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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FLAMING JEWEL ***

THE FLAMING JEWEL

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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The Flaming Jewel



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TO

MY FRIEND
R. T. HAINES-HALSEY

WHO
UNRESERVEDLY BELIEVES
EVERYTHING I WRITE

To R. T.

I

Three Guests at dinner! That's the
life!—
Wedgewood, Revere, and Duncan
Phyfe!

II

You sit on Duncan—when you dare,—
And out of Wedgewood, using care,
With Paul Revere you eat your fare.

III

From Paul you borrow fork and knife
To wage a gastronomic strife
In porringers; and platters rare
Of blue Historic Willow-ware.

IV

Banquets with cymbal, drum and fife,
Or rose-wreathed feasts with riot rife
To your chaste suppers can't
compare.

V

Let those deny the truth who dare!—
Paul, Duncan, Wedgewood! That's
the life!
All else is bunk and empty air.

ENVOI

The Cordon-bleu has set the pace
With Goulash, Haggis, Bouillabaisse,
Curry, Chop-suey, Kous-Kous Stew—
I can not offer these to you,—
Being a plain, old-fashioned cook,—
So pray accept this scrambled book.

R. W. C.

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THE FLAMING JEWEL

EPISODE ONE

[9]

EVE

I

DURING the last two years Fate, Chance, and Destiny had been too busy to attend to Mike Clinch.

But now his turn was coming in the Eternal Sequence of things. The stars in their courses indicated the beginning of the undoing of Mike Clinch.

From Esthonia a refugee Countess wrote to James Darragh in New York:

"—After two years we have discovered that it was José Quintana's band of international thieves that robbed Ricca. Quintana has disappeared.

"A Levantine diamond broker in New York, named Emanuel Sard, may be in communication with him.

"Ricca and I are going to America as soon as possible.

"VALENTINE."

The day Darragh received the letter he started to look up Sard.

But that very morning Sard had received a curious letter from Rotterdam. This was the letter:

"Sardius—Tourmaline—Aragonite—Rhodonite * Porphyry—Obsidian—Nugget Gold—Diaspore * Novaculite * Yu * Nugget Silver—Amber—Matrix Turquoise—Elaeolite * Ivory—Sardonyx * Moonstone—Iceland Spar—Kalpa Zircon—Eye Agate * Celonite—Lapis—Iolite—Nephrite—Chalcedony—Hydrolite * Hegolite—Amethyst—Selenite * Fire Opal—Labradorite—Aquamarine—Malachite—Iris Stone—Natrolite—Garnet * Jade—Emerald—Wood Opal—Essonite—Lazuli * Epidote—Ruby—Onyx—Sapphire—Indicolite—Topaz—Euclase * Indian Diamond * Star Sapphire—African Diamond—Iceland Spar—Lapis Crucifer * Abalone—Turkish Turquoise * Old Mine Stone—Natrolite—Cats Eye—Electrum
*** 1/5 ā ā."

[10]

That afternoon young Darragh located Sard's office and presented himself as a customer. The weasel-faced clerk behind the wicket laid a pistol handy and informed Darragh that Sard was away on a business trip.

Darragh looked cautiously around the small office:

"Can anybody hear us?"

"Nobody. Why?"

"I have important news concerning José Quintana," whispered Darragh; "Where is Sard?"

"Why, he had a letter from Quintana this very morning," replied the clerk in a low, uneasy voice. "Mr. Sard left for Albany on the one o'clock train. Is there any trouble?"

"Plenty," replied Darragh coolly; "do you know Quintana?"

"No. But Mr. Sard expects him here any day now."

Darragh leaned closer against the grille: "Listen very carefully; if a man comes here who calls himself José Quintana, turn him over to the police until Mr. Sard returns. No matter what he tells you, turn him over to the police. Do you understand?"

"Who are you?" demanded the worried clerk. "Are you one of Quintana's people?"

"Young man," said Darragh, "I'm close enough to Quintana to give *you* orders. And give Sard orders.... And Quintana, too!"

A great light dawned on the scared clerk:

"*You* are José Quintana!" he said hoarsely.

Darragh bored him through with his dark stare:

"Mind your business," he said.

That night in Albany Darragh picked up Sard's trail. It led to a dealer in automobiles. Sard had bought a Comet Six, paying cash, and had started north.

Through Schenectady, Fonda, and Mayfield, the following day, Darragh traced a brand new Comet Six containing one short, dark Levantine with a parrot nose. In Northville Darragh hired a Ford.

At Lake Pleasant Sard's car went wrong. Darragh missed him by ten minutes; but he learned that Sard had inquired the way to Ghost Lake Inn.

That was sufficient. Darragh bought an axe, drove as far as Harrod's Corners, dismissed the Ford, and walked into a forest entirely familiar to him.

He emerged in half an hour on a wood road two miles farther on. Here he felled a tree across the road and sat down in the bushes to await events.

Toward sunset, hearing a car coming, he tied his handkerchief over his face below the eyes, and took an automatic from his pocket.

Sard's car stopped and Sard got out to inspect the obstruction. Darragh sauntered out of the bushes, poked his pistol against Mr. Sard's fat abdomen, and leisurely and thoroughly robbed him.

In an agreeable spot near a brook Darragh lighted his pipe and sat him down to examine the booty in detail. Two pistols, a stiletto, and a blackjack composed the arsenal of Mr. Sard. A large wallet disclosed more than four thousand dollars in Treasury notes—something to reimburse Ricca when she arrived, he thought.

Among Sard's papers he discovered a cipher letter from Rotterdam—probably from Quintana. Cipher was rather in Darragh's line. All ciphers are solved by similar methods, unless the key is contained in a code book known only to sender and receiver.

But Quintana's cipher proved to be only an easy acrostic—the very simplest of secret messages. Within an hour Darragh had it pencilled out:

Cipher

"Take notice:

"Star Pond, N. Y.... Name is Mike Clinch.... Has Flaming Jewel.... Erosite.... I sail at once.

"QUINTANA."

Having served in Russia as an officer in the Military Intelligence Department attached to the American Expeditionary Forces, Darragh had little trouble with Quintana's letter. Even the signature was not difficult, the fraction $\frac{1}{5}$ was easily translated *Quint* ; and the familiar prescription symbol $\bar{a} \bar{a}$ spelled *ana* ; which gave Quintana's name in full.

He had heard of Erosite as the rarest and most magnificent of all gems. Only three were known. The young Duchess Theodorica of Esthonia had possessed one.

Darragh was immensely amused to find that the chase after Emanuel Sard should have led him to the very borders of the great Harrod estate in the Adirondacks.

He gathered up his loot and walked on through the splendid forest which once had belonged to Henry Harrod of Boston, and which now was the property of Harrod's nephew, James Darragh.

When he came to the first trespass notice he stood a moment to read it. Then, slowly, he turned and looked toward Clinch's. An autumn sunset flared like a conflagration through the pines. There was a glimmer of water, too, where Star Pond lay.

Fate, Chance, and Destiny were becoming very busy with Mike Clinch. They had started Quintana, Sard, and Darragh on his trail. Now they stirred up the sovereign State of New York.

That lank wolf, Justice, was afoot and sniffing uncomfortably close to the heels of Mike Clinch.

II

Two State Troopers drew bridles in the yellowing October forest. Their smart drab uniforms touched with purple blended harmoniously with the autumn woods. They were as inconspicuous as two deer in the dappled shadow. There was a sunny clearing just ahead. The wood road they had been travelling entered it. Beyond lay Star Pond.

Trooper Lannis said to Trooper Stormont: "That's Mike Clinch's clearing. Our man may be there. Now we'll see if anybody tips him off this time."

Forest and clearing were very still in the sunshine. Nothing stirred save gold leaves drifting down, and a hawk high in the deep blue sky turning in narrow circles.

Lannis was instructing Stormont, who had been transferred from the Long Island Troop, and who was unacquainted with local matters. [14]

Lannis said: "Clinch's dump stands on the other edge of the clearing. Clinch owns five hundred acres in here. He's a rat."

"Bad?"

"Well, he's mean. I don't know how bad he is. But he runs a rotten dump. The forest has its slums as well as the city. This is the Hell's Kitchen of the North Woods."

Stormont nodded.

"All the scum of the wilderness gathers here," went on Lannis. "Here's where half the trouble in the North Woods hatches. We'll eat dinner at Clinch's. His stepdaughter is a peach."

The sturdy, sun-browned trooper glanced at his wrist watch, stretched his legs in his stirrups.

"Jack," he said, "I want you to get Clinch right, and I'm going to tell you about his outfit while we watch this road. It's like a movie. Clinch plays the lead. I'll dope out the scenario for you—"

He turned sideways in his saddle, freeing both spurred heels and lolled so, constructing a cigarette while he talked:

"Way back around 1900 Mike Clinch was a guide—a decent young fellow they say. He guided fishing parties in summer, hunters in fall and winter. He made money and built the house. The people he guided were wealthy. He made a lot of money and bought land. I understand he was square and that everybody liked him.

"About that time there came to Clinch's 'hotel' a Mr. and Mrs. Strayer. They were 'lungers.' Strayer seemed to be a gentleman; his wife was good looking and rather common. Both were very young. He had the consump bad—the galloping variety. He didn't last long. A month after he died his young wife had a baby. Clinch married her. She also died the same year. The baby's name was Eve. Clinch became quite crazy about her and started to make a lady of her. That was his mania." [15]

Lannis leaned from his saddle and carefully dropped his cigarette end into a puddle of rain water. Then he swung one leg over and sat side saddle.

"Clinch had plenty of money in those days," he went on. "He could afford to educate the child. The kid had a governess. Then he sent her to a fancy boarding school. She had everything a young girl could want.

"She developed into a pretty young thing at fifteen.... She's eighteen now—and I don't know what to call her. She pulled a gun on me in July."

"What!"

"Sure. There was a row at Clinch's dump. A rum-runner called Jake Kloon got shot up. I came up to get Clinch. He was sick-drunk in his bunk. When I broke in the door Eve Strayer pulled a gun on me."

"What happened?" inquired Stormont.

"Nothing. I took Clinch.... But he got off as usual."

"Acquitted?"

Lannis nodded, rolling another cigarette:

"Now, I'll tell you how Clinch happened to go wrong," he said. "You see he'd always made his living by guiding. Well, some years ago Henry Harrod, of Boston, came here and bought thousands and thousands of acres of forest all around Clinch's—" Lannis half rose on one stirrup and, with a comprehensive sweep of his muscular arm, ending in a flourish: "—He bought everything for miles and miles. And that started Clinch down hill. Harrod tried to force Clinch to sell. The millionaire tactics you know. He was determined to oust him. Clinch got mad and wouldn't sell at any price. Harrod kept on buying all around Clinch and posted trespass notices. That meant ruin to Clinch. He was walled in. No hunters care to be restricted. Clinch's little property was no good. Business stopped. His stepdaughter's education became expensive. He was in a bad way. Harrod offered him a big price. But Clinch turned ugly and wouldn't budge." [16]

And that's how Clinch began to go wrong."

"Poor devil," said Stormont.

"Devil, all right. Poor, too. But he needed money. He was crazy to make a lady of Eve Strayer. And there are ways of finding money, you know."

Stormont nodded.

"Well, Clinch found money in those ways. The Conservation Commissioner in Albany began to hear about game law violations. The Revenue people heard of rum-running. Clinch lost his guide's license. But nobody could get the goods on him.

"There was a rough backwoods bunch always drifting about Clinch's place in those days. There were fights. And not so many miles from Clinch's there was highway robbery and a murder or two.

"Then the war came. The draft caught Clinch. Malone exempted him, he being the sole support of his stepchild.

"But the girl volunteered. She got to France, somehow—scrubbed in a hospital, I believe—anyway, Clinch wanted to be on the same side of the world she was on, and he went with a Forestry Regiment and cut trees for railroad ties in southern France until the war ended and they sent him home.

[17]

"Eve Strayer came back too. She's there now. You'll see her at dinner time. She sticks to Clinch. He's a rat. He's up against the dry laws and the game laws. Government enforcement agents, game protectors, State Constabulary, all keep an eye on Clinch. Harrod's trespass signs fence him in. He's like a rat in a trap. Yet Clinch makes money at law breaking and nobody can catch him red-handed.

"He kills Harrod's deer. That's certain. I mean Harrod's nephew's deer. Harrod's dead. Darragh's the young nephew's name. He's never been here—he was in the army—in Russia—I don't know what became of him—but he keeps up the Harrod preserve—game-wardens, patrols, watchers, trespass signs and all."

Lannis finished his second cigarette, got back into his stirrups and, gathering bridle, began leisurely to divide curb and snaffle.

"That's the layout, Jack," he said. "Yonder lies the Red Light district of the North Woods. Mike Clinch is the brains of all the dirty work that goes on. A floating population of crooks and bums—game violators, boot-leggers, market hunters, pelt 'collectors,' rum-runners, hootch makers, do his dirty work—and I guess there are some who'll stick you up by starlight for a quarter and others who'll knock your block off for a dollar.... And there's the girl, Eve Strayer. I don't get her at all, except that she's loyal to Clinch.... And now you know what you ought to know about this movie called 'Hell in the Woods.' And it's up to us to keep a calm, impartial eye on the picture and try to follow the plot they're acting out—if there is any."

[18]

Stormont said: "Thanks, Bill; I'm posted.... And I'm getting hungry, too."

"I believe," said Lannis, "that you want to see that girl."

"I do," returned the other, laughing.

"Well, you'll see her. She's good to look at. But I don't get her at all."

"Why?"

"Because she *looks* right and yet she lives at Clinch's with him and his bunch of bums. Would you think a straight girl could stand it?"

"No man can tell what a straight girl can stand."

"Straight or crooked she stands for Mike Clinch," said Lannis, "and he's a ratty customer."

"Maybe the girl is fond of him. It's natural."

"I guess it's that. But I don't see how any young girl can stomach the life at Clinch's."

"It's a wonder what a decent woman will stand," observed Stormont. "Ninety-nine per cent. of all wives ought to receive the D. S. O."

"Do you think we're so rotten?" inquired Lannis, smiling.

"Not so rotten. No. But any man knows what men are. And it's a wonder women stick to us when they learn."

They laughed. Lannis glanced at his watch again.

"Well," he said, "I don't believe anybody has tipped off our man. It's noon. Come on to dinner, Jack."

They cantered forward into the sunlit clearing. Star Pond lay ahead. On its edge stood Clinch's.

Clinch, in his shirt sleeves, came out on the veranda. He had little light grey eyes, close-clipped grey hair, and was clean shaven.

"How are you, Clinch," inquired Lannis affably.

"All right," replied Clinch; "you're the same, I hope."

"Trooper Stormont, Mr. Clinch," said Lannis in his genial way.

"Pleased to know you," said Clinch, level-eyed, unstimulating.

The troopers dismounted. Both shook hands with Clinch. Then Lannis led the way to the barn.

"We'll eat well," he remarked to his comrade. "Clinch cooks."

From the care of their horses they went to a pump to wash. One or two rough looking men slouched out of the house and glanced at them.

"Hallo, Jake," said Lannis cheerily.

Jake Kloon grunted acknowledgment.

Lannis said in Stormont's ear: "Here she comes with towels. She's pretty, isn't she?"

A young girl in pink gingham advanced toward them across the patch of grass.

Lannis was very polite and presented Stormont. The girl handed them two rough towels, glanced at Stormont again after the introduction, smiled slightly.

"Dinner is ready," she said.

They dried their faces and followed her back to the house.

It was an unpainted building, partly of log. In the dining room half a dozen men waited silently for food. Lannis saluted all, named his comrade, and seated himself.

A delicious odour of johnny-cake pervaded the room. Presently Eve Strayer appeared with the dinner. [20]

There was dew on her pale forehead—the heat of the kitchen, no doubt. The girl's thick, lustrous hair was brownish gold, and so twisted up that it revealed her ears and a very white neck.

When she brought Stormont his dinner he caught her eyes a moment—experienced a slight shock of pleasure at their intense blue—the gentian-blue of the summer zenith at midday.

Lannis remained affable, even became jocose at moments:

"No hootch for dinner, Mike? How's that, now?"

"The Boot-leg Express is a day late," replied Clinch, with cold humour.

Around the table ran an odd sound—a company of catamounts feeding might have made such a noise—if catamounts ever laugh.

"How's the fur market, Jake?" inquired Lannis, pouring gravy over his mashed potato.

Kloon quoted prices with an oath.

A mean-visaged young man named Leverett complained of the price of traps.

"What do you care?" inquired Lannis genially. "The other man pays. What are you kicking about, anyway? It wasn't so long ago that muskrats were ten cents."

The trooper's good-humoured intimation that Earl Leverett took fur in other men's traps was not lost on the company. Leverett's fox visage reddened; Jake Kloon, who had only one eye, glared at the State Trooper but said nothing.

Clinch's pale gaze met the trooper's smiling one: "The jays and squirrels talk too," he said slowly. "It don't mean anything. Only the show-down counts." [21]

"You're quite right, Clinch. The show-down is what we pay to see. But talk is the tune the orchestra plays before the curtain rises."

Stormont had finished dinner. He heard a low, charming voice from behind his chair:

"Apple pie, lemon pie, maple cake, berry roll."

He looked up into two gentian-blue eyes.

"Lemon pie, please," he said, blushing.

When dinner was over and the bare little dining room empty except for Clinch and the two State Troopers, the former folded his heavy, powerful hands on the table's edge and turned his

square face and pale-eyed gaze on Lannis.

"Spit it out," he said in a passionless voice.

Lannis crossed one knee over the other, lighted a cigarette:

"Is there a young fellow working for you named Hal Smith?"

"No," said Clinch.

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Clinch," continued Lannis, "have you heard about a stick-up on the wood-road out of Ghost Lake?"

"No."

"Well, a wealthy tourist from New York—a Mr. Sard, stopping at Ghost Lake Inn—was held up and robbed last Saturday toward sundown."

"Never heard of him," said Clinch, calmly.

"The robber took four thousand dollars in bills and some private papers from him."

[22]

"It's no skin off my shins," remarked Clinch.

"He's laid a complaint."

"Yes?"

"Have any strangers been here since Saturday evening?"

"No."

There was a pause.

"We heard you had a new man named Hal Smith working around your place."

"No."

"He came here Saturday night."

"Who says so?"

"A guide from Ghost Lake."

"He's a liar."

"You know," said Lannis, "it won't do you any good if hold-up men can hide here and make a getaway."

"G'wan and search," said Clinch, calmly.

They searched the "hotel" from garret to cellar. They searched the barn, boat-shed, out-houses.

While this was going on, Clinch went into the kitchen.

"Eve," he said coolly, "the State Troopers are after that fellow, Hal Smith, who came here Saturday night. Where is he?"

"He went into Harrod's to get us a deer," she replied in a low voice. "What has he done?"

"Stuck up a man on the Ghost Lake road. He ought to have told me. Do you think you could meet up with him and tip him off?"

"He's hunting on Owl Marsh. I'll try."

"All right. Change your clothes and slip out the back door. And look out for Harrod's patrols, too."

[23]

"All right, dad," she said. "If I have to be out to-night, don't worry. I'll get word to Smith somehow."

Half an hour later Lannis and Stormont returned from a prowling around the clearing. Lannis paid the reckoning; his comrade led out the horses. He said again to Lannis:

"I'm sure it was the girl. She wore men's clothes and she went into the woods on a run."

As they started to ride away, Lannis said to Clinch, who stood on the veranda:

"It's still blue-jay and squirrel talk between us, Mike, but the show-down is sure to come. Better go straight while the going's good."

"I go straight enough to suit me," said Clinch.

"But it's the Government that is to be suited, Mike. And if it gets you right you'll be in dutch."

"Don't let that worry you," said Clinch.

About three o'clock the two State Troopers, riding at a walk, came to the forks of the Ghost Lake road.

"Now," said Lannis to Stormont, "if you really believe you saw the girl beat it out of the back door and take to the woods, she's probably somewhere in there——" he pointed into the western forest. "But," he added, "what's your idea in following her?"

"She wore men's clothes; she was in a hurry and trying to keep out of sight. I wondered whether Clinch might have sent her to warn this hold-up fellow."

"That's rather a long shot, isn't it?"

"Very long. I could go in and look about a bit, if you'll lead my horse."

[24]

"All right. Take your bearings. This road runs west to Ghost Lake. We sleep at the Inn there—if you mean to cross the woods on foot."

Stormont nodded, consulted his map and compass, pocketed both, unbuckled his spurs.

When he was ready he gave his bridle to Lannis.

"I'd just like to see what she's up to," he remarked.

"All right. If you miss me come to the Inn," said Lannis, starting on with the led horse.

The forest was open amid a big stand of white pine and hemlock, and Stormont travelled easily and swiftly. He had struck a line by compass that must cross the direction taken by Eve Strayer when she left Clinch's. But it was a wild chance that he would ever run across her.

And probably he never would have if the man that she was looking for had not fired a shot on the edge of that vast maze of stream, morass and dead timber called Owl Marsh.

Far away in the open forest Stormont heard the shot and turned in that direction.

But Eve already was very near when the young man who called himself Hal Smith fired at one of Harrod's deer—a three-prong buck on the edge of the dead water.

Smith had drawn and dressed the buck by the time the girl found him.

He was cleaning up when she arrived, squatting by the water's edge when he heard her voice across the swale:

"Smith! The State Troopers are looking for you!"

[25]

He stood up, dried his hands on his breeches. The girl picked her way across the bog, jumping from one tussock to the next.

When she told him what had happened he began to laugh.

"Did you really stick up this man?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm afraid I did, Eve," he replied, still laughing.

The girl's entire expression altered.

"So that's the sort you are," she said. "I thought you different. But you're all a rotten lot——"

"Hold on," he interrupted, "what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that the only men who ever come to Star Pond are crooks," she retorted bitterly. "I didn't believe you were. You look decent. But you're as crooked as the rest of them—and it seems as if I—I couldn't stand it—any longer——"

"If you think me so rotten, why did you run all the way from Clinch's to warn me?" he asked curiously.

"I didn't do it for *you*; I did it for my father. They'll jail him if they catch him hiding you. They've got it in for him. If they put him in prison he'll die. He couldn't stand it. I *know*. And that's why I came to find you and tell you to clear out——"

The distant crack of a dry stick checked her. The next instant she picked up his rifle, seized his arm, and fairly dragged him into a spruce thicket.

"Do you want to get my father into trouble!" she said fiercely.

The rocky flank of Star Peak bordered the marsh here.

"Come on," she whispered, jerking him along through the thicket and up the rocks to a cleft—a hole in the sheer rock overhung by shaggy hemlock.

[26]

"Get in there," she said breathlessly.

"Whoever comes," he protested, "will see the buck yonder, and will certainly look in here——"

"Not if I go down there and take your medicine. Creep into that cave and lie down."

"What do you intend to do?" he demanded, interested and amused.

"If it's one of Harrod's game-keepers," said the girl drily, "it only means a summons and a fine for me. And if it's a State Trooper, who is prowling in the woods yonder hunting crooks, he'll find nobody here but a trespasser. Keep quiet. I'll stand him off."

IV

When State Trooper Stormont came out on the edge of Owl Marsh, the girl was kneeling by the water, washing deer blood from her slender, sun-tanned fingers.

"What are you doing here?" she enquired, looking up over her shoulder with a slight smile.

"Just having a look around," he said pleasantly. "That's a nice fat buck you have there."

"Yes, he's nice."

"You shot him?" asked Stormont.

"Who else do you suppose shot him?" she enquired, smilingly. She rinsed her fingers again and stood up, swinging her arms to dry her hands,—a lithe, grey-shirted figure in her boyish garments, straight, supple, and strong.

"I saw you hurrying into the woods," said Stormont.

"Yes, I was in a hurry. We need meat."

"I didn't notice that you carried a rifle when I saw you leave the house—by the back door."

[27]

"No; it was in the woods," she said indifferently.

"You have a hiding place for your rifle?"

"For other things, also," she said, letting her eyes of gentian-blue rest on the young man.

"You seem to be very secretive."

"Is a girl more so than a man?" she asked smilingly.

Stormont smiled too, then became grave.

"Who else was here with you?" he asked quietly.

She seemed surprised. "Did you see anybody else?"

He hesitated, flushed, pointed down at the wet sphagnum. Smith's foot-prints were there in damning contrast to her own. Worse than that, Smith's pipe lay on an embedded log, and a rubber tobacco pouch beside it.

She said with a slight catch in her breath: "It seems that somebody has been here.... Some hunter, perhaps,—or a game warden...."

"Or Hal Smith," said Stormont.

A painful colour swept the girl's face and throat. The man, sorry for her, looked away.

After a silence: "I know something about you," he said gently. "And now that I've seen you—heard you speak—met your eyes—I know enough about you to form an opinion.... So I don't ask you to turn informer. But the law won't stand for what Clinch is doing—whatever provocation he has had. And he must not aid or abet any criminal, or harbour any malefactor."

The girl's features were expressionless. The passive, sullen beauty of her troubled the trooper.

"Trouble for Clinch means sorrow for you," he said. "I don't want you to be unhappy. I bear Clinch no ill will. For this reason I ask him, and I ask you too, to stand clear of this affair."

[28]

"Hal Smith is wanted. I'm here to take him."

As she said nothing, he looked down at the foot-print in the sphagnum. Then his eyes moved to the next imprint; to the next. Then he moved slowly along the water's edge, tracking the course of the man he was following.

The girl watched him in silence until the plain trail led him to the spruce thicket.

"Don't go in there!" she said sharply, with an odd tremor in her voice.

He turned and looked at her, then stepped calmly into the thicket. And the next instant she was among the spruces, too, confronting him with her rifle.

"Get out of these woods!" she said.

He looked into the girl's deathly white face.

"Eve," he said, "it will go hard with you if you kill me. I don't want you to live out your life in prison."

"I can't help it. If you send my father to prison he'll die. I'd rather die myself. Let us alone, I tell you! The man you're after is nothing to us. We didn't know he had stuck up anybody!"

"If he's nothing to you, why do you point that rifle at me?"

"I tell you he is nothing to us. But my father wouldn't betray a dog. And I won't. That's all. Now get out of these woods and come back to-morrow. Nobody'll interfere with you then."

Stormont smiled: "Eve," he said, "do you really think me as yellow as that?"

Her blue eyes flashed a terrible warning, but, in the same instant, he had caught her rifle, twisting it out of her grasp as it exploded. [29]

The detonation dazed her; then, as he flung the rifle into the water, she caught him by neck and belt and flung him bodily into the spruces.

But she fell with him; he held her twisting and struggling with all her superb and supple strength; staggered to his feet, still mastering her; and, as she struggled, sobbing, locked hot and panting in his arms, he snapped a pair of handcuffs on her wrists and flung her aside.

She fell on both knees, got up, shoulder deep in spruce, blood running from her lip over her chin.

The trooper took her by the arm. She was trembling all over. He took a thin steel chain and padlock from his pocket, passed the links around her steel-bound wrists, and fastened her to a young birch tree.

Then, drawing his pistol from its holster, he went swiftly forward through the spruces.

When he saw the cleft in the rocky flank of Star Peak, he walked straight to the black hole which confronted him.

"Come out of there," he said distinctly.

After a few seconds Smith came out.

"Good God!" said Stormont in a low voice. "What are you doing here, Darragh?"

Darragh came close and rested one hand on Stormont's shoulder:

"Don't crab my game, Stormont. I never dreamed you were in the Constabulary or I'd have let you know."

"Are *you* Hal Smith?"

"I sure am. Where's that girl?"

"Handcuffed out yonder." [30]

"Then for God's sake go back and act as if you hadn't found me. Tell Mayor Chandler that I'm after bigger game than he is."

"Clinch?"

"Stormont, I'm here to *protect* Mike Clinch. Tell the Mayor not to touch him. The men I'm after are going to try to rob him. I don't want them to because—well, I'm going to rob him myself."

Stormont stared.

"You must stand by me," said Darragh. "So must the Mayor. He knows me through and through. Tell him to forget that hold-up. I stopped that man Sard. I frisked him. Tell the Mayor. I'll keep in touch with him."

"Of course," said Stormont, "that settles it."

"Thanks, old chap. Now go back to that girl and let her believe that you never found me."

A slight smile touched their eyes. Both instinctively saluted. Then they shook hands; Darragh, alias Hal Smith, went back into the hemlock-shaded hole in the rocks; Trooper Stormont walked slowly down through the spruces.

When Eve saw him returning empty handed, something flashed in her pallid face like sunlight across snow.

Stormont passed her, went to the water's edge, soaked a spicy handful of sphagnum moss in the icy water, came back and wiped the blood from her face.

The girl seemed astounded; her face surged in vivid colour as he unlocked the handcuffs and pocketed them and the little steel chain.

Her lip was bleeding again. He washed it with wet moss, took a clean handkerchief from the breast of his tunic and laid it against her mouth. [31]

"Hold it there," he said.

Mechanically she raised her hand to support the compress. Stormont went back to the shore, recovered her rifle from the shallow water, and returned with it.

As she made no motion to take it, he stood it against the tree to which he had tied her.

Then he came close to her where she stood holding his handkerchief against her mouth and looking at him out of steady eyes as deeply blue as gentian blossoms.

"Eve," he said, "you win. But you won't forgive me.... I wish we could be friends, some day.... We never can, now.... Good-bye."

Neither spoke again. Then, of a sudden, the girl's eyes filled; and Trooper Stormont caught her free hand and kissed it;—kissed it again and again,—dropped it and went striding away through the underbrush which was now all rosy with the rays of sunset.

After he had disappeared, the girl, Eve, went to the cleft in the rocks above.

"Come out," she said contemptuously. "It's a good thing you hid, because there was a real man after you; and God help you if he ever finds you!"

Hal Smith came out.

"Pack in your meat," said the girl curtly, and flung his rifle across her shoulder.

Through the ruddy afterglow she led the way homeward, a man's handkerchief pressed to her wounded mouth, her eyes preoccupied with the strangest thoughts that ever had stirred her virgin mind. [32]

Behind her walked Darragh with his load of venison and his alias,—and his tongue in his cheek.

Thus began the preliminaries toward the ultimate undoing of Mike Clinch. Fate, Chance, and Destiny had undertaken the job in earnest.

EPISODE TWO

 [33]

THE RULING PASSION

I

NOBODY understood how José Quintana had slipped through the Secret Service net spread for him at every port.

The United States authorities did not know why Quintana had come to America. They realised merely that he arrived for no good purpose; and they had meant to arrest and hold him for extradition if requested; for deportation as an undesirable alien anyway.

Only two men in America knew that Quintana had come to the United States for the purpose of recovering the famous "Flaming Jewel," stolen by him from the Grand Duchess Theodorica of Esthonia; and stolen from Quintana, in turn, by a private soldier in an American Forestry Regiment, on leave in Paris. This soldier's name, probably, was Michael Clinch.

One of the men who knew why Quintana might come to America was James Darragh, recently of the Military Intelligence, but now passing as a hold-up man under the name of Hal Smith, and actually in the employment of Clinch at his disreputable "hotel" at Star Pond in the North Woods.

The other man who knew why Quintana had come to America was Emanuel Sard, a Levantine diamond broker of New York, Quintana's agent in America. [34]

Now, as the October days passed without any report of Quintana's detention, Darragh, known as Hal Smith at Clinch's dump, began to suspect that Quintana had already slid into America through the meshes of the police.

If so, this desperate international criminal could be expected at Clinch's under some guise or other, piloted thither by Emanuel Sard.

So Hal Smith, whose duty was to wash dishes, do chores, and also to supply Clinch's with "mountain beef"—or deer taken illegally—made it convenient to prowl every day in the vicinity of the Ghost Lake road.

He was perfectly familiar with Emanuel Sard's squat features and parrot nose, having robbed Mr. Sard of Quintana's cipher and of \$4,000 at pistol point. And one morning, while roving around the guide's quarters at Ghost Lake Inn, Smith beheld Sard himself on the hotel veranda, in company with five strangers of foreign aspect.

During the midday dinner Smith, on pretense of enquiring for a guide's license, got a look at the Inn ledger. Sard's signature was on it, followed by the names of Henri Picquet, Nicolas Salzar, Victor Georgiades, Harry Beck, and José Sanchez. And Smith went back through the wilderness to Star Pond, convinced that one of these gentlemen was Quintana, and the remainder, Quintana's gang; and that they were here to do murder if necessary in their remorseless quest of "The Flaming Jewel." Two million dollars once had been offered for the Flaming Jewel; and had been refused.

Clinch probably possessed it. Smith was now convinced of that. But he was there to rob Clinch of it himself. For he had promised the little Grand Duchess to help recover her Erosite jewel; and now that he had finally traced its probable possession to Clinch, he was wondering how this recovery was to be accomplished. [35]

To arrest Clinch meant ruin to Eve Strayer. Besides he knew now that Clinch would die in prison before revealing the hiding place of the Flaming Jewel.

Also, how could it be proven that Clinch had the Erosite gem? The cipher from Quintana was not sufficient evidence.

No; the only way was to watch Clinch, prevent any robbery by Quintana's gang, somehow discover where the Flaming Jewel had been concealed, take it, and restore it to the beggared young girl whose only financial resource now lay in the possible recovery of this almost priceless gem.

Toward evening Hal Smith shot two deer near Owl Marsh. To poach on his own property appealed to his sense of humour. And Clinch, never dreaming that Hal Smith was the James Darragh who had inherited Harrod's vast preserve, damned all millionaires for every buck brought in, and became friendlier to Smith.

II

Clinch's dump was the disposal plant in which collected the human sewage of the wilderness.

It being Saturday, the scum of the North Woods was gathering at the Star Pond resort. A venison and chicken supper was promised—and a dance if any women appeared.

Jake Kloon had run in some Canadian hooch; Darragh, alias Hal Smith, contributed two fat deer and Clinch cooked them. By ten o'clock that morning many of the men were growing noisy; some were already drunk by noon. Shortly after midday dinner the first fight started—extinguished only after Clinch had beaten several of the backwoods aristocracy insensible. [36]

Towering amid the wreck of battle, his light grey eyes a-glitter, Clinch dominated, swinging his iron fists.

When the combat ended and the fallen lay starkly where they fell, Clinch said in his pleasant, level voice:

"Take them out and stick their heads in the pond. And don't go for to get me mad, boys, or I'm liable to act up rough."

They bore forth the sleepers for immersion in Star Pond. Clinch relighted his cigar and repeated the rulings which had caused the fracas:

"You gotta play square cards here or you don't play none in my house. No living thumb-nail can nick no cards in my place and get away with it. Three kings and two trays is better than three chickens and two eggs. If you don't like it, g'wan home."

He went out in his shirt sleeves to see how the knock-outs were reviving, and met Hal Smith returning from the pond, who reported progress toward consciousness. They walked back to the "hotel" together.

"Say, young fella," said Clinch in his soft, agreeable way, "you want to keep your eye peeled to-night."

"Why?" inquired Smith.

"Well, there'll be a lot o' folks here. There'll be strangers, too.... Don't forget the State Troopers are looking for you."

"Do the State Troopers ever play detective?" asked Smith, smiling. [37]

"Sure. They've been in here rigged out like peddlers and lumber-jacks and timber lookers."

"Did they ever get anything on you?"

"Not a thing."

"Can you always spot them, Mike?"

"No. But when a stranger shows up here who don't know nobody, he never sees nothing and he don't never learn nothing. He gets no hootch outa me. No, nor no craps and no cards. He gets his supper; that's what he gets ... and a dance, if there's ladies—and if any girl favours him. That's all the change any stranger gets out of Mike Clinch."

They had paused on the rough veranda in the hot October sunshine.

"Mike," suggested Smith carelessly, "wouldn't it pay you better to go straight?"

Clinch's small grey eyes, which had been roaming over the prospect of lake and forest, focussed on Smith's smiling features.

"What's that to you?" he asked.

"I'll be out of a job," remarked Smith, laughing, "if they ever land you."

Clinch's level gaze measured him; his mind was busy measuring him, too.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" he asked. "I don't know. You stick up a man on the Ghost Lake Road and hide out here when the State Troopers come after you. And now you ask me if it pays better to go straight. Why didn't *you* go straight if you think it pays?"

"I haven't got a daughter to worry about," explained Smith. "If they get me it won't hurt anybody else."

[38]

A dull red tinge came out under Clinch's tan:

"Who asked *you* to worry about Eve?"

"She's a fine girl: that's all."

Clinch's steely glare measured the young man:

"You trying to make up to her?" he enquired gently.

"No. She has no use for me."

Clinch reflected, his cold tiger-gaze still fastened on Smith.

"You're right," he said after a moment. "Eve is a good girl. Some day I'll make a lady of her."

"She *is* one, Clinch."

At that Clinch reddened heavily—the first finer emotion ever betrayed before Smith. He did not say anything for a few moments, but his grim mouth worked. Finally:

"I guess you was a gentleman once before you went crooked, Hal," he said. "You act up like you once was.... Say; there's only one thing on God's earth I care about. You've guessed it, too." He was off again upon his ruling passion.

"Eve," nodded Smith.

"Sure. She isn't my flesh and blood. But it seems like she's more, even. I want she should be a lady. It's *all* I want. That damned millionaire Harrod bust me. But he couldn't stop me giving Eve her schooling. And now all I'm livin' for is to be fixed so's to give her money to go to the city like a lady. I don't care how I make money; all I want is to make it. And I'm a-going to."

Smith nodded again.

Clinch, now obsessed by his monomania, went on with an oath:

[39]

"I can't make no money on the level after what Harrod done to me. And I gotta fix up Eve. What the hell do you mean by asking me would it pay me to travel straight I dunno."

"I was only thinking of Eve. A lady isn't supposed to have a crook for a father."

Clinch's grey eyes blazed for a moment, then their menacing glare dulled, died out into wintry fixity.

"I wan't born a crook," he said. "I ain't got no choice. And don't worry, young fella; they ain't a-going to get me."

"You can't go on beating the game forever, Clinch."

"I'm beating it——" he hesitated—"and it won't be so long, neither, before I turn over enough to let Eve live in the city like any lady, with her autymobile and her own butler and all her swell friends, in a big house like she is educated for——"

He broke off abruptly as a procession approached from the lake, escorting the battered gentry who now were able to wabble about a little.

One of them, a fox-faced trap thief named Earl Leverett, slunk hastily by as though expecting another kick from Clinch.

"G'wan inside, Earl, and act up right," said Clinch pleasantly. "You oughter have more sense than to start a fight in my place—you and Sid Hone and Harvey Chase. G'wan in and behave."

He and Smith followed the procession of damaged ones into the house.

The big unpainted room where a bar had once been was blue with cheap cigar smoke; the air reeked with the stench of beer and spirits. A score or more shambling forest louts in their dingy Saturday finery were gathered there playing cards, shooting craps, lolling around tables and tilting slopping glasses at one another.

Heavy pleasantries were exchanged with the victims of Clinch's ponderous fists as they re-entered the room from which they had been borne so recently, feet first.

"Now, boys," said Clinch kindly, "act up like swell gents and behave friendly. And if any ladies come in for the chicken supper, why, gol dang it, we'll have a dance!"

III

Toward sundown the first woodland nymph appeared—a half-shy, half-bold, willowy thing in the rosy light of the clearing.

Hal Smith, washing glasses and dishes on the back porch for Eve Strayer to dry, asked who the rustic beauty might be.

"Harvey Chase's sister," said Eve. "She shouldn't come here, but I can't keep her away and her brother doesn't care. She's only a child, too."

"Is there any harm in a chicken supper and a dance?"

Eve looked gravely at young Smith without replying.

Other girlish shapes loomed in the evening light. Some were met by gallants, some arrived at the veranda unescorted.

"Where do they all come from? Do they live in trees like dryads?" asked Smith.

"There are always squatters in the woods," she replied indifferently.

"Some of these girls come from Ghost Lake, I suppose."

"Yes; waitresses at the Inn."

"What music is there?"

"Jim Hastings plays a fiddle. I play the melodeon if they need me."

"What do you do when there's a fight?" he asked, with a side glance at her pure profile.

"What do you suppose I do? Fight, too?"

He laughed—mirthlessly—conscious always of his secret pity for this girl.

"Well," he said, "when your father makes enough to quit, he'll take you out of this. It's a vile hole for a young girl—"

"See here," she said, flushing; "you're rather particular for a young man who stuck up a tourist and robbed him of four thousand dollars."

"I'm not complaining on my own account," returned Smith, laughing; "Clinch's suits me."

"Well, don't concern yourself on my account, Hal Smith. And you'd better keep out of the dance, too, if there are any strangers there."

"You think a State Trooper may happen in?"

"It's likely. A lot of people come and go. We don't always know them." She opened a sliding wooden shutter and looked into the bar room. After a moment she beckoned him to her side.

"There are strangers there now," she said, "—that thin, dark man who looks like a Kanuk. And those two men shaking dice. I don't know who they are. I never before saw them."

But Smith had seen them at Ghost Lake Inn. One of them was Sard. Quintana's gang had arrived at Clinch's dump.

A moment later Clinch came through the pantry and kitchen and out onto the rear porch where Smith was washing glasses in a tub filled from an ever-flowing spring.

"I'm a-going to get supper," he said to Eve. "There'll be twenty-three plates." And to Smith: "Hal—you help Eve wait on the table. And if anybody acts up rough you slam him on the jaw—don't argue, don't wait—just slam him good, and I'll come on the hop."

"Who are the strangers, dad?" asked Eve.

"Don't nobody know 'em none, girlie. But they ain't State Troopers. They talk like they was

foreign. One of 'em's English—the big, bony one with yellow hair and mustache."

"Did they give any names?" asked Smith.

"You bet. The stout, dark man calls himself Hongri Picket. French, I guess. The fat beak is a fella named Sard. Sanchez is the guy with a face like a Canada priest—José Sanchez—or something on that style. And then the yellow skinned young man is Nicole Salzar; the Britisher, Harry Beck; and that good lookin' dark gent with a little black Charlie Chaplin, he's Victor Georgiades."

"What are those foreigners doing in the North Woods, Clinch?" enquired Smith.

"Oh, they all give the same spiel—hire out in a lumber camp. But *they* ain't no lumberjacks," added Clinch contemptuously. "I don't know what they be—hootch runners maybe—or booze bandits—or they done something crooked som'ers r'other. It's safe to serve 'em drinks." [43]

Clinch himself had been drinking. He always drank when preparing to cook.

He turned and went into the kitchen now, rolling up his shirt sleeves and relighting his clay pipe.

IV

By nine o'clock the noisy chicken supper had ended; the table had been cleared; Jim Hastings was tuning his fiddle in the big room; Eve had seated herself before the battered melodeon.

"Ladies and gents," said Clinch in his clear, pleasant voice, which carried through the hubbub, "we're a-going to have a dance—thanks and beholden to Jim Hastings and my daughter Eve. Eve, she don't drink and she don't dance, so no use askin' and no hard feelin' toward nobody.

"So act up pleasant to one and all and have a good time and no rough stuff in no form, shape or manner, but behave like gents all and swell dames, like you was to a swarry on Fifth Avenue. Let's go!"

He went back to the pantry, taking no notice of the cheering. The fiddler scraped a fox trot, and Eve's melodeon joined in. A vast scuffling of heavily shod feet filled the momentary silence, accented by the shrill giggle of young girls.

"They're off," remarked Clinch to Smith, who stood at the pantry shelf prepared to serve whiskey or beer upon previous receipt of payment.

In the event of a sudden raid, the arrangements at Clinch's were quite simple. Two large drain pipes emerged from the kitchen floor beside Smith, and ended in Star Pond. In case of alarm the tub of beer was poured down one pipe; the whiskey down the other. [44]

Only the trout in Star Pond would ever sample that hootch again.

Clinch, now slightly intoxicated, leaned heavily on the pantry shelf beside Smith, adjusting his pistol under his suspenders.

"Young fella," he said in his agreeable voice, "you're dead right. You sure said a face-full when you says to me, 'Eve's a lady, by God!' *You* oughta know. You was a gentleman yourself once. Even if you take to stickin' up tourists you know a lady when you see one. And you called the turn. She *is* a lady. All I'm livin' for is to get her down to the city and give her money to live like a lady. I'll do it yet.... Soon!... I'd do it to-morrow—to-night—if I dared.... If I thought it sure fire.... If I was dead certain I could get away with it.... I've *got* the money. *Now!* ... Only it ain't in *money*.... Smith?"

"Yes, Mike."

"You know me?"

"Sure."

"You size me up?"

"I do."

"All right. If you ever tell anyone I got money that ain't money I'll shoot you through the head."

"Don't worry, Clinch."

"I ain't. You're a crook; you won't talk. You're a gentleman, too. *They* don't sell out a pal. Say, Hal, there's only one fella I don't want to meet."

"Who's that, Mike?"

"Lemme tell you," continued Clinch, resting more heavily on the shelf while Smith, looking out through the pantry shutter at the dancing, listened intently. [45]

"When I was in France in a Forestry Rig'ment," went on Clinch, lowering his always pleasant voice, "I was to Paris on leave a few days before they sent us home.

"I was in the washroom of a caffy—a-cleanin' up for supper, when dod-bang! into the place comes a-tumblin' a man with two cops pushing and kickin' him.

"They didn't see me in there for they locked the door on the man. He was a swell gent, too, in full dress and silk hat and all like that, and a opry cloak and white kid gloves, and mustache and French beard.

"When they locked him up he stood stock still and lit a cigarette, as cool as ice. Then he begun walkin' around looking for a way to get out; but there wasn't no way.

"Then he seen me and over he comes and talks English right away: 'Want to make a thousand francs, soldier?' sez he in a quick whisper. 'You're on,' sez I; 'show your dough.' 'Them Flics has went to get the Commissaire for to frisk me,' sez he. 'If they find this parcel on me I do twenty years in Noumea. Five years kills anybody out there.' 'What do you want I should do?' sez I, havin' no love for no cops, French or other. 'Take this packet and stick it in your overcoat,' sez he. 'Go to 13 roo Quinze Octobre and give it to the concierge for José Quintana.' And he shoves the packet on me and a thousand-franc note.

"Then he grabs me sudden and pulls open my collar. God, he was strong.

"What's the matter with you?' says I. 'Lemme go or I'll mash your mug flat.' 'Lemme see your identification disc,' he barks. [46]

"Bein' in Paris for a bat, I had exchanged with my bunkie, Bill Hanson. 'Let him look,' thinks I; and he reads Bill's check.

"If you fool me,' says he, 'I'll folly ye and I'll do you in if it takes the rest of my life. You understand?' 'Sure,' says I, me tongue in me cheek. 'Bong! Allez vous en!' says he.

"How the hell,' sez I, 'do I get out of here?' 'You're a Yankee soldier. The Flics don't know you were in here. You go and kick on that door and make a holler.'

"So I done it good; and a cop opens and swears at me, but when he sees a Yankee soldier was locked in the wash-room by mistake, he lets me out, you bet."

Clinch smiled a thin smile, poured out three fingers of hooch.

"What else?" asked Smith quietly.

"Nothing much. I didn't go to no roo Quinze Octobre. But I don't never want to see that fella Quintana. I've been waiting till it's safe to sell—what was in that packet."

"Sell what?"

"What was in that packet," replied Clinch thickly.

"What was in it?"

"Sparklers—since you're so noseey."

"Diamonds?"

"And then some. I dunno what they're called. All I know is I'll croak Quintana if he even turns up askin' for 'em. He frisked somebody. I frisked him. I'll kill anybody who tries to frisk me."

"Where do you keep them?" enquired Smith naïvely.

Clinch looked at him, very drunk: "None o' your dinged business," he said very softly. [47]

The dancing had become boisterous but not unseemly, although all the men had been drinking too freely.

Smith closed the pantry bar at midnight, by direction of Eve. Now he came out into the ballroom and mixed affably with the company, even dancing with Harvey Chase's sister once—a slender hoyden, all flushed and dishevelled, with a tireless mania for dancing which seemed to intoxicate her.

She danced, danced, danced, accepting any partner offered. But Smith's skill enraptured her and she refused to let him go when her beau, a late arrival, one Charlie Berry, slouched up to claim her.

Smith, always trying to keep Clinch and Quintana's men in view, took no part in the discussion; but Berry thought he was detaining Lily Chase and pushed him aside.

"Hold on, young man!" exclaimed Smith sharply. "Keep your hands to yourself. If your girl don't want to dance with you she doesn't have to."

Some of Quintana's gang came up to listen. Berry glared at Smith.

"Say," he said, "I seen you before somewhere. Wasn't you in Russia?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Yes, you was. You was an officer! What you doing at Clinch's?"

"What's that?" growled Clinch, shoving his way forward and shouldering the crowd aside.

"Who's this man, Mike?" demanded Berry.

"Well, who do you think he is?" asked Clinch thickly.

"I think he's gettin' the goods on you, that's what I think," yelled Berry.

[48]

"G'wan home, Charlie," returned Clinch. "G'wan, all o' you. The dance is over. Go peaceable, every one. Stop that fiddle!"

The music ceased. The dance was ended; they all understood that; but there was grumbling and demands for drinks.

Clinch, drunk but impassive, herded them through the door out into the starlight. There was scuffling, horse-play, but no fighting.

The big Englishman, Harry Beck, asked for accommodations for his party over night.

"Naw," said Clinch, "g'wan back to the Inn. I can't bother with you folks to-night." And as the others, Salzar, Georgiades, Picquet and Sanchez gathered about to insist, Clinch pushed them all out of doors in a mass.

"Get the hell out o' here!" he growled; and slammed the door.

He stood for a moment with head lowered, drunk, but apparently capable of reflection. Eve came from the melodeon and laid one slim hand on his arm.

"Go to bed, girlie," he said, not looking at her.

"You also, dad."

"No.... I got business with Hal Smith."

Passing Smith, the girl whispered: "You look out for him and undress him."

Smith nodded, gravely preoccupied with coming events, and nerving himself to meet them.

He had no gun. Clinch's big automatic bulged under his armpit.

When the girl had ascended the creaking stairs and her door, above, closed, Clinch walked unsteadily to the door, opened it, fished out his pistol.

[49]

"Come on out," he said without turning.

"Where?" enquired Smith.

Clinch turned, lifted his square head; and the deadly glare in his eyes left Smith silent.

"You comin'?"

"Sure," said Smith quietly.

But Clinch gave him no chance to close in: it was death even to swerve. Smith walked slowly out into the starlight, ahead of Clinch—slowly forward in the luminous darkness.

"Keep going," came Clinch's quiet voice behind him. And, after they had entered the woods,—"Bear to the right."

Smith knew now. The low woods were full of sink-holes. They were headed for the nearest one.

On the edge of the thing they halted. Smith turned and faced Clinch.

"What's the idea?" he asked without a quaver.

"Was you in Roosia?"

"Yes."

"Was you an officer?"

"I was."

"Then you're spyin'. You're a cop."

"You're mistaken."

"Ah, don't hand me none like that! You're a State Trooper or a Secret Service guy, or a plain, dirty cop. And I'm a-going to croak you."

"I'm not in any service, now."

"Wasn't you an army officer?"

"Yes. Can't an officer go wrong?"

"Soft stuff. Don't feed it to me. I told you too much anyway. I was babblin' drunk. I'm drunk now, but I got sense. D'you think I'll run chances of sittin' in State's Prison for the next ten years and leave Eve out here alone? No. I gotta shoot you, Smith. And I'm a-going to do it. G'wan and

[50]

say what you want ... if you think there's some kind o' god you can square before you croak."

"If you go to the chair for murder, what good will it do Eve?" asked Smith. His lips were crackling dry; he moistened them.

"Sink holes don't talk," said Clinch. "G'wan and square yourself, if you're the church kind."

"Clinch," said Smith unsteadily, "if you kill me now you're as good as dead yourself. Quintana is here."

"Say, don't hand me that," retorted Clinch. "Do you square yourself or no?"

"I tell you Quintana's gang were at the dance to-night—Picquet, Salzar, Georgiades, Sard, Beck, José Sanchez—the one who looks like a French priest. Maybe he had a beard when you saw him in that café wash-room——"

"What!" shouted Clinch in sudden fury. "What yeh talkin' about, you poor dumb dingo! Yeh fixin' to scare me? What do *you* know about Quintana? Are you one of Quintana's gang, too? Is that what you're up to, hidin' out at Star Pond. Come on, now, out with it! I'll have it all out of you now, Hal Smith, before I plug you——"

He came lurching forward, swinging his heavy pistol as though he meant to brain his victim, but he halted after the first step or two and stood there, a shadowy bulk, growling, enraged, undecided.

And, as Smith looked at him, two shadows detached themselves from the trees behind Clinch—silently—silently glided behind—struck in utter silence.

[51]

Down crashed Clinch, black-jacked, his face in the ooze. His pistol flew from his hand, struck Smith's leg; and Smith had it at the same instant and turned it like lightning on the murderous shadows.

"Hands up! Quick!" he cried, at bay now, and his back to the sink-hole.

Pistol levelled, he bent one knee, pushed Clinch over on his back, lest the ooze suffocate him.

"Now," he said coolly, "what do you bums want of Mike Clinch?"

"Who are you?" came a sullen voice. "This is none o' your bloody business. We want Clinch, not you."

"What do you want of Clinch?"

"Take your gun off us!"

"Answer, or I'll let go at you. What do you want of Clinch?"

"Money. What do you think?"

"You're here to stick up Clinch?" enquired Smith.

"Yes. What's that to you?"

"What has Clinch done to you?"

"He stuck *us* up, that's what! Now, are you going to keep out of this?"

"No."

"We ain't going to hurt Clinch."

"You bet you're not. Where's the rest of your gang?"

"What gang?"

"Quintana's," said Smith, laughing. A wild exhilaration possessed him. His flanks and rear were protected by the sink-hole. He had Quintana's gang—two of them—over his pistol.

[52]

"Turn your backs and sit down," he said. As the shadowy forms hesitated, he picked up a stick and hurled it at them. They sat down hastily, hands up, backs toward him.

"You'll both die where you sit," remarked Smith, "if you yell for help."

Clinch sighed heavily, stirred, groped on the damp leaves with his hands.

"I say," began the voice which Smith identified as Harry Beck's, "if you'll come in with us on this it will pay you, young man."

"No," drawled Smith, "I'll go it alone."

"It can't be done, old dear. You'll see if you try it on."

"Who'll stop me? Quintana?"

"Come," urged Beck, "and be a good pal. You can't manage it alone. We've got all night to make Clinch talk. We know how, too. You'll get your share——"

"Oh, stow it," said Smith, watching Clinch, who was reviving. He sat up presently, and put both hands over his head. Smith touched him silently on the shoulder and he turned his heavy, square head in a dazed way. Blood striped his visage. He gazed dully at Smith for a little while, then, seeming to recollect, the old glare began to light his pale eyes.

The next instant, however, Beck spoke again, and Clinch turned in astonishment and saw the two figures sitting there with backs toward Smith and hands up.

Clinch stared at the squatting forms, then slowly moved his head and looked at Smith and his levelled pistol.

"We know how to make a man squeal," said Harry Beck suddenly. "He'll talk. We can make Clinch talk, no fear! Leave it to us, old pal. Are you with us?" He started to look around over his shoulder and Smith hurled another stick and hit him in the face. [53]

"Quiet there, Harry," he said. "What's my share if I go in with you?"

"One sixth, same's we all get."

"What's it worth?" asked Smith, with a motion of caution toward Clinch.

"If I say a million you'll tell me I lie. But it's nearer three—or you can have my share. Is it a go?"

"You'll not hurt Clinch when he comes to?"

"We'll make him talk, that's all. It may hurt him some."

"You won't kill him?"

"I swear by God——"

"Wait! Isn't it better to shoot him after he squeals? Here's a lovely sink-hole handy."

"Right-o! We'll make him talk first and then shove him in. Are you with us?"

"If you turn your head I'll blow the face off you, Harry," said Smith, cautioning Clinch to silence with a gesture.

"All right. Only you better make up your mind. That cove is likely to wake up now at any time," grumbled Beck.

Clinch looked at Smith. The latter smiled, leaned over, and whispered:

"Can you walk all right?"

Clinch nodded.

"Well, we'd better beat it. Quintana's whole gang is in these woods, somewhere, hunting for you, and they might stumble on us here, at any moment." And, to the two men in front: "Lie down flat on your faces. Don't stir; don't speak; or it's you for the sink-hole.... Lie down, I tell you! That's it. Don't move till I tell you to." [54]

Clinch got up from where he was sitting, cast one murderous glance at the prostrate forms, then followed Smith, noiselessly, over the stretch of sphagnum moss.

When they reached the house they saw Eve standing on the steps in her night-dress and bare feet, holding a lantern.

"Daddy," she whimpered, "I was frightened. I didn't know where you had gone——"

Clinch put his arm around her, turned his bloody face and looked at Smith.

"It's *this*," he said, "that I ain't forgetting, young fella. What you done for me you done for *her* .

"I gotta live to make a lady of her. That's why," he added thickly, "I'm much obliged to you, Hal Smith.... Go to bed, girlie——"

"You're bleeding, dad?"

"Aw, a twig scratched me. I been in the woods with Hal. G'wan to bed."

He went to the sink and washed his face, dried it, kissed the girl, and gave her a gentle shove toward the stairs.

"Hal and I is sittin' up talkin' business," he remarked, bolting the door and all the shutters.

When the girl had gone, Clinch went to a closet and brought back two Winchester rifles, two shot guns, and a box of ammunition.

"Goin' to see it out with me, Hal?"

"Sure," smiled Smith.

"Aw' right. Have a drink?" [55]

"No."

"Aw' right. Where'll you set?"

"Anywhere."

"Aw' right. Set over there. They may try the back porch. I'll jest set here a spell, n'then I'll kind er mosey 'round.... Plug the first fella that tries a shutter, Hal."

"You bet."

Clinch came over and held out his hand.

"You said a face-full that time when you says to me, 'Clinch,' you says, 'Eve *is* a lady.' ... I gotta fix her up. I gotta be alive to do it.... That's why I'm greatly obliged to yeh, Hal."

He took his rifle and walked slowly toward the pantry.

"You bet," he muttered, "she *is* a lady, so help me God."

EPISODE THREE

[56]

ON STAR PEAK

I

MIKE CLINCH regarded the jewels taken from José Quintana as legitimate loot acquired in war.

He was prepared to kill anybody who attempted to take the gems from him.

At the very possibility his ruling passion blazed—his mania to make of Eve Strayer a grand lady.

But now, what he had feared for years had happened. Quintana had found him,—Quintana, after all these years, had discovered the identity and dwelling place of the obscure American soldier who had robbed him in the wash-room of a Paris café. And Quintana was now in America, here in this very wilderness, tracking the man who had despoiled him.

Clinch, in his shirt-sleeves, carrying a rifle, came out on the log veranda and sat down to think it over.

He began to realise that he was likely to have trouble with a man as cold-blooded and as dogged as himself.

Nor did he doubt that those with Quintana were desperate men.

On whom could he count? On nobody unless he paid their hire. None among the lawless men who haunted his backwoods "hotel" at Star Pond would lift a finger to help him. Almost any among them would have robbed him,—murdered him, probably,—if it were known that jewels were hidden in the house.

[57]

He could not trust Jake Kloon; Leverett was as treacherous as only a born coward can be; Sid Hone, Harvey Chase, Blommers, Byron Hastings,—he knew them all too well to trust them,—a sullen, unscrupulous pack, partly cowardly, always fierce,—as are any creatures that live furtively, feed only by their wits, and slink through life just outside the frontiers of law.

And yet, one of this gang had stood by him—Hal Smith—the man he himself had been about to slay.

Clinch got up from the bench where he had been sitting and walked down to the pond where Hal Smith sat cleaning trout.

"Hal," he said, "I been figuring some. Quintana don't dare call in the constables. I can't afford to. Quintana and I've got to settle this on our own."

Smith slit open a ten-inch trout, stripped it, flung the entrails out into the pond, soused the fish in water, and threw it into a milk pan.

"Whose jewels were they in the beginning?" he enquired carelessly.

"How do I know?"

"If you ever found out——"

"I don't want to. I got them in the war, anyway. And it don't make no difference how I got 'em; Eve's going to be a lady if I go to the chair for it. So that's that."

Smith slit another trout, gutted it, flung away the viscera but laid back the roe.

"Shame to take them in October," he remarked, "but people must eat."

"Same's me," nodded Clinch; "I don't want to kill no one, but Eve she's gotta be a lady and ride in her own automobile with the proudest."

"Does Eve know about the jewels?"

Clinch's pale eyes, which had been roving over the wooded shores of Star Pond, reverted to Smith.

"I'd cut my throat before I'd tell her," he said softly.

"She wouldn't stand for it?"

"Hal, when you said to me, 'Eve's a lady, by God!' you swallered the hull pie. That's the answer. A lady don't stand for what you and I don't bother about."

"Suppose she learns that you robbed the man who robbed somebody else of these jewels."

Clinch's pale eyes were fixed on him: "Only you and me know," he said in his pleasant voice.

"Quintana knows. His gang knows."

Clinch's smile was terrifying. "I guess she ain't never likely to know nothing, Hal."

"What do you purpose to do, Mike?"

"Still hunt."

"For Quintana?"

"I might mistake him for a deer. Them accidents is likely, too."

"If Quintana catches you it will go hard with you, Mike."

"Sure. I know."

"He'll torture you to make you talk."

"You think I'd talk, Hal?"

Smith looked up into the light-coloured eyes. The pupils were pin points. Then he went on cleaning fish.

"Hal?"

"What?"

"If they get me,—but no matter; they ain't a-going to get me."

"Were you going to tell me where those jewels are hidden, Mike?" enquired the young man, still busy with his fish. He did not look around when he spoke. Clinch's murderous gaze was fastened on the back of his head.

"Don't go to gettin' too damn nosey, Hal," he said in his always agreeable voice.

Smith soused all the fish in water again: "You'd better tell somebody if you go gunning for Quintana."

"Did I ask your advice?"

"You did not," said the young man, smiling.

"All right. Mind your business."

Smith got up from the water's edge with his pan of trout:

"That's what I shall do, Mike," he said, laughing. "So go on with your private war; it's no button off *my* pants if Quintana gets you."

He went away toward the ice-house with the trout. Eve Strayer, doing chamber work, watched the young man from an upper room.

The girl's instinct was to like Smith,—but that very instinct aroused her distrust. What was a man of his breeding and education doing at Clinch's dump? Why was he content to hang around and do chores? A man of his type who has gone crooked enough to stick up a tourist in an automobile nourishes higher—though probably perverted—ambitions than a dollar a day and board.

She heard Clinch's light step on the uncarpeted stair; went on making up Smith's bed; and smiled as her step-father came into the room, still carrying his rifle.

He had something else in his hand, too,—a flat, thin packet wrapped in heavy paper and sealed

all over with black wax.

"Girlie," he said, "I want you should do a little errand for me this morning. If you're spry it won't take long—time to go there and get back to help with noon dinner."

"Very well, dad."

"Go git your pants on, girlie."

"You want me to go into the woods?"

"I want you to go to the hole in the rocks under Star Peak and lay this packet in the hootch cache."

She nodded, tucked in the sheets, smoothed blanket and pillow with deft hands, went out to her own room. Clinch seated himself and turned a blank face to the window.

It was a sudden decision. He realised now that he couldn't keep the jewels in his house. War was on with Quintana. The "hotel" would be the goal for Quintana and his gang. And for Smith, too, if ever temptation overpowered him. The house was liable to an attempt at robbery any night, now;—any day, perhaps. It was no place for the packet he had taken from José Quintana.

Eve came in wearing grey shirt, breeches, and puttees. Clinch gave her the packet.

"What's in it, dad?" she asked smilingly.

"Don't you get nosey, girlie. Come here."

She went to him. He put his left arm around her.

"You like me some, don't you, girlie?"

"You know it, dad."

"All right. You're all that matters to me ... since your mother went and died ... after a year.... That was crool, girlie. Only a year. Well, I ain't cared none for nobody since—only you, girlie."

[61]

He touched the packet with his forefinger:

"If I step out, that's yours. But I ain't a-going to step out. Put it with the hootch. You know how to move that keystone?"

"Yes, dad."

"And watch out that no game protector and none of that damn millionaire's wardens see you in the woods. No, nor none o' these here fancy State Troopers. You gotta watch out *this* time, Eve. It means everything to us—to you, girlie—and to me. Go tip-toe. Lay low, coming and going. Take a rifle."

Eve ran to her bed-room and returned with her Winchester and belt.

"You shoot to kill," said Clinch grimly, "if anyone wants to stop you. But lay low and you won't need to shoot nobody, girlie. G'wan out the back way; Hal's in the ice house."

II

Slim and straight as a young boy in her grey shirt and breeches, Eve continued on lightly through the woods, her rifle over her shoulder, her eyes of gentian-blue always alert.

The morning turned warm; she pulled off her soft felt hat, shook out her clipped curls, stripped open the shirt at her snowy throat where sweat glimmered like melted frost.

The forest was lovely in the morning sunlight—lovely and still—save for the blue-jays—for the summer birds had gone and only birds destined to a long Northern winter remained.

[62]

Now and then, ahead of her, she saw a ruffed grouse wandering in the trail. These, and a single tiny grey bird with a dreary note interminably repeated, were the only living things she saw except here and there a summer-battered butterfly of the Vanessa tribe flitting in some stray sunbeam.

The haunting odour of late autumn was in the air—delicately acrid—the scent of frost-killed brake and ripening wild grasses, of brilliant dead leaves and black forest loam pungent with mast from beech and oak.

Eve's tread was light on the moist trail; her quick eyes missed nothing—not the dainty imprint of deer, fresh made, nor the sprawling insignia of rambling raccoons—nor the big barred owl huddled on a pine limb overhead, nor, where the swift gravelly reaches of the brook caught sunlight, did she miss the swirl and furrowing and milling of painted trout on the spawning beds.

Once she took cover, hearing something stirring; but it was only a yearling buck that came out of the witch-hazel to stare, stamp, then wheel and trot away, displaying the danger signal.

In her cartridge-pouch she carried the flat, sealed packet which Clinch had trusted to her. The

sack swayed gently as she strode on, slapping her left hip at every step; and always her subconscious mind remained on guard and aware of it; and now and then she dropped her hand to feel of the pouch and strap.

The character of the forest was now changing as she advanced. The first tamaracks appeared, slim, silvery trunks, crowned with the gold of autumn foliage, outer sentinels of that vast maze of swamp and stream called Owl Marsh, the stronghold and refuge of forest wild things—sometimes the sanctuary of hunted men.

[63]

From Star Peak's left flank an icy stream clatters down to the level floor of the woods, here; and it was here that Eve had meant to quench her thirst with a mouthful of sweet water.

But as she approached the tiny ford, warily, she saw a saddled horse tied to a sapling and a man seated on a mossy log.

The trappings of horse, the grey-green uniform of the man, left no room for speculation; a trooper of the State Constabulary was seated there.

His cap was off; his head rested on his palm. Elbow on knee, he sat there gazing at the water—watching the slim fish, perhaps, darting up stream toward their bridal-beds hidden far away at the headwaters.

A detour was imperative. The girl, from the shelter of a pine, looked out cautiously at the trooper. The sudden sight of him had merely checked her; now the recognition of his uniform startled her heart out of its tranquil rhythm and set the blood burning in her cheeks.

There was a memory of such a man seared into the girl's very soul;—a man whose head and shoulders resembled this man's,—who had the same bright hair, the same slim and powerful body,—and who moved, too, as this young man moved.

The trooper stirred, lifted his head to relight his pipe.

The girl knew him. Her heart stood still; then heart and blood ran riot and she felt her knees tremble,—felt weak as she rested against the pine's huge trunk and covered her face with unsteady fingers.

[64]

Until the moment, Eve had never dreamed what the memory of this man really meant to her,—never dreamed that she had capacity for emotion so utterly overwhelming.

Even now confusion, shame, fear were paramount. All she wanted was to get away,—get away and still her heart's wild beating,—control the strange tremor that possessed her, recover mind and sense and breath.

She drew her hand from her eyes and looked upon the man she had attempted to kill,—upon the young man who had wrestled her off her feet and handcuffed her,—and who had bathed her bleeding mouth with sphagnum,—and who had kissed her hands—

She was trembling so that she became frightened. The racket of the brook in his ears safeguarded her in a measure. She bent over nearly double, her rifle at a trail, and cautiously began the detour.

When at length the wide circle through the woods had been safely accomplished and Eve was moving out through the thickening ranks of tamarack, her heart, which seemed to suffocate her, quieted; and she leaned against a shoulder of rock, strangely tired.

After a while she drew from her pocket *his* handkerchief, and looked at it. The square of cambric bore his initials, J. S. Blood from her lip remained on it. She had not washed out the spots.

She put it to her lips again, mechanically. A faint odour of tobacco still clung to it.

By every law of loyalty, pride, self-respect, she should have held this man her enemy. Instead, she held his handkerchief against her lips,—crushed it there suddenly, closing her eyes while the colour surged and surged through her skin from throat to hair.

[65]

Then, wearily, she lifted her head and looked out into the grey and empty vista of her life, where the dreary years seemed to stretch like milestones away, away into an endless waste.

She put the handkerchief into her pocket, shouldered her rifle, moved on without looking about her,—a mistake which only the emotion of the moment could account for in a girl so habituated to caution,—for she had gone only a few rods before a man's strident voice halted her:

"*Halte là! Crosse en air!*"

"Drop that rifle!" came another voice from behind her. "You're covered! Throw your gun on the ground!"

She stood as though paralysed. To the right and left she heard people trampling through the thicket toward her.

"Down with that gun, damn you!" repeated the voice, breathless from running. All around her men came floundering and crashing toward her through the undergrowth. She could see some of

them.

As she stooped to place her rifle on the dead leaves, she drew the flat packet from her cartridge sack at the same time and slid it deftly under a rotting log. Then, calm but very pale, she stood upright to face events.

The first man wore a red and yellow bandanna handkerchief over the lower half of his face, pulled tightly across a bony nose. He held a long pistol nearly parallel to his own body; and when he came up to where she was standing he poked the muzzle into her stomach.

She did not flinch; he said nothing; she looked intently into the two ratty eyes fastened on her over the edge of his bandanna. [66]

Five other men were surrounding her, but they all wore white masks of vizard shape, revealing chin and mouth.

They were different otherwise, also, wearing various sorts and patterns of sport clothes, brand new, and giving them an odd, foreign appearance.

What troubled her most was the silence they maintained. The man wearing the bandanna was the only one who seemed at all a familiar figure,—merely, perhaps, because he was American in build, clothing, and movement.

He took her by the shoulder, turned her around and gave her a shove forward. She staggered a step or two; he gave her another shove and she comprehended that she was to keep on going.

Presently she found herself in a steep, wet deer-trail rising upward through a gully. She knew that runaway. It led up Star Peak.

Behind her as she climbed she heard the slopping, panting tread of men; her wind was better than theirs; she climbed lithely upward, setting a pace which finally resulted in a violent jerk backward,—a savage, wordless admonition to go more slowly.

As she climbed she wondered whether she should have fired an alarm shot on the chance of the State Trooper, Stormont, hearing it.

But she had thought only of the packet at the moment of surprise. And now she wondered whether, when freed, she could ever again find that rotting log.

Up, up, always up along the wet gully, deep with silt and frost-splintered rock, she toiled, the heavy gasping of men behind her. Twice she was jerked to a halt while her escort rested. [67]

Once, without turning, she said unsteadily: "Who are you? What have I done to you?"

There was no reply.

"What are you going to do to me——" she began again, and was shaken by the shoulder until silent.

At last the vast arch of the eastern sky sprang out ahead, where stunted spruces stood out against the sunshine and the intense heat of midday fell upon a bare table-land of rock and moss and fern.

As she came out upon the level, the man behind her took both her arms and pulled them back and somebody bandaged her eyes. Then a hand closed on her left arm and, so guided, she stumbled and crept forward across the rocks for a few moments until her guide halted her and forced her into a sitting position on a smooth, flat boulder.

She heard the crunching of heavy feet all around her, whispering made hoarse by breath exhausted, movement across rock and scrub, retreating steps.

For an interminable time she sat there alone in the hot sun, drenched to the skin in sweat, listening, thinking, striving to find a reason for this lawless outrage.

After a long while she heard somebody coming across the rocks, stiffened as she listened with some vague presentiment of evil.

Somebody had halted beside her. After a pause she was aware of nimble fingers busy with the bandage over her eyes.

At first, when freed, the light blinded her. By degrees she was able to distinguish the rocky crest of Star Peak, with the tops of tall trees appearing level with the rocks from depths below. [68]

Then she turned, slowly, and looked at the man who had seated himself beside her.

He wore a white mask over a delicate, smoothly shaven face.

His soft hat and sporting clothes were dark grey, evidently new. And she noticed his hands—long, elegantly made, smooth, restless, playing with a pencil and some sheets of paper on his knees.

As she met his brilliant eyes behind the mask, his delicate, thin lips grew tense in what seemed to be a smile—or a soundless sort of laugh.

"Veree happy," he said, "to make the acquaintance. Pardon my unceremony, miss, but onlee

necissitee compels. Are you, perhaps, a little rested?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Then, if you permit, we proceed with affairs of moment. You will be sufficiently kind to write down what I say. Yes?"

He placed paper and pencil in Eve's hand. Without demurring or hesitation she made ready to write, her mind groping wildly for the reason of it all.

"Write," he said, with his silent laugh which was more like the soundless snarl of a lynx unafraid:

"To Mike Clinch, my fathaire, from his child, Eve.... I am hostage, held by José Quintana. Pay what you owe him and I go free.

"For each day delay he sends to you one finger which will be severed from my right hand——"

Eve's slender fingers trembled; she looked up at the masked man, stared steadily into his brilliant eyes. [69]

"Proceed miss, if you are so amiable," he said softly.

She wrote on: "—One finger for every day's delay. The whole hand at the week's end. The other hand then, finger by finger. Then, alas! the right foot——"

Eve trembled.

"Proceed," he said softly.

She wrote: "If you agree you shall pay what you owe to José Quintana in this manner: you shall place a stick at the edge of the Star Pond where the Star rivulet flows out. Upon this stick you shall tie a white rag. At the foot of the stick you shall lay the parcel which contains your indebt to José Quintana.

"Failing this, by to-night *one finger* at sunset."

The man paused: Eve waited, dumb under the surging confusion in her brain. A sort of incredulous horror benumbed her, through which she still heard and perceived.

"Be kind enough to sign it with your name," said the man pleasantly.

Eve signed.

Then the masked man took the letter, got up, removed his hat.

"I am Quintana," he said. "I keep my word. A thousand thanks and apologies, miss. I trust that your detention may be brief and not too disagreeable. I place at your feet my humble respects."

He bowed, put on his hat, and walked quickly away. And she saw him descend the rocks to the eastward, where the peak slopes.

When Quintana had disappeared behind the summit scrub and rocks, Eve slowly stood up and looked about her at the rocky pulpit so familiar. [70]

There was only one way out. Quintana had gone that way. His men no doubt guarded it. Otherwise, sheer precipices confronted her.

She walked to the western edge where a sheet of slippery reindeer moss clothed the rock. Below the mountain fell away to the valley where she had been made prisoner.

She looked out over the vast panorama of wilderness and mountain, range on range stretching blue to the horizon. She looked down into the depths of the valley where deep under the flaming foliage of October, somewhere, a State Trooper was sitting, cheek on hand, beside a waterfall—or, perhaps, riding slowly through a forest which she might never gaze upon again.

There was a noise on the rocks behind her. A masked man came out of the spruce scrub, laid a blanket on the rocks, placed a loaf of bread, some cheese, and a tin pail full of water upon it, motioned her, and went away through the dwarf spruces.

Eve walked slowly to the blanket. She drank out of the tin pail. Then she set aside the food, lay down, and buried her quivering face in her arms.

The sun was half way between zenith and horizon when she heard somebody coming, and rose to a sitting posture. Her visitor was Quintana.

He came up to her quite close, stood with glittering eyes intent upon her.

After a moment he handed her a letter.

She could scarcely unfold it, she trembled so:

"Girlie, for God's sake give that packet to Quintana and come on home. I'm near crazy with it all. What the hell's anything worth beside you girlie. I don't give a damn for nothing only you, so [71]

come on quick. Dad."

After a little while she lifted her eyes to Quintana.

"So," he said quietly, "you are the little she-fox that has learned tricks already."

"What do you mean?"

"Where is that packet?"

"I haven't it."

"Where is it?"

She shook her head slightly.

"You had a packet," he insisted fiercely. "Look here! Regard!" and he spread out a penciled sheet in Clinch's hand:

"José Quintana:

"You win. She's got that stuff with her. Take your damn junk and let my girl go.

"MIKE CLINCH."

"Well," said Quintana, a thin, strident edge to his tone.

"My father is mistaken. I haven't any packet."

The man's visage behind his mask flushed darkly. Without warning or ceremony he caught Eve by the throat and tore open her shirt. Then, hissing and cursing and panting with his own violence, he searched her brutally and without mercy—flung her down and tore off her spiral puttees and even her shoes and stockings, now apparently beside himself with fury, puffing, gasping, always with a fierce, nasal sort of whining undertone like an animal worrying its kill.

"Cowardly beast!" she panted, fighting him with all her strength—"filthy, cowardly beast!—" striking at him, wrenching his grasp away, snatching at the disordered clothing half stripped from her. [72]

His hunting knife fell clattering and she fought to get it, but he struck her with his open hand, knocking her down at his feet, and stood glaring at her with every tooth bared.

"So," he cried, "I give you ten minutes, make up your mind, tell me what you do with that packet."

He wiped the blood from his face where she had struck him.

"You don't know José Quintana. No! You shall make his acquaintance. Yes!"

Eve got up on naked feet, quivering from head to foot, striving to button the grey shirt at her throat.

"Where?" he demanded, beside himself.

Her mute lips only tightened.

"Ver' well, by God!" he cried. "I go make me some fire. You like it, eh? We shall put one toe in the fire until it burn off. Yes? Eh? How you like it? Eh?"

The girl's trembling hands continued busy with her clothing.

"So!" he said, hoarsely, "you remain dumb! Well, then, in ten minutes you shall talk!"

He walked toward her, pushed her savagely aside, and strode on into the spruce thicket.

The instant he disappeared Eve caught up the knife he had dropped, knelt down on the blanket and fell to cutting it into strips.

The hunting knife was like a razor; the feverish business was accomplished in a few moments, the pieces knotted, the cord strained in a desperate test over her knee. [73]

And now she ran to the precipice where, ten feet below, the top of a great pine protruded from the gulf.

On the edge of the abyss was a spruce root. It looked dead, wedged deep between two rocks; but with all her strength she could not pull it out.

Sobbing, breathless, she tied her blanket rope to this, threw the other end over the cliff's edge, and, not giving herself time to think, lay flat, grasped the knotted line, swung off.

Knot by knot she went down. Half-way her naked feet brushed the needles. She looked over her shoulder, behind and down. Then, teeth clenched, she lowered herself steadily as she had learned to do in the school gymnasium, down, down, until her legs came astride of a pine limb.

It bent, swayed, gave with her, letting her sag to a larger limb below. This she clasped, letting

go her rope.

Already, from the mountain's rocky crest above, she heard excited cries. Once, on her breakneck descent, she looked up through the foliage of the pine; and she saw, far up against the sky, a white-masked face looking over the edge of the precipice.

But if it were Quintana or another of his people she could not tell. And, again looking down, she began again the terrible descent.

An hour later, Trooper Stormont of the State Constabulary, sat his horse in amazement to see a ragged, breathless, boyish figure speeding toward him among the tamaracks, her naked feet splashing through pool and mire and sphagnum. [74]

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed as she flung herself against his stirrup, sobbing, hysterical, and clinging to his knee.

"Take me back," she stammered, "—take me back to daddy! I can't—go on—another step—"

He leaned down, swung her up to his saddle in front, holding her cradled in his arms.

"Lie still," he said coolly; "you're all right now."

For another second he sat looking down at her, at the dishevelled hair, the gasping mouth,—at the rags clothing her, and at the flat packet clasped convulsively to her breast.

Then he spoke in a low voice to his horse, guiding left with one knee.

EPISODE FOUR

A PRIVATE WAR

I

WHEN State Trooper Stormont rode up to Clinch's with Eve Strayer lying in his arms, Mike Clinch strode out of the motley crowd around the tavern, laid his rifle against a tree, and stretched forth his powerful hands to receive his stepchild.

He held her, cradled, looking down at her in silence as the men clustered around.

"Eve," he said hoarsely, "be you hurted?"

The girl opened her sky-blue eyes.

"I'm all right, dad, ... just tired.... I've got your parcel ... safe...."

"To hell with the gol-dinged parcel," he almost sobbed; "—did Quintana harm you?"

"No, dad."

As he carried her to the veranda the packet fell from her cramped fingers. Clinch kicked it under a chair and continued on into the house and up the stairs to Eve's bedroom.

Flat on the bed, the girl opened her drowsy eyes again, unsmiling.

"Did that dirty louse misuse you?" demanded Clinch unsteadily. "G'wan tell me, girlie."

"He knocked me down.... He went away to get fire to make me talk. I cut up the blanket they gave me and made a rope. Then I went over the cliff into the big pine below. That was all, dad." [76]

Clinch filled a tin basin and washed the girl's torn feet. When he had dried them he kissed them. She felt his unshaven lips trembling, heard him whimper for the first time in his life.

"Why the hell didn't you give Quintana the packet?" he demanded. "What does that count for—what does any damn thing count for against you, girlie?"

She looked up at him out of heavy-lidded eyes: "You told me to take good care of it."

"It's only a little truck I'd laid by for you," he retorted unsteadily, "—a few trifles for to make a grand lady of you when the time's ripe. 'Tain't worth a thorn in your little foot to me.... The hull gol-dinged world full o' money ain't worth that there stone-bruise onto them little white feet o' yourn, Eve.

"Look at you now—my God, look at you there, all peaked an' scairt an' bleedin'—plum tuckered

out, 'n' all ragged 'n' dirty——"

A blaze of fury flared in his small pale eyes: "—And he hit you, too, did he?—that skunk! Quintana done that to my little girlie, did he?"

"I don't know if it was Quintana. I don't know who he was, dad," she murmured drowsily.

"Masked, wa'n't he?"

"Yes."

Clinch's iron visage twitched and quivered. He gnawed his thin lips into control:

"Girlie, I gotta go out a spell. But I ain't a-leavin' you alone here. I'll git somebody to set up with you. You jest lie snug and don't think about nothin' till I come back."

[77]

"Yes, dad," she sighed, closing her eyes.

Clinch stood looking at her for a moment, then he went downstairs heavily, and out to the veranda where State Trooper Stormont still sat his saddle, talking to Hal Smith. On the porch a sullen crowd of backwoods riff-raff lounged in silence, awaiting events.

Clinch called across to Smith: "Hey, Hal, g'wan up and set with Eve a spell while she's nappin'. Take a gun."

Smith said to Stormont in a low voice: "Do me a favour, Jack?"

"You bet."

"That girl of Clinch's is in real danger if left here alone. But I've got another job on my hands. Can you keep a watch on her till I return?"

"Can't you tell me a little more, Jim?"

"I will, later. Do you mind helping me out now?"

"All right."

Trooper Stormont swung out of his saddle and led his horse away toward the stable.

Hal Smith went into the bar where Clinch stood, oiling a rifle.

"G'wan upstairs," he muttered. "I got a private war on. It's me or Quintana, now."

"You're going after Quintana?" inquired Smith, carelessly.

"I be. And I want you should git your gun and set up by Evie. And I want you should kill any living human son of a slut that comes botherin' around this here hotel."

"I'm going after Quintana with you, Mike."

[78]

"B'gosh, you ain't. You're a-goin' to keep watch here."

"No. Trooper Stormont has promised to stay with Eve. You'll need every man to-day, Mike. This isn't a deer drive."

Clinch let his rifle sag across the hollow of his left arm.

"Did you beef to that trooper?" he demanded in his pleasant, misleading way.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" retorted Smith.

"Well, what the hell——"

"They all know that some man used your girl roughly. That's all I said to him—'keep an eye on Eve until we can get back.' And I tell you, Mike, if we drive Star Peak we won't be back till long after sundown."

Clinch growled: "I ain't never asked no favours of no State Trooper——"

"He did you a favour, didn't he? He brought your daughter in."

"Yes, 'n' he'd jail us all if he got anything on us."

"Yes; and he'll shoot to kill if any of Quintana's people come here and try to break in."

Clinch grunted, peeled off his coat and got into a leather vest bristling with cartridge loops.

Trooper Stormont came in the back door, carrying his rifle.

"Some rough fellow been bothering your little daughter, Clinch?" he inquired. "The child was nearly all in when she met me out by Owl Marsh—clothes half torn off her back, bare-foot and bleeding. She's a plucky youngster. I'll say so, Clinch. If you think the fellow may come here to annoy her I'll keep an eye on her till you return."

Clinch went up to Stormont, put his powerful hands on the young fellow's shoulders.

[79]

After a moment's glaring silence: "You *look* clean. I guess you be, too. I wanta tell you I'll cut

the guts outa any guy that lays the heft of a single finger onto Eve."

"I'd do so, too, if I were you," said Stormont.

"Would ye? Well, I guess you're a real man, too, even if you're a State Trooper," growled Clinch. "G'wan up. She's a-nappin'. If she wakes up you kinda talk pleasant to her. You act kind pleasant and cosy. She ain't had no ma. You tell her to set snug and ca'm. Then you cook her a egg if she wants it. There's pie, too. I cal'late to be back by sundown."

"Nearer morning," remarked Smith.

Stormont shrugged. "I'll stay until you show up, Clinch."

The latter took another rifle from the corner and handed it to Smith with a loop of ammunition.

"Come on," he grunted.

On the veranda he strode up to the group of sullen, armed men who regarded his advent in expressionless silence.

Sid Hone was there, and Harvey Chase, and the Hastings boys, and Cornelius Blommers.

"You fellas comin'?" inquired Clinch.

"Where?" drawled Sid Hone.

"Me an' Hal Smith is cal'kalatin' to drive Star Peak. It ain't a deer, neither."

There ensued a grim interval. Clinch's wintry smile began to glimmer.

"Booze agents or game protectors? Which?" asked Byron Hastings. "They both look like deer—if a man gits mad enough." [80]

Clinch's smile became terrifying. "I shell out five hundred dollars for every *deer* that's dropped on Star Peak to-day," he said. "And I hope there won't be no accidents and no mistakin' no *stranger* for a deer," he added, wagging his great, square head.

"Them accidents is liable to happen," remarked Hone, reflectively.

After another pause: "Where's Jake Kloon?" inquired Smith.

Nobody seemed to know.

"He was here when Mike called me into the bar," insisted Smith. "Where'd he go?"

Then, of a sudden, Clinch recollected the packet which he had kicked under a veranda chair. It was no longer there.

"Any o' you fellas seen a package here on the pyazza?" demanded Clinch harshly.

"Jake Kloon, he had somethin'," drawled Chase. "I supposed it was his lunch. Mebbe 'twas, too."

In the intense stillness Clinch glared into one face after another.

"Boys," he said in his softly modulated voice, "I kinda guess there's a rat amongst us. I wouldn't like for to be that there rat—no, not for a billion hundred dollars. No, I wouldn't. Becuz that there rat has bit my little girlie, Eve,—like that there deer bit her up onto Star Peak.... No, I wouldn't like for to be that there rat. Fer he's a-goin' to die like a rat, same's that there deer is a-goin' to die like a deer.... Anyone seen which way Jake Kloon went?"

"Now you speak of it," said Byron Hastings, "seems like I noticed Jake and Earl Leverett down by the woods near the pond. I kinda disremembered when you asked, but I guess I seen them." [81]

"Sure," said Sid Hone. "Now you mention it, I seen 'em, too. Thinks I to m'self, they is pickin' them blackberries down to the crick. Yas, I seen 'em."

Clinch tossed his rifle across his left shoulder.

"Rats an' deer," he said pleasantly. "Them's the articles we're lookin' for. Only for God's sake be careful you don't mistake a *man* for 'em in the woods."

One or two men laughed.

On the edge of Owl Marsh Clinch halted in the trail, and, as his men came up, he counted them with a cold eye.

"Here's the runway and this here hazel bush is my station," he said. "You fellas do the barkin'. You, Sid Hone, and you, Corny, start drivin' from the west. Harve, you yelp 'em from the north by Lynx Brook. Jim and Byron, you get twenty minutes to go 'round to the eastward and drive by the Slide. And you, Hal Smith,"—he looked around—"where 'n hell be you, Hal?—"

Smith came up from the bog's edge.

"Send 'em out," he said in a low voice. "I've got Jake's tracks in the bog."

Clinch motioned his beaters to their duty. "Twenty minutes," he reminded Hone, Chase, and

Blommers, "before you start drivin'." And, to the Hastings boys: "If you shoot, aim low for their bellies. Don't leave no blood around. Scrape it up. We bury what we get."

He and Smith stood looking after the five slouching figures moving away toward their blind trails. When all had disappeared:

"Show me Jake's mark," he said calmly.

Smith led him to the edge of the bog, knelt down, drew aside a branch of witch-hopple. A man's footprint was plainly visible on the mud.

"That's Jake," said Clinch slowly. "I know them half-soled boots o' hisn." He lifted another branch. "There's another man's track!"

"The other is probably Leverett's."

"Likely. He's got thin feet."

"I think I'd better go after them," said Smith, reflectively.

"They'll plug you, you poor jackass—two o' them like that, and one a-settin' up to watch out. Hell! Be you tired o' bed an' board?"

Smith smiled: "Don't you worry, Mike."

"Why? You think you're that smart? Jest becuz you stuck up a tourist you think you're cock o' the North Woods—with them two foxes lyin' out for to snap you up? Hey? Why, you poor dumb thing, Jake runs Canadian hootch for a livin' and Leverett's a trap thief! What could *you* do with a pair o' foxes like that?"

"Catch 'em," said Smith, coolly. "You mind your business, Mike."

As he shouldered his rifle and started into the marsh, Clinch dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder; but the young man shook it off.

"Shut up," he said sharply. "You've a private war on your hands. So have I. I'll take care of my own."

"What's *your* grievance?" demanded Clinch, surprised.

"Jake Kloon played a dirty trick on me."

"When was that?"

"Not very long ago."

"I hadn't heard," said Clinch.

"Well, you hear it now, don't you? All right. All right; I'm going after him."

As he started again across the marsh, Clinch called out in a guarded voice: "Take good care of that packet if you catch them rats. It belongs to Eve."

"I'll take such good care of it," replied Smith, "that its proper owner need not worry."

II

The "proper owner" of the packet was, at that moment, on the Atlantic Ocean, travelling toward the United States.

Four other pretended owners of the Grand Duchess Theodorica's jewels, totally unconscious of anything impending which might impair their several titles to the gems, were now gathered together in a wilderness within a few miles of one another.

José Quintana lay somewhere in the forests with his gang, fiercely planning the recovery of the treasure of which Clinch had once robbed him. Clinch squatted on his runway, watching the mountain flank with murderous eyes. It was no longer the Flaming Jewel which mattered. His master passion ruled him now. Those who had offered violence to Eve must be reckoned with first of all. The hand that struck Eve Strayer had offered mortal insult to Mike Clinch.

As for the third pretender to the Flaming Jewel, Jake Kloon, he was now travelling in a fox's circle toward Drowned Valley—that shaggy wilderness of slime and tamarack and depthless bog which touches the northwest base of Star Peak. He was not hurrying, having no thought of pursuit. Behind him plodded Leverett, the trap thief, very, very busy with his own ideas.

To Leverett's repeated requests that Kloon halt and open the packet to see what it contained, Kloon gruffly refused.

"What do we care what's in it?" he said. "We get ten thousand apiece over our rifles for it from them guys. Ain't it a good enough job for you?"

"Maybe we make more if we take what's inside it for ourselves," argued Leverett. "Let's take a peek, anyway."

"Naw. I don't want no peek nor nothin'. The ten thousand comes too easy. More might scare us. Let that guy, Quintana, have what's his'n. All I ask is my rake-off. You allus was a dirty, thieving mink, Earl. Let's give him his and take ours and git. I'm going to Albany to live. You bet I don't stay in no woods where Mike Clinch dens."

They plodded on, arguing, toward their rendezvous with Quintana's outpost on the edge of Drowned Valley.

The fourth pretender to the pearls, rubies, and great gem called the Flaming Jewel, stolen from the young Grand Duchess Theodorica of Esthonia by José Quintana, was an unconscious pretender, entirely innocent of the rôle assigned her by Clinch.

For Eve Strayer had never heard where the packet came from or what it contained. All she knew was that her stepfather had told her that it belonged to her. And the knowledge left her incurious.

III

[85]

Eve slept the sleep of mental and physical exhaustion. Reaction from fear brings a fatigue more profound than that which follows physical overstrain. But the healthy mind, like the healthy body, disposes very thoroughly of toxics which arise from terror and exhaustion.

The girl slept profoundly, calmly. Her bruised young mind and body left her undisturbed. There was neither restlessness nor fever. Sleep swept her with its clean, sweet tide, cleansing the superb youth and health of her with the most wonderful balm in the Divine pharmacy.

She awoke late in the afternoon, opened her flower-blue eyes, and saw State Trooper Stormont sitting by the window, and gazing out.

Perhaps Eve's confused senses mistook the young man for a vision; for she lay very still, nor stirred even her little finger.

After a while Stormont glanced around at her. A warm, delicate colour stained her skin slowly, evenly, from throat to hair.

He got up and came over to the bed.

"How do you feel?" he asked, awkwardly.

"Where is dad?" she managed to inquire in a steady voice.

"He won't be back till late. He asked me to stick around—in case you needed anything——"

The girl's clear eyes searched his.

"Trooper Stormont?"

"Yes, Eve."

"Dad's gone after Quintana."

"Is he the fellow who misused you?"

"I think so."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know."

"Is he your enemy or your stepfather's?"

But the girl shook her head: "I can't discuss dad's affairs with—with——"

"With a State Trooper," smiled Stormont. "That's all right, Eve. You don't have to."

There was a pause; Stormont stood beside the bed, looking down at her with his diffident, boyish smile. And the girl gazed back straight into his eyes—eyes she had so often looked into in her dreams.

"I'm to cook you an egg and bring you some pie," he remarked, still smiling.

"Did dad say I am to stay in bed?"

"That was my inference. Do you feel very lame and sore?"

"My feet burn."

"You poor kid!... Would you let me look at them? I have a first-aid packet with me."

After a moment she nodded and turned her face on the pillow. He drew aside the cover a little, knelt down beside the bed.

Then he rose and went downstairs to the kitchen. There was hot water in the kettle. He fetched

[86]

it back, bathed her feet, drew out from cut and scratch the flakes of granite-grit and brier-points that still remained there.

From his first-aid packet he took a capsule, dissolved it, sterilized the torn skin, then bandaged both feet with a deliciously cool salve, and drew the sheets into place.

Eve had not stirred nor spoken. He washed and dried his hands and came back, drawing his chair nearer to the bedside. [87]

"Sleep, if you feel like it," he said pleasantly.

As she made no sound or movement he bent over to see if she had already fallen asleep. And noticed that her flushed cheeks were wet with tears.

"Are you suffering?" he asked gently.

"No.... You are so wonderfully kind...."

"Why shouldn't I be kind?" he said, amused and touched by the girl's emotion.

"I tried to shoot you once. That is why you ought to hate me."

He began to laugh: "Is *that* what you're thinking about?"

"I—never can—forget—"

"Nonsense. We're quits anyway. Do you remember what I did to *you* ?"

He was thinking of the handcuffs. Then, in her vivid blush he read what she was thinking. And he remembered his lips on her palms.

He, too, now was blushing brilliantly at memory of that swift, sudden rush of romantic tenderness which this girl had witnessed that memorable day on Owl Marsh.

In the hot, uncomfortable silence, neither spoke. He seated himself after a while. And, after a while, she turned on her pillow part way toward him.

Somehow they both understood that it was friendship which had subtly filled the interval that separated them since that amazing day.

"I've often thought of you," he said,—as though they had been discussing his absence.

No hour of the waking day that she had not thought of him. But she did not say so now. After a little while: [88]

"Is yours a lonely life?" she asked in a low voice.

"Sometimes. But I love the forest."

"Sometimes," she said, "the forest seems like a trap that I can't escape. Sometimes I hate it."

"Are you lonely, Eve?"

"As you are. You see I know what the outside world is. I miss it."

"You were in boarding school and college."

"Yes."

"It must be hard for you here at Star Pond."

The girl sighed, unconsciously:

"There are days when I—can scarcely—stand it.... The wilderness would be more endurable if dad and I were all alone.... But even then—"

"You need young people of your own age,—educated companions—"

"I need the city, Mr. Stormont. I need all it can give: I'm starving for it. That's all."

She turned on her pillow, and he saw that she was smiling faintly. Her face bore no trace of the tragic truth she had uttered. But the tragedy was plain enough to him, even without her passionless words of revolt. The situation of this young, educated girl, aglow with youth, fettered, body and mind, to the squalor of Clinch's dump, was perfectly plain to anybody.

She said, seeing his troubled expression: "I'm sorry I spoke that way."

"I knew how you must feel, anyway."

"It seems ungrateful," she murmured. "I love my step-father."

"You've proven that," he remarked with a dry humour that brought the hot flush to her face again. [89]

"I must have been crazy that day," she said. "It scares me to remember what I tried to do.... What a frightful thing—if I had killed you—How *can* you forgive me?"

"How can you forgive *me*, Eve?"

She turned her head: "I do."

"Entirely?"

"Yes."

He said,—a slight emotion noticeable in his voice: "Well, I forgave you before the darned gun exploded in our hands."

"How *could* you?" she protested.

"I was thinking all the while that you were acting as I'd have acted if anything threatened *my* father."

"Were you thinking of *that*?"

"Yes,—and also how to get hold of you before you shot me." He began to laugh.

After a moment she turned her head to look at him, and her smile glimmered, responsive to his amusement. But she shivered slightly, too.

"How about that egg?" he inquired.

"I can get up——"

"Better keep off your feet. What is there in the pantry? You must be starved."

"I could eat a little before supper time," she admitted. "I forgot to take my lunch with me this morning. It is still there in the pantry on the bread box, wrapped up in brown paper, just as I left it——"

She half rose in bed, supported on one arm, her curly brown-gold hair framing her face:

"—Two cakes of sugar-milk chocolate in a flat brown packet tied with a string," she explained, smiling at his amusement. [90]

So he went down to the pantry and discovered the parcel on the bread box where she had left it that morning before starting for the cache on Owl Marsh.

He brought it to her, placed both pillows upright behind her, stepped back gaily to admire the effect. Eve, with her parcel in her hands, laughed shyly at his comedy.

"Begin on your chocolate," he said. "I'm going back to fix you some bread and butter and a cup of tea."

When again he had disappeared, the girl, still smiling, began to untie her packet, unhurriedly, slowly loosening string and wrapping.

Her attention was not fixed on what her slender fingers were about.

She drew from the parcel a flat morocco case with a coat of arms and crest stamped on it in gold, black, and scarlet.

For a few moments she stared at the object stupidly. The next moment she heard Stormont's spurred tread on the stairs; and she thrust the morocco case and the wrapping under the pillows behind her.

She looked up at him in a dazed way when he came in with the tea and bread. He set the tin tray on her bureau and came over to the bedside.

"Eve," he said, "you look very white and ill. Have you been hurt somewhere, and haven't you admitted it?"

She seemed unable to speak, and he took both her hands and looked anxiously into the lovely, pallid features.

After a moment she turned her head and buried her face in the pillow, trembling now in overwhelming realization of what she had endured for the sake of two cakes of sugar-milk chocolate hidden under a bush in the forest. [91]

For a long while the girl lay there, the feverish flush of tears on her partly hidden face, her nervous hands tremulous, restless, now seeking his, convulsively, now striving to escape his clasp—eloquent, uncertain little hands that seemed to tell so much and yet were telling him nothing he could understand.

"Eve, dear," he said, "are you in pain? What is it that has happened to you? I thought you were all right. You seemed all right——"

"I am," she said in a smothered voice. "You'll stay here with me, won't you?"

"Of course I will. It's just the reaction. It's all over. You're relaxing. That's all, dear. You're safe. Nothing can harm you now——"

"Please don't leave me."

After a moment: "I won't leave you.... I wish I might never leave you."

In the tense silence that followed her trembling ceased. Then his heart, heavy, irregular, began beating so that the startled pulses in her body awoke, wildly responsive.

Deep emotions, new, unfamiliar, were stirring, awaking, confusing them both. In a sudden instinct to escape, she turned and partly rose on one elbow, gazing blindly about her out of tear-marred eyes.

"I want my room to myself," she murmured in a breathless sort of way, "—I want you to go out, please—"

A boyish flush burnt his face. He got up slowly, took his rifle from the corner, went out, closing the door, and seated himself on the stairs. [92]

And there, on guard, sat Trooper Stormont, rigid, unshirring, hour after hour, facing the first great passion of his life, and stunned by the impact of its swift and unexpected blow.

In her chamber, on the bed's edge, sat Eve Strayer, her deep eyes fixed on space. Vague emotions, exquisitely recurrent, new born, possessed her. The whole world, too, all around her seemed to have become misty and golden and all pulsating with a faint, still rhythm that indefinably thrilled her pulses to response.

Passion, full-armed, springs flaming from the heart of man. Woman is slow to burn. And it was the delicate phantom of passion that Eve gazed upon, there in her unpainted chamber, her sun-tanned fingers linked listlessly in her lap, her little feet like bruised white flowers drooping above the floor.

Hour after hour she sat there dreaming, staring at the tinted ghost of Eros, rose-hued, near-smiling, unreal, impalpable as the dusty sunbeam that slanted from her window, gilding the boarded floor.

Three spectres, gliding near, paused to gaze at State Trooper Stormont, on guard by the stairs. Then they looked at the closed door of Eve's chamber.

Then the three spectres, Fate, Chance and Destiny, whispering together, passed on toward the depths of the sunset forest.

EPISODE FIVE [93]

DROWNED VALLEY

I

THE soft, bluish forest shadows had lengthened, and the barred sun-rays, filtering through, were tinged with a rosy hue before Jake Kloon, the hootch runner, and Earl Leverett, trap thief, came to Drowned Valley.

They were still a mile distant from the most southern edge of that vast desolation, but already tamaracks appeared in the beauty of their burnt gold; little pools glimmered here and there; patches of amber sphagnum and crimson pitcher-plants became frequent; and once or twice Kloon's big boots broke through the crust of fallen leaves, soaking him to the ankles with black silt.

Leverett, always a coward, had pursued his devious and larcenous way through the world, always in deadly fear of sink holes.

His movements and paths were those of a weasel, preferring always solid ground; but he lacked the courage of that sinuous little beast, though he possessed all of its ferocity and far more cunning.

Now trotting lightly and tirelessly in the broad and careless spoor of Jake Kloon, his narrow, pointed head alert, and every fear-sharpened instinct tensely observant, the trap-thief continued to meditate murder.

Like all cowards, he had always been inclined to bold and ruthless action; but inclination was all that ever had happened. [94]

Yet, even in his pitiable misdemeanours he slunk through life in terror of that strength which

never hesitates at violence. In his petty pilfering he died a hundred deaths for every trapped mink or otter he filched; he heard the game protector's tread as he slunk from the bagged trout brook or crawled away, belly dragging, and pockets full of snared grouse.

Always he had dreamed of the day when, through some sudden bold and savage stroke, he could deliver himself from a life of fear and live in a city, grossly, replete with the pleasures of satiation, never again to see a tree or a lonely lake or the blue peaks which, always, he had hated because they seemed to spy on him from their sky-blue heights.

They were spying on him now as he moved lightly, furtively at Jake Kloon's heels, meditating once more that swift, bold stroke which forever would free him from all care and fear.

He looked at the back of Kloon's massive head. One shot would blow that skull into fragments, he thought, shivering.

One shot from behind,—and twenty thousand dollars,—or, if it proved a better deal, the contents of the packet. For, if Quintana's bribery had dazzled them, what effect might the contents of that secret packet have if revealed?

Always in his mean and busy brain he was trying to figure to himself what that packet must contain. And, to make the bribe worth while, Leverett had concluded that only a solid packet of thousand-dollar bills could account for the twenty thousand offered.

There might easily be half a million in bills pressed together in that heavy, flat packet. Bills were absolutely safe plunder. But Kloon had turned a deaf ear to his suggestions,—Kloon, who never entertained ambitions beyond his hootch rake-off,—whose miserable imagination stopped at a wretched percentage, satisfied. [95]

One shot! There was the back of Kloon's bushy head. One shot!—and fear, which had shadowed him from birth, was at an end forever. Ended, too, privation,—the bitter rigour of black winters; scorching days; bodily squalor; ills that such as he endured in a wilderness where, like other creatures of the wild, men stricken died or recovered by chance alone.

A single shot would settle all problems for him.... But if he missed? At the mere idea he trembled as he trotted on, trying to tell himself that he couldn't miss. No use; always the coward's "if" blocked him; and the coward's rage,—fiercest of all fury,—ravaged him, almost crazing him with his own impotence.

Tamaracks, sphagnum, crimson pitcher-plants grew thicker; wet woods set with little black pools stretched away on every side.

It was still nearly a mile from Drowned Valley when Jake Kloon halted in his tracks and seated himself on a narrow ridge of hard ground. And Leverett came lightly up and, after nosing the whole vicinity, sat down cautiously where Kloon would have to turn partly around to look at him.

"Where the hell do we meet up with Quintana?" growled Kloon, tearing a mouthful from a gnawed tobacco plug and shoving the remainder deep into his trousers pocket. [96]

"We gotta travel a piece, yet.... Say, Jake, be you a man or be you a poor dumb critter what ain't got no spunk?"

Kloon, chewing on his cud, turned and glanced at him. Then he spat, as answer.

"If you got the spunk of a chipmunk you and me'll take a peek at that there packet. I bet you it's thousand-dollar bills—more'n a billion million dollars, likely."

Kloon's dogged silence continued. Leverett licked his dry lips. His rifle lay on his knees. Almost imperceptibly he moved it, moved it again, froze stiff as Kloon spat, then, by infinitesimal degrees, continued to edge the muzzle toward Kloon.

"Jake?"

"Aw, shut your head," grumbled Kloon disdainfully. "You allus was a dirty rat—you sneakin' trap robber. Enough's enough. I ain't got no use for no billion million dollar bills. Ten thousand'll buy me all I cal'late to need till I'm planted. But you're like a hawg; you ain't never had enough o' nothin' and you won't never git enough, neither,—not if you wuz God a'mighty you wouldn't."

"Ten thousand dollars hain't nothin' to a billion million, Jake."

Kloon squirted a stream of tobacco at a pitcher plant and filled the cup. Diverted and gratified by the accuracy of his aim, he took other shots at intervals.

Leverett moved the muzzle of his rifle a hair's width to the left, shivered, moved it again. Under his soggy, sun-tanned skin a pallor made his visage sickly grey.

"Jake?" [97]

No answer.

"Say, Jake?"

No notice.

"Jake, I wanta take a peek at them bills."

Merely another stream of tobacco soiling the crimson pitcher.

"I'm—I'm desprit. I gotta take a peek. I gotta—gotta—"

Something in Leverett's unsteady voice made Kloon turn his head.

"You gol rammed fool," he said, "what you doin' with your—"

The loud detonation of the rifle punctuated Kloon's inquiry with a final period. The big, soft-nosed bullet struck him full in the face, spilling his brains and part of his skull down his back, and knocking him flat as though he had been clubbed.

Leverett, stunned, sat staring, motionless, clutching the rifle from the muzzle of which a delicate stain of vapour floated and disappeared through a rosy bar of sunshine.

In the intense stillness of the place, suddenly the dead man made a sound; and the trap-robber nearly fainted.

But it was only air escaping from the slowly collapsing lungs; and Leverett, ashy pale, shaking, got to his feet and leaned heavily against an oak tree, his eyes never stirring from the sprawling thing on the ground.

If it were a minute or a year he stood there he could never have reckoned the space of time. The sun's level rays glimmered ruddy through the woods. A green fly appeared, buzzing about the dead man. Another zig-zagged through the sunshine, lacing it with streaks of greenish fire. Others appeared, whirling, gyrating, filling the silence with their humming. And still Leverett dared not budge, dared not search the dead and take from it that for which the dead had died.

[98]

A little breeze came by and stirred the bushy hair on Kloon's head and fluttered the ferns around him where he lay.

Two delicate, pure-white butterflies—rare survivors of a native species driven from civilization into the wilderness by the advent of the foreign white—fluttered in airy play over the dead man, drifting away into the woodland at times, yet always returning to wage a fairy combat above the heap of soiled clothing which once had been a man.

Then, near in the ferns, the withering fronds twitched, and a red squirrel sprung his startling alarm, squeaking, squealing, chattering his opinion of murder; and Leverett, shaking with the shock, wiped icy sweat from his face, laid aside his rifle, and took his first stiff step toward the dead man.

But as he bent over he changed his mind, turned, reeling a little, then crept slowly out among the pitcher-plants, searching about him as though sniffing.

In a few minutes he discovered what he was looking for; took his bearings; carefully picked his way back over a leafy crust that trembled under his cautious tread.

He bent over Kloon and, from the left inside coat pocket, he drew the packet and placed it inside his own flannel shirt.

Then, turning his back to the dead, he squatted down and clutched Kloon's burly ankles, as a man grasps the handles of a wheelbarrow to draw it after him.

[99]

Dragging, rolling, bumping over roots, Jake Kloon took his last trail through the wilderness, leaving a redder path than was left by the setting sun through fern and moss and wastes of pitcher-plants.

Always, as Leverett crept on, pulling the dead behind him, the floor of the woods trembled slightly, and a black ooze wet the crust of withered leaves.

At the quaking edge of a little pool of water, Leverett halted. The water was dark but scarcely an inch deep over its black bed of silt.

Beside this sink hole the trap-thief dropped Kloon. Then he drew his hunting knife and cut a tall, slim swamp maple. The sapling was about twenty feet in height. Leverett thrust the butt of it into the pool. Without any effort he pushed the entire sapling out of sight in the depthless silt.

He had to manoeuvre very gingerly to dump Kloon into the pool and keep out of it himself. Finally he managed it.

To his alarm, Kloon did not sink far. He cut another sapling and pushed the body until only the shoes were visible above the silt.

These, however, were very slowly sinking, now. Bubbles rose, dully iridescent, floated, broke. Strings of blood hung suspended in the clouding water.

Leverett went back to the little ridge and covered with dead leaves the spot where Kloon had lain. There were broken ferns, but he could not straighten them. And there lay Kloon's rifle.

For a while he hesitated, his habits of economy being ingrained; but he remembered the packet in his shirt, and he carried the rifle to the little pool and shoved it, muzzle first, driving it

[100]

downward, out of sight.

As he rose from the pool's edge, somebody laid a hand on his shoulder.

That was the most real death that Leverett ever had died.

II

A coward dies many times before Old Man Death really gets him.

The swimming minutes passed; his mind ceased to live for a space. Then, as through the swirling waters of the last dark whirlpool, a dulled roar of returning consciousness filled his being.

Somebody was shaking him, shouting at him. Suddenly instinct resumed its function, and he struggled madly to get away from the edge of the sink-hole—fought his way, blindly, through tangled undergrowth toward the hard ridge. No human power could have blocked the frantic creature thrashing toward solid ground.

But there Quintana held him in his wiry grip.

"Fool! Mule! Crazee fellow! What you do, eh? For why you make jumps like rabbits! Eh? You expec' Quintana? Yes? Alors!"

Leverett, in a state of collapse, sagged back against an oak tree. Quintana's nervous grasp fell from his arms and they swung, dangling.

"What you do by that pond-hole? Eh? I come and touch you, and, my God!—one would think I have stab you. Such an ass!"

The sickly greenish hue changed in Leverett's face as the warmer tide stirred from its stagnation. He lifted his head and tried to look at Quintana. [101]

"Where Jake Klooon?" demanded the latter.

At that the weasel wits of the trap-robber awoke to the instant crisis. Blood and pulse began to jump. He passed one dirty hand over his mouth to mask any twitching.

"Where my packet, eh?" inquired Quintana.

"Jake's got it." Leverett's voice was growing stronger. His small eyes switched for an instant toward his rifle, where it stood against a tree behind Quintana.

"Where is he, then, this Jake?" repeated Quintana impatiently.

"He got bogged."

"Bogged? What is that, then?"

"He got into a sink-hole."

"What!"

"That's all I know," said Leverett, sullenly. "Him and me was travellin' hell-bent to meet up with you,—Jake, he was for a short cut to Drowned Valley,—but 'no,' sez I, 'gimme a good hard ridge an' a long deetoor when there's sink-holes into the woods—'"

"What is it the talk you talk to me?" asked Quintana, whose perplexed features began to darken. "Where is it, my packet?"

"I'm tellin' you, ain't I?" retorted the other, raising a voice now shrill with the strain of this new crisis rushing so unexpectedly upon him: "I heard Jake give a holler. 'What the hell's the trouble?' I yells. Then he lets out a beller, 'Save me!' he screeches, 'I'm into a sink-hole! The quicksand's got me,' sez he. So I drop my rifle, I did,—there she stands against that birch sapling!—and I run down into them there pitcher-plants. [102]

"'Whar be ye!' I yells. Then I listens, and don't hear nothin' only a kina wallerin' noise an' a slobber like he was gulpin' mud.

"Then I foller them there sounds and I come out by that sink-hole. The water was a-shakin' all over it but Jake he had went down plum out o' sight. T'want no use. I cut a sapling an' I poked down. I was sick and scared like, so when you come up over the moss, not makin' no noise, an' grabbed me—God!—I guess you'd jump, too."

Quintana's dark, tense face was expressionless when Leverett ventured to look at him. Like most liars he realised the advisability of looking his victim straight in the eyes. This he managed to accomplish, sustaining the cold intensity of Quintana's gaze as long as he deemed it necessary. Then he started toward his rifle. Quintana blocked his way.

"Where my packet?"

"Gol ram it! Ain't I told you? Jake had it in his pocket."

"My packet?"

"Yaas, yourn."

"My packet, it is down in thee sink 'ole?"

"You think I'm lyin'?" blustered Leverett, trying to move around Quintana's extended arm. The arm swerved and clutched him by the collar of his flannel shirt.

"Wait, my frien'," said Quintana in a soft voice. "You shall explain to me some things before you go."

"Explain what!—you gol dinged——"

Quintana shook him into speechlessness.

"Listen, my frien'," he continued with a terrifying smile, "I mus' ask you what it was, that gunshot, which I hear while I await at Drown' Vallee. Eh? Who fire a gun?"

[103]

"I ain't heard no gun," replied Leverett in a strangled voice.

"You did not shoot? No?"

"No!—damn it all——"

"And Jake? He did not fire?"

"No, I tell yeh——"

"Ah! Someone lies. It is not me, my frien'. No. Let us examine your rifle——"

Leverett made a rush for the gun; Quintana slung him back against the oak tree and thrust an automatic pistol against his chin.

"Han's up, my frien'," he said gently, "—up! high up!—or someone will fire another shot you shall never hear.... So!... Now I search the other pocket.... So!... Still no packet. Bah! Not in the pants, either? Ah, bah! But wait! Tiens! What is this you hide inside your shirt——?"

"I was jokin'," gasped Leverett; "—I was jest a-goin' to give it to you——"

"Is that my packet?"

"Yes. It was all in fun; I wan't a-going to steal it——"

Quintana unbuttoned the grey wool shirt, thrust in his hand and drew forth the packet for which Jake Kloon had died within the hour.

Suddenly Leverett's knees gave way and he dropped to the ground, grovelling at Quintana's feet in an agony of fright:

"Don't hurt me," he screamed, "—I didn't meant no harm! Jake, he wanted me to steal it. I told him I was honest. I fired a shot to scare him, an' he tuk an' run off! I wan't a-goin' to steal it off you, so help me God! I was lookin' for you—as God is my witness——"

[104]

He got Quintana by one foot. Quintana kicked him aside and backed away.

"Swine," he said, calmly inspecting the whimpering creature who had started to crawl toward him.

He hesitated, lifted his automatic, then, as though annoyed by Leverett's deafening shriek, shrugged, hesitated, pocketed both pistol and packet, and turned on his heel.

By the birch sapling he paused and picked up Leverett's rifle. Something left a red smear on his palm as he worked the ejector. It was blood.

Quintana gazed curiously at his soiled hand. Then he stooped and picked up the empty cartridge case which had been ejected. And, as he stooped, he noticed more blood on a fallen leaf.

With one foot, daintily as a game-cock scratches, he brushed away the fallen leaves, revealing the mess underneath.

After he had contemplated the crimson traces of murder for a few moments, he turned and looked at Leverett with faint curiosity.

"So," he said in his leisurely, emotionless way, "you have fight with my frien' Jake for thee packet. Yes? Ver' amusing." He shrugged his indifference, tossed the rifle to his shoulder and, without another glance at the cringing creature on the ground, walked away toward Drowned Valley, unhurriedly.

III

[105]

When Quintana disappeared among the tamaracks, Leverett ventured to rise to his knees. As he crouched there, peering after Quintana, a man came swiftly out of the forest behind him and

nearly stumbled over him.

Recognition was instant and mutual as the man jerked the trap-robber to his feet, stifling the muffled yell in his throat.

"I want that packet you picked up on Clinch's veranda," said Hal Smith.

"M-my God," stammered Leverett, "Quintana just took it off me. He ain't been gone a minute——"

"You lie!"

"I ain't lyin'. Look at his foot-marks there in the mud!"

"Quintana!"

"Yaas, Quintana! He tuk my gun, too——"

"Which way!" whispered Smith fiercely, shaking Leverett till his jaws wagged.

"Drowned Valley.... Lemme loose!—I'm chokin'——"

Smith pushed him aside.

"You rat," he said, "if you're lying to me I'll come back and settle your affair. And Kloons', too!"

"Quintana shot Jake and stuck him into a sink-hole!" snivelled Leverett, breaking down and sobbing; "—oh, Gawd—Gawd—he's down under all that black mud with his brains spillin' out——"

But Smith was already gone, running lightly along the string of footprints which led straight away across slime and sphagnum toward the head of Drowned Valley.

In the first clump of hard-wood trees Smith saw Quintana. He had halted and he was fumbling at the twine which bound a flat, paper-wrapped packet. [106]

He did not start when Smith's sharp warning struck his ear: "Don't move! I've got you over my rifle, Quintana!"

Quintana's fingers had instantly ceased operations. Then, warily, he lifted his head and looked into the muzzle of Smith's rifle.

"Ah, bah!" he said tranquilly. "There were three of you, then."

"Lay that packet on the ground."

"My frien'——"

"Drop it or I'll drop *you*!"

Quintana carefully placed the packet on a bed of vivid moss.

"Now your gun!" continued Smith.

Quintana shrugged and laid Leverett's rifle beside the packet.

"Kneel down with your hands up and your back toward me!" said Smith.

"My frien'——"

"Down with you!"

Quintana dropped gracefully into the humiliating attitude popularly indicative of prayerful supplication. Smith walked slowly up behind him, relieved him of two automatics and a dirk.

"Stay put," he said sharply, as Quintana started to turn his head. Then he picked up the packet with its loosened string, slipped it into his side pocket, gathered together the arsenal which had decorated Quintana, and so, loaded with weapons, walked away a few paces and seated himself on a fallen log. [107]

Here he pocketed both automatics, shoved the sheathed dirk into his belt, placed the captured rifle handy, after examining the magazine, and laid his own weapon across his knees.

"You may turn around now, Quintana," he said amiably.

Quintana lowered his arms and started to rise.

"Sit down!" said Smith.

Quintana seated himself on the moss, facing Smith.

"Now, my gay and nimble thimble-rigger," said Smith genially, "while I take ten minutes' rest we'll have a little polite conversation. Or, rather, a monologue. Because I don't want to hear anything from you."

He settled himself comfortably on the log:

"Let me assemble for you, Señor Quintana, the interesting history of the jewels which so sparkingly repose in the packet in my pocket.

"In the first place, as you know, Monsieur Quintana, the famous Flaming Jewel and the other gems contained in this packet of mine, belonged to Her Highness the Grand Duchess Theodorica of Esthonia.

"Very interesting. More interesting still—along comes Don José Quintana and his celebrated gang of international thieves, and steals from the Grand Duchess of Esthonia the Flaming Jewel and all her rubies, emeralds and diamonds. Yes?"

"Certainly," said Quintana, with a polite inclination of acknowledgment.

"Bon! Well, then, still more interesting to relate, a gentleman named Clinch helps himself to these famous jewels. How very careless of you, Mr. Quintana." [108]

"Careless, certainly," assented Quintana politely.

"Well," said Smith, laughing, "Clinch was more careless still. The robber baron, Sir Jacobus Kloon, swiped,—as Froissart has it,—the Esthonian gems, and, under agreement to deliver them to you, I suppose, thought better of it and attempted to abscond. Do you get me, Herr Quintana?"

"Gewiss."

"Yes, and you got Jake Kloon, I hear," laughed Smith.

"No."

"Didn't you kill Kloon?"

"No."

"Oh, pardon. The mistake was natural. You merely robbed Kloon and Leverett. You should have killed them."

"Yes," said Quintana slowly, "I should have. It was my mistake."

"Signor Quintana, it is human for the human crook to err. Sooner or later he always does it. And then the Piper comes around holding out two itching palms."

"Mr. Smith," said Quintana pleasantly, "you are an unusually agreeable gentleman for a thief. I regret that you do not see your way to an amalgamation of interests with myself."

"As you say, Quintana mea, I am somewhat unusual. For example, what do you suppose I am going to do with this packet in my pocket?"

"Live," replied Quintana tersely.

"Live, certainly," laughed Smith, "but not on the proceeds of this coup-de-main. Non pas! I am going to return this packet to its rightful owner, the Grand Duchess Theodorica of Esthonia. And what do you think of that, Quintana?" [109]

Quintana smiled.

"You do not believe me?" inquired Smith.

Quintana smiled again.

"Allons, bon!" exclaimed Smith, rising. "It's the unusual that happens in life, my dear Quintana. And now we'll take a little inventory of these marvellous gems before we part.... Sit very, very still, Quintana,—unless you want to lie stiller still.... I'll let you take a modest peep at the Flaming Jewel—" busily unwrapping the packet—"just one little peep, Quintana—"

He unwrapped the paper. Two cakes of sugar-milk chocolate lay within.

Quintana turned white, then deeply, heavily red. Then he smiled in ghastly fashion:

"Yes," he said hoarsely, "as you have just said, sir, it is usually the unusual which happens in the world."

EPISODE SIX

THE JEWEL AFLAME

MIKE CLINCH and his men "drove" Star Peak, and drew a blanket covert.

There was a new shanty atop, camp débris, plenty of signs of recent occupation everywhere,—hot embers in which offal still smouldered, bottles odorous of claret dregs, and an aluminum culinary outfit, unwashed, as though Quintana and his men had departed in haste.

Far in the still valley below, Mike Clinch squatted beside the runway he had chosen, a cocked rifle across his knees.

The glare in his small, pale eyes waned and flared as distant sounds broke the forest silence, grew vague, died out,—the fairy clatter of a falling leaf, the sudden scurry of a squirrel, a feathery rustle of swift wings in play or combat, the soft crash of a rotten bough sagging earthward to enrich the soil that grew it.

And, as Clinch squatted there, murderously intent, ever the fixed obsession burned in his fever brain, stirring his thin lips to incessant muttering,—a sort of soundless invocation, part chronicle, part prayer:

"O God A'mighty, in your big, swell mansion up there, all has went contrary with me sence you let that there damn millionaire, Harrod, come into this here forest.... He went and built unto hissself an habitation, and he put up a wall of law all around me where I was earnin' a lawful livin' in Thy nice, clean wilderness.... And now comes this here Quintana and robs my girlie.... I promised her mother I'd make a lady of her little Eve.... I loved my wife, O Lord.... Once she showed me a piece in the Bible,—I ain't never found it sence,—but it said: 'And the woman she fled into the wilderness where there was a place prepared for her of God.' ... That's what *you* wrote into your own Bible, O God! You can't go back on it. I seen it.

[111]

"And now I wanta to ask, What place did you prepare for my Eve? What spot have you reference to? You didn't mean my 'Dump,' did you? Why, Lord, that ain't no place for no lady.... And now Quintana has went and robbed me of what I'd saved up for Eve.... Does that go with Thee, O Lord? No, it don't. And it don't go with me, neither. I'm a-goin' to git Quintana. Then I'm a-goin' to git them two minks that robbed my girlie,—I am!... Jake Klooon, he done it in cahoots with Earl Leverett; and Quintana set 'em on. And they gotta die, O Lord of Israel, them there Egyptians is about to hop the twig.... I ain't aimin' to be mean to nobody. I buy hootch of them that runs it. I eat mountain mutton in season and out. I trade with law-breakers, I do. But, Lord, I gotta get my girlie outa here; and Harrod he walled me in with the chariots and spears of Egypt, till I nigh went wild.... And now comes Quintana, and here I be a-lyin' out to get him so's my girlie can become a lady, same's them fine folks with all their butlers and automobiles and what-not—"

A far crash in the forest stilled his twitching lips and stiffened every iron muscle.

As he lifted his rifle, Sid Hone came into the glade.

[112]

"Yahoo! Yahoo!" he called. "Where be you, Mike?"

Clinch slowly rose, grasping his rifle, his small, grey eyes ablaze.

"Where's Quintana?" he demanded.

"H'ain't you seen nobody?"

"No."

In the intense silence other sounds broke sharply in the sunset forest; Harvey Chase's halloo rang out from the rocks above; Blommers and the Hastings boys came slouching through the ferns.

Byron Hastings greeted Clinch with upflung gun: "Me and Jim heard a shot away out on Drowned Valley," he announced. "Was you out that way, Mike?"

"No."

One by one the men who had driven Star Peak lounged up in the red sunset light, gathering around Clinch and wiping the sweat from sun-reddened faces.

"Someone's in Drowned Valley," repeated Byron. "Them minks slid off'n Star in a hurry, I reckon, judgin' how they left their shanty. Phew! It stunk! They had French hootch, too."

"Mebby Leverett and Klooon told 'em we was fixin' to visit them," suggested Blommers.

"They didn't know," said Clinch.

"Where's Hal Smith?" inquired Hone.

Clinch made no reply. Blommers silently gnawed a new quid from the remains of a sticky plug.

"Well," inquired Jim Hastings finally, "do we quit, Mike, or do we still-hunt in Drowned Valley?"

"Not me, at night," remarked Blommers drily.

"Not amongst them sink-holes," added Hone.

[113]

Suddenly Clinch turned and stared at him. Then the deadly light from his little eyes shone on

the others one by one.

"Boys," he said, "I gotta get Quintana. I can't never sleep another wink till I get that man. Come on. Act up like gents all. Let's go."

Nobody stirred.

"Come on," repeated Clinch softly. But his lips shrank back, twitching.

As they looked at him they saw his teeth.

"All right, all right," growled Hone, shouldering his rifle with a jerk.

The Hastings boys, young and rash, shuffled into the trail. Blommers hesitated, glanced askance at Clinch, and instantly made up his mind to take a chance with the sink-holes rather than with Clinch.

"God A'mighty, Mike, what be you aimin' to do?" faltered Harvey.

"I'm aimin' to stop the inlet and outlet to Drowned Valley, Harve," replied Clinch in his pleasant voice. "God is a-goin' to deliver Quintana into my hands."

"All right. What next?"

"Then," continued Clinch, "I cal'late to set down and wait."

"How long?"

"Ask God, boys. I don't know. All I know is that whatever is livin' in Drowned Valley at this hour has gotta live and die there. For it can't never live to come outen that there morass walkin' onto two legs like a real man."

He moved slowly along the file of sullen men, his rifle a-trail in one huge fist.

[114]

"Boys," he said, "I got first. There ain't no sink-hole deep enough to drowned me while Eve needs me.... And my little girlie needs me bad.... After she gits what's her'n, then I don't care no more...." He looked up into the sky, where the last ashes of sunset faded from the zenith.... "Then I don't care," he murmured. "Like's not I'll creep away like some shot-up critter, n'kinda find some lone, safe spot, n'kinda fix me f'r a long nap.... I guess that'll be the way ... when Eve's a lady down to Noo York 'r'som'ers—" he added vaguely.

Then, still looking up at the fading heavens, he moved forward, head lifted, silent, unhurried, with the soundless, stealthy, and certain tread of those who walk unseeing and asleep.

II

Clinch had not taken a dozen strides before Hal Smith loomed up ahead in the rosy dusk, driving in Leverett before him.

An exclamation of fierce exultation burst from Clinch's thin lips as he flung out one arm, indicating Smith and his clinking prisoner:

"Who was that gol-dinged catamount that suspicioned Hal? I wa'nt worried none, neither. Hal's a gent. Mebbe he sticks up folks, too, but he's a gent. And gents is honest or they ain't gents."

Smith came up at his easy, tireless gait, hustling Leverett along with prods from gun-butt or muzzle, as came handiest.

The prisoner turned a ghastly visage on Clinch, who ignored him.

"Got my packet, Hal?" he demanded.

[115]

Smith poked Leverett with his rifle: "Tune up," he said; "tell Clinch your story."

As a caged rat looks death in the face, his ratty wits working like lightning and every atom of cunning and ferocity alert for attack or escape, so the little, mean eyes of Earl Leverett became fixed on Clinch like two immobile and glassy beads of jet.

"G'wan," said Clinch softly, "spit it out."

"Jake done it," muttered Leverett, thickly.

"Done what?"

"Stole that there packet o' yourn—whatever there was into it."

"Who put him up to it?"

"A fella called Quintana."

"What was there in it for Jake?" inquired Clinch pleasantly.

"Ten thousand."

"How about you?"

"I told 'em I wouldn't touch it. Then they pulled their guns on me, and I was scared to squeal."

"So that was the way?" asked Clinch in his even, reassuring voice.

Leverett's eyes travelled stealthily around the circle of men, then reverted to Clinch.

"I dassn't touch it," he said, "but I dassn't squeal.... I was huntin' onto Drowned Valley when Jake meets up with me."

"I got the packet," he sez, "and I'm a-going to double criss-cross Quintana, I am, and beat it. Don't you wish you was whacks with me?"

"No," sez I, "honesty is my policy, no matter what they tell about me. S'help me God, I ain't never robbed no trap and I ain't no skin thief, whatever lies folks tell. All I ever done was run a little hootch, same's everybody." [116]

He licked his lips furtively, his cold, bright eyes fastened on Clinch.

"G'wan, Earl," nodded the latter, "heave her up."

"That's all. I sez, 'Good-bye, Jake. An' if you heed my warnin', ill-gotten gains ain't a-going to prosper nobody.' That's what I said to Jake Kloon, the last solemn words I spoke to that there man now in his bloody grave——"

"Hey?" demanded Clinch.

"That's where Jake is," repeated Leverett. "Why, so help me, I wa'nt gone ten yards when, bang! goes a gun, and I see this here Quintana come outen the bush, I do, and walk up to Jake and frisk him, and Jake still a-kickin' the moss to slivers. Yessir, that's what I seen."

"G'wan."

"Yessir.... 'N'then Quintana he shoved Jake into a sink-hole. Thaswot I seen with my two eyes. Yessir. 'N'then Quintana he run off, 'n'I jest set down in the trail, I did; 'n'then Hal come up and acted like I had stole your packet, he did; 'n'then I told him what Quintana done. 'N'Hal, he takes after Quintana, but I don't guess he meets up with him, for he come back and ketched holt o' me, 'n'he druv me in like I was a caaf, he did. 'N'here I be."

The dusk in the forest had deepened so that the men's faces had become mere blotches of grey.

Smith said to Clinch: "That's his story, Mike. But I preferred he should tell it to you himself, so I brought him along.... Did you drive Star Peak?"

"There wa'nt nothin' onto it," said Clinch very softly. Then, of a sudden, his shadowy visage became contorted and he jerked up his rifle and threw a cartridge into the magazine. [117]

"You dirty louse!" he roared at Leverett, "you was into this, too, a-robbin' my little Eve——"

"Run!" yelled somebody, giving Leverett a violent shove into the woods.

In the darkness and confusion, Clinch shouldered his way out of the circle and fired at the crackling noise that marked Leverett's course,—fired again, lower, and again as a distant crash revealed the frenzied flight of the trap-robber. After he had fired a fourth shot, somebody struck up his rifle.

"Aw," said Jim Hastings, "that ain't no good. You act up like a kid, Mike. 'Tain't so far to Ghost Lake, n'them Troopers might hear you."

After a silence, Clinch spoke, his voice heavy with reaction:

"Into that there packet is my little girl's dower. It's all I got to give her. It's all she's got to make her a lady. I'll kill any man that robs her or that helps rob her. 'N'that's that."

"Are you going on after Quintana?" asked Smith.

"I am. 'N'these fellas are a-going with me. N' I want you should go back to my Dump and look after my girlie while I'm gone."

"How long are you going to be away?"

"I dunno."

There was a silence. Then,

"All right," said Smith, briefly. He added: "Look out for sink-holes, Mike." [118]

Clinch tossed his heavy rifle to his shoulder: "Let's go," he said in his pleasant, misleading way, "—and I'll shoot the guts outa any fella that don't show up at roll call."

III

For its size there is no fiercer animal than a rat.

Rat-like rage possessed Leverett. In his headlong flight through the dusk, fear, instead of

quenching, added to his rage; and he ran on and on, crashing through the undergrowth, made wilder by the pain of vicious blows from branches which flew back and struck him in the dark.

Thorns bled him; unseen logs tripped him; he heard Clinch's bullets whining around him; and he ran on, beginning to sob and curse in a frenzy of fury, fear, and shame.

Shots from Clinch's rifle ceased; the fugitive dropped into a heavy, shuffling walk, slavering, gasping, gesticulating with his weaponless fists in the darkness.

"Gol ram ye, I'll fix ye!" he kept stammering in his snarling, jangling voice, broken by sobs. "I'll learn ye, yeh poor danged thing, gol ram ye——"

An unseen limb struck him cruelly across the face, and a moose-bush tripped him flat. Almost crazed, he got up, yelling in his pain, one hand wet and sticky from blood welling up from his cheek-bone.

He stood listening, infuriated, vindictive, but heard nothing save the panting, animal sounds in his own throat.

He strove to see in the ghostly obscurity around him, but could make out little except the trees close by.

But wood-rats are never completely lost in their native darkness; and Leverett presently discovered the far stars shining faintly through rifts in the phantom foliage above. [119]

These heavenly signals were sufficient to give him his directions. Then the question suddenly came, *which* direction?

To his own shack on Stinking Lake he dared not go. He tried to believe that it was fear of Clinch that made him shy of the home shanty; but, in his cowering soul, he knew it was fear of another kind—the deep, superstitious horror of Jake Kloon's empty bunk—the repugnant sight of Kloon's spare clothing hanging from its peg—the dead man's shoes——

No, he could not go to Stinking Lake and sleep.... And wake with the faint stench of sulphur in his throat.... And see the worm-like leeches unfolding in the shallows, and the big, reddish water-lizards, livid as skinned eels, wriggling convulsively toward their sunless lairs....

At the mere thought of his dead bunk-mate he sought relief in vindictive rage—stirred up the smouldering embers again, cursed Clinch and Hal Smith, violently searching in his inflamed brain some instant vengeance upon these men who had driven him out from the only place on earth where he knew how to exist—the wilderness.

All at once he thought of Clinch's step-daughter. The thought instantly scared him. Yet—what a revenge!—to strike Clinch through the only creature he cared for in all the world!... What a revenge!... Clinch was headed for Drowned Valley. Eve Strayer was alone at the Dump.... Another thought flashed like lightning across his turbid mind;—*the packet* !

Bribed by Quintana, Jake Kloon, lurking at Clinch's door, had heard him direct Eve to take a packet to Owl Marsh, and had notified Quintana. [120]

Wittingly or unwittingly, the girl had taken a packet of sugar-milk chocolate instead of the priceless parcel expected.

Again, carried in, exhausted, by a State Trooper, Jake Kloon had been fooled; and it was the packet of sugar-milk chocolate that Jake had purloined from the veranda where Clinch kicked it. For two cakes of chocolate Kloon had died. For two cakes of chocolate he, Earl Leverett, had become a man-slayer, a homeless fugitive in peril of his life.

He stood licking his blood-dried lips there in the darkness, striving to hatch courage out of the dull fury eating at a coward's heart.

Somewhere in Clinch's Dump was the packet that would make him rich.... Here was his opportunity. He had only to dare; and pain and poverty and fear—above all else *fear*—would end forever!...

When, at last, he came out to the edge of Clinch's clearing, the dark October heavens were but a vast wilderness of stars.

Star Pond, set to its limpid depths with the heavenly gems, glittered and darkled with its million diamond incrustations. The humped-up lump of Clinch's Dump crouched like some huge and feeding night-beast on the bank, ringed by the solemn forest.

There was a kerosene lamp burning in Eve Strayer's rooms. Another light—a candle—flickered in the kitchen.

Leverett, crouching, ran rat-like down to the barn, slid in between the ice house and corn-crib, crawled out among the wilderness of weeds and lay flat. [121]

The light burned steadily from Eve's window.

IV

From his form among frost-blackened rag-weeds, the trap-robber could see only the plastered ceiling of the bed chamber.

But the kerosene lamp cast two shadows on that—tall shadows of human shapes that stirred at times.

The trap-robber, scared, stiffened to immobility, but his little eyes remained fastened on the camera obscura above. All the cunning, patience, and murderous immobility of the rat were his.

Not a weed stirred under the stars where he lay with tiny, unwinking eyes intent upon the shadows on the ceiling.

The shadows on the ceiling were cast by Eve Strayer and her State Trooper.

Eve sat on her bed's edge, swathed in a lilac silk kimona—delicate relic of school days. Her bandaged feet, crossed, dangled above the rag-rug on the floor; her slim, tanned fingers were interlaced over the book on her lap.

Near the door stood State Trooper Stormont, spurred, booted, trig and trim, an undecided and flushed young man, fumbling irresolutely with the purple cord on his campaign-hat.

The book on Eve's knees—another relic of the past—was *Sigurd the Volsung*. Stormont had been reading to her—they having found, after the half shy tentatives of new friends, a point d'appui in literature. And the girl, admitting a passion for the poets, invited him to inspect the bookcase of unpainted pine which Clinch had built into her bedroom wall.

[122]

Here it was he discovered mutual friends among the nobler Victorians—surprised to discover *Sigurd* there—and, carrying it to her bedside, looked leisurely through the half forgotten pages.

"Would you read a little?" she ventured.

He blushed but did his best. His was an agreeable, boyish voice, betraying taste and understanding. Time passed quickly—not so much in the reading but in the conversations intervening.

And now, made uneasy by chance consultation with his wrist-watch, and being rather a conscientious young man, he had risen and had informed Eve that she ought to go to sleep.

And she had denounced the idea, almost fretfully.

"Even if you go I shan't sleep till daddy comes," she said. "Of course," she added, smiling at him out of gentian-blue eyes, "if *you* are sleepy I shouldn't dream of asking you to stay."

"I'm not intending to sleep."

"What are you going to do?"

"Take a chair on the landing outside your door."

"What!"

"Certainly. What did you expect me to do, Eve?"

"Go to bed, of course. The beds in the guest rooms are all made up."

"Your father didn't expect me to do that," he said, smiling.

"I'm not afraid, as long as you're in the house," she said.

She looked up at him again, wistfully. Perhaps he was restless, bored, sitting there beside her half the day, and, already, half the night. Men of that kind—active, nervous young men accustomed to the open, can't stand caging.

[123]

"I want you to go out and get some fresh air," she said. "It's a wonderful night. Go and walk a while. And—if you feel like—coming back to me—"

"Will you sleep?"

"No, I'll wait for you."

Her words were natural and direct, but in their simplicity there seemed a delicate sweetness that stirred him.

"I'll come back to you," he said.

Then, in his response, the girl in her turn became aware of something beside the simple words—a vague charm about them that faintly haunted her after he had gone away down the stairs.

That was the man she had once tried to kill! At the sudden and terrible recollection she shivered from curly head to bandaged feet. Then she trembled a little with the memory of his lips against her bruised hands—bruised by handcuffs which he had fastened upon her.

She sat very, very still now, huddled on the bed's edge, scarcely breathing.

For the girl was beginning to dare formulate the deepest of any thoughts that ever had stirred her virgin mind and body.

If it was love, then it had come suddenly, and strangely. It had come on that day—at the very moment when he flung her against the tree and handcuffed her—that terrible instant—if it were love.

Or—what was it that so delicately overwhelmed her with pleasure in his presence, in his voice, in the light, firm sound of his spurred tread on the veranda below?

Friendship? A lonely passion for young and decent companionship? The clean youth of him in contrast to the mangy, surly louts who haunted Clinch's Dump,—was that the appeal?

Listening there where she sat clasping the book, she heard his steady tread patrolling the veranda; caught the faint fragrance of his brier pipe in the still night air.

"I think—I think it's—love," she said under her breath.... "But he couldn't ever think of me——" always listening to his spurred tread below.

After a while she placed both bandaged feet on the rug. It hurt her, but she stood up, walked to the open window. She wanted to look at him—just a moment——

By chance he looked up at that instant, and saw her pale face, like a flower in the starlight.

"Why, Eve," he said, "you ought not to be on your feet."

"Once," she said, "you weren't so particular about my bruises."

Her breathless little voice coming down through the starlight thrilled him.

"Do you remember what I did?" he asked.

"Yes. You bruised my hands and made my mouth bleed."

"I did penance—for your hands."

"Yes, you kissed *them* !"

What possessed her—what irresponsible exhilaration was inciting her to a daring utterly foreign to her nature? She heard herself laugh, knew that she was young, pretty, capable of provocation. And in a sudden, breathless sort of way an overwhelming desire seized her to please, to charm, to be noticed by such a man—whatever, on afterthought, he might think of the step-child of Mike Clinch.

Stormont had come directly under her window and stood looking up.

"I dared not offer further penance," he said.

The emotion in his voice stirred her—but she was still laughing down at him.

She said: "You *did* offer further penance—you offered your handkerchief. So—as that was *all* you offered as reparation for—my lips——"

"Eve! I could have taken you into my arms——"

"You *did* ! And threw me down among the spruces. You really did everything that a contrite heart could suggest——"

"Good heavens!" said that rather matter-of-fact young man, "I don't believe you have forgiven me after all."

"I have—everything except the handkerchief——"

"Then I'm coming up to complete my penance——"

"I'll lock my door!"

"Would you?"

"I ought to.... But if you are in great spiritual distress, and if you really and truly repent, and if you humbly desire to expiate your sin by doing—penance——" And hesitated: "Do you so desire?"

"Yes, I do."

"Humbly? Contritely?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Say 'Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.'"

"Mea maxima culpa," he said so earnestly, looking up into her face that she bent lower over the sill to see him.

"Let me come up, Eve," he said.

She strove to laugh, gazing down into his shadowy face—but suddenly the desire had left her,—and all her gaiety left her, too, suddenly, leaving only a still excitement in her breast.

"You—you knew I was just laughing," she said unsteadily. "You understood, didn't you?"

"I don't know."

After a silence: "I didn't mean you to take me seriously," she said. She tried to laugh. It was no use. And, as she leaned there on the sill, her heart frightened her with its loud beating.

"Will you let me come up, Eve?"

No answer.

"Would you lock your door?"

"What do you think I'd do?" she asked tremulously.

"You know; I don't."

"Are you so sure I know what I'd do? I don't think either of us know our own minds.... I seem to have lost some of my wits.... Somehow...."

"If you are not going to sleep, let me come up."

"I want you to take a walk down by the pond. And while you're walking there all by yourself, I want you to think very clearly, very calmly, and make up your mind whether I should remain awake to-night, or whether, when you return, I ought to be asleep and—and my door bolted."

After a long pause: "All right," he said in a low voice.

V

She saw him walk away—saw his shadowy, well-built form fade into the starlit mist.

An almost uncontrollable impulse set her throat and lips quivering with desire to call to him through the night, "I do love you! I do love you! Come back quickly, quickly!—" [127]

Fog hung over Star Pond, edging the veranda, rising in frail shreds to her window. The lapping of the water sounded very near. An owl was very mournful in the hemlocks.

The girl turned from the window, looked at the door for a moment, then her face flushed and she walked toward a chair and seated herself, leaving the door unbolted.

For a little while she sat upright, alert, as though a little frightened. After a few moments she folded her hands and sat unstirring, with lowered head, awaiting Destiny.

It came, noiselessly. And so swiftly that the rush of air from her violently opened door was what first startled her.

For in the same second Earl Leverett was upon her in his stockinged feet, one bony hand gripping her mouth, the other flung around her, pinning both arms to her sides.

"The packet!" he panted, "—quick, yeh dirty little cat, 'r'I'll break yeh head off'n yeh damn neck!"

She bit at the hand that he held crushed against her mouth. He lifted her bodily, flung her onto the bed, and, twisting sheet and quilt around her, swathed her to the throat.

Still controlling her violently distorted lips with his left hand and holding her so, one knee upon her, he reached back, unsheathed his hunting knife, and pricked her throat till the blood spurted.

"Now, gol ram yeh!" he whispered fiercely, "where's Mike's packet? Yell, and I'll hog-stick yeh fur fair! Where is it, you dum thing!" [128]

He took his left hand from her mouth. The distorted, scarlet lips writhed back, displaying her white teeth clenched.

"Where's Mike's bundle!" he repeated, hoarse with rage and fear.

"You rat!" she gasped.

At that he closed her mouth again, and again he pricked her with his knife, cruelly. The blood welled up onto the sheets.

"Now, by God!" he said in a ghastly voice, "answer or I'll hog-stick yeh next time! Where is it? Where! where!"

She only showed her teeth in answer. Her eyes flamed.

"Where! Quick! Gol ding yeh, I'll shove this knife in behind your ear if you don't tell! Go on. Where is it? It's in this Dump som'ers. I know it is—don't lie! You want that I should stick you good? That what you want—you dirty little dump-slut? Well, then, gol ram yeh—I'll fix yeh like

Quintana was aimin' at——"

He slit the sheet downward from her imprisoned knees, seized one wounded foot and tried to slash the bandages.

"I'll cut a coupla toes off'n yeh," he snarled, "—I'll hamstring yeh fur keeps!"—struggling to mutilate her while she flung her helpless and entangled body from side to side and bit at the hand that was almost suffocating her.

Unable to hold her any longer, he seized a pillow, to bury the venomous little head that writhed, biting, under his clutch.

As he lifted it he saw a packet lying under it.

"By God!" he panted.

As he seized it she screamed for the first time: "Jack! Jack Stormont!"—and fairly hurled her helpless little body at Leverett, striking him full in the face with her head.

Half stunned, still clutching the packet, he tried to stab her in the stomach; but the armour of bed-clothes turned the knife, although his violence dashed all breath out of her.

Sick with the agony of it, speechless, she still made the effort; and, as he stumbled to his feet and turned to escape, she struggled upright, choking, blood running from the knife pricks in her neck.

With the remnant of her strength, and still writhing and gasping for breath, she tore herself from the sheets and blankets, reeled across the room to where Stormont's rifle stood, threw in a cartridge, dragged herself to the window.

Dimly she saw a running figure in the night mist, flung the rifle across the window sill and fired. Then she fired again—or thought she did. There were two shots.

"Eve!" came Stormont's sharp cry, "what the devil are you trying to do to me?"

His cry terrified her; the rifle clattered to the floor.

The next instant he came running up the stairs, bare headed, heavy pistol swinging, and halted, horrified at sight of her.

"Eve! My God!" he whispered, taking her blood-wet body into his arms.

"Go after Leverett," she gasped. "He's robbed daddy. He's running away—out there—somewhere——"

"Where did he hurt you, Eve—my little Eve——"

"Oh, go! go!" she wailed,—"I'm not hurt. He only pricked me with his knife. I'm not hurt, I tell you. Go after him! Take your pistol and follow him and kill him!"

"Oh," she cried hysterically, twisting and sobbing in his arms, "don't lose time here with me! Don't stand here while he's running away with dad's money!" And, "Oh—oh—oh !!" she sobbed, collapsing in his arms and clinging to him convulsively as he carried her to her tumbled bed and laid her there.

He said: "I couldn't risk following anybody now, after what has happened to you. I can't leave you alone here! Don't cry, Eve. I'll get your man for you, I promise! Don't cry, dear. It was all my fault for leaving this room even for a minute——"

"No, no, no! It's my fault. I sent you away. Oh, I wish I hadn't. I wish I had let you come back when you wanted to.... I was waiting for you.... I left the door unbolted for you. When it opened I thought it was you. And it was Leverett!—it was Leverett!——"

Stormont's face grew very white: "What did he do to you, Eve? Tell me, darling. What did he do to you?"

"Dad's money was under my pillow," she wailed. "Leverett tried to make me tell where it was. I wouldn't, and he hurt me——"

"How?"

"He pricked me with his knife. When I screamed for you he tried to choke me with the pillow. Didn't you hear me scream?"

"Yes. I came on the jump."

"It was too late," she sobbed; "—too late! He saw the money packet under my pillow and he snatched it and ran. Somehow I found your rifle and fired. I fired twice."

Her only bullet had torn his campaign hat from his head. But he did not tell her.

"Let me see your neck," he said, bending closer.

She bared her throat, making a soft, vague complaint like a hurt bird,—lay there whimpering under her breath while he bathed the blood away with lint, sterilised the two cuts from his

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emergency packet, and bound them.

He was still bending low over her when her blue eyes unclosed on his.

"That is the second time I've tried to kill you," she whispered. "I thought it was Leverett.... I'd have died if I had killed you."

There was a silence.

"Lie very still," he said huskily. "I'll be back in a moment to rebandage your feet and make you comfortable for the night."

"I can't sleep," she repeated desolately. "Dad trusted his money to me and I've let Leverett rob me. How can I sleep?"

"I'll bring you something to make you sleep."

"I can't!"

"I promise you you will sleep. Lie still."

He rose, went away downstairs and out to the barn, where his campaign hat lay in the weed, drilled through by a bullet.

There was something else lying there in the weeds,—a flat, muddy, shoeless shape sprawling grotesquely in the foggy starlight.

One hand clutched a hunting knife; the other a packet.

Stormont drew the packet from the stiff fingers, then turned the body over, and, flashing his electric torch, examined the ratty visage—what remained of it—for his pistol bullet had crashed through from ear to cheek-bone, almost obliterating the trap-robber's features.

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Stormont came slowly into Eve's room and laid the packet on the sheet beside her.

"Now," he said, "there is no reason for you to lie awake any longer. I'll fix you up for the night."

Deftly he unbandaged, bathed, dressed, and rebandaged her slim white feet—little wounded feet so lovely, so exquisite that his hand trembled as he touched them.

"They're doing fine," he said cheerily. "You've half a degree of fever and I'm going to give you something to drink before you go to sleep—"

He poured out a glass of water, dissolved two tablets, supported her shoulders while she drank in a dazed way, looking always at him over the glass.

"Now," he said, "go to sleep. I'll be on the job outside your door until your daddy arrives."

"How did you get back dad's money?" she asked in an odd, emotionless way as though too weary for further surprises.

"I'll tell you in the morning."

"Did you kill him? I didn't hear your pistol."

"I'll tell you all about it in the morning. Good night, Eve."

As he bent over her, she looked up into his eyes and put both arms around his neck.

It was her first kiss given to any man, except Mike Clinch.

After Stormont had gone out and closed the door, she lay very still for a long while.

Then, instinctively, she touched her lips with her fingers; and, at the contact, a blush clothed her from brow to ankle.

[133]

The Flaming Jewel in its morocco casket under her pillow burned with no purer fire than the enchanted flame glowing in the virgin heart of Eve Strayer of Clinch's Dump.

Thus they lay together, two lovely flaming jewels burning softly, steadily through the misty splendour of the night.

Under a million stars, Death sprawled in squalor among the trampled weeds. Under the same high stars dark mountains waited; and there was a silvery sound of waters stirring somewhere in the mist.

CLINCH'S DUMP

I

WHEN Mike Clinch bade Hal Smith return to the Dump and take care of Eve, Smith already had decided to go there.

Somewhere in Clinch's Dump was hidden the Flaming Jewel. Now was his time to search for it.

There were two other reasons why he should go back. One of them was that Leverett was loose. If anything had called Trooper Stormont away, Eve would be alone in the house. And nobody on earth could forecast what a coward like Leverett might attempt.

But there was another and more serious reason for returning to Clinch's. Clinch, blood-mad, was headed for Drowned Valley with his men, to stop both ends of that vast morass before Quintana and his gang could get out.

It was evident that neither Clinch nor any of his men—although their very lives depended upon familiarity with the wilderness—knew that a third exit from Drowned Valley existed.

But the nephew of the late Henry Harrod knew.

When Jake Kloon was a young man and Darragh was a boy, Kloon had shown him the rocky, submerged game trail into Drowned Valley. Doubtless Kloon had used it in hootch running since. If ever he had told anybody else about it, probably he had revealed the trail to Quintana. [135]

And that was why Darragh, or Hal Smith, finally decided to return to Star Pond;—because if Quintana had been told or had discovered that circuitous way out of Drowned Valley, he might go straight to Clinch's Dump.... And, supposing Stormont was still there, how long could one State Trooper stand off Quintana's gang?

No sooner had Clinch and his motley followers disappeared in the dusk than Smith unslung his basket-pack, fished out a big electric torch, flashed it tentatively, and then, reslinging the pack and taking his rifle in his left hand, he set off at an easy swinging stride.

His course was not toward Star Pond; it was at right angles with that trail. For he was taking no chances. Quintana might already have left Drowned Valley by that third exit unknown to Clinch.

Smith's course would now cut this unmarked trail, trodden only by game that left no sign in the shallow mountain rivulet which was the path.

The trail lay a long way off through the night. But if Quintana had discovered and taken that trail, it would be longer still for him—twice as long as the regular trail out.

For a mile or two the forest was first growth pine, and sufficiently open so that Smith might economise on his torch.

He knew every foot of it. As a boy he had carried a jacob-staff in the Geological Survey. Who better than the forest-roaming nephew of Henry Harrod should know this blind wilderness?

The great pines towered on every side, lofty and smooth to the feathery canopy that crowned them under the high stars. [136]

There was no game here, no water, nothing to attract anybody except the devastating lumberman. But this was a five thousand acre patch of State land. The ugly whine of the steam-saw would never be heard here.

On he walked at an easy, swinging stride, flashing his torch rarely, feeling no concern about discovery by Quintana's people.

It was only when he came into the hardwoods that the combined necessity for caution and torch perplexed and worried him.

Somewhere in here began an outcrop of rock running east for miles. Only stunted cedar and berry bushes found shallow nourishment on this ridge.

When at last he found it he travelled upon it, more slowly, constantly obliged to employ the torch.

After an hour, perhaps, his feet splashed in shallow water. *That* was what he was expecting. The water was only an inch or two deep; it was ice cold and running north.

Now, he must advance with every caution. For here trickled the thin flow of that rocky rivulet which was the other entrance and exit penetrating that immense horror of marsh and bog and depthless sink-hole known as Drowned Valley.

For a long while he did not dare to use his torch; but now he was obliged to.

He shined the ground at his feet, elevated the torch with infinite precaution, throwing a fan-shaped light over the stretch of sink he had suspected and feared. It flanked the flat, wet path of rock on either side. Here Death spread its slimy trap at his very feet.

Then, as he stood taking his bearings with burning torch, far ahead in the darkness a light flashed, went out, flashed twice more, and was extinguished.

Quintana!

Smith's wits were working like lightning, but instinct guided him before his brain took command. He levelled his torch and repeated the three signal flashes. Then, in darkness, he came to swift conclusion.

There were no other signals from the unknown. The stony bottom of the rivulet was his only aid.

In his right hand the torch hung almost touching the water. At times he ventured sufficient pressure for a feeble glimmer, then again trusted to his sense of contact.

For three hundred yards, counting his strides, he continued on. Then, in total darkness, he pocketed the torch, slid a cartridge into the breach of his rifle, slung the weapon, pulled out a handkerchief, and tied it across his face under the eyes.

Now, he drew the torch from his pocket, levelled it, sent three quick flashes out into darkness.

Instantly, close ahead, three blinding flashes broke out.

For Hal Smith it all had become a question of seconds.

Death lay depthless on either hand; ahead Death blocked the trail in silence.

Out of the dark some unseen rifle might vomit death in his very face at any moment.

He continued to move forward. After a little while his ear caught a slight splash ahead. Suddenly a glare of light enveloped him.

"Is it you, Harry Beck?"

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Instinct led again while wits worked madly: "Harry Beck is two miles back on guard. Where is Sard?"

The silence became terrible. Once the glaring light in front moved, then become fixed. There was a light splashing. Instantly Smith realised that the man in front had set his torch in a tree-crotch and was now cowering somewhere behind a levelled weapon. His voice came presently:

"Hé! Drap-a that-a gun damn quick!"

Smith bent, leisurely, and laid his rifle on a mossy rock.

"Now! You there! Why you want Sard! Eh?"

"I'll tell Sard, not you," retorted Smith coolly. "You listen to me, whoever you are. I'm from Sard's office in New York. I'm Abrams. The police are on their way here to find Quintana."

"How I know? Eh? Why shall I believe that? You tell-a me queeck or I blow-a your damn head off!"

"Quintana will blow-a *your* head off unless you take me to Sard," drawled Smith.

A movement might have meant death, but he calmly rummaged for a cigarette, lighted it, blew a cloud insolently toward the white glare ahead. Then he took another chance:

"I guess you're Nick Salzar, aren't you?"

"Si! I am Salzar. Who the dev' are you?"

"I'm Eddie Abrams, Sard's lawyer. My business is to find my client. If you stop me you'll go to prison—the whole gang of you—Sard, Quintana, Picquet, Sanchez, Georgiades and Harry Beck,—and *you*!"

After a dead silence: "Maybe *you'll* go to the chair, too!"

It was the third chance he took.

There was a dreadful stillness in the woods. Finally came a slight series of splashes; the crunch of heavy boots on rock.

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"For why you com-a here, eh?" demanded Salzar, in a less aggressive manner. "What-a da matt', eh?"

"Well," said Smith, "if you've got to know, there are people from Esthonia in New York.... If you understand that."

"Christi! When do they arrive?"

"A week ago. Sard's place is in the hands of the police. I couldn't stop them. They've got his

safe and all his papers. City, State, and Federal officers are looking for him. The Constabulary rode into Ghost Lake yesterday. Now, don't you think you'd better lead me to Sard?"

"Cristi!" exclaimed Salzar. "Sard he is a mile ahead with the others. Damn! Damn! Me, how should I know what is to be done? Me, I have my orders from Quintana. What I do, eh? Cristi! What to do? What you say I should do, eh, Abrams?"

A new fear had succeeded the old one—that was evident—and Salzar came forward into the light of his own fixed torch—a well-knit figure in slouch hat, grey shirt, and grey breeches, and wearing a red bandanna over the lower part of his face. He carried a heavy rifle.

He came on, sturdily, splashing through the water, and walked up to Smith, his rifle resting on his right shoulder.

"For me," he said excitedly, "long time I have worry in this-a damn wood! Si! Where you say those carabinieri? Eh?"

"At Ghost Lake. *Your* signature is in the hotel ledger."

"Cristi! You know where Clinch is?"

"You know, too. He is on the way to Drowned Valley."

"Damn! I knew it. Quintana also. You know where is Quintana? And Sard? I tell-a you. They march ver' fast to the Dump of Clinch. Si! And there they would discover these-a beeg-a dimon'—these-a Flame-Jewel. Si! *Now*, you tell-a me what I do?"

Smith said slowly: "If Quintana is marching on Clinch's he's marching into a trap!"

Salzar blanched above his bandanna.

"The State Troopers are there," said Smith. "They'll get him sure."

"Cristi," faltered Salzar, "—then they are gobble—Quintana, Sard, everybody! Si?"

Smith considered the man: "You can save *your* skin anyway. You can go back and tell Harry Beck. Then both of you can beat it for Drowned Valley."

He picked up his rifle, stood a moment in troubled reflection:

"If I could overtake Quintana I'd do it," he said. "I think I'll try. If I can't, he's done for. You tell Harry Beck that Eddie Abrams advises him to beat it for Drowned Valley."

Suddenly Salzar tore the bandanna from his face, flung it down and stamped on it.

"What I tell Quintana!" he yelled, his features distorted with rage. "I don't-a like!—no, not me!—no, I tell-a heem, stay at those Ghost-a Lake and watch thees-a fellow Clinch. Si! Not for me thees-a wood. No! I spit upon it! I curse like hell! I tell Quintana I don't-a like. Now, eet is trouble that comes and we lose-a out! Damn! *Damn!* Me, I find me Beck. You shall say to José Quintana how he is a damfool. Me, I am finish—me, Nick Salzar! You hear me, Abrams! I am through! I go!"

He glared at Smith, started to move, came back and took his torch, made a violent gesture with it which drenched the woods with goblin light.

"You stop-a Quintana, maybe. You tell-a heem he is the bigg-a fool! You tell-a heem Nick Salzar is no damn fool. No! Adios, my frien' Abrams. I beat it. I save my skin!"

Once more Salzar turned and headed for Drowned Valley.... Where Clinch would not fail to kill him.... The man was going to his death.... And it was Smith who sent him.

Suddenly it came to Smith that he could not do this thing; that this man had no chance; that he was slaying a human being with perfect safety to himself and without giving him a chance.

"Salzar!" he called sharply.

The man halted and looked around.

"Come back!"

Salzar hesitated, turned finally, slouched toward him.

Smith laid aside his pack and rifle, and, as Salzar came up, he quietly took his weapon from him and laid it beside his own.

"What-a da matt'?" demanded Salzar, astonished. "Why you taka my gun?"

Smith measured him. They were well matched.

"Set your torch in that crotch," he said.

Salzar, puzzled and impatient, demanded to know why. Smith took both torches, set them opposite each other and drew Salzar into the white glare.

"Now," he said, "you dirty desperado, I am going to try to kill you clean. Look out for yourself!"

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For a second Salzar stood rooted in blank astonishment.

"I'm one of Clinch's men," said Smith, "but I can't stick a knife in your back, at that! Now, take care of yourself if you can——"

His voice died in his throat; Salzar was on him, clawing, biting, kicking, striving to strangle him, to wrestle him off his feet. Smith reeled, staggering under the sheer rush of the man, almost blinded by blows, clutched, bewildered in Salzar's panther grip.

For a moment he writhed there, searching blindly for his enemy's wrist, striving to avoid the teeth that snapped at his throat, stifled by the hot stench of the man's breath in his face.

"I keel you! I keel you! Damn! Damn!" panted Salzar, in convulsive fury as Smith freed his left arm and struck him in the face.

Now, on the narrow, wet and slippery strip of rock they swayed to and fro, murderously interlocked, their heavy boots splashing, battling with limb and body.

Twice Salzar forced Smith outward over the sink, trying to end it, but could not free himself.

Once, too, he managed to get at a hidden knife, drag it out and stab at head and throat; but Smith caught the fist that wielded it, forced back the arm, held it while Salzar screamed at him, lunging at his face with bared teeth.

Suddenly the end came: Salzar's body heaved upward, sprawled for an instant in the dazzling glare, hurtled over Smith's head and fell into the sink with a crashing splash.

Frantically he thrashed there, spattering and floundering in darkness. He made no outcry. Probably he had landed head first. [143]

In a moment only a vague heaving came from the unseen ooze.

Smith, exhausted, drenched with sweat, leaned against a tamarack, sickened.

After all sound had ceased he straightened up with an effort. Presently he bent and recovered Salzar's red bandanna and his hat, lifted his own rifle and pack and struggled into the harness. Then, kicking Salzar's rifle overboard, he unfastened both torches, pocketed one, and started on in a flood of ghostly light.

He was shaking all over and the torch quivered in his hand. He had seen men die in the Great War. He had been near death himself. But never before had he been near death in so horrible a form. The sodden noises in the mud, the deadened flopping of the sinking body—mud-plastered hands beating frantically on mud, spattering, agonising in darkness—"My God," he breathed, "anything but that—anything but that!——"

II

Before midnight he struck the hard forest. Here there was no trail at all, only spreading outcrop of rock under dying leaves.

He could see a few stars. Cautiously he ventured to shine his compass close to the ground. He was still headed right. The ghostly sink country lay behind him.

Ahead of him, somewhere in darkness—but how far he did not know—Quintana and his people were moving swiftly on Clinch's Dump.

It may have been an hour later—two hours, perhaps—when from far ahead in the forest came a sound—the faint clink of a shod heel on rock. [144]

Now, Smith unslung his pack, placed it between two rocks where laurel grew.

Salzar's red bandanna was still wet, but he tied it across his face, leaving his eyes exposed. The dead man's hat fitted him. His own hat and the extra torch he dropped into his basket-pack.

Ready, now, he moved swiftly forward, trailing his rifle. And very soon it became plain to him that the people ahead were moving without much caution, evidently fearing no unfriendly ear or eye in that section of the wilderness.

Smith could hear their tread on rock and root and rotten branch, or swishing through frosted fern and brake, or louder on newly fallen leaves.

At times he could even see the round white glare of a torch on the ground—see it shift ahead, lighting up tree trunks, spread out, fanlike, into a wide, misty glory, then vanish as darkness rushed in from the vast ocean of the night.

Once they halted at a brook. Their torches flashed it; he heard them sounding its depths with their gun-butts.

Smith knew that brook. It was the east branch of Star Brook, the inlet to Star Pond.

Far ahead above the trees the sky seemed luminous. It was star lustre over the pond, turning the mist to a silvery splendour.

Now the people ahead of him moved with more caution, crossing the brook without splashing, and their boots made less noise in the woods.

To keep in touch with them Smith hastened his pace until he drew near enough to hear the low murmur of their voices. [145]

They were travelling in single file; he had a glimpse of them against the ghostly radiance ahead. Indeed, so near had he approached that he could hear the heavy, laboured breathing of the last man in the file—some laggard who dragged his feet, plodding on doggedly, panting, muttering. Probably the man was Sard.

Already the forest in front was invaded by the misty radiance from the clearing. Through the trees starlight glimmered on water. The perfume of the open land grew in the night air,—the scent of dew-wet grass, the smell of still water and of sedgy shores.

Lying flat behind a rotting log, Smith could see them all now,—spectral shapes against the light. There were five of them at the forest's edge.

They seemed to know what was to be done and how to do it. Two went down among the ferns and stunted willows toward the west shore of the pond; two sheered off to the southwest, shoulder deep in blackberry and sumac. The fifth man waited for a while, then ran down across the open pasture.

Scarcely had he started when Smith glided to the wood's edge, crouched, and looked down.

Below stood Clinch's Dump, plain in the starlight, every window dark. To the west the barn loomed, huge with its ramshackle outbuildings straggling toward the lake.

Straight down the slope toward the barn ran the fifth man of Quintana's gang, and disappeared among the out-buildings.

Smith crept after him through the sumacs; and, at the foot of the slope, squatted low in a clump of rag-weed. [146]

So close to the house was he now that he could hear the dew rattling on the veranda roof. He saw shadowy figures appear, one after another, and take stations at the four corners of the house. The fifth man was somewhere near the out-buildings, very silent about whatever he had on hand.

The stillness was absolute save for the drumming dew and a faint ripple from the water's edge.

Smith crouched, listened, searched the starlight with intent eyes, and waited.

Until something happened he could not solve the problem before him. He could be of no use to Eve Strayer and to Stormont until he found out what Quintana was going to do.

He could be of little use anyway unless he got into the house, where two rifles might hold out against five.

There was no use in trying to get to Ghost Lake for assistance. He felt that whatever was about to happen would come with a rush. It would be all over before he had gone five minutes. No; the only thing to do was to stay where he was.

As for his pledge to the little Grand Duchess, that was always in his mind. Sooner or later, somehow, he was going to make good his pledge.

He knew that Quintana and his gang were here to find the Flaming Jewel.

Had he not encountered Quintana, his own errand had been the same. For Smith had started for Clinch's prepared to reveal himself to Stormont, and then, masked to the eyes—and to save Eve from a broken heart, and Clinch from States Prison—he had meant to rob the girl at pistol-point. [147]

It was the only way to save Clinch; the only way to save the pride of this blindly loyal girl. For the arrest of Clinch meant ruin to both, and Smith realised it thoroughly.

A slight sound from one of the out-houses—a sort of wagon-shed—attracted his attention. Through the frost-blighted rag-weeds he peered intently, listening.

After a few moments a faint glow appeared in the shed. There was a crackling noise. The glow grew pinker.

III

Inside Clinch's house Eve awoke with a start. Her ears were filled with a strange, rushing, crackling noise. A rosy glare danced and shook outside her windows.

As she sprang to the floor on bandaged feet, a shrill scream burst out in the ruddy darkness—unearthly, horrible; and there came a thunderous battering from the barn.

The girl tore open her bedroom door. "Jack!" she cried in a terrified voice. "The barn's on fire!"

"Good God!" he said, "—my horse!"

He had already sprung from his chair outside her door. Now he ran downstairs, and she heard bolt and chain clash at the kitchen door and his spurred boots land on the porch.

"Oh," she whimpered, snatching a blanket wrapper from a peg and struggling into it. "Oh, the poor horse! Jack! Jack! I'm coming to help! Don't risk your life! I'm coming—I'm coming—"

Terror clutched her as she stumbled downstairs on bandaged feet.

As she reached the door a great flare of light almost blinded her.

"Jack!"

And at the same instant she saw him struggling with three masked men in the glare of the wagon-shed afire.

His rifle stood in the corridor outside her door. With one bound she was on the stairs again. There came the crash and splinter of wood and glass from the kitchen, and a man with a handkerchief over his face caught her on the landing.

Twice she wrenched herself loose and her fingers almost touched Stormont's rifle; she fought like a cornered lynx, tore the handkerchief from her assailant's face, recognised Quintana, hurled her very body at him, eyes flaming, small teeth bared.

Two other men laid hold. In another moment she had tripped Quintana, and all four fell, rolling over and over down the short flight of stairs, landing in the kitchen, still fighting.

Here, in darkness, she wriggled out, somehow, leaving her blanket wrapped in their clutches. In another instant she was up the stairs again, only to discover that the rifle was gone.

The red glare from the wagon-house lighted her bedroom; she sprang inside and bolted the door.

Her chamois jacket with its loops full of cartridges hung on a peg. She got into it, seized her rifle and ran to the window just as two masked men, pushing Stormont before them, entered the house by the kitchen way.

Her own door was resounding with kicks and blows, shaking, shivering under the furious impact of boot and rifle-butt.

She ran to the bed, thrust her hand under the pillow, pulled out the case containing the Flaming Jewel, and placed it in the breast pocket of her shooting jacket.

Again she crept to the window. Only the wagon-house was burning. Somebody, however, had led Stormont's horse from the barn, and had tied it to a tree at a safe distance. It stood there, trembling, its beautiful, nervous head turned toward the burning building.

The blows upon her bedroom door had ceased; there came a loud trampling, the sound of excited voices; Quintana's sarcastic tones, clear, dominant:

"Dios! The police! Why you bring me this gendarme? What am I to do with a gentleman of the Constabulary, eh? Do you think I am fool enough to cut his throat? Well, Señor Gendarme, what are you doing here in the Dump of Clinch?"

Then Stormont's voice, clear and quiet: "What are *you* doing here? If you've a quarrel with Clinch, he's not here. There's only a young girl in this house."

"So?" said Quintana. "Well, that is what I expec', my frien'. It is thees lady upon whom I do myse'f the honour to call!"

Eve, listening, heard Stormont's rejoinder, still, calm, and very grave:

"The man who lays a finger on that young girl had better be dead. He's as good as dead the moment he touches her. There won't be a chance for him.... Nor for any of you, if you harm her."

"Calm youse'f, my frien'," said Quintana. "I demand of thees young lady only that she return to me the property of which I have been rob by Monsieur Clinch."

"I knew nothing of any theft. Nor does she—"

"Pardon; Señor Clinch knows; and I know." His tone changed, offensively: "Señor Gendarme, am I permit to understan' that you are a frien' of thees young lady?—a heart-frien', per'aps—"

"I am her friend," said Stormont bluntly.

"Ah," said Quintana, "then you shall persuade her to return to me thees packet of which Monsieur Clinch has rob me."

There was a short silence, then Quintana's voice again:

"I know thees packet is concel in thees house. Peaceably, if possible, I would recover my property.... If she refuse—"

Another pause.

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"Well?" inquired Stormont, coolly.

"Ah! It is ver' painful to say. Alas, Señor Gendarme, I mus' have my property.... If she refuse, then I mus' sever one of her pretty fingers.... An' if she still refuse—I sever her pretty fingers, one by one, until——"

"You know what would happen to *you*?" interrupted Stormont, in a voice that quivered in spite of himself.

"I take my chance. Señor Gendarme, she is within that room. If you are her frien', you shall advise her to return to me my property."

After another silence:

"Eve!" he called sharply.

She placed her lips to the door: "Yes, Jack."

He said: "There are five masked men out here who say that Clinch robbed them and they are here to recover their property.... Do you know anything about this?"

"I know they lie. My father is not a thief.... I have my rifle and plenty of ammunition. I shall kill every man who enters this room." [151]

For a moment nobody stirred or spoke. Then Quintana strode to the bolted door and struck it with the butt of his rifle.

"You, in there," he said in a menacing voice, "—you listen once to *me* ! You open your door and come out. I give you one minute!" He struck the door again: "*One* minute, señorita!—or I cut from your frien', here, the hand from his right arm!"

There was a deathly silence. Then the sound of bolts. The door opened. Slowly the girl limped forward, still wearing the hunting jacket over her night-dress.

Quintana made her an elaborate and ironical bow, slouch hat in hand; another masked man took her rifle.

"Señorita," said Quintana with another sweep of his hat, "I ask pardon that I trouble you for my packet of which your father has rob me for ver' long time."

Slowly the girl lifted her blue eyes to Stormont. He was standing between two masked men. Their pistols were pressed slightly against his stomach.

Stormont reddened painfully:

"It was not for myself that I let you open your door," he said. "They would not have ventured to lay hands on *me* ."

"Ah," said Quintana with a terrifying smile, "you would not have been the first gendarme who had—*accorded me his hand* !"

Two of the masked men laughed loudly.

Outside in the rag-weed patch, Smith rose, stole across the grass to the kitchen door and slipped inside.

"Now, señorita," said Quintana gaily, "my packet, if you please,—and we leave you to the caresses of your faithful gendarme,—who should thank God that he still possesses two good hands to fondle you! Alons! Come then! My packet!" [152]

One of the masked men said: "Take her downstairs and lock her up somewhere or she'll shoot us from her window."

"Lead out that gendarme, too!" added Quintana, grasping Eve by the arm.

Down the stairs tramped the men, forcing their prisoners with them.

In the big kitchen the glare from the burning out-house fell dimly; the place was full of shadows.

"Now," said Quintana, "I take my property and my leave. Where is the packet hidden?"

She stood for a moment with drooping head, amid the sombre shadows, then, slowly, she drew the emblazoned morocco case from her breast pocket.

What followed occurred in the twinkling of an eye: for, as Quintana extended his arm to grasp the case, a hand snatched it, a masked figure sprang through the doorway, and ran toward the barn.

Somebody recognised the hat and red bandanna:

"Salzar!" he yelled. "Nick Salzar!"

"A traitor, by God!" shouted Quintana. Even before he had reached the door, his pistol flashed

twice, deafening all in the semi-darkness, choking them with stifling fumes.

A masked man turned on Stormont, forcing him back into the pantry at pistol-point. Another man pushed Eve after him, slammed the pantry door and bolted it.

Through the iron bars of the pantry window, Stormont saw a man, wearing a red bandanna tied under his eyes, run up and untie his horse and fling himself astride under a shower of bullets. [153]

As he wheeled the horse and swung him into the clearing toward the foot of Star Pond, his seat and horsemanship were not to be mistaken.

He was gone, now, the gallop stretching into a dead run; and Quintana's men still following, shooting, hallooing in the starlight like a pack of leaping shapes from hell.

But Quintana had not followed far. When he had emptied his automatic he halted.

Something about the transaction suddenly checked his fury, stilled it, summoned his brain into action.

For a full minute he stood unstirring, every atom of intelligence in terrible concentration.

Presently he put his left hand into his pocket, fitted another clip to his pistol, turned on his heel and walked straight back to the house.

Between the two locked in the pantry not a word had passed. Stormont still peered out between the iron bars, striving to catch a glimpse of what was going on. Eve crouched at the pantry doors, her face in her hands, listening.

Suddenly she heard Quintana's step in the kitchen. Cautiously she turned the pantry key from inside.

Stormont heard her, and instantly came to her. At the same moment Quintana unbolted the door from the outside and tried to open it.

"Come out," he said coldly, "or it will not go well with you when my men return."

"You've got what you say is your property," replied Stormont. "What do you want now?"

"I tell you what I want ver' damn quick. Who was he, thees man who rides with my property on your horse away? Eh? Because it was not Nick Salzar! No! Salzar can not ride thees way. No! Alors?" [154]

"I can't tell you who he was," replied Stormont. "That's your affair, not ours."

"No? Ah! Ver' well, then. I shall tell you, Señor Flic! He was one of *yours*. I understand. It is a trap, a cheat—what you call a *plant*! Thees man who rode your horse he is disguise! Yes! He also is a gendarme! Yes! You think I let a gendarme rob me? I got you where I want you now. You shall write your gendarme frien' that he return to me my property, *one day's time*, or I send him by parcel post two nice, fresh-out right-hands—your sweetheart's and your own!"

Stormont drew Eve's head close to his:

"This man is blood mad or out of his mind! I'd better go out and take a chance at him before the others come back."

But the girl shook her head violently, caught him by the arm and drew him toward the mouth of the tile down which Clinch always emptied his hootch when the Dump was raided.

But now, it appeared that the tile which protruded from the cement floor was removable.

In silence she began to unscrew it, and he, seeing what she was trying to do, helped her.

Together they lifted the heavy tile and laid it on the floor.

"You open thees door!" shouted Quintana in a paroxysm of fury. "I give you one minute! Then, by God, I kill you both!"

Eve lifted a screen of wood through which the tile had been set. Under it a black hole yawned. It was a tunnel made of three-foot aqueduct tiles; and it led straight into Star Pond, two hundred feet away. [155]

Now, as she straightened up and looked silently at Stormont, they heard the trample of boots in the kitchen, voices, the bang of gun-stocks.

"Does that drain lead into the lake?" whispered Stormont.

She nodded.

"Will you follow me, Eve?"

She pushed him aside, indicating that he was to follow her.

As she stripped the hunting jacket from her, a hot colour swept her face. But she dropped on both knees, crept straight into the tile and slipped out of sight.

As she disappeared, Quintana shouted something in Portuguese, and fired at the lock.

With the smash of splintering wood in his ears, Stormont slid into the smooth tunnel.

In an instant he was shooting down a polished toboggan slide, and in another moment was under the icy water of Star Pond.

Shocked, blinded, fighting his way to the surface, he felt his spurred boots dragging at him like a ton of iron. Then to him came her helping hand.

"I can make it," he gasped.

But his clothing and his boots and the icy water began to tell on him in mid-lake.

Swimming without effort beside him, watching his every stroke, presently she sank a little and glided under him and a little ahead, so that his hands fell upon her shoulders.

He let them rest, so, aware now that it was no burden to such a swimmer. Supple and silent as a swimming otter, the girl slipped lithely through the chilled water, which washed his body to the nostrils and numbed his legs till he could scarcely move them. [156]

And now, of a sudden, his feet touched gravel. He stumbled forward in the shadow of overhanging trees and saw her wading shoreward, a dripping, silvery shape on the shoal.

Then, as he staggered up to her, breathless, where she was standing on the pebbled shore, he saw her join both hands, cup-shape, and lift them to her lips.

And out of her mouth poured diamond, sapphire, and emerald in a dazzling stream,—and, among them, one great, flashing gem blazing in the starlight,—the Flaming Jewel!

Like a naiad of the lake she stood, white, slim, silent, the heaped gems glittering in her snowy hands, her face framed by the curling masses of her wet hair.

Then, slowly she turned her head to Stormont.

"These are what Quintana came for," she said. "Could you put them into your pocket?"

EPISODE EIGHT

[157]

CUP AND LIP

I

TWO miles beyond Clinch's Dump, Hal Smith pulled Stormont's horse to a walk. He was tremendously excited.

With naïve sincerity he believed that what he had done on the spur of the moment had been the only thing to do.

By snatching the Flaming Jewel from Quintana's very fingers he had diverted that vindictive bandit's fury from Eve, from Clinch, from Stormont, and had centred it upon himself.

More than that, he had sown the seeds of suspicion among Quintana's own people. They never could discover Salzar's body. Always they must believe that it was Nicolas Salzar and no other who so treacherously robbed them, and who rode away in a rain of bullets, shaking the emblazoned morocco case above his masked head in triumph, derision and defiance.

At the recollection of what had happened, Hal Smith drew bridle, and, sitting his saddle there in the false dawn, threw back his handsome head and laughed until the fading stars overhead swam in his eyes through tears of sheerest mirth.

For he was still young enough to have had the time of his life. Nothing in the Great War had so thrilled him. For, in what had just happened, there was humour. There had been none in the Great Grim Drama. [158]

Still, Smith began to realise that he had taken the long, long chance of the opportunist who rolls the bones with Death. He had kept his pledge to the little Grand Duchess. It was a clean job. It was even good drama——

The picturesque angle of the affair shook Hal Smith with renewed laughter. As a moving picture hero he thought himself the funniest thing on earth.

From the time he had poked a pistol against Sard's fat paunch, to this bullet-pelted ride for life, life had become one ridiculously exciting episode after another.

He had come through like the hero in a best-seller.... Lacking only a heroine.... If there had been any heroine it was Eve Strayer. Drama had gone wrong in that detail.... So perhaps, after all, it was real life he had been living and not drama. Drama, for the masses, must have a definite beginning and ending. Real life lacks the latter. In life nothing is finished. It is always a premature curtain which is yanked by that doddering old stage-hand, Johnny Death.

Smith sat his saddle, thinking, beginning to be sobered now by the inevitable reaction which follows excitement and mirth as relentlessly as care dogs the horseman.

He had had a fine time,—save for the horror of the Rocktrail.... He shuddered.... Anyway, at worst he had not shirked a clean deal in that ghastly game.... It was God's mercy that he was not lying where Salzar lay, ten feet—twenty—a hundred deep, perhaps—in immemorial slime—

He shook himself in his saddle as though to be rid of the creeping horror, and wiped his clammy face. [159]

Now, in the false dawn, a blue-jay awoke somewhere among the oaks and filled the misty silence with harsh grace-notes.

Then reaction, setting in like a tide, stirred more sombre depths in the heart of this young man.

He thought of Riga; and of the Red Terror; of murder at noon-day, and outrage by night. He remembered his only encounter with a lovely child—once Grand Duchess of Esthonia—then a destitute refugee in silken rags.

What a day that had been.... Only one day and one evening.... And never had he been so near in love in all his life....

That one day and evening had been enough for her to confide to an American officer her entire life's history.... Enough for him to pledge himself to her service while life endured.... And if emotion had swept every atom of reason out of his youthful head, there in the turmoil and alarm—there in the terrified, riotous city jammed with refugees, reeking with disease, half frantic from famine and the filthy, rising flood of war—if really it all had been merely romantic impulse, ardour born of overwrought sentimentalism, nevertheless, what he had pledged that day to a little Grand Duchess in rags, he had fulfilled to the letter within the hour.

As the false dawn began to fade, he loosened hunting coat and cartridge sling, drew from his shirt-bosom the morocco case.

It bore the arms and crest of the Grand Duchess Theodorica of Esthonia.

His fingers trembled slightly as he pressed the jewelled spring. It opened on an empty casket. [160]

In the sudden shock of horror and astonishment, his convulsive clutch on the spring started a tiny bell ringing. Then, under his very nose, the empty tray slid aside revealing another tray underneath, set solidly with brilliants. A rainbow glitter streamed from the unset gems in the silken tray. Like an incredulous child he touched them. They were magnificently real.

In the centre lay blazing the great Erosite gem,—the Flaming Jewel itself. Priceless diamonds, sapphires, emeralds ringed it. In his hands he held nearly four millions of dollars.

Gingerly he balanced the emblazoned case, fascinated. Then he replaced the empty tray, closed the box, thrust it into the bosom of his flannel shirt and buttoned it in.

Now there was little more for this excited young man to do. He was through with Clinch. Hal Smith, hold-up man and dish-washer at Clinch's Dump, had ended his career. The time had now arrived for him to vanish and make room for James Darragh.

Because there still remained a very agreeable rôle for Darragh to play. And he meant to eat it up—as Broadway has it.

For by this time the Grand Duchess of Esthonia—Ricca, as she was called by her companion, Valentine, the pretty Countess Orloff-Strelwitz—must have arrived in New York.

At the big hunting lodge of the late Henry Harrod—now inherited by Darragh—there might be a letter—perhaps a telegram—the cue for Hal Smith to vanish and for James Darragh to enter, play his brief but glittering part, and—

Darragh's sequence of pleasing meditations halted abruptly.... To walk out of the life of the little Grand Duchess did not seem to suit his ideas—indefinite and hazy as they were, so far. [161]

He lifted the bridle from the horse's neck, divided curb and snaffle thoughtfully, touched the splendid animal with heel and knee.

As he cantered on into the wide forest road that led to his late uncle's abode, curiosity led him to wheel into a narrower trail running east along Star Pond, and from whence he could take a farewell view of Clinch's Dump.

He smiled to think of Eve and Stormont there together, and now in safety behind bolted doors and shutters.

He grinned to think of Quintana and his precious crew, blood-crazy, baffled, probably already

distrusting one another, yet running wild through the night like starving wolves galloping at hazard across a famine-stricken waste.

"Only wait till Stormont makes his report," he thought, grinning more broadly still. "Every State Trooper north of Albany will be after Señor Quintana. Some hunting! And, if he could understand, Mike Clinch might thank his stars that what I've done this night has saved him his skin and Eve a broken heart!"

He drew his horse to a walk, now, for the path began to run closer to Star Pond, skirting the pebbled shallows in the open just ahead.

Alders still concealed the house across the lake, but the trail was already coming out into the starlight.

Suddenly his horse stopped short, trembling, its ears pricked forward.

Darragh sat listening intently for a moment. Then with infinite caution, he leaned over the cantle and gently parted the alders. [162]

On the pebbled beach, full in the starlight, stood two figures, one white and slim, the other dark.

The arm of the dark figure clasped the waist of the white and slender one.

Evidently they had heard his horse, for they stood motionless, looking directly at the alders behind which his horse had halted.

To turn might mean a shot in the back as far as Darragh knew. He was still masked with Salzar's red bandanna. He raised his rifle, slid a cartridge into the breech, pressed his horse forward with a slight touch of heel and knee, and rode slowly out into the star-dusk.

What Stormont saw was a masked man, riding his own horse, with menacing rifle half lifted for a shot! What Eve Strayer thought she saw was too terrible for words. And before Stormont could prevent her she sprang in front of him, covering his body with her own.

At that the horseman tore off his red mask:

"Eve! Jack Stormont! What the devil are you doing over *here*?"

Stormont walked slowly up to his own horse, laid one unsteady hand on its silky nose, kept it there while dusty, velvet lips mumbled and caressed his fingers.

"I knew it was a cavalryman," he said quietly. "I suspected you, Jim. It was the sort of crazy thing you were likely to do.... I don't ask you what you're up to, where you've been, what your plans may be. If you needed me you'd have told me.

"But I've got to have my horse for Eve. Her feet are wounded. She's in her night-dress and wringing wet. I've got to set her on my horse and try to take her through to Ghost Lake." [163]

Darragh stared at Stormont, at the ghostly figure of the girl who had sunk down on the sand at the lake's edge. Then he scrambled out of the saddle and handed over the bridle.

"Quintana came back," said Stormont. "I hope to reckon with him some day.... I believe he came back to harm Eve.... We got out of the house.... We swam the lake.... I'd have gone under except for her—"

In his distress and overwhelming mortification, Darragh stood miserable, mute, irresolute.

Stormont seemed to understand: "What you did, Jim, was well meant," he said. "I understand. Eve will understand when I tell her. But that fellow Quintana is a devil. You can't draw a herring across any trail he follows. I tell you, Jim, this fellow Quintana is either blood-mad or just plain crazy. Somebody will have to put him out of the way. I'll do it if I ever find him."

"Yes.... Your people ought to do that.... Or, if you like, I'll volunteer.... I've a little business to transact in New York, first.... Jack, your tunic and breeches are soaked; I'll be glad to chip in something for Eve.... Wait a moment—"

He stepped into cover, drew the morocco box from his grey shirt, shoved it into his hip pocket.

Then he threw off his cartridge belt and hunting coat, pulled the grey shirt over his head and came out in his undershirt and breeches, with the other garments hanging over his arm.

"Give her these," he said. "She can button the coat around her waist for a skirt. She'd better go somewhere and get out of that soaking-wet night-dress—"

Eve, crouched on the sand, trying to wring out and twist up her drenched hair, looked up at Stormont as he came toward her holding out Darragh's dry clothing. [164]

"You'd better do what you can with these," he said, trying to speak carelessly.... "*He* says you'd better chuck—what you're wearing—"

She nodded in flushed comprehension. Stormont walked back to his horse, his boots slopping water at every stride.

"I don't know any place nearer than Ghost Lake Inn," he said ... "except Harrod's."

"That's where we're going, Jack," said Darragh cheerfully.

"That's *your* place, isn't it?"

"It is. But I don't want Eve to know it.... I think it better she should not know me except as Hal Smith—for the present, anyway. You'll see to that, won't you?"

"As you wish, Jim.... Only, if we go to your own house——"

"We're not going to the main house. She wouldn't, anyway. Clinch has taught that girl to hate the very name of Harrod—hate every foot of forest that the Harrod game keepers patrol. She wouldn't cross my threshold to save her life."

"I don't understand, but—it's all right—whatever *you* say, Jim."

"I'll tell you the whole business some day. But where I'm going to take you now is into a brand new camp which I ordered built last spring. It's within a mile of the State Forest border. Eve won't know that it's Harrod property. I've a hatchery there and the State lets me have a man in exchange for free fry. When I get there I'll post my man.... It will be a roof for to-night, anyway, and breakfast in the morning, whenever you're ready."

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"How far is it?"

"Only about three miles east of here."

"That's the thing to do, then," said Stormont bluntly.

He dropped one sopping-wet sleeve over his horse's neck, taking care not to touch the saddle. He was thinking of the handful of gems in his pocket; and he wondered why Darragh had said nothing about the empty case for which he had so recklessly risked his life.

What this whole business was about Stormont had no notion. But he knew Darragh. That was sufficient to leave him tranquil, and perfectly certain that whatever Darragh was doing must be the right thing to do.

Yet—Eve had swum Star Pond with her mouth filled with jewels.

When she had handed the morocco box to Quintana, Stormont now realised that she must have played her last card on the utterly desperate chance that Quintana might go away without examining the case.

Evidently she had emptied the case before she left her room. He recollected that, during all that followed, Eve had not uttered a single word. He knew why, now. How could she speak with her mouth full of diamonds?

A slight sound from the shore caused him to turn. Eve was coming toward him in the dusk, moving painfully on her wounded feet. Darragh's flannel shirt and his hunting coat buttoned around her slender waist clothed her.

The next instant he was beside her, lifting her in both arms.

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As he placed her in the saddle and adjusted one stirrup to her bandaged foot, she turned and quietly thanked Darragh for the clothing.

"And that was a brave thing you did," she added, "—to risk your life for my father's property. Because the morocco case which you saved proved to be empty does not make what you did any the less loyal and gallant."

Darragh gazed at her, astounded; took the hand she stretched out to him; held it with a silly expression on his features.

"Hal Smith," she said with perceptible emotion, "I take back what I once said to you on Owl Marsh. No man is a real crook by nature who did what you have done. That is 'faithfulness unto death'—the supreme offer—loyalty——"

Her voice broke; she pressed Darragh's hand convulsively and her lip quivered.

Darragh, with the morocco case full of jewels buttoned into his hip pocket, stood motionless, mutely swallowing his amazement.

What in the world did this girl mean, talking about an *empty* case?

But this was no time to unravel that sort of puzzle. He turned to Stormont who, as perplexed as he, had been listening in silence.

"Lead your horse forward," he said. "I know the trail. All you need do is to follow me." And, shouldering his rifle, he walked leisurely into the woods, the cartridge belt sagging *en bandouliere* across his woollen undershirt.

II

When Stormont gently halted his horse it was dawn, and Eve, sagging against him with one

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arm around his neck, sat huddled up on her saddle fast asleep.

In a birch woods, on the eastern slope of the divide, stood the log camp, dimly visible in the silvery light of early morning.

Darragh, cautioning Stormont with a slight gesture, went forward, mounted the rustic veranda, and knocked at a lighted window.

A man, already dressed, came and peered out at him, then hurried to open the door.

"I didn't know you, Captain Darragh——" he began, but fell silent under the warning gesture that checked him.

"I've a guest outside. She's Clinch's step-daughter, Eve Strayer. She knows me by the name of Hal Smith. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir——"

"Cut *that* out, too. I'm Hal Smith to you, also. State Trooper Stormont is out there with Eve Strayer. He was a comrade of mine in Russia. I'm Hal Smith to him, by mutual agreement. *Now* do you get me, Ralph?"

"Sure, Hal. Go on; spit it out!"

They both grinned.

"You're a hootch runner," said Darragh. "This is your shack. The hatchery is only a blind. That's all you have to know, Ralph. So put that girl into my room and let her sleep till she wakes of her own accord.

"Stormont and I will take two of the guest-bunks in the *L*. And for heaven's sake make us some coffee when you make your own. But first come out and take the horse."

They went out together. Stormont lifted Eve out of the saddle. She did not wake. Darragh led the way into the log house and along a corridor to his own room.

"Turn down the sheets," whispered Stormont. And, when the bed was ready: "Can you get a bath towel, Jim?"

Darragh fetched one from the connecting bath-room.

"Wrap it around her wet hair," whispered Stormont. "Good heavens, I wish there were a woman here."

"I wish so too," said Darragh; "she's chilled to the bone. You'll have to wake her. She can't sleep in what she's wearing; it's almost as damp as her hair——"

He went to the closet and returned with a man's morning robe, as soft as fleece.

"Somehow or other she's got to get into that," he said.

There was a silence.

"Very well," said Stormont, reddening.... "If you'll step out I'll—manage...." He looked Darragh straight in the eyes: "I have asked her to marry me," he said.

When Stormont came out a great fire of birch-logs was blazing in the living-room, and Darragh stood there, his elbow on the rough stone mantel-shelf.

Stormont came straight to the fire and set one spurred boot on the fender.

"She's warm and dry and sound asleep," he said. "I'll wake her again if you think she ought to swallow something hot."

At that moment the fish-culturist came in with a pot of steaming coffee.

"This is my friend, Ralph Wier," said Darragh. "I think you'd better give Eve a cup of coffee." And, to Wier, "Fill a couple of hot water bags, old chap. We don't want any pneumonia in this house."

When breakfast was ready Eve once more lay asleep with a slight dew of perspiration on her brow.

Darragh was half starved: Stormont ate little. Neither spoke at all until, satisfied, they rose, ready for sleep.

At the door of his room Stormont took Darragh's offered hand, understanding what it implied:

"Thanks, Jim.... Hers is the loveliest character I have ever known.... If I weren't as poor as a homeless dog I'd marry her to-morrow.... I'll do it anyway, I think.... I *can't* let her go back to Clinch's Dump!"

"After all," said Darragh, smiling, "if it's only money that worries you, why not talk about a job to *me* !"

Stormont flushed heavily: "That's rather wonderful of you, Jim——"

"Why? You're the best officer I had. Why the devil did you go into the Constabulary without talking to me?"

Stormont's upper lip seemed inclined to twitch but he controlled it and scowled at space.

"Go to bed, you darned fool," said Darragh, carelessly. "You'll find dry things ready. Ralph will take care of your uniform and boots."

Then he went into his own quarters to read two letters which, conforming to arrangements made with Mrs. Ray the day he had robbed Emanuel Sard, were to be sent to Trout Lodge to await his arrival.

Both, written from the Ritz, bore the date of the day before: the first he opened was from the Countess Orloff-Strelwitz:

"Dear Captain Darragh,

"—You are so wonderful! Your messenger, with the *ten* thousand dollars which you say you already have recovered from those miscreants who robbed Ricca, came aboard our ship before we landed. It was a godsend; we were nearly penniless,—and oh, *so* shabby!

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"Instantly, my friend, we shopped, Ricca and I. Fifth Avenue enchanted us. All misery was forgotten in the magic of that paradise for women.

"Yet, spendthrifts that we naturally are, we were not silly enough to be extravagant. Ricca was wild for American sport-clothes. I, also. Yet—only *two* gowns apiece, excepting our sport clothes. And other necessaries. Don't you think we were economical?"

"Furthermore, dear Captain Darragh, we are hastening to follow your instructions. We are leaving to-day for your château in the wonderful forest, of which you told us that never-to-be-forgotten day in Riga.

"Your agent is politeness, consideration and kindness itself. We have our accommodations. We leave New York at midnight.

"Ricca is so excited that it is difficult for her to restrain her happiness. God knows the child has seen enough unhappiness to quench the gaiety of anybody!

"Well, all things end. Even tears. Even the Red Terror shall pass from our beloved Russia. For, after all, Monsieur, God still lives.

"VALENTINE."

"P. S. Ricca has written to you. I have read the letter. I have let it go uncensored."

Darragh went to the door of his room:

"Ralph! Ralph!" he called. And, when Wier hurriedly appeared:

"What time does the midnight train from New York get into Five Lakes?"

"A little before nine——"

"You can make it in the flivver, can't you?"

"Yes, if I start *now*."

"All right. Two ladies. You're to bring them to the *house*, not *here*. Mrs. Ray knows about them. And—get back here as soon as you can."

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He closed his door again, sat down on the bed and opened the other letter. His hand shook as he unfolded it. He was so scared and excited that he could scarcely decipher the angular, girlish penmanship:

"To dear Captain Darragh, our champion and friend—

"It is difficult for me, Monsieur, to express my happiness and my deep gratitude in the so cold formality of the written page.

"Alas, sir, it will be still more difficult to find words for it when again I have the happiness of greeting you in proper person.

"Valentine has told you everything, she warns me, and I am, therefore, somewhat at a loss to know what I should write to you.

"Yet, I know very well what I would write if I dare. It is this: that I wish you to know—although it may not pass the censor—that I am most impatient to see you, Monsieur. *Not* because of kindness past, nor with an unworthy expectation of benefits to come. But because of friendship,—*the deepest, sincerest of my* WHOLE LIFE.

"Is it not modest of a young girl to say this? Yes, surely all the world which was once *en régle*, formal, artificial, has been burnt out of our hearts by this so frightful calamity which has overwhelmed the world with fire and blood.

"If ever on earth there was a time when we might venture to express with candour what is hidden within our minds and hearts, it would seem, Monsieur, that the time is

now.

"True, I have known you only for one day and one evening. Yet, what happened to the world in that brief space of time—and to us, Monsieur—brought *us* together as though our meeting were but a blessed reunion after the happy intimacy of many years.... I speak, Monsieur, for myself. May I hope that I speak, also, for you?"

"With a heart too full to thank you, and with expectations indescribable—but with courage, always, for any event,—I take my leave of you at the foot of this page. Like death—I trust—my adieu is not the end, but the beginning. It is not farewell; it is a greeting to him whom I most honour in all the world.... And would willingly obey if he shall command. And otherwise—*all* else that in his mind—and heart—he might desire.

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"THEODORICA."

It was the most beautiful love-letter any man ever received in all the history of love.

And it had passed the censor.

III

It was afternoon when Darragh awoke in his bunk, stiff, sore, confused in mind and battered in body.

However, when he recollected where he was he got out of bed in a hurry and jerked aside the window curtains.

The day was magnificent; a sky of royal azure overhead, and everywhere the silver pillars of the birches supporting their splendid canopy of ochre, orange, and burnt-gold.

Wier, hearing him astir, came in.

"How long have you been back! Did you meet the ladies with your flivver?" demanded Darragh, impatiently.

"I got to Five Lakes station just as the train came in. The young ladies were the only passengers who got out. I waited to get their two steamer trunks and then I drove them to Harrod Place——"

"How did they seem, Ralph—worn-out—worried—ill?"

Wier laughed: "No, sir, they looked very pretty and lively to me. They seemed delighted to get here. They talked to each other in some foreign tongue—Russian, I should say—at least, it sounded like what we heard over in Siberia, Captain——"

"It *was* Russian.... You go on and tell me while I take another hot bath!——"

Wier followed him into the bath-room and vaulted to a seat on the deep set window-sill:

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"—When they weren't talking Russian and laughing they talked to me and admired the woods and mountains. I had to tell them everything—they wanted to see buffalo and Indians. And when I told them there weren't any, enquired for bears and panthers.

"We saw two deer on the Scaur, and a woodchuck near the house; I thought they'd jump out of the flivver——"

He began to laugh at the recollection: "No, sir, they didn't act tired and sad; they said they were crazy to get into their knickerbockers and go to look for you——"

"Where did you say I was?" asked Darragh, drying himself vigorously.

"Out in the woods, somewhere. The last I saw of them, Mrs. Ray had their hand-bags and Jerry and Tom were shouldering their trunks."

"I'm going up there right away," interrupted Darragh excitedly. "—Good heavens, Ralph, I haven't any clothes here, have I?"

"No, sir. But those you wore last night are dry——"

"Confound it! I meant to send some decent clothes here—— All right; get me those duds I wore yesterday—and a bite to eat! I'm in a hurry, Ralph——"

He ate while dressing, disgustedly arraying himself in the grey shirt, breeches, and laced boots which weather, water, rock, and brier had not improved.

In a pathetic attempt to spruce up, he knotted the red bandanna around his neck and pinched Salzar's slouch hat into a peak.

"I look like a hootch-running Wop," he said. "Maybe I can get into the house before I meet the ladies——"

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"You look like one of Clinch's bums," remarked Wier with native honesty.

Darragh, chagrined, went to his bunk, pulled the morocco case from under the pillow, and shoved it into the bosom of his flannel shirt.

"That's the main thing anyway," he thought. Then, turning to Wier, he asked whether Eve and Stormont had awakened.

It appeared that Trooper Stormont had saddled up and cantered away shortly after sunrise, leaving word that he must hunt up his comrade, Trooper Lannis, at Ghost Lake.

"They're coming back this evening," added Wier. "He asked you to look out for Clinch's step-daughter."

"She's all right here. Can't you keep an eye on her, Ralph?"

"I'm stripping trout, sir. I'll be around here to cook dinner for her when she wakes up."

Darragh glanced across the brook at the hatchery. It was only a few yards away. He nodded and started for the veranda:

"That'll be all right," he said. "Nobody is coming here to bother her.... And don't let her leave, Ralph, till I get back—"

"Very well, sir. But suppose she takes it into her head to leave—"

Darragh called back, gaily: "She can't: she hasn't any clothes!" And away he strode in the gorgeous sunshine of a magnificent autumn day, all the clean and vigorous youth of him afire in anticipation of a reunion which the letter from his lady-love had transfigured into a tryst. [175]

For, in that amazing courtship of a single day, he never dreamed that he had won the heart of that sad, white-faced, hungry child in rags—silken tatters still stained with the blood of massacre,—the very soles of her shoes still charred by the embers of her own home.

Yet, that is what must have happened in a single day and evening. Life passes swiftly during such periods. Minutes lengthen into days; hours into years. The soul finds itself.

Then mind and heart become twin prophets,—clairvoyant concerning what hides behind the veil; comprehending with divine clair-audience what the Three Sisters whisper there—hearing even the whirr of the spindle—the very snipping of the Eternal Shears!

The soul finds itself; the mind knows itself; the heart perfectly understands.

He had not spoken to this young girl of love. The blood of friends and servants was still rusty on her skirt's ragged hem.

Yet, that night, when at last in safety she had said good-bye to the man who had secured it for her, he knew that he was in love with her. And, at such crises, the veil that hides hearts becomes transparent.

At that instant he had seen and known. Afterward he had dared not believe that he had known.

But hers had been a purer courage.

As he strode on, the comprehension of her candour, her honesty, the sweet bravery that had conceived, created, and sent that letter, thrilled this young man until his heavy boots sprouted wings, and the trail he followed was but a path of rosy clouds over which he floated heavenward. [176]

About half an hour later he came to his senses with a distinct shock.

Straight ahead of him on the trail, and coming directly toward him, moved a figure in knickers and belted tweed.

Flecked sunlight slanted on the stranger's cheek and burnished hair, dappling face and figure with moving, golden spots.

Instantly Darragh knew and trembled.

But Theodorica of Esthonia had known him only in his uniform.

As she came toward him, lovely in her lithe and rounded grace, only friendly curiosity gazed at him from her blue eyes.

Suddenly she knew him, went scarlet to her yellow hair, then white: and tried to speak—but had no control of the short, rosy upper lip which only quivered as he took her hands.

The forest was dead still around them save for the whisper of painted leaves sifting down from a sunlit vault above.

Finally she said in a ghost of a voice: "My—friend...."

"If you accept his friendship...."

"Friendship is to be shared.... Ours mingled—on that day.... Your share is—as much as pleases you."

"All you have to give me, then."

"Take it ... all I have...." Her blue eyes met his with a little effort. All courage is an effort.

Then that young man dropped on both knees at her feet and laid his lips to her soft hands.

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In trembling silence she stood for a moment, then slowly sank on both knees to face him across their clasped hands.

So, in the gilded cathedral of the woods, pillared with silver, and azure-domed, the betrothal of these two was sealed with clasp and lip.

Awed, a little fearful, she looked into her lover's eyes with a gaze so chaste, so oblivious to all things earthly, that the still purity of her face seemed a sacrament, and he scarcely dared touch the childish lips she offered.

But when the sacrament of the kiss had been accomplished, she rested one hand on his shoulder and rose, and drew him with her.

Then *his* moment came: he drew the emblazoned case from his breast, opened it, and, in silence, laid it in her hands. The blaze of the jewels in the sunshine almost blinded them.

That was *his* moment.

The next moment was Quintana's.

Darragh hadn't a chance. Out of the bushes two pistols were thrust hard against his stomach. Quintana's face was behind them. He wore no mask, but the three men with him watched him over the edges of handkerchiefs,—over the sights of levelled rifles, too.

The youthful Grand Duchess had turned deadly white. One of Quintana's men took the morocco case from her hands and shoved her aside without ceremony.

Quintana leered at Darragh over his levelled weapons:

"My frien' Smith!" he exclaimed softly. "So it is you, then, who have twice try to rob me of my property!

"Ah! You recollect'? Yes? How you have rob me of a pacquet which contain only some chocolate?"

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Darragh's face was burning with helpless rage.

"My frien', Smith," repeated Quintana, "do you recollect' what it was you say to me? Yes?... How often it is the onexpected which so usually happen? You are quite correc', l'ami Smith. It has happen."

He glanced at the open jewel box which one of the masked men held, then, like lightning, his sinister eyes focussed on Darragh.

"So," he said, "it was also you who rob me las' night of my property.... What you do to Nick Salzar, eh?"

"Killed him," said Darragh, dry lipped, nerved for death. "I ought to have killed you, too, when I had the chance. But—*I'm* white, you see."

At the insult flung into his face over the muzzles of his own pistols, Quintana burst into laughter.

"Ah! You *should* have shot me! You are quite right, my frien'. I mus' say you have behave ver' foolish."

He laughed again so hard that Darragh felt his pistols shaking against his body.

"So you have kill Nick Salzar, eh?" continued Quintana with perfect good humour. "My frien', I am oblige to you for what you do. You are surprise? Eh? It is ver' simple, my frien' Smith. What I want of a man who can be kill? Eh? Of what use is he to me? Voilà!"

He laughed, patted Darragh on the shoulder with one of his pistols.

"You, now—*you* could be of use. Why? Because you are a better man than was Nick Salzar. He who kills is better than the dead."

Then, swiftly his dark features altered:

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"My frien' Smith," he said, "I have come here for my property, not to kill. I have recover my property. Why shall I kill you? To say that I am a better man? Yes, perhaps. But also I should be oblige to say that also I am a fool. Yaas! A poor damfool."

Without shifting his eyes he made a motion with one pistol to his men. As they turned and entered the thicket, Quintana's intent gaze became murderous.

"If I mus' kill you I shall do so. Otherwise I have sufficient trouble to keep me from ennuï. My frien', I am going home to enjoy my property. If you live or die it signifies nothing to me. No! Why, for the pleasure of killing you, should I bring your dirty gendarmes on my heels?"

He backed away to the edge of the thicket, venturing one swift and evil glance at the girl who stood as though dazed.

"Listen attentively," he said to Darragh. "One of my men remains hidden very near. He is a dead shot. His aim is at your—sweetheart's—body. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Ver' well. You shall not go away for one hour time. After that——" he took off his slouch hat with a sweeping bow—"you may go to hell!"

Behind him the bushes parted, closed.

José Quintana had made his adieux.

EPISODE NINE

[180]

THE FOREST AND MR. SARD

I

WHEN at last José Quintana had secured what he had been after for years, his troubles really began.

In his pocket he had two million dollars worth of gems, including the Flaming Jewel.

But he was in the middle of a wilderness ringed in by hostile men, and obliged to rely for aid on a handful of the most desperate criminals in Europe.

Those openly hostile to him had a wide net spread around him—wide of mesh too, perhaps; and it was through a mesh he meant to wriggle, but the net was intact from Canada to New York.

Canadian police and secret agents held it on the north: this he had learned from Jake Kloon long since.

East, west and south he knew he had the troopers of the New York State Constabulary to deal with, and in addition every game warden and fire warden in the State Forests, a swarm of plain clothes men from the Metropolis, and the rural constabulary of every town along the edges of the vast reservation.

Just who was responsible for this enormous conspiracy to rob him of what he considered his own legitimate loot Quintana did not know.

Sard's attorney, Eddie Abrams, believed that the French police instigated it through agents of the United States Secret Service.

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Of one thing Quintana was satisfied, Mike Clinch had nothing to do with stirring up the authorities. Law-breakers of his sort don't shout for the police or invoke State or Government aid.

As for the status of Darragh—or Hal Smith, as he supposed him to be—Quintana took him for what he seemed to be, a well-born young man gone wrong. Europe was full of that kind. To Quintana there was nothing suspicious about Hal Smith. On the contrary, his clever recklessness confirmed that polished bandit's opinion that Smith was a gentleman degenerated into a crook. It takes an educated imagination for a man to do what Smith had done to him. If the common crook has any imagination at all it never is educated.

Another matter worried José Quintana: he was not only short on provisions, but what remained was cached in Drowned Valley; and Mike Clinch and his men were guarding every outlet to that sinister region, excepting only the rocky and submerged trail by which he had made his exit.

That was annoying; it cut off provisions and liquor from Canada, for which he had arranged with Jake Kloon. For Kloon's hootch-runners now would be stopped by Clinch; and not one among them knew about the rocky trail in.

All these matters were disquieting enough: but what really and most deeply troubled Quintana was his knowledge of his own men.

He did not trust one among them. Of international crookdom they were the cream. Not one of them but would have murdered his fellow if the loot were worth it and the chances of escape sufficient.

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There was no loyalty to him, none to one another, no "honour among thieves"—and it was José

Quintana who knew that only in romance such a thing existed.

No, he could not trust a single man. Only hope of plunder attached these marauders to him, and merely because he had education and imagination enough to provide what they wanted.

Anyone among them would murder and rob him if opportunity presented.

Now, how to keep his loot; how to get back to Europe with it, was the problem that confronted Quintana after robbing Darragh. And he determined to settle part of that question at once.

About five miles from Harrod Place, within a hundred rods of which he had held up Hal Smith, Quintana halted, seated himself on a rotting log, and waited until his men came up and gathered around him.

For a little while, in utter silence, his keen eyes travelled from one visage to the next, from Henri Picquet to Victor Georgiades, to Sanchez, to Sard. His intent scrutiny focussed on Sard; lingered.

If there were anybody he might trust, a little way, it would be Sard.

Then a polite, untroubled smile smoothed the pale, dark features of José Quintana:

"Bien, messieurs, the coup has been success. Yes? Ver' well; in turn, then, en accord with our custom, I shall dispose myse'f to listen to your good advice."

He looked at Henri Picquet, smiled and nodded invitation to speak.

Picquet shrugged: "For me, mon capitaine, eet ees ver' simple. We are five. Therefore, divide into five ze gems. After zat, each one for himself to make his way out——"

"Nick Salzar and Harry Beck are in the Drowned Valley," interrupted Quintana.

Picquet shrugged again; Sanchez laughed, saying: "If they are there it is their misfortune. Also, we others are in a hurry."

Picquet added: "Also five shares are sufficient division."

"It is propose, then, that we abandon our comrades Beck and Salzar to the rifle of Mike Clinch?"

"Why not?" demanded Georgiades sullenly;—"we shall have worse to face before we see the Place de l'Opéra."

"There remains, also, Eddie Abrams," remarked Quintana.

Crooks never betray their attorney. Everybody expressed a willingness to have the five shares of plunder properly assessed to satisfy the fee due to Mr. Abrams.

"Ver' well," nodded Quintana, "are you satisfy, messieurs, to divide an' disperse?"

Sard said, heavily, that they ought to stick together until they arrived in New York.

Sanchez sneered, accusing Sard of wanting a bodyguard to escort him to his own home. "In this accursed forest," he insisted, "five of us would attract attention where one alone, with sufficient stealth, can slip through into the open country."

"Two by two is better," said Picquet. "You, Sanchez, shall travel alone if you desire——"

"Divide the gems first," growled Georgiades, "and then let each do what pleases him."

"That," nodded Quintana, "is also my opinion. It is so settle. Attention!" Two pistols were in his hands as by magic. With a slight smile he laid them on the moss beside him.

He then spread a large white handkerchief flat on the ground; and, from his pockets, he poured out the glittering cascade. Yet, like a feeding panther, every sense remained alert to the slightest sound or movement elsewhere; and when Georgiades grunted from excess emotion, Quintana's right hand held a pistol before the grunt had ceased.

It was a serious business, this division of loot; every reckless visage reflected the strain of the situation.

Quintana, both pistols in his hands, looked down at the scintillating heap of jewels.

"I estimate two and one quarte million of dollaires," he said simply. "It has been agree that I accep' for me the erosite gem known as The Flaming Jewel. In addition, messieurs, it has been agree that I accep' for myse'f one part in five of the remainder."

A fierce silence reigned. Every wolfish eye was on the leader. He smiled, rested his pair of pistols on either knee.

"Is there," he asked softly, "any gentleman who shall objec'?"

"Who," demanded Georgiades hoarsely, "is to divide for us?"

"It is for such purpose," explained Quintana suavely, "that my frien', Emanuel Sard, has arrive. Monsieur Sard is a brokaire of diamon's, as all know ver' well. Therefore, it shall be our frien'

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Sard who will divide for us what we have gain to-day by our—industry."

The savage tension broke with a laugh at the word chosen by Quintana to express their efforts of the morning.

Sard had been standing with one fat hand flat against the trunk of a tree. Now, at a nod from Quintana, he squatted down, and, with the same hand that had been resting against the tree, he spread out the pile of jewels into a flat layer.

As he began to divide this into five parts, still using the flat of his pudgy hand, something poked him lightly in the ribs. It was the muzzle of one of Quintana's pistols.

Sard, ghastly pale, looked up. His palm, sticky with balsam gum, quivered in Quintana's grasp.

"I was going to scrape it off," he gasped. "The tree was sticky——"

Quintana, with the muzzle of his pistol, detached half a dozen diamonds and rubies that clung to the gum on Mr. Sard's palm.

"Wash!" he said drily.

Sard, sweating with fear, washed his right hand with whiskey from his pocket-flask, and dried it for general inspection.

"My God," he protested tremulously, "it was accidental, gentlemen. Do you think I'd try to get away with anything like that——"

Quintana coolly shoved him aside and with the barrel of his pistol he pushed the flat pile of gems into five separate heaps. Only he and Georgiades knew that a magnificent diamond had been lodged in the muzzle of his pistol. The eyes of the Greek flamed with rage at the trick, but he awaited the division before he should come to any conclusion. [186]

Quintana coolly picked out The Flaming Jewel and pocketed it. Then, to each man he indicated the heap which was to be his portion.

A snarling wrangle instantly began, Sanchez objecting to rubies and demanding more emeralds, and Picquet complaining violently concerning the smallness of the diamonds allotted him.

Sard's trained eyes appraised every allotment. Without weighing, and, lacking time and paraphernalia for expert examination, he was inclined to think the division fair enough.

Quintana got to his feet lithely.

"For me," he said, "it is finish. With my frien' Sard I shall now depart. Messieurs, I embrace and salute you. A bientôt in Paris—if it be God's will! Donc—au revoir, les amis, et à la bonheur! Allons! Each for himself and gar' aux flics!"

Sard, seized with a sort of still terror, regarded Quintana with enormous eyes. Torn between dismay of being left alone in the wilderness, and a very natural fear of any single companion, he did not know what to say or do.

En masse, the gang were too distrustful of one another to unite on robbing any individual. But any individual might easily rob a companion when alone with him.

"Why—why can't we all go together," he stammered. "It is safer, surer——"

"I go with Quintana and you," interrupted Georgiades, smilingly; his mind on the diamond in the muzzle of Quintana's pistol. [187]

"I do not invite you," said Quintana. "But come if it pleases you."

"I also prefer to come with you others," growled Sanchez. "To roam alone in this filthy forest does not suit me."

Picquet shrugged his shoulders, turned on his heel in silence. They watched him moving away all alone, eastward. When he had disappeared among the trees, Quintana looked inquiringly at the others.

"Eh, bien, non alors!" snarled Georgiades suddenly. "There are too many in your trupeau, mon capitaine. Bonne chance!"

He turned and started noisily in the direction taken by Picquet.

They watched him out of sight; listened to his careless trample after he was lost to view. When at length the last distant sound of his retreat had died away in the stillness, Quintana touched Sard with the point of his pistol.

"Go first," he said suavely.

"For God's sake, be a little careful of your gun——"

"I am, my dear frien'. It is of *you* I may become careless. You will mos' kin'ly face south, and you will be kin' sufficient to start immediate. Tha's what I mean.... I thank you.... Now, my frien', Sanchez! Tha's correc'! You shall follow my frien' Sard ver' close. Me, I march in the rear. So we

shall pass to the eas' of thees Star Pon', then between the cross-road an' Ghos' Lake; an' then we shall repose; an' one of us, en vidette, shall discover if the Constabulary have patrol beyon'.... Allons! March!"

II

Guided by Quintana's directions, the three had made a wide detour to the east, steering by compass for the cross-roads beyond Star Pond. [188]

In a dense growth of cedars, on a little ridge traversing wet land, Quintana halted to listen.

Sard and Sanchez, supposing him to be at their heels, continued on, pushing their way blindly through the cedars, clinging to the hard ridge in terror of sink-holes. But their progress was very slow; and they were still in sight, fighting a painful path amid the evergreens, when Quintana suddenly squatted close to the moist earth behind a juniper bush.

At first, except for the threshing of Sard and Sanchez through the massed obstructions ahead, there was not a sound in the woods.

After a little while there *was* a sound—very, very slight. No dry stick cracked; no dry leaves rustled; no swish of foliage; no whipping sound of branches disturbed the intense silence.

But, presently, came a soft, swift rhythm like the pace of a forest creature in haste—a discreetly hurrying tread which was more a series of light earth-shocks than sound.

Quintana, kneeling on one knee, lifted his pistol. He already felt the slight vibration of the ground on the hard ridge. The cedars were moving just beyond him now. He waited until, through the parted foliage, a face appeared.

The loud report of his pistol struck Sard with the horror of paralysis. Sanchez faced about with one spring, snarling, a weapon in either hand.

In the terrible silence they could hear something heavy floundering in the bushes, choking, moaning, thudding on the ground. [189]

Sanchez began to creep back; Sard, more dead than alive, crawled at his heels. Presently they saw Quintana, waist deep in juniper, looking down at something.

And when they drew closer they saw Georgiades lying on his back under a cedar, the whole front of his shirt from chest to belly a sopping mess of blood.

There seemed no need of explanation. The dead Greek lay there where he had not been expected, and his two pistols lay beside him where they had fallen.

Sanchez looked stealthily at Quintana, who said softly:

"Bien sure.... In his left side pocket, I believe."

Sanchez laid a cool hand on the dead man's heart; then, satisfied, rummaged until he found Georgiades' share of the loot.

Sard, hurriedly displaying a pair of clean but shaky hands, made the division.

When the three men had silently pocketed what was allotted to each, Quintana pushed curiously at the dead man with the toe of his shoe.

"Peste!" he remarked. "I had place, for security, a ver' large diamon' in my pistol barrel. Now it is within the interior of this gentleman...." He turned to Sanchez: "I sell him to you. One sapphire. Yes?"

Sanchez shook his head with a slight sneer: "We wait—if you want your diamond, mon capitaine."

Quintana hesitated, then made a grimace and shook his head.

"No," he said, "he has swallow. Let him digest. Allons! March!" [190]

But after they had gone on—two hundred yards, perhaps—Sanchez stopped.

"Well?" inquired Quintana. Then, with a sneer: "I now recollect' that once you have been a butcher in Madrid.... Suit your tas'e, l'ami Sanchez."

Sard gazed at Sanchez out of sickened eyes.

"You keep away from me until you've washed yourself," he burst out, revolted. "Don't you come near me till you're clean!"

Quintana laughed and seated himself. Sanchez, with a hang-dog glance at him, turned and sneaked back on the trail they had traversed. Before he was out of sight Sard saw him fish out a Spanish knife from his hip pocket and unclasp it.

Almost nauseated, he turned on Quintana in a sort of frightened fury:

"Come on!" he said hoarsely. "I don't want to travel with that man! I won't associate with a ghoul! My God, I'm a respectable business man——"

"Yaas," drawled Quintana, "tha's what I saw always myse'f; my frien' Sard he is ver' respec'able, an' I trus' him like I trus' myse'f."

However, after a moment, Quintana got up from the fallen tree where he had been seated.

As he passed Sard he looked curiously into the man's frightened eyes. There was not the slightest doubt that Sard was a coward.

"You shall walk behin' me," remarked Quintana carelessly. "If Sanchez fin' us, it is well; if he shall not, that also is ver' well.... We go, now." [191]

Sanchez made no effort to find them. They had been gone half an hour before he had finished the business that had turned him back.

After that he wandered about hunting for water—a rivulet, a puddle, anything. But the wet ground proved wet only on the surface moss. Sanchez needed more than damp moss for his toilet. Casting about him, hither and thither, for some depression that might indicate a stream, he came to a heavily wooded slope, and descended it.

There was a bog at the foot. With his fouled hands he dug out a basin which filled up full of reddish water, discoloured by alders.

But the water was redder still when his toilet ended.

As he stood there, examining his clothing, and washing what he could of the ominous stains from sleeve and shoe, very far away to the north he heard a curious noise—a far, faint sound such as he never before had heard.

If it were a voice of any sort there was nothing human about it.... Probably some sort of unknown bird.... Perhaps a bird of prey.... That was natural, considering the attraction that Geordiades would have for such creatures.... If it were a bird it must be a large one, he thought.... Because there was a certain volume to the cry.... Perhaps it was a beast, after all.... Some unknown beast of the forest....

Sanchez was suddenly afraid. Scarcely knowing what he was doing he began to run along the edge of the bog.

First growth timber skirted it; running was unobstructed by underbrush. [192]

With his startled ears full of the alarming and unknown sound, he ran through the woods under gigantic pines which spread a soft green twilight around him.

He was tired, or thought he was, but the alarming sounds were filling his ears now; the entire forest seemed full of them, echoing in all directions, coming in upon him from everywhere, so that he knew not in which direction to run.

But he could not stop. Demoralised, he darted this way and that; terror winged his feet; the air vibrated above and around him with the dreadful, unearthly sounds.

The next instant he fell headlong over a ledge, struck water, felt himself whirled around in the icy, rushing current, rolled over, tumbled through rapids, blinded, deafened, choked, swept helplessly in a vast green wall of water toward something that thundered in his brain an instant, then dashed it into roaring chaos.

Half a mile down the turbulent outlet of Star Pond,—where a great sheet of green water pours thirty feet into the tossing foam below,—and spinning, dipping, diving, bobbing up like a lost log after the drive, the body of Señor Sanchez danced all alone in the wilderness, spilling from soggy pockets diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, into crystal caves where only the shadows of slim trout stirred.

Very far away to the eastward Quintana stood listening, clutching Sard by one sleeve to silence him.

Presently he said: "My frien', somebody is hunting with houn's in this fores'.

"Maybe they are not hunting *us*.... *Maybe*.... But, for me, I shall seek running water. Go you your own way! Houp! Vamose!" [193]

He turned westward; but he had taken scarcely a dozen strides when Sard came panting after him:

"Don't leave me!" gasped the terrified diamond broker. "I don't know where to go——"

Quintana faced him abruptly—with a terrifying smile and glimmer of white teeth—and shoved a pistol into the fold of fat beneath Sard's double chin.

"You hear those dogs? Yes? Ver' well; I also. Run, now. I say to you run ver' damn quick. Hé!

Houp! Allez vous en! Beat eet!"

He struck Sard a stinging blow on his fleshy ear with the pistol barrel, and Sard gave a muffled shriek which was more like the squeak of a frightened animal.

"My God, Quintana——" he sobbed. Then Quintana's eyes blazed murder: and Sard turned and ran lumbering through the thicket like a stampeded ox, crashing on amid withered brake, white birch scrub and brier, not knowing whither he was headed, crazed with terror.

Quintana watched his flight for a moment, then, pistol swinging, he ran in the opposite direction, eastward, speeding lithely as a cat down a long, wooded slope which promised running water at the foot.

Sard could not run very far. He could scarcely stand when he pulled up and clung to the trunk of a tree.

More dead than alive he embraced the tree, gulping horribly for air, every fat-incrusted organ labouring, his senses swimming.

As he sagged there, gripping his support on shaking knees, by degrees his senses began to return. [194]

He could hear the dogs, now, vaguely as in a nightmare. But after a little while he began to believe that their hysterical yelping was really growing more distant.

Then this man whose every breath was an outrage on God, prayed.

He prayed that the hounds would follow Quintana, come up with him, drag him down, worry him, tear him to shreds of flesh and clothing.

He listened and prayed alternately. After a while he no longer prayed but concentrated on his ears.

Surely, surely, the diabolical sound was growing less distinct.... It was changing direction too. But whether in Quintana's direction or not Sard could not tell. He was no woodsman. He was completely turned around.

He looked upward through a dense yellow foliage, but all was grey in the sky—very grey and still;—and there seemed to be no traces of the sun that had been shining.

He looked fearfully around: trees, trees, and more trees. No break, no glimmer, nothing to guide him, teach him. He could see, perhaps, fifty feet; no further.

In panic he started to move on. That is what fright invariably does to those ignorant of the forest. Terror starts them moving.

Sobbing, frightened almost witless, he had been floundering forward for over an hour, and had made circle after circle without knowing, when, by chance, he set foot in a perfectly plain trail.

Emotion overpowered him. He was too overcome to stir for a while. At length, however, he tottered off down the trail, oblivious as to what direction he was taking, animated only by a sort of madness—horror of trees—an insane necessity to see open ground, get into it, and lie down on it. [195]

And now, directly ahead, he saw clear grey sky low through the trees. The wood's edge!

He began to run.

As he emerged from the edge of the woods, waist-deep in brush and weeds, wide before his blood-shot eyes spread Star Pond.

Even in his half-stupefied brain there was memory enough left for recognition.

He remembered the lake. His gaze travelled to the westward; and he saw Clinch's Dump standing below, stark, silent, the doors swinging open in the wind.

When terror had subsided in a measure and some of his trembling strength returned, he got up out of the clump of rag-weeds where he had lain down, and earnestly nosed the unpainted house, listening with all his ears.

There was not a sound save the sougning of autumn winds and the delicate rattle of falling leaves in the woods behind him.

He needed food and rest. He gazed earnestly at the house. Nothing stirred there save the open doors swinging idly in every vagrant wind.

He ventured down a little way—near enough to see the black cinders of the burned barn, and close enough to hear the lake waters slapping the sandy shore.

If he dared——

And after a long while he ventured to waddle nearer, slinking through brush and frosted weed, [196]

creeping behind boulders, edging always closer and closer to that silent house where nothing moved except the wind-blown door.

And now, at last, he set a furtive foot upon the threshold, stood listening, tip-toed in, peered here and there, sidled to the dining-room, peered in.

When, at length, Emanuel Sard discovered that Clinch's Dump was tenantless, he made straight for the pantry. Here was cheese, crackers, an apple pie, half a dozen bottles of home-brewed beer.

He loaded his arms with all they could carry, stole through the dance-hall out to the veranda, which overlooked the lake.

Here, hidden in the doorway, he could watch the road from Ghost Lake and survey the hillside down which an intruder must come from the forest.

And here Sard slaked his raging thirst and satiated the gnawing appetite of the obese, than which there is no crueller torment to an inert liver and distended paunch.

Munching, guzzling, watching, Sard squatted just within the veranda doorway, anxiously considering his chances.

He knew where he was. At the foot of the lake, and eastward, he had been robbed by a highwayman on the forest road branching from the main highway. Southwest lay Ghost Lake and the Inn.

Somewhere between these two points he must try to cross the State Road.... After that, comparative safety. For the miles that still would lie between him and distant civilisation seemed as nothing to the horror of that hell of trees.

He looked up now at the shaggy fringing woods, shuddered, opened another bottle of beer.

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In all that panorama of forest, swale, and water the only thing that had alarmed him at all by moving was something in the water. When first he noticed it he almost swooned, for he took it to be a swimming dog.

In his agitation he had risen to his feet; and then the swimming creature almost frightened Sard out of his senses, for it tilted suddenly and went down with a report like the crack of a pistol.

However, when Sard regained control of his wits he realised that a swimming dog doesn't dive and doesn't whack the water with its tail.

He dimly remembered hearing that beavers behaved that way.

Watching the water he saw the thing out there in the lake again, swimming in erratic circles, its big, dog-like head well out of the water.

It certainly was no dog. A beaver, maybe. Whatever it was, Sard didn't care any longer.

Idly he watched it. Sometimes, when it swam very near, he made a sudden motion with his fat arm; and crack!—with a pistol-shot report down it dived. But always it reappeared.

What had a creature like that to do with him? Sard watched it with failing interest, thinking of other things—of Quintana and the chances that the dogs had caught him,—of Sanchez, the Ghoul, hoping that dire misfortune might overtake him, too;—of the dead man sprawling under the cedar-tree, all sopping crimson— Faugh!

Shivering, Sard filled his mouth with apple-pie and cheese and pulled the cork from another bottle of home-brewed beer.

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III

About that time, a mile and a half to the southward, James Darragh came out on the rocky and rushing outlet to Star Pond.

Over his shoulder was a rifle, and all around him ran dogs,—big, powerful dogs, built like foxhounds but with the rough, wiry coats of Airedales, even rougher of ear and features.

The dogs,—half a dozen or so in number,—seemed very tired. All ran down eagerly to the water and drank and slobbered and panted, lolling their tongues, and slaking their thirst again and again along the swirling edge of a deep trout pool.

Darragh's rifle lay in the hollow of his left arm; his khaki waistcoat was set with loops full of cartridges. From his left wrist hung a raw-hide whip.

Now he laid aside his rifle and whip, took from the pocket of his shooting coat three or four leather dog-leashes, went down among the dogs and coupled them up.

They followed him back to the bank above. Here he sat down on a rock and inspected his watch.

He had been seated there for ten minutes, possibly, with his tired dogs lying around him, when just above him he saw a State Trooper emerge from the woods on foot, carrying a rifle over one shoulder.

"Jack!" he called in a guarded voice.

Trooper Stormont turned, caught sight of Darragh, made a signal of recognition, and came toward him.

Darragh said: "Your mate, Trooper Lannis, is down stream. I've two of my own game wardens at the cross-roads, two more on the Ghost Lake Road, and two foresters and an inspector out toward Owl Marsh." [199]

Stormont nodded, looked down at the dogs.

"This isn't the State Forest," said Darragh, smiling. Then his face grew grave: "How is Eve?" he asked.

"She's feeling better," replied Stormont. "I telephoned to Ghost Lake Inn for the hotel physician.... I was afraid of pneumonia, Jim. Eve had chills last night.... But Dr. Claybourn thinks she's all right.... So I left her in care of your housekeeper."

"Mrs. Ray will look out for her.... You haven't told Eve who I am, have you?"

"No."

"I'll tell her myself to-night. I don't know how she'll take it when she learns I'm the heir to the mortal enemy of Mike Clinch."

"I don't know either," said Stormont.

There was a silence; the State Trooper looked down at the dogs:

"What are they, Jim?"

"Otter-hounds," said Darragh, "—a breed of my own.... But that's *all* they are capable of hunting, I guess," he added grimly.

Stormont's gaze questioned him.

Darragh said: "After I telephoned you this morning that a guest of mine at Harrod Place, and I, had been stuck up and robbed by Quintana's outfit, what did you do, Jack?"

"I called up Bill Lannis first," said Stormont, "—then the doctor. After he came, Mrs. Ray arrived with a maid. Then I went in and spoke to Eve. Then I did what you suggested—I crossed the forest diagonally toward The Scaur, zig-zagged north, turned by the rock hog-back south of Drowned Valley, came southeast, circled west, and came out here as you asked me to." [200]

"Almost on the minute," nodded Darragh.... "You saw no signs of Quintana's gang?"

"None."

"Well," said Darragh, "I left my two guests at Harrod Place to amuse each other, got out three couple of my otter-hounds and started them,—as I hoped and supposed,—on Quintana's trail."

"What happened?" inquired Stormont curiously.

"Well—I don't know. I think they were following some of Quintana's gang—for a while, anyway. After that, God knows,—deer, hare, cotton-tail,—I don't know. They yelled their bally heads off—I on the run—they're slow dogs, you know—and whatever they were after either fooled them or there were too many trails.... I made a mistake, that's all. These poor beasts don't know anything except an otter. I just *hoped* they might take Quintana's trail if I put them on it."

"Well," said Stormont, "it can't be helped now.... I told Bill Lannis that we'd rendezvous at Clinch's Dump."

"All right," nodded Darragh. "Let's keep to the open; my dogs are leashed couples."

They had been walking for twenty minutes, possibly, exchanging scarcely a word, and they were now nearing the hilly basin where Star Pond lay, when Darragh said abruptly:

"I'm going to tell you about things, Jack. You've taken my word so far that it's all right——" [201]

"Naturally," said Stormont simply.

The two men, who had been brother officers in the Great War, glanced at each other, slightly smiling.

"Here it is then," said Darragh. "When I was on duty in Riga for the Intelligence Department, I met two ladies in dire distress, whose mansion had been burned and looted, supposedly by the Bolsheviki.

"They were actually hungry and penniless; the only clothing they possessed they were wearing. These ladies were the Countess Orloff-Strelwitz, and a young girl, Theodorica, Grand Duchess of Esthonia.... I did what I could for them. After a while, in the course of other duty, I found out that

the Bolsheviks had had nothing to do with the arson and robbery, but that the crime had been perpetrated by José Quintana's gang of international crooks masquerading as Bolsheviks."

Stormont nodded: "I also came across similar cases," he remarked.

"Well, this was a flagrant example. Quintana had burnt the château and had made off with over two million dollars worth of the little Grand Duchess's jewels—among them the famous Erosite gem known as The Flaming Jewel."

"I've heard of it."

"There are only two others known.... Well, I did what I could with the Esthonian police, who didn't believe me.

"But a short time ago the Countess Orloff sent me word that Quintana really was the guilty one, and that he had started for America.

"I've been after him ever since.... But, Jack, until this morning Quintana did not possess these stolen jewels. *Clinch did!*"

[202]

"What!"

"Clinch served over-seas in a Forestry Regiment. In Paris he robbed Quintana of these jewels. That's why I've been hanging around Clinch."

Stormont's face was flushed and incredulous. Then it lost colour as he thought of the jewels that Eve had concealed—the gems for which she had risked her life.

He said: "But you tell me Quintana robbed you this morning."

"He did. The little Grand Duchess and the Countess Orloff-Strelwitz are my guests at Harrod Place.

"Last night I snatched the case containing these gems from Quintana's fingers. This morning, as I offered them to the Grand Duchess, Quintana coolly stepped between us—"

His voice became bitter and his features reddened with rage poorly controlled:

"By God, Jack, I should have shot Quintana when the opportunity offered. Twice I've had the chance. The next time I shall kill him any way I can.... Legitimately."

"Of course," said Stormont gravely. But his mind was full of the jewels which Eve had. What and whose were they,—if Quintana again had the Esthonian gems in his possession?

"Had you recovered all the jewels for the Grand Duchess?" he asked Darragh.

"Every one, Jack.... Quintana has done me a terrible injury. I shan't let it go. I mean to hunt that man to the end."

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Stormont, terribly perplexed, nodded.

A few minutes later, as they came out among the willows and alders on the northeast side of Star Pond, Stormont touched his comrade's arm.

"Look at that enormous dog-otter out there in the lake!"

"Grab those dogs! They'll strangle each other," cried Darragh quickly. "That's it—unleash them, Jack, and let them go!"—he was struggling with the other two couples while speaking.

And now the hounds, unleashed, lifted frantic voices. The very sky seemed full of the discordant tumult; wood and shore reverberated with the volume of convulsive and dissonant baying.

"Damn it," said Darragh, disgusted, "—that's what they've been trailing all the while across-woods,—that devilish dog-otter yonder.... And I had hoped they were on Quintana's trail—"

A mass rush and scurry of crazed dogs nearly swept him off his feet, and both men caught a glimpse of a large bitch-otter taking to the lake from a ledge of rock just beyond.

Now the sky vibrated with the deafening outcry of the dogs, some taking to water, others racing madly along shore.

Crack! The echo of the dog-otter's blow on the water came across to them as the beast dived.

"Well, I'm in for it now," muttered Darragh, starting along the bank toward Clinch's Dump, to keep an eye on his dogs.

Stormont followed more leisurely.

IV

A few minutes before Darragh and Stormont had come out on the farther edge of Star Pond, Sard, who had heard from Quintana about the big drain pipe which led from Clinch's pantry into the lake, decided to go in and take a look at it.

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He had been told all about its uses,—how Clinch,—in the event of a raid by State Troopers or Government enforcement agents,—could empty his contraband hootch into the lake if necessary,—and even could slide a barrel of ale or a keg of rum, intact, into the great tile tunnel and recover the liquor at his leisure.

Also, and grimly, Quintana had admitted that through this drain Eve Strayer and the State Trooper, Stormont, had escaped from Clinch's Dump.

So now Sard, full of curiosity, went back into the pantry to look at it for himself.

Almost instantly the idea occurred to him to make use of the drain for his own safety and comfort.

Why shouldn't he sleep in the pantry, lock the door, and, in case of intrusion,—other exits being unavailable,—why shouldn't he feel entirely safe with such an avenue of escape open?

For swimming was Sard's single accomplishment. He wasn't afraid of the water; he simply couldn't sink. Swimming was the only sport he ever had indulged in. He adored it.

Also, the mere idea of sleeping alone amid that hell of trees terrified Sard. Never had he known such horror as when Quintana abandoned him in the woods. Never again could he gaze upon a tree without malignant hatred. Never again did he desire to lay eyes upon even a bush. The very sight, now, of the dusky forest filled him with loathing. Why should he not risk one night in this deserted house,—sleep well and warmly, feed well, drink his bellyfull of Clinch's beer, before attempting the dead-line southward, where he was only too sure that patrols were riding and hiding on the lookout for the fancy gentlemen of José Quintana's selected company of malefactors?

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Well, here in the snug pantry were pies, crullers, bread, cheeses, various dried meats, tinned vegetables, ham, bacon, fuel and range to prepare what he desired.

Here was beer, too; and doubtless ardent spirits if he could nose out the hidden demijohns and bottles.

He peered out of the pantry window at the forest, shuddered, cursed it and every separate tree in it; cursed Quintana, too, wishing him black mischance. No; it was settled. He'd take his chance here in the pantry.... And there must be a mattress somewhere upstairs.

He climbed the staircase, cautiously, discovered Clinch's bedroom, took the mattress and blankets from the bed, dragged them to the pantry.

Could any honest man be more tight and snug in this perilous world of the desperate and undeserving? Sard thought not. But one matter troubled him: the lock of the pantry door had been shattered. To remedy this he moused around until he discovered some long nails and a claw-hammer. When he was ready to go to sleep he'd nail himself in. And in the morning he'd pry the door loose. That was simple. Sard chuckled for the first time since he had set eyes upon the accursed region.

And now the sun came out from behind a low bank of solid grey cloud, and fell upon the countenance of Emanuel Sard. It warmed his parrot-nose agreeably; it cheered and enlivened him.

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Not for him a night of terrors in that horrible forest which he could see through the pantry window.

A sense of security and of well-being pervaded Sard to his muddy shoes. He even curled his fat toes in them with animal contentment.

A little snack before cooking a heavily satisfactory dinner? Certainly.

So he tucked a couple of bottles of beer under one arm, a loaf of bread and a chunk of cheese under the other, and waddled out to the veranda door.

And at that instant the very heavens echoed with that awful tumult which had first paralysed, then crazed him in the woods.

Bottles, bread, cheese fell from his grasp and his knees nearly collapsed under him. In the bushes on the lake shore he saw animals leaping and racing, but, in his terror, he did not recognise them for dogs.

Then, suddenly, he saw a man, close to the house, running: and another man not far behind. *That* he understood, and it electrified him into action.

It was too late to escape from the house now. He understood that instantly.

He ran back through the dance-hall and dining-room to the pantry; but he dared not let these intruders hear the noise of hammering.

In an agony of indecision he stood trembling, listening to the infernal racket of the dogs, and waiting for the first footstep within the house.

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No step came. But, chancing to look over his shoulder, he saw a man peering through the pantry window at him.

Ungovernable terror seized Sard. Scarcely aware what he was about, he seized the edges of the big drain-pipe and crowded his obese body into it head first. He was so fat and heavy that he filled the tile. To start himself down he pulled with both hands and kicked himself forward, tortoise-like, down the slanting tunnel, sticking now and then, dragging himself on and downward.

Now he began to gain momentum; he felt himself sliding, not fast but steadily.

There came a hitch somewhere; his heavy body stuck on the steep incline.

Then, as he lifted his bewildered head and strove to peer into the blackness in front, he saw four balls of green fire close to him in darkness.

He began to slide at the same instant, and flung out both hands to check himself. But his palms slid in the slime and his body slid after.

He shrieked once as his face struck a furry obstruction where four balls of green fire flamed horribly and a fury of murderous teeth tore his face and throat to bloody tatters as he slid lower, lower, settling through crimson-dyed waters into the icy depths of Star Pond.

Stormont, down by the lake, called to Darragh, who appeared on the veranda:

"Oh, Jim! Both otters crawled into the drain! I think your dogs must have killed one of them under water. There's a big patch of blood spreading off shore." [208]

"Yes," said Darragh, "something has just been killed, somewhere ... Jack!"

"Yes?"

"Pull both your guns and come up here, quick!"

EPISODE TEN [209]

THE TWILIGHT OF MIKE

I

WHEN Quintana turned like an enraged snake on Sard and drove him to his destruction, he would have killed and robbed the frightened diamond broker had he dared risk the shot. He had intended to do this anyway, sooner or later. But with the noise of the hunting dogs filling the forest, Quintana was afraid to fire. Yet, even then he followed Sard stealthily for a few minutes, afraid yet murderously desirous of the gems, confused by the tumult of the hounds, timid and ferocious at the same time, and loath to leave his fat, perspiring, and demoralised victim.

But the racket of the dogs proved too much for Quintana. He sheered away toward the South, leaving Sard floundering on ahead, unconscious of the treachery that had followed furtively in his panic-stricken tracks.

About an hour later Quintana was seen, challenged, chased and shot at by State Trooper Lannis.

Quintana ran. And what with the dense growth of seedling beech and oak and the heavily falling birch and poplar leaves, Lannis first lost Quintana and then his trail.

The State Trooper had left his horse at the cross-roads near the scene of Darragh's masked exploit, where he had stopped and robbed Sard—and now Lannis hastened back to find and mount his horse, and gallop straight into the first growth timber. [210]

Through dim aisles of giant pine he spurred to a dead run on the chance of cutting Quintana from the eastward edge of the forest and forcing him back toward the north or west, where patrols were more than likely to hold him.

The State Trooper rode with all the reckless indifference and grace of the Western cavalryman, and he seemed to be part of the superb animal he rode—part of its bone and muscle, its litheness, its supple power—part of its vertebræ and ribs and limbs, so perfect was their bodily co-ordination.

Rifle and eyes intently alert, the rider scarce noticed his rushing mount; and if he guided with wrist and knee it was instinctive and as though the horse were guiding them both.

And now, far ahead through this primeval stand of pine, sunshine glimmered, warning of a

clearing. And here Trooper Lannis pulled in his horse at the edge of what seemed to be a broad, flat meadow, vividly green.

But it was the intense, arsenical green of hair-fine grass that covers with its false velvet those quaking bogs where only a thin, crust-like skin of root-fibre and vegetation cover infinite depths of silt.

The silt had no more substance than a drop of ink colouring the water in a tumbler.

Sitting his fast-breathing mount, Lannis searched this wide, flat expanse of brilliant green. Nothing moved on it save a great heron picking its deliberate way on stilt-like legs. It was well for Quintana that he had not attempted it.

Very cautiously Lannis walked his horse along the hard ground which edged this marsh on the west. Nowhere was there any sign that Quintana had come down to the edge among the shrubs and swale grasses. [211]

Beyond the marsh another trooper patrolled; and when at length he and Lannis perceived each other and exchanged signals, the latter wheeled his horse and retraced his route at an easy canter, satisfied that Quintana had not yet broken cover.

Back through the first growth he cantered, his rifle at a ready, carefully scanning the more open woodlands, and so came again to the cross-roads.

And here stood a State Game Inspector, with a report that some sort of beagle-pack was hunting in the forest to the northwest; and very curious to investigate.

So it was arranged that the Inspector should turn road-patrol and the Trooper become the rover.

There was no sound of dogs when Lannis rode in on the narrow, spotted trail whence he had flushed Quintana into the dense growth of saplings that bordered it.

His horse made little noise on the moist layer of leaves and forest mould; he listened hard for the sound of hounds as he rode; heard nothing save the chirr of red squirrels, the shriek of a watching jay, or the startling noise of falling acorns rapping and knocking on great limbs in their descent to the forest floor.

Once, very, very far away westward in the direction of Star Pond he fancied he heard a faint vibration in the air that might have been hounds baying.

He was right. And at that very moment Sard was dying, horribly, among two trapped otters as big and fierce as the dogs that had driven them into the drain.

But Lannis knew nothing of that as he moved on, mounted, along the spotted trail, now all a yellow glory of birch and poplar which made the woodland brilliant as though lighted by yellow lanterns. [212]

Somewhere among the birches, between him and Star Pond, was Harrod Place. And the idea occurred to him that Quintana might have ventured to ask food and shelter there. Yet, that was not likely because Trooper Stormont had called him that morning on the telephone from the Hatchery Lodge.

No; the only logical retreat for Quintana was northward to the mountains, where patrols were plenty and fire-wardens on duty in every watch-tower. Or, the fugitive could make for Drowned Valley by a blind trail which, Stormont informed him, existed but which Lannis never had heard of.

However, to reassure himself, Lannis rode as far as Harrod Place, and found game wardens on duty along the line.

Then he turned west and trotted his mount down to the hatchery, where he saw Ralph Wier, the Superintendent, standing outside the lodge talking to his assistant, George Fry.

When Lannis rode up on the opposite side of the brook, he called across to Wier:

"You haven't seen anything of any crooked outfit around here, have you, Ralph? I'm looking for that kind."

"See here," said the Superintendent, "I don't know but George Fry may have seen one of your guys. Come over and he'll tell you what happened an hour ago."

Trooper Lannis pivotted his horse and put him to the brook with scarcely any take-off; and the splendid animal cleared the water like a deer and came cantering up to the door of the lodge. [213]

Fry's boyish face seemed agitated; he looked up at the State Trooper with the flush of tears in his gaze and pointed at the rifle Lannis carried:

"If I'd had *that*," he said excitedly, "I'd have brought in a crook, you bet!"

"Where did you see him?" inquired Lannis.

"Jest west of the Scaur, about an hour and a half ago. Wier and me was stockin' the head of Scaur Brook with fingerlings. There's more good water—two miles of it—to the east, and all it

needed was a fish-ladder around Scaur Falls.

"So I toted in cement and sand and grub last week, and I built me a shanty on the Scaur, and I been laying up a fish-way around the falls. So that's how I come there——" He clicked his teeth and darted a furious glance at the woods. "By God," he said, "I was such a fool I didn't take no rifle. All I had was an axe and a few traps.... I wasn't going to let the mink get our trout whatever you fellows say," he added defiantly, "—and law or no law——"

"Get along with your story, young man," interrupted Lannis; "—you can spill the rest out to the Commissioner."

"All right, then. This is the way it happened down to the Scaur. I was eating lunch by the fish-stairs, looking up at 'em and kind of planning how to save cement, and not thinking about anybody being near me, when *something* made me turn my head.... You know how it is in the woods.... I kinda *felt* somebody near. And, by cracky!—there stood a man with a big, black automatic pistol, and he had a bead on my belly.

"Well," said I, "what's troubling *you* and your gun, my friend?"—I was that astonished.

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"He was a slim-built, powerful guy with a foreign face and voice and way. He wanted to know if he had the honour—as he put it—to introduce himself to a detective or game constable, or a friend of Mike Clinch.

"I told him I wasn't any of these, and that I worked in a private hatchery; and he called me a liar."

Young Fry's face flushed and his voice began to quiver:

"That's the way he misused me: and he backed me into the shanty and I had to sit down with both hands up. Then he filled my pack-basket with grub, and took my axe, and strapped my kit onto his back.... And talking all the time in his mean, sneery, foreign way—and I guess he thought he was funny, for he laughed at his own jokes.

"He told me his name was Quintana, and that he ought to shoot me for a rat, but wouldn't because of the stink. Then he said he was going to do a quick job that the police were too cowardly to do;—that he was a-going to find Mike Clinch down to Drowned Valley and kill him; and if he could catch Mike's daughter, too, he'd spoil her face for life——"

The boy was breathing so hard and his rage made him so incoherent that Lannis took him by the shoulder and shook him:

"What next?" demanded the Trooper impatiently. "Tell your story and quit thinking how you were misused!"

"He told me to stay in the shanty for an hour or he'd do for me good," cried Fry.... "Once I got up and went to the door; and there he stood by the brook, wolfing my lunch with both hands. I tell you he cursed and drove me, like a dog, inside with his big pistol—my God—like a dog....

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"Then, the next time I took a chance he was gone.... And I beat it here to get me a rifle——" The boy broke down and sobbed: "He drove me around—like a dog—he did——"

"You leave that to me," interrupted Lannis sharply. And, to Wier: "You and George had better get a gun apiece. That fellow *might* come back here or go to Harrod Place if we starve him out."

Wier said to Fry: "Go up to Harrod Place and tell Jansen your story and bring back two 45-70's.... And quit snivelling.... You may get a shot at him yet."

Lannis had already ridden down to the brook. Now he jumped his horse across, pulled up, called back to Wier:

"I think our man is making for Drowned Valley, all right. My mate, Stormont, telephoned me that some of his gang are there, and that Mike Clinch and his gang have them stopped on the other side! Keep your eye on Harrod Place!"

And away he cantered into the North.

Behind the curtains of her open window Eve Strayer, lying on her bed, had heard every word.

Crouched there beside her pillow she peered out and saw Trooper Lannis ride away; saw the Fry boy start toward Harrod Place on a run; saw Ralph Wier watch them out of sight and then turn and re-enter the lodge.

Wrapped in Darragh's big blanket robe she got off the bed and opened her chamber door as Wier was passing through the living-room.

"Please—I'd like to speak to you a moment," she called.

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Wier turned instantly and came to the partly open door.

"I want to know," she said, "where I am."

"Ma'am?"

"What is this place?"

"It's a hatchery——"

"Whose?"

"Ma'am?"

"Whose lodge is this? Does it belong to Harrod Place?"

"We're h-hootch runners, Miss——" stammered Wier, mindful of instructions, but making a poor business of deception; "—I and Hal Smith, we run a 'Easy One,' and we strip trout for a blind and sell to Harrod Place—Hal and I——"

"*Who* is Hal Smith?" she asked.

"Ma'am?"

The girl's flower-blue eyes turned icy: "Who is the man who calls himself Hal Smith?" she repeated.

Wier looked at her, red and dumb.

"Is he a Trooper in plain clothes?" she demanded in a bitter voice. "Is he one of the Commissioner's spies? Are *you* one, too?"

Wier gazed miserably at her, unable to formulate a convincing lie.

She flushed swiftly as a terrible suspicion seized her:

"Is this Harrod property? Is Hal Smith old Harrod's heir? *Is* he?"

"My God, Miss——"

"He *is*!"

"Listen, Miss——"

She flung open the door and came out into the living-room.

"Hal Smith is that nephew of old Harrod," she said calmly. "His name is Darragh. And you are one of his wardens.... And I can't stay here. Do you understand?"

Wier wiped his hot face and waited. The cat was out; there was a hole in the bag; and he knew there was no use in such lies as he could tell.

He said: "All I know, Miss, is that I was to look after you and get you whatever you want——"

"I want my clothes!"

"Ma'am?"

"My *clothes*!" she repeated impatiently. "I've *got* to have them!"

"Where are they, ma'am?" asked the bewildered man.

At the same moment the girl's eyes fell on a pile of men's sporting clothing—garments sent down from Harrod Place to the Lodge—lying on a leather lounge near a gun-rack.

Without a glance at Wier, Eve went to the heap of clothing, tossed it about, selected cords, two pairs of woollen socks, grey shirt, puttees, shoes, flung the garments through the door into her own room, followed them, and locked herself in.

When she was dressed—the two heavy pairs of socks helping to fit her feet to the shoes—she emptied her handful of diamonds, sapphires and emeralds, including the Flaming Jewel, into the pockets of her breeches.

Now she was ready. She unlocked her door and went out, scarcely limping at all, now.

Wier gazed at her helplessly as she coolly chose a rifle and cartridge-belt at the gun-rack.

Then she turned on him as still and dangerous as a young puma:

"Tell Darragh he'd better keep clear of Clinch's," she said. "Tell him I always thought he was a rat. Now I know he's one."

She plunged one slim hand into her pocket and drew out a diamond.

"Here," she said insolently. "This will pay your *gentleman* for his gun and clothing."

She tossed the gem onto a table, where it rolled, glittering.

"For heaven's sake, Miss——" burst out Wier, horrified, but she cut him short:

"—He may keep the change," she said. "We're no swindlers at Clinch's Dump!"

Wier started forward as though to intercept her. Eve's eyes flamed. And he stood still. She

wrenched open the door and walked out among the silver birches.

At the edge of the brook she stood a moment, coolly loading the magazine of her rifle. Then, with one swift glance of hatred, flung at the place that Harrod's money had built, she sprang across the brook, tossed her rifle to her shoulder, and passed lithely into the golden wilderness of poplar and silver birch.

II

Quintana, on a fox-trot along the rock-trail into Drowned Valley, now thoroughly understood that it was the only sanctuary left him for the moment. Egress to the southward was closed; to the eastward, also; and he was too wary to venture westward toward Ghost Lake.

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No, the only temporary safety lay in the swamps of Drowned Valley.

And there, he decided as he jogged along, if worse came to worst and starvation drove him out, he'd settle matters with Mike Clinch and break through to the north.

He meant to settle matters with Mike Clinch anyway. He was not afraid of Clinch; not really afraid of anybody. It had been the dogs that demoralised Quintana. He'd had no experience with hunting hounds,—did not know what to expect,—how to manoeuvre. If only he could have *seen* these beasts that filled the forest with their hob-goblin outcries—if he could have had a good look at the creatures who gave forth that weird, crazed, melancholy volume of sound!—

"Bon!" he said coolly to himself. "It was a crisis of nerves which I experience. Yes.... I should have shot him, that fat Sard. Yes.... Only those damn dog— And now he shall die an' rot—that fat Sard—all by himse'f, parbleu!—like one big dead thing all alone in the wood.... A puddle of guts full of diamonds! Ah!—mon dieu!—a million francs in gems that shine like festering stars in this damn wood till the world end. Ah, bah—nome de dieu de—"

"Halte là!" came a sharp voice from the cedar fringe in front. A pause, then recognition; and Henri Picquet walked out on the hard ridge beyond and stood leaning on his rifle and looking sullenly at his leader.

Quintana came forward, carelessly, a disagreeable expression in his eyes and on his narrow lips, and continued on past Picquet.

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The latter slouched after his leader, who had walked over to the lean-to before which a pile of charred logs lay in cold ashes.

As Picquet came up, Quintana turned on him, with a gesture toward the extinguished fire: "It is cold like hell," he said. "Why do you not have some fire?"

"Not for me, non," growled Picquet, and jerked a dirty thumb in the direction of the lean-to.

And there Quintana saw a pair of muddy boots protruding from a blanket.

"It is Harry Beck, yes?" he inquired. Then *something* about the boots and the blanket silenced him. He kept his eyes on them for a full minute, then walked into the lean-to. The blanket also covered Harry Beck's features and there was a stain on it where it outlined the prostrate man's features, making a ridge over the bony nose.

After a moment Quintana looked around at Picquet:

"So. He is dead. Yes?"

Picquet shrugged: "Since noon, mon capitaine."

"Comment?"

"How shall I know? It was the fire, perhaps,—green wood or wet—it is no matter now.... I said to him, 'Pay attention, Henri; your wood makes too much smoke.' To me he reply I shall go to hell.... Well, there was too much smoke for me. I arise to search for wood more dry, when, crack!—they begin to shoot out there—"

He waved a dirty hand toward the forest.

"'Bon,' said I, 'Clinch, he have seen your damn smoke!'

"'What shall I care?' he make reply, Henri Beck, to me. 'Clinch he shall shoot and be damn to him. I cook me my déjeuner all the same.'

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"I make representations to that Johnbull; he say to me that I am a frog, and other injuries, while he lay yet more wood on his sacré fire.

"Then crack! crack! crack! and zing-gg!—whee-ee! come the big bullets of Clinch and his voyous yonder.

"'Bon,' I say, 'me, I make my excuse to retire.'

"Then Henri Beck he laugh and say, 'Hop it, frog!' And that is all he has find time to say, when crack! spat! Bien droit he has it—tenez, mon capitaine—here, over the left eye!... Like a beef surprise he go over, crash! thump! And like a beef that dies, the air bellows out from his big lungs—"

Picquet looked down at the dead comrade in a sort of weary compassion for such stupidity.

"—So he pass, this ros-biff goddam Johnbull.... Me, I roll him in there.... Je ne sais pas pourquoi.... Then I put out the fire and leave."

Quintana let his sneering glance rest on the dead a moment, and his thin lip curled immemorial contempt for the Anglo-Saxon.

Then he divested himself of the basket-pack which he had stolen from the Fry boy.

"Alors," he said calmly, "it has been Mike Clinch who shoot my frien' Beck. Bien."

He threw a cartridge into the breech of his rifle, adjusted his ammunition belt *en bandoulière*, carelessly.

Then, in a quiet voice: "My frien' Picquet, the time has now arrive when it become ver' necessary that we go from here away. Donc—I shall now go kill me my frien' Mike Clinch."

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Picquet, unastonished, gave him a heavy, bovine look of inquiry.

Quintana said softly: "Me, I have enough already of this damn woods. Why shall we starve here when there lies our path?" He pointed north; his arm remained outstretched for a while.

"Clinch, he is there," growled Picquet.

"Also our path, l'ami Henri.... And, behind us, they hunt us now with *dogs*."

Picquet bared his big white teeth in fierce surprise. "Dogs?" he repeated with a sort of snarl.

"That is how they now hunt us, my frien'—like they hunt the hare in the Côte d'Or.... Me, I shall now reconnoitre—*that* way!" And he looked where he was pointing, into the north—with smouldering eyes. Then he turned calmly to Picquet: "An' you, l'ami?"

"At orders, mon capitaine."

"C'est bien. Venez."

They walked leisurely forward with rifles shouldered, following the hard ridge out across a vast and flooded land where the bark of trees glimmered with wet mosses.

After a quarter of a mile the ridge broadened and split into two, one hog-back branching northeast! They, however, continued north.

About twenty minutes later Picquet, creeping along on Quintana's left, and some sixty yards distant, discovered something moving in the woods beyond, and fired at it. Instantly two unseen rifles spoke from the woods ahead. Picquet was jerked clear around, lost his balance and nearly fell. Blood was spurting from his right arm, between elbow and shoulder.

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He tried to lift and level his rifle; his arm collapsed and dangled broken and powerless; his rifle clattered to the forest floor.

For a moment he stood there in plain view, dumb, deathly white; then he began screaming with fury while the big, soft-nosed bullets came streaming in all around him. His broken arm was hit again. His screaming ceased; he dragged out his big clasp-knife with his left hand and started running toward the shooting.

As he ran, his mangled arm flopping like a broken wing, Byron Hastings stepped out from behind a tree and coolly shot him down at close quarters.

Then Quintana's rifle exploded twice very quickly, and the Hastings boy stumbled sideways and fell sprawling. He managed to rise to his knees again; he even was trying to stand up when Quintana, taking his time, deliberately began to empty his magazine into the boy, riddling him limb and body and head.

Down once more, he still moved his arms. Sid Hone reached out from behind a fallen log to grasp the dying lad's ankle and draw him into shelter, but Quintana reloaded swiftly and smashed Hone's left hand with the first shot.

Then Jim Hastings, kneeling behind a bunch of juniper, fired a high-velocity bullet into the tree behind which Quintana stood; but before he could fire again Quintana's shot in reply came ripping through the juniper and tore a ghastly hole in the calf of his left leg, striking a blow that knocked young Hastings flat and paralysed as a dead flounder.

A mile to the north, blocking the other exit from Drowned Valley, Mike Clinch, Harvey Chase, Cornelius Blommers, and Dick Berry stood listening to the shooting.

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"B'gosh," blurted out Chase, "it sounds like they was goin' through, Mike. B'gosh, it does!"

Clinch's little pale eyes blazed, but he said in his soft, agreeable voice:

"Stay right here, boys. Like as not some of 'em will come this way."

The shooting below ceased. Clinch's nostrils expanded and flattened with every breath, as he stood glaring into the woods.

"Harve," he said presently, "you an' Corny go down there an' kinda look around. And you signal if I'm wanted. G'wan, both o' you. Git!"

They started, running heavily, but their feet made little noise on the moss.

Berry came over and stood near Clinch. For ten minutes neither man moved. Clinch stared at the woods in front of him. The younger man's nervous glance flickered like a snake's tongue in every direction, and he kept moistening his lips with his tongue.

Presently two shots came from the south. A pause; a rattle of shots from hastily emptied magazines.

"G'wan down there, Dick!" said Clinch.

"You'll be alone, Mike——"

"Au' right. You do like I say; git along quick!"

Berry walked southward a little way. He had turned very white under his tan.

"Gol ding ye!" shouted Clinch, "take it on a lope or I'll kick the pants off'n ye!"

Berry began to run, carrying his rifle at a trail.

For half an hour there was not a sound in the forests of Drowned Valley except in the dead timber where unseen woodpeckers hammered fitfully at the ghosts of ancient trees. [225]

Always Clinch's little pale eyes searched the forest twilight in front of him; not a falling leaf escaped him; not a chipmunk.

And all the while Clinch talked to himself; his lips moved a little now and then, but uttered no sound:

"All I want God should do," he repeated again and again, "is to just let Quintana come *my way*. 'Tain't for because he robbed my girlie. 'Tain't for the stuff he carries onto him.... No, God, 'tain't them things. But it's what that there skunk done to my Evie.... O God, be you listenin'? He *hurt* her, Quintana did. That's it. He misused her.... God, if you had seen my girlie's little bleeding feet!—— *That's* the reason.... 'Tain't the stuff. I can work. I can save for to make my Evie a lady same's them high-steppers on Fifth Avenoo. I can moil and toil and slave an' run hootch—hootch—— They wuz wine 'n' fixin's into the Bible. It ain't you, God, it's them fanatics.... Nobody in my Dump wanted I should sell 'em more'n a bottle o' beer before this here prohybishun set us all crazy. 'Tain't right.... O God, don't hold a little hootch agin me when all I want of you is to let Quintana——"

The slightest noise behind him. He waited, turned slowly. Eve stood there.

Hell died in his pale eyes as she came to him, rested silently in his gentle embrace, returned his kiss, laid her flushed, sweet cheek against his unshaven face.

"Dad, darling?" [226]

"Yes, my baby——"

"You're watching to kill Quintana. But there's no use watching any longer."

"Have the boys below got him?" he demanded.

"They got one of his gang. Byron Hastings is dead. Jim is badly hurt; Sid Hone, too,—not so badly——"

"Where's Quintana?"

"Dad, he's gone.... But it don't matter. See here!——" She dug her slender hand into her breeches' pocket and pulled out a little fistful of gems.

Clinch, his powerful arm closing her shoulders, looked dully at the jewels.

"You see, dad, there's no use killing Quintana. These are the things he robbed you of."

"'Tain't them that matter.... I'm glad you got 'em. I allus wanted you should be a great lady, girlie. Them's the tickets of admission. You put 'em in your pants. I gotta stay here a spell——"

"Dad! Take them!"

He took them, smiled, shoved them into his pocket.

"What is it, girlie?" he asked absently, his pale eyes searching the woods ahead.

"I've just told you," she said, "that the boys went in as far as Quintana's shanty. There was a dead man there, too; but Quintana has gone."

Clinch said,—not removing his eyes from the forest: "If any o' them boys has let Quintana crawl through I'll kill *him*, too.... G'wan home, girlie. I gotta mosey—I gotta kinda loaf around fr a spell——"

"Dad, I want you to come back with me——"

"You go home; you hear me, Eve? Tell Corny and Dick Berry to hook it for Owl Marsh and stop the Star Peak trails—both on 'em.... Can Sid and Jimmy walk?"

"Jim can't—"

"Well, let Harve take him on his back. You go too. You help fix Jimmy up at the house. He's a little fella, Jimmy Hastings is. Harve can tote him. And you go along—"

"Dad, Quintana says he means to kill you! What is the use of hurting him? You have what he took—"

"I gotta have more'n he took. But even that ain't enough. He couldn't pay for all he ever done to me, girlie.... I'm aimin' to draw on him on sight—"

Clinch's set visage relaxed into an alarming smile which flickered, faded, died in the wintry ferocity of his eyes.

"Dad—"

"G'wan home!" he interrupted harshly. "You want that Hastings boy to bleed to death?"

She came up to him, not uttering a word, yet asking him with all the tenderness and eloquence of her eyes to leave this blood-trail where it lay and hunt no more.

He kissed her mouth, infinitely tender, smiled; then, again prim and scowling:

"G'wan home, you little scut, an' do what I told ye, or, by God, I'll cut a switch that'll learn ye good! Never a word, now! On yer way! G'wan!"

Twice she turned to look back. The second time, Clinch was slowly walking into the woods straight ahead of him. She waited; saw him go in; waited. After a while she continued on her way.

When she sighted the men below she called to Blommers and Dick Berry:

"Dad says you're to stop Star Peak trail by Owl Marsh."

Jimmy Hastings sat on a log, crying and looking down at his dead brother, over whose head somebody had spread a coat.

Blommers had made a tourniquet for Jimmy out of a bandanna and a peeled stick.

The girl examined it, loosened it for a moment, twisted it again, and bade Harvey Chase take him on his back and start for Clinch's.

The boy began to sob that he didn't want his brother to be left out there all alone; but Chase promised to come back and bring him in before night.

Sid Hone came up, haggard from pain and loss of blood, resting his mangled hand in the sling of his cartridge-belt.

Berry and Blommers were already starting across toward Owl Marsh; and the latter, passing by, asked Eve where Mike was.

"He went into Drowned Valley by the upper outlet," she said.

"He'll never find no one in them logans an' sinks," muttered Chase, squatting to hoist Jimmy Hastings to his broad back.

"I guess he'll be over Star Peak side by sundown," nodded Blommers.

Eve watched him slouching off into the woods, followed sullenly by Berry. Then she looked down at the dead man in silence.

"Be you ready, Eve?" grunted Chase.

She turned with a heavy heart to the home trail; but her mind was passionately with Clinch in the spectral forests of Drowned Valley.

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III

And Clinch's mind was on her. All else—his watchfulness, his stealthy advance—all the alertness of eye and ear, all the subtlety, the cunning, the infinite caution—were purely instinctive mechanics.

Somewhere in this flooded twilight of gigantic trees was José Quintana. Knowing that, he dismissed that fact from his mind and turned his thoughts to Eve.

Sometimes his lips moved. They usually did when he was arguing with God or calling his Creator's attention to the justice of his case. His *two* cases—each, to him, a cause célèbre; the matter of Harrod; the affair of Quintana.

Many a time he had pleaded these two causes before the Most High.

But now his thoughts were chiefly concerned with Eve—with the problem of her future—his master passion—this daughter of the dead wife he had loved.

He sighed unconsciously; halted.

"Well, Lord," he concluded, in his wordless way, "my girlie has gotta have a chance if I gotta go to hell for it. That's sure as shootin'.... Amen."

At that instant he saw Quintana.

Recognition was instant and mutual. Neither man stirred. Quintana was standing beside a giant hemlock. His pack lay at his feet.

Clinch had halted—always the mechanics!—close to a great ironwood tree.

Probably both men knew that they could cover themselves before the other moved a muscle. Clinch's small, light eyes were blazing; Quintana's black eyes had become two slits. [230]

Finally: "You—dirty—skunk," drawled Clinch in his agreeably misleading voice, "by Jesus Christ I got you now."

"Ah—h," said Quintana, "thees has happen ver' nice like I expec'.... Always I say myse'f, yet a little patience, José, an' one day you shall meet thees fellow Clinch, who has rob you.... I am ver' thankful to the good God—"

He had made the slightest of movements: instantly both men were behind their trees. Clinch, in the ferocious pride of woodcraft, laughed exultingly—filled the dim and spectral forest with his roar of laughter.

"Quintana," he called out, "you're a-going to cash in. Savvy? You're a-going to hop off. An' first you gotta hear why. 'Tain't for the stuff. Naw! I hooked it off'n you; you hooked it off'n me; now I got it again. *That's* all square.... No, 'tain't *that* grudge, you green-livered whelp of a cross-bred, still-born slut! No! It's becuz you laid the heft o' your dirty little finger onto my girlie. 'N' now you gotta hop!"

Quintana's sinister laughter was his retort. Then: "You damfool Clinch," he said, "I got in my pocket what you rob of me. Now I kill you, and then I feel ver' well. I go home, live like some kings; yes. But you," he sneered, "you shall not go home never no more. No. You shall remain in thees damn wood like ver' dead old rat that is all wormy.... Hé! I got a million dollaire—five million franc in my pocket. You shall learn what it cost to rob José Quintana! Unnerstan'?"

"You liar," said Clinch contemptuously, "I got them jools in my pants pocket—"

Quintana's derisive laugh cut him short: "I give you thee Flaming Jewel if you show me you got my gems in you pants pocket!" [231]

"I'll show you. Lay down your rifle so's I see the stock."

"First you, my frien' Mike," said Quintana cautiously.

Clinch took his rifle by the muzzle and shoved the stock into view so that Quintana could see it without moving.

To his surprise, Quintana did the same, then coolly stepped a pace outside the shelter of his hemlock stump.

"You show me now!" he called across the swamp.

Clinch stepped into view, dug into his pocket, and, cupping both hands, displayed a glittering heap of gems.

"I wanted you should know who's gottem," he said, "before you hop. It'll give you something to think over in hell."

Quintana's eyes had become slits again. Neither man stirred. Then:

"So you are buzzard, eh, Clinch? You feed on dead man's pockets, eh? You find Sard somewhere an' you feed." He held up the morocco case, emblazoned with the arms of the Grand Duchess of Esthonia, and shook it at Clinch.

"In there is my share.... Not all. Ver' quick, now, I take yours, too—"

Clinch vanished and so did his rifle; and Quintana's first bullet struck the moss where the stock had rested.

"You black crow!" jeered Clinch, laughing, "—I need that empty case of yours. And I'm going after it.... But it's because your filthy claw touched my girlie that you gotta hop!" [232]

Twilight lay over the phantom wood, touching with pallid tints the flooded forest.

So far only that one shot had been fired. Both men were still manœuvring, always creeping in circles and always lining some great tree for shelter.

Now, the gathering dusk was making them bolder and swifter; and twice, already, Clinch

caught the shadow of a fading edge of something that vanished against the shadows too swiftly for a shot.

Now Quintana, keeping a tree in line, brushed with his lithe back a leafless moose-bush that stood swaying as he avoided it.

Instantly a stealthy hope seized him: he slipped out of his coat, spread it on the bush, set the naked branches swaying, and darted to his tree.

Waiting, he saw that the grey blot his coat made in the dusk was still moving a little—just vibrating a little bit in the twilight. He touched the bush with his rifle barrel, then crouched almost flat.

Suddenly the red crash of a rifle lit up Clinch's visage for a fraction of a second. And Quintana's bullet smashed Clinch between the eyes.

After a long while Quintana ventured to rise and creep forward.

Night, too, came creeping like an assassin amid the ghostly trees.

So twilight died in the stillness of Drowned Valley and the pall of night lay over all things,—living and dead alike.

EPISODE ELEVEN

[233]

THE PLACE OF PINES

I

THE last sound that Mike Clinch heard on earth was the detonation of his own rifle. Probably it was an agreeable sound to him. He lay there with a pleasant expression on his massive features. His watch had fallen out of his pocket.

Quintana shined him with an electric torch; picked up the watch. Then, holding the torch in one hand, he went through the dead man's pockets very thoroughly.

When Quintana had finished, both trays of the flat morocco case were full of jewels. And Quintana was full of wonder and suspicion.

Unquietly he looked upon the dead—upon the glittering contents of the jewel-box,—but always his gaze reverted to the dead. The faintest shadow of a smile edged Clinch's lips. Quintana's lips grew graver. He said slowly, like one who does his thinking aloud:

"What is it you have done to me, l'ami Clinch?... Are there truly then two sets of precious stones?—*two* Flaming Jewels?—two gems of Erosite like there never has been in all thees worl' excep' only two more?... Or is one set false?... Have I here one set of paste facsimiles?... My frien' Clinch, why do you lie there an' smile at me so ver' funny ... like you are amuse?... I am wondering what you may have done to me, my frien' Clinch...."

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For a while he remained kneeling beside the dead. Then: "Ah, bah," he said, pocketing the morocco case and getting to his feet.

He moved a little way toward the open trail, stopped, came back, stood his rifle against a tree.

For a while he was busy with his sharp Spanish clasp knife, whittling and fitting together two peeled twigs. A cross was the ultimate result. Then he placed Clinch's hands palm to palm upon his chest, laid the cross on his breast, and shined the result with complacency.

Then Quintana took off his hat.

"L'ami Mike," he said, "you were a *man* !... Adios!"

Quintana put on his hat. The path was free. The world lay open before José Quintana once more;—the world, his hunting ground.

"But," he thought uneasily, "what is it that I bring home this time? How much is paste? My God, how droll that smile of Clinch.... Which is the false—his jewels or mine? Dieu que j'étais bête!—Me who have not suspec' that there are *two* trays within my jewel-box!... I unnerstan'. It is ver' simple. In the top tray the false gems. Ah! Paste on top to deceive a thief!... Alors.... Then what I have recover of Clinch is the *real* !... Nom de Dieu!... How should I know? His smile is so ver'

funny.... I think thees dead man make mock of me—all inside himse'f—"

So, in darkness, prowling south by west, shining the trail furtively, and loaded rifle ready, Quintana moved with stealthy, unhurried tread out of the wilderness that had trapped him and toward the tangled border of that outer world which led to safe, obscure, uncharted labyrinths—old-world mazes, immemorial hunting grounds—haunted by men who prey.

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The night had turned frosty. Quintana, wet to the knees and very tired, moved slowly, not daring to leave the trail because of sink-holes.

However, the trail led to Clinch's Dump, and sooner or later he must leave it.

What he had to have was a fire; he realised that. Somewhere off the trail, in big timber if possible, he must build a fire and master this deadly chill that was slowly paralysing all power of movement.

He knew that a fire in the forest, particularly in big timber, could be seen only a little way. He must take his chances with sink-holes and find some spot in the forest to build that fire.

Who could discover him except by accident?

Who would prowl the midnight wilderness? At thirty yards the fire would not be visible. And, as for the odour—well, he'd be gone before dawn.... Meanwhile, he must have that fire. He could wait no longer.

He cut a pole first. Then he left the trail where a little spring flowed west, and turned to the right, shining the forest floor as he moved and sounding with his pole every wet stretch of moss, every strip of mud, every tiniest glimmer of water.

At last he came to a place of pines, first growth giants towering into night, and, looking up, saw stars, infinitely distant, ... where perhaps those things called souls drifted like wisps of vapour.

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When the fire took, Quintana's thin dark hands had become nearly useless from cold. He could not have crooked finger to trigger.

For a long time he sat close to the blaze, slowly massaging his torpid limbs, but did not dare strip off his foot-gear.

Steam rose from puttee and heavy shoe and from the sodden woollen breeches. Warmth slowly penetrated. There was little smoke; the big dry branches were dead and bleached and he let the fire eat into them without using his axe.

Once or twice he sighed, "Oh, my God," in a weary demi-voice, as though the content of well-being were permeating him.

Later he ate and drank languidly, looking up at the stars, speculating as to the possible presence of Mike Clinch up there.

"Ah, the dirty thief," he murmured; "—nevertheless a man. Quel homme! Mais bête à faire pleurer! Je l'ai bien triché, moi! Ha!"

Quintana smiled palely as he thought of the coat and the gently-swaying bush—of the red glare of Clinch's shot, of the death-echo of his own shot.

Then, uneasy, he drew out the morocco case and gazed at the two trays full of gems.

The jewels blazed in the firelight. He touched them, moved them about, picked up several and examined them, testing the unset edges against his under lip as an expert tests jade.

But he couldn't tell; there was no knowing. He replaced them, closed the case, pocketed it. When he had a chance he could try boiling water for one sort of trick. He could scratch one or two.... Sard would know. He wondered whether Sard had got away, not concerned except selfishly. However, there were others in Paris whom he could trust—at a price....

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Quintana rested both elbows on his knees and framed his dark face between both bony hands.

What a chase Clinch had led him after the Flaming Jewel. And now Clinch lay dead in the forest—faintly smiling. At *what*?

In a very low, passionless voice, Quintana cursed monotonously as he gazed into the fire. In Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, he cursed Clinch. After a little while he remembered Clinch's daughter, and he cursed her, elaborately, thoroughly, wishing her black mischance awake and asleep, living or dead.

Darragh, too, he remembered in his curses, and did not slight him. And the trooper, Stormont—ah, he should have killed all of them when he had the chance.... And those two Baltic Russians, also, the girl duchess and her friend. Why on earth hadn't he made a clean job of it? Over-caution. A wary disinclination to stir up civilization by needless murder. But after all, old maxims, old beliefs, old truths are the best, God knows. The dead don't talk! And that's the wisest wisdom of all.

"If," murmured Quintana fervently, "God gives me further opportunity to acquire a little

property to comfort me in my old age, I shall leave no gossiping fool to do me harm with his tongue. No! I kill.

"And though they raise a hue and cry, dead tongues can not wag and I save myse'f much annoyance in the end."

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He leaned his back against the trunk of a massive pine.

Presently Quintana slept after his own fashion—that is to say, looking closely at him one could discover a glimmer under his lowered eyelids. And he listened always in that kind of sleep. As though a shadowy part of him were detached from his body, and mounted guard over it.

The inaudible movement of a wood-mouse venturing into the firelit circle awoke Quintana. Again a dropping leaf amid distant birches awoke him. Such things. And so he slept with wet feet to the fire and his rifle across his knees; and dreamed of Eve and of murder, and that the Flaming Jewel was but a mass of glass.

At that moment the girl of whose white throat Quintana was dreaming, and whining faintly in his dreams, stood alone outside Clinch's Dump, rifle in hand, listening, fighting the creeping dread that touched her slender body at times—seemed to touch her very heart with frost.

Clinch's men had gone on to Ghost Lake with their wounded and dead, where there was fitter shelter for both. All had gone on; nobody remained to await Clinch's home-coming except Eve Strayer.

Black Care, that tireless squire of dames, had followed her from the time she had left Clinch, facing the spectral forests of Drowned Valley.

An odd, unusual dread weighted her heart—something in emotions that she never before had experienced in time of danger. In it there was the deathly unease of premonition. But of what it was born she did not understand,—perhaps of the strain of dangers passed—of the shock of discovery concerning Smith's identity with Darragh—Darragh!—the hated kinsman of Harrod the abhorred.

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Fiercely she wondered how much her lover knew about this miserable masquerade. Was Stormont involved in this deception—Stormont, the object of her first girl's passion—Stormont, for whom she would have died?

Wretched, perplexed, fiercely enraged at Darragh, deadly anxious concerning Clinch, she had gone about cooking supper.

The supper, kept warm on the range, still awaited the man who had no more need of meat and drink.

Of the tragedy of Sard Eve knew nothing. There were no traces save in the disorder in the pantry and the bottles and chair on the veranda.

Who had visited the place excepting those from whom she and Stormont had fled, did not appear. She had no idea why her step-father's mattress and bed-quilt lay in the pantry.

Her heart heavy with ceaseless anxiety, Eve carried mattress and bed-clothes to Clinch's chamber, re-made his bed, wandered through the house setting it in order; then, in the kitchen, seated herself and waited until the strange dread that possessed her drove her out into the starlight to stand and listen and stare at the dark forest where all her dread seemed concentrated.

It was not yet dawn, but the girl could endure the strain no longer.

With electric torch and rifle she started for the forest, almost running at first; then, among the first trees, moving with caution and in silence along the trail over which Clinch should long since have journeyed homeward.

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In soft places, when she ventured to flash her torch, foot-prints cast curious shadows, and it was hard to make out tracks so oddly distorted by the light. Prints mingled and partly obliterated other prints. She identified her own tracks leading south, and guessed at the others, pointing north and south, where they had carried in the wounded and had gone back to bring in the dead.

But nowhere could she discover any impression resembling her step-father's,—that great, firm stride and solid imprint which so often she had tracked through moss and swale and which she knew so well.

Once when she got up from her knees after close examination of the muddy trail, she became aware of the slightest taint in the night air—stood with delicate nostrils quivering—advanced, still conscious of the taint, listening, wary, every stealthy instinct alert.

She had not been mistaken: somewhere in the forest there was smoke. Somewhere a fire was burning. It might not be very far away; it might be distant. *Whose fire?* Her father's? Would a hunter of men build a fire?

The girl stood shivering in the darkness. There was not a sound.

Now, keeping her cautious feet in the trail by sense of touch alone, she moved on. Gradually, as she advanced, the odour of smoke became more distinct. She heard nothing, saw nothing; but there was a near reek of smoke in her nostrils and she stopped short.

After a little while in the intense silence of the forest she ventured to touch the switch of her torch, very cautiously. [241]

In the faint, pale lustre she saw a tiny rivulet flowing westward from a spring, and, beside it, in the mud, imprints of a man's feet.

The tracks were small, narrow, slimmer than imprints made by any man she could think of. Under the glimmer of her torch they seemed quite fresh; contours were still sharp, some ready to crumble, and water stood in the heels.

A little way she traced them, saw where their maker had cut a pole, peeled it; saw, farther on, where this unknown man had probed in moss and mud—peppered some particularly suspicious swale with a series of holes as though a giant woodcock had been "boring" there.

Who was this man wandering all alone at night off the Drowned Valley trail and probing the darkness with a pole?

She knew it was not her father. She knew that no native—none of her father's men—would behave in such a manner. Nor could any of these have left such narrow, almost delicate tracks.

As she stole along, dimly shining the tracks, lifting her head incessantly to listen and peer into the darkness, her quick eye caught something ahead—something very slightly different from the wall of black obscurity—a vague hint of colour—the very vaguest tint scarcely perceptible at all.

But she knew it was firelight touching the trunk of an unseen tree.

Now, soundlessly over damp pine needles she crept. The scent of smoke grew strong in nostril and throat; the pale tint became palely reddish. All about her the blackness seemed palpable—seemed to touch her body with its weight; but, ahead, a ruddy glow stained two huge pines. And presently she saw the fire, burning low, but redly alive. And, after a long, long while, she saw a man. [242]

He had left the fire circle. His pack and belted mackinaw still lay there at the foot of a great tree. But when, finally, she discovered him, he was scarcely visible where he crouched in the shadow of a tree-trunk, with his rifle half lowered at a ready.

Had he heard her? It did not seem possible. Had he been crouching there since he made his fire? Why had he made it then—for its warmth could not reach him there. And why was he so stealthily watching—silent, unobtrusive, crouched in the shadows?

She strained her eyes; but distance and obscurity made recognition impossible. And yet, somehow, every quivering instinct within her was telling her that the crouched and shadowy watcher beyond the fire was Quintana.

And every concentrated instinct was telling her that he'd kill her if he caught sight of her; her heart clamoured it; her pulses thumped it in her ears.

Had the girl been capable of it she could have killed him where he crouched. She thought of it, but knew it was not in her to do it. And yet Quintana had boasted that he meant to kill her father. That was what terribly concerned her. And there must be a way to stop that danger—some way to stop it short of murder,—a way to render this man harmless to her and hers.

No, she could not kill him this way. Except in extremes she could not bring herself to fire upon any human creature. And yet this man must be rendered harmless—somehow—somehow—ah! —

As the problem presented itself its solution flashed into her mind. Men of the wilderness knew how to take dangerous creatures alive. To take a dangerous and reasoning human was even less difficult, because reason makes more mistakes than does instinct. [243]

Stealthily, without a sound, the girl crept back through the shadows over the damp pine needles, until, peering fearfully over her shoulder, she saw the last ghost-tint of Quintana's fire die out in the terrific dark behind.

Slowly, still, she moved until her sensitive feet felt the trodden path from Drowned Valley.

Now, with torch flaring, she ran, carrying her rifle at a trail. Before her, here and there, little night creatures fled—a humped-up raccoon, dazzled by the glare, a barred owl still struggling with its wood-rat kill.

She ran easily,—an agile, tireless young thing, part of the swiftness and silence of the woods—part of the darkness, the sinuous celerity, the ominous hush of wide, still places—part of its very blood and pulse and hot, sweet breath.

Even when she came out among the birches by Clinch's Dump she was breathing evenly and without distress. She ran to the kitchen door but did not enter. On pegs under the porch a score or more of rusty traps hung. She unhooked the largest, wound the chain around it, tucked it

under her left arm and started back.

When at last she arrived at the place of pines again, and saw the far, spectral glimmer of Quintana's fire, the girl was almost breathless. But dawn was not very far away and there remained little time for the taking alive of a dangerous man. [244]

Where two enormous pines grew close together near a sapling, she knelt down, and, with both hands, scooped out a big hollow in the immemorial layers of pine needles. Here she placed her trap. It took all her strength and skill to set it; to fasten the chain around the base of the sapling pine.

And now, working with only the faintest glimmer of her torch, she covered everything with pine needles.

It was not possible to restore the forest floor; the place remained visible—a darker, rougher patch on the bronzed carpet of needles beaten smooth by decades of rain and snow. No animal would have trodden that suspicious space. But it was with man she had to deal—a dangerous but reasoning man with few and atrophied instincts—and with no experience in traps; and, therefore, in no dread of them.

Before she started she had thrown a cartridge into the breech of her rifle.

Now she pocketed her torch and seated herself between the two big pines and about three feet behind the hidden trap.

Dawn was not far away. She looked upward through high pine-tops where stars shone; and saw no sign of dawn. But the watcher by the fire beyond was astir, now, in the imminence of dawn, and evidently meant to warm himself before leaving.

Eve could hear him piling dry wood on the fire; the light on the tree trunks grew redder; a pungent reek of smoke was drawn through the forest aisles. She sniffed it, listened, and watched, her rifle across her knees. [245]

Eve never had been afraid of anything. She was not afraid of this man. If it came to combat she would have to kill. It never entered her mind to fear Quintana's rifle. Even Clinch was not as swift with a rifle as she.... Only Stormont had been swifter—thank God!—

She thought of Stormont—sat there in the terrific darkness loving him, her heart of a child tremulous with adoration.

Then the memory of Darragh pushed in and hot hatred possessed her. Always, in her heart, she had distrusted the man.

Instinct had warned her. A spy! What evil had he worked already? Where was her father? Evidently Quintana had escaped him at Drowned Valley.... Quintana was yonder by his fire, preparing to flee the wilderness where men hunted him.... But where was Clinch? Had this sneak, Darragh, betrayed him? Was Clinch already in the clutch of the State Troopers? Was he in *jail*?

At the thought the girl felt slightly faint, then a rush of angry blood stung her face in the darkness. Except for game and excise violations the stories they told about Clinch were lies.

He had nothing to fear, nothing to be ashamed of. Harrod had driven him to lawlessness; the Government took away what was left him to make a living. He had to live. What if he did break laws made by millionaire and fanatic! What of it? He had her love and her respect—and her deep, deep pity. And these were enough for any girl to fight for.

Dawn spread a silvery light above the pines, but Quintana's fire still reddened the tree trunks; and she could hear him feeding it at intervals. [246]

Finally she saw him. He came out on the edge of the ruddy ring of light and stood peering around at the woods where already a vague greyness was revealing nearer trees.

When, finally, he turned his back and looked at his fire, Eve rose and stood between the two big pines. Behind one of them she placed her rifle.

It was growing lighter in the woods. She could see Quintana in the fire ring and outside,—saw him go to the spring rivulet, lie flat, drink, then, on his knees, wash face and hands in the icy water.

It became plain to her that he was nearly ready to depart. She watched him preparing. And now she could see him plainly, and knew him to be Quintana and no other.

He had a light basket pack. He put some articles into it, stretched himself and yawned, pulled on his hat, hoisted the pack and fastened it to his back, stood staring at the fire for a long time; then, with a sudden upward look at the zenith where a slight flush stained a cloud, he picked up his rifle.

At that moment Eve called to him in a clear and steady voice.

The effect on Quintana was instant; he was behind a tree before her voice ceased.

"Hallo! Hi! You over there!" she called again. "This is Eve Strayer. I'm looking for Clinch! He hasn't been home all night. Have you seen him?"

After a moment she saw Quintana's head watching her,—not at the shoulder-height of a man but close to the ground and just above the tree roots. [247]

"Hey!" she cried. "What's the matter with you over there? I'm asking you who you are and if you've seen my father?"

After a while she saw Quintana coming toward her, circling, creeping swiftly from tree to tree.

As he flitted through the shadows the trees between which she was standing hid her from him a moment. Instantly she placed her rifle on the ground and kicked the pine needles over it.

As Quintana continued his encircling manœuvres Eve, apparently perplexed, walked out into the clear space, putting the concealed trap between her and Quintana, who now came stealthily toward her from the rear.

It was evident that he had reconnoitred sufficiently to satisfy himself that the girl was alone and that no trick, no ambushade, threatened him.

And now, from behind a pine, and startingly near her, came Quintana, moving with confident grace yet holding his rifle ready for any emergency.

Eve's horrified stare was natural; she had not realised that any man could wear so evil a smile.

Quintana stopped short a dozen paces away. The dramatic in him demanded of the moment its full value. He swept off his hat with a flourish, bowed deeply where he stood.

"Ah!" he cried gaily, "the happy encounter, Señorita. God is too good to us. And it was but a moment since my thoughts were of you! I swear it!—"

It was not fear; it was a sort of slow horror of this man that began to creep over the girl. She stared at his brilliant eyes, at his thick mouth, too red—shuddered slightly. But the toe of her right foot touched the stock of her rifle under the pine needles. [248]

She held herself under control.

"So it's you," she said unsteadily. "I thought our people had caught you."

Quintana laughed: "Charming child," he said, "it is *I* who have caught your people. And now, my God!—I catch *you* !... It is ver' funny. Is it not?"

She looked straight into Quintana's black eyes, but the look he returned sent the shamed blood surging into her face.

"By God," he said between his white, even teeth,—"by God!"

Staring at her he slowly disengaged his pack, let it fall behind him on the pine needles; rested his rifle on it; slipped out of his mackinaw and laid that across his rifle—always keeping his brilliant eyes on her.

His lips tightened, the muscles in his dark face grew tense; his eyes became a blazing insult.

For an instant he stood there, unencumbered, a wiry, graceful shape in his woollen breeches, leggings, and grey shirt open at the throat. Then he took a step toward her. And the girl watched him, fascinated.

One pace, two, a third, a fourth—the girl's involuntary cry echoed the stumbling crash of the man thrashing, clawing, scrambling in the clenched jaws of the bear-trap amid a whirl of flying pine needles.

He screamed once, tried to rise, turned blindly to seize the jaws that clutched him; and suddenly crouched, loose-jointed, cringing like a trapped wolf—the true fatalist among our lesser brothers. [249]

Eve picked up her rifle. She was trembling violently. Then, mastering her emotion, she walked over to the pack, placed Quintana's rifle and mackinaw in it, coolly hoisted it to her shoulders and buckled it there.

Over her shoulder she kept an eye on Quintana who crouched where he had fallen, unstirring, his deadly eyes watching her.

She placed the muzzle of her rifle against his stomach, rested it so, holding it with one hand, and her finger at the trigger.

At her brief order he turned out both breeches pockets. She herself stooped and drew the Spanish clasp-knife from its sheath at his belt, took a pistol from the holster, another out of his hip pocket. Reaching up and behind her, she dropped these into the pack.

"Maybe," she said slowly, "your ankle is broken. I'll send somebody from Ghost Lake to find you. But whether you've a broken bone or not you'll not go very far, Quintana.... After I'm gone you'll be able to free yourself. But you can't get away. You'll be followed and caught.... So if you can walk at all you'd better go in to Ghost Lake and give yourself up.... It's that or starvation...."

You've got a watch.... Don't stir or touch that trap for half an hour.... And that's all."

As she moved away toward the Drowned Valley trail she looked back at him. His face was bloodless but his black eyes blazed.

"If ever you come into this forest again," she said, "my father will surely kill you."

To her horror Quintana slowly grinned at her. Then, still grinning, he placed the forefinger of his left hand between his teeth and bit it. [250]

Whatever he meant by the gesture it seemed unclean, horrible; and the girl hurried on, seized with an overwhelming loathing through which a sort of terror pulsated like evil premonition in a heavy and tortured heart.

Straight into the fire of dawn she sped. A pale primrose light glimmered through the woods; trees, bushes, undergrowth turned a dusky purple. Already the few small clouds overhead were edged with fiery rose.

Then, of a sudden, a shaft of flame played over the forest. The sun had risen.

Hastening, she searched the soft path for any imprint of her father's foot. And even in the vain search she hoped to find him at home—hurried on burdened with two rifles and a pack, still all nervous and aquiver from her encounter with Quintana.

Surely, surely, she thought, if he had missed Quintana in Drowned Valley he would not linger in that ghastly place; he'd come home, call in his men, take counsel perhaps—

Mist over Star Pond was dissolving to a golden powder in the blinding glory of the sun. The eastern window-panes in Clinch's Dump glittered as though the rooms inside were all on fire.

Down through withered weeds and scrub she hurried, ran across the grass to the kitchen door which swung ajar under its porch.

"Dad!" she called, "Dad!"

Only her own frightened voice echoed in the empty house. She climbed the stairs to his room. The bed lay undisturbed as she had made it. He was not in any of the rooms; there were no signs of him. [251]

Slowly she descended to the kitchen. He was not there. The food she had prepared for him had become cold on a chilled range.

For a long while she stood staring through the window at the sunlight outside. Probably, since Quintana had eluded him, he'd come home for something to eat.... Surely, now that Quintana had escaped, Clinch would come back for some breakfast.

Eve slipped the pack from her back and laid it on the kitchen table. There was kindling in the wood-box. She shook down the cinders, laid a fire, soaked it with kerosene, lighted it, filled the kettle with fresh water.

In the pantry she cut some ham, and found eggs, condensed milk, butter, bread, and an apple pie. After she had ground the coffee she placed all these on a tray and carried them into the kitchen.

Now there was nothing more to do until her father came, and she sat down by the kitchen table to wait.

Outside the sunlight was becoming warm and vivid. There had been no frost after all—or, at most, merely a white trace in the shadow—on a fallen plank here and there—but not enough to freeze the ground. And, in the sunshine, it all quickly turned to dew, and glittered and sparkled in a million hues and tints like gems—like that handful of jewels she had poured into her father's joined palms—yesterday—there at the ghostly edge of Drowned Valley.

At the memory, and quite mechanically, she turned in her chair and drew Quintana's basket pack toward her.

First she lifted out his rifle, examined it, set it against the window sill. Then, one by one, she drew out two pistols, loaded; the murderous Spanish clasp-knife; an axe; a fry-pan and a tin pail, and the rolled-up mackinaw. [252]

Under these the pack seemed to contain nothing except food and ammunition; staples in sacks and a few cans—lard, salt, tea—such things.

The cartridge boxes she piled up on the table; the food she tossed into a tin swill bucket.

About the effects of this man it seemed to her as though something unclean lingered. She could scarcely bear to handle them,—threw them from her with disgust.

The garment, also—the heavy brown and green mackinaw—she disliked to touch. To throw it out doors was her intention; but, as she lifted the coat, it unrolled and some things fell from the pockets to the kitchen table,—money, keys, a watch, a flat leather case—

She looked stupidly at the case. It had a coat of arms emblazoned on it.

Still, stupidly and as though dazed, she laid one hand on it, drew it to her, opened it.

The Flaming Jewel blazed in her face amid a heap of glittering gems.

Still she seemed slow to comprehend—as though understanding were paralysed.

It was when her eyes fell upon the watch that her heart seemed to stop. Suddenly her stunned senses were lighted as by an infernal flare.... Under the awful blow she swayed upright to her feet, sick with fright, her eyes fixed on her father's watch.

It was still ticking.

She did not know whether she cried out in anguish or was dumb under it. The house seemed to reel around her; under foot too. [253]

When she came to her senses she found herself outside the house, running with her rifle, already entering the woods. But, inside the barrier of trees, something blocked her way, stopped her,—a man—*her* man!

"Eve! In God's name!—" he said as she struggled in his arms; but she fought him and strove to tear her body from his embrace:

"They've killed Dad!" she panted,— "Quintana killed him. I didn't know—oh, I didn't know!—and I let Quintana go! Oh, Jack, Jack, he's at the Place of Pines! I'm going there to shoot him! Let me go!—he's killed Dad, I tell you! He had Dad's watch—and the case of jewels—they were in his pack on the kitchen table—"

"Eve!"

"Let me go!—"

"*Eve!*" He held her rigid a moment in his powerful grip, compelled her dazed, half-crazed eyes to meet his own:

"You must come to your senses," he said. "Listen to what I say: they are *bringing in your father*."

Her dilated blue eyes never moved from his.

"We found him in Drowned Valley at sunrise," said Stormont quietly. "The men are only a few rods behind me. They are carrying him out."

Her lips made a word without sound.

"Yes," said Stormont in a low voice.

There was a sound in the woods behind them. Stormont turned. Far away down the trail the men came into sight.

Then the State Trooper turned the girl very gently and placed one arm around her shoulders. [254]

Very slowly they descended the hill together. His equipment was shining in the morning sun: and the sun fell on Eve's drooping head, turning her chestnut hair to fiery gold.

An hour later Trooper Stormont was at the Place of Pines.

There was nothing there except an empty trap and the ashes of the dying fire beyond.

EPISODE TWELVE

HER HIGHNESS INTERVENES

I

Toward noon the wind changed, and about one o'clock it began to snow.

Eve, exhausted, lay on the sofa in her bedroom. Her step-father lay on a table in the dance hall below, covered by a sheet from his own bed. And beside him sat Trooper Stormont, waiting.

It was snowing heavily when Mr. Lyken, the little undertaker from Ghost Lake, arrived with several assistants, a casket, and what he called "swell trimmings."

Long ago Mike Clinch had selected his own mortuary site and had driven a section of iron pipe

into the ground on a ferny knoll overlooking Star Pond. In explanation he grimly remarked to Eve that after death he preferred to be planted where he could see that Old Harrod's ghost didn't trespass.

Here two of Mr. Lyken's able assistants dug a grave while the digging was still good; for if Mike Clinch was to lie underground that season there might be need of haste—no weather prophet ever having successfully forecast Adirondack weather.

Eve, exhausted by shock and a sleepless night, was spared the more harrowing details of the coroner's visit and the subsequent jaunty activities of Mr. Lyken and his efficient assistants. [256]

She had managed to dress herself in a black wool gown, intending to watch by Mike, but Stormont's blunt authority prevailed and she lay down for an hour's rest.

The hour lengthened into many hours; the girl slept heavily on her sofa under blankets laid over her by Stormont.

All that dark, snowy day she slept, mercifully unconscious of the proceedings below.

In its own mysterious way the news penetrated the wilderness; and out of the desolation of forest and swamp and mountain drifted the people who somehow existed there—a few shy, half wild young girls, a dozen silent, lank men, two or three of Clinch's own people, who stood silently about in the falling snow and lent a hand whenever requested.

One long shanked youth cut hemlock to line the grave; others erected a little fence of silver birch around it, making of the enclosure a "plot."

A gaunt old woman from God knows where aided Mr. Lyken at intervals: a pretty, sulky-eyed girl with her slovenly, red-headed sister cooked for anybody who desired nourishment.

When Mike was ready to hold the inevitable reception everybody filed into the dance hall. Mr. Lyken was master of ceremonies; Trooper Stormont stood very tall and straight by the head of the casket.

Clinch wore a vague, indefinable smile and his best clothes,—that same smile which had so troubled José Quintana.

Light was fading fast in the room when the last visitor took silent leave of Clinch and rejoined the groups in the kitchen, where were the funeral baked meats. [257]

Eve still slept. Descending again from his reconnaissance, Trooper Stormont encountered Trooper Lannis below.

"Has anybody picked up Quintana's tracks?" inquired the former.

"Not so far. An Inspector and two State Game Protectors are out beyond Owl Marsh. The Troopers from Five Lakes are on the job, and we have enforcement men along Drowned Valley from The Scaur to Harrod Place."

"Does Darragh know?"

"Yes. He's in there with Mike. He brought a lot of flowers from Harrod Place."

The two troopers went into the dance hall where Darragh was arranging the flowers from his greenhouses.

Stormont said quietly: "All right, Jim, but Eve must not know that they came from Harrod's."

Darragh nodded: "How is she, Jack?"

"All in."

"Do you know the story?"

"Yes. Mike went into Drowned Valley early last evening after Quintana. He didn't come back. Before dawn this morning Eve located Quintana, set a bear-trap for him, and caught him with the goods——"

"What goods?" demanded Darragh sharply.

"Well, she got his pack and found Mike's watch and jewelry in it——"

"What jewelry?"

"The jewels Quintana was after. But that was after she'd arrived at the Dump, here, leaving Quintana to get free of the trap and beat it.

"That's how I met her—half crazed, going to find Quintana again. We'd found Mike in Drowned Valley and were bringing him out when I ran into Eve.... I brought her back here and called Ghost Lake.... They haven't picked up Quintana's tracks so far." [258]

After a silence: "Too bad this snow came so late," remarked Trooper Lannis. "But we ought to get Quintana anyway."

Darragh went over and looked silently at Mike Clinch.

"I liked you," he said under his breath. "It wasn't your fault. And it wasn't mine, Mike.... I'll try to square things. Don't worry."

He came back slowly to where Stormont was standing near the door:

"Jack," he said, "you can't marry Eve on a Trooper's pay. Why not quit and take over the Harrod estate?... You and I can go into business together later if you like."

After a pause: "That's rather wonderful of you, Jim," said Stormont, "but you don't know what sort of business man I'd make——"

"I know what sort of officer you made.... I'm taking no chance.... And I'll make my peace with Eve—or somebody will do it for me.... Is it settled then?"

"Thanks," said Trooper Stormont, reddening. They clasped hands. Then Stormont went about and lighted the candles in the room. Clinch's face, again revealed, was still faintly amused at something or other. The dead have much to be amused at.

As Darragh was about to go, Stormont said: "We're burying Clinch at eleven to-morrow morning. The Ghost Lake Pilot officiates."

"I'll come if it won't upset Eve," said Darragh.

"She won't notice anybody, I fancy," remarked Stormont.

He stood by the veranda and watched Darragh take the Lake Trail through the snow. Finally the glimmer of his swinging lantern was lost in the woods and Stormont mounted the stairs once more, stood silently by Eve's open door, realised she was still heavily asleep, and seated himself on a chair outside her door to watch and wait.

All night long it snowed hard over the Star Pond country, and the late grey light of morning revealed a blinding storm pelting a white robed world.

Toward ten o'clock, Stormont, on guard, noticed that Eve was growing restless.

Downstairs the flotsam of the forest had gathered again: Mr. Lyken was there in black gloves; the Reverend Laomi Smatter had arrived in a sleigh from Ghost Lake. Both were breakfasting heavily.

The pretty, sulky-faced girl fetched a tray and placed Eve's breakfast on it; and Trooper Stormont carried it to her room.

She was awake when he entered. He set the tray on the table. She put both arms around his neck.

"Jack," she murmured, her eyes tremulous with tears.

"Everything has been done," he said. "Will you be ready by eleven? I'll come for you."

She clung to him in silence for a while.

At eleven he knocked on her door. She opened it. She wore her black wool gown and a black fur turban. Some of her pallor remained,—traces of tears and bluish smears under both eyes. But her voice was steady.

"Could I see Dad a moment alone?"

"Of course."

She took his arm: they descended the stairs. There seemed to be many people about but she did not lift her eyes until her lover led her into the dance hall where Clinch lay smiling his mysterious smile.

Then Stormont left her alone there and closed the door.

In a terrific snow-storm they buried Mike Clinch on the spot he had selected, in order that he might keep a watchful eye upon the trespassing ghost of old man Harrod.

It blew and stormed and stormed, and the thin, nasal voice of "Rev. Smatter" was utterly lost in the wind. The slanting lances of snow drove down on the casket, building a white mound over the flowers, blotting the hemlock boughs from sight.

There was no time to be lost now; the ground was freezing under a veering and bitter wind out of the west. Mr. Lyken's talented assistants had some difficulty in shaping the mound which snow began to make into a white and flawless monument.

The last slap of the spade rang with a metallic jar across the lake, where snow already blotted the newly forming film of ice; the human denizens of the wilderness filtered back into it one by one; "Rev. Smatter" got into his sleigh, plainly concerned about the road; Mr. Lyken betrayed unprofessional haste in loading his wagon with his talented assistants and starting for Ghost Lake.

A Game Protector or two put on snow-shoes when they departed. Trooper Lannis led out his horse and Stormont's, and got into the saddle.

"I'd better get these beasts into Ghost Lake while I can," he said. "You'll follow on snow-shoes, won't you, Jack?"

"I don't know. I may need a sleigh for Eve. She can't remain here all alone. I'll telephone the Inn."

Darragh, in blanket outfit, a pair of snow-shoes on his back, a rifle in his mittened hand, came trudging up from the lake. He and Stormont watched Lannis riding away with the two horses.

"He'll make it all right, but it's time he started," said the latter.

Darragh nodded: "Some storm. Where is Eve?"

"In her room."

"What is she going to do, Jack?"

"Marry me as soon as possible. She wants to stay here for a few days but I can't leave her here alone. I think I'll telephone to Ghost Lake for a sleigh."

"Let me talk to her," said Darragh in a low voice.

"Do you think you'd better—at such a time?"

"I think it's a good time. It will divert her mind, anyway. I want her to come to Harrod Place."

"She won't," said Stormont grimly.

"She might. Let me talk to her."

"Do you realise how she feels toward you, Jim?"

"I do, indeed. And I don't blame her. But let me tell you; Eve Strayer is the most honest and fair-minded girl I ever knew.... Except one.... I'll take a chance that she'll listen to me.... Sooner or later she will be obliged to hear what I have to tell her.... But it will be easier for her—for everybody—if I speak to her now. Let me try, Jack."

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Stormont hesitated, looked at him, nodded. Darragh stood his rifle against the bench on the kitchen porch. They entered the house slowly. And met Eve descending the stairs.

The girl looked at Darragh, astonished, then her pale face flushed with anger.

"What are you doing in this house?" she demanded unsteadily. "Have you no decency, no shame?"

"Yes," he said, "I am ashamed of what my kinsman has done to you and yours. That is partly why I am here."

"You came here as a spy," she said with hot contempt. "You lied about your name; you lied about your purpose. You came here to betray Dad! If he'd known it he would have killed you!"

"Yes, he would have. But—do you know why I came here, Eve?"

"I've told you!"

"And you are wrong. I didn't come here to betray Mike Clinch: I came to save him."

"Do you suppose I believe a man who has lied to Dad?" she cried.

"I don't ask you to, Eve. I shall let somebody else prove what I say. I don't blame you for your attitude. God knows I don't blame Mike Clinch. He stood up like a man to Henry Harrod.... All I ask is to undo some of the rotten things that my uncle did to you and yours. And that is partly why I came here."

The girl said passionately: "Neither Dad nor I want anything from Harrod Place or from you! Do you suppose you can come here after Dad is dead and pretend you want to make amends for what your uncle did to us?"

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"Eve," said Darragh gravely, "I've made some amends already. You don't know it, but I have.... You may not believe it, but I liked your father. He was a real man. Had anybody done to me what Henry Harrod did to your father I'd have behaved as your father behaved; I'd never have budged from this spot; I'd have hunted where I chose; I'd have borne an implacable hatred against Henry Harrod and Harrod Place, and every soul in it!"

The girl, silenced, looked at him without belief.

He said: "I am not surprised that you distrust what I say. But the man you are going to marry was a junior officer in my command. I have no closer friend than Jack Stormont. Ask him whether I am to be believed."

Astounded, the girl turned a flushed, incredulous face to Stormont.

He said: "You may trust Darragh as you trust me. I don't know what he has to say to you, dear.

But whatever he says will be the truth."

Darragh said, gravely: "Through a misunderstanding your father came into possession of stolen property, Eve. He did not know it had been stolen. I did. But Mike Clinch would not have believed me if I had told him that the case of jewels in his possession had been stolen from a woman.... Quintana stole them. By accident they came into your father's possession. I learned of this. I had promised this woman to recover her jewels.

"I came here for that purpose, Eve. And for two reasons: first, because I learned that Quintana also was coming here to rob your father of these gems; second, because, when I knew your father, and knew *you*, I concluded that it would be an outrage to call on the police. It would mean prison for Clinch, misery and ruin for you, Eve. So—I tried to steal the jewels ... to save you both."

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He looked at Stormont, who seemed astonished.

"To whom do these jewels belong, Jim?" demanded the trooper.

"To the young Grand Duchess of Esthonia.... Do you remember that I befriended her over there?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember that the Reds were accused of burning her château and looting it?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, it was Quintana and his gang of international criminals who did that," said Darragh drily.

And, to Eve: "By accident this case of jewels, emblazoned with the coat of arms of the Grand Duchess of Esthonia, came into your father's possession. That is the story, Eve."

There was a silence. The girl looked at Stormont, flushed painfully, looked at Darragh.

Then, without a word, she turned, ascended the stairs, and reappeared immediately carrying the leather case.

"Thank you, Mr. Darragh," she said simply; and laid the case in his hand.

"But," said Darragh, "I want you to do a little more, Eve. The owner of these gems is my guest at Harrod Place. I want you to give them to her yourself."

"I—I can't go to Harrod Place," stammered the girl.

"Please don't visit the sins of Henry Harrod on me, Eve."

"I—don't. But—but that place——"

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After a silence: "If Eve feels that way," began Stormont awkwardly, "I couldn't become associated with you in business, Jim——"

"I'd rather sell Harrod Place than lose you!" retorted Darragh almost sharply. "I want to go into business with you, Jack—if Eve will permit me——"

She stood looking at Stormont, the heightened colour playing in her cheeks as she began to comprehend the comradeship between these two men.

Slowly she turned to Darragh, offered her hand:

"I'll go to Harrod Place," she said in a low voice.

Darragh's quick smile brightened the sombre gravity of his face.

"Eve," he said, "when I came over here this morning from Harrod Place I was afraid you would refuse to listen to me; I was afraid you would not even see me. And so I brought with me—somebody—to whom I felt certain you would listen.... I brought with me a young girl—a poor refugee from Russia, once wealthy, to-day almost penniless.... Her name is Theodorica.... Once she was Grand Duchess of Esthonia.... But this morning a clergyman from Five Lakes changed her name.... To such friends as you and Jack she is Ricca Darragh now ... and she's having a wonderful time on her new snow-shoes——"

He took Eve by one hand and Stormont by the other, and drew them to the kitchen door and kicked it open.

Through the swirling snow, over on the lake-slope at the timber edge, a graceful, boyish figure in scarlet and white wool moved swiftly over the drifts with all the naïve delight of a child with a brand new toy.

As Darragh strode out into the open the distant figure flung up one arm in salutation and came racing over the drifts, her brilliant scarf flying.

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All aglow and a trifle breathless, she met Darragh just beyond the veranda, rested one mittened hand on his shoulder while he knelt and unbuckled her snow-shoes, stepped lightly from them and came forward to Eve with out-stretched hand and a sudden winning gravity in her lovely face.

"We shall be friends, surely," she said in her quick, winning voice;—"because my husband has told me—and I am so grieved for you—and I need a girl friend——"

Holding both Eve's hands, her mittens dangling from her wrist, she looked into her eyes very steadily.

Slowly Eve's eyes filled; more slowly still Ricca kissed her on both cheeks, framed her face in both hands, kissed her lightly on the lips.

Then, still holding Eve's hands, she turned and looked at Stormont.

"I remember you now," she said. "You were with my husband in Riga."

She freed her right hand and held it out to Stormont. He had the grace to kiss it and did it very well for a Yankee.

Together they entered the kitchen door and turned into the dining room on the left, where were chairs around the plain pine table.

Darragh said: "The new mistress of Harrod Place has selected your quarters, Eve. They adjoin the quarters of her friend, the Countess Orloff-Strelwitz."

"Valentine begged me," said Ricca, smiling. "She is going to be lonely without me. All hours of day and night we were trotting into one another's rooms——" She looked gravely at Eve: "You will like Valentine; and she will like you very much.... As for me—I already love you."

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She put one arm around Eve's shoulders: "How could you even think of remaining here all alone? Why, I should never close my eyes for thinking of you, dear."

Eve's head drooped; she said in a stifled voice: "I'll go with you.... I want to.... I'm very—tired."

"We had better go now," said Darragh. "Your things can be brought over later. If you'll dress for snow-shoeing, Jack can pack what clothes you need.... Are there snow-shoes for him, too?"

Eve turned tragically to her lover: "In Dad's closet——" she said, choking; then turned and went up the stairs, still clinging to Ricca's hand and drawing her with her.

Stormont followed, entered Clinch's quarters, and presently came downstairs again, carrying Clinch's snow-shoes and a basket pack.

He seated himself near Darragh. After a silence: "Your wife is beautiful, Jim.... Her character seems to be even more beautiful.... She's like God's own messenger to Eve.... And—you're rather wonderful yourself——"

"Nonsense," said Darragh, "I've given my wife her first American friend and I've done a shrewd stroke of business in nabbing the best business associate I ever heard of——"

"You're crazy but kind.... I hope I'll be some good.... One thing; I'll never get over what you've done for Eve in this crisis——"

"There'll be no crisis, Jack. Marry, and hook up with me in business. That solves everything.... Lord!—what a life Eve has had! But you'll make it all up to her ... all this loneliness and shame and misery of Clinch's Dump——"

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Stormont touched his arm in caution: Eve and Ricca came down the stairs—the former now in the grey wool snow-shoe dress, and carrying her snow-shoes, black gown, and toilet articles.

Stormont began to stow away her effects in the basket pack; Darragh went over to her and took her hand.

"I'm so glad we are to be friends," he said. "It hurt a lot to know you held me in contempt. But I had to go about it that way."

Eve nodded. Then, suddenly recollecting: "Oh," she exclaimed, reddening, "I forgot the jewel case! It's under my pillow——"

She turned and sped upstairs and reappeared almost instantly, carrying the jewel-case.

Breathless, flushed, thankful and happy in the excitement of restitution, she placed the leather case in Ricca's hands.

"My jewels!" cried the girl, astounded. Then, with a little cry of delight, she placed the case upon the table, stripped open the emblazoned cover, and emptied the two trays. All over the table rolled the jewels, flashing, scintillating, ablaze with blinding light.

And at the same instant the outer door crashed open and Quintana covered them with Darragh's rifle.

"Now, by Christ!" he shouted, "who stirs a finger shall go to God in one jump! You, my gendarme frien'—*you*, my frien' Smith—turn your damn backs—han's up high!—tha's the way!—now, ladies!—back away there—get back or I kill!—sure, by Jesus, I kill you like I would some white little mice!——"

With incredible quickness he stepped forward and swept the jewels into one hand—filled the pocket of his trousers, caught up every stray stone and pocketed them.

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"You gendarme," he cried in a menacing voice, "you think you shall follow in my track. Yes? I blow your damn head off if you stir before the hour.... After that—well, follow and be damn!"

Even as he spoke he stepped outside and slammed the door; and Darragh and Stormont leaped for it. Then the loud detonation of Quintana's rifle was echoed by the splintering rip of bullets tearing through the closed door; and both men halted in the face of the leaden hail.

Eve ran to the pantry window and saw Quintana in somebody's stolen lumber-sledge, lash a big pair of horses to a gallop and go floundering past into the Ghost Lake road.

As he sped by in a whirl of snow he fired five times at the house, then, rising and swinging his whip, he flogged the frantic horses into the woods.

In the dining room, Stormont, red with rage and shame, and having found his rifle in the corridor outside Eve's bedroom, was trying to open the shutters for a shot; and Darragh, empty-handed, searched the house frantically for a weapon.

Eve, terribly excited, came from the pantry:

"He's gone!" she cried furiously. "He's in somebody's lumber-sledge with a pair of horses and he's driving west like the devil!"

Stormont ran to the tap-room telephone, cranked it, and warned the constabulary at Five Lakes.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, turning to Darragh, scarlet with mortification, "what a ghastly business! I never dreamed he was within miles of Clinch's! It's the most shameful thing that ever happened to me——"

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"What could anybody do under that rifle?" said Eve hotly. "That beast would have murdered the first person who stirred!"

Darragh, exasperated and dreadfully humiliated, looked miserably at his brand-new wife.

Eve and Stormont also looked at her. She had come forward from the rear of the stairway where Quintana had brutally driven her. Now she stood with one hand on the empty leather jewel case, looking at everybody out of pretty, bewildered eyes.

To Darragh, in a perplexed, unsteady voice: "Is it the same bandit who robbed us before?"

"Yes; Quintana," he said wretchedly. Rage began to redden his features. "Ricca," he said, "I promised I'd find your jewels.... I promise you again that I'll never drop this business until your gems—and the Flaming Jewel—are in your possession——"

"But, Jim——"

"I swear it!" he exclaimed violently. "I'm not such a stupid fool as I seem——"

"Dear!" she protested excitedly, "you *have* done what you promised. My gems *are* in my possession—I believe——"

She caught up the emblazoned case, stripped out the first tray, then the second, and flung them aside. Then, searching with the delicate tip of her forefinger in the empty case, she suddenly pressed the bottom hard,—thumb, middle finger and little finger forming the three apexes of an equilateral triangle.

There came a clear, tiny sound like the ringing of the alarm in a repeating watch. Very gently the false bottom of the case detached itself and came away in the palm of her hand.

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And there, each embedded in its own shaped compartment of chamois, lay the Esthonian jewels—the true ones—deep hidden, always doubly guarded by two sets of perfect imitations lining the two visible trays above.

And, in the centre, blazed the Erosite gem—the magnificent Flaming Jewel, a glory of living, blinding fire.

Nobody stirred or spoke. Darragh blinked at the crystalline blaze as though stunned.

Then the young girl who had once been Her Serene Highness Theodorica, Grand Duchess of Esthonia, looked up at her brand-new husband and laughed.

"Did you really suppose it was these that brought me across the ocean? Did you suppose it was a passion for these that filled my heart? Did you think it was for these that I followed you?"

She laughed again, turned to Eve:

"*You* understand. Tell him that if he had been in rags I would have followed him like a gypsy.... They say there is gypsy blood in us.... God knows.... I think perhaps there is a little of it in all real women——" Still laughing she placed her hand lightly upon her heart—"In all women—perhaps—a Flaming Jewel imbedded here——"

Her eyes, tender, and mocking, met his; she lifted the jewel-case, closed it, and placed it in his hands.

"Now," she said, "you have everything in your possession; and we are safe—we are quite safe, now, my jewels and I."

Then she went to Eve and rested both hands on her shoulders.

"Shall we put on our snow-shoes and go—home?"

Stormont flung open the bullet-splintered door. Outside in the snow he dropped on both knees to buckle on Eve's snow-shoes.

Darragh was performing a like office for his wife, and the State Trooper, being unobserved, took Eve's slim hands and kissed them, looking up at her where he was kneeling.

Her pale face blushed as it had that day in the woods on Owl Marsh, so long, so long ago, when this man's lips first touched her hands.

As their eyes met both remembered. Then she smiled at her lover with the shy girl's soul of her gazing out at him through eyes as blue as the wild blind-gentians that grow among the ferns and mosses of Star Pond.

Far away in the northwestern forests Quintana still lashed his horses through the primeval pines.

Triumphant, reckless, resourceful, dangerous, he felt that now nothing could stop him, nothing bar his way to freedom.

Out of the wilderness lay his road and his destiny; out of it he must win his way, by strategy, by cunning, by violence—creep out, lie his way out, shoot his way out—it scarcely mattered. He was going out! He was going back to life once more. Who could forbid him? Who stop him? Who deny him, now, when, in his pockets, he held all that was worth living for—the keys to power, to pleasure,—the key to everything on earth!

In fierce exultation he slapped the glass jewels in his pocket and laughed aloud.

"The keys to the world!" he cried. "Let him stop me and take them who is a better man than I!" Then his long whip whistled and he cursed his horses.

Then, of a sudden, close by in the snowy road ahead, he saw a State Trooper on snow-shoes,—saw the upflung arm warning him—screamed curses at his horses, flogged them forward to crush this thing to death that dared menace him—this object that suddenly rose up out of nowhere to snatch from him the keys of the world—

For a moment the State Trooper looked after the runaway horses. There was no use following; they'd have to run till they dropped.

Then he lowered the levelled rifle from his shoulder, looked grimly at the limp thing which had tumbled from the sledge into the snowy road and which sprawled there crimsoning the spotless flakes that fell upon it.

THE END

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THE FLAMING JEWEL
THE LITTLE RED FOOT
THE SLAYER OF SOULS
THE CRIMSON TIDE
THE LAUGHING GIRL
THE RESTLESS SEX
BARBARIANS
THE DARK STAR
THE GIRL PHILIPPA

WHO GOES THERE!
ATHALIE
THE BUSINESS OF LIFE
THE GAY REBELLION
THE STREETS OF ASCALON

THE TREE OF HEAVEN
THE MOONLIT WAY
IN SECRET
CARDIGAN
THE RECKONING
THE MAID-AT-ARMS
AILSA PAIGE
SPECIAL MESSENGER
THE HAUNTS OF MEN

LORRAINE
MAIDS OF PARADISE
ASHES OF EMPIRE
THE RED REPUBLIC
BLUE-BIRD WEATHER

THE COMMON LAW
THE FIGHTING CHANCE
THE YOUNGER SET
THE DANGER MARK
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THE KING IN YELLOW
IN SEARCH OF THE UNKNOWN
THE TRACER OF LOST PERSONS
THE CONSPIRATORS
A KING AND A FEW DUKES
THE HIDDEN CHILDREN
IN THE QUARTER

Transcriber's Note:

Page 14 [Stormond](#) changed to Stormont
Page 40 Double close quotation mark added after [have a dance!](#)
Page 95 [hmiself](#) changed to himself
Page 96 [pallour](#) changed to pallor
Page 103 Open bracket removed from [\(But wait!](#)
Page 112 Double close quotation mark added after [that way, Mike.](#)
Page 118 Double close quotation mark added after [at roll call.](#)
Page 197 [swiming](#) changed to swimming
Page 226 [breeches](#) changed to breeches'
Page 258 Double open quotation mark added before [But](#)

All other inconsistencies in spelling, hyphenation and dialect have been retained as they appear in the original book.

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