he imagined they were going to gather mushrooms on the other side.

'Is the water deep!' one asked, and the clear voice awoke vague memories.

'Two or three feet,' said John. 'The tide is running fast.'

'We are too late,' an older woman remarked drearily. 'In the mist and cold, grey light, they were somehow forlorn, and John, seizing the pole, drove the punt's bow onto the sand.

'If you are for the marsh, I'll ferry you across.'

They came down the bank; their' bare feet glimmering In the muddy sand. In the fields the grass was wet and the dew was on their clothes. One's head was covered by a shawl and their faces were pinched and lifeless white. That was all John remarked, for when they were on board he pushed off and the narrow, unstable punt carried on awkward load. Balancing the craft cautiously, he poled across and when the keel touched bottom helped his passengers to land.

The women climbed the broken march top and their dark lonely figures melted in the haze. John fell pitiful. The village was two or three miles on, and in the cold dawn they had for some distance ploughed through dew-drenched grass, he thought they would not do so unless they were forced, and their going barefoot was significant. Mushrooms were comparatively cheap, but boots were not.

He drove the punt up channel, but other mushrooms gatherers were on the marsh, and although he shot a widgeon the snipe were gone. The time to use the big punt-gun was not yet.

Three or four hours after he landed, he saw smoke curl about the reeds by a ditch and when he reached the spot the women were sluing by a little fire. Until the tide ebbed, they could not re-cross the channel and it looked as it they had picnicked and brewed some tea. The thin smoke drifted past them in a flowing curve, and the tall reeds rippled in the wind.

One turned her head, as if she heard his steps, and John stopped In surprise. Her hair was white, her clothes were shabby, and her face was deeply lined, but he knew it was Mrs. Lane. When he advanced with lifted cap, the other gave him a calm glance. The last time he saw Jessie she was a joyous, romantic girl; now her look was sober and her mouth was firm.

Well, although he had prospered, the eight years had left some mark on him; but when one fronted poverty one got older soon. In the meantime he saw Mrs. Lane hesitate.

'It's Mr. Rigg?' she said.

'Yes, I'm John. When you got on board the punt in the early morning I did not know you,' John replied. He sat down, as if old acquaintance justified his joining them, but Jessie's look was inscrutable. Her joyous youth had vanished, although John felt the pluck he had known was left. Her face was thin, but her glance was steady and somehow resolute.

'How is my old friend, Lane?' he asked.

'Jim's dead seven years, Mrs. Lane replied. 'He went 12 months after we left the Garth.'

'Ah,' sold John, 'I'm sorry! You see, I did not know. When I was in disgrace at Beckfoot, Lane and you were kind; I remember he sometimes consoled me with the red apples that grew by the wall. Well my folks are gone, and now lonelier than I was abroad.'

The others said nothing and he began to be embarrassed. It looked as if Lane's leaving the Garth had broken him, but John hesitated to inquire, and he remarked that their baskets were full.

'Our good luck was good,' said Jessie. 'Mushrooms are sixpence a pound, and in the morning nobody comes to the shop. For that matter, except on baking days when the cakes are fresh, trade is not very brisk.'

'If landlord would give us a new oven, I'd make more cakes,' Mrs. Lane remarked. 'This morning I was tired and did not wake. If we hadn't met you, we couldn't have got on marsh.'

John studied Jessie. It did not look as if she remembered that they were long since pals, and although be knew her pride and independence, he was annoyed. After all. he was not accountable for his grandfather's deeds and he liked people to be fair.

Well, Mrs Lane was a peasant and he sprang from stock like hers. Between themselves country folk ore not reserved.

'Why did your husband leave the Garth? I want to know,' he said.

She told him and sometimes used her native dialect: he had remarked that Jessie's English was as good as his.

'Jim was putten out. Your grandfather wanted Garth, and what John Rigg wanted he generally got. He boddered us about fences and water from meadow drains, and when council ordered a new culvert and condemt byre and pig-holes we kenned old John's hand.'

John thought she did not exaggerate. The byre was a clay doubin built a 100 years since, and the pig-styes ought perhaps to be moved; but, as she said,

John Rigg knew where to use another's hand. Young John saw him patiently scheming. The old fellow was land-greedy, and until he had seized his neighbor's plot he could not be satisfied. In foot, the Garth was a sort of Naboth's vineyard. But Mrs Lane did not talk as if she were revengeful. Her voice was calm; one sensed her stoic resignation, and John felt her artless tale was true. Bent and careworn, for all her shabby clothes, she was somehow dignified. John glanced at Jessie. Her color was rather high and her look was hard. She was young and she obviously rebelled. Then she perhaps felt herself her mother's champion.

'Lane held on for some time,' said John.

'In a way, we'd come t' think the place was, ours. Jim's folk were old stannarts, t' Lanes was lang at Garth, and we kenned Mr Richardson wad niver put us out. But he was killed when his car cowped and John Rigg saw his chance. He browt t' place and we got notice to quit—' She stopped.

It looked as if she brooded and Jessie was quiet.

A flock of circling plover called, and one heard the ebb tide fret the sands. The sun was hot and the set wind was bracing, but the women's faces were joyless and pale. John saw they had not tried to move him; Mrs Lane had satiisfied his curiosity and now she waited for him to go. Yet he was moved to anger as well as pity, for his temper was hot. In a way, the girl and the tired women had paid for his inheritance! Well, the ground was awkward, but there was something he must know.

'I expect to leave the Garth was hard for Lane. When I knew him, he was strong and cheerful. Do you think he pined?'

Jessie met John's searching glance.

'One must be just. Your grandfather's turning us out did not account for father's death.'

'No,' sold Mrs Lane, 'I dinnot think it. Maybe Jim did pine, but he was done before we left. Doctor had warned him he couldn't stand t' cold and wet. I've sometimes thowt I felt our going most.'

Their fairness bothered John, but he was conscious of keen relief.

'Anyhow, if your husband was an invalid you could not have carried on.' 'I'd have tried. Since I could walk I've helped aboot a farm, and Jim bon-t and sold nothing until he'd talked wi' me. When we got notice I'd made my plans. With the help I knew where to get I could have manished. For aw I'm getting old, I could do it yet!'

John admitted it was possible. He knew small farms that had not paid the farmer, but had prospered when his widow took control. Moreover he remembered the woman's industry and pluck.

'Are you satisfied at the shop?' he asked.

'It keeps us, and that's something.' Mrs Lane replied. 'But t' little front room is dark and out-house where we store t' goods is damp. Then oven's small and I'll can not bake all I might—' She stopped as if she pondered, and resumed hesitatingly; 'Noo the Garth's again to let, Forsyth o' Marshside will no doubt take the bit o' land, but he'll not have much use for house.'

'Well, the place is yours, and the front rooms is good.'

Jessie looked up and the blood came to her skin.

'No, Mother!' she said firmly. 'The rent would be too high. Besides, we were put out and we cannot go back.'

John's mouth went tight. He liked the girl's pride, but she was not entitled to blame him for his grandfather's greed. Moreover, he had inherited something of the old man's stubbornness.

'Please go on, Mrs Lane,' he said.

'I thowt if new window was put in, front room would do fine for shop. Then the house is on main road and folks going home from market on Saturdays would stop. When they saw t' stuff I bake, they wouldn't carry cakes from town. Maybe we'd want new oven, but if I was home again, somehow I'd make the rent.'

'Very well, I'll inquire about it,' sold John. 'You see, I've just arrived, and my lawyers have managed things. I don't yet know if they have got a tenant, but I expect to look them up in a few days.'

He saw fresh hope in Mrs Lane's worn face, but Jessie said nothing and he went off.

In the evening he smoked his pipe on the slate bench in the porch at Beckfoot and pondered thoughtfully. Plover called across the marsh and mist began to float about the level fields. But for the circling wild fowl and the throb of the tide on the sand, all was very quiet. Dark fell and John felt the dark, old house was bleak and lonely.

Yet Beckfoot, with the pastures and corn fields, running back to the tall marsh dyke, was his, and John loved the soil. Others, however, did so, and Mrs Lang sprang from thrifty peasant stock. John understood her brooding because she, so to speak, was dispossessed and her proper job was gone. But, although she and Lane had paid for old John's covetousness, Jessie, perhaps had paid the most. The keen, ambitious girl he had known was now a tired woman; he had met her, going, barefoot in the cold dawn to gather mushrooms, for sixpence a pound.

John frowned, but admitted he did not see what she ought to have done. Mrs Lane obviously needed her, and Jessie was not the sort to leave her mother to front a hard light when she got old.

In the morning he went to the little shop. A smell of fresh bread Indicated how Mrs Lane was occupied, and Jessie carried a tray of cakes to the small, dark window. When John came In she stopped and he thought her color rose, but she waited calmly. In fact, he had begun to feel that Jessie's calm was baffling.

'In the old days we were pals,' he said. 'I expect you don't like my meddling; but for your mother's sake, I might perhaps be allowed to help.'

'We keep a shop,' said Jessie. 'I really think our bread is good, and the groceries are fresh, although they are dearer than things are in town. In order to sell cheap one must use a larger capital than we have got.'

John smiled, rather dryly.

'Well, that is something, and if you are willing to supply me, my housekeeper will let you know the stuff we want. Since we feed two men, I believe she uses a lot. However, you had talent. Could you not have helped your mother, had you stopped at the school.'

'In four of five years I might; but my talents are not very marked and she could not wait,' Jessie replied. 'A teacher who wants to make progress must work for certificates and if possible a university degree. In the meantime, we needed a home, besides such things as food and clothes.'

John knew her staunchness had cost her much. Jessie had let her career go and fronted poverty at the cottage shop. Yet her charm was not gone; she was harder perhaps, but finer than the girl he had known. He, however, was John Rigg's grandson and it looked as if she could not forget.

'Your mother is kinder and, I think, juster than you,' he said. 'When my grandfather bought the Garth I was in New Zealand and he did not consult me. Well, I haven't yet seen the lawyers, but If I can fix about the house, you must not refuse. You durst not indulge your pride at your mother's expense.'

Jessie's eyes sparkled and the bloom came to her skin. 'You're like the old man, John. All you want you get; but perhaps you'll use your power better than he used his.'

John said nothing. He was glad he had some power, and when he went off he smiled, a crooked smile. In a way, he was not forced to apologize for John Rigg. When the Garth was for sale, the executors took his bid, and the little plot so to speak, naturally went with the farm it joined. To link it up with Marshside was the proper line. Jessie was not logical; but if she was resolved to fight, John would see she did not win.

A week or two afterwards he returned to the shop and, asking for Mrs. Lane, put two documents with red seals on the counter.

'When you touch the seal on this agreement and write your name in the space the Garth is yours for life,' he said. 'The consideration stated is not large

and covers the use of the land your husband cultivated. In fact, my lawyer imagines I myself could not turn you out. You might, however, study the document.'

Mrs. Lane did so. She started in surprise, and when she put down the paper her hand shook.

Jessie fronted John and her face was red. 'The consideration is ridiculous; you could get a much larger sum.'

'Until your mother signs, the Garth is mine, and I'm content,' said John, and addressed Mrs. Lane. 'Jessie has nothing to do with this. If you are satisfied, send for somebody to witness your hand.'

The witnesses arrived and Mrs. Lane took the pen.

'We are going back; t' old place is ours again,' she said, with keen emotion. 'I doubt if you are a right Rigg, John. You're mother's sort. When t' old man would let her, she was kind.'

'We are all mixed, and perhaps none Is ever quite satisfied,' John remarked with a crooked smile and fronted Jessie. 'All the same, I think I have one of my grandfather's qualities: I know when to wait.'

For a moment Jessie turned her head. When she looked up her color was high, but her glance was level.

'You are very generous, and I'm sorry for much I thought. To forget is hard, John; but that goes both ways,' she said.

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11: The Lane That Ran East and West

Algernon Blackwood

1869-1951

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THE CURVING STRIP of lane, fading into invisibility east and west, had always symbolized life to her. In some minds life pictures itself a straight line, uphill, downhill, flat, as the case may be; in hers it had been, since childhood, this sweep of country lane that ran past her cottage door.

In thick white summer dust, she invariably visualized it, blue and yellow flowers along its untidy banks of green.

It flowed, it glided, sometimes it rushed. Without a sound it ran along past the nut trees and the brambles where honeysuckle and wild roses shone. With every year now its silent speed increased.

From either end she imagined, as a child, that she looked over into outer space from the eastern end into the infinity before birth, from the western into the infinity that follows death. It was to her of real importance.

From the veranda the entire stretch was visible, not more than five hundred yards at most; from the platform in her mind, whence she viewed existence, she saw her own life, similarly, as a white curve of flowering lane, arising she knew not whence, gliding whither she could not tell. At eighteen she had paraphrased the quatrain with a smile upon her red lips, her chin tilted, her strong grey eyes rather wistful with yearning.

Into this little lane, and why not knowing,
Nor whence, like water willy-nilly flowing,
And out again like dust along the waste,
I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing.

At thirty she now repeated it, the smile still there, but the lips not quite so red, the chin a trifle firmer, the grey eyes stronger, clearer, but charged with a more wistful and a deeper yearning.

It was her turn of mind, imaginative, introspective, querulous perhaps, that made the bit of running lane significant. Food with the butcher's and baker's carts came to her from its eastern, its arriving end, as she called it; news with the postman, adventure with rare callers. Youth, hope, excitement, all these came from the sunrise. Thence came likewise spring and summer, flowers, butterflies, the swallows. The fairies, in her childhood, had come that way too, their silver feet and gossamer wings brightening the summer dawns; and it was

but a year ago that Dick Messenger, his car stirring a cloud of thick white dust, had also come into her life from the space beyond the sunrise.

She sat thinking about him now— how he had suddenly appeared out of nothing that warm June morning, asked her permission about some engineering business on the neighbouring big estate over the hill, given her a dogrose and a bit of fern-leaf, and eventually gone away with her promise when he left. Out of the eastern end he appeared; into the western end he vanished.

For there was this departing end as well, where the lane curved out of sight into the space behind the yellow sunset. In this direction went all that left her life. Her parents, each in turn, had taken that way to the churchyard. Spring, summer, the fading butterflies, the restless swallows, all left her round that western curve. Later the fairies followed them, her dreams one by one, the vanishing years as well and now her youth, swifter, ever swifter, into the region where the sun dipped nightly among pale rising stars, leaving her brief strip of life colder, more and more unlit.

Just beyond this end she imagined shadows.

She saw Dick's car whirling towards her, whirling away again, making for distant Mexico, where his treasure lay. In the interval he had found that treasure and realized it. He was now coming back again. He had landed in England yesterday.

Seated in her deck-chair on the veranda, she watched the sun sink to the level of the hazel trees. The last swallows already flashed their dark wings against the fading gold. Over that western end to morrow or the next day, amid a cloud of whirling white dust, would emerge, again out of nothingness, the noisy car that brought Dick Messenger back to her, back from the Mexican expedition that ensured his great new riches, back into her heart and life. In the other direction she would depart a week or so later, her life in his keeping, and his in hers... and the feet of their children, in due course, would run up and down the mysterious lane in search of flowers, butterflies, excitement, in search of life.

She wondered... and as the light faded her wondering grew deeper. Questions that had lain dormant for twelve months became audible suddenly. Would Dick be satisfied with this humble cottage which meant so much to her that she felt she could never, never leave it? Would not his money, his new position, demand palaces elsewhere? He was ambitious. Could his ambitions set an altar of sacrifice to his love? And she could she, on the other hand, walk happy and satisfied along the western curve, leaving her lane finally behind her, lost, untravelled, forgotten? Could she face this sacrifice for him? Was he, in a word, the man whose appearance out of the sunrise she had been

watching and waiting for all these hurrying, swift years? She wondered. Now that the decisive moment was so near, unhappy doubts assailed her. Her wondering grew deeper, spread, enveloped, penetrated her being like a gathering darkness. And the sun sank lower, dusk crept along the hedgerows, the flowers closed their little burning eyes. Shadows passed hand in hand along the familiar bend that was so short, so soon travelled over and left behind that a mistake must ruin all its sweetest joy. To wander down it with a companion to whom its flowers, its butterflies, its swallows brought no full message, must turn it chill, dark, lonely, colourless.... Her thoughts slipped on thus into a soft inner reverie born of that scented twilight hour of honeysuckle and wild roses, born too of her deep self-questioning, of wonder, of yearning unsatisfied.

The lane, meanwhile, produced its customary few figures, moving homewards through the dusk. She knew them well, these familiar figures of the countryside, had known them from childhood onwards labourers, hedgers, ditchers and the like, with whom now, even in her reverie, she exchanged the usual friendly greetings across the wicket-gate. This time, however, she gave but her mind to them, her heart absorbed with its own personal and immediate problem.

Melancey had come and gone; old Averill, carrying his hedger's sickle-knife, had followed; and she was vaguely looking for Hezekiah Purdy, bent with years and rheumatism, his tea-pail always rattling, his shuffling feet making a sorry dust, when the figure she did not quite recognize came into view, emerging unexpectedly from the sunrise end. Was it Purdy? Yes no yet, if not, who was it? Of course it must be Purdy. Yet while the others, being homeward bound, came naturally from west to east, with this new figure it was otherwise, so that he was half-way down the curve before she fully realized him. Out of the eastern end the man drew nearer, a stranger therefore; out of the unknown regions where the sun rose, and where no shadows were, he moved towards her down the deserted lane, perhaps a trespasser, an intruder possibly, but certainly an unfamiliar figure.

Without particular attention or interest, she watched him drift nearer down her little semi-private lane of dream, passing leisurely from east to west, the mere fact that he was there establishing an intimacy that remained at first unsuspected. It was her eye that watched him, not her mind. What was he doing here, where going, whither come, she wondered vaguely, the lane both his background and his starting-point? A little by-way, after all, this haunted lane. The real world, she knew, swept down the big high-road beyond, unconscious of the humble folk its unimportant tributary served. Suddenly the burden of the years assailed her. Had she, then, missed life by living here?

Then, with a little shock, her heart contracted as she became aware of two eyes fixed upon her in the dusk. The stranger had already reached the wicket gate and now stood leaning against it, staring at her over its spiked wooden top. It was certainly not old Purdy. The blood rushed back into her heart again as she returned the gaze. He was watching her with a curious intentness, with an odd sense of authority almost, with something that persuaded her instantly of a definite purpose in his being there. He was waiting for her expecting her to come down and speak with him as she had spoken with the others. Of this, her little habit, he made use, she felt. Shyly, half nervously, she left her deck-chair and went slowly down the short gravel path between the flowers, noticing meanwhile that his clothes were ragged, his hair unkempt, his face worn and ravaged as by want and suffering, yet that his eyes were curiously young. His eyes, indeed, were full brown smiling eyes, and it was the surprise of his youth that impressed her chiefly. That he could be tramp or trespasser left her. She felt no fear.

She wished him "Good evening" in her calm, quiet voice, adding with sympathy, "And who are you, I wonder? You want to ask me something?" It flashed across her that his shabby clothing was somehow a disguise. Over his shoulder hung a faded sack. "I can do something for you?" she pursued inquiringly, as was her kindly custom. "If you are hungry, thirsty, or—"

It was the expression of vigour leaping into the deep eyes that stopped her.

"If you need clothes," she had been going to add. She was not frightened, but suddenly she paused, gripped by a wonder she could not understand. And his first words justified her wonder.

"*I* have something for you," he said, his voice faint, a kind of stillness in it as though it came through distance. Also, though this she did not notice, it was an educated voice, and it was the absence of surprise that made this detail too natural to claim attention. She had expected it.

"Something to give you. I have brought it for you," the man concluded.

"Yes," she replied, aware, again without comprehension, that her courage and her patience were both summoned to support her. "Yes," she repeated more faintly, as though this was all natural, inevitable, expected. She saw that the sack was now lifted from his shoulder and that his hand plunged into it, as it hung apparently loose and empty against the gate. His eyes, however, never for one instant left her own. Alarm, she was able to remind herself, she did not feel. She only recognized that this ragged figure laid something upon her spirit she could not fathom, yet was compelled to face.

His next words startled her. She drew, if unconsciously, upon her courage:

"A dream."

The voice was deep, yet still with the faintness as of distance in it. His hand, she saw, was moving slowly from the empty sack. A strange attraction, mingled with pity, with yearning too, stirred deeply in her. The face, it seemed, turned soft, the eyes glowed with some inner fire of feeling. Her heart now beat unevenly.

"Something to sell to me," she faltered, aware that his glowing eyes upon her made her tremble. The same instant she was ashamed of the words, knowing they were uttered by a portion of her that resisted, and that this was not the language he deserved.

He smiled, and she knew her resistance a vain make-believe he pierced too easily, though he let it pass in silence.

"There is, I mean, a price for every dream," she tried to save herself, conscious delightfully that her heart was smiling in return.

The dusk enveloped them, the corncrakes were calling from the fields, the scent of honeysuckle and wild roses lay round her in a warm wave of air, yet at the same time she felt as if her naked soul stood side by side with this figure in the infinitude of space beyond the sunrise end. The golden stars hung calm and motionless above them.

"That price" his answer fell like a summons she had actually expected "you pay to another, not to me." The voice grew fainter, farther away, dropping through empty space behind her. "All dreams are but a single dream. You pay that price to—"

Her interruption slipped spontaneously from her lips, its inevitable truth a prophecy:

"To myself!"

He smiled again, but this time he did not answer.

His hand, instead, now moved across the gate towards her.

And before she quite realized what had happened, she was holding a little object he had passed across to her. She had taken it, obeying, it seemed, an inner compulsion and authority which were inevitable, fore ordained. Lowering her face she examined it in the dusk a small green leaf of fern fingered it with tender caution as it lay in her palm, gazed for some seconds closely at the tiny thing.... When she looked up again the stranger, the "seller of dreams", as she now imagined him, had moved some yards away from the gate, and was moving still, a leisurely quiet tread that stirred no dust, a shadowy outline soft with dusk and starlight, moving towards the sunrise end, whence he had first appeared.

Her heart gave a sudden leap, as once again the burden of the years assailed her. Her words seemed driven out: "Who are you? Before you go your name! What is your name?"

His voice, now faint with distance as he melted from sight against the dark fringe of hazel trees, reached her but indistinctly, though its meaning was somehow clear:

"The dream," she heard like a breath of wind against her ear, "shall bring its own name with it. I wait..."

Both sound and figure trailed off into the unknown space beyond the eastern end, and, leaning against the wicket gate as usual, the white dust settling about his heavy boots, the tea-pail but just ceased from rattling, was old Purdy.

Unless the mind can fix the reality of an event in the actual instant of its happening, judgment soon dwindles into a confusion between memory and argument. Five minutes later, when old Purdy had gone his way again, she found herself already wondering, reflecting, questioning. Yearning had perhaps conjured with emotion to fashion both voice and figure out of imagination, out of this perfumed dusk, out of the troubled heart's desire. Confusion in time had further helped to metamorphose old Purdy into some legendary shape that had stolen upon her mood of reverie from the shadows of her beloved lane.... Yet the dream she had accepted from a stranger hand, a little fern leaf, remained at any rate to shape a delightful certainty her brain might criticize while her heart believed. The fern leaf assuredly was real. A fairy gift! Those who eat of this fern-seed, she remembered as she sank into sleep that night, shall see the fairies! And, indeed, a few hours later she walked in dream along the familiar curve between the hedges, her own childhood taking her by the hand as she played with the flowers, the butterflies, the glad swallows beckoning while they flashed. Without the smallest sense of surprise or unexpectedness, too, she met at the eastern end two Figures. They stood, as she with her childhood stood, hand in hand, the seller of dreams and her lover, waiting since time began, she realized, waiting with some great unuttered question on their lips. Neither addressed her, neither spoke a word. Dick looked at her, ambition, hard and restless, shining in his eyes; in the eyes of the other dark, gentle, piercing, but extraordinarily young for all the ragged hair about the face, the shabby clothes, the ravaged and unkempt appearance a brightness as of the coming dawn.

A choice, she understood, was offered to her; there was a decision she must make. She realized, as though some great wind blew it into her from outer space, another, a new standard to which her judgment must inevitably conform, or admit the purpose of her life evaded finally. The same moment she knew what her decision was. No hesitation touched her. Calm, yet trembling, her courage and her patience faced the decision and accepted it. The hands then instantly fell apart, unclasped. One figure turned and vanished

down the lane towards the departing end, but with the other, now hand in hand, she rose floating, gliding without effort, a strange bliss in her heart, to meet the sunrise.

"He has awakened... so he cannot stay," she heard, like a breath of wind that whispered into her ear. "I, who bring you this dream— I wait."

She did not wake at once when the dream was ended, but slept on long beyond her accustomed hour, missing thereby Melancey, Averill, old Purdy as they passed the wicket-gate in the early hours. She woke, however, with a new clear knowledge of herself, of her mind and heart, to all of which in simple truth to her own soul she must conform. The fern-seed she placed in a locket attached to a fine gold chain about her neck. During the long, lonely, expectant yet unsatisfied years that followed she wore it day and night.

ii

SHE had the curious feeling that she remained young. Others grew older, but not she. She watched her contemporaries slowly give the signs, while she herself held stationary. Even those younger than herself went past her, growing older in the ordinary way, whereas her heart, her mind, even her appearance, she felt certain, hardly aged at all. In a room full of people she felt pity often as she read the signs in their faces, knowing her own unchanged. Their eyes were burning out, but hers burned on. It was neither vanity nor delusion, but an inner conviction she could not alter.

The age she held to was the year she had received the fern-seed from old Purdy, or, rather, from an imaginary figure her reverie had set momentarily in old Purdy's place. That figure of her reverie, the dream that followed, the subsequent confession to Dick Messenger, meeting his own half-way these marked the year when she stopped growing older. To that year she seemed chained, gazing into the sunrise end waiting, ever waiting. Whether in her absent-minded reverie she had actually plucked the bit of fern herself, or whether, after all, old Purdy had handed it to her, was not a point that troubled her. It was in her locket about her neck still, day and night. The seller of dreams was an established imaginative reality in her life. Her heart assured her she would meet him again one day. She waited. It was very curious, it was rather pathetic. Men came and went, she saw her chances pass; her answer was invariably "No."

The break came suddenly, and with devastating effect. As she was dressing carefully for the party, full of excited anticipation like some young girl still, she saw looking out upon her from the long mirror a face of plain middle-age. A blackness rose about her. It seemed the Mirror shattered. The long, long

dream, at any rate, fell in a thousand broken pieces at her feet. It was perhaps the ball dress, perhaps the flowers in her hair; it may have been the low-cut gown that betrayed the neck and throat, or the one brilliant jewel that proved her eyes now dimmed beside it but most probably it was the tell-tale hands, whose ageing no artifice ever can conceal. The middle-aged woman, at any rate, rushed from the glass and claimed her.

It was a long time, too, before the signs of tears had been carefully obliterated again, and the battle with her self to go or not to go was decided by clear courage. She would not send a hurried excuse of illness, but would take the place where she now herself almost like a girl belonged. She saw herself, a fading figure, more than half-way now towards the sunset end, within sight even of the shadowed emptiness that lay beyond the sun's dipping edge. She had lingered over-long, expecting a dream to confirm a dream; she had been oblivious of the truth that the lane went rushing just the same. It was now too late. The speed increased. She had waited, waited for nothing. The seller of dreams was a myth. No man could need her as she now was.

Yet the chief ingredient in her decision was, oddly enough, itself a sign of youth. A party, a ball, is ever an adventure. Fate, with her destined eyes aglow, may be bidden too, waiting among the throng, waiting for that very one who hesitates whether to go or not to go. Who knows what the evening may bring forth? It was this anticipation, faintly beckoning, its voice the merest echo of her shadowy youth, that tipped the scales between an evening of sleepless regrets at home and hours of neglected loneliness, watching the young fulfil the happy night. This and her courage weighed the balance down against the afflicting weariness of her sudden disillusion.

Therefore she went, her aunt, in whose house she was a visitor, accompanying her. They arrived late, walking under the awning alone into the great mansion. Music, flowers, lovely dresses, and bright happy faces filled the air about them. The dancing feet, the flashing eyes, the swing of the music, the throng of graceful figures ex pressed one word pleasure. Pleasure, of course, meant youth. Beneath the calm summer stars youth realized itself prodigally, reckless of years to follow. Under the same calm stars, some fifty miles away in Kent, her stretch of deserted lane flowed peacefully, never pausing, passing relentlessly out into unknown space beyond the edge of the world. A girl and a middle-aged woman bravely watched both scenes.

"Dreadfully overcrowded," remarked her prosaic aunt. "When I was a young thing there was more taste always room to dance, at any rate."

"It is a rabble rather," replied the middle-aged woman, while the girl added, "but I enjoy it."

She had enjoyed one duty-dance with an elderly man to whom her aunt had introduced her. She now sat watching the rabble whirl and laugh. Her friend, behind unabashed lorgnettes, made occasional comments.

"There's Mabel. Look at her frock, will you, the naked back. The way he holds her, too!"

She looked at Mabel Messenger, exactly her own age, wife of the successful engineer, yet bearing herself almost like a girl.

"He's away in Mexico as usual," went on her aunt, "with somebody else, also as usual."

"I don't envy her," mentioned the middle-aged woman, while the girl added, "but she did well for herself, anyhow."

"It's a mistake to wait too long," was a suggestion she did not comment on.

The host's brother came up and carried off her aunt. She was left alone. An old gentleman dropped into the vacated chair. Only in the centre of the brilliantly lit room was there dancing now; people stood and talked in animated throngs, every seat along the walls, every chair and sofa in alcove corners occupied. The landing outside the great flung doors was packed; some, going on elsewhere, were already leaving, but others arriving late still poured up the staircase. Her loneliness remained unnoticed; with many other women, similarly stationed behind the whirling, moving dancers, she sat looking on, an artificial smile of enjoyment upon her face, but the eyes empty and unlit.

Two pictures she watched simultaneously the gay ballroom and the lane that ran east and west.

Midnight was past and supper over, though she had not noticed it. Her aunt had disappeared finally, it seemed. The two pictures filled her mind, absorbed her. What she was feeling was not clear, for there was confusion in her between the two scenes somewhere as though the brilliant ballroom lay set against the dark background of the lane beneath the quiet stars. The contrast struck her. How calm and lovely the night lane seemed against this feverish gaiety, this heat, this artificial perfume, these exaggerated clothes. Like a small, rapid cinema-picture the dazzling ballroom passed along the dark throat of the deserted lane. A patch of light, alive with whirling animalculae, it shone a moment against the velvet background of the midnight countryside. It grew smaller and smaller. It vanished over the edge of the departing end. It was gone.

Night and the stars enveloped her, and her eyes became accustomed to the change, so that she saw the sandy strip of lane, the hazel bushes, the dim outline of the cottage. Her naked soul, it seemed again, stood facing an infinitude. Yet the scent of roses, of dew soaked grass came to her. A blackbird was whistling in the hedge. The eastern end showed itself now more plainly.

The tops of the trees defined themselves. There came a glimmer in the sky, an early swallow flashed past against a streak of pale sweet gold. Old Purdy, his tea-pail faintly rattling, a stir of thick white dust about his feet, came slowly round the curve. It was the sunrise. A deep, passionate thrill ran through her body from head to feet. There was a clap beside her in the air it seemed as though the wings of the early swallow had flashed past her very ear, or the approaching sunrise called aloud. She turned her head along the brightening lane, but also across the gay ballroom. Old Purdy, straightening up his bent shoulders, was gazing over the wicket-gate into her eyes.

Something quivered. A shimmer ran fluttering before her sight. She trembled. Over the crowd of intervening heads, as over the spiked top of the little gate, a man was gazing at her.

Old Purdy, however, did not fade, nor did his outline wholly pass. There was this confusion between two pictures. Yet this man who gazed at her was in the London ballroom. He was so tall and straight. The same moment her aunt's face appeared below his shoulder, only just visible, and he turned his head, but did not turn his eyes, to listen to her. Both looked her way; they moved, threading their way towards her. It meant an introduction coming. He had asked for it.

She did not catch his name, so quickly, yet so easily and naturally, the little formalities were managed, and she was dancing. The same sweet, dim confusion was about her. His touch, his voice, his eyes combined extraordinarily in a sense of complete possession to which she yielded utterly. The two pictures, moreover, still held their place. Behind the glaring lights ran the pale sweet gold of a country dawn; woven like a silver thread among the strings she heard the blackbirds whistling; in the stale, heated air lay the subtle freshness of a summer sunrise. Their dancing feet bore them along in a flowing motion that curved from east to west.

They danced without speaking; one rhythm took them; like a single person they glided over the smooth, perfect floor, and, more and more to her, it was as if the floor flowed with them, bearing them along. Such dancing she had never known. The strange sweetness of the confusion that half entranced her increased almost as though she lay upon her partner's arms and that he bore her through the air. Both the sense of weight and the touch of her feet on solid ground were gone delightfully. The London room grew hazy, too; the other figures faded; the ceiling, half-transparent, let through a filtering glimmer of the dawn. Her thoughts surely he shared them with her went out floating beneath this brightening sky. There was a sound of wakening birds, a smell of flowers.

They had danced perhaps five minutes when both stopped abruptly as with one accord.

"Shall we sit it out if you've no objection?" he suggested in the very instant that the same thought occurred to her. "The conservatory, among the flowers," he added, leading her to the corner among scented blooms and plants, exactly as she herself desired.

There were leaves and ferns about them in the warm air. The light was dim. A streak of gold in the sky showed through the glass. But for one other couple they were alone.

"I have something to say to you," he began. "You must have thought it curious I've been staring at you so. The whole evening I've been watching you."

"I— hadn't noticed," she said truthfully, her voice, as it were, not quite her own. "I've not been dancing— only once, that is."

But her heart was dancing as she said it. For the first time she became aware of her partner more distinctly of his deep, resonant voice, his soldierly tall figure, his deferential, almost protective manner. She turned suddenly and looked into his face. The clear, rather penetrating eyes reminded her of someone she had known. At the same instant he used her thought, turning it in his own direction.

"I can't remember, for the life of me," he said quietly, "where I have seen you before. Your face is familiar to me, oddly familiar— years ago— in my first youth somewhere."

It was as though he broke something to her gently something he was sure of and knew positively, that yet might shock and startle her. The blood rushed from her heart as she quickly turned her gaze away. The wave of deep feeling that rose with a sensation of glowing warmth troubled her voice.

"I find in you, too, a faint resemblance to someone I have met," she murmured. Without meaning it she let slip the added words, "when I was a girl."

She felt him start, but he saved the situation, making it ordinary again by obtaining her permission to smoke, then slowly lighting his cigarette before he spoke.

"You must forgive me," he put in with a smile, "but your name, when you were kind enough to let me be introduced, escaped me. I did not catch it."

She told him her surname, but he asked in his persuasive yet somehow masterful way for the Christian name as well. He turned round instantly as she gave it, staring hard at her with meaning, with an examining intentness, with open curiosity. There was a question on his lips, but she interrupted, delaying it by a question of her own. Without looking at him she knew and feared his question. Her voice just concealed a trembling that was in her throat.

"My aunt," she agreed lightly, "is incorrigible. Do you know I didn't catch yours either? Oh— I meant your surname," she added, confusion gaining upon her when he mentioned his first name only.

He became suddenly more earnest, his voice deepened, his whole manner took on the guise of deliberate intention backed by some profound emotion that he could no longer hide. The music, which had momentarily ceased, began again, and a couple, who had been sitting out diagonally across from them, rose and went out. They were now quite alone. The sky was brighter.

"I must tell you," he went on in a way that compelled her to look up and meet his intent gaze. "You really must allow me. I feel sure somehow you'll understand. At any rate," he added like a boy, "you won't laugh." She believes she gave the permission and assurance.

Memory fails her a little here, for as she returned his gaze, it seemed a curious change came stealing over him, yet at first so imperceptibly, so vaguely, that she could not say when it began, nor how it happened.

"Yes," she murmured, "please—" The change defined itself. She stopped dead.

"I know now where I've seen you before. I remember." His voice vibrated like a wind in big trees. It enveloped her.

"Yes," she repeated in a whisper, for the hammering of her heart made both a louder tone or further words impossible. She knew not what he was going to say, yet at the same time she knew with accuracy. Her eyes gazed helplessly into his. The change absorbed her. Within his outline she watched another outline grow. Behind the immaculate evening clothes a ragged, unkempt figure rose. A worn, ravaged face with young burning eyes peered through his own. "Please, please," she whispered again very faintly. He took her hand in his.

His voice came from very far away, yet drawing nearer, and the scene about them faded, vanished. The lane that curved east and west now stretched behind him, and she sat gazing towards the sunrise end, as years ago when the girl passed into the woman first.

"I knew— a friend of yours Dick Messenger," he was saying in this distant voice that yet was close beside her, "knew him at school, at Cambridge, and later in Mexico. We worked in the same mines together, only he was contractor and I was in difficulties. That made no difference. He he told me about a girl of his love and admiration, an admiration that remained, but a love that had already faded."

She saw only the ragged outline within the well groomed figure of the man who spoke. The young eyes that gazed so piercingly into hers belonged to him, the seller of her dream of years before. It was to this ragged stranger in her

lane she made her answer: "I, too, now remember," she said softly. "Please go on."

"He gave me his confidence, asking me where his duty lay, and I told him that the real love comes once only; it knows no doubt, no fading. I told him this—"

"We both discovered it in time," she said to herself, so low it was scarcely audible, yet not resisting as he laid his other hand upon the one he already held.

"I also told him there was only one true dream," the voice continued, the inner face drawing nearer to the outer that contained it. "I asked him, and he told me— everything. I knew all about this girl. Her picture, too, he showed me." The voice broke off. The flood of love and pity, of sympathy and understanding that rose in her like a power long suppressed, threatened tears, yet happy, yearning tears like those of a girl, which only the quick, strong pressure of his hands prevented.

"The—little painting—yes, I know it," she faltered.

"It saved me," he said simply. "It changed my life. From that moment I began living decently again— living for an ideal."

Without knowing that she did so, the pressure of her hand upon his own came instantly.

"He— he gave it to me," the voice went on, "to keep. He said he could neither keep it himself nor destroy it. It was the day before he sailed. I remember it as yesterday. I said I must give him something in return, or it would cut friendship. But I had nothing in the world to give. We were in the hills. I picked a leaf of fern instead. 'Fern-seed,' I told him, 'it will make you see the fairies and find your true dream.' I remember his laugh to this day— a sad, uneasy laugh. 'I shall give it to her,' he told me, 'when I give her my difficult explanation.' But I said, 'Give it with my love, and tell her that I wait.' He looked at me with surprise, incredulous. Then he said slowly, 'Why not? If if only you hadn't let yourself go to pieces like this!' "

An immensity of clear emotion she could not understand passed over her in a wave. Involuntarily she moved closer against him. With her eyes unflinchingly upon his own, she whispered: "You were hungry, thirsty, you had no clothes.... You waited!"

"You're reading my thoughts, as I knew one day you would." It seemed as if their minds, their bodies too, were one, as he said the words. "You, too you waited." His voice was low. There came a glow between them as of hidden fire; their faces shone; there was a brightening as of dawn upon their skins, within their eyes, lighting their very hair. Out of this happy sky his voice floated to her

with the blackbird's song: "And that night I dreamed of you. I dreamed I met you in an English country lane."

"We did," she murmured, as though it were quite natural. "I dreamed I gave you the fern leaf across a wicket- gate— and in front of a little house that was our home. In my dream— I handed to you— a dream—"

"You did." And as she whispered it the two figures merged into one before her very eyes.

"See," she added softly, "I have it still. It is in my locket at this moment, for I have worn it day and night through all these years of waiting."

She began fumbling at her chain.

He smiled. "Such things," he said gently, "are beyond me rather. I have found you. That's all that matters. That" he smiled again "is real, at any rate."

"A vision," she murmured, half to herself and half to him, "I can understand. A dream, though wonderful, is a dream. But the little fern you gave me," drawing the fine gold chair from her bosom, "the actual leaf I have worn all these years in my locket!"

He smiled as she held the locket out to him, her fingers feeling for the little spring. He shook his head, but so slightly she did not notice it.

"I will prove it to you," she said. "I must. Look!" she cried, as with trembling hand she pressed the hidden catch. "There! There!"

With heads close together they bent over. The tiny lid flew open. And as he took her for one quick instant in his arms the sun flashed his first golden shaft upon them, covering them with light. But her exclamation of incredulous surprise he smothered with a kiss. For inside the little locket there lay— nothing. It was quite empty.

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12: A Surrender

Robert Grant

1852-1940

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MORGAN RUSSELL and I were lolling one day on the beach at Rock Ledge watching the bathers. We had played three sets of tennis, followed by a dip in the ocean, and were waiting for the luncheon hour. Though Russell was my junior by four years, we were old friends, and had prearranged our vacation to renew our intimacy, which the force of circumstances had interrupted since we were students together at Harvard. Russell had been a Freshman when I was a Senior, but as we happened to room in the same entry, this propinquity had resulted in warm mutual liking. I had been out of college for eight years, had studied law, and was the managing clerk of a large law firm, and in receipt of what I then thought a tremendous salary. Russell was still at Cambridge. He had elected at graduation to pursue post-graduate courses in chemistry and physics, and had recently accepted a tutorship. He had not discovered until the beginning of the Junior year his strong predilection for scientific investigation, but he had given himself up to it with an ardor which dwarfed everything else on the horizon of his fancy. It was of his future we were talking, for he wished to take his old chum into his confidence and to make plain his ambition. "I recognize of course," he told me, "that I've an uphill fight ahead of me, but my heart is in it. My heart wouldn't be in it if I felt that the best years of my life were to be eaten up by mere teaching. Nowadays a man who's hired to teach is expected to teach until his daily supply of gray matter has run out, and his original work has to wait until after he's dead. There's where I'm more fortunate than some. The fifteen hundred dollars— a veritable godsend— which I receive annually under the will of my aunt, will keep the wolf at a respectful distance and enable me to play the investigator to my heart's content. I'm determined to be thorough, George. There is no excuse for superficiality in science. But in the end I intend to find out something new. See if I don't, old man."

"I haven't a doubt you will, Morgan," I replied. "I don't mind letting on that I ran across Professor Drayson last winter, and he told me you were the most promising enthusiast he had seen for a long time; that you were patient and level-headed as well as eager. Drayson doesn't scatter compliments lightly. But fifteen hundred dollars isn't a very impressive income."

"It was very good of the old fellow to speak so well of me."

"Suppose you marry?"

"Marry?" Russell looked up from the sea-shells with which he had been playing, and smiled brightly. He had a thin, slightly delicate face with an

expression which was both animated and amiable, and keen, strong gray eyes. "I've thought of that. I'm not what is called contemplating matrimony at the moment; but I've considered the possibility, and it doesn't appall me."

"On fifteen hundred a year?"

"And why not, George?" he responded a little fiercely. "Think of the host of teachers, clerks, small tradesmen, and innumerable other reputable human beings who marry and bring up families on that or less. Which do you think I would prefer, to amass a fortune in business and have my town and country house and steam yacht, or to exist on a pittance and discover before I die something to benefit the race of man?"

"Knowing you as I do, there's only one answer to that conundrum," said I. "And you're right, too, theoretically, Morgan. My ancestors in Westford would have thought fifteen hundred downright comfort, and in admitting to you that five thousand in New York is genteel poverty, I merely reveal what greater comforts the ambitious American demands. I agree with you that from the point of view of real necessity one-half the increase is sheer materialism. But who's the girl?"

"There is no girl. Probably there never will be. But I'm no crank. I like a good dinner and a seat at the play and an artistic domestic hearth as well as the next man. If I were to marry, of course I should retain the tutorship which I accepted temporarily as a means of training my own perceptions, though I should try to preserve as at present a considerable portion of my time free from the grind of teaching. Then much as I despise the method of rushing into print prematurely in order to achieve a newspaper scientific reputation, I should expect to eke out my income by occasional magazine articles and presently a book. With twenty-five hundred or three thousand a year we should manage famously."

"It would all depend upon the woman," said I with the definiteness of an oracle.

"If the savants in England, France, and Germany— the men who have been content to starve in order to attain immortality— could find wives to keep them company, surely their counterparts are to be found here where woman is not the slave but the companion of man and is encouraged to think not merely about him but think of him." After this preroration Russell stopped abruptly, then raised himself on one elbow. Attracted by his sudden interest I turned lazily in the same direction, and after a moment's scrutiny ejaculated: "It looks just like her."

As it was nearing the luncheon hour, most of the bathers had retired.

Two women, one of them a girl of twenty-five, in the full bloom of youth and vigor, with an open countenance and a self-reliant, slightly effusive smile,

were on the way to their bath. They were stepping transversely across the beach from their bath-house at one end in order to reach the place where the waves were highest, and their course was taking them within a few yards of where we lay. For some reason the younger woman had not put on the oil-skin cap designed to save her abundant hair from getting wet, but carried it dangling from her fingers, and, just as Russell noticed her, she dropped it on the beach. After stooping to pick it up, she waited a moment for her friend to join her, revealing her full face.

"Yes, it's certainly she," I announced. "I spoke to her on the pier in New York last autumn, when she was returning from Europe, and it's either she or her double."

"You know her?"

"Yes, the Widow Spaulding."

"Widow? You mean the girl?"

There was just a trace of disappointment in the tone of Russell's surprise.

"Yes, I mean the girl. But you needn't dismiss her altogether from your fastidiously romantic soul merely because she has belonged to another. There are extenuating circumstances. She married the Rev. Horace Spaulding, poor fellow, on his deathbed, when he was in the last stages of consumption, and two days later she was his widow."

"You seem to know a good deal about her."

"I ought to, for she was born and bred in Westford. Edna Knight was her name— the daughter of Justin Knight, the local attorney, half-lawyer and half-dreamer. His parents were followers of Emerson, and there have been plain living and high thinking in that family for three generations. Look at her," I added, as she breasted a giant wave and jubilantly threw herself into its embrace, "she takes to the water like a duck. I never saw a girl so metamorphosed in three years."

"What was she like before?" asked Russell.

"Changed physically, I mean, and— and socially, I suppose it should be called. Three years ago, at the time of her marriage to Spaulding, she was a slip of a girl, shy, delicate, and introspective. She and her lover were brought up in adjacent houses, and the world for her signified the garden hedge over which they whispered in the gloaming, and later his prowess at the divinity school and his hope of a parish.

When galloping consumption cut him off she walked about shrouded in her grief as one dead to the world of men and women. I passed her occasionally when I returned home to visit my family, and she looked as though she were going into a decline. That was a year after her marriage. Solicitous sympathy was unavailing, and the person responsible for her regaining her grip on life

was, curiously enough, a summer boarder whom old Mrs. Spaulding had taken into her family in order to make both ends meet. Westford has been saved from rusting out by the advent in the nick of time of the fashionable summer boarder, and Mrs. Sidney Dale, whose husband is a New York banker, and who spent two summers there as a cure for nervous prostration, fascinated Edna without meaning to and made a new woman of her in the process.

There is the story for you. A year ago Mrs. Dale took her to Europe as a sort of finishing touch, I suppose. I understand Westford thinks her affliction has developed her wonderfully, and finds her immensely improved; which must mean that she has triumphed over her grief, but has not forgotten, for Westford would never pardon a purely material evolution."

"I noticed her at the hotel this morning before you arrived, and admired the earnestness and ardor of her expression."

"And her good looks presumably. I saw you start when she approached just now. She may be just the woman for you."

"Introduce me then. And her companion?"

"Will fall to my lot, of course, but I have no clew as to her identity."

Mrs. Spaulding enlightened me on the hotel piazza, after luncheon, when, as a sequence to this persiflage I brought up my friend. The stranger proved to be Mrs. Agnes Gay Spinney, a literary person, a lecturer on history and literature. It transpired later that she and Edna had become acquainted and intimate at Westford the previous spring during a few weeks which Mrs. Spinney had spent there in the preparation of three new lectures for the coming season. She was a rather serious-looking woman of about forty with a straight figure, good features, and a pleasant, but infrequent smile, suggesting that its owner was not susceptible to flippancy. However, she naively admitted that she had come away for pure recreation and to forget the responsibilities of life.

Morgan and the widow were conversing with so much animation that I, to whom this remark was addressed, took upon myself to give youth a free field; consequently I resigned myself to Mrs. Spinney's dignified point of view, and, avoiding badinage or irony, evinced such an amiable interest in drawing her out that by the end of fifteen minutes she asked leave to show me the catalogue of her lectures, a proof of which she had just received from the printer. When she had gone to fetch it, I promptly inquired:

"Why don't you two young people improve this fine afternoon by a round of golf?"

A gleam of animation over Morgan's face betrayed that he regarded the suggestion as eminently happy. But it was Edna who spoke first.

"If Mr. Russell will put up with my poor game, I should enjoy playing immensely. But," she added smiling confidently and regarding him with her large, steady brown eyes, "I don't intend to remain a duffer at it long. I see," she continued after a moment, "from your expression, Mr. Randall, that you doubt this. I could tell from the corners of your mouth."

"I must grow a mustache to conceal my thoughts, it seems. I was only thinking, Mrs. Spaulding, that golf is a difficult game at which to excel."

"Yes, but they say that care and determination and— and keeping the eye on the ball will work wonders even for a woman. I shall be only a moment in getting ready, Mr. Russell."

"But what is to become of you, George?" asked Morgan as she disappeared.

"I noticed that a sensitive conscience kept you tongue-tied. This is probably one of the most self-sacrificing acts which will be performed the present summer. But you will remember that Mephistopheles on a certain occasion was equally good-natured."

"Don't be absurd. Is she very trying?"

"Dame Martha had some humor and no understanding; Mrs. Spinney has some understanding and no humor. Here she comes with her catalogue of lectures. There are over fifty of them, and from their scope she must be almost omniscient. How are you getting on with the widow?"

"Mrs. Spaulding seems to me an interesting woman. She has opinions of her own, which she expresses clearly and firmly. I like her," responded Morgan with a definiteness of manner which suggested that he was not to be debarred by fear of banter from admitting that he was attracted.

It seems that as they strode over the links that afternoon he was impressed by her fine physical bearing. There were a freedom and an ease in her movements, essentially womanly and graceful, yet independent and self-reliant, which stirred his pulses. He had been a close and absorbed student, and his observation of the other sex had been largely indifferent and formal. He knew, of course, that the modern woman had sloughed off helplessness and docile dependence on man, but like an ostrich with its head in the sand he had chosen to form a mental conception of what she was like, and he had pictured her either as a hoyden or an unsympathetic blue-stocking. This trig, well-developed beauty, with her sensible, alert face and capable manner was an agreeable revelation. If she was a type, he had neglected his opportunities. But the present was his at all events.

Here was companionship worthy of the name, and a stimulating vindication of the success of woman's revolt from her own weakness and subserviency. When at the conclusion of their game they sat down on a bank

overlooking the last hole and connected conversation took the place of desultory dialogue between shots, he was struck by her common sense, her enthusiasm, and her friendliness. He gathered that she was eager to support herself by some form of intellectual occupation, preferably teaching or writing, and that she had come to Rock Ledge with Mrs. Spinney in order to talk over quietly whether she might better take courses of study at Radcliffe or Wellesley, or learn the Kindergarten methods and at the same time apply herself diligently to preparation for creative work. Of one thing she was certain, that she did not wish to rust out in Westford. While her father lived, of course her nominal home would be there, but she felt that she could not be happy with nothing but household employment in a small town out of touch with the movement and breadth of modern life. The substance of this information was confided to me by Morgan before we went to bed that night.

It is easy and natural for two young people vegetating at a summer resort to become exceedingly intimate in three or four days, especially when facility for intercourse is promoted and freedom from interruption guaranteed by a self-sacrificing accessory. My complicity at the outset had been pure off-hand pleasantry, but by the end of thirty-six hours it was obvious to me that Morgan's interest was that of a man deeply infatuated. Seeing that the two young people were of marriageable age and free, so far as I knew, from disqualifying blemishes which would justify me in putting either on guard against the other, I concluded that it behooved me as a loyal friend to keep Mrs. Spinney occupied and out of the way. Consequently Morgan and Mrs.

Spaulding were constantly together during the ensuing ten days, and so skilfully did I behave that the innocent pair regarded the flirtation which I was carrying on as a superb joke— a case of a banterer caught in the toils, and Mrs. Spinney's manners suggested that she was agreeably flattered.

Morgan's statement that he had never contemplated marriage was true, and yet in the background of his dream of the future lurked a female vision whose sympathy and companionship were to be the spur of his ambition and the mainstay of his courage. Had he found her? He did not need to ask himself the question more than once. He knew that he had, and, knowing that he was deeply in love, he turned to face the two questions by which he was confronted. First, would she have him?

Second, in case she would, was he in a position to ask her to marry him, or, more concretely, could he support her? The first could be solved only by direct inquiry. The answer to the second depended on whether the views which he had expressed to me as to the possibilities of matrimonial content in circumstances like his were correct. Or was I right, and did it all depend upon the woman? But what if it did? Was not this just the woman to sympathize

entirely with his ambition and to keep him up to the mark in case the shoe pinched? There was no doubt of her enthusiasm and interest when in the course of one of their walks he had confided to her that he had dedicated his life to close scientific investigation. Well, he would lay the situation squarely before her and she could give him his answer. If she was the kind of woman he believed her to be and she loved him and had faith in him, would the prospect of limited means appall her? He felt sure that it would not.

By the light of subsequent events, being something of a mind reader, I know the rest of their story as well as though I had been present in the flesh.

Before the end of the fortnight he made a clean breast of his love and of his scruples. He chose an occasion when they had strolled far along the shore and were resting among picturesque rocks overlooking the ocean. She listened shyly, as became a woman, but once or twice while he was speaking she looked up at him with unmistakable ardor and joy in her brown eyes which let him know that his feelings were reciprocated before she confessed it by speech. He was so determined to make clear to her what was in store for her if she accepted him that without waiting for an answer to his burning avowal he proceeded to point out and to reiterate that the scantiest kind of living so far as creature comforts were concerned was all which he could promise either for the present or for the future.

When, having satisfied his conscience, he ceased speaking, Edna turned toward him and with a sigh of sentiment swept back the low bands of profuse dark hair from her temples as though by the gesture she were casting all anxieties and hindrances to the winds.

"How strange it is!" she murmured. "The last thing which I supposed could happen to me in coming here was that I should marry. But I am in love— in love with you; and to turn one's back on that blessing would be to squander the happiness of existence." She was silent a moment. Then she continued gravely, "As you know, I was engaged— married once before. How long ago it seems! I thought once, I believed once, that I could never love again. Dear Horace, how wrapped up we were in each other! But I was a child then, and— and it seems as though all I know of the real world has been learned since. I must not distrust— I will not refuse the opportunity to make you happy and to become happier myself by resisting the impulse of my heart. I love you Morgan."

"Thank God! But are you sure, Edna, that you have counted the cost of marrying me?"

"Oh, yes! We shall manage very well, I think," she answered, speaking slowly and contracting a little her broad brow in the attempt to argue dispassionately. "It isn't as if you had nothing. You have fifteen hundred dollars

and your salary, nearly two thousand more. Five years ago that would have seemed to me wealth, and now, of course, I understand that it isn't; and five years ago I suppose I would have married a man if I loved him no matter how poor he was. But to-day I am wiser— that's the word, isn't it? For I recognize that I might not be happy as a mere drudge, and to become one would conflict with what I feel that I owe myself in the way of— shall I call it civilizing and self-respecting comfort? So you see if you hadn't a cent, I might feel it was more sensible and better for us both to wait or to give each other up. But it isn't a case of that at all. We've plenty to start on— plenty, and more than I'm accustomed to; and by the time we need more, if we do need more, you will be famous."

"But it's just that, Edna," he interjected quickly. "I may never be famous. I may be obscure, and we may be poor, relatively speaking, all our lives," and he sighed dismally.

"Oh, yes, you will, and oh, no, we shan't!" she exclaimed buoyantly.

"Surely, you don't expect me to believe that you are not going to succeed and to make a name for yourself? We must take some chances— if that is a chance. You have told me yourself that you intended to succeed."

"In the end, yes."

"Why, then, shouldn't I believe it, too? It would be monstrous— disloyal and unromantic not to. I won't listen to a word more on that score, please. And the rest follows, doesn't it? We are marrying because we love each other and believe we can help each other, and I am sure one of the reasons why we love each other is that we both have enthusiasm and find life intensely absorbing and admire that in the other. There's the great difference between me now and what I was at eighteen. The mere zest of existence seems to me so much greater than it used. There are so many interesting things to do, so many interesting things which we would like to do. And now we shall be able to do them together, shan't we?" she concluded, her eyes lighted with confident happiness, her cheeks mantling partly from love, partly, perhaps, from a sudden consciousness that she was almost playing the wooer.

Morgan was equal to the occasion. "Until death do us part, Edna. This is the joy of which I have dreamed for years and wondered if it could ever be mine," he whispered, as he looked into her face with all the ardor of his soul and kissed her on the lips.

That evening he hooked his arm in mine on the piazza after dinner and said, "You builded better than you knew, George. We are engaged, and she's the one woman in the world for me. I've told her everything— everything, and she isn't afraid."

"And you give me the credit of it. That's Christian and handsome. I'll say one thing for her which any one can see from her face, that she has good looks and intelligence. As to the rest, you monopolized her so that our acquaintance is yet to begin."

"It shall begin at once," said Morgan, with a happy laugh. "But what about you, George?"

"I leave for New York to-night. Now that the young lovers have plighted their troth my presence is no longer necessary. A sudden telegram will arrive."

"But Mrs. Spinney? We have begun to— er— hope—"

"Hope?"

"Begun to think— wondered if—"

"I were going to marry a woman several years my senior who has the effrontery to believe that she can lecture acceptably on the entire range of literary and social knowledge from the Troubadours and the Crusades to Rudyard Kipling and the Referendum? Such is the reward of disinterested self-sacrifice!"

"Forgive me, George. I knew at first that you were trying to do me a good turn, but— but you were so persistent that you deceived us. I'm really glad there's nothing in it."

"Thanks awfully." Then bending a sardonic glance on my friend, I murmured sententiously:

"Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, And therefore is Winged Cupid painted blind."

"EDNA, why don't you take a more active interest in these club gatherings?" asked Morgan Russell one afternoon eight years subsequent to their marriage. He had laid aside his work for the day, and having joined his wife on the piazza was glancing over a printed notice of a meeting which she had left on the table. "I'm inclined to think you would get considerable diversion from them, and the study work at home would be in your line."

Edna was silent a moment. She bent her head over her work— a child's blouse— that he might not notice that she was biting her lip, and she managed to impart a dispassionate and almost jaunty tone to the indictment which uttered.

"Every now and then, Morgan, you remind me of Edward Casaubon in 'Middlemarch.' Not often, but every now and then lately."

"That selfish, fusty, undiscerning bookworm?"

"You're not selfish and you're not fusty; but you remind me of him when you make remarks like your first." She brushed a caterpillar from her light summer skirt, and noticing the draggled edge held it up.

"There's one answer to your question about taking an active interest in clubs. There are twenty others, but this is one."

Her husband appeared puzzled. He looked well, but pale and thin, as though accustomed to close application.

"I mean I can't afford it," she added.

"I see. Then it was stupid of me— Casaubonish, I dare say, to have spoken. I was only trying to put a little more variety into your life because I realized that you ought to have it."

Edna gave a faint sigh by way of acquiescence. Marriage had changed her but little in appearance. She looked scarcely older, and her steady eyes, broad brow, and ready smile gave the same effect of determination and spirit, though she seemed more sober.

"I'm a little dull myself and that makes me captious," she asserted.

Then dropping her work and clasping her hands she looked up earnestly at him and said, "Don't you see the impossibility of my being active in my club, Morgan? I go to it, of course, occasionally, so as not to drop out of things altogether, but in order to take a prominent part and get the real benefit of the meetings a woman needs time and money.

Not so very much money, nor so very much time, but more of either than I have at my disposal. Of course, I would like, if we had more income— and what is much more essential— more time, to accept some of the invitations which I receive to express my ideas before the club, but it is out of the question. I have a horror of superficiality just as you have."

"A sad fate; a poor man's wife," said Morgan with a smile which, though tranquil, was wan.

"And you warned me. Don't think for a moment I'm complaining or regretting. I was only answering your question. Do you realize, dear, we shall have been married eight years day after to-morrow?"

"So we have, Edna. And what a blessing our marriage has been to me!"

"We have been very happy." Then, she said, after a pause, as though she had been making up her mind to put the question, "You are really content, Morgan?"

"Content?" he echoed, "with you, Edna?"

"Not with me as me, but with us both together; with our progress, and with what we stand for as human beings?"

"I think so. That is, relatively speaking, and provided I understand correctly what you mean."

She had not resumed her work, and her eager, resolute expression indicated that she was preparing to push the conversation to a more crucial point.

"I suppose what I mean is, would you, if we were going to start over again, do just as you have— devote yourself to science?"

"Oh!" Morgan flushed. "I don't see the use of considering that conundrum. I have devoted myself to science and there is no help for it, even if I were dissatisfied."

"No present help."

"No help at any time, Edna. But why resurrect this ghost? We burned our bridges at the altar."

"We did. And don't misunderstand me, dear. I'm not flinching, I'm not even regretting, as I said to you before. Perhaps it may seem to you brutal— which is worse than Casaubonish— to ask you such a question. Still, we're husband and wife, and on an anniversary like this why isn't it sensible to look matters squarely in the face, and consider whether we've been wise or not? You ask the use. Are we not both seeking the truth?"

"Just as a tradesman takes an account of stock to ascertain whether he is bankrupt. I suppose you are thinking of the children and— and you admitted that you are a little tired yourself."

"I wasn't thinking of any one. I was simply considering the question as an abstract proposition— by the light, of course, of our experience."

"It is hard for you, Edna; yes, it is hard. I often think of it."

"But I shouldn't mind its being hard if I were sure we were wise— justified."

Morgan leaned toward her and said with grave intensity, "How, dear, are the great truths of science to be ascertained unless men— men and their wives— are willing to delve lovingly, to sacrifice comforts, and even endure hardships in pursuit of them?"

Edna drew a deep breath. "But you must answer me a question. How are children to be educated, and their minds, bodies, and manners guarded and formed in the ideal way on a small income such as ours?"

"I thought it was the children."

"It isn't merely the children. It's myself and you— you, Morgan. It breaks my heart to see you pale, thin, and tired most of the time. You like good food and we can't afford to keep a decent cook. You have to consider every cent you spend, and the consequence is you have no amusement, and if you take a vacation, it is at some cheap place where you are thoroughly uncomfortable. And, of course, it is the children, too. If you, with your talents had gone into business or followed medicine or the law, like your friend Mr. Randall, we should have an income by this time which— well, for one thing, we should be able to keep the children at the seaside until October, and for another have Ernest's teeth straightened."

"Perhaps I can manage both of those, as it is. But, Edna, what's the advantage of considering what might have been? Besides, you haven't answered my question."

"I know it," she said slowly. "You mustn't misunderstand me, Morgan.

I'm very proud of you, and I appreciate fully your talent, your self-sacrifice, and your modesty. I thought you entirely right the other day in repulsing that odious reporter who wished to make a public character of you before you were ready. I'm content to wait— to wait forever, and I shall be happy in waiting. But, on the other hand, I've never been afraid to face the truth. It's my way. I've done so all my life; and my growth mentally and morally has come through my willingness to acknowledge my mistakes. Every one says it is fine for other people to starve for the sake of discovery, but how few are willing to do it themselves! If we were in a book, the world would admire us, but sometimes I can't help wondering if we would not be happier and more satisfactory human products if you had done something which brought you rewards more commensurate with your abilities. I'm merely thinking aloud, Morgan. I'm intensely interested, as you know, in the problems of life, and this is one of them."

"But you know foreigners claim that we as a nation are not really interested in culture and knowledge, but only in their money value. What becomes of the best scholarship if we are ready to admit it?"

"Ah! but Professor Drayson told me only the other day that abroad, in Germany, for instance, they give their learned professors and savants suitable salaries and make much of them socially, because it is recognized that otherwise they wouldn't be willing to consecrate themselves to their work."

"Then the essential thing for me to do is to invent some apparatus which I can sell to a syndicate for half a million dollars."

"That would be very nice, Morgan," she answered, smiling brightly.

"But you know perfectly well that if we go on just as we are to the end, I shall be thoroughly proud of you, and thoroughly happy— relatively speaking." So saying she put her arm around her husband's neck and kissed him affectionately.

Although this conversation was more definite than any which had taken place between them, Morgan was not seriously distressed. He knew that it was his wife's method to think aloud, and he knew that she would be just as loyal to him and no less cheerful because of it. She was considering a problem in living, and one which indisputably had two sides. He had always been aware of it, and the passage of time without special achievement on his part had brought it more pointedly before him now that there were two children and the prospect of a third. He was absorbed in his vocation; and the lack of certain

comforts— necessities, perhaps— though inconvenient, would not have weighed appreciably in the scale were he the only one affected. But though he was pursuing his course along the path of investigation eagerly and doing good work without a shadow of disappointment, he was aware not merely that he had not as yet made a concrete valuable discovery, but might never do so. This possibility did not appall him, but he recognized that it was a part of the circumstances of his particular case viewed from the standpoint of a contemplative judgment on his behavior. He was succeeding, but was his success of a character to justify depriving his wife and children of what might have been theirs but for his selection? The discussion was purely academic, for he had made his choice, but he did not question Edna's privilege to weigh the abstract proposition, and accordingly was not depressed by her frankness.

It happened a few weeks later that Edna received a letter from Mrs.

Sidney Dale inviting her and Morgan to spend a fortnight at the Dale spring and autumn home on the Hudson. Edna had seen Mrs. Dale but twice since their trip abroad. She had been unable to accept a previous similar invitation, but on this occasion Morgan insisted that she should go. He argued that it would refresh and rest her, and he agreed to conduct her to Cliffside and remain for a day or two himself.

Cliffside proved to be a picturesque, spacious house artistically situated at the vantage point of a domain of twenty acres and furnished with the soothing elegancies of modern ingenuity and taste.

Among the attractions were a terrace garden, a well-accoutred stable, a tennis court, and a steam yacht. Mrs. Dale, who had prefaced her invitation by informing her husband that she never understood exactly why she was so fond of Edna and feared that the Russells were very poor, sat, a vision of successive cool, light summer garments, doing fancy work on the piazza, and talking in her engaging, brightly indolent manner. Morgan found Mr. Dale, who was taking a vacation within telephonic reach of New York, a genial, well-informed man with the effect of mental strength and reserve power. They became friendly over their cigars, and a common liking for old-fashioned gardens. On the evening before he departed, Morgan, in the course of conversation, expressed an opinion concerning certain electrical appliances before the public in the securities of which his host was interested. The banker listened with keen attention, put sundry questions which revealed his own acuteness, and in pursuance of the topic talked to Morgan graphically until after midnight of the large enterprises involving new mechanical discoveries in which his firm was engaged.

Morgan was obliged to go home on the following morning, but Edna remained a full fortnight. On the day of her return Morgan was pleased to

perceive that the trip had evidently done her good. Not only did she look brighter and fresher, but there was a sparkling gayety in her manner which suggested that the change had served as a tonic. Morgan did not suspect that this access of spirits was occasioned by the secret she was cherishing until she confronted him with it in the evening.

"My dear," she said, "you would never guess what has happened, so I won't ask you to try. I wonder what you will think of it. Mr. Dale is going to ask you— has asked you to go into his business— to become one of his partners."

"Asked me?"

"Yes. It seems you made a good impression on him from the first— especially the last evening when you sat up together. It came about through Mrs. Dale, I think. That is, Mr. Dale has been looking about for some time for what he calls the right sort of man to take in, for one of his partners has died recently and the business is growing; and Mrs. Dale seems to have had us on her mind because she had got it into her head that we were dreadfully poor. I don't think she has at all a definite idea of what your occupation is. But the long and short of it is her husband wants you. He told me so himself in black and white, and you will receive a letter from him within a day or two."

"Wants me to become a broker?"

"A banker and broker."

"And— er— give up my regular work?"

Edna nervously smoothed out the lap of her dress as though she realized that she might be inflicting pain, but she raised her steady eyes and said with pleasant firmness:

"You would have to, of course, wouldn't you? But Mr. Dale explained that you would be expected to keep a special eye on the mechanical and scientific interests of the firm. He said he had told you about them. So all that would be in your line of work, wouldn't it?"

"I understand— I understand. It would amount to nothing from the point of view of my special field of investigation," he answered a little sternly. "What reply did you make to him, Edna?"

"I merely said that I would tell you of the offer; that I didn't know what you would think."

"I wish you had refused it then and there."

"I couldn't do that, of course. The decision did not rest with me. Besides, Morgan, I thought you might think that we could not— er— afford to refuse it, and that as you would still be more or less connected with scientific matters, you might regard it as a happy compromise. Mr. Dale said," she continued with incisive clearness in which there was a tinge of jubilation, "that on a conservative estimate you could count on ten or twelve thousand dollars a

year, and his manner suggested that your share of the profits would be very much more than that."

"The scientific part is a mere sop; it amounts to nothing. I should be a banker, engaged in floating new financial enterprises and selling their securities to the public."

There was a brief silence. Edna rose and seating herself on the sofa beside him took his hands and said with solemn emphasis, "Morgan, if you think you will be unhappy— if you are satisfied that this change would not be the best thing for us, say so and let us give it up. Give it up and we will never think of it again."

He looked her squarely in the face. "My God, Edna, I don't know what to answer! It's a temptation. So many things would be made easy. It comes to this: Is a man justified in refusing such an opportunity and sacrificing his wife and children in order to be true to his—?"

She interrupted him. "If you put it that way, Morgan, we must decline. If you are going to break your heart—"

"Or yours—"

"Morgan, whichever way you decide I shall be happy, provided only you are sure. If you feel that you— we— all of us will be happier and er— more effective human creatures going on as we are, it is your duty to refuse Mr. Dale's offer."

"It's a temptation," murmured Morgan. "I must think it over, Edna. Am I bound to resist it?"

"Bound?"

"You know I may never be heard of in science outside of a few partial contemporaries." His lip quivered with his wan smile.

"That has really nothing to do with it," she asserted.

"I think it has, Edna," he said simply. Then suddenly the remembrance of the conversation with his friend Randall recurred to him with vivid clearness. He looked up into his wife's eyes and said, "After all, dear, it really rests with you. The modern woman is man's helpmate and counsellor. What do you advise?"

Edna did not answer for a few moments. Her open, sensible brow seemed to be seeking to be dispassionate as a judge and to expel every vestige of prejudice.

"It's a very close question to decide, Morgan. Of course, there are two distinct sides. You ask me to tell you, as your wife, what I think is wisest and best. I can't set it forth as clearly as I should like— I won't attempt to give my reasons even. But somehow my instinct tells me that if you don't accept Mr. Dale's offer, you will be sorry three years hence."

"Then I shall accept, Edna, dear," he said.

THREE YEARS later I took Mrs. Sidney Dale out to dinner at the house of a common friend in New York. In the course of conversation I remarked, "I believe it is you, Mrs. Dale, who is responsible for the metamorphosis in my friend, Morgan Russell."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"An old friend since college days. I never saw any one so spruced up, shall I call it? He has gained fifteen pounds, is growing whiskers, and is beginning to look the embodiment of worldly prosperity."

"It is delightful to see them— both him and his wife. Yes, I suppose I may claim to be responsible for rescuing him from obscurity. My husband finds him a most valuable man in his business. I'm very fond of Mrs. Russell. She hasn't the obnoxious ways of most progressive women, and she certainly has executive ability and common sense. Being such an indolent person myself, I have always been fascinated by her spirit and cleverness. I'm glad she has been given a chance. They are getting on nicely."

"I think she is in her element now. I was at their house the other day," I continued blandly. "It seems that Edna is prominent in various educational and philanthropic bodies, high in the councils of her club, and a leading spirit in diverse lines of reform. They are entertaining a good deal— a judicious sprinkling of the fashionable and the literary. The latest swashbuckler romances were on the table, and it was evident from her tone that she regarded them as great American literature. Everything was rose color. Morgan came home while I was there. His hands were full of toys for his children and violets for his wife. He began to talk golf. It's a complete case of ossification of the soul— pleasant enough to encounter in daily intercourse, but sad to contemplate."

Mrs. Dale turned in her chair. "I believe you're laughing at me, Mr. Randall. What is sad? And what do you mean by ossification of the soul?"

Said I with quiet gravity, "Fifteen or twenty thousand dollars a year. Morgan Russell's life is ruined— and the world had great hopes of him."

Mrs. Dale, who is a clever person, in spite of her disclaimers, was silent a moment. "I know what you mean, of course. But I don't agree with you in the least. And you," she added with the air of a woman making a telling point— "you the recently appointed attorney of the paper trust, with a fabulous salary, you're the last man to talk like that."

I regarded her a moment with sardonic brightness. "Mrs. Dale," I said, "it grieves us to see the ideals of our friends shattered."

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13: Visitors from Venus

Anthony M Rud

1893-1942

Blue Book, Oct 1937

American pulp writer of crime, science fiction and horror

LOOKING out of the window, I can see Mt. Greylock of the Berkshires of Massachusetts. I have my typewriter here in an enormous new chicken-house— never used for chickens.

My hair stands right up on end when I think back to last summer— when I think why there never were any chickens to put in this large, new and splendidly equipped house— and why every feather of the eighteen hundred hens in the other four chicken-houses was destroyed.

I take a good deal of credit for having any garden at all this spring. My nerve is better. Annie Overalls, the giant swamp-Yankee woman who does my plowing and harrowing, is out there now behind her team, turning over the soil for the truck-field. Annie weighs over two hundred, and has been plowing for thirty years. Just the same, her hair was midnight black this time last spring.

Now it has a wide white streak, pure white. And there is a sullen, slightly distrustful look in Annie's black eyes, any time she runs the apex of the plow into a root or some other obstruction. This land is damned, she says.

Annie never knew Dr. Armstrong— Charles Llewellyn Armstrong, D. Sc., and all the rest of the alphabet. I did. He was why I came here last year. He tempted me with a mystery. It tempted him too, and that is why he died. I am alive— by but the margin of a frog-hair.

Chuck Armstrong taught astronomy at State when I was a freshman there. He was the youngest full professor of that science in the country then, I believe. He awed me. I did well enough during my four-year course, so for one year I was a fledgling instructor under him. But then I went to writing and editing.

Doctor Armstrong's way led him further and further from the affairs of earth, and into attempts at short-wave communication with planets and even the nearer of the great stars. I have no doubt at all that by the standards of clerks and hinds, he became so obsessed with universal affairs, that in the eyes of the world he would have to be called crazy. Great astronomers cannot think in terms of glove-sizes and forty-quart milk-cans. They see a million miles, or a million million, and think in terms of light years. What price the short-ticking stop-watch of man's terrestrial existence?

TWENTY-TWO years passed. I was at Key West when Armstrong's telegram came. If I quoted the words, they would mean nothing. Suffice it to say that once long ago he had promised me a breath-taking thing. "I'll call you to help, Tom, when I get through indisputably to people of another planet, or get word here from them. Then you'll come, no matter what you're doing."

I remember how I chuckled to myself when I made that promise. Sure, I'd come— any time we had Mars on long distance.

That high noon, with the early spring sun pouring its rays like molten metal upon the sands of Florida's tip, I read the yellow sheets— three of them— of his night letter. My eyes widened.

Somehow I forgot to chuckle. I had learned a few things in the intervening years. I felt chills skitter across my shoulder- blades ; but at the same time my stomach felt as though it were blanching like an almond. Either Armstrong had gone downright mad, or— or else here was something that would make Leif the Lucky, and Columbus, and Stanley and all the other explorer lads look a dime a dozen.

Here was a man who claimed to have received a shipment of goods from the planet Venus!

Of course his telegram was couched in words such as we had used in the observatory, and which meant little or nothing to the telegraph-operators, Doubtless they thought it code.

I WENT by air, changing once. I landed at Canaan, Connecticut, one afternoon, then took a livery car (as they call cabs here) a few miles across the Massachusetts line into the heart of the Berkshires. The snow had gone, but only recently. It was chilly, though the sun was warm. Some plowing had been started, though only foolhardy farmers would put in anything like a crop for at least another month... .

The Doctor had been near Flagstaff, Arizona, when it happened. I may as well say that the projectile from Venus missed the Southwest by a few thousand miles, and landed in New England. The Doctor knew all about it, though, and was on his way in a fast plane before the dazed natives of the Berkshires had got around to investigating. A little quick buying at a high price, no questions asked, and the Doctor owned one hundred and sixty acres, part of which had been used as a budding chicken-farm by an old fellow named Sassenach.

THE Doctor's second wife had died. Her mother, a worldly-wise frivolous creature— I had never liked her much— had spent a good many years moving from Monaco to Cannes to Paris to London as the seasons changed. She was about as much use on a farm as a spare tire is of use to a rooster.

Her granddaughter Helen— well, sometimes something good cometh out of Nazareth, and the most unlikely people are the ancestors of angels. That's how I felt at first sight of Helen, anyhow. I'd never particularly liked the name of Helen. Now I understood the Siege of Ilium, and all that. Helen was not very pretty; she was just a smooth and lovely blonde, built by a master sculptor with Eternity on his hands, and strangely enough endowed with sympathy and understanding. She could even understand her father and love him. Mighty few could have grasped his immensity, any more than they could have understood Copernicus in his early day....

Just a few days before Armstrong brought his two womenfolk, buying the farm, and installing the half-witted hired hand to take care of the chickens till I arrived, something awesome and frightening had occurred in the still snow-capped Berkshires. A meteor had fallen.

Now, this was no ordinary shooting star, to blaze a second or two in the night sky and then be consumed. It did not blaze at all. No one saw it— though they heard and felt it strike, that morning at two-forty-five.

It came at terrific speed, and in a slanting direction. Not straight down, as a baseball falls if you drop it from a third-story window, but at an angle of incidence probably no greater than twenty degrees. This slanting hit, of course, was due to the rotation of the earth.

As luck would have it, the projectile (I am admitting from the first that it was sent deliberately from Venus, though I did not believe that myself for a long time) struck rather lightly on the bare granite side of Ranger Mountain. It ricocheted like a flat stone shied across the surface of a pond. It narrowly missed Music Mountain, and then zipped a distance of some forty-odd miles before it lost elevation in its new trajectory and sought earth again.

Its final resting-place was this farm, of course; but before arriving to gouge that long furrow in the heart of the maple and pine woods beyond Dog River, it played a couple of strange pranks:

A brick silo on the Swanson farm lost the top twelve feet of its trim tower. And if Ole Swanson, who owns the most prosperous grazing farm and Holstein herd in Sheffield, was not known to be rich, his agonized Skandahoovian curses would have been pitiful. Doctor Armstrong sent him a fifty-dollar bill in a plain envelope, and worried no more about Ole. Probably he is still invoking Wodin, and Thor with his billy boats, and wondering just what happened.

Two miles farther along toward this place, having lost about ten feet of altitude, the speeding projectile neatly lifted one small new automobile (untenanted) from the top of one of these big trucks which deliver four new cars to dealers. I understand that the driver felt a jar, but thought nothing of it— until the driver tried to deliver four brand-new cars to a dealer at

Egremont later that morning, and found only three cars left. Then there was hell to pay for the driver, and no mistake.... I don't recall what Armstrong did about that, though he probably got the man another job.

UNLIKE that first slanting hit on Ranger Mountain, when the meteor-projectile crashed into the maple and pine woods here at Dog River, it caused no great noise or earth tremor. The topsoil there is soft— ten tons of pine needles lie rotting there, and the earth below that is sand, gravel and clay, the bedrock being nearly forty feet down. The meteor lost impetus and stopped, long before it got to bedrock, thanks to the ricochet, and fortunately for the Doctor and myself— or unfortunately, if you think human life precious above all else. I don't— though I value my own, and the lives of those dear to me. In the abstract, though, and to others on this earth, I and my sweetheart are worth mighty little. We are too much in love with each other. Yes, even if I am in crusty middle age, that seems to be true.

ARMSTRONG, discouraging Sassenach and other people who tried to be neighborly, had hired just the half-wit called Ranny, and told the womenfolk to use his car, get groceries, ice, meat and whatever, allow no deliveries (there were none anyway), and to keep house for a little while as best they could. I was coming and I would help. (It seems he forgot that I had turned writer, and described me as an instructor in astronomy who had been with him years ago. This explains Helen's eyes going wide, when I arrived in the most unsuitable attire imaginable. I had on a Palm Beach suit and Bangkok straw— and a cheap, heavy overcoat and gloves hurriedly purchased. The rest of my stuff was coming by express.)

"Why— Mr. Cattell!" she gasped, when I had mentioned my name and asked for the Doc. "I— I thought you —were old! You— oh, excuse me!" And she blushed, putting one hand on my arm and leading me in to the small living-room of the farmhouse where sat cross, tired, and frizzle-haired Grandma.

The old lady's name was Mrs. Kramer, if it matters. They called her Nana, which made her furious. She was going "to get right out of this horrible place" just as quickly as possible, and go back to her dear Monte Carlo.

Well, she got out fast enough when the time came. But her destination was not Monte Carlo— unless that rather rundown gambling resort has changed a lot since I last saw it, and has become a suburb of one of the after-worlds.

I could forgive Helen, all right, for considering me of old. Any man of forty, slowing down a little in his tennis game, and going a trifle thin on top, could forgive a lovely girl for making that mistake. I may as well say right out, I fell in love the first minute I looked into Helen's blue eyes. I'd done it before, with all

manner of eyes, of course; but somehow it never seemed to last. But there is a certain stanchness and sweetness about blue eyes. You— But I'll stop raving now and get to my meteors.

I had supper, listened to Mrs. Kramer complain, and then got out hastily. The Doctor had not appeared.

"He— stays out there!" whispered Helen, touching my arm as she came out into the dusk with me. 'There is a lantern here, Mr. Cattell—"

"The name is Tom, Helen," I dared. "D'you mind?"

"I'm glad, Tom," she said quietly. "I was scared. Tom, what has he got, out there? He won't tell us, except it's some kind of meteor. Is— is it very valuable, do you suppose? Made of radium, or something?"

"I don't know— but I'm going to find out right now," I told her. "Which way do I go?"

"I'll show you, but I'm not allowed to go out. When you go, whistle a tune. Do you remember 'Men of State'?"

Of course I remembered the old college song. And regretfully taking leave of the girl, who stayed there on the west bank of the small river, leaning against a stone fence, I distrustfully crossed the swinging footbridge, a suspension affair that swayed a full yard sidewise as I inched across.

Beyond lay the gloom of the woods. I lighted the lantern, started whistling, and then looked rather alarmedly at the straight bore through the wall of trees. Certainly some large meteorite had done this— and it was coming to earth when it did! Just thirty yards back in the close-thatched woods, where a man had to break branches from in front of his eyes continually, the first slanting gouge in the soft topsoil appeared.

Why, the blamed projectile, or whatever it was, must be as big around as a wine-tun, and smooth! The earth had fused until it was hard and almost like glass, there where the hot body from the stratosphere had struck!

Just as I reached a spot where the glazed furrow was five feet deep, I heard a short growl on the ground surface right beside my shoulder. A truculent white English bulldog stood there, evidently just about to take a jaw hold on my neck!

"Down, Lord Nelson!" came a brusque voice. "You, Tom— and thank the Lord you didn't waste time!"

Bearing another lantern, the short, rather paunchy figure of Dr. Armstrong— terribly ravaged by the years, from the man I had known— strode up, reached down a grimy hand, and clasped mine, shaking it and helping me climb up out of the bore, at the same time.

My old professor wore glasses now. He was hatless, and he wore old brogans and overalls, dirt-stained from digging. But his voice was just the

same. Perhaps a little graver,. but with a restrained triumph ringing through it every now and then.

Certainly he did not seem in the least mad, was my first reaction. And I was relieved. Then I began to get really excited. If he was not mad, then could this incredible tale have any vestige of truth? Had he really got something, even a meteor, from Venus?

A LOT of what followed, I must compress. The Doctor wasted no time in reminiscences. He took for granted that I was there to help him in every way, and simply commanded my services wherever he wished them. Largely because of the lovely girl I had left back there at the stone fence, I made less remonstrance at taking up chicken-farm duties, than you would have thought. Sitting down at the side of the bore, with our two lanterns and two pipes burning, Dr. Armstrong told me hair-raising things. Most of them have been published in the scientific journals, and I can skip them—furnishing a bibliography to anyone who cares to read back through the months and years, of his scientific claims. Most of them were laughed at then, I must admit. Now, no one laughs. Dr. Armstrong was not lying. He was not even exaggerating. A few of his inferences were faulty, but in the main the terrific and incredible tale he unfolded was nothing more nor less than the simple truth, as far as it went. But even the Doctor did not guess now the hellish trick that had been played upon him by the Venusians themselves !

"I have been in communication with Ooloo, the highest-powered of six message-sending stations on Venus, for thirteen years," he told me curtly. "This is the result—" And he waved a heavy hand toward the furrow. "Somehow, Tom, I am almost afraid to dig further. I'm going to dig, all right. But I have found out that the Venusians are scarcely people at all, as you and I understand the term. They are intelligences, all right. Far ahead of us. But I—well, I have not the faintest idea in God's world and universe, what a single Venusian looks like!"

"But— but isn't he a person? Isn't he a man?" I cried rather blankly. "What on— that is, what else could he be?"

"I don't know. A machine, perhaps. A sort of fish with a brain. A great pterodactyl, maybe. Anyhow, I pin my faith on the fact that he does have a brain.

"It is a highly developed intelligence, too. I think the Venusians live in caves, or have underground houses. Yet they knew about us, all right. I can't seem to get much out of them, though they accept and acknowledge all my messages, as if they understood perfectly.

"Lately, for over a year, they have sent me brief ether-waves which I have understood as meaning that they were building a great catapult or gun, and would send me on earth a shipment of goods of their own manufacture— or possibly, produce from their fields. I am not sure which. They have some way of shipping things in asbestos or some similar material, so it is not consumed by the heat of passing through another planet's atmosphere.

"In fact—well, down here a few more feet, is that shipment! Can you imagine, Tom Cattell, what we are going to find when it cools, and we can open it ?"

NO use trying to tell anyone else the thrill those words gave me, as I stood and looked down in lantern light, in the midst of the dark woods, at the place where the furrow stopped, and the great projectile had burrowed on in an underground bore. But I could only stammer at the time. I was frightened, and at the same time so fascinated that I could not have left that thing, even had I been sure my own life was going to be forfeited to further curiosity.

I found out now, though, that I was to do no digging. The Doctor would call me fast enough when he really got to the projectile. But he estimated that there was more than a month of hard work here for himself— and meanwhile I would have to run the chicken-farm as a sort of blind, and see to it that the two women did not suffer. The Doctor had found a deserted cabin back here in the brush, and stocked it with bottled water, beer, tinned food of all sorts, and brought some bedding. He intended to stay till the job was done. I could come once a day, after nightfall—no other time unless he called me.

THINKING of Helen, I was torn two ways. But I agreed reluctantly, and wended my way back with the lantern. Certainly I had never thought that the young woman would still be waiting for me, after a good two hours, but there she was.

"Tom!" she cried chokingly; and she grasped my arms.

"Why, Helen!" I breathed, feeling that she was trembling from head to foot. "Why didn't you go back?"

"I— I'm afraid!" she whispered. "You— you are the only sane man around! I— " And then she hid her face in the lapel of my jacket.

Well, I'm human. I kissed her— idiotic though it may sound, after knowing the girl only about three hours. But I did, and she was modern enough not to mind. In fact, she seemed to take a certain comfort from it, though she speedily drew away a little, and did not allow any more of the familiarity. I know now that she liked me at first sight; but that womanlike, she needed a certain reassurance that normal, human things like love and sympathy and

understanding, still could influence a man, no matter what queer visitors came from Venus or anywhere else in the heavens.

And I must say that I walked on air. I was really in love for— well, I almost said for the first time. For the greatest time, anyhow! If that be treason to science, make the most of it. I was only an ex-astronomer, anyhow.

Doctor Armstrong intended to keep his secret. He worked harder than might a section-hand on a railway, and the work changed him. He always had been clean-shaven. Now he grew a white beard; it was stained yellow around his mouth from his incessant stogie-smoking. His paunch shrank. He hardened, of course, but somehow seemed to grow frailer instead of stronger. He was too old for the task he had set himself; but every time I offered to take his place, a certain fanatical zeal, and a light of what I came to know was genuine apprehension, blazed in his eyes.

"Never! This is my responsibility, Tom!" he would say firmly.

He ate supper late. I took to bringing him over hot meals from the house in a basket, then sitting down and listening— after telling him of Mrs. Kramer and Helen, and how I was getting along with the half-witted Ranny, and with the eighteen hundred hens. Those damned chickens really kept me busy. In the state of mind I was, loving a girl and waiting with trepidation for the wild cry from Doctor Armstrong, telling me that the meteorite was uncovered, I needed hours in which to accomplish an amount of work which normally I could finish in a half hour any time.

In order to make the place look like a real farm, I had engaged a giant swamp-Yankee woman, nicknamed Annie Overalls, to plow and harrow a truck patch. I would seed it, with Helen helping. It amused her, and provided something to busy her mind. She was glad, too, to have an excuse for getting away from Mrs. Kramer.

IT is the almost incredible truth that, lulled by the routine of the Doctor's steady digging, by the work of seeding a truck-patch in the company of a laughing blue-eyed miss who nevertheless could accomplish just as much as I at that sort of bending-down work, and by the responsibility of marketing eggs and broilers and caring for so many chickens, 'I really began to discount the matter of the Venusian projectile said to contain a shipment from that planet. Yet all this while of fool's paradise, more than two hundred thousand loathsome things were waiting down there— held by a high pressure of indrawn breath, in that queerly constructed cylinder below-ground! Waiting to destroy me, the Doctor, Helen, Mrs. Kramer, Annie Overalls, the half-witted Ranny, and every other human being and living thing on the face of Mother Earth! ' The Doctor had given me a hint. But he did not understand it himself,

and of course I paid no particular attention— then. In the unsatisfactory, one-sided communications he had established with Venus— the Venusians would ask all manner of questions, but tell little or nothing about themselves— Dr. Armstrong had noted that their interest lay chiefly in the soil of the ground, and in descriptions of the living vegetation and animals upon the surface of the world.

"They don't seem to understand when I talk of cities, airplanes, skyscrapers, locomotives, and other things," he told me. "They seem to have an avid agrarian interest, however. I have sent messages of description as long as the ordinary juvenile encyclopaedia, and they never thank me. They always ask more questions, They never answer the things I ask— or only partly. I— well, to be frank, Tom, they have me worried. I fear they have no souls.

"Yes, I fear— worse than that! I have an idea that their intelligences are motivated by selfishness and a sort of hellish cruelty only! I do not think we would like the men and women of Venus, even if we ever managed to see one. And this shipment of goods on consignment, you might say, may turn out to be some devilish joke— a shipment of troubles worse than those which were held tightly in Pandora's box!"

"Anyway, we'll have a look," I chuckled—little dreaming how much more horrible than his wildest guess, the truth would prove to be!

I tried to let him rest while I dug a couple of evening hours— not that I care for digging and hauling up buckets of gravel— but he would not allow it.

"Something is going to happen, when I reach that cylinder," he told me solemnly. "I am not quite sure how soon I'll reach it. You see, the bore curves to the left? Well, I think the cylinder is about twelve feet more down; over there. But it may be closer. If— if something awful is there, Tom, I want it to act on me, You are young. You can see the women safely away. Uh, by the way, do you find my daughter at all— um, I mean— she is pretty, isn't she?"

THE old man actually had feelings! I colored, though in the lantern-light I don't believe it showed under my tan. "Some day I'm going to marry Helen, if she'll have me," I said. "Too bad I didn't see her ten years ago."

"When she was twelve?" he asked. "Oh— I see what you mean. Nonsense, Tom, you are young— young. Wish to God I were, now, though I never have regretted the years and what they have brought. This discovery, and possibly the contents of this projectile—"

He fell silent then; and I left him.

And the next day, early in the morning, the Doctor unexpectedly uncovered the end of the giant projectile!

HE did not let me know. I was busy.

Helen had wrenched her back, and I was lame from hours of planting. So I had got Annie Overalls to finish up the truck patch seeding. The first things I had planted, the lettuce and peas, were coming up beautifully. Annie shook her head and said they would get frosted. But I did not care much. After all, this farming and chicken-raising both were parts of an elaborate camouflage. The odd part was that I had found out I liked them. So did Helen. She never would make a farmhouse woman, a drudge, but for the playing at farming which most city people do, she was splendid, enjoying everything. I had begun to visualize life with her in a place a whole lot like this, with some one more capable than poor Ranny to take care of the chickens, while I went back to writing for five or six hours a day....

That day, for the first time, through the coincidence of a message regarding a Venusian communication— a message for the doctor sent by his assistant left behind at the Ajo, Arizona, inter-planetary radio station— I hurried out at midday to the diggings in the pine wood.

I whistled. The dog came up, growling uneasily but wagging his stub of tail. Then I heard the gasping breaths of Armstrong. He was down at the foot of the ladder, shoveling away like mad to uncover more of the great cylinder.

Now I saw it, and gasped. The thing looked as though the outer shell was made of a soft sort of concrete. But it was covered with a bluish-green flame all over— something like phosphorus, perhaps, though it was perfectly plain in daylight. It was still hot. The Doctor heard me. "It's here! See, Tom!" he croaked, in a voice gone fog-hoarse with emotion and triumph and apprehension all mingled.

"I see!" I cried. "Good Lord, what is it? Is it burning?"

"No. That is a cooling flame, I think. This— this is made by men of some kind, Tom! You see? Look at this great seam? I— I believe the thing is going to crack open when it cools some more! See that jagged line? It is a crack!"

We were both wild with excitement now, the message from Arizona forgotten.

The cylinder, as we found out immediately, had been equipped with a disintegration mechanism, doubtless chemical, which began to act immediately the great shell struck Earth, much as a high explosive shell of the kind used in war, works, only much slower. Hours were required for this, instead of from one to four seconds. Now the blue-green flame, which oddly seemed to cool and shrink the outer shell of the projectile, making it crack widely, was busily at work on every square inch of the cylinder exposed to air.

MY description must be sketchy, because of the fact of fast disintegration. If we only had been granted days instead of hours for examination! But there was a reason, known only to the cold-blooded Venusians themselves, why any inter-planetary shell of this kind, could not accomplish its hellish purpose, unless it cracked and crumbled like a big piece of sugar under a hot-water jet. And that is what this proceeded to do.

The Doctor had a sort of adze. He struck at the crack— and a whole chunk of the substance crumbled away!

"It's all going to pieces!" I cried. "The goods inside will all be spoiled before we can see what they are!"

"I don't think that, Tom," he replied, standing back in the bore and shaking his head so the white beard swayed. "Maybe that would be far better— or a few sticks of dynamite right now—"

"Oh, for the love of Rameses!" I snapped impatiently. "Are you sunstruck? Here we have a chance to see just what this is, and you mumble a lot of nonsense!"

He was filled with forebodings, though, and for twenty minutes I argued, to dissuade him from doing anything rash. All this while the disintegration was going on apace, though we could not guess how thoroughly it was working. The outer shell remained about the same, except for widening cracks.

The cylinder— a few feet of which still remained covered by earth— was about twenty-eight feet long, and exactly seventy-eight inches high at the base as it lay on its side. I measured it. Roughly, the thing consisted of several layers of material, non-metallic by nature, which acted as a heat-resistant and insulation against cold for the inter-planetary flight.

Inside these several layers (and now I am giving pure inference, since I never saw with my own eyes what was there) was a relatively small cylinder, perhaps the size of a sixty-gallon hot-water tank of the old-fashioned sort you used to see in farm kitchens, hitched up to the stove by a coil of pipe.

This was of strong material, possibly metal. It was built to withstand a terrific pressure from within— but to let go when the cooling of the outside shell, and its disintegration, had proceeded to a certain degree. Maybe there were delicate cocks, and a release as sensitive as one of the thermostats we have on our oil-burners. I think that very likely.

"I think I will try to crack it open, then," said Armstrong at last. "I do not like how it is going, though as I have said, it might be far better for us—and the world—if it was destroyed right here and now. However, I have worked forty years for this, and at Ooloo on Venus—"

He raised his adze, hesitated, and then brought it down on that inner layer from which the crumbling flake had dropped away.

The adze went through just as though it had been cutting into husks! A huge piece fell away. Now a blue-colored layer appeared below. The blue-green cooling flame ran down in rivulets, attacking this hidden layer with a hissing and crackling avidity.

The Doctor sniffed. "No fumes that I can smell," he muttered, and raised his adze again. Down it came— and then the horrible end! The blade of the tool sank so deep that Armstrong's fingers almost followed the handle into the soft, oozy stuff that now bubbled and began to pop up spats of viscous bluish stuff like the mud-pots of Yellowstone.

Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

Up and out of the cylinder came a thin jet of vapor, almost colorless, though in the daylight there was a faint greenish tinge.

"T think I got clear to the middle of it!" yelled Armstrong, highly excited. He jumped back out of the way of that jet of vapor, which at first just played up about a yard, then wafted away in the slight breeze.

But then gasps came from us both. The hissing heightened to a whistling scream! Up came green vapor now like a geyser! It mounted eight feet, fifteen, thirty—and it was blowing green fumes that were half-liquid, up to the tops and through the nodding plumes of the pine trees! The screech drowned our voices. We scrambled out of the bore, to escape. This might be poisonous, we thought.

It was worse than poisonous! It contained something— two hundred thousand things, I should say!

The first intimation came when a popping sounded, then another; then faster than a machine-gun chatters, the sounds came— and at each sound, something brown-rubbery, looking almost like a dead stingaree or a deflated football, was spouted and blown up into the air high above our heads!

"The cargo! What is it?" shrieked Armstrong, his mouth only a foot from my ear. I just shook my head dumbly, staring. I was truly frightened now.

BEFORE our horrified eyes, the great cylinder cracked and crumbled. The thin spout of geyser widened. Now the brown footballs were being vomited upward in a great cloud. I stared up at them above the trees. Then I shrieked, covered my eyes, and ran.

Those damned things were not falling to the ground! They were hovering there in a sort of immense swarm! And each of those near enough to me so I could see some details, appeared to be unfolding and shaking out creases, growing immensely larger, and lighter brown in color!

Panic had me. I brought up short when I ran squarely into a tree, and for half a minute or so I was stunned. Then I went back to the bore, but the Doctor

was not there. He also had run, though not very far. He was out in a little glade in the woods, staring up at the floating amber-colored balloons— for that is what they seemed now. Second by second immense numbers of them were being vomited up to join their first comrades in the air; and the whole loathsome, shivery cloud seemed to float around an axis, or perhaps some kind of queen balloon, as bees surround a queen bee!

Probably the geyser of gas and cargo had been going full force about fifteen minutes, when I caught a lowering of the pitch of sound. Yes, the pressure was failing! The cloud of queer, light-brown things, floating now like gossamer scarfs, made practically a tent over this part of the wood, filtering down the sunlight in a tan haze. But the things were coming slower, the geyser rapidly falling. I did not guess the immediate danger, even when I saw a number of the loathsome things get only part way up to the main swarm. Some of them plastered themselves against branches as they failed to get high enough. And the last thirty or so were spewed up and out only a yard or so, and hung wavering and unfolding right there before my horrified eyes!

Oh, God, I was insane then for a time myself! Those damned things were alive! They had big spots like bullseyes, that stared unwinkingly at me! Seven eyes apiece! I shrieked and tried to run,

Let me forget that madness for a moment, just to tell you what they really were. Essentially they were slightly moist sheets of living fiber, when they came out of the gas-liquid in which they had traveled from Venus.

Yes, each one was a thin, translucent sheet, scalloped at the edges, oval in shape, and with seven eyes and a dark blotch near the edge at one place. As I know now, this dark blotch was a brain, an intelligence which activated the creature!

It was contained in a bag of this fiber, and was essentially a sticky, viscous mass no larger at first than a small grapefruit. (When the creatures were able to get water, or establish contact with earth or other food, this expanded quickly, as I shall show.)

These things, I believe, had been carefully dried out and packed in small compass, before being sent from Venus. If the soil and other food of Earth agreed with them, they would expand hugely, reproduce in swarms, and— well, you shall see!

A yell of terror and warning came then from Doctor Armstrong! He was out of my sight, behind some trees, but I heard the agony and fright. That same second a screeching i-yi-yi came from Lord Nelson—one of the fearless breed of dogs, that nothing like an enemy on earth could cause to flinch.

With an answering cry, I started forward to help in God only knew what extremity. But I got only a few yards. Then I stopped, a screech of pure terror starting from my own lungs.

Something chill and damp had swathed itself, like the tendrils of a great goat's-beard jellyfish, about my left leg, side and arm!

FOR precious seconds, while my flesh crawled with loathing, I writhed and struggled against an impalpable but relentless foe. The thing knew its horrible business. It proceeded to swath my arms and legs, binding me stickily until I fell to the ground.

Then it threw a flap of prickly, stinging, malodorous fiber over my face and head! It was going to shut my nostrils and mouth, and suffocate me!

I could writhe, and move some. The fiber gave like live rubber. But I could not get it off my skin! Choking, smothering as I tried to scream, I yanked forth my pocket-knife and slashed at the horror. It cut easily— but that made no difference. Even the strips and tiny pieces clung to me— and then joined up again with the main body of the creature! It was almost like a great amoeba, offering small resistance seemingly, yet going right ahead to its horrible end, no matter what struggles its prey offered!

I could see those seven awesome eyes, hovering out there only a yard from my face. They burned with a queer green light. I felt my senses going. Damn them, they were gloating over me! *I was to be a first Earth meal for this abomination of the Universe!*

Pure luck, and the instinct which makes a man struggle— with his brain as well as his muscles— saved my life at the very last; perhaps saved all of Earth as well, I shiver when I think—

Anyhow, I was going. I could not breathe. I dropped the knife. One hand moved a little... It found my jacket pocket. It clutched something hard and heavy: My cigarette-lighter! I thought sickeningly but vengefully, "perhaps I can hurt this damned thing a little before I go!" ...and I snicked on the lighter, forcing it outward toward those staring bull's-eyes of the Venusian creature...

Crackle-crackle-sssssssss—Whack!

A frightful stench came to my nose— and my nose was free to breathe! The thing twitched, convulsed, almost breaking my ribs. Then it let go, and floated away— and it burned swiftly, fiercely, almost as though it were a celluloid envelope lighted at one corner. It writhed on itself, beating its folds of fiber vainly against the flame. Its great eyes, which had no lids, gradually slitted to black lines— and then the fire reached them.

Only a viscous, sticky something dropped with a plunk to the earth at my feet. But it also was burning briskly— and in sixty seconds more there was nothing but some oily-looking char upon the grass! I was free!

BUT what of Doctor Armstrong? Still clutching the lighter, I ran to help him, breathing great gasps of the blessed air, and scratching my itching skin where the creature had set up some kind of inflammation and irritation. Another of the creatures swiped its folds at me as I ran. But I saw these and dodged them. They did not move very fast, thank God. I wanted first to succour the Doctor, and his dog— not having a real chance yet to think of the even greater emergency pressing upon the girl I loved, and the others at the field and house....

Then a cry of anger and anguish burst from my lips. No less than three of the things had bound the Doctor. Another had the dog. Both were dead— though of course I was not sure until a moment later. In an instant, I had set fire to the folds of the things that had Dr. Armstrong. Whish! They burned fiercely, though they unfolded rapidly and freed him. He was scarcely scorched at all, as they floated away, squeezing their eyes to slits— I hope in plenty of pain!

But he and the dog both were stone dead, suffocated. They had been attacked before my particular foeman came after me; and the clinging folds had done their awful work.

I HATED to leave Armstrong there. But I saw something now. All the creatures remaining in the wood were wafting themselves slowly upward. They were joining the main swarm— a gigantic tent which now stretched like a manila envelope over several acres of the woods. I thought to myself, I would give ten thousand dollars for a skyrocket, right now, to shoot straight into that hell born swarm of ghouls!

Then I noted something— and I think I leaped a yard from the ground and yelled insanely at the top of my lungs. The whole swarm was bound straight for the field, and the house where Helen and Mrs. Kramer were!

(I realize now that the things were aiming for the truck field. The plowed and harrowed raw earth attracted them particularly. But I thought only of the house and Helen. Wisely so, since there were far too many of the Venusian creatures to crowd down on the single acre of truck patch. They overflowed to the house-roof and porch, covered the chicken houses— and a couple of thousand even oozed into the houses and fastened each upon one of my poor White Orpington hens! But I did not know that then.)

By sprinting, I managed to gain on the swarm. But I stumbled and went headlong, losing a few yards. And then when I came to Dog River, and the footbridge, the blamed contraption swayed so violently (it was made only for careful crossing) that I slipped and fell through the side. I splashed down into three feet of water, landing on my feet and not falling. But with anguished curses I realized that the damned swarm would get to the house before I ever could reach it! Oh, God, that Helen might remain indoors and close all the windows!

While I was scrambling up the bank, forcing a way through thorn bushes, and getting under way again, terrible things were occurring. I know that now. Then, when I finally reached the path, and sprinted, I saw the giant figure of Annie Overalls running blindly in my direction— and getting tangled up in a barbed wire fence as she came.

The swarm had hovered, then descended rather swiftly on the harrowed field where Annie was seeding corn in hills. She had been leaning on her rake, staring up at the phenomenon— and only taking fright when the things started down upon her.

Poor Ranny had come running out of one of the long chicken-houses, gaping and gabbling in his weak-brained way. Waving his hands, poor fellow, trying to shoo the yellow-brown creatures away from his precious chickens, he went down under a smother of half a dozen or more of the Venusians. He was not even noted. He died right there, and was partially consumed before he was discovered. But that is getting ahead of the rapid-fire happenings.

ONE of the things had seized Annie Overalls, and had blinded her so that she ran straight into the barbed wire. I grudged even a moment, but her loud yells of fright could not be ignored. I ran to her, just as the smothering started. She had managed to tear loose from the wire, but now the folds of the Venusian had her, and she fell, writhing. Even her great strength, equal to that of two men like myself, was powerless. The moist, clinging folds of fiber stuff would not be denied.

Croaking out sounds that had no meaning, I snicked the lighter with trembling hands, and thrust it against the brown folds. They caught swiftly with a crackle and blazing. And then Annie was free, her eyes staring, and stentorian bellows starting again as soon as a few good breaths took root in her lungs. Then she plunged past me, and made a straight line across fields and fences. She got home, to tell one of the wildest stories ever heard by countrymen. But at the moment I was not caring about her further fortunes. I saw that at the house two figures in women's dresses had come out to the front, and were coming down to investigate just what was occurring in their

plowed field! I screamed warning— too late! Helen stopped, startled. I heard her voice: "Tom! Tom! Come here! What in heaven's name—"

THEN I give you my word, the most terrible thing of all happened. Those folded creatures had settled down, huddling in the soft field, swaying a little, jostling each other. The entire field, as I said, was covered, and there was part of a second laver of creatures on top of the first. These were Venusians denied access to the raw earth, from which they could draw quick nourishment— water and food. Almost as quickly as they could get it from the arteries, veins and flesh of a living creature like a cow, a chicken—or an unsuspecting girl come out to gaze upon the abnormal, unnatural wonder.

Helen and Mrs. K. had come down to within a couple of yards of the swaying, huddling mass. No doubt it looked innocent enough, if marvelous, to them. But the creatures saw two new victims— living victims from whom quick blood-and-flesh food could be taken.

A full dozen of the first comers to the field, now hauled up a multitude of white roots— water-seekers they had thrust down into the soft, sandy clay— and started to float toward the two women!

Of course I was running to help, sprinting around the acre field— it was impossible to cross, of course— but I knew I was too late, unless the women ran for their lives.

I screamed that command. They heard, and seemed to understand. They ran— but in opposite directions, and not very far. I had eyes only for Helen. I saw her stumble, cover her face with her hands, and fall. Then a cloud of those horrible creatures floated over and settled upon her quivering body!

There were about eight of them, I think. I got there, snicking my lighter— was it going to catch?

No! The thing took this terrible instant to refuse to light! I screamed, tore at the folds vainly, and then caught hold of reason. I searched my pockets fast. Ah, one match of the grocer's variety! Almost coolly, though my heart was dying inside me, I lighted it on Helen's heel— my own trousers were drenched, as were my shoes— and then held the flickering flame to those brown folds....

Whish! Crackle! Snap! The blaze started. The things unfolded and floated away, flapping vainly and squinting their terrible eyes. I waited for no more. I grabbed Helen, finding that her heart still beat fast, though she was unconscious, and ran from there with her. I think I ran a half mile before I dared put her down. Then I remembered Mrs. Kramer.

I raced back, leaving Helen, praying for her safety.: I needed matches or something with which to make a fire. I dashed to the house, slammed inside, grabbed the phone, called the police at State police headquarters, and told

them to come and bring the town fire department. Then J ran out to the back, grabbed a hatchet and a box of matches, and ran to the driveway at the side where the Doctor's car was parked.

Jamming foot on the starter, I backed the car to the field. As I had known only too well, there was no sign of Mrs. Kramer. Over there at one side, in the grass some yards from the field, there was a detached huddle of swaying things —maybe forty or fifty of them. No doubt she was underneath. But since minutes had passed, I knew she was beyond all human help.

I DROVE the car right into the edge of the Venusians. Then I leaped out, hatchet in hand. One swipe spilled open the gas tank. A thrown match— and the great fire cleansing started. The whole field and the chicken-houses went, just as fire tears through celluloid!

I could not watch, for several of the things had fastened to me. I had to light a separate fire to free myself— and it was hard to get movement enough of one hand, so I could light that match! But I did, and I was free.

Then I dashed to that separate huddle, while the whole field seethed in flames behind me, and lighted that. Yes, there was poor old Mrs. Kramer, singed now by the fire, but looking calm enough in death.

And far over at the other side, now that curling, charring folds of brown-black were floating upward and leaving the ground bare, appeared the body of poor Ranny.

The chicken-houses caught fire. But the fire-department boys, with their booster pump, quickly extinguished the conflagration. Then I had to explain a whole lot—and I am not going to detail that anti-climax. Suffice it to say that in a neighboring field the police and firemen found three cows being consumed by the creatures from Venus. When I lighted matches and burned up the folded horrors, they were ready to believe anything I had to-tell.

I went back up the road, and found Helen stumbling pale-faced toward the house. Without a word I took her into my arms, and let her weep relieving tears.

THERE is little more to tell. Just one thing, really, though that is important. I sent a version of the story by air-mail to Alonzo Jordan, who had been Dr. Armstrong's assistant at Ajo, Arizona, near Flagstaff. Unwittingly, I caused a further tragedy.

Young Jordan sent news of the destruction of the creatures on to Ooloo, before anyone could prevent him. And it seems that a spasm of anger and horror swept Venus— horror that we on Earth had not simply allowed

ourselves to be consumed by that colony of dehydrated immigrants they had shipped to us, I suppose !

Anyway, Ooloo berated Earth bitterly. It seems that there were some intrepid pioneer Venusians in that shipment.

After cursing us up and down, in and out for our "heartless cruelty," the Venusians declared a ban and taboo on Earth forever! They would not come to visit, even if we begged them— and they would execute any of us who dared visit them! They asserted also, that hereafter Ooloo and the five other inter-planetary stations would be closed to messages from Earth. In short, in the future they would have nothing whatever to do with us. We might consider ourselves ostracized.

When Jordan learned this, he carefully jotted down the messages. Then he smashed the sending- and receiving-station beyond repair. Finally he sat down and wrote this:

My life-work was with Dr. Armstrong. It is ruined, and I do not care to live, Good-by. Alonzo Jordan.

Poor, mistaken young fellow! He took that failure too seriously—since after all it was no failure at all, simply an experience. It showed us that one planet, at least, was peopled by creatures with whom Earthmen could not deal.

They found Alonzo Jordan with a bullet through his brain, and a pistol clasped in a lifeless hand.

———————————

14: Last Flight

Max Brand

Frederick Faust, 1892-1944

Blue Book, Sep 1938

Prolific novelist and pulp short story writer, in several genres, he created the Ronicky Doone and Silvertip western series, the Doctor Kildare medical series, (all as novels) as well as countless short stories.

CARMICHAEL had closed his eyes to shut out the sight of his father-in-law Tomi. Now he opened them again, and squinted straight up at the roof of the long, narrow hut; for it took its dimensions from one wing of the airplane he had crashed on the island over a year before. The belly of the wing curved smoothly down and ran out to the two strong posts which supported the tip. As for walls, there were sections of matting which could be rolled back during the day and allow the cool of the sea-wind to flow through the hut.

This was the left wing of the plane. The right wing had crumpled when he had made that forced landing, staggering down out of the sky toward the green bit of an island as toward a paradise of safety, only to find that there was hardly a level acre to receive him. It was as rough as a stormy ocean, the jumping waves frozen in green ridges; but of course he had been a fool to venture out over the ocean in a land-plane, when a sea-plane was so clearly indicated. He looked back and up at that wild self which had flown out over the great Pacific as a tame duck might look up at its wild brothers, flying toward unknown horions. His wings were clipped, now.... He would keep, he knew, to this barnyard existence.

For it was a barnyard existence. Tomi, there, for instance: fat wrapped the entire body of Tomi; it widened his nose; and the jowls of Tomi, like nicely counter-balanced weights, exerted exactly the right pressure to maintain a ceaseless smile. Touched anew with disgust, Carmichael turned his head to shut out the picture of his father-in-law; and in so doing, found himself looking at Tanya, his wife. She had been a mere golden flash of a girl, a year ago; but now she was great with child; and there would be no return, he knew, to that light-footed loveliness which had been almost like the beauty of thought. Carmichael closed his eyes, but he could not stop his mind. For in the house of Tomi half a dozen pots of food were simmering by the fire all day long, and the sweet odor of cookery never left the air. He was becoming like the islanders, he knew. Those good clean Christian muscles, neatly incised all over his body, were now sleeked away under a growing layer of fat; and what happened to the body was happening to the mind also.

WHEN he heard metal scrape on metal in the cabin of the plane, just behind his head. His nerves still extended, as it were, through the vitals of the wrecked machine; and everybody on the island knew that it was strictly forbidden to tamper with anything in the fuselage of the plane. He sat up suddenly, so that the thin necklace'swayed out from his chest, and the little golden "H" which hung pendant from it glittered under his eyes. He caught the pendant, scowling, and hid it in the palm of his hand, as he wished he could hide the entire past, darkening the whole face of the other life with a gesture.

Now that he was sitting up, he could look down the brief slope where the palm trees were always a-flutter in the seabreeze like dancers who do not move their feet. Beyond the trees he saw the ragged white line of the beach, a smooth wave swelling through the lagoon, and the great ocean exploding on the coral reef beyond. He saw these things as he got hastily to his feet and stepped into the open. The sand, white and hot under the sun, almost scorched the tender skin between his toes as he went back to the fuselage and jerked open the door. Within, there was nothing but a voice murmuring so small and far away that it was like a speaking conscience. However, he reached inside and pulled away a big tarpaulin. Under it, curled up small like a golden cat in a nest, was not one of the curious, prying boys of the village, but Tanya's younger sister Rika. She covered her face with both hands and sobbed: "Beat me! Beat me! But do not speak angry words!"

"Get out!" said Carmichael.

She slipped out from the plane and stood in the sun, appealing to him silently. She had been a slip of nothingness, a child, a year before; but like some nightblooming plant, suddenly she had become a woman. The eyes of Carmichael fell away from her.

"You've turned on the receiving-set of the wireless, Rika," he said. "And you mustn't do that. It uses up electricity. There isn't much strength left in the batteries.... Don't you understand? Now, look here. These batteries are like a sick child, which has to sleep. Every time you waken it, it loses strength. Isn't that clear?"

"Ai! Ai! Ai!" mourned Rika, softly. "I am killing something you love?"

She laid her hand on the arm of Carmichael; and he, after looking down at it for a moment, put it carefully away.

"Run along, Rika," he said, and leaned back into the cabin to turn off the wireless receiving-set.

So he brought his ear close to the voice, which was saying quietly: "...fifty miles west and south of Tanayo Island... A small atoll that the first big waves will wash over... Food and water gone... Broken propeller... plane intact

otherwise ... Henry Pearson speaking... down with Silver Glide... Fifty miles west—'

He turned off the sound, and stepping back to close the door, he saw that Rika had not moved. "Go on, Rika. Run along!" said Carmichael; but the girl had grown amazingly bold. As he made the gesture of dismissal, she took his hand in both of hers and held it, and laughed so softly that the sound was no more than the wirelessed voice. Even when he scowled at her and spoke sharply, she could not stop that laughter; and all the while her eyes were taking quiet and assured possession of him.

CARMICHAEL went down to the sea, cursing, and calling himself a rat, a rotten rat, until he heard feet whispering in the sand, and then saw Rika gliding along behind him like a golden shadow. She pretended not to notice his anger, but extended her arm with an insolent grace toward a. gleam of white rocks on the side of the nearest hill. He realized with a-cold shrinking of the heart that she was pointing out the heaped barrow of stones that covered the grave of Kamakama. Rika made in her throat a sound like the plucking of a musical string; she struck the back of her hand lightly against her forehead as. though to mimic the blow with which Carmichael had beaten down Kamakama on that unlucky evening of too much gin and too much talk.

TO the islanders, Carmichael was a hero because he had killed big, swaggering Kamakama. There had been too much liquor in his brain for him to remember exactly how the fight had gone; but Jameson, the trader, who was the one witness of the night, avoided Carmichael from that moment forward, and when they chanced to pass, Jameson looked at him as at a dangerous beast.

To the natives, Carmichael might be a hero; but to Jameson, plainly, he was a murderer; and though the trader might be content to let the story remain untold here on the island, certainly he would not hold his tongue if Carmichael tried to return to civilization. An ugly ghost and rumor would follow him all the days of his life. So that white heap of stones was to Carmichael a monument of a dead past, and of a future into which he never would dare to go.

He cried out to Rika in a passion of anger: "Away with you! Go home!" But she refused to be afraid; and when he hurried off to the beach, she remained smiling on the hillside. On the beach, Carmichael sat for an hour watching the trembling flag of mist which streamed into the northwest from Mount Tanayo, with little clouds snapping off the tip of the flag from time to time, and scudding briskly along the arch of the sky. Old Mosabi, the fisherman who was

bleaching white with time, like a bone in the sun, came by and begged for tobacco. Carmichael gave him a handful.

"When does the wind change?" he asked.

"One, two, three days," said Mosabi, glancing at the sky with knowing eyes.

"And then?" asked Carmichael.

"So!" said Mosabi, and beckoned a wind out of the northeast.

"How big?" asked Carmichael.

Mosabi considered the sky again; and as he did so, he filled the big barrel of his chest until his ribs stood out; then he expelled the air in a long hiss.

It was a plain way of stating that, in three days, the wind would come whistling out of the northeast, though since it was only fifty miles to the atoll, there would be plenty of time to get out there and back to Tanayo; but all the while, Carmichael was fighting himself. It irritated him that he never had heard of Henry Pearson before; but he knew that the Silver Glide was a sister ship of his own plane, though probably it had been equipped with pontoons.... Tarry Never" was a silly name to give a plane; and now it was tarrying long enough on Tanayo. But who was this fellow Pearson, into whose hands that great, swift monoplane had been entrusted? Well, the youngsters kept coming on like the waves of the sea.

FOR another hour he pondered, knowing quite well that in the end he would have to go. Then he went back to the wreck of his ship which was also his home, and took off the great propeller with the help of young Tabai, and carried it down to the shore; but it was Rika who helped him load the outrigger with water and food. It was twilight when he launched the boat, and she wanted to go with him. It was not that the large cargo of provisions seemed strange to her, for all the ways of the white man were inexplicable; but she had set about giving herself to him. When at last he convinced her she could not come, she stood breast-deep at the side of the boat, and held up her face and her arms to him, shamelessly. But after all, on Tanayo it was an act of exquisite propriety to marry two sisters. Carmichael took her by the wrists and held them hard.

"Tell Tomi that I am sailing around the end of the island. I may be gone for two, three days," he said.

"Ai! Ai! Ail!" wailed Rika. "In three days I shall be dead of grieving. What shall I do for three days?"

"Talk to Tanya and keep her happy," said Carmichael.

"Tanya? She is already an old woman; and old women can talk to themselves," said Rika. This thought pleased her so much that she began to

laugh, and she still was laughing and waving and holding out her arms to the future as the wind carried the boat into the lagoon.

She was such a child that it had not even seemed odd to her that he was sailing the tricky little craft alone, clumsy as he was at the business; and as a matter of fact, he had yearned to take along a crew of helpers, but then it would be almost sure to come out to Henry Pearson that he was the lost flyer Carmichael, and that he was married and housed and about to become the father of a half-breed on Tanayo Island. Moreover, while the wind hung in this quarter he could make smooth going of the trip to the atoll, and the return.

So, with the clumsy sail of matting hoisted, he stood away on his course, and the wind bore them on with a soft, steady hand all night long. Sometimes, in the gleaming valleys between the great ground-swells, the breeze was cut off and left the sail empty and rattling against the mast; otherwise, he drowsed under the stars until, in the dawn, he heard the waves on the reef, and saw the plane like a big silver fish in the smooth waters of the lagoon. A little figure, black against the sky, danced and waved frantically on the top of the left wing of the big ship.

That was Henry Pearson. He wanted water first, and then food; but when he saw the propeller, he was almost unable to eat or drink. He was a long, lean, desert-dried Southwestern youth; and a quarter of his twenty-five years had been spent in the air.

"But who are you, and how in the name of God did you rise out of the sea with this propeller?" cried Pearson.

"I'm just one of those things, and my name is Happenchance," said Carmichael dryly; and Pearson asked no more questions. He had been down several days since his propeller— an unheard-of accident— cracked up in a prodigious hailstorm. The grace of God permitted him to slant down into the temporary safety of this lagoon.

They got the substitute propeller on at once; but then they discovered, when they started the motor, that the carburetion was all knocked in the head. Pearson, keen as an eagle for the air, was only a half-hearted mechanic, but Carmichael went after the job with patient care. He worked for endless hours, checking and re-checking, grimly patient.

"Give yourself a chance," urged Pearson. "You'll kill yourself working day and night. What difference do a few hours make, more or less?"

"Suppose a heavy wind comes along and begins to knock a man-sized seaway? What would happen to the Glide 2" asked Carmichael.

But during the second day he began to give out. His nerves jittered. It wasn't a question of muscular strength, but the gradual softening effect of the

easy island life semed to have drained away and corrupted his nerve-strength also. They went over to the bit of red beach, and he lay on his back in the sand,

"I'll not make a sound. You get some sleep," said Pearson.

"Sleep? Id go crazy if I went to sleep," answered Carmichael, "Sit here and talk to me."

"About what?" asked Pearson.

"Anything. Tell me about your girl. No, damn all that. Tell me what you want to do in the world, anyway."

"Me?" asked Pearson. Suddenly he laughed. "I want to keep up in the air; all I want is to do something that'll make me a Halcyon!"

The left hand of Carmichael slipped up on his chest and covered the little golden "H" hanging pendant from a necklace.

He said, after a moment: " 'Halcyon?' That's some sort of bird, or weather, or something, isn't it ?"

"You never heard about the Halcyon Club?" asked Pearson, eagerly. 'Well, you know, I don't suppose there are fifty people in the whole world who know about it. And who they are, I can't tell. Silence is part of their rule, I suppose, but a great thing like that is sure to be whispered about, like buried treasure. And I've heard some rumors, It's like this: You do something that's really tops in aviation— or a lot of things; and you're not a rotter— I mean, you're just human, and all that, but you've never done anything dirty, you see?"

"YES," said Carmichael in a strange voice. "Yes, I see."

"I don't pretend that I'd ever be good enough to get in," said Pearson hastily. "But you know, you asked me what I wanted, not what I expected to get. But suppose I got across the Pacific, flying alone. That— that would be something, wouldn't it? You know, even Carmichael flopped when he tried it."

"Did he?" said Carmichael. "Who was he?"

"Carmichael? Well, you are a funny fish if you've never heard of him! Why, I saw him once myself!"

"Did you?" said Carmichael.

"Yeah. Three years ago. Mitchell Field. I was only a mechanic then. He'd come all the way up from Texas, bringing a boy along for some funny kind of operation on the spine. He had to fly blind about half the way. It was the damnedest storm you ever saw. And he came down out of it in the middle of the night. The field was one white, crazy whirl of snow. And he came down like a sea-gull. A bird-man, air-sense, All that is easy to read about but when you see it, it drives you crazy. They carried the boy on the stretcher away from the plane with Carmichael walking beside it, talking to the kid and forgetting himself. But, my gosh, he was done in! On edge for twenty hours, going it

blind, feeling his way through the dark. But he kept smiling. He was a thin, hard, fine-looking fellow. Not old. But you could see he'd lived. In the air. Up high! There was something noble about him. You saw him, and you wanted to say: 'Carmichael, take everything I've got! It's yours. It's on the table for you!'... Does this sourid sort of crazy?"

CARMICHAEL, gripping the little golden "Hf" until it cut into his hand, said nothing.

"Well," said Pearson, "I only saw him once, that one flash, in the storm, with the lights dazzling through the snow; but when I saw him, I saw something great. He was the sort— why, he was the sort that might have been a Halcyon, It's a club, they say, in London. International. Suppose you do something really great in the air, one day, and you're asked to come to London. Your way is paid. You go into a big, quiet house. Like a fine home. There's a room with a tremendous whacking big table in it, And the chairs are named. Some of the chairs are pulled back against the wall. That's for the dead members. It doesn't matter who you are— maybe you're a Russian, or a Jap, or a German, or an Englishman, or whatever; but when you become a Halcyon, you take an oath, and everybody in the Club is like a brother to you, all at once. And if you're ever in trouble, they'd come around the world, and get you gut. But just being a Halcyon keeps you out of trouble, I suppose, because you'd rather die, after that, than do anything low or rotten; because a blot on your life would be a blot on the whole club, and every man would feel as though his wind had been cut off."

Carmichael could see. He closed his eyes, and still he could see the red face and the dauntless eyes of that glorious dead Englishman Dunsbury, whose picture hung in the great room with his own fine words beneath it: "Peace in the air."

He got up and went back to his work on the plane. He had the motor in perfect shape, presently, but he said nothing of that to Pearson, for still he had to add up certain accounts of the .spirit and see what his debt was to this world. And the words of young Pearson kept dinging back into his ear. It was true that every sin of a Halcyon member was a sin for the entire fraternity. He knew, suddenly, that for him there was no return. It seemed to Carmichael that as he had walked for a year through the blue and golden days of peace, he had been passing all the while deeper and deeper into a trap. Now he realized it. The teeth of the trap were so fixed in him that if he escaped from it, his honor would be left dead behind him.

He had come to this grim conclusion when he was surprised to feel the wind on his back, instead of his face. He looked up at the sky, saw the drift of

the clouds streaking out of the northeast, and knew that God had finished the argument for him. Old Mosabi had been right. The wind had changed, but it had changed a day sooner than the prophecy.

For a long moment Carmichael stared at those fleeing clouds, whipped along by a wind already powerful in the upper stratum of the air, and soon to rush over the sea, whitening the face of it. He never could sail the little outrigger back to Tanayo against such a storm; and if he headed before it, there were eleven hundred miles of open sea....

He tried the motor. As he expected, it sang out with a bellow and a roar, like a thundering herd; and Pearson looked at him with a sudden smile.

The smile went out as he pointed to windward.

"You better come along with me," he said. "The sea's kicking up.... You'd better come right along with me."

"And spoil your solitary flight?" asked Carmichael, smiling a little in his turn.

"I know. ... But it's not safe, here. You come along," pleaded Pearson. "'At least, leave that silly boat and let me fly you back to Tanayo in ten minutes."

BUT Carmichael turned, facing into the wind— toward Tomi, and Tanya, and those dark possessive eyes of Rika. "I'll tell you what," he said: "when you make your bed, you damned well lie in it, or else.... Besides, these outriggers are made for any weather. I'll be as safe as a duck in a pool. Good-by, Pearson. And good luck for the Halcyon Club.... By the way, before you go—ever hear of that English aviator, Archie Lamont ?"

"Archibald Lamont? Heard of him? Why, he's one of the greatest names that was ever in the air," said Pearson.

"I've got something of his that I should have sent back a long time ago," said Carmichael. He detached the golden "H" from the necklace and put it into Pearson's hand. "Give Lamont this," he said.

"Who shall I say it's from?" asked Pearson, staring in puzzled fashion at the little emblem.

"You won't have to say who it's from," said Carmichael. "Lamont will understand— everything. Good-by again. Get going before the waves begin to topple into the lagoon.... As for the outrigger, why, these boats can outlive any storm," he lied cheerfully.

"You've been great," said Pearson. "You've been a great fellow. You've saved everything for me. There's no way on God's green earth that I can repay you, of course; but if there's anything you possibly can let me do—"

"One thing," answered Carmichael. "Never tell a living soul how you got that second propeller."

"What?" cried Pearson. Then he added, nodding: "I don't understand, but I'll do as you say."

He was gone five minutes later, the big plane lifting its pontoons lightly out of the water. Pearson came back for one short circle, stooping down over Carmichael in a sort of air-gesture, a last salute, then shooting away into the north, where the big monoplane turned into a sailing hawk, a swallow, an instant that dissolved into distance.

OFF to the northeast, toward Tanayo, a squall was coming down on Carmichael, rapidly drawing an opaque curtain from the sky to the ocean, which it swept over with a white fringe. Carmichael knew well what lay in the heart of that darkness for him; and he was half of a mind to let the fragile little craft lie still and take the death-stroke at once; but he had fought for every chance through so many years of his life, that he could not help fighting against even the inevitable, now.

The first breath of the fast-approaching storm sent the outrigger staggering with speed across the water; and now the voice of it began to thunder at his ear like the roar of a great motor that was bearing him alone through the high adventure of the sky.

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15: Ann White

A. Perrin

1867-1934

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THE LITTLE ENGLISH CHURCHYARD looked so peaceful, so cool, that I paused at the entrance; then made for a fine old yew tree to rest for a while in its shade on a flat tombstone that was age-worn, bespattered with lichen. I was tired and hot, having wandered farther than I had intended that sultry summer morning; people who have lived in the East feel the heat more severely than those who have never experienced months on end of stifling days and nights, pitiless metallic skies, the white glare of a death-dealing sun. It is a fact that is rarely recognized by untravelled folk; so I smile and say nothing when I am told that, of course, coming from India, I must revel in heat waves.

How pleasant I found it in this sacred green garden filled with the perfume of flowers, silent save for the humming of bees, the sweet, clear calling of birds! As I glanced about me I thought what a contrast to the arid cemeteries I had seen in India, with their neglected memorials to victims of exile, all the tragic inscriptions that told of untimely deaths; women and little children who in England might have recovered from sickness, men cut off in their youth, or when long-looked-for retirement was in sight; sometimes whole families swept away by cholera. Few white people die natural deaths in India; if they live they go home, and if they die there is seldom one of their kindred in the country to visit and attend to their graves.

Close to where I sat was a marble cross; at its base a wealth of blue flowers. I read that it was erected to the memory of Ann White, by her sorrowing grandchildren; and of a sudden it brought to my recollection a plain stone slab, in an Indian cemetery, that marked the last resting place of another Ann White, also an old woman. Drowsed by the warm perfume and peace, I let the curious history of that other Ann White steal through my mind slowly, dreamily.

The first time I saw her was at the beginning of the hot weather, soon after I had arrived in India to keep house for my brother. She was seated, with an untidy-looking ayah squatting beside her, on the edge of the old concrete bandstand that still remained at one end of the deserted parade-ground. Before the mutiny Jutpore had been a military cantonment; now it was no more than a small civil station, remote from the railway, out of all proportion in size to the teeming native city, whose turbulent and fanatical population caused ceaseless anxiety to the few European officials and an inadequate staff of police. I remembered remarking to my brother as we rode past the bandstand, that it was surely unusual to see an Englishwoman of that age living

in India— who was she? And Tom said, indifferently, he didn't know; he believed there was some legend about the old lady, but he couldn't remember. What did it matter?

Tom was an engineer, and mysteries connected with human beings held no interest for him. Had I made some inquiry concerning bridges or bricks, buildings or roads, I should no doubt have received voluble and animated information.

"But she looks so quaint!" I persisted; "a sort of early Victorian sketch. Do try to recollect what you have heard about her."

"No use, my dear. Whatever I might have heard went in at one ear and out at the other. You'd better apply to the missionaries. I think she lives with them, but whether they're C.M.S., or Baptists, or Papists, I can't say. There are samples of all kinds in the country, much to the mystification of the natives."

Being of an imaginative, or, perhaps more truthfully, an inquisitive disposition, I felt a longing to ferret out the old lady's history. What was she doing in India at her time of life, and looking like a ghost from the past, dressed in a poke-bonnet and a voluminous grey gown? She might almost have been wearing a crinoline. There must be some interesting story.

Consequently, next morning I started out alone, on foot, for the parade-ground, hoping to find her. Yes, she was there, seated on the bandstand, and with her the ayah, a stout, pock-marked person chewing betel-nut, who regarded me apathetically as I approached.

The old lady was crooning softly to herself; she had a small crumpled-up face that reminded me of a peeled walnut; her eyes were a faded blue, the loops of hair, beneath the old-fashioned bonnet, like fleece. I was struck by a certain daintiness about her appearance, a lingering grace in the way she held herself; one would fancy her being described years long ago as "a sweetly pretty young female." She merely nodded and smiled when I greeted her with some polite remark, and continued her soft little song.

The ayah bestirred herself fussily, dragged her wrapper over her head, opened a large, white umbrella, and turned aside to spit forth red betel juice. Then, with the curious sort of respect that the lower classes all the world over seem to entertain towards mental affliction, she explained proudly that the old lady was paghal. I knew the word, for I was learning Hindustani; it meant crazy, mad.

I nodded sympathetically, inquired where they lived, and the ayah pointed to a solitary thatched bungalow that stood facing the parade-ground some distance from the residential quarter of the station.

"Missun," she said, through her nose. "Kristarn Missun-school."

With that she bawled indulgently at her charge, helped her up, salaamed to me, and the pair started off across the bare plain. I watched their slow progress, the ayah clopping along in loose shoes, the old lady stepping feebly, supported by the native woman's arm, the white umbrella bobbing up and down— watched them till they passed between the two gateless white posts to disappear amongst plantain trees and shrubs.

That evening I shirked the usual visit to the club, made some plausible excuse to Tom with secret satisfaction, since I played tennis and bridge badly; and also I was glad for once to escape the well-intentioned adjurations with which I was always deluged by the mem-sahibs regarding the correct management of servants and fowls, goats and cows, all the talk about charcoal and dusters and bazaar prices, the ordering of stores from Bombay, and so forth. Not that I was ungrateful for kindly advice, or undervalued the importance of good housekeeping, but beyond a point my interest in such matters failed; and I had never been good at games, mental or physical.

With a sense of adventure I drove to the white gate-posts I had noted that morning, boldly turned into the compound, and drew up before the thatched bungalow. As a new-comer to the station, it was quite in accordance with Anglo-Indian etiquette that I should make the first call on anyone I chose, a sensible custom among an ever-fluctuating official community.

One or two native children were playing in the veranda, who fled when I shouted the immemorial summons, "Quai hai." Presently out came a neatly garbed little Englishwoman with a round, pleasant face and steady grey eyes, who proclaimed herself to be Miss Brownlow, assistant missionary to Padre Grigson and his wife; both, she said, were just now absent in the district "itinerating." Rather to my dismay, she took it for granted that my errand was not to make a formal call, but to give an order for mission needlework.

"Come in, do come in!" she cried civilly, "and see all the lovely things made by our girls and women. What is it that you particularly require?"

I could hardly explain that I particularly required information about the paghal old lady! There was nothing for it but to pretend that I was anxious to buy something manufactured by the converts. As a result, I spent an hour, and a good deal of money, at the mission bungalow, allowing myself to be lured into purchasing mats and tidies, tray-cloths and handkerchiefs, none of which did I "require." All the same, Miss Brownlow contrived to excite my interest in the work she and the Grigsons were doing for India, and so engrossed did I become in our conversation that I completely forgot the real object of my visit until, just as I was leaving, I caught sight of my bandstand acquaintance, the fat ayah, crossing the compound.

"Why there," I exclaimed with cunning, "is the ayah I have seen in the mornings on the parade-ground with an old lady!"

"Yes, our dear old Ann White, and Tulsi, who looks after her. It's their favourite little walk, across the parade-ground and back, with an interval of rest on the bandstand. Ann can't walk far nowadays, and there is no other place within easy reach where she can sit down. I am afraid soon she will not be able to leave the compound, she is failing very fast."

"Was she a missionary?" I asked, dawdling purposely at the top of the veranda steps.

"Oh no, poor old thing! She has been imbecile since her childhood. In fact, no one knows who she is, and we shall never know unless, as Mr. Grigson says happens sometimes in these cases, her memory should return in the hour of her death. She was named Ann White by the mission people who were here at the time of the Mutiny. It's a sad story. Are you in a hurry? Can you wait while I tell you?"

I felt that not even the most desperate need for haste would have prevented me from waiting to hear about old Ann White. And this was what I heard as I waited:

When in '57, the native regiment at Jutpore mutinied, murdering officers, women and children, the only Europeans to somehow escape death in the station, as far as was known at the time, were the members of the mission. But when, alas, too late, a British relief party arrived and were scouring the neighbourhood in search of the rebels, a little English girl of about ten years old was found in the jungle, starving, disguised as a native. What was her name, who had disguised her and hidden her away, could never be ascertained; she herself was too exhausted to speak when rescued, and though in time her bodily strength returned, both reason and memory had been lost beyond hope of recovery. The missionaries took charge of her, and a small grant was made by the Government for her support. There, ever since, she had lived, handed on with her pitiful story from one succeeding mission family to another, in the thatched bungalow, well cared for, no trouble, unless, as Miss Brownlow confided to me with a smile, anyone should attempt to dress her differently; then she would cry, refuse to eat, until the poke-bonnet and full skirts were restored to her.

"So Mrs. Grigson and I make new bonnets and gowns for her when she needs them, copying the old patterns faithfully— the fashion she was accustomed to see in her childhood. It's the only thing she seems to remember at all. And doesn't she look an old darling!"

Cordially I agreed and departed, saddened by the pathetic history of Ann White, yet well pleased with my visit, because I felt I had gained a friend in the

missionary lady, and that the embroideries were cheap at the price. (I sent them all home next mail to a relative whose mania was foreign missions.)

From that day I saw much of Emily Brownlow, also made friends with Padre Grigson and his wife when they returned from their tour in the district— an earnest, hard-working couple who yet were under no delusion as to the apparent hopelessness of their task in India. I grew to understand and appreciate their efforts, to share their conviction that though the work might seem but a scratch on the surface of idolatry, it was infinitely worth while, and must lead eventually to a deep undermining of ignorance and superstition among a people steeped in Nature worship, cruelly oppressed by higher castes, the priesthood, and indirectly by each other.

So far, the Grigsons admitted, the converts had been drawn principally from a class that had nothing to lose— indeed, everything to gain— by becoming Christians; but in the future the descendants of these converts would count, multiply into a strong community that sooner or later must rise to the top, triumphant. I found it all very interesting, though Tom chaffed and declared that I was fast going the way of our mission-mad kinswoman. The other ladies in the station assured me that when I had lived longer in India I should realize that the ardour of missionaries like Mr. Grigson did more harm than good, interfering with ancient faiths that suited the people, forcing new wine into old bottles, often making trouble in the bazaars where already trouble enough was brewing. Here in Jutpore, for example, it was well known that a strong feeling existed against mission influence. Anything at any moment might lead to a riot, the missionaries would be the first to suffer if the mob got out of hand, and then probably we should all have our throats cut.

I remembered their sayings with a sick sense of foreboding one morning when Tom was away on inspection, and I had ridden over, before the sun got too hot, to spend the day with my friends at the mission bungalow. I found Mrs. Grigson and Emily in a state of suspense and anxiety, for Mr. Grigson was out preaching in the bazaar, and the native Bible teacher who accompanied him had just raced back, scared and breathless, with ill news. The city, he said, was in an uproar, it had been over something to do with rival religious processions that had clashed; the police had come; there was fighting. What had happened to the padre-sahib he was unable to say; they were separated in the crowd, he himself had been attacked, knocked down.

The man could tell us no more. Exhausted with fear and his flight, he collapsed.

We all knew that there was grave cause for alarm. Quite recently there had been a ghastly affair of the same kind in another part of the province, a riot during which the mob had turned on a missionary, beaten him to death in the

street, and a general massacre of Europeans and natives had only been averted by the strongest measures. Mrs. Grigson's behaviour was wonderful; not for a moment did she falter as she gave her orders. Emily Brownlow and I helped to collect the women and children from the outhouses and gather them into the bungalow, a chattering, frightened flock, for the bad news had spread in the compound. We kept them away from the side of the house where old Ann White lay asleep. During the past few days she had been ailing, nothing very definite beyond a slight temperature, and loss of strength.

Mrs. Grigson asked me to have a look at the old lady in case she had awakened. Tulsi was useless, she deserted her charge, wept, and declared her liver had turned to water, and resolutely joined the huddled throng in the living-room. I went and sat beside Ann White, who still slept undisturbed by the commotion, all the time straining my ears for sounds outside. Now and then above the ceaseless murmur of native voices within the bungalow I fancied I caught the echo of shots. What if the police should be overcome!

I looked at the peaceful, wrinkled old face on the pillow. When Ann was a child had her mother, possibly with other children about her too, gone through such an anxious period of waiting before the end came? I imagined the subsequent confusion, the cries, the horror, and shivered. Some faithful servant must have saved the little girl, fled with her, disguised her; but what actually had happened would never be known unless, as Mr. Grigson had said, Ann's memory should return before she died. For Ann's sake it was only to be hoped that it would not.

The heat became intolerable, for the punkah hung motionless. Presumably every coolie had fled, and the silence in the compound was sinister; no sound of the padre's return.

All the stories I had heard and read of the Mutiny crowded into my mind. Was history about to repeat itself at Jutpore? At last I could bear it no longer. Old Ann was all right, sound asleep, and I crept from the room, threaded my way through squatting groups of native women and children to seek Mrs. Grigson. I found her standing in the veranda, regardless of the hot wind that was like the blast of a furnace. She was shading her eyes with her hands that she might gaze over the bare parade-ground in the direction of the city. How long we stood there together in silence I don't know— to me it seemed hours— until suddenly, above a line of mango-trees in the distance, a flame shot up, paled by the strong sunlight, then a column of smoke.

Mrs. Grigson drew in her breath.

"They have begun burning, looting," she whispered hoarsely. "Oh, my husband, where are you?"

I passed my arm about her, fearing she might faint; indeed, I felt like fainting myself. But her courage held, bracing my spirit, too, even when there came to our ears the sound of a muffled roar, the roar of an angry multitude. The dull clamour grew louder, and a few moments later we saw a vast concourse of people pouring out from behind the trees, spreading over the opposite end of the plain.

Mrs. Grigson pulled me back.

"They will come here," she said, quietly. "We must go in and shut the doors."

The last thing I saw as we shut the long door-windows, bolting them top and bottom, was that mad, surging crowd making, as it seemed, direct for the mission bungalow. I had a dim recollection of hearing her voice, clear and strong. I think she was speaking to Emily Brownlow and me— telling us to be brave, to pray, asking us to help her to keep the knowledge of approaching danger and death from the little flock for as long as possible, and she started them singing a hymn. I tried to join in, but my throat felt dry, a mist swam before my eyes, my heart beat wildly with terror. I could see nothing, hear nothing, but that murderous crowd outside. The doors would be burst open, and then—

I know I called out "Tom! Tom!" in a frenzy, but my own voice sounded far off; and after that, to my shame, I must have lost consciousness, for next I found myself on my knees in a corner, leaning against the wall. Slowly my senses began to clear. I dared to look up, and could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the padre! As I struggled to my feet the room seemed to spin round, and I should have fallen but that Emily Brownlow caught hold of me.

"We're all safe— safe!" she said loudly in my ear, half-laughing, half-crying.

I noticed that the "flock" were streaming out into the compound, dancing and shouting like children released from school, and that Mrs. Grigson was cutting away the coat-sleeve from her husband's right arm. I heard him say:

"It's only a flesh wound, no bones broken. Lucky it wasn't my head!"

It was not until later, when the injured arm had been bathed and bound up, and we were all refreshing ourselves with tea, that I learned what had happened. Just as the mob were overpowering the police, and the padre, his right arm rendered helpless by a savage blow, believed that his last hour had come, a British infantry regiment had suddenly made its appearance as if by magic. Not a shot was fired; the soldiers had simply marched through the streets, thumping the butt ends of their rifles on the toes of the petrified crowd, driving it before them, until it broke and fled, scattering over the parade-ground. A sergeant had helped the padre into his trap and seen him off

safely; but where the regiment had come from, what was the explanation of its merciful arrival, Mr. Grigson said he was too dazed at the time to inquire.

"We shall know all about it sooner or later," he added.

And we did know, much sooner than we anticipated; for shortly afterwards we heard the sound of hoofs outside, and an officer rode up to the veranda steps. Of course, we all hurried out.

"The colonel wants to know if you are all right, padre!" he shouted. "A near shave, wasn't it? A little longer and it would have been all U.P. with you, and probably everyone else in the station!"

No thanks! Very sorry, but he couldn't come in; hadn't time. The affair had delayed the regiment on the march; they must be getting on to the next camping ground. Anyway, these rascals in the city had learnt a lesson they wouldn't forget in a hurry!

He saluted and turned his horse's head.

"One moment!" called Mr. Grigson. "How did you hear of the row? The fellow who stopped the regiment ought to be rewarded."

The officer drew rein, looked back over his shoulder.

"It was an old woman. She met us on the road; told the colonel we were wanted."

"An old woman?" we chorused.

"Yes, an English woman, a queer-looking old dame in a poke-bonnet. I don't know where she got to. By the time the order had been given to turn out of our line of march, she'd disappeared. We couldn't see her anywhere. But, knowing what these riots may mean, we took her word for it. Just as well we did, eh?"

Again he saluted, and this time galloped off.

We looked at each other in amazement.

"Old Ann!" Mrs. Grigson exclaimed. "We'd forgotten all about her. She must have got up and gone out!"

Then we flew to Ann's room, fearful as to what had become of her, expecting to see the bed empty. But there she lay, sleeping, just as I had left her, a serene smile on her old face. Nothing pointed to her having moved. The poke-bonnet and grey dress hung from their pegs on the wall; her underclothing lay folded on a chair. Certainly the small pair of shoes beneath the chair were dusty, but as no housework had been attempted that morning, dust was thick everywhere.

Mrs. Grigson bent over the pillow.

"Ann," she said, gently, and again a little louder, "Ann!"

There came no stir, no response from the quiet form on the bed as we listened in the hot silence; and when, presently, Mrs. Grigson looked round,

held up her hand, I knew from the expression on her face that Ann had gone to where memories cannot hurt, do not matter, where she would answer to her real name.

It is, and ever will be, my firm conviction, that Ann's spirit went forth that morning to save the lives of those who had loved and taken care of her on earth, and, in their secret hearts, I think both Mrs. Grigson and Emily Brownlow were inclined to hold the same view. But, with the curious prejudice against belief in the supernatural shared by many truly pious people, the padre was entirely opposed to such an idea. Whenever we touched on the subject, he would repeat obstinately that the dying often displayed remarkable vitality shortly before the end came— the proverbial flash in the pan. He always maintained that Ann had risen and wandered out on to the Grand Trunk Road, which wasn't far off; that having met the regiment on the march, the sight of English soldiers had just for the moment awakened her recollection of that day in '57, when the relief party found her as a little girl in the jungle, when her one overwhelming desire, could she have uttered it, must have been to bid them go on to the rescue of her people. There was plenty of time, he would argue, for her to return. She had come back to die quietly in her bed; as a proof, were not her shoes covered with dust?

To my mind, this explanation seemed far more unlikely, even more miraculous, than my own; but I never could get the padre to agree with me.

And now, as I sat beneath the yew tree in an English churchyard, the green mounds, the flowers, the tombstones faded from my sight. I only visioned the corner of a desolate cemetery, rank with coarse yellow grass, bounded by a mud wall. I saw an old monument, the inscription on it almost obliterated— "mortal remains... Ensign... of sunstroke..."— and close beside it a newly laid slab that marked the grave of one whose true name was not Ann White.

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16: The Brothers of Mount Rest

Ernest O'Ferrall

1881-1925

The Bulletin, 11 June 1914

MRS. BELLEVUE, the stout, fair wife of the eminent K.C. of that name, passed her visitor a cup of tea and took up the dropped thread of her discourse.

"Oh, I thought everyone knew of the Brothers of Mount Rest! My dear, it's the most splendid idea, and Howard's nerves have been ever so much better since he joined. It's a sort of week-end rest-cure started by an American gentleman— a Mr. K. Stanthorpe Potts. I can't explain all the details, dear, but everybody wears monks' dresses from Saturday to Monday, and nobody talks more than is necessary, and there are walks in the grounds and choir singing, or else you can read an improving book, or do some work for the poor. The Home, you know, is that lovely old abbey place that rich Jabberson, the ironmonger, built out in the wilds of Gloomsome Hills before he went insolvent and committed suicide. It's just the place for the 'monastic rest cure,' as they call it. I'm just wild to see over the place, and Howard is dreadfully keen to study up and be promoted to Choir B— that's the higher grade, you know. He is in Choir A now, and has to study the most dreadfully difficult books. Mr. Stanthorpe Potts is most particular, and will not allow any of Choir A to mix with the B's. They are kept entirely separate from the moment they enter on Saturday evening to the time they leave on Monday. In fact, I believe, they leave at different times, so they never get a chance of meeting. I don't know very much about it, because Howard is under a solemn vow not to divulge any of the secrets of the place. What I have told you I have just had to dig out of him. Oh! I had almost forgotten! You know that man Wagglin who was employed here for a little while? Well, I believe the poor fellow is there doing kitchen work. Now do let me give you another cup of tea! That's right, my dear! One or two lumps?"

THE HOME motor whirred up to the main door of the Abbey with the Brother it had brought from the wayside station. A cowled figure stood on the threshold.

"Welcome, Brother Bellevue," it cried in good American, and deftly relieved the plain-clothes member of the heavy suit-case he carried. "How goes the outside world?"

Bellevue sighed gratefully as the great door swung open and the cool silence of the high, stone-flagged hall enveloped them.

"Noisy as ever, Brother Potts. I'm very glad to get away from it and back to my cell."

Brother Potts patted him encouragingly on the shoulder. "That's the right spirit. Peace— good works—reflection. You have found nothing better than the watchwords of the order, Brother?"

"Nothing!" sighed the plain clothes member.

"Good ! Now, I guess you will find everything ready in your cell. Brother Richard will carry your bag up for you. Meditations are at eight, Brother."

"Very well, Brother," returned the novice, and, handing his suit-case to the habited underling, he panted up the carpeted staircase in his wake.

"The Abbey" (Stanthorpe Potts had given the place the title after purchasing it) was a beautifully appointed Gothic mansion surrounded by acres of grounds and close handy to a State forest. From the second-floor windows the Brothers looked over miles of treetops. No woman was ever allowed inside the place, and it had all the restful privacy of a good club without a good club's dissipations. That was how Bellevue described the place in his confidential conversations with trusted friends.

On reaching his "cell"— actually a well but plainly-furnished room— he washed his face and hands and changed into his habit. Then

he sighed once more, and opened the immense, leather-bound tome lying ready on the table. The contents consisted of soothing passages selected by Potts from a modern American author who specialises in soul-stirring. He had just read and meditated on "Look Into Yourself— search your heart for Doubt, and be Valiant," when the great bell in the tower clanged three times— the signal for the evening meal.

Closing the book, he walked softly on sandalled feet from the darkened room and joined the cowled procession passing noiselessly down the lamp-lit stairs to the Choir A refectory. He spoke to nobody and nobody spoke to him. Mr. Potts had adopted, as far as practicable, the Trappist rule of silence, for he held that the manufacture of small talk was one of the greatest of modern evils and one of the chief causes of brain exhaustion. The Choir B Brothers were understood to enjoy more license; but those of Choir A were strictly enjoined to speak only when it was absolutely necessary. The consequence was that the members of Choir A were not even acquainted with one another, for they sat at meals or study and went to and fro merely as animated habits. Bellevue, sitting at his numbered place at meals, knew that the little brother on his right had an irritating habit of clicking his teeth, and that the fat brother on his left had clumsy red hands and a black moustache. But there his knowledge ended. He did not know their names, and could not have identified them in their ordinary clothes.

That night, as he ate the plain but excellent food served round by the cowled steward-brothers, Bellevue heard a lot of muffled laughter. It seemed

to come from the other side of the dividing wall, and he decided that the B refectory must be in that direction. It had a grateful sound, and he looked round distastefully at the dumb and sombre figures surrounding the board. Sometimes the silence and restraint of Choir A depressed him and made him long for the time when, having progressed sufficiently in nerve-control, he should be promoted to the jolly and sociable side of the house.

The silent brothers, as they finished their meal, rose and glode away to their various evening employments without saying a word to those who remained. Bellevue, being moodier than usual, sat long over his food, and was, in consequence, the only one left at table when the stewards came to clear away. Some very discouraging part-singing broke out as the collection of dirty dishes was being taken up. The twelve "singing" brothers had started their evening practice, and, as Brother Bellevue knew, there would not be an end of it for two long hours.

He sighed heavily inside his cowl, and was about to rise when the steward nearest him edged along and whispered hoarsely, "Good evenin', Mr. Bellevue!"

"Who's that?" gasped the startled recluse.

The steward, under pretence of piling some plates, swung round and faced him. Brother Bellevue discerned inside the other cowl the face of Wagglin, his late man of all work.

"I bin tryin' ter get a word with you this lars' two week-ends, sir," he breathed. "I wanter tell yer" A plate rattled at the other end of the room, and he looked round to assure himself that he had not been detected breaking the rule of silence. "I wanter tell yer somethin' erbout this 'ere place! There's somethin' dead wrong, sir! Lars' night I 'card... See yer later, sir!... Don' mix up with th' crowd ter-night, sir... Keep outer th' way and wait fer me! Look out!"

He grabbed his pile of dishes and evaporated just as one of the other stewards approached.

Brother Bellevue, now thoroughly unsettled, rose from his chair and rustled from the room wondering what information it was the depraved Wagglin had to impart. He felt certain in his own mind that it must be either a murder or a scandal. There could be no rest for him now until he knew exactly what it was. But where was he to wait?

He went to pass along to the hall where the brothers were meditating. As he moved off a habit and cowl bumped into him and a voice hissed, "Keep outer there! They'll lock yer in! Keep out, I tell yer!"

Brother Bellevue jumped, and the habit and cowl scuttled away and disappeared round a corner.

Where could he go to? Disregarding the clang of the bell that called to meditations, he made his way shrinkingly upstairs towards his cell, eyeing narrowly every monkish figure that drifted past him. The groaning of the alleged "singing" brothers pursued him all the way like a prolonged and dismal curse. At the top of the staircase he paused irresolutely and looked about him.

Every now and then a cowled figure went by mysteriously like a challenging riddle. It was practically impossible to distinguish between them in the dim light, and he came at last to the state of mind when he felt convinced that it was the same figure all the time. It only needed another shock to quite unsettle him, and in due course it arrived.

A cowl and habit shuffled along which he felt sure contained Wagglin. He moved along, and. judging his distance nicely, shouldered it sufficiently to necessitate a whispered apology. At the impact the other's habit swung open and revealed a glimpse of evening dress. And the other spoke, rapidly and harshly in the voice of Brother Potts:

"Keep these d—d fools in A locked up and get 'em on choir practice. If they come, we'll make 'em look like thirty cents, that's all! I'll go in now to the boys in B and start biz."

He passed on, and Brother Bellevue shrank into the shadows. He could not imagine who "They" were, and he was not quite clear who was to be made look "like thirty cents." But he knew now, on the authority of Potts himself, that the Brothers in A were regarded as d—d fools, and that B division was full of "boys" carrying on some sort of business to which the head went attired in evening dress.

The dismal exercises of the singing brothers were still making the night fearful; but the cowled figures had ceased to pass to and fro. A jingle of keys was heard downstairs and a couple of locks snapped. Then the keys jingled away, and the house was as much at peace as the attempted choristers would allow. Bellevue, flattened against the wall on the dark landing, reflected bitterly that no train would pass the wayside station until Monday morning, and that there was no possible chance for a man of his weight to walk the distance to the nearest junction. He felt utterly alone and ridiculous.

Suddenly a far door slammed and a cowl and habit bounded up the stairs as if pursued by the Devil.

Bellevue jumped out of his retreat, and the flying figure gasped. "There you are! Run!"

A canvas bag fell at Bellevue's feet. He snatched it up and set off after the flying brother. Upstairs they sped, the K.C. gaining at every bound. They reached the third floor in record time, and rushed down a passage neck and

neck. When the leader threw himself against a door. Bellevue also hurled his stout person at the same target.

But, to his amazement and horror, the other emitted a curse and shouldered him roughly back. "Not here, you fool! Get back, or they'll nail you! RUN!"

Bellevue realised with a sick sensation that he was involved in some dangerous enterprise.

"Get back! GET BACK!" hissed the furious stranger, and slipped inside the room. The door slammed and the key turned.

Bellevue went thoughtfully down the stairs, the mysterious bag clutched to his chest. As he reached his landing, another cowl and habit rushed at him waving its sleeves and hissing, "Git upstairs, sir! Git upstairs!"

Bellevue, his breath coming in loud sobs, wheeled again and charged up the staircase like a failing warhorse. The breathing of Wagglin toiling behind him sounded like an old gas engine.

When they struggled to the top landing Wagglin flung himself flat on the floor and half threw his late employer. Quite exhausted, they lay side by side on the carpet and fought for breath.

"Gawd!... that...was a run!" Wagglin gasped thankfully, and dragged himself to where he could peer over the edge of the landing into the hall below.

"What... didger run upstairs fer?"

Bellevue raised himself on one elbow and whispered faintly, "I... followed... someone I thought was you!"

" 'Oo *was* it?" breathed the anxious Wagglin. "Didger see 'is face, sir?"

"Didn't see his face at all! He told me to run and gave me this!" The canvas bag was pushed cautiously along the carpet. Wagglin touched it with his hand and stifled a cry of alarm.

"What's the matter *now*?"

"My Gawd, sir! That mus' be some of th' munney!"

"*What* money?"

Wagglin squirmed nearer and hissed. "That's what I wanted ter tell yer. All this 'ere singin' an' muck is nothin' but a blind, sir. This ain't a monkery reely—it's a 'igh-class gamblin' 'ell. Yous gennelmun in A sorter covers up th' doins in B, sir. You're jus' ere ter bluff th' pleece if there's a raid. One of th' kitchen blokes gimme th' tip a couple o' weeks ago. I bin waitin' ter git a charnce ter tell yer."

"Is this true?" demanded Brother Bellevue wildly.

"True, sir! I give yer me word it's orl true!"

"Then, by Heaven, I'll give information to the police! I'll not be made a fool of by—"

Wagglin pulled desperately at his sleeve to make him modulate his voice. "It's too late, sir— at least, I am afraid it is. I 'ear they've been expectin' a raid f'r th' larst two weeks, an' I swear blind I seen two pleecemen down th' road this mornin'. They was pertendin' to be 'awkers, but I knows a John when I sees one. No, Mr. Bellevue, sir, we gotter try an' keep outer th' way ter-night, an' be ready ter do a git if there's trouble. You wouldn't look well as a monk in gaol, sir."

"What about this money, then?"

"Blimey! I was fergettin' erbout that! It's a mix-up. I believe Brother Potts had arranged with the chief archbishop to get away with the funds before the pleece came, and either Potts took you for the archbishop or the archbishop took you for Potts."

"That's it, Wagglin!" whispered the old K.C. "How are we to get rid of it? Can you think of anything? We mustn't be caught with it, you know. We would be roughly handled."

"You bet yer life we would!" shivered the servitor. "Lemme think now!" He relapsed into silence and hard breathing.

Bellevue lay on his chest and stared down into the hall.

At last Wagglin spoke— in the usual hoarse whisper. "It's no use, sir! We'll jus' 'ave ter chuck it downstairs! 'Ere goes!"

A bag containing about 2,000 sovereigns soared over the banisters and flashed downward into the hall. It hit the great Chinese gong in the centre and produced a perfectly deafening series of sounds— first a sort of metallic yell warranted to make anyone jump, then a long roll of musical thunder that made the whole house vibrate.

As the thunder trailed away into an angry buzzing, a door flung open, and the voice of Brother Potts shrieked, "Who's makin' that Ghardam noise?" There was no answer.

But a second or so later there was a second and a wilder yell. "Th' safe's been robbed! Gee! there's been a Ghardam robbery! Thieves, boys! Thieves!"

Sounds of men running were heard, and the silent watchers upstairs were aware that the lights in the hall had been turned up. An ever-increasing crowd of disturbed gamblers in habits and cowls poured into the hall through the door opened by the enraged Potts, who was dancing about in evening dress, flourishing in one hand the recovered bag of money and in the other a large revolver. The murmuring gamblers eyed this display of energy with approbation, and roared appreciatively when he cried, "Pull out these lop-

eared rest-curers and we'll dahm soon find out who got away with the boodle! Pull 'em out!"

They were pulled out from their meditations with all speed, and very astonished they looked on finding the hall full of raging brothers who cursed and shouted about money. The habits and cowls quickly mingled in one tossing, shouting sea of brown cloth, which presently began to heave tumultously and fight itself, in spite of the demented efforts of Potts to restore order, or enough order to enable him to do a little cross-examining. Plainly the bag of cash flung to Mr. Bellevue had been only a portion of the loot.

It was at this uproarious moment that the front door began to shudder beneath a furious and thunderous assault.

"Th' police!" yelled a stout brother, and the crowd in an instant ceased wrangling and fled like rats from the threatened portal. Some of the most panicky at first bounded upstairs; but. seeing the others streaming towards the dark back regions, they turned back and fled after them. Furniture and ornaments fell and crashed as the stampeded rest-curists and gamblers flowed away together like a receding tide. The attack on the front door grew fiercer.

"What can we do?" wailed Brother Bellevue on the dark landing.

Wagglin scrambled up. "I was only waitin' till they got clear, sir! Come on with me before that door goes! I know a way out!"

They flitted down the stairs, shivering at every crashing axe-stroke on the stout, iron-bound door. They noticed a distinct smell of burning as they passed a refectory, but of course could not stop to investigate. Wagglin went on unswervinglv up and down dark corridors, and presently they came to a small side door. The key was found in the lock, and. in a second or so, they were outside, with dark shrubberies all around and the calm, cold stars overhead.

"This way, sir!" hissed the guide. They trotted along a pitch-dark overgrown path, got through a post-and-rail fence, and found themselves plodding through heavy ground.

"Must rest a bit!" gasped Bellevue, whose knees were going underneath him. He sank down thankfully with one hand on a dew-wet cabbage. Wagglin subsided without a word on the next vegetable.

Sounds of riot and panic came faintly to them across the cool night, and once they heard the report of a revolver. The upstairs portion of the mansion was dim, but several of the downstairs windows were golden with light.

"What's that glare downstairs?" asked Bellevue.

Wagglin emerged cautiously from his cabbage and gazed at the illumination.

"W'y, the 'ouse is on fire!" he moaned. "They muster upset some of them lamps. Blimey! there she goes!" As he spoke, flames burst from the heat-cracked windows, and thick smoke rolled out.

"They'll never git it out! There ain't no water 'ere!"

Fascinated by the spectacle, they lay low and watched the rapid progress of the fire until it had fairly caught the top floors and started to light up the neighborhood in a dangerous way. They suddenly found themselves lying in a blaze of light, and Wagglin with a cry of fear besought his late employer to get up and resume his flight.

"Why didn't we bring my suit-case?" moaned the habited K.C.

"No good, sir! We couldn't run with an 'eavy thing like time!" He seized Bellevue's arm, and. despite breathless protests, started to run him across the vegetable garden,

"I— can't— run any more!....Too— done up!"

"Come on, sir! There's— pony in stable— down 'ere!"

They blundered on into the dark and presently came to a dark outbuilding. "Wait a jiff!" muttered Wagglin, and disappeared utterly. Bellevue leant against the slab wall and longed for brandy. Then Wagglin appeared or loomed up, leading a four-footed shadow which turned out to be a fat, docile pony saddled with a bag and arrayed in a halter. He helped the incoherently grateful Bellevue to mount and directed him to hold on as lightly as possible by the mane. That done, they started off into the wilderness of the night, two monkish wayfarers travelling in simple ancient fashion towards safety,

JUST after dawn an early ploughman, twenty miles away over the hills, heard a nervous coo-ee from the fence, and turning saw a couple of drooping monks, one of whom was seated on a fat pony.

He lounged across and heard with surprise that Mount Rest had been burnt down the previous evening soon after he had retired to bed.

"I'm real sorry to 'ear it," he drawled in simple country friendliness. Rather to his surprise, the two brothers received the remark with weary indifference. The one on the pony made some earnest inquiries about the possibility of getting a breakfast and some ordinary clothes.

"Right yer are!" said the ploughman heartily, and let down the sliprails for them. The worn-out travellers entered and allowed themselves to be piloted across the field to a little house on a hill, from the chimney of which blue smoke was spiralling into the still air.

At the door, the mounted brother gradually unloaded himself from the pony with numerous groans.

The ploughman watched him sympathetically. "Bit stiff, brother, ain't yer?"

Exhausted as he was, Bellevue turned on him. "Don't call me *brother*!" he entreated.

The ploughman, who was a man of some reading, looked very abashed.

"Beg pardon, sir, I think I understand. I didn't know what you was up to at first goin' about that way; but I suppose now this is what these 'ere books calls 'travellin' incog.,' so ter speak?"

17: A Pagan of the South

Gilbert Parker

1862-1932

In: *Cumner's Son*, Toronto, 1910

Original magazine title "The Woman in the Morgue", first published in the 1890s.

WHEN Blake Shorland stepped from the steamer *Belle Sauvage* upon the quay at Noumea, he proceeded, with the alertness of the trained newspaper correspondent, to take his bearings. So this was New Caledonia, the home of outcast, criminal France, the recent refuge of Communist exiles, of Rochefort, Louise Michel, Felix Rastoul, and the rest! Over there to the left was Ile Nou, the convict prison; on the hill was the Governor's residence; below, the Government establishments with their red-tiled roofs; and hidden away in a luxuriance of tropical vegetation lay the houses of the citizens. He stroked his black moustache thoughtfully for a moment, and put his hand to his pocket to see that his letters of introduction from the French Consul at Sydney to Governor Rapont and his journalistic credentials were there. Then he remembered the advice of the captain of the *Belle Sauvage* as to the best hotel, and started towards it. He had not been shown the way, but his instincts directed him. He knew where it ought to be, according to the outlines of the place.

It proved to be where he thought, and, having engaged rooms, sent for his luggage, and refreshed himself, he set out to explore the town. His prudent mind told him that he ought to proceed at once to Governor Rapont and present his letters of commendation, for he was in a country where feeling was running high against English interference with the deportation of French convicts to New Caledonia, and the intention of France to annex the New Hebrides. But he knew also that so soon as these letters were presented, his freedom of action would be restricted, either by a courtesy which would be so constant as to become surveillance, or by an injunction having no such gloss. He had come to study French government in New Caledonia, to gauge the extent of the menace that the convict question bore towards Australia, and to tell his tale to Australia, and to such other countries as would listen. The task was not pleasant, and it had its dangers, too, of a certain kind. But Shorland had had difficulty and peril often in his life, and he borrowed no trouble. Proceeding along the Rue de l'Alma, and listening to the babble of French voices round him, he suddenly paused abstractedly, and said to himself "Somehow it brings back Paris to me, and that last night there, when I bade Freeman good-bye. Poor old boy, I'm glad better days are coming for him. Sure

to be better, if he marries Clare. Why didn't he do it seven years ago, and save all that other horrible business?"

Then he moved on, noticing that he was the object of remark, but as it was daytime, and in the street he felt himself safe. Glancing up at a doorway he saw a familiar Paris name— Café Voisin. This was interesting. It was in the Cafe Voisin that he had touched a farewell glass with Luke Freeman, the one bosom friend of his life. He entered this Café Voisin with the thought of how vague would be the society which he would meet in such a reproduction of a famous Parisian haunt. He thought of a Café *chantant* at Port Said, and said to himself, "It can't be worse than that." He was right then. The world had no shambles of ghastly frivolity and debauchery like those of Port Said.

The Cafe Voisin had many visitors, and Shorland saw at a glance who they were— *liberes*, or ticket-of-leave men, a drunken soldier or two, and a few of that class who with an army are called camp-followers, in an English town roughs, in a French convict settlement *recidivistes*. He felt at once that he had entered upon a trying experience; but he also felt that the luck would be with him, as it had been with him so many times these late years. He sat down at a small table, and called to a haggard waitress near to bring him a cup of coffee. He then saw that there was another woman in the room. Leaning with her elbows on the bar and her chin in her hands, she fixed her eyes on him as he opened and made a pretence of reading *La Nouvelle Caledonie*. Looking up, he met her eyes again; there was hatred in them if ever he saw it, or what might be called constitutional *diablerie*. He felt that this woman, whoever she was, had power of a curious kind; too much power for her to be altogether vile, too physically healthy to be of that class to which the girl who handed him his coffee belonged. There was not a sign of gaudiness about her; not a ring, a necklace, or a bracelet. Her dress was of cotton, faintly pink and perfectly clean; her hair was brown, and waving away loosely from her forehead. But her eyes— was there a touch of insanity there? Perhaps because they were rather deeply set, though large, and because they seemed to glow in the shadows made by the brows, the strange intensity was deepened. But Shorland could not get rid of the feeling of active malevolence in them. The mouth was neither small nor sensuous, the chin was strong without being coarse, the figure was not suggestive. The hands— confound the woman's eyes! Why could he not get rid of the feeling they gave him? She suddenly turned her head, not moving her chin from her hands, however, or altering her position, and said something to a man at her elbow— rather the wreck of a man, one who bore tokens of having been some time a gallant of the town, now only a disreputable citizen of a far from reputable French colony.

Immediately a murmur was heard: "A spy, an English spy!" From the mouths of absinthe-drinking *liberes* it passed to the mouths of rum-drinking recidivistes. It did not escape Blake Shorland's ears, but he betrayed no sign. He sipped his coffee and appeared absorbed in his paper, thinking carefully of the difficulties of his position. He knew that to rise now and make for the door would be of no advantage, for a number of the excited crowd were between him and it. To show fear might precipitate a catastrophe with this drunken mob. He had nerve and coolness.

Presently a dirty outcast passed him and rudely jostled his arm as he drank his coffee. He begged the other's pardon conventionally in French, and went on reading. A moment later the paper was snatched from his hand, and a red-faced unkempt scoundrel yelled in his face: "Spy of the devil! English thief!"

Then he rose quickly and stepped back to the wall, feeling for the spring in the sword-stick which he held closely pressed to his side. This same sword-stick had been of use to him on the Fly River in New Guinea.

"Down with the English spy!" rang through the room, joined to vile French oaths. Meanwhile the woman had not changed her position, but closely watched the tumult which she herself had roused. She did not stir when she saw a glass hurled at the unoffending Englishman's head. A hand reached over and seized a bottle behind her. The bottle was raised and still she did not move, though her fingers pressed her cheeks with a spasmodic quickness. Three times Shorland had said, in well-controlled tones: "Frenchmen, I am no spy," but they gave him the lie with increasing uproar. Had not Gabrielle Rouget said that he was an English spy? As the bottle was poised in the air with a fiendish cry of "A baptism! a baptism!" and Shorland was debating on his chances of avoiding it, and on the wisdom of now drawing his weapon and cutting his way through the mob, there came from the door a call of "Hold! hold!" and a young officer dashed in, his arm raised against the brutal missile in the hands of the ticket-of-leave man, whose Chauvinism was a matter of absinthe, natural evil, and Gabrielle Rouget. "Wretches! scum of France!" he cried: "what is this here? And you, Gabrielle, do you sleep? Do you permit murder?"

The woman met the fire in his eyes without flinching, and some one answered for her. "He is an English spy."

"Take care, Gabrielle," the young officer went on, "take care— you go too far!" Waving back the sullen crowd, now joined by the woman who had not yet spoken, he said: "Who are you, monsieur? What is the trouble?"

Shorland drew from his pocket his letters and credentials. Gabrielle now stood at the young officer's elbow. As the papers were handed over, a photograph dropped from among them and fell to the floor face upward.

Shorland stooped to pick it up, but, as he did so, he heard a low exclamation from Gabrielle. He looked up. She pointed to the portrait, and said gaspingly: "My God— look! look!" She leaned forward and touched the portrait in his hand. "Look! look!" she said again. And then she paused, and a moment after laughed. But there was no mirth in her laughter— it was hollow and nervous. Meanwhile the young officer had glanced at the papers, and now handed them back, with the words: "All is right, monsieur— eh, Gabrielle, well, what is the matter?" But she drew back, keeping her eyes fixed on the Englishman, and did not answer.

The young officer stretched out his hand. "I am Alençon Barre, lieutenant, at your service. Let us go, monsieur."

But there was some unusual devilry working in that drunken crowd. The sight of an officer was not sufficient to awe them into obedience. Bad blood had been fired, and it was fed by some cause unknown to Alençon Barre, but to be understood fully hereafter. The mass surged forward, with cries of "Down with the Englishman!"

Alençon Barre drew his sword. "Villains!" he cried, and pressed the point against the breast of the leader, who drew back. Then Gabrielle's voice was heard: "No, no, my children," she said, "no more of that to-day— not to-day. Let the man go." Her face was white and drawn.

Shorland had been turning over in his mind all the events of the last few moments, and he thought as he looked at her that just such women had made a hell of the Paris Commune. But one thought dominated all others. What was the meaning of her excitement when she saw the portrait—the portrait of Luke Freeman?

He felt that he was standing on the verge of some tragic history.

Barre's sword again made a clear circle round him, and he said: "Shame, Frenchmen! This gentleman is no spy. He is the friend of the Governor— he is my friend. He is English? Well, where is the English flag, there are the French— good French-protected. Where is the French flag, there shall the English— good English— be safe."

As they moved towards the door Gabrielle came forward, and, touching Shorland's arm, said in English: "You will come again, monsieur? You shall be safe altogether. You will come?" Looking at her searchingly, he answered slowly: "Yes, I will come."

As they left the turbulent crowd behind them and stepped into the street, Barre said: "You should have gone at once to the Hotel du Gouverneur and presented your letters, *monsieur*, or, at least, have avoided the Café Voisin. Noumea is the Whitechapel and the Pentonville of France, remember."

Shorland acknowledged his error, thanked his rescuer, enjoyed the situation, and was taken to Governor Rapont, by whom he was cordially received, and then turned over to the hospitality of the officers of the post. It was conveyed to him later by letters of commendation from the Governor that he should be free to go anywhere in the islands and to see whatever was to be seen, from convict prison to Hotel Dieu.

ii

SITTING that night in the rooms of Alençon Barre, this question was put to Blake Shorland by his host: "What did Gabrielle say to you as we left, monsieur? And why did she act so, when she saw the portrait? I do not understand English well, and it was not quite clear."

Shorland had a clear conviction that he ought to take Alençon Barre into his confidence. If Gabrielle Rouget should have any special connection with Luke Freeman, there might be need of the active counsel of a friend like this young officer, whose face bespoke chivalry and gentle birth. Better that Alençon Barre should know all, than that he should know in part and some day unwittingly make trouble. So he raised frank eyes to those of the other, and told the story of the man whose portrait had so affected Gabrielle Rouget.

"Monsieur," said he, "I will tell you of this man first, and then it will be easier to answer your questions."

He took the portrait from his pocket, passed it over, and continued. "I received this portrait in a letter from England the day that I left Sydney, as I was getting aboard the boat. I placed it among those papers which you read. It fell out on the floor of the café, and you saw the rest. The man whose face is before you there, and who sent that to me, was my best friend in the days when I was at school and college. Afterwards, when a law-student, and, still later, when I began to practise my profession, we lived together in a rare old house at Fulham, with high garden walls and— but I forget, you do not know London perhaps. Yes? Well, the house is neither here nor there; but I like to think of those days and of that home. Luke Freeman— that was my friend's name— was an artist and a clever one. He had made a reputation by his paintings of Egyptian and Algerian life. He was brilliant and original, an indefatigable worker. Suddenly, one winter, he became less industrious, fitful in his work, gloomy one day and elated the next, generally uncomfortable. What was the matter? Strange to say, although we were such friends, we chose different sets of society, and therefore seldom appeared at the same houses or knew the same people. He liked most things continental; he found his social pleasures in that polite Bohemia which indulges in midnight suppers

and permits ladies to smoke cigarettes after dinner, which dines at rich men's tables and is hob-a-nob with Russian Counts, Persian Ministers, and German Barons. That was not to my taste, save as a kind of dramatic entertainment to be indulged in at intervals like a Drury Lane pantomime. But though I had no proof that such was the case, I knew Luke Freeman's malady to be a woman. I taxed him with it. He did not deny it. He was painting at the time, I remember, and he testily and unprofitably drew his brush across the face of a Copt woman he was working at, and bit off the end of a cigar. I asked him if it was another man's wife; he promptly said no. I asked him if there were any awkward complications any inconsiderate pressure from the girl's parents of brothers; and he promptly told me to be damned. I told him I thought he ought to know that an ambitious man might as well drown himself at once as get a fast woman in his path. Then he showed a faculty for temper and profanity that stunned me. But the up shot was that I found the case straight enough to all appearances. The woman was a foreigner and not easy to win; was beautiful, had a fine voice, loved admiration, and possessed a scamp of a brother who, wanted her to marry a foreigner, so that, according to her father's will, a large portion of her fortune would come to him.... Were you going to speak? No? Very well. Things got worse and worse. Freeman neglected business and everything else, became a nuisance. He never offered to take me to see the lady, and I did not suggest it, did not even know where she lived. What galled me most in the matter was that Freeman had been for years attentive to a cousin of mine, Clare Hazard, almost my sister, indeed, since she had been brought up in my father's house; and I knew that from a child she had adored him. However, these things seldom work out according to the law of Nature, and so I chewed the cud of dissatisfaction and kept the thing from my cousin as long as I could. About the time matters seemed at a crisis I was taken ill, and was ordered south. My mother and Freeman accompanied me as far as Paris. Here Freeman left me to return to England, and in the Café Voisin, at Paris— yes, mark that— we had our farewell. I have never seen him since. While in Italy I was brought to death's door by my illness; and when I got up, Clare told me that Freeman was married and had gone to Egypt. She, poor girl, bore it well. I was savage, but it was too late. I was ordered to go to the South Seas, at least to take a long sea-voyage; and though I could not well afford it I started for Australia. On my way out I stopped off at Port Said to try and find Freeman in Egypt, but failed. I heard of him at Cairo, and learned also that his wife's brother had joined them. Two years passed, and then I got a letter from an old friend, saying that Freeman's wife had eloped with a Frenchman. Another year, and then came a letter from Freeman himself, saying that his wife was dead; that he had identified her body in the Morgue at Paris— found drowned, and

all that. He believed that remorse had driven her to suicide. But he had no trace of the brother, no trace of the villain whom he had scoured Europe and America over to find. Again, another three years, and now he writes me that he is going to be married to Clare Hazard on the twenty sixth of this month. With that information came this portrait. I tell you all, M. Barre, because I feel that this woman Gabrielle has some connection with the past life of my friend Luke Freeman. She recognised the face, and you saw the effect. Now will you tell me what you know about her?"

Shorland had been much more communicative than was his custom. But he knew men. This man had done him a service, and that made towards friendship on both sides. He was an officer and a gentleman, and so he showed his hand. Then he wanted information and perhaps much more, though what that would be he could not yet tell.

M. Barre had smoked cigarettes freely during Shorland's narrative. At the end he said with peculiar emphasis: "Your friend's wife was surely a Frenchwoman?"

"Yes."

"Was her name Laroche?"

"Yes, that was it. Do you think that Lucile Laroche and Gabrielle—!"

"That Lucile Laroche and Gabrielle Rouget are one? Yes. But that Lucile Laroche was the wife of your friend? Well, that is another matter. But we shall see soon. Listen. A scoundrel, Henri Durien, was sent out here for killing an American at cards. The jury called it murder, but recommended him to mercy, and he escaped the guillotine. He had the sympathy of the women, the Press did not deal hardly with him, and the Public Prosecutor did not seem to push the case as he might have done. But that was no matter to us. The woman, Gabrielle Rouget, followed him here, where he is a prisoner for life. He is engaged in road-making with other prisoners. She keeps the Cafe Voisin. Now here is the point which concerns your story. Once, when Gabrielle was permitted to see Henri, they quarrelled. I was acting as governor of the prison at the time, saw the meeting and heard the quarrel. No one else was near. Henri accused her of being intimate with a young officer of the post. I am sure there was no truth in it, for Gabrielle does not have followers of that kind. But Henri had got the idea from some source; perhaps by the convicts' 'Underground Railway,' which has connection even with the Hotel du Gouverneur. Through it the prisoners know all that is going on, and more. In response to Henri's accusation Gabrielle replied: 'As I live, Henri, it is a lie.' He sardonically rejoined: 'But you do not live. You are dead, dead I tell you. You were found drowned and carried to the Morgue and properly identified—not by me, curse you, Lucile Laroche. And then you were properly buried, and not

by me either, nor at my cost, curse you again. You are dead, I tell you!' She looked at him as she looked at you the other day, dazed and spectre-like, and said: 'Henri, I gave up my life once to a husband to please my brother.

"He was a villain, my brother. I gave it up a second time to please you, and because I loved you. I left behind me name, fortune, Paris, France, everything, to follow you here. I was willing to live here, while you lived, or till you should be free. And you curse me— you dare to curse me! Now I will give you some cause to curse. You are a devil— I am a sinner. Henceforth I shall be devil and sinner too.' With that she left him. Since then she has been both devil and sinner, but not in the way he meant; simply a danger to the safety of this dangerous community; a Louise Michel— we had her here too!— without Louise Michel's high motives. Gabrielle Rouget may cause a revolt of the convicts some day, to secure the escape of Henri Durien, or to give them all a chance. The Governor does not believe it, but I do. You noticed what I said about the Morgue, and that?"

Shorland paced up and down the room for a time, and then said: "Great heaven, suppose that by some hideous chance this woman, Gabrielle Rouget, or Lucile Laroche, should prove to be Freeman's wife! The evidence is so overwhelming. There evidently was some trick, some strange mistake, about the Morgue and the burial. This is the fourteenth of January; Freeman is to be married on the twenty-sixth! Monsieur, if this woman should be his wife, there never was brewed an uglier scrape. There is Freeman— that's pitiful; there is Clare Hazard— that's pitiful and horrible. For nothing can be done; no cables from here, the Belle Sauvage gone, no vessels or sails for two weeks. Ah well, there's only one thing to do— find out the truth from Gabrielle if I can, and trust in Providence."

"Well spoken," said M. Barre. "Have some more champagne. I make the most of the pleasure of your company, and so I break another bottle. Besides, it may be the last I shall get for a time. There is trouble brewing at Bompari—a native insurrection— and we may have to move at any moment. However this Gabrielle affair turns out, you have your business to do. You want to see the country, to study our life-well, come with us. We will house you, feed you as we feed, and you shall have your tobacco at army prices."

Much as Blake Shorland was moved by the events of the last few hours he was enough the soldier and the man of the world to face possible troubles without the loss of appetite, sleep, or nerve. He had cultivated a habit of deliberation which saved his digestion and preserved his mental poise; and he had a faculty for doing the right thing at the right time. From his stand-point, his late adventure in the Cafe Voisin was the right thing, serious as the results might have been or might yet be. He now promptly met the French officer's

exuberance of spirits with a hearty gaiety, and drank his wine with genial compliment and happy anecdote. It was late when they parted; the Frenchman excited, beaming, joyous, the Englishman responsive, but cool in mind still.

iii

AFTER breakfast next morning Shorland expressed to M. Barre his intention of going to see Gabrielle Rouget. He was told that he must not go alone; a guard would be too conspicuous and might invite trouble; he himself would bear him company.

The hot January day was reflected from the red streets, white houses, and waxen leaves of the tropical foliage with enervating force. An occasional ex-convict sullenly lounged by, touching his cap as he was required by law; a native here and there leaned idly against a house-wall or a magnolia tree; ill-looking men and women loitered in the shade. A Government officer went languidly by in full uniform— even the Governor wore uniform at all times to encourage respect— and the cafés were filling. Every hour was "absinthe-hour" in Noumea, which had improved on Paris in this particular. A knot of men stood at the door of the Café Voisin gesticulating nervously. One was pointing to a notice posted on the bulletin-board of the café announcing that all citizens must hold themselves in readiness to bear arms in case the rumoured insurrection among the natives proved serious. It was an evil-looking company who thus discussed Governor Rapont's commands. As the two passed in, Shorland noticed that one of the group made a menacing action towards Alençon Barre.

Gabrielle was talking to an ex-convict as they entered. Her face looked worn; there was a hectic spot on each cheek and dark circles round the eyes. There was something animal-like about the poise of the head and neck, something intense and daring about the woman altogether. Her companion muttered between his teeth: "The cursed English spy!"

But she turned on him sharply: "Go away, Gaspard, I have business. So have you— go." The ex-convict slowly left the cafe still muttering.

"Well, Gabrielle, how are your children this morning? They look gloomy enough for the guillotine, eh?" said M. Barre.

"They are much trouble, sometimes— my children."

"Last night, for instance."

"Last night. But monsieur was unwise. We do not love the English here. They do not find it comfortable on English soil, in Australia— my children! Not so comfortable as Louis Philippe and Louis Napoleon. Criminal kings with gold are welcome; criminal subjects without gold— ah, that is another matter,

monsieur. It is just the same. They may be gentlemen—many are; if they escape to Australia or go as liberes, they are hunted down. That is English, and they hate the English— my children."

Gabrielle's voice was directed to M. Barre, but her eyes were on Shorland.

"Well, Gabrielle, all English are not inhospitable. My friend here, we must be hospitable to him. The coals of fire, you know, Gabrielle. We owe him some thing for yesterday. He wishes to speak to you. Be careful, Gabrielle. No communist justice, Citizen Gabrielle." M. Barre smiled gaily.

Gabrielle smiled in reply, but it was not a pleasant smile, and she said: "Treachery, M. Barre— treachery in Noumea? There is no such thing. It is all fair in love and war. No quarter, no mercy, no hope. All is fair where all is foul, M. Barre."

M. Barre shrugged his shoulders pleasantly and replied: "If I had my way your freedom should be promptly curtailed, Gabrielle. You are an active citizen, but you are dangerous, truly."

"I like you better when you do not have your way. Yet my children do not hate you, M. Barre. You speak your thought, and they know what to expect. Your family have little more freedom in France than my children have here."

M. Barre looked at her keenly for an instant, then, lighting a cigarette, he said: "So, Gabrielle, so! That is enough. You wish to speak to M. Shorland— well!" He waved his hand to her and walked away from them. Gabrielle paused a moment, looking sharply at Blake Shorland, then she said: "Monsieur will come with me?"

She led the way into another room, the boudoir, sitting-room, breakfast-room, library, all in one. She parted the curtains at the window, letting the light fall upon the face of her companion, while hers remained in the shadow. He knew the trick, and moved out of the belt of light. He felt that he was dealing with a woman of singular astuteness, with one whose wickedness was unconventional and intrepid. To his mind there came on the instant the memory of a Rocky Mountain lioness that he had seen caged years before; lithe, watchful, nervously powerful, superior to its surroundings, yet mastered by those surroundings— the trick of a lock, not a trick of strength. He thought he saw in Gabrielle a woman who for a personal motive was trying to learn the trick of the lock in Noumea, France's farthest prison. For a moment they looked at each other steadily, then she said: "That portrait— let me see it."

The hand that she held out was unsteady, and it looked strangely white and cold. He drew the photograph from his pocket and handed it to her. A flush passed across her face as she looked at it, and was followed by a marked paleness. She gazed at the portrait for a moment, then her lips parted and a great sigh broke from her. She was about to hand it back to him, but an

inspiration seemed to seize her, and she threw it on the floor and put her heel upon it. "That is the way I treated him," she said, and she ground her heel into the face of the portrait. Then she took her foot away. "See, see," she cried, "how his face is scarred and torn! I did that. Do you know what it is to torture one who loves you? No, you do not. You begin with shame and regret. But the sight of your lover's agonies, his indignation, his anger, madden you and you get the lust of cruelty. You become insane. You make new wounds. You tear open old ones. You cut, you thrust, you bruise, you put acid in the sores—the sharpest nitric acid; and then you heal with a kiss of remorse, and that is acid too— carbolic acid, and it smells of death. They put it in the room where dead people are. Have you ever been to the Morgue in Paris? They use it there."

She took up the portrait. "Look," she said, "how his face is torn! Tell me of him."

"First, who are you?"

She steadied herself. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am his friend, Blake Shorland."

"Yes, I remember your name." She threw her hands up with a laugh, a bitter hopeless laugh. Her eyes half closed, so that only light came from them, no colour. The head was thrown back with a defiant recklessness, and then she said: "I was Lucile Laroche, his wife— Luke Freeman's wife."

"But his wife died. He identified her in the Morgue."

"I do not know why I speak to you so, but I feel that the time has come to tell all to you. That was not his wife in the Morgue. It was his wife's sister, my sister whom my brother drowned for her money— he made her life such a misery! And he did not try to save her when he knew she meant to drown herself. She was not bad; she was a thousand times better than I am, a million times better than he was. He was a devil. But he is dead now too.... She was taken to the Morgue. She looked like me altogether; she wore a ring of mine, and she had a mark on her shoulder the same as one on mine; her initials were the same. Luke had never seen her. He believed that I lay dead there, and he buried her for me. I thought at the time that it would be best I should be dead to him and to the world. And so I did not speak. It was all the same to my brother. He got what was left of my fortune, and I got what was left of hers. For I was dead, you see— dead, dead, dead!"

She paused again. Neither spoke for a moment. Shorland was thinking what all this meant to Clare Hazard and Luke Freeman.

"Where is he? What is he doing?" she said at length. "Tell me. I was— I am— his wife."

"Yes, you were— you are— his wife. But better if you had been that woman in the Morgue," he said without pity. What were this creature's feelings to him? There was his friend and the true-souled Clare.

"I know, I know," she replied. "Go on!"

"He is well. The man that was born when his wife lay before him in the Morgue has found another woman, a good woman who loves him and—"

"And is married to her?" interrupted Gabrielle, her face taking on again a shining whiteness. But, as though suddenly remembering something, she laughed that strange laugh which might have come from a soul irretrievably lost. "And is married to her?"

Blake Shorland thought of the lust of cruelty, of the wounds, and the acids of torture. "Not yet," he said; "but the marriage is set for the twenty-six of this month."

"How I could spoil all that!"

"Yes, you could spoil all that. But you have spoiled enough already. Don't you think that if Luke Freeman does marry, you had better be dead as you have been this last five years? To have spoiled one life ought to be enough to satisfy even a woman like you."

Her eyes looked through Blake Shorland's eyes and beyond them to something else; and then they closed. When they opened again, she said: "It is strange that I never thought of his marrying again. And now I want to kill her— just for the moment. That is the selfish devil in me. Well, what is to be done, monsieur? There is the Morgue left. But then there is no Morgue here. Ah, well, we can make one, perhaps— we can make a Morgue, monsieur."

"Can't you see that he ought to be left the rest of his life in peace?"

"Yes, I can see that."

"Well, then!"

"Well— and then, monsieur? Ah, you did not wish him to marry me. He told me so. 'A fickle foreigner,' you said. And you were right, but it was not pleasant to me. I hated you then, though I had never spoken to you nor seen you; not because I wanted him, but because you interfered. He said once to me that you had told the truth in that. But—and then, monsieur?"

"Then continue to efface yourself. Continue to be the woman in the Morgue."

"But others know."

"Yes, Henri Durien knows and M. Barre suspects."

"So, you see."

"But Henri Durien is a prisoner for life; he cannot hear of the marriage unless you tell him. M. Barre is a gentleman: he is my friend; his memory will be dead like you."

"For M. Barre, well! But the other— Henri. How do you know that he is here for life? Men get pardoned, men get free, men— get free, I tell you."

Shorland noticed the interrupted word. He remembered it afterwards all too distinctly enough.

"The twenty-sixth, the twenty-sixth," she said.

Then a pause, and afterwards with a sudden sharpness: "Come to me on the twenty-fifth, and I will give you my reply, M. Shorland."

He still held the portrait in his hand. She stepped forward. "Let me see it again," she said.

He handed it to her: "You have spoiled a good face, Gabrielle."

"But the eyes are not hurt," she replied; "see how they look at one." She handed it back.

"Yes, kindly."

"And sadly. As though he still remembered Lucile. Lucile! I have not been called that name for a long time. It is on my grave-stone, you know. Ah, perhaps you do not know. You never saw my grave. I have. And on the tombstone is written this: By Luke to Lucile. And then beneath, where the grass almost hides it, the line: I have followed my Star to the last. You do not know what that line means; I will tell you. Once, when we were first married, he wrote me some verses, and he called them, 'My Star, Lucile.' Here is a verse— ah, why do you not smile, when I say I will tell you what he wrote? Chut! Women such as I have memories sometimes. One can admire the Heaven even if one lives in— ah, you know! Listen." And with a voice that seemed far away and not part of herself she repeated these lines:

"In my sky of delight there's a beautiful Star;
'Tis the sun and the moon of my days;
And the doors of its glory are ever ajar,
And I live in the glow of its rays.

'Tis my winter of joy and my summer of rest,
'Tis my future, my present, my past;
And though storms fill the East and the clouds haunt the West,
I shall follow my Star to the last."

"There, that was to Lucile. What would he write to Gabrielle— to Henri's Gabrielle? How droll— how droll!" Again she laughed that laugh of eternal recklessness.

It filled Shorland this time with a sense of fear. He lost sight of everything— this strange and interesting woman, and the peculiar nature of the events in which he was sharing, and saw only Clare Hazard's ruined life, Luke Freeman's despair, and the fatal 26th of January, so near at hand. He could see no way

out of the labyrinth of disgrace. It unnerved him more than anything that had ever happened to him, and he turned bewildered towards the door. He saw that while Gabrielle lived, a dead misfortune would be ever crouching at the threshold of Freeman's home, that whether the woman agreed to be silent or not, the hurt to Clare would remain the same. With an angry bitterness in his voice that he did not try to hide he said: "There is nothing more to be done now, Gabrielle, that I can see. But it is a crime— it is a pity!"

"A pity that he did not tell the truth on the gravestone— that he did not follow his star to the last, monsieur? How droll! And you should see how green the grass was on my grave! Yes, it is a pity."

But Shorland, heavy at heart, looked at her and said nothing more. He wondered why it was that he did not loathe her. Somehow, even in her shame, she compelled a kind of admiration and awe. She was the wreck of splendid possibilities. A poisonous vitality possessed her, but through it glowed a daring and a candour that belonged to her before she became wicked, and that now half redeemed her in the eyes of this man, who knew the worst of her. Even in her sin she was loyal to the scoundrel for whom she had sacrificed two lives, her own and another's. Her brow might flush with shame of the mad deed that turned her life awry, and of the degradation of her present surroundings; but her eyes looked straight into those of Shorland without wavering, with the pride of strength if not of goodness.

"Yes, there is one thing more," she said. "Give me that portrait to keep— until the 25th. Then you may take it— from the woman in the Morgue."

Shorland thought for a moment. She had spoken just now without sneering, without bravado, without hardness. He felt that behind this woman's outward cruelty and varying moods there was something working that perhaps might be trusted, something in Luke's interest. He was certain that this portrait had moved her deeply. Had she come to that period of reaction in evil when there is an agonised desire to turn back towards the good? He gave the portrait to her.

iv

SITTING in Alençon Barre's room an hour later, Shorland told him in substance the result of his conference with Gabrielle, and begged his consideration for Luke if the worst should happen. Alençon Barre gave his word as a man of honour that the matter should be sacred to him. As they sat there, a messenger came from the commandant to say that the detachment was to start that afternoon for Bompari. Then a note was handed to Shorland from Governor Rapont offering him a horse and a native servant if he chose to

go with the troops. This was what Shorland had come for— news and adventure. He did not hesitate, though the shadow of the twenty-fifth was hanging over him. He felt his helplessness in the matter, but determined to try to be back in Noumea on that date. Not that he expected anything definite, but because he had a feeling that where Gabrielle was on that day he ought to be.

For two days they travelled, the friendship between them growing hourly closer. It was the swift amalgamation of two kindred natures in the flame of a perfect sincerity, for even with the dramatic element so strongly developed in him, the Englishman was downright and true. His friendship was as tenacious as his head was cool.

On the evening of the third day Shorland noticed that the strap of his spur was frayed. He told his native servant to attend to it. Next morning as they were starting he saw that the strap had not been mended or replaced. His language on the occasion was pointed and confident. The fact is, he was angry with himself for trusting anything to a servant. He was not used to such a luxury, and he made up his mind to live for the rest of the campaign without a servant, as he had done all his life long.

The two friends rode side by side for miles through the jungle of fern and palm, and then began to enter a more open but scrubby country. The scouts could be seen half a mile ahead. Not a sign of natives had been discovered on the march. More than once Barre had expressed his anxiety at this. He knew it pointed to concentrated trouble ahead, and, just as they neared the edge of the free country, he rose in his saddle and looked around carefully. Shorland imitated his action, and, as he resumed his seat, he felt his spur-strap break. He leaned back, and drew up the foot to take off the spur. As he did so, he felt a sudden twitch at his side, and Barre swayed in his saddle with a spear in the groin. Shorland caught him and prevented him falling to the ground. A wild cry rose from the jungle behind and from the clearing ahead, and in a moment the infuriated French soldiers were in the thick of a hand-to-hand fray under a rain of spears and clubs. The spear that had struck Barre would have struck Shorland had he not bent backward when he did. As it was the weapon had torn a piece of cloth from his coat.

A moment, and the wounded man was lifted to the ground. The surgeon shook his head in sad negation. Death already blanched the young officer's face. Shorland looked into the misty eyes with a sadness only known to those who can gauge the regard of men who suffer for each other. Four days ago this gallant young officer had taken risk for him, had saved him from injury, perhaps death; to-day the spear meant for him had stricken down this same young officer, never to rise again. The vicarious sacrifice seemed none the less

noble to the Englishman because it was involuntary and an accident. The only point clear in his mind was that had he not leant back, Barre would be the whole man and he the wounded one.

"How goes it, my friend?" said Shorland, bending over him.

Alençon Barre looked up, agony twitching his nostrils and a dry white line on his lips. "Ah, *mon camarade*," he answered huskily, "it is in action— that is much; it is for France, that is more to me— everything. They would not let me serve France in Paris, but I die for her in New Caledonia. I have lived six-and-twenty years. I have loved the world. Many men have been kind, and once there was a woman— and I shall see her soon, quite soon. It is strange. The eyes will become blind, and then they will open, and—ah!" His fingers closed convulsively on those of Blake Shorland. When the ghastly tremor, the deadly corrosions of the poisoned spear passed he said: "So— so! It is the end. *C'est bien, c'est bien*!"

All round them the fight raged, and French soldiers were repeating English bravery in the Soudan.

"It is not against a great enemy, but it is good," said the wounded man as he heard the conquering cries of a handful of soldiers punishing ten times their numbers. "You remember Prince Eugene and the assegais?"

"I remember."

"Our Houses were enemies, but we were friends, he and I. And so, and so, you see, it is the same for both."

Again the teeth of the devouring poison fastened on him, and, when it left him, a grey pallor had settled upon the face.

Blake Shorland said to him gently: "How do you feel about it all?"

As if in gentle protest the head moved slightly. "All's well, all's well," the low voice said.

A pause, in which the cries of the wounded came through the smoke, and then the dying man, feeling the approach of another convulsion, said: "A cigarette, mon ami."

Blake Shorland put a cigarette between his lips and lighted it.

"And now a little wine," the fallen soldier added. The surgeon, who had come again for a moment, nodded and said: "It may help."

Barre's native servant brought a bottle of champagne intended to be drunk after the expected victory, but not in this fashion!

Shorland understood. This brave young soldier of a dispossessed family wished to show no fear of pain, no lack of outward and physical courage in the approaching and final shock. He must do something that was conventional, natural, habitual, that would take his mind from the thing itself. At heart he was right. The rest was a question of living like a strong-nerved soldier to the

last. The tobacco-smoke curled feebly from his lips, and was swallowed up in the clouds of powder-smoke that circled round them. With his head on his native servant's knee he watched Shorland uncork the bottle and pour the wine into the surgeon's medicine-glass. It was put in his fingers; he sipped it once and then drank it all. "Again," he said.

Again it was filled. The cigarette was smoked nearly to the end. Shorland must unburden his mind of one thought, and he said: "You took what was meant for me, my friend."

"Ah, no, no! It was the fortune, we will say the good fortune. C'est bien!" Then, "The wine, the wine," he said, and his fingers again clasped those of Shorland tremblingly. He took the glass in his right hand and lifted it. "God guard all at home, God keep France!" he said. He was about to place the glass to his lips, when a tremor seized him, and the glass fell from his hand. He fell back, his breath quick and vanishing, his eyes closing, and a faint smile upon his lips. "It is always the same with France," he said; "always the same." And he was gone.

v

THE FRENCH had bought their victory dear with the death of Alençon Barre, their favourite officer. When they turned their backs upon a quelled insurrection, there was a gap that not even French buoyancy could fill. On the morning of the twenty-fifth they neared Noumea. Shorland thought of all that day meant to Luke and Clare. He was helpless to alter the course of events, to stay a terrible possibility.

"You can never trust a woman of Gabrielle's stamp," he said to himself, as they rode along through valleys of ferns, grenadillas, and limes. "They have no baseline of duty; they either rend themselves or rend others, but rend they must, hearts and not garments. Henri Durien knows, and she knows, and Alençon Barre knew, poor boy! But what Barre knew is buried with him back there under the palms. Luke and Clare are to be married to-morrow-God help them! And I can see them in their home, he standing by the fireplace in his old way— it's winter there— and looking down at Clare; and on the other side of the fireplace sits the sister of the Woman in the Morgue, waiting for the happiest moment in the lives of these two before her. And when it comes, as she did with the portrait, as she did with him before, she will set her foot upon his face and then on Clare's; only neither Luke nor Clare will live again after that crucifixion." Then aloud: "Hello! what's that?— a messenger riding hard to meet us! Smoke in the direction of Noumea and sound of firing! What's that, doctor? Convicts revolted, made a break at the prison and on the way to the

quarries at the same moment! Of course— seized the time when the post was weakest, helped by ticket-of-leave-men and led by Henri Durien, Gaspard, and Gabrielle Rouget. Gabrielle Rouget, eh! And this is the twenty-fifth! Yes, I will take Barre's horse, captain, thank you; it is fresher than mine. Away we go! Egad, they're at it, doctor! Hear the rifles!" Answering to the leader's cry of "Forward, forward!" the detachment dashed into the streets of this little Paris, which, after the fashion of its far-away mother, was dipping its hands in Revolution. Outcast and criminal France were arrayed against military France once more. A handful of guards in the prison at Ile Nou were bravely holding in check a ruthless mob of convicts; and a crowd of convicts in the street keeping back a determined military force. Part of the newly-arrived reinforcements proceeded to Ile Nou, part moved towards the barricade. Shorland went to the barricade.

The convicts had the Café Voisin in their rear. As the reinforcements joined the besieging party a cheer arose, and a sally was made upon the barricade. It was a hail of fire meeting a slighter rain of fire— a cry of coming victory cutting through a sullen roar of despair. The square in which the convicts were massed was a trench of blood and bodies; but they fought on. There was but one hope— to break out, to meet the soldiers hand to hand and fight for passage to the friendly jungle and to the sea, where they might trust to that Providence who appears to help even the wicked sometimes. As Shorland looked upon the scene he thought of Alençon Barre's words: "It is always the same with France, always the same."

The fight grew fiercer, the soldiers pressed nearer. And now one clear voice was heard above the din, "Forward, forward, my children!" and some one sprang upon the outer barricade. It was the plotter of the revolt, the leader, the manager of the "Underground Railway," the beloved of the convicts— Gabrielle Rouget.

The sunlight glorified her flying hair and vivid dress-vivid with the blood of the fallen. Her arms, her shoulders, her feet were bare; all that she could spare from her body had gone to bind the wounds of her desperate comrades. In her hands she held a carbine. As she stood for an instant unmoving, the firing, as if by magic, ceased. She raised a hand. "We will have the guillotine in Paris," she said; "but not the hell of exile here."

Then Henri Durien, the convict, sprang up beside her; the man for whom she had made a life's sacrifice— for whom she had come to this! His head was bandaged and clotted with blood; his eyes shone with the fierceness of an animal at bay. Close after him crowded the handful of his frenzied compatriots in crime.

Then a rifle-crack was heard, and Henri Durieu fell at the feet of Gabrielle. The wave on the barricade quivered, and then Gabrielle's voice was heard crying, "Avenge him! Free yourselves, my children! Death is better than prison!"

The wave fell in red turmoil on the breakers. And still Gabrielle stood alone above the body of Henri Durien; but the carbine was fallen from her hands. She stood as one awaiting death, her eyes upon the unmoving form at her feet. The soldiers watched her, but no one fired. Her face was white; but in the eyes there was a wild triumph. She wanted death now; but these French soldiers had not the heart to kill her.

When she saw that, she leaned and thrust a hand into the bleeding bosom of Henri Durien, and holding it aloft cried: "For this blood men must die." Stooping again she seized the carbine and levelled it at the officer in command. Before she could pull the trigger some one fired, and she fell across the body of her lover. A moment afterwards Shorland stood beside her. She was shot through the lungs.

He stooped over her. "Gabrielle, Gabrielle!" he said. "Yes, yes, I know— I saw you. This is the twenty-fifth. He will be married to-morrow— Luke. I owed it to him to die; I owed it to Henri to die this way." She drew the scarred portrait of Luke Freeman from her bosom and gave it over.

"His eyes made me," she said. "They haunted me.

"Well, it is all done. I am sorry, ah! Never tell him of this. I go away— away— with Henri."

She closed her eyes and was still for a moment; so still that he thought her dead. But she looked up at him again and said with her last breath: "I am— the Woman in the Morgue— always— now!"

End