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THE DOOMSMAN

BY

VAN TASSEL SUTPHEN

AUTHOR OF

"THE CARDINAL'S ROSE"
"THE GATES OF CHANCE"
ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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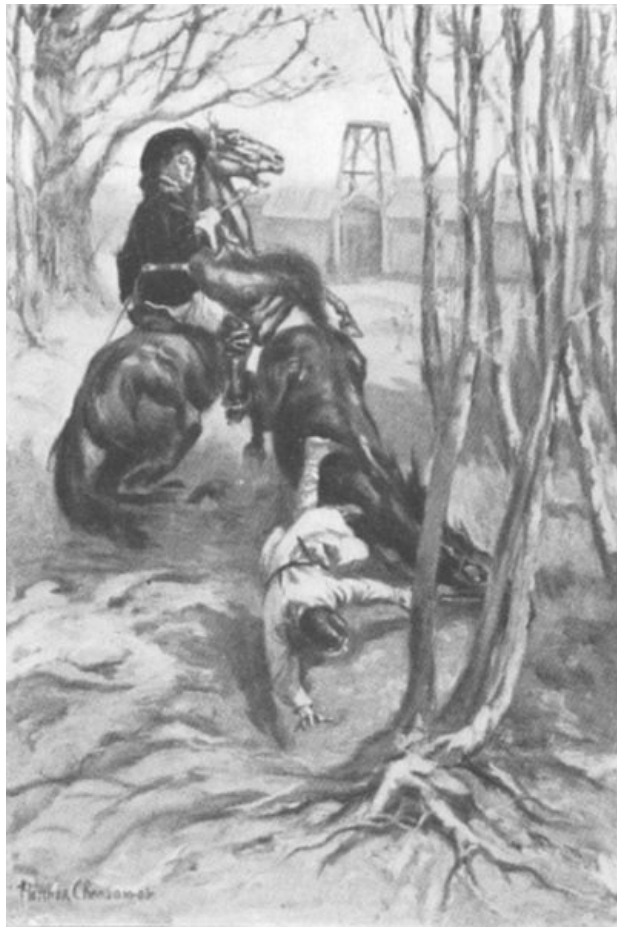
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Transcriber's note.

A number of typographical errors found in the original text have been corrected in this version. A [list](#) of these errors is found at the end of this book.



**"CONSTANS AND NIGHT WERE DOWN."
See p. 28**

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THE DOOMSMAN

I

THE VERMILION FEATHER

A beach of yellow sand and a stranded log upon which sat a boy looking steadfastly out upon the shining waters.

It was a delicious morning in early May, and the sun was at his back, its warm rays falling upon him with affectionate caress. But the lad was plainly oblivious of his immediate surroundings; in spirit he had followed the leading of his eyes a league or more to the westward, where a mass of indefinable shadow bulked hugely upon the horizon line. Indefinable, in that it was neither forest nor mountain nor yet an atmospheric illusion produced by the presence of watery vapor. It did not change in density as does the true cloud; for all of its mistiness of outline there was an impression of solidity about its deeper shadows, something that the wind could not lift nor the light pierce. A mystery, and the boy devoured it with his eyes, his head bent forward and his shoulders held tensely.

The place was a rocky point of land jutting forth into a reef-strewn tideway. The forest came down close to the strip of beach, but there was comparatively little underwood, and the grass, growing up to the very roots of the trees, gave to the glade an appearance almost parklike. There was no house in sight, not even the thin, blue curl of a smoking hearth to proclaim the neighborhood of man. Yet the sign of human handicraft was not wholly wanting; through the tree trunks, at perhaps a hundred yards away, appeared the line of a timber stockade—enormous palisades, composed of twelve-foot ash and hickory poles, set in a double row and bound together by lengths of copper wire. It was to be further observed that the timbers had been stripped of their bark and the knots smoothed down so as to afford no coigne of vantage to even a naked foot. Add, again, that the poles had been charred and sharpened at the top, and it will be understood that the barrier was a formidable one against any assault short of artillery.

There was no beaten road or path near the line of palisades, but, following the curving of the shore, a forest track, already green with the young grass that was pushing its way through last year's stubble, stretched away to the north and south. It was hardly more than a runway for the deer and wild cattle, but it did not give one the impression of having been originally plotted out by these creatures, after the immemorial fashion of their kind. An animal does not lay out his road in sections of perfectly straight lines connected by mathematical curves, neither does he fill up gullies nor cut through hills, when it is so easy to go around these obstructions.

The boy, who sat and dreamed at the water's edge, was in his eighteenth year or thereabouts, slenderly proportioned, and with well-cut features. The delicately moulded chin, the sensitive nostril—these are the signs of the poet, the dreamer, rather than of the man of action. And yet the face was not altogether deficient in indications of strength. That heavy line of eyebrow should mean something, as also the free up-throw of the head when he sat erect; the final impression was of immaturity of character rather than of the lack of it. From the merely superficial stand-point, it may be added that he had brown eyes and hair (the latter being cut square across his forehead

and falling to his shoulders), a good mouth containing the whitest of teeth, and a naturally light complexion that was already beginning to accumulate its summer's coat of tan.

He was dressed in a tunic or smock of brown linen, gathered at the waist by a belt of greenish leather, with a buckle that shone like gold. His knees were bare, but around his legs were wound spiral bands of soft-dressed deer-hide. Buskins, secured by thongs of red leather and soled with moose-hide, to prevent slipping, covered his feet, while his head-dress consisted of a simple band of thin gold, worn fillet-wise. This last, being purely ornamental, was doubtless a token of gentle birth or of an assured social station. A short fur coat, made from the pelt of the much-prized forest cat, lay in a careless heap at the boy's feet. It had felt comfortable enough in the still keenness of the early morning hour, but now that the sun was well up in the sky it had been discarded.

In his belt was stuck a long, double-edged hunting-knife, having its wooden handle neatly bound with black waxed thread. A five-foot bow of second-growth hickory leaned against the log beside him, but it was unstrung, and the quiver of arrows, suspended by a strap from his shoulders, had been allowed to shift from its proper position so that it hung down the middle of his back and was, consequently, out of easy hand-reach. But the youth was in no apparent fear of being surprised by the advent of an enemy; certainly he had made no provision against such a contingency, and the carelessness of his attitude was entirely unaffected. It may be remarked that the arrows aforesaid were iron-tipped instead of being simply fire-hardened, and in the feathering of each a single plume of the scarlet tanager had been carefully inserted. Presumably, the vermilion feather was the owner's private sign of his work as a marksman. So far the lad's dress and accoutrements were in entire conformity to the primeval rusticity of his surroundings. Judge, then, of the reasonable surprise which the observer might feel at discovering that the object in the boy's hand was nothing less incongruous than a pair of binocular glasses, an exquisitely finished example of the highest art of the optician. One of the eye-piece lenses had been lost or broken, for, as the youth raised the glasses to sweep again the distant sea-line, he covered the left-hand cylinder with a flat, oblong object—a printed book. Its title, indeed, could be clearly read as, a moment after, it lay partly open upon his knee—*A Child's History of the United States*—and across the top of the page had been neatly written in charcoal ink, "Constans, Son of Gavan at the Greenwood Keep."

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Mechanically, the boy began turning the leaves, stopping finally at a page upon which was a picture of the lower part of New York City as seen from the bay. Long and earnestly he studied it, looking up occasionally as though he would find its visible presentment in that dark blur on the horizon line. "It must be," he muttered, with a quick intake of his breath. "The Forgotten City and Doom the Forbidden—one and the same. Well, and what then?" and again he fell upon his dreaming.

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For the best part of an hour the boy had sat almost motionless, looking out across the water. Then, suddenly, he turned his head; his ear had caught a suspicious sound, perhaps the dip of an oar-blade. Thrusting the field-glass and book into his bosom, he drew the bow towards him and listened. All was still, except for the chatter of a blue-jay, and after a moment or so his attention again relaxed. But his eyes, instead of losing themselves in the distance as before, remained fixed upon the sand at his feet. Fortunately so, or he must have failed to notice the long shadow that hung poised for an instant above his right shoulder and then darted downward, menacing, deadly.

An infinitesimal fraction of a second, yet within that brief space Constans had contrived to fling himself, bodily, forward and sideways from his seat. The spear-shaft grazed his shoulder and the blade buried itself in the sand. The treacherous assailant, overbalanced by the force of his thrust, toppled over the log and fell heavily, ignominiously, at the boy's side. In the indefinite background some one laughed melodiously.

Constans was up and out upon the forest track before his clumsy opponent had begun to recover his breath. It was almost too easy, and then he all but cannoned plump into a horseman who sat carelessly in his saddle, half hidden by the bole of a thousand-year oak. The cavalier, gathering up his reins, called upon the fugitive to stop, but Constans, without once looking behind, ran on, actuated by the ultimate instinct of a hunted animal, zigzagging as much as he dared, and glancing from side to side for a way of escape.

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But none offered. On the right ran the wall of the stockade, impenetrable and unscalable, and it was a long two miles to the north gate. On the left was the water and behind him the enemy. A few hundred yards and he must inevitably be brought to a standstill, breathless and defenceless. Yet he kept on; there was nothing else to do.

The horseman followed, putting his big blood-bay into a leisurely hand-gallop. A sword-thrust would settle the business quite as effectually as a shot from his cross-bow, and he would not be obliged to risk the loss of a bolt, a consideration of importance in this latter age when good artisan work is scarce and correspondingly precious.

Constans could run, and he was sound of wind and limb. Yet, as the thunder of hoofs grew louder, he realized that his chance was of a desperate smallness. If only he could gain a dozen seconds in which to string his bow and fit an arrow.

But he could not make or save those longed-for moments; already he had lost a good part of his original advantage, and the horseman was barely sixty yards behind. His head felt as though it

were about to split in two; a cloud, shot with crimson stars, swam before his eyes.

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The track swung suddenly to the right, in a sharp curve, and Constans's heart bounded wildly; he had forgotten how close he must be to the crossing of the Swiftwater. Now the rotting and worm-eaten timbers of the open trestle-work were under his feet; mechanically, he avoided the numerous gaps, where a misstep meant destruction, and so at last gained the farther bank and sank down panting on the short, crisp sward.

The cavalier reined in at the beginning of the trestle; he looked doubtfully at the ford above the bridge; but the Swiftwater was in spring flood, and, was the chase worth a wetting?

Evidently not, for, with a shrug of his shoulders, the horseman threw one leg across the saddle-pommel and sat there, very much at his ease, while he proceeded to roll himself a cigarette from coarse, black tobacco and a leaf of dampened corn-husk.

Constans felt his face flush hotly as he noted the contempt implied in his enemy's well-played indifference. Already he had put his bow in order; now he stood up and, with some ostentation, proceeded to fit an arrow to the string. The cavalier looked at these preparations with entire calmness and busied himself again with his flint and steel.

"It would be murder," muttered Constans, irritably, and lowered his hand. Then, moved by sudden impulse, he took aim anew and with more than ordinary care. The arrow sung through the air and transfixed the fleshy part of the cavalier's bridle-arm. The horse, whose withers had been grazed by the shaft, started to rear, but his rider neither moved nor changed color. Quieting the frightened animal with a reassuring word, he deftly caught the tinder spark at the tip of his cigarette and drew in a deep inhalation of the smoke. Then, with the utmost coolness, he proceeded to snap the arrow-shaft in twain and draw out the barb, Constans yielding him grudging admiration, for it was all very perfectly done.

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"Here is a man," thought Constans, and looked him over carefully.

And truly the cavalier made a gallant figure, dressed as he was in the bravest raiment that the eyes of Constans had ever yet beheld. For his close-fitting suit was of claret-colored velvet with gilt buttons, while his throat-gear was a wonderfully fine lace jabot, with a great red jewel fastened in the knot. A soft hat, trimmed with gold lace and an ostrich-feather, covered his dark curls, while yellow gauntlets and high riding-boots of polished leather completed his outward attire. Not an unpleasing picture as he sat there in the sunshine astride the big blood-bay, but Constans, looking upon him, knew that neither now nor hereafter could there be any verity of peace between them. There is such a thing as hate at first sight even as there is love.

The horseman had retained the feathered end of the arrow-shaft, and he proceeded to examine it with an appearance of polite interest.

"Your private token, young sir?" he inquired, indicating the single feather of scarlet. His voice was pitched in an affectedly high key, his manner languidly ceremonious. Constans could only bow stiffly in the affirmative.

"Ah, yes; it is one not to be easily forgotten. I, too, have my sign-manual, and I should have been glad to have exchanged with you."

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Again Constans bowed. He wanted to say something, but the words would not come. The cavalier smiled.

"But there may be another opportunity later on," he continued. "At least, we may hope so." He bowed, lifting his plumed hat. "To our future acquaintance." He turned his horse's head to the southward, and rode away at a slow canter without once looking back.

Constans watched the ostrich-crest as it rose and fell, until it was lost to sight among the tree-trunks. Then, drawing his belt tight, he started on a dog-trot in the contrary direction; the barrier, admitting him to the protection of the stockade, was still some distance away, and he must reach it without delay and give the warning. But, even as he ran, he heard the tolling of a bell; it was the alarm that the Doomsmen were abroad. Now, indeed, he must make haste or he would find the barrier closed against himself.

Ten minutes later he stood before the northern entrance of the Greenwood Keep. Already the warders were fitting into place the gates of iron-studded oak, but they recognized the voice of their lord's son and allowed him to squeeze his way through. Guyder Touchett, the burly captain of the watch, clapped him familiarly on the back.

"Your legs have saved your skin, master. God's life! but you flashed through the cover like a cock-grouse going down the wind. Yet I trembled lest a cross-bow bolt might be following even faster."

"They have come—the Doomsmen?" panted Constans.

"Garth, the swineherd, reported their landing at the Golden Cove an hour before sunup. Three war-galleys, which means twice that score of men."

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"Some mischance of wind or tide," said Constans, thoughtfully. "I noticed that the water in the Gut was rougher than is usual at dawn."

"Like enough," assented Touchett. "These night-birds are not often seen in a blue sky, and luckily so, for the safety of your father's ricks and byres. After all, there is no certainty in the matter;

Garth is stupid enough betimes for one of his own boars, and there was a christening-party at the barracks last night. You know what that means—the can clinking until the tap runs dry."

"Yet you say he saw——"

Guyder Touchett shrugged his shoulders. "Anything you like. When the ale is in the eye there are stranger things than gray cats to be discovered at the half-dawn. In my opinion, Garth is a fool and a liar."

"And, as usual, your opinion is wrong," retorted Constans, "for the Gray Men are really here. But I cannot wait; I must speak with Sir Gavan himself."

"You will find him at the water gate," bawled Touchett, as the boy ran past him.

Constans sped rapidly up the green slope leading to the house a quarter of a mile away. As he ran, he mentally rehearsed the story of his late adventure. Surely, now, Sir Gavan would permit him to bear a man's part in the impending crisis. Had he not already drawn hostile blood—the first?

Sir Gavan awaited his son at the water gate, his ruddy countenance streaked with an unwonted pallor and his gray eyes dark with trouble.

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"Where is your sister?" he asked, abruptly, as Constans ran up.

The boy stared. "She did not go out with me, sir. Do you mean that Issa——"

"Hush! or your mother will overhear. Come this way." And Sir Gavan preceded his son into the guard-room on the left of the vaulted entrance, walking heavily, as one who bears an unaccustomed burden upon his shoulders. Yet when he spoke again his voice had its accustomed steadiness.

"No one has seen her since ten of the sundial. It is now noon, and the alarm-bell has been ringing this half-hour."

Constans felt something tighten at his own throat. "You have searched the enclosure?" he faltered.

"Every nook and corner," returned Sir Gavan. "Tennant, with a dozen men, is now beating the upper plantations."

Constans thought guiltily of that cleverly concealed gap in the palisades just beyond the intake of the Ochre brook. He and Issa had shared it between them as a precious secret, and he had used it this very morning as a short cut to the water-side. Tennant, their elder brother, was not aware of its existence, but then Tennant was a prig, and not to be trusted in truly momentous affairs.

There was his father's wrath. Constans turned sick at the thought of arousing it. No; he could not tell him.

"I don't know," he said, vaguely.

Sir Gavan looked at him searchingly, then turned and strode out of the room.

Constans felt his cheeks grow hot. Why had he not told all the truth? He was a coward, a liar, in all but the actual word. He sat down on a bench and buried his face in his hands; then the recurring thought of Issa and of her peril stung him to his feet. Where had Sir Gavan gone?

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Constans made his way, hesitatingly, into the court-yard of the keep. He found it thronged with men, his father's retainers and servants. The archers were busy putting new strings to their bows; the spearmen were testing, with grave eagerness, the stout ash of their weapons, or perchance whetting an edge on the broad blades. Half a dozen of the younger men were engaged in covering the roof of the main and out buildings with horse-hides soaked in water, as a protection against burning arrows; others were driving the protesting cattle into the byres and sacking up a quantity of newly threshed grain that lay upon the flailing floor; everywhere the noise of shouting men and of hurrying feet.

Sir Gavan was not to be seen, and Constans, after inquiring for him through a fruitless quarter of an hour, entered the main house and sought the fighting platform on its roof. Why had no lookout been stationed here? Surely an oversight. He gazed eagerly about him.

Directly to the right of the house lay the home paddock, stretching away some two hundred yards to the edge of a white-birch plantation. The Ochre brook bounded it on one side, and the current had scoured out for itself an ever-deepening channel in the soft, alluvial soil. A clump of alders, just bursting into leaf, masked the bed of the stream at one particular point, where the bank rose into a miniature bluff. Constans, from his elevated position, was enabled to overlook this point, and so to make out the figure of a mounted man behind the alder screen, his horse standing belly deep in the water. It was the cavalier of the ostrich-feathers; and then, through the white trunks of the birches, he caught the flutter of a woman's gown. Constans tried to shout, to call out, but the vocal chords refused to relax, the sounds rattled in his throat.

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THE NIGHT OF THE TERROR

The reader, desiring to inform himself *in extenso* regarding the physical and social changes that followed the catastrophe by which the ancient civilization was so suddenly subverted, would do well to consult the final authority upon the subject, the learned Vigilas, author of *The Later Cosmos* (elephant folio edition). But for our present purpose a brief epitome should suffice. To borrow then, with all due acknowledgments, from our admirable historian:

"It was in the later years of the twentieth century that the Great Change came; at least, so the traditions agree, and how is a man to know certainly of such things except as he learns them from his father's lips? True, the accounts differ, and widely so at times, but that much is to be expected—where were there ever two men who heard or saw the same things in the same way? It is human nature that we should color even transparent fact with the reflected glow of our passions and fancies, and so the distortion becomes inevitable; we should be satisfied if, to-day, we succeed in making out even the broad outlines of the picture.

"It appears tolerably certain that the wreck of the ancient civilization took place about three generations ago, the catastrophe being both sudden and overwhelming; moreover, all the authorities agree that only an infinitesimal portion of the race escaped, with whole skins, from what were, in very sooth, cities of destruction. These fortunate ones were naturally the politically powerful and the immensely rich, and they owed their safety to the fact that they were able to seize upon the shipping in the harbors for their exclusive use. The fugitives sailed away, presumably to the southward, and so disappeared from the pages of authentic history. We know nothing for certain; only that they departed, and that we saw their faces no more.

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"Let us reconstruct, as best we may, the panorama of those few but awful days. The first rush was naturally to the country, but the crowds, choking the ferry and railway stations, were quickly confronted with the terror-stricken thousands of the suburbs, who were flocking to the city for refuge. And all through the dragging hours the same despairing reports flowed in from the remoter rural districts; everywhere the Terror walked, and men were dying like flies. From ocean to ocean, from the lakes to the gulf, the shadow rushed, and now the whole land lay in darkness.

"Such was the situation in what was then the United States of America, and similar conditions prevailed throughout the habitable world. London and Hong-Kong, Vienna and Peking, Buenos Ayres and Archangel—from every direction came the same inquiry, to every questioner was returned the same answer. It was the end of all things.

"Coincidentally with this great recession of the human tide, occurred the eclipse of industry, science, and, indeed, every form of thought and progress. The plough rusted in the furrow, the half-formed web dropped to pieces in the loom, the very crops stood unharvested in the fields, to be finally devoured by the birds and by a horde of rats and mice. Up to the last moment there had been confusion and dismay certainly, but the wheels of trade and of the civil administration had continued to turn; men had stood at their posts in answer to the call of duty or impressed by the blind instinct of habit. And then, suddenly, the sun went down, only to rise again upon a silent land.

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"The relapse into barbarism was swift. The few who had escaped were segregated from one another in small family groups, each man content with the bare necessities of animal existence and fearing the face of the stranger. Under such circumstances, there could be but little neighborly intercourse, and the ancient highways speedily became overgrown with grass and weeds, or else they were undermined and washed out by the winter storms. It was not until the second generation after the Terror that men once more began to draw together, in obedience to inherited instincts, and even then the new movement must have been largely brought about through the increasing aggressions of the Doomsmen. But of this in another place.

"It has been asserted that fire played a principal part in the destruction of the ancient cities, and it was at one time supposed that these extensive conflagrations were partly accidental and partly attributable to the wide-spread lawlessness that marked the closing hours of the greatest drama in all history. But later researches have evolved a new theory, and it now seems probable that the torch was employed by the authorities themselves as a final and truly a desperate measure. An heroic cautery, but, alas, a useless one.

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"The comparative exemption of New York from the universal fate goes to support rather than to discredit this hypothesis. It escaped the dynamite cartridge and the torch simply because in that city no recognized authority remained in power; there was no one to carry out the imperative orders of the federal government. There were, of course, many isolated cases of incendiarism, but the city did not suffer from any general and organized conflagration, as was the fate of Philadelphia and St. Louis and New Orleans. The destiny of the metropolis was decided in a different way; already it had passed into the keeping of the Doomsmen.

"In effect, then, the highly civilized North American continent had relapsed, within the brief

period of ninety years, into its primeval estate. In every direction stretched an inhospitable wilderness of morass and forest, with a few feeble settlements of the Stockade people fringing the principal waterways, and here and there the smoke of an encampment of the Painted Men rising in a thin spiral from out of the vast ocean of green leaves. To-day the wild boar ranges where once the tide of human passion most turbulently flowed, and the poor herdsman, eating his noonday curds from a wooden bowl, crushes with indifferent heel the priceless bit of faience lying half hidden in the rotting leaves. Everywhere, the old order changing and disappearing, only to recreate itself in form ever more fantastic and enfeebled, a dead being, and yet inextricably bound up with the life of the new age. And over all, the shadow of Doom, gigantic, threatening, omnipotent."

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III

THE NEW WORLD

Again we make acknowledgment to the "Laudable" Vigilans and quote at large from the luminous pages of *The Later Cosmos*. Now the reader, scenting more learned discourse, may meditate upon skipping this chapter; nay, will probably do so. Yet, to my thinking, he will act more wisely in buckling down to it, seeing that it contains matter of moment for the perfect understanding of the narrative proper. The studying of guide-posts is not an amusing occupation, but it is infinitely less tedious than to wander around all day in a fog and perhaps miss one's destination altogether.

"It is, indeed, a small world as we know it to-day. Our philosophers, reconstructing, as best they may, the science of the ancients from the treatises, few and sadly incomplete, that have come down to us, affirm that the earth is an orb and that another continent (perhaps more than one) lies beyond the rim of the eastern horizon. It may be so, but the issue is not of practical importance, seeing that there are none who care to make adventure of the great salty gulf that lies between. And so the sea keeps its mysteries.

"On the other hand, we count it inadvisable to wander far afield. To the north, to the west, and to the south stretches the unbroken forest, and in a few hours a man's legs may easily carry him out of hailing of the voice of his kind. The waterways form the only regular channels for social and commercial intercourse, and the busybody and gad-about are not regarded with favor by honest people.

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"It appears highly probable that the human race was virtually annihilated over the general area of the ancient United States of America; it persisted only in a few particularly favored localities and through accidental circumstances of which we know nothing definite. In our own day, the northern, central, and southern group of colonies maintain a system of infrequent intercommunication, and beyond that certain knowledge does not extend. It is possible that mankind may exist in a degraded state, in many inaccessible corners of this vast continent of ours, but this is only a possibility, concerning which the theories of the learned are no more susceptible of proof than are the idle speculations of the vulgar.

"For convenience, we will accept the popular classification of the human race as it exists to-day—the Painted Men, the House People, and the Doomsmen. To take them up in that order.

"The Painted Men, otherwise the Wood Folk, are the descendants of the Indians of old, but the strain is largely mingled with that of the negro race, and, with hardly an exception, it is the weaker qualities both of body and of mind that have been emphasized in the hybrid. From their Indian forebears they have preserved the custom of painting their face with crude and hideous pigments upon all occasions of ceremony; hence their popular designation—the 'Painted Men.'

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"The House People are conveniently subdivided into two classes—the townsmen, or House People proper, and the stockade dwellers, colloquially, the Stockaders.

"The House People of the walled towns represent as nearly as may be the middle classes of the ancient civilization. Originally, the family was the political and social unit, just as with the patriarchs of Holy Writ, but within the last generation the community idea has been growing rapidly, and there are perhaps a score of towns and villages scattered along the banks of the Greater and Lesser rivers.

"The Stockaders, reversing the procedure of their kinsmen of the towns, live apart from one another, each proprietor depending wholly upon his own resources for sustenance and defence. Some of the larger estates contain several hundred acres enclosed by a strong timber stockade and otherwise defended against the assaults of enemies. The head of the family, or clan, as it might more properly be termed, is lord paramount within his own borders, even possessing the rights of life and death. But this last authority is rarely called in exercise, since these folk of the free country-side are naturally wholesome, honest, generous-hearted men, content to lead a simple life and coveting no man's honor or goods. On the other hand, it must be admitted that the stockade dweller is both provincial of habit and prejudiced of mind. He looks down upon the

townsman as a huckster in private and a shuffler in public life, and this feeling of contemptuous enmity is fully returned by the cit, who regards the free proprietor in the light of a boor and a bully. Moreover, it rankles in the Houseman's breast that no Stockader pays a farthing of head-money to the treasure-chest of the Doomsmen. Now and then some well-to-do proprietor may suffer loss from cattle thieving and rick burning, but as often as not the marauders pay full price for all they get. And this leads us to a consideration of the Doomsman himself, that foul excrescence upon our modern body politic. Fortunately, history here speaks clearly, and we have only to listen to her voice.

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"It was a natural procedure, upon the coming of the Terror, to throw open the doors of the jails and other punitive institutions, thereby giving the wretched inmates an equal chance for life. The great mass of these degraded beings gravitated inevitably towards the cities, seeking plunder and opportunities for bestial dissipation that even the dread presence of the Terror could not restrain. Without hope and without fear, they rushed to the vulture's feast; here was wine and gold and soft raiment; let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.

"It was the ancient city of New York that received the vast bulk of this army of human rats; naturally so, since it was the supreme treasure-house of the western world. In such overwhelming numbers did these vermin come that the civil and military administrations were literally swarmed over. Between two days the outlaws were in complete possession, and the small remnant of the decent residents retired precipitately, preferring to meet death under the open sky rather than in company with their new masters.

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"The years went on, but the changes that they brought were few. The descendants of the ancient criminals remained in the ruined city, at first of necessity, afterwards by choice, finding there fuel and shelter in abundance besides large stores of non-perishable food supplies. When, in the next generation, these provisions became exhausted it was inevitable that the refugees should fix covetous eyes upon the threshing-floors and herd-stalls of their rural neighbors. But although the outlaws had continued to gain in numbers, their natural increase was not proportionate to the growing power of their adversaries. Little by little the Doomsmen began to lose ground; already they had been defeated several times in pitched battle, and it looked as though the hornet's-nest would soon be smoked out.

"It was at this critical juncture that the infamous personality of Dom Gillian made itself of commanding account, and thenceforth the balance began to incline the other way. It was but the weight of one man's hand in the scale-pan, yet there are still many of us who remember how heavy that hand could be.

"Infamous is the adjective deliberately applied, and with reason. Dominus Gillian, to give him his full name, was a renegade, the unworthy son of a distinguished Stockader family. Admittedly a man of fine intellect and force, it is equally unquestionable that he was entirely devoid of moral sense. He possessed a genius for organization, and he succeeded in consolidating the unruly Doomsmen into a compact and disciplined body of outlaws. Murder and rapine were quickly reduced to exact sciences, and, unfortunately, the House People could not be made to see the necessity of united action; the townsman and the stockade dweller preferred to contend with each other rather than against the common enemy. As a consequence, the freebooters had a clear road before them, and so was established that intolerable tyranny under which the land still groans. All this occurred upward of sixty years ago.

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"It only remains to add that Dominus, or, more colloquially, Dom Gillian, still lives, albeit he must be verging upon ninety years of age. For many years he has not been seen in the field, and it is even asserted that he no longer takes active part in the councils of the Doomsmen. Be that as it may, his will still remains dominant to animate and direct the malign powers created by his wicked genius. And the evil that men do, doth it not live after them?

"Such is the world, or, rather, one infinitesimal portion of the cosmos, in the year 2015, according to the ancient calendar, or 90 since the Terror."

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IV

THE MAN ON HORSEBACK

Gavan of the Greenwood Keep was a prosperous man according to the standard of these latter days, and his estate was reckoned to be the largest and finest holding in all the western countryside. A man might walk from break of day until darkness and yet not complete the periphery of its boundary-lines, but the palisaded portion included only the arable land and home paddocks and was of comparatively limited extent. Viewed from a bird's-eye elevation, this stockaded enclosure appeared to be laid out in the shape of a pear, the house being situated near the small end. The greatest length of the area thus enclosed was a mile and a half, and it was three-quarters of a mile wide at the big or southern side, tapering down to a couple of hundred yards at the northern entrance or barrier.

A quarter of a mile back from the north gate stood the keep, not one distinct building, but rather

several, built in the form of a hollow square and consolidated for mutual protection. The principal entrance, the one at the northern end, was called the water gate, for it should be explained that the keep stood on the bank of the Ochre brook and access was only possible by means of a drawbridge. Some day Sir Gavan intended to turn the course of the stream so as to carry it around the keep and thereby secure the protection of a continuous moat. But hitherto other duties had seemed more pressing, and the plan was still in abeyance.

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Entering through the covered way of the water gate, with guard-room and bailiff's office to the right and left, one found himself in the court-yard, some fifty yards in the square. On the right were the cow-barns, horse-stalls, granaries, tool-houses, and store-buildings, while the dwelling proper, known as the Great House, occupied the entire left of the square, the kitchens and other offices adjoining the retainers' quarters on the south. An enormous hall, running clear to the roof, took up the central portion of the house, staircases and galleries affording access to the store and sleeping-rooms on the second and attic stories. The roof proper was surmounted by a parapetted and loop-holed structure called the fighting platform, and it was thither that Constans had repaired upon receiving the startling intelligence of his sister's disappearance. Let us rejoin him there.

In the leisurely moving figure glimpsed through the birches, Constans had instantly recognized Issa. Plainly she had been out flower-hunting; with the aid of his binoculars he could determine that she carried a bunch of the delicate pink-and-white blossoms that we call May-bloom. She was directing her steps straight for the house, but either she was unaccountably deaf to the continuous clanging of the alarm-bell or, still more strangely, unaware of its significance; she walked as though in a reverie, slowly and with her head bent forward. Thunder of God! it was a trap, and the foolish girl would not see. Unquestionably, the Doomsmen had forced the stockade at some distant point and were even now in ambush about the keep. But Constans, for all his keenness of vision and the assistance of his glass, could discover nothing to indicate the presence of any considerable body of men. There was no one in actual sight save he who sat upon his blood-bay steed, girth deep in the Ochre brook under shadow of the alders. Only one, but that one!

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Constans found himself in the court-yard; how he scarcely knew. The water gate still stood open with the drawbridge lowered, but both could be easily secured within a few seconds should the enemy venture upon any open demonstration. Sir Gavan stood in the covered way talking anxiously with his eldest son Tennant, who had just returned from an unsuccessful search of the upper orchard.

Constans, in his confusion of mind, did not notice his father and brother; he ran across the court-yard to the horse-boxes. His black mare Night whickered upon recognizing her master, and tried to rub her muzzle against his cheek as he fumbled with the throat-latch of the bridle. An instant longer, to lead out the mare and vault upon her back, and he was clattering through the court-yard and covered way.

Upon reaching the open Constans saw that the situation had developed into a crisis. The cavalier of the ostrich-feather had forced his horse up the steep bank of the Ochre brook and was riding slowly towards the girl, who stood motionless, realizing her perilous position, but unable for the moment to cope with it. She half turned, as though to seek again the shelter of the birchen copse; then, clutching at her impeding skirts, she ran in the direction of the keep. He of the ostrich-plume spurred to the gallop; inevitably their paths must intersect a few yards farther on.

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From behind came the noise of men shouting and the thud of quarrels impinging upon stout oak; the Doomsmen, hitherto in hiding, were making a diversion, in answer, doubtless, to a signal from their leader. A hundred gray-garbed men showed themselves in the open, coming from the shelter of the fir plantation back of the rickyards; they ran towards the open water gate, exposing themselves recklessly in their eagerness to reach it.

But the defenders were not to be surprised so easily, and Constans, glancing backward, saw that the drawbridge was already in the air and the gate closed. The outlaws, realizing that the surprise was a failure, and unwilling to brave the arrows sent whistling about their ears from the fighting platforms of the keep, fell back in some disorder. At the same moment a solitary figure appeared, emerging as though by magic from the solid wall of the keep—Sir Gavan himself, a father forgetful of all else but the peril of his children. He must have used the "Rat's-Hole" for egress; he hurried down the green slope, calling his daughter by name. All this Constans saw in that swift backward glance. Well, there was but one thing that he could do.

And Night knew it, too; brave little Night, how cleverly you forced yourself under the towering bulk of that brute of a blood-bay! A thunder of hoofs and they were in touch; Constans felt himself hurled into space; the bridle-reins of tough plaited leather were torn from his hands; Night and he were down.

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The dust cloud cleared and the boy struggled up, although his head was still spinning from the shock of the encounter. Ten yards away lay the black mare with a broken foreleg. She was trying to rise, her eyes glazed with pain and her flanks heaving horribly.

The blood-bay had kept his feet and his master his saddle—a hardy pair, these two. But the desperate expedient had proved successful in that Issa was safe. Already Sir Gavan had her in his arms, and before the horseman had fully found himself the fugitives were under the shadow of the keep's walls.

The question of his own danger did not immediately concern Constans; he had no eyes for anything but Night lying there in her agony. His father had given him the horse when she was a foal of a week old, and Constans had broken and trained her himself. Well, she had served him faithfully, and in return he would show her the last mercy. His knife-sheath hung from his girdle; he drew out the blade and drove it home just behind the glossy black shoulder. Night shuddered and lay still. The knife had sunken deep, and Constans had to exert all his strength to withdraw it. The bare point of a rapier touched him meaningly on the arm; he stood up and faced his enemy.

The man on horseback laughed softly. "Oho, my young cockerel, it was but a touch of the gaff, and now that you are ready is reason sufficient why I should prefer to wait. But that neither of us may forget—" He bent down and caught Constans by the shoulders, turning him around and forcing him backward until his head rested against the blood-bay's withers. Two slashes of his hunting-knife and a tiny, triangular nick appeared on the upper part of the lad's right ear.

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"That is my sign-manual of which I spoke to you an hour or more ago. It is Quinton Edge's mark, as all men know, and it brands whatever bears it as Quinton Edge's property. Some day I may deem it worth while to claim my own; until then you can be my caretaker, my tenant. What! no answer? And yet it is a generous offer, I think, considering how sore my arm has grown and how impertinently you behaved just now in interfering between me and a lady. Light of God! but she is a bewitching bundle of femineity. But twice, boy, have I seen her; hardly a dozen words have passed—"

He stopped abruptly and gazed hard at Constans. Then slowly:

"Your sister, I take it; there is the same straight line of eyebrow. No answer again? Well, we will pass it over for the nonce; you have still many things to learn, and, chiefly, to becomingly order body and soul in the presence of your lord. After all, it pleases me better to have the last word from the lady's own lips; she had been most discourteously treated, and I would fain be shriven. Until we meet again, then."

The cavalier put spur to the blood-bay's flank and rode straight for the Great House. The boy stood staring after him; he did not notice the trickle of blood from the cut in his ear; he was not even conscious that he was still in life. He remembered only the unforgivable affront which this man had put upon him, the mark which was the infamous badge of the bondman, the slave. Quinton Edge! Ah, yes; he would remember that face and name.

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The Doomsman had ridden in cool defiance up to the very walls of the keep. It would have been an easy matter for one of the garrison to have bored his gay jacket through with a feathered shaft, and for a moment Constans trembled, fearing lest some overzealous partisan should thus rob him of his future vengeance. But the very audacity of the man proved the saving of his skin. They were brave men who manned the fighting platforms of the Greenwood Keep, and they could not bring themselves to set upon naked courage.

Constans fancied that the man spoke to some one who stood hidden in the deep embrasure of a window, but it was too far to either see or hear. Then it seemed that a small object fell lightly from the window-sill. The Doomsman caught it dexterously and fastened it on his breast. Another low bow and, wheeling his horse, he dashed down the slope. Constans ran blindly to meet him; why, he did not know. He who named himself Quinton Edge swerved slightly in his course so as to pass within arm's-length, calling out as he did so:

"Gage of battle and gage of love; a fortunate day for me. Believe me that at some future time I shall answer for them both."

It was a sprig of the May-bloom that the cavalier wore in his button-hole; Constans had only time to recognize it when the blood-bay broke into full gallop. The lad flung himself at full length upon the turf, face downward, and lay there motionless.

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V

THE RAT'S-HOLE

It was a warm, cloudy night some two weeks later, and Constans sat in the great hall of the keep, listlessly regarding the preparations that were being made for the evening meal. Six or seven of the house-servants were bustling to and fro from the buttery laden with flagons and dishes, which they deposited with a vast amount of noise and confusion upon the tables. These latter were of the most primitive construction, nothing more than puncheons smoothed down with the adze and supported by wooden trestles.

The main table ran nearly the full length of the hall, and was intended to accommodate the men-at-arms and the superior servants, together with such strangers of low degree as might chance to be present. The furniture was of the rudest pattern—platters of bass and white wood, which were daily scoured with sand to keep them clean and sweet, earthenware pitchers of a bricklike hue, drinking-cups of pewter and leather, and clumsy iron forks. There was no provision of cutlery;

evidently the guests were expected to use their hunting-knives and daggers for the dismemberment of the viands.

At the upper or dais end of the hall there was a second table, placed at right angles to the long one and elevated above it by the height of the superior flooring upon which it stood. This principal board was, of course, for the exclusive use of the family and distinguished guests, and from the circumstance of its being raised above the main level the master could command an unobstructed view of the entire household in the event of any overt disorder or indecorum.

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The viands were quite in keeping with the simplicity of the table-gear. Huge chines of beef and mutton, with spare-rib and fowl in apparently unlimited quantity, formed the staple of the repast, and were reinforced by vast bowls of the commoner garden vegetables and by bread made of unbolted flour. Sweetmeats were scarce, for the products of the sugarcane are difficult to procure in these northern latitudes. Maple sugar and honey serve as the ordinary substitutes, and even these are regarded as luxuries, since maple-trees are few in number and bee-keeping is but little practised. Finally, there were the drinkables, these including hard cider and a thin, acid wine made from the wild grape.

Annoyed by the clatter of the dishes and the half-whispered conversation of the domestics, Constans rose and walked to the dais end of the hall, where his mother and sister were seated, engaged in the agreeable occupation of inspecting the contents of a peddler's pack. It was an imposing array to the eye, and the chapman, kneeling on the floor close by Issa's stool, kept handing up one article after another for closer examination. The stuff seemed worthless enough to Constans—trumpery pieces of quartz crystal set in copper and debased silver, rings and bangles of a hue unmistakably brassy, hair ribbons, parti-colored dress goods, pins, needles, and a miscellaneous assortment of useless trinkets. Constans was genuinely astonished that Issa, who had been hitherto something of a good-fellow, should seem interested in such rubbish; but then women were all alike when it was a question of pretty things to buy. He looked sharply at the peddler, but the latter appeared commonplace enough, a man of forty or thereabouts, and dressed in the looped-up gray gaberdine peculiar to the guild of itinerant chapmen. Possibly he was bald, for he wore a close-fitting skull-cap; his beard, however, was luxuriant and effectually hid the contour of the lower half of his face. Constans stood by frowning lightly, but he had no reasonable pretext for interfering with his sister's amusement, and in the feminine catalogue of diversions the peddler's infrequent visit held a prominent place.

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The major-domo, wearing a silver chain about his neck by virtue of his office, advanced to his mistress's chair and announced that the meal was ready for serving. The Lady Rayne nodded, a brazen gong sounded, the big folding-doors at the south end were thrown open, and the hall was quickly filled with the customary throng of retainers and hangers-on. But all remained standing in silence until the master and mistress had taken their places. Sir Gavan entered from his workshop, and, offering his hand to his wife, led her ceremoniously to her seat, Issa and Constans following.

To Constans's indignant amazement the peddler stepped forward, as though to take the vacant seat alongside of Issa. But before Constans could move or speak the chapman appeared to recognize the impropriety of which he had been so nearly guilty; with a profound genuflection, he withdrew from the dais and found a place at the lower table. The incident had been so momentary that it had passed entirely unnoticed by his father and the Lady Rayne; Constans could not even be sure that Issa had understood, and certainly she gave no sign of discomposure.

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"What presumption!" muttered Constans, under his breath. "These fellows are becoming more insufferable every day, and my father sees nothing." Constans resolved that the man should be packed off immediately upon the conclusion of the meal. He could easily persuade Sir Gavan that the fellow had none too honest a look, while his wares were assuredly the cheapest trash. He must be got rid of before the women had been beguiled into spending all their pin-money.

The repast dragged out to its end, and the women withdrew to the upper end of the hall, comparative privacy being secured by large leather screens set up along the edge of the dais. The men remained at the table for deeper potations and the smoking of rank black kinnectikut tobacco in huge wooden pipes.

A heavy thunderstorm, the first of the season, had come up, and Constans recognized, to his vexation, that he would have no decent excuse for turning the peddler out-of-doors. So he kept his seat at the table in sulky silence, watching the man closely, and ready to note anything of further suspicion in his actions and bearing. But he had his trouble for his pains, for the fellow was the itinerant chapman to the life, even to the stock of gross stories with which he kept his bucolic audience in an uninterrupted guffaw. Pah! would Sir Gavan never finish his second pipe and give the signal to rise?

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The storm had turned into a heavy downpour, and the peddler was consequently sure of his night's lodging. He had been summoned again to the presence of the ladies, and, as before, Constans stood aloof and wondered irritably how his fastidious sister could find aught in common with this wayside huckster. She was talking to him now with an animation rare with her, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glowing.

"And you have been in Doom—in the city itself?" she asked, incredulously.

"Yes, gracious lady; and not once, but a score of times. The brocades that I promised to show you after supper will be my witness. And there are some superlative satin and silk lengths which my

Lady Rayne wished particularly to see. Will you allow me, then?"

The peddler, opening an inner compartment of his pack, drew out several pieces of stuff wrapped up in brown linen. Removing the covering, he spread the goods upon the rug before the ladies, holding up each separate piece to the light and expatiating upon its merits in the approved fashion of the shopman. The two women gave a little gasp of astonishment; never had they seen such wondrous beauty of color and finish; their little market-town of Croye held nothing to compare to this.

"I must send for Meta to advise me," said the Lady Rayne, glancing fondly from one rich fabric to another. "She ought to know good silk when she sees it, after living so long in Croye; and you, Issa, seem strangely indifferent to-night. You hardly looked at this piece of brocade."

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Meta, the Lady Rayne's bedwoman, speedily appeared, and mistress and maid fell into earnest converse. Issa, as in duty bound, listened; then her attention seemed to flag again. She bent over the open pack and picked up a chain of filigree work. It was beautifully fashioned and looked like gold.

"It is gold," said the chapman, answering the question in her eyes. "The pure gold of the ancients; you never see that pale yellow nowadays. Ah, yes, a pretty trinket to have brought from the heart of Doom for the delight of a fair woman's eyes, and well worth its price of a man's life. But, then, fortune was kind, and I did not have to pay."

"Tell me about it," said the girl, beseechingly, and her breath came short and hot.

Whereupon the chapman drew a little nearer and began a wondrous tale of a secret visit that he had lately made to Doom, the Forbidden; of how he had crossed the river on a raft, the moon being in its dark quarter; of his landing upon a shaking wharf, where each foot-fall left a print of phosphorescent fire on the rotting planks; then of the marvels that he had seen there—vast warehouses covering whole acres of ground and filled with incalculable store of goods; lofty buildings, whose chimney-pots were in the clouds; palaces of sculptured stone, now empty and despoiled, the habitation of foxes and unclean nocturnal creatures.

Then again of hidden treasure, heaps and heaps of yellow gold; of the fierce Doomsmen who guarded it so well; of pitfalls and gins and siren voices that lured the soul astray; of ghastly shapes that crept along the crumbling walls; of mystery in every sound and shadow; of treacheries and alarms and the ever present terror of death—a tale of amazing wonder, at which the blood ran alternately warm and cold and the heart fluttered with a certain fearful joy.

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How the maid hung upon the word, her little breasts heaving and her lips parted! "You have seen all these things?" she panted. "How wonderful! And you were not afraid? That was like a man—to be brave——" She blushed deeply, stammered, and turned to the neglected brocades. Constans, standing close at hand, was moved to new anger. The impertinent, how dared he! Yet he had listened himself, and in spite of himself, for assuredly the fellow talked well.

The evening was now well advanced and the customary hour of retirement was at hand. It was still raining, but Guyder Touchett, who came in dripping from his nightly task of posting the watch, remarked that the wind was changing and that it was likely to clear when the moon rose. Of course the peddler would now spend the night at the keep, and at his own request he was allowed to remain in the hall, a straw pallet being brought in for his accommodation.

"The Rat's-Hole!"

Constans repeated the words half aloud, holding the paper close to the guttering candle. It was but a tiny scrap, scarce large enough for the writing that it held. But paper of any kind is rare in these days, and so the gleam of white had caught his eye as he went up-stairs to his sleeping apartment. The handwriting was unfamiliar, and besides it was in back-hand, and it may be disguised as well; he was hardly an expert in such fine distinctions. But it was plainly a message, and its possible import startled him. For the Rat's-Hole was the secret exit that existed behind the jamb of the fireplace at the upper end of the hall. So cunningly had the panelled door been joinered into the wainscoting that a man might search for hours and yet not discover the spring that threw it open. Furthermore, the wainscoting was but a screen for the real door of iron-bound oak giving passage directly through the outer wall of the keep to the open country. A jealously guarded secret, this matter of the Rat's-Hole, and supposed to be known only to the master of the household and his immediate family. Even among them its existence was never referred to in ordinary conversation, while its actual use was restricted to the gravest of emergencies.

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"The Rat's-Hole!" A message, an agreement, an appointment? By whose hand had these words been written? For whose eye had they been intended?

It would have been the wiser course to have communicated at once with Sir Gavan, but the latter, feeling somewhat indisposed, had retired early, and Constans hesitated to disturb him. Moreover, the boy stood in awe of his father, and of late a feeling of estrangement had been growing up between them. To Sir Gavan, Constans, with his dreamy, inactive nature, was a keen disappointment—so different from his brother Tennant. And Constans felt that his father did not understand him nor, indeed, cared to do so. Latterly, they had gone their own ways, and now at this perplexing juncture Constans could not bring himself to take his father into his confidence.

When, a few moments later, the lights had been formally extinguished for the night, Constans made his way back to the hall; he had to pass close by the pallet occupied by the peddler, and he paused an instant to listen to his deep and measured breathing. Surely the man slept.

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Even in the dark Constans knew how to put his hand on the spring in the wainscoting, and it yielded to his touch. It was discomposing to find the key of the real door standing, ready for turning, in the lock. In theory, the key was never out of the master's immediate possession. An oversight, then? Constans's mind reverted to the one occasion in his remembrance on which the Rat's-Hole had been used, that day a fortnight back, when his sister Issa came out of the birch-copse, with her hands full of May-bloom and Quinton Edge had waited under cover of the alders. It was possible; his father might have forgotten. And yet—

Constans took the key and slipped it into the bosom of his doublet. Then closing the secret door in the wainscoting, he drew one of the big leather screens into convenient position and crouched down behind it. The dying fire gave out a flickering and uncertain light; he watched the grotesque procession of the shadows on the opposite wall until his eyes grew heavy. The odor of a smouldering bough of balsam-fir hung in the air—warm, spicy, soporific. He slept.

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VI

TROY TOWN

Constans awoke just as the footsteps died away; he listened, but again the stillness was profound. He felt his way to the secret door; the wainscot screen stood ajar. It was plain that some one had come to the Rat's-Hole only to discover that the key of the outside door was missing. Constans realized that he, too, had missed something—his chance to get to the bottom of the mystery. Shame on such a sentinel!

Without any definite plan of action, Constans made his way to the lower hall. The moonbeams were pouring a flood of light through the east windows and he could see plainly. The peddler's couch was empty, save for his gabardine of gray and the false hair that had served him for a beard. There were two figures dimly visible in the obscurity of the vaulted entrance to the water gate. They were working at the clumsy fastenings of the doors. As Constans ran up he recognized his sister Issa and the man who called himself Quinton Edge.

Without a word Constans seized the girl by the arm and swung her behind him. He struck at the Doomsman with his hunting-knife, but the latter caught his wrist with the grip of a wolf-trap. Yet even at that moment of stress Quinton Edge's voice preserved its soft, mincing inflections; the man wore his irritating affectations of speech as jauntily as he did the ostrich plumes in his cap.

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"A brave ruffling of feathers—but gently, gently boy, you are frightening the lady. She goes with me of her full consent. Is it not so, sweetheart?"

"You lie!" said the boy, thickly.

The man laughed. "I tell you," he went on, "that the girl is mine by her own choice, and you have only to stand aside quietly to save the house and your own skin. But softly now; you are tearing the lace of my sleeve. A plague on your clumsy fingers!"

With a wrench Constans twisted himself free and turned to face his sister. "Issa!" he implored.

But she, with eyes like rain-washed stars, only looked beyond him to where Quinton Edge stood, softly smiling and holding out his womanish white hands. She would have rejoined him, but once again Constans forced her back. The dangling rope of the alarm-bell grazed his hand; he clutched at it, and a clang re-echoed through the court-yard, rousing the recreant warders from their slumbers. In that same instant Quinton Edge blew his whistle.

The Doomsmen must have already crossed the moat and been close up to the water gate, for the response to their leader's call was immediate. Quinton Edge had just time to remove the last of the bars securing the barrier when the night-watch streamed out tumultuously from their quarters under the arch, and he was obliged to retreat into the court-yard. But already the outlaws had forced apart the wooden leaves of the water gate; now they filled the vaulted passageway, and by sheer impact of superior weight began to drive back the bewildered and disorganized defenders. Friend and foe together, the mass surged into the quadrangle, a blind, indefinite cluster of struggling men, like to a swarm of hiving bees.

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The storm had blown over, but the moon was every now and then obscured by masses of scurrying cloud-wrack, and in these periods of semi-darkness Doomsman and Stockader were hardly to be told apart. So closely packed was the scrimmage that the use of any missile weapon was impossible. The dagger and the night-stick (the latter a stout truncheon weighted with lead) were doing the work, and effectively, too. And in that press a man might be struck and die upon his feet, the corpse being stayed from falling through its juxtaposition to the bodies of the living.

The men of the keep, now that they had recovered from their first discomfiture, rallied manfully.

So stubborn and bitter raged the struggle that there was not a sound to be heard outside the noise of scuffling feet and the thud of blows. A man when hard beset for his life has no breath to spare for either oath of despair or shout of triumph. But not for long were the scales to swing so evenly; presently the ranks of the Stockaders yielded again to the pressure and broke into separate groups. Then were to be heard the groans of the wounded and dying; then for the first time the yell of the Doomsmen broke forth, ear-piercing in its exultancy.

Constans had managed to reach the shelter of the Great House, half dragging, half carrying the fainting form of his sister. Already Sir Gavan, with Tennant and the house-servants, were under arms and making what preparations they could for the final stand. A hopeless task it seemed, for the outlaws were now in full possession of the rest of the keep. The retainers occupying the general quarters in the south barracks had fallen easy victims. Surprised, out-numbered, and poorly armed, they had been quickly cut down as they reached the court-yard, and active resistance to the invaders was at an end.

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Now the attack was turned directly upon the entrance to the Great House, and Sir Gavan, with his handful of followers, waited on the threshold for the inevitable issue. Already the ponderous door of iron-banded oak was groaning and splintering under the hail of blows. And in the forefront, with a laugh upon his lips, hewed Quinton Edge.

The barrier was down at last and the wolves were free to fall upon their quarry. A score of men, all told, against a hundred; the outcome was hardly doubtful. Yet it was not Gavan of the Greenwood Keep who held up his hand in sign of parley, but the Doomsman, Quinton Edge.

"The maiden Issa," he said, speaking with a smooth insolence that made Constans set his teeth. "Give her safely to my hand and your goods and your lives shall go free of further damage. A cheap bargain; but speak quickly, old man, these hounds of mine are not to be held in leash for long."

The partisans on either side had fallen back, leaving the two leaders face to face. Sir Gavan plucked twice at his throat, where the veins stood out like cords, constricting the vocal passages so that he stuttered thickly as he spoke.

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"This—this gallows-scape!" he stammered. "This burner of peasants' hayricks, this pitiful plunderer of hen-roosts and cattle byres! If it were a man, now—to nail the insult to his lips——"

"We lose time," interrupted the Doomsman. "I have named my price."

"The price—ah, yes, the price. Tennant, Constans, you heard what he said. But where is my child? Let the girl stand forth; she is her father's daughter, and she shall answer for herself."

"I will abide by it," said Quinton Edge, with cool confidence.

The half-circle opened and Issa stood before them; a mere child she looked in her simple slip of white and with her fair hair all unbound. A vague terror seized upon Sir Gavan. What was this question that he was about to ask of his daughter? Could there be other than the one answer? How quietly she stood there and waited. Yes, and they were all waiting upon him; he must speak.

"Issa!"

It seemed to him that he had shouted aloud; then he realized that he had not spoken at all. "Issa!" he said, again, and she turned towards him.

"This man; he is not known to you. How could it be?"

"Yet it is the truth, my father," answered the girl, steadily. "It is just a month ago that chance set us face to face—one day when I rode alone in the green drive."

"And thereafter?"

"Once he came to the walled garden, adventuring the thousand chances of discovery. Yet how he managed to cross the stockade-line I know not, for I was frightened, and begged him to leave me. And this he did most courteously, only swearing that he would again return."

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"The third time?"

"That was the day—the day of the first May-bloom—the Ochre brook and the Doomsmen——" The girl's voice faltered.

"Yet never a word to me or to your mother?"

"It was not my secret," she answered, bravely; and upon that Quinton Edge himself took up the word.

"The blame is mine, since I used the peril in which I stood to set a seal upon her lips. A true and loyal maid is your daughter, and it was only after she had twice said me nay that I resolved to take without the asking. So I came that day which we both remember, and waited under the alder bushes, and once again I missed my cast. Yet was the quest not altogether fruitless, for I carried away this token from my lady's hostile garden."

He drew a faded spray of the May-bloom from his doublet and touched it lightly to his lips.

"What gentleman could refuse to redeem so dear a pledge? You have seen how I took head in

hand and sat me down under your own roof-tree, my good Gavan of the keep. Faith, it was an even chance on which side the platter would fall, but this time the luck was mine. We should have been leagues away in the sun's eye by now, only that a peevish boy would have his way."

"And this—this is also true?" said Sir Gavan, and it seemed that the preceding silence had been very long.

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"It is true." She had answered quietly, almost mechanically, but the heart of the Lady Rayne thrilled to the new note in her child's voice.

"Issa!" she cried, softly, and fell to weeping, not as a mother for her daughter but as one woman who sorrows for another.

"Issa!" she said, again, but neither then nor thereafter did the girl vouchsafe her mother look or word, all her soul seeming to hang upon the will of the man who had brought this woe upon her house. There was no need for word to pass; reading the command in her lover's eyes, she slipped from her mother's detaining clasp and placed her hand in his. Now, Issa was exceeding fair to look upon, and Quinton Edge's blood stirred hotly within him. And so for once he lost his head and did a foolish thing (only that no woman would agree that it was foolish), for there, in the presence of all, he quickly drew her face to his and kissed her on the lips. Then turning to his men, he made as though to send them from the house.

But it was not to be. A keen-pointed, heavy throwing-knife hung at Sir Gavan's side. Without a word he snatched it from the sheath, poised and flung it with all his force at his enemy's heart, a master throw and executed like a flash of light. Issa felt rather than saw the coming of the missile, and with an instinctive movement contrived to interpose her own delicate body. The steel bit deep into the white flesh, and with a little, shuddering cry the girl sank to the floor; out leaped Quinton Edge's sword. Constans, supporting his mother, felt her hand grow cold in his. He laid her gently down upon a convenient settle and thanked God that she, too, was safe.

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It seemed to Constans that he was wandering in a bristling thicket of steel points; thunderous crashes re-echoed in his ears; the red light from the burning building eddied about his feet, a sea of blood and flame. His father and Tennant were down, never to rise again; a few paces in front of him Guyder Touchett headed a little knot of the defenders, swearing furiously as he hewed and hacked. A half-dozen against ten times their number; the issue could not be doubtful. Even as he gazed, two of the six sunk to their knees and then fell face downward, a dreadful sign that even a child might understand.

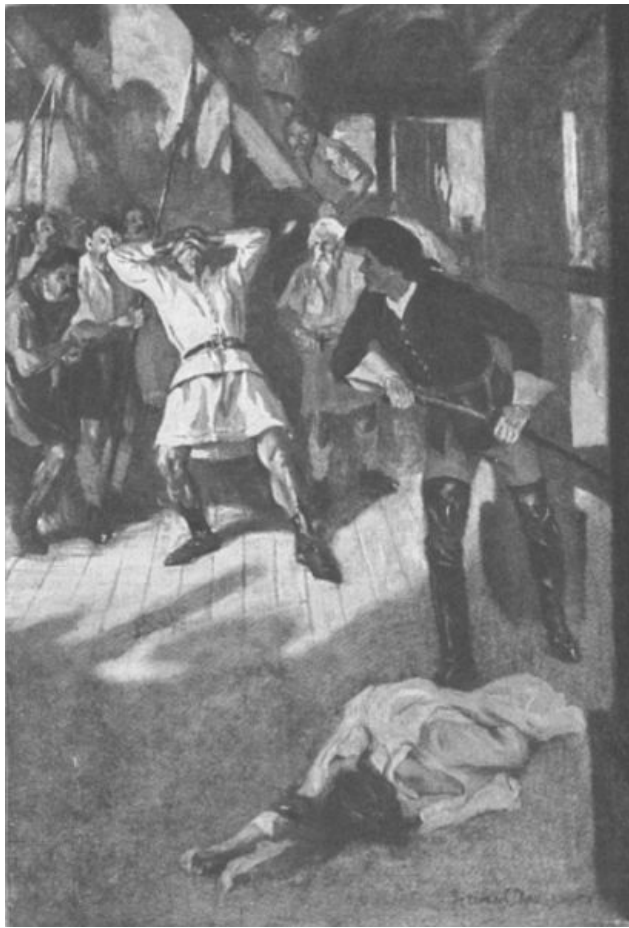
Now, Guyder Touchett stood alone, and about him a snarling pack of Dom Gillian's wolves, waiting cautiously upon one another, for the Stockader had a long sword-arm. Thereupon a man broke out of the press, signing the prudent ones to fall back. It was Quinton Edge, and, as ever, he was laughing, only that now his laughter sounded like to a bell that has cracked in the ringing. The swords clashed together; then the Doomsman dropped his point.

"You are too good a man for crows' meat," he said, shortly. "Stand clear and save your ears; my business is with the white-faced boy behind you."

But Guyder Touchett, ruddy, full-bodied, and loving his life as well as any man, only girded at him, saying:

"Is there, then, a deeper hell than this? I follow where my master has gone, and you, my lord, shall show me the way."

"The more fool you," quoth Quinton Edge, and drove at him.



"OUT LEAPED QUINTON EDGE'S SWORD"

Again the blades engaged, and a great fear suddenly tightened at the boy's heart. His champion had been exhausted by his previous efforts, and now his strength was going fast. Constans saw Touchett stagger and Quinton Edge preparing for a final stroke; he turned and ran for the upper end of the hall—the Rat's-Hole.

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The key was still in his bosom, and in a few seconds he had passed the postern, closing and locking it behind him. Five minutes' hard running and he was free of the stockade and at the summit of a hill that commanded the scene which he had just left. The conflagration was progressing with astonishing rapidity; already the Great House itself was in flames, and dark figures could be seen issuing from the water gate. There! the red cock was crowing from the top of the bell-tower, and now the whole court-yard was a furnace of fire. A spark carried by the wind fell on his naked shoulder, where it bit like a fiery serpent. Yet he scarcely felt the smart; he stood motionless, looking upon the wreck of his little world, the only one that he had ever known.

"So in the end he made me a coward as well," said the boy, speaking softly to himself. "Is it that a slave must be a slave—always?"

He drew a long breath. "No, not always. But in the mean time I am to go on living and bearing everywhere his mark—Quinton Edge's mark. Well, I will begin by learning how to wait."

He stood irresolute for a moment longer, gazing at the scene of the night's tragedy as though to impress it indelibly upon his memory. Then turning his back to the east, where the faint saffron of early dawn was now showing, he started off on a long, swinging trot that speedily carried him down the slope and into the deeper shadow of the wood beyond.

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VII

THE BREAD OF AFFLICTION

Two miles from the keep was a cave that Constans had discovered on one of his hunting-trips, and which, boylike, he had proceeded to fit up with some rude furniture for lodging and cooking, little dreaming that he should ever stand in actual need of these necessities.

Thither he betook himself, impelled primarily by the mere instinct for refuge and shelter. Fortunately, the larder had been replenished within the past week, there was an abundance of dry fuel stacked up in the interior of the cavern, and the woods were full of game. But during those first two or three days it is doubtful if Constans would have remarked either the presence or the absence of these creature comforts; he ate when he was hungry and went to sleep when it grew dark. The rest of the time he sat motionless, thinking, thinking—living for the most part in

that past that now seemed so infinitely far away.

Of course, the cavern had been the storehouse of his treasures. Here he kept a spare hunting-bow and a full stock of arrows, together with his fishing lines and nets and a miscellaneous assortment of traps and tools. Here, too, was the secret depository of his cherished spying-glasses and of another equally marvellous but unfortunately valueless piece of mechanism—a revolver of large caliber. This latter had belonged to his grandfather (for whom he had been named), and upon his death Constans had claimed and taken possession of it. The weapon was in perfect order, for its former owner had been careful to keep it well cleaned and oiled; an absurd whim, of course, since without its ammunition it was useless. The boy used to puzzle mightily over it, setting the hammer and watching the cylinder as it revolved, then pulling the trigger and listening to its fascinating click. But he never got any nearer to the secret.

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Even more precious than the pistol and binoculars were his books, an oddly assorted library that included the child's pictorial history already mentioned, Dryden's translation of the *Iliad*, an imperfect copy of *The Three Musketeers*, and *The Descent of Man*. These, indeed, made up the full list of books belonging to the keep, and Constans had been permitted to appropriate them, nobody else caring to waste time over their stained and worm-eaten pages.

With Constans, however, it had been different. In company with the other children he had been set at the task of learning his letters, and at first he, too, had rebelled at the uncongenial labor. What possible use could these ugly, crooked characters ever be to him? And then, suddenly, he found in them a magic key unlocking a door that opened upon an undiscovered country—that of the mighty past.

Naturally he experienced some difficulty in viewing this new old world in anything like its proper proportions, and it was the literal baldness of the child's school-book that first gave him anything like a true perspective. Here was both the written story and the visible picture of the world as it once was, as it might be again. Studying these records and achievements of the ancient civilization, Constans found himself possessed of the knowledge of many things and consumed by the desire to lay hold of many more.

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But all this lay in the past—ages ago, when as yet no Doomsman had landed at the Golden Cove, and the pine-tree banner still flew from the fighting platform of the Greenwood Keep. Now nothing mattered to the boy sitting dull-eyed and inert in the darkest corner of his miserable refuge, while outside it was raining in torrents. But on the third day it cleared, and the rays of the morning sun, striking level with the mouth of the cave, fell full upon the lad's face, rousing him in a double sense. He sprang to his feet and drew in a deep breath of the morning air. How blue the sky! How golden the sun! As he sat eating his frugal breakfast of oat-cake and honey he rapidly reviewed his present condition and future prospects, coming at last to the decision that he would go to Croye and see what his uncle Hugolin might be inclined to do for him.

It was inspiring, the mere fact that he had determined upon a course of action, and Constans immediately began his preparations for departure. It did not take long to put together his worldly wealth—the four books, the binoculars, the pistol, and the chief of his other possessions; now he had everything compactly stowed away in a shoulder pack and was ready for the journey.

The town of Croye was situated on the Greater river (formerly the Hudson) and some ten miles north of the ancient city of New York. It boasted a population of quite fifteen hundred souls, and this, with its importance as a trading centre, made it a notable municipality for these latter days. Its appearance, however, does not call for any extended description; assuredly, it was not imposing. A heterogeneous jumble of low, half-timbered houses and mud-plastered hovels; dirty, unpaved streets, a mean-looking market-place, where the shrill clamor of huckstering never seemed to cease; some pretentious-looking public buildings, with stuccoed fronts; outside of all, the inevitable earth rampart, topped by a palisade and pierced by sally-ports at the cardinal points—such was Croye, the principal city of this western hemisphere in the year 2015, or ninety since the Great Change.

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Constans frowned as he gazed upon this unlovely picture. Yet he determined that he would find something of good in it, and as though answering his thought, the sun reappeared at that very moment from behind a passing cloud, its rays lighting up the red tiling used as roofing in the houses of the better class—the one note of cheerful color among these dingy browns and grays. It was an omen, and he accepted it as such.

It was to one of these red-topped mansions that Constans finally found his way, after experiencing several rebuffs from churlish citizens of whom he had ventured to inquire for the whereabouts of his uncle. Now, as he laid his hand upon the knocker, he was conscious that the feeling of despondency had again fallen upon him; he recalled the old story of Messer Hugolin's bitter opposition to the marriage of his sister Rayne and Gavan of the keep, of how he had refused to attend the wedding and had sent no gift. Since then there had been no real intimacy between the families, although the breach had been outwardly healed and formal civilities infrequently passed. A poor prospect, it would seem, for the success of Constans's appeal. But blood is blood, and there was literally no one else to whom he could turn in this his extremity. He let the knocker fall.

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Messer Hugolin, a stout man, with crafty lines creased in his broad face, received his nephew with nominal cordiality and listened attentively to his story. But he was not over-prompt with either advice or offer of assistance, and Constans, with a sore heart, finally rose to go.

"Don't be in a hurry," said his uncle, coolly. "Let me think this over again. After all, we are of the same stock, although your father always flouted me for a mean-spirited churl. Poor Gavan, we may forgive him now."

After another period of cogitation and incidental homilies upon the sinfulness of pride and free living, Messer Hugolin came to the point; he offered to take Constans into his employ as an apprentice in the tannery. Of course, Constans would have no wages until his indenture was out, but he would, at least, be assured of lodging, food, and clothes, the bare necessities of existence. Not an especially attractive proposition, but Constans, after a short consideration, concluded to accept it. He had a purpose in remaining here in Croye, almost within sight of Doom the Forbidden; he had not forgotten that therein dwelt one Quinton Edge.

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And now a new life began for the boy, and a hard one. Lodged in a corner of the garret, clad in the meanest garments, fed on the coarsest fare, his lot was little better than that of the actual serf, and in some respects inferior to it, for it was good policy to treat the slave with some decency and so secure a full life's work from the human machine. Constans, on the other hand, was bound for four years only, and it was policy to drive him at full speed.

Messer Hugolin's business was of a general nature. He bought and sold everything in the way of raw product and finished goods, but cloth and leather formed the staple of his trade. The latter he manufactured himself, and his tannery was the largest in Croye. It occupied extensive yards along the river-front, and Constans entered upon the agreeable occupation of unloading stinking hides from the barges which came down from the upper river twice in the week, a routine varied only by long hours of pounding at interminable lengths of white-oak bark, preparing it for use in the tan-pits. Hard, dirty, malodorous work it was, but he kept at it steadily, his purpose always in view.

Little by little his plans had been taking shape, and now at last he had arrived at something definite. A secret, of course, and fortunately opportunity had been given him in which to develop his idea. To explain more particularly:

On ordinary days the working-hours were from dawn to dark, but Sunday was his own, save for the hour immediately following sunrise and that preceding sunset, when everybody was required to attend upon public worship.

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Every Sunday, then, Constans made his way through the town barriers immediately upon their unclosing, and betook himself to a wooded river-cove about a mile south of the town. For three months he had been working on a canoe, shaping it with fire and adze from a poplar log, and now, after infinite difficulty, the task approached completion. Could he have had a confidant, a helper, the work might have been done in a third of the time, for Constans was not much of a mechanic. But there was no one among his fellow-workmen whom he dared trust, and so he toiled on alone.

The canoe had been launched, and, to Constans's delight, she was but slightly lopsided. A few stones brought her to trim, and she paddled beautifully.

He had fixed upon the third Sunday in August for the great trial, for the Monday following was a civic holiday, the anniversary of the founding of the city. The double event would give him abundant time in which to make a reconnoissance of his enemy's position and then return to Croye to resume his position in Messer Hugolin's tanyard. For his foothold there must not be endangered; if he returned at all, he would find it more necessary than ever.

Permission to absent himself from Saturday night to Tuesday morning had to be obtained from the city authorities. They objected at first, but finally accorded their consent. With his uncle, the matter was quickly settled. Messer Hugolin did not approve of holidays for apprentices, but he dared not controvert the law, and Constans was already in possession of the blue ticket which would enable him to pass the city barriers after sunset on Saturday. So Messer Hugolin contented himself with black looks and an acid jibe at the vanity of his civic associates, who multiplied holidays that they might have opportunity to display themselves in their gold chains and red robes of office.

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"And harkee, boy!" he concluded, harshly. "Let me see you at roll-call Tuesday morning or not at all. With flour at ten tokens the quarter, there is no bread of idleness to be eaten in my house." And thereupon they parted without further speaking.

It was a warm August evening when he finally pushed out from shore and laid his course downstream. He had not ventured upon the experiment of a sail, but the tide was beginning to run out, and that, with the current, should carry him to his destination without the dipping of an oar. But he reflected that the moon would rise at nine o'clock, and as it was barely past the full the light might betray him to watching eyes. He could take no risks, and so must reach the city under cover of darkness. Accordingly, he bent to his paddle, taking it easy at first, and then lengthening out the stroke as he gained confidence in this hitherto untried art.

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IN THE SHADOW OF DOOM

An hour wore on, and Constans was approaching the suburbs of the ancient municipality. But it did not suit his purpose to make a landing here. His plan was to reach the lower end of the island upon which the city was built, then to work his way northward on foot until he should discover the innermost citadel of the Doomsmen. To get a fair idea of his task, he proposed to ascend one of the immensely high buildings which stood crowded together in the down-town district. From such a vantage-point he could surely fix upon landmarks for his future guidance in penetrating the labyrinth of streets. It would not be a pleasant experience to lose one's way, and, perhaps, stumble by mistake on Master Quinton Edge's front door.

Now, as Constans travelled onward, the ruined city began to grow upon him in ever heavier and darker mass. Here and there a half-demolished church-spire raised itself above the neighboring roof-line; plainly this had been one of the old-time residential sections and of the better class. Still farther down the stream and the water-front stood crowded thickly with wharves and warehouses, the scene of the mighty commerce of the past. The ships themselves were there, great monsters of iron and steel, scaled and honeycombed with red rust. But the wharf-slips had long since silted up, and the vessels, careening little by little with the subsidence of the water, had finally broken away from the restraining hawsers and lay on their beam-ends in the mud, a sorrowful spectacle.

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The moon was rising and it was time to go ashore. Accordingly, he directed his course for a pier that extended somewhat farther than its fellows into the stream. There was just water enough to float the canoe within arm's-length of the girders—a fortunate circumstance, since Constans had not liked the idea of trusting himself upon the treacherous-looking mud-flat left uncovered by the ebbing tide. Securing the boat under shadow of the structure, he took his hunting-knife and basket of provisions and climbed easily to the floor of the pier, then picking his way across its broken planking he reached solid ground. At last he stood within Doom the Forbidden.

Now this street, which ran parallel with the river, was of unusual width, and Constans crossed it quickly, seeking for cover in some narrower and darker thoroughfare. A cross-street opened directly in front of him. He plunged into it without hesitation, for the moonlight was now in full flood and there might be sharp eyes about.

In the open spaces along the water-front grass grew thick and tall as in a meadow, but in this narrow, crooked lane the wholesomer, sun-loving plants found little encouragement to existence. In their stead, pale-colored creepers mantled the house walls, and everywhere were moss stains and the spore of the various fungoid growths. Constans's footsteps fell hollowly upon the pavement slippery with weed and the August damp, and as he walked along an unearthly radiance suddenly illuminated his path; from every cornice and eaves-end hung balls of the pale St. Elmo's fire; not a house but boasted its array of corpse-candles that flickered with a greenish flame.

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A terrifying sight, but harmless. Far more dangerous, could he have known it, were the invisible but deadly gases from the century-old corruption that rose to meet him and were unconsciously inhaled. Then, as the fumes mounted to his brain, sober reason was ousted from her throne and imagination rioted unchecked, peopling the void with horrors and ineffectual phantoms. From the sashless windows grotesque faces stared down upon him, scowling malignantly, while others, with still more hideous smile, invited him to enter and become one of their dreadful company. Insane laughter re-echoed in his ears, and the music of lutes, irresistible in its languor-compelling potency. Already had Constans stopped twice to listen, and upon each occasion he had been obliged to exercise all his failing strength of body and mind to resume his forward march. If he halted again it would be forever; of that he felt perfectly assured, but neither the imminence nor the character of the peril in which he stood seemed sufficient to arouse him from his lethargy. Yet he kept on, walking with the shuffling stride of a mechanical doll; now he wavered and hesitated, as though the propelling spring had wellnigh run down. The night reek, hot and damp, hung like a poisoned veil upon his mouth and lips; he could not breathe; he gasped and threw up one arm as does a swimmer who looks his last upon a pitiless sun and sky.

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The wind had risen with the moon; it had been growing in strength, and now a strong gust rattled among the chimney-pots. One fell with a crash, and a tiny fragment of brick struck Constans on the cheek, cutting the skin. The shock and the trickle of blood brought him to with a sharp shock; he ran forward a few steps and found himself sinking. The roadway immediately in front of him had doubtless been undermined by the action of water; for the space of a dozen yards or more the pavement was but a shell concealing an abyss.

Constans had already proceeded too far for retreat; he must go on or founder where he stood. He flung himself forward, the oblong blocks of granite, with which the street was paved, grinding together underneath his feet as the mass yielded to the downward pressure. He was sucked in to his knees, but instinctively he kept the upper part of his body extended horizontally, his outstretched hand seeking for some chance holdfast. Then, as he was beginning to despair, he found it, a section of small diameter lead piping that had been uncovered by the breaking away of the surrounding earth. It bent under his clutch but did not give way. With one last effort he pulled himself clear, gained the firm ground beyond, and lay there trembling.

When afterwards he came to reason soberly over the adventure, the conclusion seemed obvious that the pitfall had been a consequent upon the breaking out of one of the ancient springs, so that

the water, in endeavoring to find an outlet, had finally undermined the whole roadway. The chasm, as he looked back upon it, extended dear across the street. Its depth was only conjectural, but the mass presented the treacherous appearance of quaking sand, and Constans shuddered as he gazed. Yet he had escaped; the peril was past; let him forget what was behind and press forward.

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Half a block farther on and he found himself in a cul-de-sac. The street was filled from house-wall to house-wall with an immense mass of broken stone, brick, and other débris. The cause was not far to seek.

Immediately upon the left rose one of the fabulously high buildings for which the ancient city had been famous. It could not compare in magnitude with the tremendous structures that he could discern still farther ahead, but its dozen and a half of stories loomed up imposingly when contrasted with the moderate sized houses adjoining it. Constans looked up in wonder at its towering façade, then started back with an exclamation of alarm.

It appeared that the foundations of the structure had in some way become weakened, for the whole building had settled and was leaning over at a terrifying divergence from the perpendicular. Being constructed of iron truss-work similar to that of a bridge, the essential framework still held together, but the outside walls, mere shells of stone and brick, had cracked and given way under the strain, falling piece-meal into the street below. Even as he looked, a stone dropped from a window pediment and crashed into splinters on the pavement a few yards beyond where he stood. The angle of inclination seemed to grow larger as he gazed at it; the enormous mass poised itself above him, monstrous, informed, threatening to strike.

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With that uncomfortable contraction of the scalp-skin that attends upon the sudden presence of peril, Constans backed hastily away; not for worlds would he have ventured again under that overhang of artificial cliff. Yet behind him was the stretch of sunken pavement; he could not risk another passage of that. A single alternative remained—to enter one of the small houses that lined the street, ascend to its roof, and so escape to the nearest cross thoroughfare.

With a sigh of relief, Constans threw open the scuttle and climbed out upon the leads. He had entered at random one of the mean-looking edifices that hemmed him in at the right and left, and it was pleasant to escape from the close atmosphere of its long-unused staircases and corridors. Apparently the house had been occupied as a tenement in the ancient time; the marks of its degradation had survived the universal decay, and there was even a fetid suggestion in the air of old-time squalor and disease. Glad he was to be free of it all, and he let the scuttle fall to with a bang.

After surveying the different routes as best he could, Constans determined to work his way to the southward. He took one forward step and stood transfixed; from below then came a faint but unmistakable tap, tap upon the closed scuttle. The bare suspicion that there could be some living thing in that hideous interior, that it was appealing to him for aid, made him physically sick. But better to meet any horror face to face than to wrestle longer with the invisible presence of Fear; he threw aside the hatch, and a big white owl flew out, its wing grazing his face. He could have shouted aloud, so nakedly had his nerves been laid bare in the last quarter of an hour; then setting his teeth hard he took hold of himself and laughed at his own vaporing. The worst was over now; he was sure of that, and so again took courage.

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It was an easy matter to pass from one connecting roof to another, and thereafter down a fire-escape to the side street. A few steps took him round the corner and into a wide thoroughfare leading directly to the more important business quarter.

Constans looked about him in wonderment. The high buildings stood shoulder to shoulder, hemming him in on every side; the street itself was but a fissure in a mountain-range. The moon had now risen high in the heavens, and her beams performed odd tricks of shadow play as they danced through these colossal halls of emptiness and silence. Nothing seemed real or substantial; these enormous masses of masonry and iron looked almost dreamlike, the ghosts of a forgotten past, shadows that must surely vanish with the morning sun.

To sober his imagination, Constans began counting the number of stories in a sky-scraper that reared its monstrous bulk directly in front of him. Thirty-six in all, and so higher by half a dozen floors than any of its neighbors. It should make an excellent observatory, and he determined upon exploring it.



**"CONSTANS LOOKED ABOUT HIM IN
WONDERMENT"**

The street doors stood wide open, and the entrance-way was half blocked up by piles of dust and other refuse blown in from the street by the winter storms. On the left, as one entered, was the principal suite of offices; it had been occupied by a banking firm, to judge from the desk fittings and the long array of safes and vaults. These latter were open and empty, the doors having been shattered by some powerful explosive. In all probability the vaults had been closed and locked by their owners, and had afterwards been looted by the criminals who thronged the doomed city and who would naturally seek their richest booty in the financial district. The floor was literally knee-deep in papers of all description, and in the heap were a number of bundles of the old-time bank-notes, neatly labelled and banded. These the plunderers had evidently discarded as beneath their notice, for all that they represented wealth so vast as to be wellnigh incalculable. With the Great Change at hand these paper promises had become valueless; only the precious metals themselves were worth the picking up, and the plunderers had accordingly made a clean sweep of the specie drawers. It was by the merest accident that Constans, in kicking aside a pile of elaborately engraved stock certificates, uncovered two of the smaller gold coins, a five and ten dollar piece. He put the treasure-trove carefully away, but in spite of this promising beginning he was not tempted to proceed further on this golden trail. He had another purpose in view, and so found his way to the principal staircase and began the upward climb.

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Interminable it seemed, and the sense of loneliness and oppression, which lay heavy on Constans's spirits, increased steadily as he went from one landing to another. Each succeeding story was so precisely like the one he had just left; it was always the same long, marble-paved corridor, with every door and window exactly duplicated. How could living men and women have endured the appalling uniformity of this human beehive? Everywhere, too, were the same recurring evidences of the haste and panic that had characterized the final moments of that terrible hegira. Hats and garments, cash-boxes and account-books, littered the hallways, and were piled in little heaps at the entrances to the elevators—impedimenta that must inevitably be abandoned at the last if life itself were to be saved. And the final tragedy—an elevator cage that had jammed in its ways and so hung fixed between two landings. Its occupants had suddenly found themselves entrapped, with no one to hear or to help. One can fancy the growing uneasiness, the wild amaze, the terror that was afraid of the sound of its own voice. Constans hurried by; he had looked but that once.

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Onward and upward, and at last he had gained the topmost floor. It was hardly worth his while to ascend to the roof itself, and so he walked into a room that faced the north and consequently commanded a view of the city along its longitudinal axis. He gazed long and earnestly into the obscurity, and far in the distance he caught the faint twinkle of a solitary light—a camp-fire, perhaps. He tried to fix its bearings in his mind; if it were a fire it must indicate the neighborhood of the Doomsman stronghold.

For a long time Constans stood at the window seeking to penetrate the mystery of the darkness that surrounded him; then at last nature asserted her rights, he yawned vigorously, and his

eyelids fell. There was a brown leather lounge in the room, still in tolerable condition, and he threw himself down without even troubling to remove the thick coating of dust that covered it. He slept.

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IX

THE KEYS OF POWER

The sun was high in the sky when Constans awoke. For a moment or two the unfamiliar environment puzzled him; then the keen edge of remembrance sheared through the mists of sleep and he sprang to his feet, alert and ready for whatever might befall. He walked over to the window facing the north and looked out.

For miles and miles the ruined city stretched away, a wilderness of brick and mortar. Here and there were areas of blackness and vacancy, where fire had worked its will, but these latter were confined for the most part to the region along the water-front and to the poorer residential portions. The business section, with its substantial shops and warehouses, and the central district, made up of the clubs, churches, theatres, and the handsomer private houses, remained intact, in outward appearance at least. Viewed under the rays of a glorious midsummer sun, the city seemed fair and proud as of yore, a stupendous monument to the industry and genius of the race.

And yet, withal, the spectacle was a singularly mournful and depressing one, for nowhere were there any signs of life. Not a plume of vapor waved against the azure sky, not even a dog ranged the grass-grown streets. The silence reigned infinite and profound, and Constans started in alarm as it was suddenly broken by the scream of an eagle out of the blue. Here was the picture of a desolation incomparably more complete than that of the untrodden desert upon which the life-giving spirit has never breathed. For in this place there had existed a very citadel of being, and behold! a night had passed and it was not.

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Suddenly Constans bethought himself of that indefinite twinkle of fire, and he trained his broken binoculars on the spot where he had marked it down the night before. The glass disclosed the existence of a comparatively open space, doubtless one of the public squares of the ancient city. It was bordered by a number of handsome edifices, and one unusually large, cream-colored building, whose distinctive architectural feature was a tower of remarkably graceful proportions, attracted Constans's attention; it should serve him for a landmark, and he took its bearings carefully.

Breakfast of brown bread and cold smoked beef was a simple and expeditious meal, and, with his appetite appeased, Constans descended to the street. He had his general direction in mind, and so was able to proceed at once upon his journey of exploration, keeping as closely as possible due north. He found the sidewalks and roadway encumbered by rubbish, and here and there almost entirely blocked by fallen masonry; but in spite of these obstructions he managed to maintain a fair average pace. Indeed, it was the strangeness of his surroundings rather than the material obstacles that caused his steps to loiter. The glimpses that he got through the windows of the deserted shops amazed him; a hundred times he would fain have halted to investigate some fresh marvel. But he withstood the temptation, telling himself that these things were but trifles, and that the real objects of his quest lay farther on.

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An hour's walk brought Constans to within three blocks of the building with the tower. He had purposely diverged from the direct line in approaching it, being shrewdly of the opinion that the stronghold of the Doomsmen was not far distant. He was convinced of the truth of this conjecture when he reached the next cross-street, which debouched into the public square already mentioned. He could see that the end of the street was filled by a barricade of paving-blocks and flag-stones torn up from the roadway; it looked as though the whole square were one vast and formidable fortress.

It was still early in the morning, and up to this time Constans had not seen sign of man. Now, as he continued his cautious examination of the barrier, he noticed two or three spirals of smoke rising behind the parapet and going straight up into the windless air. The hornets were stirring then, and it behooved him to keep well away from their nest.

After some consideration Constans decided that he would continue on towards the north, skirting this centre of danger at a safe distance until he should be some distance above it. He would then work cautiously back towards the citadel, finally seeking some elevated point, such as the roof of a tall building, from which to complete his observations.

After proceeding about a mile in an up-town direction, Constans turned and walked westward for a couple of blocks. It was a broad and handsome avenue on which he now found himself, and from the character of the buildings which lined it Constans concluded that here was where the wealth and fashion of the ancient world had had its chosen habitation. Once again he would gladly have lingered for a closer examination of the many things that interested him, but the spur of his purpose as often pricked him on. Yet finally he did stop, thrilling with the sense of a great

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discovery.

It was a large and architecturally impressive building that had attracted Constans's attention, and a flash of intuition enabled him to pronounce upon its true character at first sight. He was now at the very heart of the city's social and intellectual life; here, if anywhere, he might expect to find one of the magnificent libraries upon which the ancient municipality had prided itself. He must decide the question, and, after some further searching, he discovered a side door that yielded to his touch.

He was right, then; this was truly a library, and could he ever have imagined that there were so many books in the world! A cloud of dust rose under his feet as he went up to the cases and tried to read the tarnished titles of the volumes on the shelves. Again Chance led him aright, and his eye brightened as he discovered an unpretentious volume that proclaimed itself: *The Official Visitors' Guide to the City of New York for the Year 1905*. He pulled out the book and opened it. Of course it contained what he wanted, a large folding map, and spreading the latter out upon a table Constans set himself to studying it earnestly; this was his enemy's territory, and he must acquaint himself as thoroughly as possible with its points of weakness and its points of strength. [Pg 71]

The task of identification proved easier than he had thought possible. Here was where he had landed the night before. Step by step he could trace his walk up-town, and the identity of the building in which he now stood was made certain by the ruins of the great white cathedral a few blocks farther north. And there, a dozen or more blocks to the south, there was the citadel, the living heart of the outlaw world, there was the stronghold in which one Quinton Edge sat secure and at his ease. A cold misgiving suddenly struck at Constans's heart. How could he hope to make way alone against a host? How could he think to reach an enemy protected by these impregnable walls? For such a task he would need to wield the thunderbolts of the gods, and he had only his useless pistol and his long bow. He sighed and let his head droop for a moment, then felt ashamed of his weakness and straightened up again. The way was there; he would find it.

Mechanically, his eyes roved along the serried shelves of books, and a new light came into them. In these dusty tomes themselves were hidden the keys of power; he had but to seize them and the secrets of the mighty past would be revealed to him, to him alone. Armed with these potencies he might dare and accomplish anything—everything.

Trembling with excitement, he went and stood before the cases, scanning the various titles. Again his lucky star guided him; on the row level with his eyes stood an encyclopædia of the applied arts and sciences. He carried the two bulky volumes to a convenient table and sat there absorbed. [Pg 72]

Constans looked up in the sudden consciousness that he was observed, and met the half-defiant, half-terrified, and wholly curious gaze of a girl. Hardly more than a child she seemed, not over fourteen at the outside, and with a figure that was all flatness and unlovely angles. Certainly an exceedingly ugly duckling, yet there was promise of future swanship in the clean curves of her neck and in the firm poise of the small head. Moreover, her coloring was good, a clear brown through which a scarlet flush, born of the excitement of the moment, glowed intermittently, like the flashing of distant signal-flags. And in her eyes there was a curious red glint where the light fell slantingly upon the pupil. Constans found his feet awkwardly and stood gazing at her. She in turn scanned him with attention, and obviously grew at ease in noting his increasing disconcertment.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, abruptly. "You are not of the children of the Doomsmen."

"No," he answered, and compressed his lips obstinately.

"You are very foolish," she retorted, with a slow shake of her head. "If Master Quinton Edge catches you he will nick your ear, and then you will have to row in the galleys."

Constans winced. Could she possibly have discovered his secret? But no; the hair fell in a thick wave upon his ears—it had been but a chance shot.

"I am not afraid," he said, coldly. The tawny eyes, with their heart of fire, rested upon him approvingly.

"I am Esmay," she answered. "What is your name?" [Pg 73]

"What does it matter?—well, then, Constans." He spoke impatiently, being anxious to get back to his book. He glanced at it longingly, and she, who, as it afterwards appeared, had a part to play, took the cue.

"Such stupid-looking books!" She bent carelessly over the volume on the table. "Nothing but wheels and dotted lines and wheels again. It is a ridiculous book."

"It is not," said Constans, hotly.

The damsel smiled. "Oh, if you like that sort of thing, I know of a book over there." She pointed airily to an alcove at the opposite end of the hall. "It has many more pictures and many more wheels in colors, too, red and yellow and blue."

Constans was all on fire in an instant. "Will you show it to me?" he asked.

"In there," said the girl, and pointed to a recess between two tall cases.

Ten feet above his head ran a metal gallery that gave access to the upper tiers of shelves, but Constans did not look up, being intent upon the treasure. Where was it? He could not see.

The noose of a rope had tightened upon his arms before he was aware that it encircled them. He made one furious, ineffectual effort to free himself, and then stood motionless, waiting for the next move of the unseen enemy. Forthwith, a second noose dropped smoothly around his neck; it was at once drawn taut, and Constans was obliged to stretch himself to his full height to avoid being strangled. He heard Esmay clap her hands, and steps descending from the gallery; then his captor stood before him. He was a boy of Constans's own age, but of shorter, sturdier build. A pleasant, ingenuous face it was, flushed now with the joy of triumph.

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"Got him," he announced, importantly, to the traitress Esmay, who had retreated towards the door. "Don't be such a coward; he can't get away," he continued, examining his victim's bonds with critical attention.

"Look, Esmay; if he moves he hangs himself. A fix, isn't it?" and the boy laughed contentedly. It had been rare sport, this trapping of a man, worth half a dozen wolves or even a bear.

"Hollo! Esmay," he called again, and the girl came up slowly. "You did it splendidly," said the boy. "Here's the bracelet I promised you," and he held out a circlet of gold-filigree work studded with carbuncles. "They match your eyes," he added, in awkward compliment, and then blushed for the incredible weakness of mind that had prompted his words. Was she going to laugh at him?

But the girl took the bracelet without even a look at the donor. She snapped it on her wrist and walked defiantly, straight up to the prisoner, as though she would compel him to admire her treasure, to congratulate her upon it.

Constans held himself serenely imperturbable, not even turning his head. Her face burned. She threw the bauble on the floor; it lay there crushed and shapeless. Then she turned upon her accomplice in the successful treachery.

"I hate you! I hate you!" She walked away, imperially offended, and stood looking out of a window that faced the street.

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"Whew!" whistled the boy, in dismay, that was half comic and half real. He addressed himself to Constans, naively confident of masculine sympathy. "Well, if that isn't—" but the words failed him.

Constans, angry and humiliated as he was, could not help smiling.

"You know it wasn't exactly fair," he said.

The boy considered, then answered, honestly:

"It wasn't, then, but what are we going to do about it? You are a Houseman, and you have come to spy out the secrets of Doom the Forbidden. Any of the men who saw you would kill you like a snake."

"Perhaps so, but they would not wait until my back was turned or get a girl to help them."

Constans suddenly realized that he stood free of his bonds. The boy had severed them with his clasp-knife, that being the quickest means of releasing his captive.

"We will fight for it, then," he said, simply.

Constans nodded.

It was not at all an even match, for Constans was at least thirty pounds lighter than his adversary, and his slightly longer reach of arm was more than counter-balanced by the latter's ability to take any amount of punishment.

Half a dozen ineffectual passes and they clinched. Constans was forced backward; he tripped and fell. The blows, short but savage, rained down upon his face. He tried to strike back, but his throat was gripped hard; he was suffocating. Consciousness was about to desert him, and he felt vaguely angry at this betrayal of his senses; then the light returned, and he sat up, his head swimming. A man stood between him and his late opponent. It was Quinton Edge, and the recognition was a mutual one.

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"Oh, you!" drawled Quinton Edge, with that well-remembered, fine-gentleman inflection. "I am almost sorry that I interfered, but this young lady would have it so, and a woman's will is always law. Eh, Ulick?"

But the boy Ulick scowled. "It was no business of yours," he said, angrily.

"That depends. Besides, it stands to reason that no man likes to see his own property mishandled. You don't realize, my good fellow, that you have a fist as rough as a shark-skin."

"Your property!" echoed the boy, in disdain. "Prove it."

"Easily," smiled Quinton Edge, and drew aside the lock of hair that concealed the V-shaped nick in Constans's left ear.

"Oh!" said Ulick, shortly. He had been quick to see and interpret the appeal in his prisoner's eyes. "It makes not a particle of difference," asserted Ulick, stubbornly. "He is my captive, taken in fair fight, and he belongs to me for all of his nicked ear. I sha'n't give him up, and that's my last word to you, Master Quinton Edge."

Half a dozen men entered the hall hurriedly; the girl Esmay must have summoned them when she had disappeared a few minutes before. Sturdy varlets they were, clad in green jerkins and armed with ashen lances pointed with steel. As Constans came afterwards to know, they were of the personal body-guard of the old Dom Gillian, to whom the boy Ulick was both grandson and presumptive heir. Now Quinton Edge was not yet ready to measure swords with Dom Gillian. So he veiled his irritation and answered, equably:

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**"THE BLOWS RAINED DOWN UPON HIS
FACE"**

"You know the law about harboring a House-dweller, and since you choose to violate it"—here he shrugged his shoulders detestably—"let Dom Gillian see to it. Yet, for the sake of peace, I will ask you once more to surrender this serf, who bears my mark and is legally proved my property. In the end it may save a mountain of trouble. What say you?"

"No!" thundered Ulick, roundly, for he was angered at the implied threat, and would have held his ground now out of pure stubbornness. Whereupon Quinton Edge smiled and sauntered out, adjusting the ruffles at his wrist and carrying himself as gallantly as though he had been the victor, not the vanquished, in this little contest of wills.

Constans went up to Ulick and held out his hand. "Thank you," he said, awkwardly, and Ulick flushed in his turn.

The guardsmen were crowding about the two boys, looking curiously at Constans. But Ulick ordered them out imperiously, and they obeyed, being men of slow wit and not used to argue with their superiors. Ulick turned to Constans. "Well, that was fair enough, to make up for—for the other thing?"

Constans nodded a hearty assent; he hesitated, and then spoke, steadily: "But you must understand that I would rather fight again than wear the iron collar of a slave, or call any one master, even you. You will kill me, for you are the better man with the naked fist. But I should prefer it that way."

"Will you leave this with me?" asked Ulick, nodding his head wisely, and Constans wondered and submitted.

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They went out into the breathless noon of an August day. Two or three men were loitering about, and Ulick frowned as he saw them.

"I shall have to take you to my grandsire," he whispered. "These are Quinton Edge's men, and they are doubtless under orders to watch us. This way," and Constans followed obediently.

Ulick stopped at a beautiful Gothic edifice, built about a small court-yard, in which a score of the green-jerked guardsmen were lounging. In a corner stood a wooden cistern for the collection of rain-water from the roof-spouts. Ulick drew a pannikin of water and offered it to Constans that he might bathe his face, which was badly puffed and marked. How reviving, the touch of the cool, clean liquid! Constans arose, mightily refreshed; then, in response to his guide's look, he followed him into the main hallway of the house and up the broad stairs.

The building, judging from its size and appointments, must have been the dwelling of one of the richest members of the ancient plutocracy, and the traces of a splendid luxury were to be seen on all sides. The colored marbles underfoot, the gilding overhead, the gorgeous, albeit torn and weather-stained tapestries that covered the walls—these things were eloquent of a pristine magnificence that could hardly have been equalled, even in this city of palaces. Constans kept looking about him with all his eyes, but Ulick strode along indifferently. Every son of the Doomsday might possess a dwelling measurably as fine as this if he chose to look for it, but from a practical point of view the sole qualification for a man's house was that it should be standing in plumb and tolerably weather-proof. Gold-leaf and silken hangings would not keep out the rain, and it was folly to spend time in making repairs. When a house became uninhabitable it was a simple matter to move into another.

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The apartment into which they now entered was long and lofty. The thick curtains remained drawn before the windows, excluding so much of the light that Constans had great difficulty in finding his way about. Then, his eyes adjusting themselves to the obscurity, he saw before him a divan piled high with pillows. Propped up against them was the figure of an old man.

And such a man! In his prime he must have been a very colossus of strength and stature, and even now, in his senility, the muscles that had made terrible those great limbs could be plainly traced. For this was Dominus Gillian, whose name had been first a byword and then a terror, and even now was a power to conjure with; Dom Gillian, renegade and hero, gallows-bird and world-builder, but ever and in all things a man, as all other men will bear witness.

He knew his favorite grandchild, and smiled as Ulick respectfully raised and kissed his hand, that hand in whose hollow had lain the world, now shrunken and nerveless, scarce able to crush an impertinent fly. Ulick spoke slowly and distinctly, explaining his action and seeking boldly to justify it.

This dog of the House People had dared, under veil of darkness, to creep into the Gray Wolf's den. He, Ulick, had captured him alone and unaided; surely such an exploit deserved recognition, and Ulick desired to keep the prisoner as his own property. Could he do so, no matter what claim might be urged against his right?

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The old man listened, and looked at Constans indifferently. Then he spoke in the inflectionless monotone of extreme old age:

"A House-dweller and a snake, my son—crush them when you can, for the woods are full of shadows, and a man cannot always see where to plant his foot. I have lived very long, and I know."

"But, my father, if you will only let me——"

"I am tired," interrupted the even, expressionless tones. "Go away and leave me to sleep. Tomorrow we will cut out this Houseman's eyes and tongue, so that he may see nothing and tell nothing. Then you may have him for your plaything—it will be better so."

The eyelids fell, and the old man slept placidly, his face serene as that of a babe. The two boys stole quietly away.

Down a narrow passage and a flight of stairs into a dark, cool room, underground, as Constans conjectured. Ulick left him there, counselling quiet and repose for the next few hours.

It was night when Ulick finally appeared and conducted his departing guest to the open air. The moon had not yet risen, and the danger of detection was practically past.

"You are sure that you can find your boat," whispered Ulick, as they stood facing each other, curiously loath to part.

"Yes," answered Constans, "for I shall follow the river straight down. It will take a little longer, but that matters not. Good-bye; I sha'n't forget."

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A slender figure slipped out from the shadow of a doorway and confronted them. It was Esmay, and she spoke with serene gravity.

"Since you and Ulick are friends you ought to make it up with me also. But not unless you really want to," she added, hastily.

Constans smiled with youthful cynicism.

"Of course," he answered, magnificently condescending. "You are a woman, and knew no better."

She snatched her hand away. "Yes, I am a woman, Master Constans, and some day you will know what that means." She moved away, majestically as does a goddess, conscious of her power but magnanimously refraining from using it. Constans and Ulick laughed after the manner of mankind who find it easy to disbelieve in what they do not understand. Then, with a long hand-grip,

they parted.

The canoe was still in its hiding-place underneath the ruined pier, and Constans's first care was to stow away in the stern-locker the two volumes of the scientific cyclopædia that he had been reading at the time of his capture. Ulick of his own volition had stolen the books from the library hall, and had put them into Constans's hands at the moment of parting. They made a heavy load for him to carry, but what a precious burden it was and how gladly he assumed it! For these were the keys of power.

As Constans paddled out into the stream he heard the steady thumping of oars in rowlock. He shoved back into the shadow of the pier just as a great galley filled with men came foaming down the river. Constans could see that it was a war-vessel of the largest size, for there were full sixty oars on a side arranged in two banks. The figure-head was the representation of a black swan, and on the poop-deck stood the slight, graceful figure of a man wearing a plumed hat. Constans saw him remove the cigar from his lips as he turned to give an order. Instantly the port-oars held and backed, and the galley, swinging round on her heel, headed up-stream again, passing within fifty yards of Constans's hiding-place. The boy's bow was in his hand, but he had not attempted to fit an arrow to the string. "It will come—the time," he said, under his breath.

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Constans stared gravely after the *Black Swan* as she drove along. But for the best of good-fortune he might now be tugging at a heavy ashen oar, with the lash of the deck-master striping his back. Ulick, Esmay—yes, he had much to remember.

Two hours later he had scaled the wall of Croye, without being discovered by the sleepy sentinels, and was safe on his pallet of corn-husks in Messer Hugolin's attic.

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X

THE MESSAGE

Three years had passed since that first memorable visit to Doom the Forbidden—years of work and of growth. The simple out-door life and the physical toil had been good discipline for Constans, and he was now a well-built young fellow of two-and-twenty, nearly six feet tall and with muscles like steel wire.

The nights, too, had afforded compensation for the labors of the day, for then he could read and study. The two big volumes of the scientific cyclopædia had been his school-masters, and he had striven faithfully to learn of them. What a wonderful lesson it had been, for while there was much in this teaching that he could not understand at all, there was much again that, with the aid of the illustrations and diagrams, he could make really his own. And so, little by little, he had been able to reconstruct, in imagination, at least, the lost civilization of the ancient world; how men had tamed the lightning and bade it speak their will and work their pleasure; how the same vapor that issued from the pot bubbling on Martina's fire could be harnessed and made to draw a hundred wagons at once upon the old-time steel-railed highways; how a child's hand on the crank of a machine-gun might hurl invisible death among a regiment of men and put even an army to flight. Steam and gunpowder and electricity, what wonderful ideas were connoted in the words! The very names thrilled him with a sense of infinite power.

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A wonderfully fascinating study, and yet at times it left him unspeakably weary and depressed, for what did all this knowledge avail without the practical means to apply it? The great machines that the ancients had built, what were they now but masses of red rust, useless alike to the fool who laughed at them and to the visionary who could only dream of their magnificent potentialities.

A dream, for, in truth, a lion was in the way. So long as the Doomsmen held sway in the land, so long must the wheels of progress stay locked. Unable to use themselves the treasures of knowledge stored under their hands, they were unwilling that another should even touch them. What could he or any other one man do?

Once, indeed, during the three years, Constans had found brief opportunity to revisit the scenes of his old home in the valley of the Swiftwater. In this general district of the West Inch were to be found nearly all of the larger estates, a fitting cradling-place, it would seem, for the new liberty, the awakening era.

But time was not yet come, as Constans soon saw clearly. He had been hospitably enough received, for the country-side had not forgotten the story of the Greenwood Keep, and it was plain to see that this clear-eyed, well-set-up lad was of the true Stockader breed. One of his father's bond-friends, Piers Major, of the River Barony, had even offered Constans a home under his roof-tree in exchange for sword-service. But this he declined, with becoming gratitude indeed, but none the less firmly. He had no fancy to spend the rest of his life in a trooper's saddle riding down naked savages—an agreeable occupation, whose only variation was an afternoon at pig-sticking or a chance crack at some Doomsmen's head. Better to endure the drudgery of the tan-pits than to part with all purpose in life.

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And so the crusade, which Constans had hoped to father, died at its birth. The kinsmen and friends of his family were sincere enough in their sympathy, but they could not be expected to risk their own skins in the furtherance of his private quarrels, and, so far as it was a question of political economy or of patriotism, these easy-going gentlemen troubled themselves not one whit. For the most part the Doomsmen kept their distance from a Stockader's threshold, and *laissez-faire* was a good motto for both sides to adopt.

Constans returned to Croye and to Messer Hugolin's attic neither overmuch surprised nor discouraged by the results of his mission. After all, his ultimate object was a personal one—his revenge—and only his own hand could discharge that debt in full. Did the time seem over-long, the way unendurably lonely and toilsome? He had only to close his eyes to remember—to remember. And so the years had passed.

It was the noon spell on a day in late October, and Constans sat on the river end of the long wooden pier at the tanyard eating his luncheon of bread and bacon scraps. The tide was running up slowly, as could be noted from the bubbles and drift-wood that circled past the piling of the wharf, and Constans, happening to glance down into the swirl, saw something that brought him to his feet. Nothing more remarkable than a bottle of thick, greenish glass, but bottles of any kind had become valuable now that the art of glass blowing was so little practised, and such flotsam was not to be despised.

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Having strung a length of noosed cord to a light pole, Constans threw himself flat along the string-piece of the pier and began angling for the prize. A failure or two and then he had it snared securely; now it was in his hand.

The bottle was foul with slime and fungous growth, showing that it had been in the water for a long period. Possibly it had been out to sea and back many times before this particular flood-tide had brought it to Messer Hugolin's tannery and under the eyes of one who would have the wit to distinguish it from a rotten stick. At all events it had found a port at last.

The bottle had been corked and then sealed with pitch, and Constans had to use some care in getting at its contents, a slender cylinder of tightly rolled paper. Finally he succeeded in drawing it out uninjured, and saw that it was superscribed to his uncle Hugolin.

The old man looked up with a frown as Constans presented himself at the door of the counting-room. The rest hour was over and Constans's place was at the tan-pit. How was the work to get done if everybody shirked their part of the common task? A message in a bottle. What foolery was this? Nevertheless, Messer Hugolin extended his hand to receive the roll, and, removing the waxed string that bound it, knit his brows over the enclosure—half a dozen sheets of writing. Constans was about to retire discreetly, but Messer Hugolin raised his hand.

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"The writing is too fine for my eyes," he grumbled. "Read it for me, nephew; but, harkee! you will keep your mouth shut whatever its import." Then, in a sudden gust of passion: "A thousand plagues on that fool of an up-river factor who broke for me my reading-glass! Not another one to be had in Croye for good-will or gold, and I compelled to borrow another's eyes, to live at the mercy of my meanest clerk. Come, boy, you must have the sense of it by this time!"

"Shall I read it aloud?" asked Constans, and then, in compliance with his uncle's nod, he began:

"Dated at Doom, in the year 90 after the Great Change.

"It is a score of years my brother, since that moonless August night when the Doomsmen came to Croye and I went back with them, tied to Mad Scarlett's saddle-bow. Twenty years of silence in the City of Silence, and I but a slim, brown-faced maid who might be found one day playing at polo and lamenting her lack of mustachios, and on the very next, mooning over a love charm. It was only through the look in my cousin Philip's eyes, as he died under the weight of the Doomsmen battle-axes, that I knew myself a woman, that I finally entered upon my sex's heritage of sorrow.

"Does this seem an old and hardly remembered tale to you, Anthony Hugolin, Councillor Primus of Croye, and a rich man, if one may judge from the yearly tax rate that stands opposite your name in Dom Gillian's head list? Withal, you are still my brother, and you must listen to what I have now to say, the first and the last word from me to you.

"I must be just and acknowledge that he truly loved me, the man who plucked me like an apple from the bough; later on he made what amends he could by proclaiming me his wife under the Doomsman law. Yet it was a tiger-cat rather than a woman whom he had taken to his bosom, and I wonder now that I did not a thousand times overpass the limits of his forbearance. Assuredly, in that first agony, I tried my hardest to stretch his patience to the breaking-point, in the hope that a knife-thrust might open for me the doors of the prison-house. You see, I was very young, and I could not forget my cousin Philip's eyes.

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"A woman's heart is like a cup; it holds but one fixed quantity of life's essential liquor, be the latter sweet or bitter. An infinity of little sips or one deep draught,

what does it matter? The vessel is empty in either case. Yet, as time went on, I grew to endure existence; afterwards, when my Esmay was born, I valued it again for her sake. Moreover, she was his daughter as well as mine, and so I came finally to endure and even to welcome the touch of my master's hand. In all these years it had never been aught but gentle, for all that they called him Mad Scarlett, and the children were taught to believe that he always wore gloves, because he had a bloody palm whose stain no water would wash away. Yes, and I wept, as any wife and mother might do, on that gray November day when I knelt beside his bier.

"But this concerns only myself, and it is of Esmay, my daughter, that I would speak. In a year she will be seventeen, and before that time, if at all, the way must be opened for her to go to her mother's people. I am helpless, except for this one opportunity of committing a message to the hands of Chance, one slender line dropped into the ocean of uncertainty. Yet nothing remains to me but to make the cast, for in six months' time I shall be dead; I can count the downward steps of my disease as clearly as though they formed part of the actual stairway under my feet.

"And this also I know—that the message will reach you, my brother; so far, at least, my eyes are permitted to explore the advancing darkness. You will assuredly receive this letter, but with what disposition of heart? That, alas! I may not know. Nor can I give aught of service in either counsel or means; I must trust to your love and good-will for everything. I can only say that the girl is known to all in Doom as Mad Scarlett's daughter. She has her father's tawny hair and red-brown eyes, and her name, as I have already told you, is Esmay.

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"To-morrow night I shall make my opportunity to reach the river edge unobserved. I shall then commit to the current the bottle containing this message, a precious freight, for it is my darling's life and happiness.

"To you, my brother, the gift and the grace of God, according as you deal with me and mine.

ELENA.

"Watch him whom they call Quinton Edge."

"The date is a year ago, lacking a month," added Constans, as he handed the roll to his uncle.

Messer Hugolin tied up the document with a piece of tape, labelled it with the date of receipt, and laid it away in a pigeon-hole.

"Well?" said Constans, interrogatively.

"Do you want me to put myself within reach of the Gray Wolf's paws?" retorted Messer Hugolin, shrewdly. "I was flayed badly enough the last time the *Black Swan* cast anchor before Croye, and I am not paying between rent-days."

"The year is almost up," urged Constans, insistently.

"I have lived my life," returned the old man, with sombre fixity of resolve, "and these things do not interest me. I have other use for my hands than to keep them stretched out idly in the dark."

"But that letter—a mother pleading for her child. You have but to give the word—there are men who will go, and gladly."

"I doubt it not, for there are always drones a-plenty around a beehive. But why should I spend my good, red gold to make a beggar's holiday?"

Constans felt his cheeks burn. "Their blood is redder than your gold," he said. "And if they are not afraid to risk——"

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"What has cost them nothing and for whose loss there is quick repair in a few square inches of sticking-plaster. Tush! boy, you speak of these things as one who dreams visions at noonday. While I—what I know, I know. There is but one thing precious in the world, and that is what a man holds safely in his strong-box. Why should I spend myself for naught?"

"The girl is your niece—your flesh and blood."

"No more so than yourself, nephew. And tell me, have I ever been over-tender with you on that account? Can you call to mind when and where I have spared you because you were of my kin? At least, I make a virtue of my honesty."

Messer Hugolin smiled. He saw from Constans's face that he need not plot out the thought in plainer words, and so they parted without further speaking, although the blood throbbed in Constans's temples as he made obeisance and walked away. He was conscious that he must keep himself in hand; the stocks and the whipping-post were ever ready for the rebellious apprentice, and a single hasty act might imperil his whole future. But as he lay awake that night in his attic bedchamber he resolved that this should be his last week's work in Messer Hugolin's tan-pits.

The time had come for him to make a second visit to Doom the Forbidden, and to remain there for an indefinite period—until his work had been accomplished.

It would have been impossible for Constans to have embarked upon this new adventure were it not for the two small gold coins that he had found and carried away from Doom on the occasion of his former visit. It was against the common law of the land for a bound apprentice to possess any money, even a handful of copper pence. He had to be careful, therefore, with whom he dealt, and he expected to be cheated in making his bargain for a boat and a supply of provisions. As it was, he was skilfully skinned by the rascal with whom he finally ventured to open negotiations, and Constans thought himself lucky to exchange it for a leaky, flat-bottomed tub and fifty pounds weight of absolute necessaries, chiefly sun-dried strips of beef and parched grain.

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"THEY PARTED WITHOUT FURTHER SPEAKING"

His personal belongings were not burdensome to transfer—the books, half a dozen in all, his revolver and field-glass, and a good ash bow with twelve dozen arrows, each bearing his private mark of a scarlet feather. These last he had been at work upon through many a long evening in the last two months, and he was sure that they would serve him well should need arise. Clothing and blankets he did not trouble about, even with the cold weather close at hand, for he could reckon certainly on finding abundant supplies of this nature in the city itself.

On the fourth night after the finding of the bottle Constans swung lightly out of his garret window. He cast one farewell glance at the shuttered windows of Messer Hugolin's office. Through a chink struggled a feeble beam of pale, yellow light, but his uncle was poring, doubtless, over his ledgers and had heard no sound. The wolf-hound Grip wagged his tail as Constans passed, and he patted his head, the one single creature in his uncle's household who might regret his absence on the morrow. Now the way was clear; he stole off into the darkness, finding no difficulty in scaling the wall, and so was free.

The night was misty and starless and the tide on a strong ebb. The voyage down-stream was without incident, and by midnight he had landed within the city lines, but much farther up-town than upon the occasion of his first adventure. His plan was to seek some uninhabited house within convenient distance of the library building and make that his temporary headquarters. He found what he wanted in the block immediately to the westward of the library, and in three or four trips he had transported thither his stock of food and other impedimenta. The boat had leaked badly on the way down the river, and was plainly unseaworthy. There was no place in which to hide the craft, and to allow her to remain moored at the pier would be tantamount to announcing his arrival to the first sharp-eyed Doomsman who might chance to pass that way. So, pushing her out into the current with a vigorous shove from his foot, Constans watched the little hull disappear in the darkness. Henceforth he must depend entirely upon his own resources, inadequate as they were for the task before him. But upon this phase of the situation he would not allow himself to dwell. Such unprofitable meditation could breed naught but irresolution and be unnerving to both body and mind; if he were to play the coward now he but invited the fate he feared. Courage, then, and forward!

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XI

THE SISTERS

A young girl sat before a magnificent fireplace of cut stone gazing into the fire of drift-wood that burned diffidently upon a hearth whose spaciousness would have been more fittingly adorned by Vergil's "no small part of a tree." Out-of-doors the snow was whirling down in small, frozen flakes that the northwest gale ground into powder against the granite walls and then sifted through every crack and crevice; not a door-sill or window-seat but wore its decoration of a pure white wreath. Bitterly cold it had grown with the closing in of the dusk, and the girl drew her cloak, a superb garment of Russian sables, closer about her shoulders and stretched out her hands to the dying blaze. Then she clapped them impatiently. A long interval and a middle-aged man answered the summons—a servant, as the coarse quality of his clothing proclaimed. He shuffled across the floor, his big boots creaking unpleasantly.

"More wood, Ugo," said the girl, without looking around; "and I do wish you would grease your boots. It is unbearable the way you clatter about."

"Grease my boots!" echoed the man, with ironic emphasis. "That is good counsel, seeing there isn't enough lard in the house for the frying of an egg; yes, and no egg to fry."

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The girl half turned, as though about to speak, then checked herself. Ugo went on impertinently:

"I could see long ago how things were going, but, Lord, what was the use of breaking my heart over it! A dainty lip means a short purse-string, and a sick woman's fancy is a bottomless well. Let's have plain speaking about this; it can't hurt any one now, and your mother——"

He stopped short, disconcerted, for all his bravado, by the sudden glint of red that lit up the girl's eyes. Her hand plucked at the black ribbon around her throat; yet when she spoke her voice was clear and even.

"Never mind about my mother," she said, and the man kept sulky silence.

"Is it really true that there is no food in the house?" she continued.

"There was never a rope made that hadn't an end," answered the servant, with a trifle more of his former assurance. "Not a scrap of bacon nor a handful of flour in the larder; even the rats will tell you that. I saw two of them leaving to-day, and I've about made up my mind to follow them."

The girl unlocked a drawer in the teak-wood table that stood at her elbow, and took from it a leathern thong some eight inches in length and knotted together at the ends, a purse-string in common parlance. Upon it were strung three of the thin brass tokens pierced in the centre by a square hole that were in ordinary use among the Doomsmen as currency, redeemable against the material supplies on hand in the public storehouses.

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The girl untied the thong and let the coins fall upon the table. She pushed them over to the fellow with a gesture superbly indifferent.

"Go now," she said, curtly. The man Ugo pocketed the money with a darkening face and turned to depart. At the door he hesitated, making as though he would say a final word. But the girl cut him short.

"Go!" she reiterated, and he had no choice but to obey.

"I should have been in peril of having my ear nicked," he said, under his breath, as he crossed the threshold. "It's just as well that I kept my tongue between my teeth and concluded not to mind Quinton Edge's business." He closed the door.

It had grown quite dark, and the fire was making its last stand for life. Only one small piece of wood remained unconsumed, and the flame licked at it lazily, like a beast of prey hanging over a carcass, gorged to repletion and yet unwilling to give over employment so delicious. Suddenly the girl rose to her feet and went to one of the long windows that looked out upon the street. The casement shook and rattled under the gale's rough hand. Hardly knowing what she did, she flung the window wide open.

In an instant she seemed to have been transported into the midst of the tumult, her face lashed by windy whips, her eyes blinded by fine particles of frozen snow, her ears deafened by the multitudinous voices of the storm sprites shrieking to their fellows. Something in her nature, fierce and untamed, leaped forth to meet the tempest. Intoxicated by the strong wine of its fury, she flung out her arms, half fearing, half hoping that she might be swept away, whirled like some wild sea-bird, into the heart of the madness. A strong hand pulled her back.

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"Esmay!" shrieked a voice in her ear. "Esmay!"

Loudly as the call must have been uttered, it came to her, as though from a great distance, thin and of an infinite littleness. Yet she allowed herself to be drawn back into the room, and made no

demur to the closing of the window.

It was a tall, finely built woman of thirty or thereabouts who stood beside her—a woman with a dark, passionate face shaded by a mop of raven hair as coarse as a horse's mane. "Esmay!" she said again, with an accent of wondering reproach.

The girl stood silent, motionless for a moment; then, with a swift intake of her breath:

"Don't be angry, Nanna, but something is going to happen. I've got to laugh or to cry—I don't know which."

It was a laugh, low but genuine, and full of a silver trickle of sound. The elder woman caught up the girl impetuously into a close embrace.

"My dear! my dear! is it really you? I can't believe it. After these dreadful three months in which you have hardly said as many words. It would be a miracle, if there were any saints in Doom to work one."

She drew away for a moment, her eyes ablaze with excitement. There was a smooth, graceful strength in her every movement that was almost animal-like; she suggested the idea of a big cat as she alternately released the girl and then returned, in a half-circle, to take renewed possession of her. "A miracle!" she repeated.

"Indeed, it almost needed that to bring me to myself," said the girl, gravely. "But now I see things clearly; it seems almost as though the mother herself had stood beside me and drawn the veil away. It was Ugo, though, who really did it," she added, and laughed again softly.

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"Ugo!" echoed the other, indignantly. "And, if you please, where is the fellow? The candles have not been lighted, the fire is dying out, and not a sign of supper visible. It is unbearable, Esmay, and he shall pack this very night."

"But Nanna!"

"I won't listen to a word."

"You will. He has gone already."

She pushed the elder woman into a chair. "Now don't dare to move until I am back with wood and a light. Not a word, sister mine—if you love me." Taken by surprise, Nanna let her go, and sat waiting.

The girl returned in a few minutes with a basket containing several lumps of sea-coal.

"This is a thousand times better than Ugo's boards and barrel-staves," said Esmay, triumphantly, and transferred the fuel to the hearth, where it presently burst into a cheerful flame. "There are three or four boxes of the stuff in the cellar, enough to last us all winter. Now for the lamp."

On the mantel-piece stood a shallow dish containing a small quantity of cotton-seed oil and a piece of lampwick. Esmay took down the vessel and inspected it with a calculating eye. "It will last until bedtime," she announced, and lit it with a spill of paper.

Nanna looked at her half-sister questioningly, but did not offer to speak. She had never seen Esmay just like this, and the change was especially noticeable after the silence and apathy of the past months. Her thoughts travelled back to the human link that had united them for so long—the woman whom each had called mother, although to Nanna it had been only a step-relationship. How impossible it had once seemed that there could be any new adjustment of life's machinery; how difficult the realization that nature is accustomed to settle these matters in her own time and way, and invariably does so! Yet here was Esmay suddenly returned to herself, moving about, alert and eager, knitting her brows over the one important problem of the moment, the question of supper.

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"You'll have to make out with the firelight for a little while," said Esmay, picking up the rude lamp. "But you won't mind, dear?" She stooped, kissed her sister, and was gone again.

The elder woman felt her eyes brimming saltily. The girl, so far as years were concerned, might almost have been her daughter, since Nanna had been both wife and widow at seventeen. For all that, the sisterly relation was the true one between them; they were of the same strong breed, even if Esmay were only in half a daughter of the Doomsmen. Nanna had never been able to forget that her father's second wife had been of the blood of the despised House People. In spite of herself she had learned to love the dead Elena; she adored Esmay as a part of herself. A primitive emotion, but then Nanna was the elemental woman.

When Esmay returned she brought with her a bowl containing a small quantity of cottage cheese, hard and yellow with age. Surmounting the bowl was a plate upon which were some crusts of bread and a knuckle of ham, the latter being little more than the bare bone. A table stood in the middle of the room, a handsome piece of buhl-work. Esmay drew it forward to the fire and proceeded to arrange her feast. Scanty enough it seemed, but the cloth covering the table was of the finest damask, the plates that she took from a glazed cabinet were of the precious china of Sèvres, the knives and forks were in solid silver, and the drinking-cups of silver-gilt had been fashioned by a great artist. A strange contrast! beggar's fare served so royally; but hunger is not nice about trifles one way or the other. And so it was upon the viands that Nanna's attention was immediately concentrated. She glanced suspiciously at the cheese, despairingly at the knuckle-

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bone, and then said, solemnly:

"Tell me, Esmay, what does it mean? Where is Ugo?"

"Ugo has deserted us—like the rats," answered the girl. "And the situation—it is just this." She stopped and took a swallow of water. "It is three months now since she—the mother—slipped away from our arms, and of course the pension stopped with her. I gave the last handful of tokens to Ugo to settle up his wages. So you see I'm a beggar. It's a woman against the world, and one of us will have to devour the other. Lucky, isn't it, that I woke up desperately hungry? That means that I'll make a fight for it. Have the first bite."

"Esmay! You know that I have still my widow's rate."

"Yes, and I also know that it is barely enough to keep one body and soul together; the two of us would only starve by inches. No use, Nanna, we must take things as we find them. But isn't it strange—" She stopped abruptly and let her glance wander over the luxurious table-service, the gleaming surface of the silver reflecting her troubled eyes. She went on slowly:

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"All this meant something once—this array of silver and jewelled glass, the tapestries on the walls, the fur cloak about my shoulders. Think of it, Nanna! These things must have been the envied treasures of the rich, the luxuries of life. And now any one may possess them who cares to fight their battle with moth and rust."

"While a single one of Dom Gillian's brass tokens outweighs it all," rejoined Nanna, nodding her head wisely. "It is not hard to understand why, for with the token any one may buy a quarterweight of flour at the public stores or a fore-shoulder of mutton."

"And bread and meat mean life, don't they? Well, and suppose one doesn't happen to possess a long purse-string laden with these wonderful, miracle-working bits of token-money, what then? A woman can't put on a quilted coat and steel cap and go out with the raiders to earn her share of the loot. Fancy my teaching a fat House-dweller how to dance on a red-hot plate or riding the toll roads of the West Inch in a jacket full of arrow-holes."

"That is true," agreed Nanna, gravely.

Esmay rose and walked excitedly up and down the long room.

"It's just hopeless, Nanna, to stay on here in this city of the dead."

She stopped and faced her sister.

"So I have decided; I am going back to my mother's people. There is a chance in their world for a woman to secure her own living; here she can only starve or accept some man's protection."

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The elder woman remonstrated feebly, but the girl swept her aside.

"Listen to me, Nanna. You know that Messer Hugolin, Councillor Primus of Croye, is my uncle, my mother's own brother. She ever insisted that in his charity I had a final resource. He might not offer it, but surely he could not deny me, if I sought it. Nanna, you recall what the mother herself said—how she always believed that the message would reach him. My own uncle and Councillor Primus of Croye," she concluded, hopefully.

But Nanna was not to be so easily convinced. "But, Esmay, it is impossible," she exclaimed. "You could never escape from Doom."

"But I will."

"You cannot. The High Bridge to the north is always guarded, and on the other three sides of the city there is deep water."

"I shall manage it," returned the girl, confidently. "It is simply a question of my going empty-handed to my uncle's house. Now gold among the House-dwellers has a value that it does not possess with us; so Ulick once told me. They use it as money."

"Here in Doom it is nothing," assented Nanna, "save that we women like the pretty things that the ancients fashioned from it."

"Precisely; and as you know there is not much of it in existence, even here in Doom, where silver is almost as common as iron."

"Well, and then?"

"Don't you see? If only golden tongues could plead my cause in Croye I should be independent, even of my uncle Hugolin. Now there is store of this gold somewhere in Doom. It must be so, for the war-galleys always carry a money-chest when they sail to the northern colonies."

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"A treasure," said Nanna, slowly. "Who would know of it here in Doom? Dom Gillian himself—or perhaps—"

"Master Quinton Edge," supplied Esmay, and thereupon silence fell between them.

The minutes passed away. Then, suddenly, Esmay stopped in her monotonous pacing of the room and flung herself on her knees by her sister's chair.

"You goose!" she exclaimed, with tender suspicion. "I believe you have been crying."

"Not a bit of it," returned Nanna, sitting bolt upright and staring hard at the ceiling. "I only want you to be sure and let me know before you go. Or couldn't you take me with you?" she added, wistfully, as though the idea had but just occurred to her.

"Why, Nanna, as though I could have dreamed of anything else! Go without you! Don't you see yourself how ridiculous that would be?"

"Then nothing else matters," said Nanna, comfortably, and openly wiped her eyes. "When do you want to go—to-night?"

"Foolish one! But then you love me, and I can forgive you. Now let me be quiet; I want to think out my—our plan."

Nanna left the room softly. Esmay sat looking into the fire, her small, firm chin propped in her palm. So violent was the storm that she did not hear the opening and closing of the street-door, but the flickering of the lamp in the swirl of a current from the outer air warned her that she had a visitor. She recognized him instantly as he came forward, his laced hat in the hollow of his arm. There was no one in Doom besides Master Quinton Edge who bowed with so easy a grace—a woman has a quick eye for such trifles.

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"You are Esmay, daughter of Mad Scarlett," he began, gently. "My intrusion is unseasonable, perhaps, but none the less unavoidable."

The girl made no answer.

"I will speak to the point," he went on. "Are you ready to make choice, to-night, between young Ulick and his oafish cousin Boris? I have a reason for asking, believe me."

Esmay flushed with annoyance. "I will not listen to either of them," she said. "Boris I detest, and Ulick is only a boy, and a silly one; I have told him so a score of times."

"I thought as much, but I wanted the confirmation of your own lips, my dear child. The knowledge emboldens me to offer you an asylum under my own roof for the next few months—or longer. Ulick, as you say, is but a boy, half hot, half muddle-head. He, perhaps, could be kept in check —"

"I can manage that sufficiently well," broke in the girl, haughtily.

"No doubt, no doubt; but with Boris also in the field the situation becomes a complicated one. Accordingly, I have concluded to offer you my assistance in dealing with it."

"It is difficult to think of Master Quinton Edge in the light of a disinterested adviser. Perhaps you have other motives."

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"Possibly," returned the man, with calm assurance. "Why not a dozen of them? But to disclose them—this is not the time. You have only to accept my offer and be thankful."

"Suppose that I refuse?"

Quinton Edge glanced over his shoulder, and the three men who had been standing motionless in the shadow of the doorway took a step forward.

"You perceive that there is no such alternative," he said, suavely.

The girl started but kept herself in hand. "My sister goes with me?"

"No," said Quinton Edge.

But Nanna's arms were already encircling her treasure. She had entered unobserved, and she had heard enough to understand. "You!" she said, and spat at Quinton Edge.

The man's face paled. He stepped forward as though making to push the intruder away. In a flash she had turned upon him and her teeth closed upon the fleshy part of his right hand. He shook her off as one does a snake.

"A true forest-cat," said Quinton Edge, and smiled as he twisted a fine lawn handkerchief about the wounded member. Then, with entire good-humor: "I apologize for my incivility and truth; it were a biting rejoinder. Madam, you, too, are welcome to my poor house. With such a dragon in the garden, he will be a brave man indeed who thinks to filch my apples."

Nanna, huddled up in a corner of the room whither she had been flung, answered not a word, but watched him steadily, unwinkingly, her eyes narrowed to two gleaming slits. Esmay went over and assisted her to her feet.

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"You will give us time to get a few things together," said the girl, turning to Quinton Edge. "A woman cannot be moved about like a piece of furniture."

"Ten minutes."

It were waste of breath to renew the argument, and within the quarter of an hour the two women, closely shawled and veiled, descended the steps to the street. It was still storming. A coach drawn by two horses was waiting at the curb, and the Doomsman, having assisted his

unwilling guests to mount within, took his place on the box with the driver, the three men following on horseback. The little company moved slowly down the avenue; then, turning into a side thoroughfare, proceeded directly eastward.

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XII

THE HEDGE OF ARROWS

For the first few days following upon his arrival in the city, Constans kept under cover, venturing forth only after nightfall. He wanted to make sure of all his bearings before taking any long step in advance, and the extent and strength of the enemy's defences particularly interested him. Fortunately for his purpose the weather was growing colder every day, autumn having given place to winter much earlier than usual, and on these chilly nights the Doomsmen were not inclined to wander far abroad. By keeping closely to the side streets he ran but little risk of discovery through a chance encounter; at the same time he must get inside the danger zone if he hoped to obtain any information of value.

Constans found the solution of his problem by betaking himself to the house-tops. Through the aid of a rope, furnished with cross-pieces inserted in the strands at regular intervals and a grappling-hook at the free end, he could pass easily from roof to roof of contiguous buildings, and so gain points of observation that otherwise he would never have dared to approach.

One of these aerial routes led from the side avenue on the east to a moderate-sized building situated on the Citadel Square and directly overlooking the fortress. Twice now he had ventured to spend the whole of a day lying perdue in this convenient eyrie, his binoculars in constant use, and what he saw and learned increased his thoughtfulness, although he would not let it shake his resolution.

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So far as he could judge, the Doomsmen could not be regarded as formidable through mere weight of numbers. Their available fighting force Constans estimated at two hundred, which would indicate a total population of a round thousand. Now Croye alone was a city of full fifteen hundred inhabitants, and the census of the West Inch should show twice that number. In an open field, and man to man, the House-dwellers were much more than a match for Dom Gillian's wolves.

On the other hand, the Doomsmen were all trained warriors, and to smoke them out of their own nest—one would have to think twice about that. Here was a half-ruined city, several square miles in actual area, and surrounded by unfordable tidal rivers. Deep at its heart was the citadel, strongly built and abundantly supplied with water and provisions. Under these circumstances it was a simple matter for a small force to maintain itself indefinitely; it would necessitate the employment of an attacking army four or five times as large as the defence to even up the chances. This, of course, on the presumption that both sides were armed alike. Constans's thoughts reverted to the fire artillery of the ancients; with that at his disposal he would hold the balance of power. The possession of a single score of rifles should enable him to demonstrate the feasibility of the attempt to his sluggard kinsmen, the Stockaders, and to the even more reluctant townsmen. He determined to take the first opportunity to make a careful search of the city armories and ammunition depots; in the mean time, it was his business to acquaint himself as thoroughly as possible with the material situation.

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The stronghold of the Doomsmen occupied the middle section of the ancient city square. In shape it was an irregular oblong, the original builders being apparently content to enclose sufficient space without reference to architectural symmetry. Its perimeter might be roughly estimated at eight hundred yards, respectable proportions, and indicating a capacity to comfortably accommodate the whole population of Doom should the necessity arise.

The barricade was constructed of stone, principally paving-blocks torn up from the adjoining streets, and since the material was unlimited in quantity the walls were of massive proportions, sixteen feet in height and nearly six feet in thickness at the bottom course. At the several corners stood towers elevated some ten feet above the wall veil and properly loop-holed. Under the east and south walls and virtually built into them were a series of huts, which served as storehouses and for living quarters in time of siege. At present these huts—low, uncomfortable-looking structures of stone and roofed with broad, flat flags—were untenanted save for the two or three used by the small garrison on duty. The western side of the enclosure was occupied almost entirely by storehouses for grain and other provisions; here, too, were pens for cattle on the hoof and immense cisterns for the storage of drinking-water. Somewhat to the south of the centre of the square stood what appeared to be the administration building, a round, tower-like structure, three stories in height and with enormously thick walls. One could fancy it the scene of a last stand in a lost cause.

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Directly opposite, in the north wall, was the gateway. It opened on to the Palace Road, one of the principal avenues of the ancient city, and was in the form of a vaulted passageway defended by flanking towers and superimposed battlements. A notable stronghold was this citadel of the Doomsmen, wisely planned and well built, and Constans could hardly fall into the error of under-

estimating its resources. For all that, he would not acknowledge that it was impregnable; stone walls cannot stand forever against stout hearts.

Day by day went on and Constans kept adding steadily to his stock of information. Most important of all, he had succeeded in definitely locating the several positions of the enemy. It appeared that the district actually inhabited by the Doomsmen included only the fortified square and a few of the city blocks contiguous to it on the north. The distance from the citadel to the library building and Dom Gillian's house was about a mile, and it was some five miles further to the tidal estuary which formed the northern boundary of the city proper. Of the various structures that had formerly spanned the stream, but one, the High Bridge, remained. Built of massive masonry, it had wonderfully resisted the disintegrating processes of time, and stood today, immovable as the granite hills of which it formed the connecting link. Being the sole means of landward approach to Doom, it was guarded carefully, and a detail from the general garrison was at all times on duty there.

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The final conclusion to which Constans arrived was that he had only to avoid the immediate neighborhood of the Palace Road and the Citadel Square to pursue his investigations with entire safety. Accordingly he grew venturesome, and began to go out-of-doors at all hours of the day or night. And then on the fourteenth day after his arrival in the city his immunity came abruptly to an end.

It was early in the forenoon, and Constans was exploring a quarter of the city that lay to the northeast of the Citadel Square. He became interested in the curious, bridgelike structure which spanned the street; enough of it remained standing to show him that it had been designed for overhead traffic, a highway in the air. There were the rails, the signal-boxes, and other mysterious adjuncts of the ancient railways; he had read about them in his books and he recognized them at once.

Now this particular section of the aerial railway must have been a branch line, for it ended abruptly in front of a building of unusual size and consequent importance. Beyond this again could be seen a surface net-work of iron rails converging to the black mouth of a great tunnel—a highway under the earth. Constans felt a lively impulse to push his explorations further. This was evidently a terminal station of the wonderful steel roads of the ancients; within the building itself he might reasonably expect to find some of the old-time engines and wagons with which the traffic had been carried on.

Passing through a central hall of fine proportions, Constans found himself standing under an immense arched structure of stone and iron and glass. The ancient car-shed, so Constans conjectured; then he paused excitedly before a long platform, at which stood a complete train, made up and ready to start.

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Constans examined this new find with critical attention. The enormous locomotive-engine, with its driving-wheels that stood higher than a man's head, impressed him mightily, for all that the monster's burning heart had grown cold and its stentor breathing had been hushed forever. He climbed into the cab and wondered hugely at the multiplicity of stopcocks and levers and cabalistically lettered dials. It seemed incredible that the giant could have moved even his own weight, and yet there was his appointed task strung out behind him, fifteen long and heavy vehicles—it was amazing!

Behind the engine came the cars for luggage, piled high with bags and boxes, and then the regular train equipment, a long line of coaches. These last were of the most luxurious pattern—that was plain to see, although the varnish had blistered on the panels and the silken curtains at the windows hung in tatters. The last car of all had clearly been in service as an eating apartment, and fortunately the doors of this coach had been left closed and the windows remained intact. Constans entered and looked about him, noting that the tables still bore their weight of plate and china and napery. Most moving of all was the little nosegay that stood in a tall glass at each cover. But even as he gazed, delighted that the flowers still retained recognizable shape, they broke and crumbled into nothingness.

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It was difficult to understand why the train should have been abandoned, it being evident that it had stood here, ready for immediate departure, but the unquestionable fact may serve to emphasize again the suddenness of the final catastrophe. People had simply dropped and forgotten everything. In the extremity of terror civilized man had become a savage, reverting to primeval instincts in preferring his legs to any other means of escape. There was but one thing left for him—to run away.

It was a depressing experience to be standing solitary and alone under these vast arches that had echoed to the tramp of feet innumerable. A sense of his loneliness pressed heavily upon Constans; then, suddenly, he became aware of the presence of a man, who stood leaning against a pillar a short distance away and watched him from under close-knit brows.

The fair hair and frank, kindly face seemed dimly familiar to Constans; and what thighs and breadth of shoulder! The stranger stood little short of gianthood, and Constans would have run small chance against him as man to man. Bitterly he regretted having left his bow behind; even his double-edged hunting-knife was missing from his belt.

The man walked deliberately forward to meet him. Certainly his dress and equipment proclaimed him a Doomsman, and by the same token he must have recognized that Constans was an alien. Yet he smiled and held out his hand as he came up.

"It is Constans, of course; for who else among the House People would dare to cross the Gray Wolf's threshold. Do you not remember Ulick?"

The two young men shook hands heartily, albeit a certain constraint was immediately to fall upon them. For Constans could not be unmindful of his purpose, and Ulick was a true Doomsman, and hatred of the House-dweller was the first article in his hereditary creed. The inheritance of a naked sword lay between them. Was it not inevitable that one or the other of them should be moved to take it up?

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It was Constans who realized that only frankness could save the situation, and as they walked along he told Ulick the full story of the enmity between him and Quinton Edge, then of the years of his apprenticeship to his Uncle Hugolin, and of the message in the bottle that had served to crystallize desire into action. The purport of the letter was still fresh in his mind, and he repeated it as nearly as he could word for word.

"Esmay, did you say?" interrupted Ulick. "It was Esmay who helped me trap you. Don't you remember her eyes, brown and with a flame in them like to the carbuncles in the bracelet that I gave her? Elena was her mother."

Constans assented, indifferently. In truth, he had entirely forgotten about the girl.

"Ten days ago she disappeared," said Ulick, gloomily, "and not a trace of her have I been able to discover. Yet I believe that your friend Quinton Edge could tell me if he would."

"I don't understand."

"Nor does anybody else. For all that, I am sure that he does not want her for himself; no woman has ever been able to boast that Master Quinton Edge looked at her twice. Were it otherwise I think I should go mad."

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Constans shrugged his shoulders impatiently; then he looked up and saw the pain in the big fellow's face. It touched him, although he could not comprehend the weakness (for such it seemed to him), that had given it birth.

"If you could see her, you would understand," continued Ulick, as though divining his thought. Again they walked along in silence. Constans broke it abruptly:

"And your grandsire, is he still living? I can see him yet, that terrible old man who wanted to cut out my eyes and tongue so that you could have a new toy."

Ulick smiled, and the current of his darker mood was diverted.

"Lucky for you that he fell asleep again before he could give the order for the irons to be heated. And so we ran away trembling, and I brought you to the vault underneath the sidewalk—do you remember?"

"I remember," said Constans, briefly.

"He is living still; think how old he must be! Nowadays he sleeps nearly all the time; sometimes for a week on end he will not leave his couch in the darkened room. Then again he will have himself apparelled and his great sword girded upon him, and he will come down into the courtyard and walk in the sun for hours. You should see those lazy rascals of guardsmen scatter at the first sight of him—like mice running to their holes when puss begins to yawn and stretch herself."

"You are still the heir?"

"Yes, unless the council sees fit to set my rights aside in favor of my cousin Boris. To tell the truth, neither of us is fit to be chief in Doom while Quinton Edge lives."

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"Tell me."

"Why, you see, Boris is a brute whose brains, such as he has, are always fuddled with ale. And I ——" Ulick stopped and laughed a little sheepishly.

"Well?"

"Frankly, then, I don't want to carry the weight of the wolf-skin; I should feel like a man buried up to his neck in sand. I dreamed of that the other night, and how a raven that had Quinton Edge's face came and pecked at my eyes."

"Then you really don't care," commented Constans, shrewdly.

"No; except to have my fair share of the fighting and feasting—and, of course, Esmay."

Constans laughed. "You always come back to the girl."

"How could it be otherwise, since I love her?" said Ulick, simply.

Constans grew sober again. "Strange that it should be the same man, Quinton Edge, for whom we are both seeking. I can see, however, that my arrow must not leave the string until first you have had speech with him."

"But that is just what I cannot do," returned Ulick, with a frown. "It is a week now that any one has seen him, and yet neither galley nor troop has left the city since the new moon."

"He must show himself in time; we have only to wait."

"Waiting! it is the one thing——"

"Yet you must; the chance is certain to come. Only, if I help you in this, then afterwards when you have learned what you want——" [Pg 116]

Ulick nodded. "Do what you will, but until then it is Esmay who stands first, and he lives under her shadow."

The young men had been walking in the direction of the Citadel Square, and the time had come for Constans to decide whether or not he should give Ulick his full confidence. Yesterday he had moved all his belongings to a large building on the south side of the square overlooking the fortress, and he was minded to establish himself there permanently. It might seem foolhardy for him to take up his abode, not under, indeed, but just above the noses of his enemies; in reality, he was as safe in one place as in another. Here was an immense building, containing literally hundreds of apartments; it was like being in a rabbit-warren, a labyrinth of passages and rooms that it would take a regiment to explore. He had only to observe reasonable prudence in entering and leaving his lair to be assured against the ordinary risks of discovery, and he depended, too, upon the obvious negligence of the sentinels. It was a simple application of the principle that what is nearest to the eye is oftenest overlooked.

For where he stood he could see the huge bulk of the sky-scraper towering into the blue. The building had been constructed upon a narrow, triangular plot of land, and its ground-plan bore a fanciful resemblance to the shape of a flat-iron. Its acute angle was pointed towards them; one compared it instinctively to the prow of some gigantic ship of stone ploughing its way through billows of brick and mortar. [Pg 117]

"Come," said Constans, and Ulick, understanding the confidence about to be reposed in him, followed silently.

It was a small front-room on the third floor that Constans had fitted up as his abode, and after Ulick had passed approving judgment upon his friend's domestic arrangement they walked over to the window and stood there looking down into the thoroughfare upon which the building faced. Formerly this open space had been paved with small oblong blocks of stone, but these had long since been incorporated with the walls of the fortress, and in their stead was a stretch of thick, short turf. Pacing slowly along, there came in sight the figure of a man, his head bent down and his hands clasped behind his back. Constans recognized him instantly, even before Ulick's eager whisper had reached his ear. It was Quinton Edge.

Constans knew that he was doing a foolish thing, but the humor of the moment gripped him, and he yielded to it. To make sport of this insolent, and so wipe out, in some measure, the memory of his own humiliation—the temptation was too great to be resisted, and the next instant the bowstring twanged and an arrow plunged into the ground, a scant yard in front of Quinton Edge, and stuck there quivering. Involuntarily, the Doomsman stepped back and another arrow grazed his heel; a half turn to the right and a third shaft sheared the curling ostrich-plume from his hat. A fourth arrow to the left of him, and then Quinton Edge understood. He drew himself up and stood still while a dozen more skilfully directed bolts winged their way to complete the barbed circle that hemmed him in. And each missile bore its individual message to his memory—a tiny tuft of scarlet inserted in the feathering. [Pg 118]

Quinton Edge waited an instant or so, as though out of pure politeness, then turned and faced the great building that towered mountainously above his head. There were hundreds of window openings in the tremendous façade of the "Flat-iron," and he had no means of guessing the precise one in whose deep embrasure his enemy stood concealed; at any moment he might expect the final shaft striking home to his heart and staining its feathering all crimson in his life blood. Yet there was no hint of perturbation in the affected languor of his voice; he bowed slightly and spoke:

"What a sorry marksman! See! I will give you a final chance to hit the gold. Make the most of it, for here in Doom no man's hair grows long enough to hide a nicked ear."

He threw back his cloak of crimson cloth and unbuttoned the white, ruffled shirt that he wore underneath, exposing his naked throat and breast. And not an eyelash quivered, while he stood there for the space in which one might count a score slowly.

"As you please, then," he continued, readjusting his garments with punctilious care. "I must warn you, however, that standing so long in this chilly air may mean the influenza for me. By the Shining One! if we keep on like this the interest due on our little account is likely to exceed in amount the original principal. That would be a pity as happening between gentlemen, who know naturally nothing of what they call business and have no desire to cheat each other."



**"AN INSTANT LATER THE BOWSTRING
TWANGED"**

Then he laughed heartily, unaffectedly. "What a comedy! and you and I cast for the fools in it. Which is the bigger one neither of us should be willing to say. And for the best of reasons, we don't know. My compliments, brother imbecile, and so good-day." [Pg 119]

Quinton Edge doffed his hat as though to intimate that the interview was at an end, then stepped lightly across the hedge of arrows and proceeded at an even pace to the eastern angle of the fortress, around which he disappeared.

Ulick's eyes were sparkling as he turned to Constans.

"He is at least a man," he said, half proudly, half enviously.

But Constans only set his teeth the harder. "I could have gone out, met him face to face and killed him," he said, sombrely, "only for you and your Esmay." [Pg 120]

XIII

GODS IN EXILE

February, and a full three months since Constans had come to Doom. And yet he was virtually at his starting-point, so little had he been able to accomplish along the line of his purpose. A dozen times indeed he might have planted an arrow between the delicately shrugged shoulders of Master Quinton Edge as he strolled, of a sunshiny morning, along the Palace Road, surrounded by his little body-guard of flatterers and political courtiers. But such an act would have stained his honor without fully satisfying his vengeance; he did not want to strike until he should know where it would hurt the most.

It had been Ulick always who had stood in the road; Ulick with his eternal lamentations over the maid Esmay. Together they had searched for her in every possible quarter. But where was one to look first in this wilderness of stone? It would have been an obvious procedure to have kept close watch upon the movements of Quinton Edge, whose complicity was a matter of reasonable suspicion. But the first attempts at shadowing him had resulted in nothing, and early in December the *Black Swan*, with Quinton Edge himself in command, had left her moorings in the Greater river, bound doubtless on some piratical expedition. [Pg 121]

It was an added aggravation of Constans's impatience that Ulick himself was ordered away at the end of January. He had been drafted to take part in a raid, and since the route of the proposed foray led far to the southward he would probably be absent for a considerable time. It would take

a fortnight's hard riding for the band to reach the distant colony against which the attack had been planned, and fully six weeks would be required in which to drive the cattle home. Two full months, then, and as yet only one had passed; the returning raiders would not cross the High Bridge much before the first day in April.

As the weeks went heavily on, Constans, in spite of his philosophy, began to fret and chafe. He could put in a part of each day in the library poring over his books and digging out the ancient wisdom from the printed page by sheer force of will. But there always came a time when only physical exertion would have any effect in dispelling the mental disquietude that possessed him, and then he would throw aside his books and walk the empty streets for hours.

The weather continued bad, bitter cold alternating with storms of rain and sleet. Towards the end of January the snow came in earnest: it lay a foot deep on the level, and the Doomsmen, after their custom, kept closely within doors. Constans would occasionally note a few fresh tracks along the Palace Road, and the smoke that curled steadily from scattered chimney-pots and the bivouac fires on the Citadel Square might be taken as evidence that the suspension of social activities was only temporary. But for the present, at least, Constans had the city to himself, and he wandered about as he chose without a thought of possible danger.

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An anxiously longed-for discovery was the reward of one of these lonely excursions. In a shop that had once been devoted to the sale of fire-arms, Constans found a quantity of ammunition of a caliber that would fit the chambers of his revolver. The cartridges had been packed in hermetically sealed cases, presumably for export-shipment or upon a special order. However that might be, the precaution had prevented the deterioration of the powder, and the ammunition was consequently, in condition for use. Constans nerved himself to make the experiment, but although his studies had made him well acquainted with the theory of the explosive projectile, he had to summon all his resolution for the actual pulling of the trigger.

The detonation that followed startled him out of his self-possession. He dropped the pistol, and was out of the shop and half way across the street before he could recover himself. Then, ashamed of his cowardice, he forced himself to pick up the weapon and went forward to examine the two-inch plank at which he had taken aim. To his astonishment and delight he saw that a hole had been drilled clean through the solid oak and the bullet itself was lying on the ground, flattened from its impact with the masonry behind the planking. All this, let it be said again, was perfectly familiar to Constans in theory, but its realization in fact gave him a strange thrill. A score of men armed with these large caliber pistols, or, better still, rifles, might easily enough compel the surrender or bring about the destruction of the entire fighting force of the Doomsmen.

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Inspired by this new thought, Constans made a thorough examination of the stock of arms in the shop. To his disappointment he found most of the rifles in unserviceable condition, covered with rust and verdigris. Finally, however, he came across a dozen carbines carefully wrapped and packed for a prospective shipment across the ocean. Protected by their heavy coverings the weapons had suffered comparatively little damage, and Constans spent the best part of a week in cleaning them and getting the mechanism of their working parts into tolerable order.

Later on, Constans removed the serviceable ammunition, amounting to several hundred rounds, to a convenient hiding-place in the cellar of a building fronting on the Lesser or Eastern river, and he also transported thither the carbines, the latter carefully wrapped in greased rags to preserve them from dampness. Some day the opportunity would come to put these things to use. And now, February had passed, and March was well into its third quarter; in a few more days the returning sun would cross the line, and spring, the time for action, would be at hand. How he longed for its advent.

This was the third occasion upon which Constans had noticed that peculiar noise, a continuous, deep, humming note, such as might have been made by swarming-bees multiplied a hundredfold. On the day that he first heard it he happened to be walking three blocks to the westward of the Citadel Square, and it seemed then that the seat of the mystery lay almost due south. A week later he happened to be in the same locality. Once more, those deep-toned vibrations smote upon his ears; now the sound-waves were all about him and the sense of direction was lost; again, and they plainly proceeded from somewhere to the eastward. It was perplexing, but the varying quarter and strength of the wind might be sufficient to account for the difference, and in one curious particular the two observations corresponded. The day of the week in each case had been Friday, and the humming noise had commenced at precisely the same time—the passing of the sun over the meridian.

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To-day was the third successive Friday, and Constans had made preparations for the careful noting of the phenomenon should it reoccur. He waited with a lively sense of expectation, and he was not disappointed. At high noon the humming began again, and it seemed to be louder than when he had listened to it on the two former occasions—the air was full of the vibrant droning. There was a sinister quality, too, in its monotone, and Constans for the moment felt himself swayed by a gust of superstitious terror. He recalled the traditions current among the House-dwellers, the belief that Doom was inhabited not only by the outlaws but by demons of many a grewsome sort and kind. There were strange tales of lights that lured the wanderer onward, only to vanish as the victim sank into some frightful abyss; of invisible hands that plucked at the rash intruder's skirts; of monstrous shapes that leered and gabbled behind the traveller's back and were only blocks of stone when he turned to face them; of bloodless creatures that one might meet in the full flood of day, and whose unearthly character was only to be proved by observing

that they cast no shadow in even the brightest sunlight; of vampires and ghouls and fair women with enchanting voices, who enticed their victims into blind passageways and then changed suddenly to foul, harpy-like monsters. But in this latter case the foolish one had only himself to blame, for if he kept on the lookout he could always detect the masquerade by observing the creature's hands. The harpies could transform themselves in every other way, but their claws remained unchanged, and they were, consequently, obliged to cover them with gloves. "Beware the gloved hand," was a familiar aphorism among the wise women of the West Inch, and Constans, shaken in spite of himself by the remembrance of these old fables, felt the sweat break out upon his forehead, for all that the wind blew shrewdly cold.

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Yet as he waited and listened and still nothing happened his natural good-sense reasserted itself. Overhead a glorious winter sun was shining; as everybody knew, the sirens never sang until after dark, and assuredly they were accustomed to give a much more artistic performance. His courage re-established, curiosity asserted her rights; he must discover the source and nature of this mystery, and so he proceeded cautiously in the direction from whence it now appeared to come, a course that led him south by east for perhaps ten of the city blocks.

Constans found himself a short distance below the Citadel Square and in a quarter of the city that he had never yet explored. Suddenly he came upon a large building of brick covering a full square in area but only two stories in height. As he approached the humming noise grew louder and louder; the secret, whatever it was, lay concealed behind those common-place-looking walls. Constans held his breath and went forward slowly.

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The street, upon which the main elevation of the building faced was an unusually wide one, and directly in front of the entrance to the structure the snow had been cleared away from a circular space whose diameter was about forty feet. In this enclosure were three women whose costume, a dark gray cloak and scarlet hood, proclaimed them to be of the Doomsmen. They were kneeling on the hard pavement, and kept alternately bowing their foreheads to the ground and then bringing the upper body to a vertical position, the arms extended and the palms turned outward. The movements were done in time to the rhythmic throb of the mysterious humming, and undoubtedly the ceremony possessed some religious significance.

For perhaps ten minutes Constans stood motionless, watching the scene. Then, together, the women rose to their feet and approached a rude, block-shaped structure of stone that apparently served as an altar. Upon it each in turn laid her gift, some article of food, and immediately departed. In his eagerness to see what would follow, Constans stepped boldly around the corner, and so came within the view of a man who had just made his exit from the building.

It was too late to retreat, and Constans stood his ground, noting that the stranger seemed equally astonished with himself at the encounter. An elderly man, to judge by the whitening beard, but his eye was bright and searching, and there was no hint at superannuation in either port or movement. He was dressed in a long skirtlike garment of black cloth—true priest garb—and for a mirdle he wore a length of hempen rope tied in the peculiar and sinister fashion known as the "hangman's knot." Around his neck, suspended like a priest's stole, hung a steel chain with pendent manacles or handcuffs that jangled unmusically as he moved. A grotesque, almost ridiculous figure this priest of the Doomsmen, but with the first look into the man's face one forgot about the fantastic garb. A singular contradiction it presented, for the large, square jaw was indicative of a mind keenly rationalistic, while the high, narrow forehead assuredly proclaimed the partisan and the bigot.

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It was the elder man who broke the silence.

"The time is long since a man of the Doomsmen has appeared to pay his vows to the Shining One. You are welcome, my son."

Constans wondered if he had heard aright. Then he remembered that he was wearing a suit of Ulick's clothes and that his hair was cut after the Doomsmen fashion. It was a comfortable assurance of the merit of his disguise that it had passed muster so easily; he had only to guard against talking too much, and detection was practically impossible. So he contented himself with what might pass for an obeisance and some vague words of apology. The priest, however, paid no attention to his excuses, but continued in a tone of sarcastic bitterness:

"Strange that you should think it worth while to seek a god who is served only by women. Yet the Shining One seems neither to know nor to care that the sons of the Doomsmen come no longer into his presence chamber and bring no gifts to his altar. A god forsaken by his people, a neglected shrine, a worn-out creed—why, indeed, should any one do reverence to such things as these? Yet you have come."

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"I—my father——" stammered Constans. "There are reasons; I will explain——"

"It matters not," interrupted the priest, impatiently. "It is enough that you are here, and, being a man, you have the privilege of the inner mysteries. And possibly a message may be awaiting you. Come."

He took Constans by the hand and drew him towards the vaulted entrance-way. There was no reasonable opportunity for protest, and before Constans was fully aware of what was happening he had been hurried through the passage and into a large, semi-darkened building that was filled with the rumble and clank of machinery in rapid motion. Constans, having recovered from the first surprise and his eyes becoming accustomed to the obscurity, looked about him with a

dawning sense of comprehension.

In the middle of the hall was installed an enormous piece of machinery, a vast cylindrical construction revolving at great speed, and Constans became the more certain of its real nature as he proceeded to examine it in detail. He recalled the illustrations and diagrams that he had been poring over only the day before at the library building, and he was sure that this monster could be nothing else than an electric dynamo, and one of the very largest size, delivering as high as fifteen thousand horse-power of potential energy. But how to account for the chance that had preserved this mightiest of the Old-World forces? What miracle had been wrought to keep this soulless giant in life through so many years of darkness and of silence? Constans felt his head spinning; the consciousness of a fact so tremendous was overwhelming; to save himself he turned away from the dynamo proper and began looking about for the source of its mechanical energy. He found it in an odd-appearing motor, to which the dynamo was connected by the ordinary means of a shaft and belting.

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The engine was simple enough in outward construction. All that could be seen was an apparatus consisting of two ten-foot tuning-forks of steel supported on insulated pedestals, and between them a disk of some unknown composition, mounted in a vertical plane and revolving at inconceivable velocity. The power was taken from the shaft of this revolving disk and reduced in speed by means of gear-wheels before being conveyed to the dynamo. The prongs of the big tuning-forks continued to vibrate strongly, and gave out in unison the loud, humming note that had originally attracted Constans's attention. It was undoubtedly, a form of motor whose power was derived from some secret property of vibratory bodies, a recondite subject to which his books alluded but obscurely. Yet in the years immediately preceding the Great Change the principle seems to have been reduced to practical utility. Here was the engine in actual operation, and whatever its source of fuel supply or the ultimate secret of its energy there could be no doubt about its production of power. It moved, it was alive, and Constans gazed upon it with fascinated eyes.

The priest had risen to his feet; he touched Constans lightly on the shoulder.

"The presence chamber," he said, in a whisper. "Come, that you may look upon the face of the Shining One; he will rejoice in knowing that there is left even one faithful in Doom."

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He opened a door leading to a room at the left of the main hall and motioned Constans to enter. The door closed behind them and they stood in darkness. Then came the click of a switch-key, and out of the blackness faint lines of radiance appeared, changing slowly to a fiery brightness. And as the lines grew visible they resolved themselves into the semblance of a great and terrible face, the countenance of a man of heroic size with long hair. There was no suggestion of a body, only that majestic head crowned with hyacinthine locks and limned in lambent fire.

Constans felt his knees shaking under him, and involuntarily he prostrated himself; then again he heard the switch click, and the vision faded into nothingness.

There was the sound of a shutter being thrown back, and the daylight streamed in. He rose uncertainly to his feet and looked about him.

It was a small apartment, low-studded, with cement walls and a tiled floor. Near the door and fastened against the wall was a wooden framework, bearing a complicated arrangement of push-buttons and levers. Constans had seen its like pictured in his books, and he instantly conjectured it to be an electrical switch-board, designed to control and direct the current generated by the dynamo. On the opposite wall was suspended a thick sheet of some insulating substance—vulcanite—and fixed upon it was a net-work of wires in whose outlines he could distinguish the lineaments of the fiery face. Now he understood; it was simply a trick, the passing of a strong current of electricity through platinum wires until they became incandescent.

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The recognition of those material agencies for the production of the apparition that had so terrified him gave Constans back his confidence; his books had not deceived him, and he was ready now for any fresh marvels that might be on the cards. But the attitude of the priest puzzled him. Was he really the charlatan, the trickster that he seemed? Was it not equally simple to regard him as the self-deluded votary? He could not decide.

"You have looked upon the face of the Shining One," said the old man, breaking the silence. "Now behold his throne; perchance he will accord you the honor of sharing it with him."

In the middle of the apartment stood the only piece of furniture proper that it contained, a massive oaken chair, with a head-piece, upon which was fastened a metal plate. On the arms of the chair were copper clips, the size of a man's wrist, and all the points of contact were supplied with cups containing sponges. Again Constans understood. It was only necessary to dampen these sponges to ensure a perfect discharge of the electrical current passing through the head-rest and the metal wrist-clips. Constans shuddered, and this time with reason; he knew enough of the science to realize that the slightest contact with those enormously charged electrodes must be fatal.

The priest went to the switch-board, and, after a series of genuflections and the mumbling of what might have been an invocation, he turned a lever. Constans stepped back hastily.

"Now is the Shining One come upon his throne. Take your seat at his side if you would put his divinity to the proof. Or else be content to serve him in silence and singleness of heart, even as I."

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Constans guessed acutely that the full current from the dynamo must be passing through the metal framework of the great chair; he moved a little farther back and stood on guard. There was a glitter in the old man's eye that was disquieting, and Constans did not relish the idea of a hand-to-hand struggle in this contracted space with these wicked-looking wires running in every direction. One of them had been broken, and from the dangling end, which hung close to a metal wall-bracket, a continuous stream of sparks fizzed and spluttered.

"I am content," he said, quietly.

The priest smiled grimly. "Yet it is a pity that your doubts are not of a more stubborn growth, for it is many a year since the Shining One has taken a man to his arms. Of a truth, the ancient faith has failed miserably among the children of the Doomsmen, and I alone of all his priests remain to serve our lord."

There was silence, the old man remaining apparently absorbed in his bitter reverie. Constans had been growing more and more uncomfortable, and this seemed to be his opportunity to escape. He edged towards the door. Now the metal knob of the door handle was within reach; he grasped it, and received a severe electric shock. Unable to master his startled nerves, he gave utterance to a cry of pain. The priest turned quickly, a frosty smile upon his lips.

"The sentinels of the Shining One are faithful to their duty," he said, quietly. He touched a push-button, and Constans was at last able to let go of that innocent-looking door-knob; he fell to rubbing his arm vigorously in order to relieve the contracted muscles. What a ridiculous figure he had made of himself, he thought, vexedly.

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"My son."

There was a new note in the old man's voice, an inflection almost kindly, and Constans wondered.

"Nothing happens of itself," continued the priest, "and it was more than chance that led you thither. Surely, the Shining One has been mindful of his own, for I am an old man and my days are numbered. Therefore, has he sent you, my son, that to you I may commit the secrets of his power and worship. Then shall I ascend in peace upon the knees of the Silent One, knowing that his honor is safe in your hands. What say you?"

Constans realized that he was in a difficult position; nay more, that he was absolutely at the mercy of his new acquaintance. There was no means of exit save by the one door, and he had no desire for a second trial of strength with the electric current. The old priest might be ignorant of the real nature of the forces under his control, but certainly he was well provided with practical formulas for their exploitation, as witness the illuminated face and the electrically charged door-knob. Constans understood that he was in a trap, where even to come into contact with the walls of his prison-house might mean death. There was but one thing to do, and that was to surrender.

"I will serve the Shining One," he said, quietly.

"You have chosen well, my son," returned the old man. "Now a fool would never have understood that a net may be none the less strong for being invisible, and our lord does not love to speak twice. You have heard and you have obeyed; it is good."

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He stepped to the switch-board, and, after going through a series of genuflections, accompanied by an undertone of carelessly gabbled ritual, he depressed a lever. Instantly the room was in darkness and the spluttering wire ceased its crackling. The priest passed into the great hall, motioning Constans to follow him. Another brief and incomprehensible ritual and he approached the vibratory motor. Constans watched intently as he proceeded to manipulate a series of polished rods and levers. Suddenly the loud, humming note separated into two distinct tones, at first in musical accord and then becoming more and more dissonant. The revolving disk slowed down and stopped, and with it the dynamo came finally to rest. The hour of worship had come to an end; the Shining One had departed from his sanctuary.

At the suggestion of his ecclesiastical superior Constans brought within doors the offerings of food that had been left by the earlier worshippers. There were some dry cakes, baked of rye flour, a pot of honey, cheese, milk, and two bottles of wine. These provisions he was ordered to carry to a room on the story above the street, where a fire of sea-coal burned cheerfully in a brazier. Here they sat down and feasted amicably together, for the frosty air had put a keen edge to appetite and the noon hour was long overpast. And then as they sat at ease after the meal and the old man was well started on his second pipe, Constans came directly to the point.

"If I am to serve the Shining One acceptably," he said, "there are many things that I should know. May I speak, my father?"

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The priest looked at him searchingly. "As you will," he replied.

All through the afternoon and deep into the night they talked earnestly together. And so, from time to time, in the days that were to follow, for it was a question of many things, and of some that were hard of understanding.

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ARCADIA HOUSE

Little by little, Constans succeeded in piecing together the puzzle, for puzzle indeed it was. Here in this city of the dead he had found in actual operation one of the great power-producing plants of the ancient world. How to account for the miracle of its preservation during the generations that had passed since the sun of knowledge had disappeared beneath the sea of mental darkness. What sufficient explanation could there be for this amazing fact?

From Prosper, the priest, Constans drew the main outlines of the story, and his studies enabled him to fill in the details. In brief, it may be set down as follows:

When the convicts and criminals, who were the ancestors of the Doomsmen, took possession of the old-time city, it is reasonable to suppose that among them were a certain proportion of technically educated men—artisans, mechanics, engineers. A power-plant of such imposing proportions (designed, we may conjecture, for the furnishing of motive power to one of the great transportation systems) could hardly escape their notice, and they would certainly know how to utilize it if they cared to do so. And they did—for a peculiar reason.

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It is a matter of record that in the twentieth century the universal form of capital punishment was execution by electricity. In every state-prison stood the "death-chair," the visible embodiment of the moral force which the wrong-doer had defied, and which, in the ensuing struggle, had proved too strong for him. No wonder that it was both feared and hated by the citizens of the underworld of crime.

Now that the social fabric lay in ruins, now that the very foundations of law and order had been razed, what could be more natural than the impulse to turn this instrument of legal punishment into one of unlicensed vengeance? Society had dealt, mercilessly, with the breaker of laws, and now it was to suffer in its turn. So it came to pass that whenever a House-dweller (as representative of the old law-creating and law-abiding classes) fell alive into the hands of the Doomsmen, it was invariably ordained that he must take his seat in the chair of death and in his own body make satisfaction for the ancient debt.

But the years rolled on, and with the new generations came a slow but sweeping change in sentiment. The Doomsmen were now the dominant race, and the Housemen had become their vassals. It was not good policy for a master to wantonly destroy productive property, and so by degrees these barbarous reprisals slackened. The time was now ripe for the second stage of the evolution—the introduction of the religious element and the final conversion of the execution into the sacrifice. That the transformation was a natural one may be easily shown.

Even among the ancient scientists the nature of electricity was but imperfectly understood, and as the night of ignorance settled down upon the world it was inevitable that the various phenomena of electrical energy should come to be regarded with ever-increasing awe. To the commonalty among the Doomsmen this invisible, inaudible, intangible force which slew at a breath, became invested with supernatural attributes; it was the spirit of a god that came and sat in the chair of death, now transformed into the high altar of his chosen sacrifice.

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But outside of the vulgar crowd were the initiated, the *illuminati*, the technically trained adepts who managed the whole business. How about them? In the beginning, doubtless, they would be tempted to foster the new cult, recognizing in it a weakness upon which they could profitably play. And this they did, only to be trapped, in turn, in the net of superstition which they had helped to weave. It was now three generations back to the electricians and mechanical experts to whom the care of the great engines had originally been intrusted. Their sons and grandsons continued to preserve the practical knowledge which was required for the management of the machinery under their charge, but as time went on they cared less and less about the principles of the mysterious forces that they controlled. Now, let the tide of religious fervor sweep onward to its flood, and inevitably the apprentice would be replaced by the acolyte; the neophytes of the fourth generation would be taught only so much about the engines as was absolutely necessary for their maintenance in running order. At last, the Shining One had come to his own, and all bowed before his throne.

Following upon this culmination came decadence; it is the universal law. Through imperceptible degrees men fell away from the faith of their fathers, and the worship of the god had become unfashionable. The devotees were reduced to a handful of women; of the once all-powerful priesthood, Prosper alone remained, and he was an old and feeble man.

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One man but he had stood unflinching at his post; every Friday for more than thirty years he had caused the spirit of the god to descend into his sanctuary, and had called upon all true-hearted believers to draw near and worship. That they would not heed was no concern of his; his duty was accomplished, and beyond this no man may go.

"And surely the Shining One is jealous of his own honor," said Constans, guardedly. "Will he not bring to naught these foolish contemners of his majesty? Without doubt, else he were no god."

It was the afternoon of the following day, and the two men had been busy with the care of the machinery in the great hall, polishing up the bright parts and examining with infinite patience the innumerable bearings, their oil-cups and dust-caps. The conversation had naturally been colored by the pious character of their task, and Prosper had spoken more unreservedly than was

his wont, emboldening Constans to ask the question recorded above. "Else he were no god," he repeated, insistently. The old man turned on him.

"And who shall tell us whether he be a god or no?" he demanded, with startling vehemence. "What manner of divinity can he be who allows these feeble hands to call him into existence and again to reduce him to nothingness? A god! This senseless block of iron that lives only at my will and pleasure. Behold, boy! shall the Shining One suffer indignity such as this and not worthily avenge himself?" and as he spoke, he caught up a handful of refuse from the floor and deliberately threw it at the great dynamo before which they were standing.

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"A god!" he reiterated, with contemptuous bitterness, and spat upon the mass of polished metal.

There was a moment of suspense so real that Constans, despite his vantage ground of superior knowledge, trembled with an inexplicable terror. Surely, the outraged divinity had started into life; it was preparing to strike down the blasphemer.

"Perchance he is on a journey, or he sleeps," said the old priest, coldly. "He is a wise man who knows in whom he believes, and the Shining One shall, doubtless, be justified of his children." Then, with a gesture of indescribable dignity, he drew a corner of his flowing outer cape across his face and passed out into the gathering shadows of the winter day.

The task was still unfinished, but not for worlds would Constans have remained alone in that echoing, wind-swept cavern, surrounded by these monstrous shapes of metal. Lever and piston, wheel and shaft, the familiar outlines had disappeared, and in their stead a vast, indefinable bulk loomed through the dusk. It hung in the background like a wild beast, eternally watchful and waiting, waiting. Of a sudden, Constans felt horribly afraid. Stumbling and panting he ran upstairs and gained the shelter of his own little room. A fire was smouldering on the hearth; he blew the log into a flame and lighted every candle upon which he could lay his hand. Then as mind and body relaxed under the cheering influence of light and warmth he drew a chair to the fire and sat down to seriously consider his future course of action. The situation had forced itself upon him. How was he to grapple with it?

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In the first place, here was this tremendous power whose secret he alone possessed; the day and hour might even now be at hand when he should be able to wrest this superior knowledge to advantage.

Secondly, there was the question of personal safety, and assuredly it would be to his interest to be numbered among the accredited servants of the Shining One. The people might have grown indifferent to the worship of their ancient gods, but superstition still counselled an outward measure of respect towards those who wore the priestly garb. Finally, there was the pressing necessity of putting food into his mouth, a commonplace but still cogent consideration. Constans had been living on short rations now for a week past, his provisions were just about exhausted, and the prospects for the future had caused him no little anxiety. In the service of the Shining One he would at least be fed. So he resolved to accept the issue that had been forced upon him: he had passed his word, and he would keep it until destiny itself absolved him.

Several days later Constans adventured forth, making directly for the Citadel Square and from thence into the Palace Road. His official garb, a long black soutane and hood, was a tolerable disguise in itself, while the emblem of the forked lightning, worked in gold thread upon his left sleeve, vouched for his sacerdotal character as a member of the inferior priesthood. The Doomsday men whom he encountered looked at him with indifference, a very few saluted him with a perfunctory respect. It was plain that his appearance awakened neither interest nor distrust, and during the course of his walk he was enabled to add materially to his stock of knowledge about the city and its defences.

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Half way down the Palace Road he overtook a man, a squat, broad-shouldered fellow, who limped as he walked. Constans would have brushed by, but the man plucked at his sleeve, and he was forced to stop and accommodate his pace to that of his interlocutor. A disagreeable appearing personage, with a crafty face, yet he spoke civilly enough.

"A fair day, master. Eh! but a black cassock's a rare bird nowadays upon the Palace Road."

"Is it not wide enough for us both?" returned Constans, as easily as he could.

"Oh, of a most noble broadness; I've no complaint to make on that score. It's the length of the way that is troubling me just now—this cursed leg of mine! Might I be so bold to ask the loan of your arm so far as the fortress? An old sailorman with a sprung spar navigates but badly on these icy stones."

Constans could do nothing but comply, albeit somewhat ungraciously. His new acquaintance did not seem to notice his coldness. He went on volubly:

"A fair day, as I have said, but I should prefer a leaden sky and the fighting-deck of the *Black Swan*, with the oars ripping through the yeast of a north-wester."

"The *Black Swan*!" ejaculated Constans, forgetting himself for the moment.

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"Ay, master, and I may well curse my luck in missing the chance," continued the fellow grumblingly. "There is always fat picking to be had under that same bird's beak, but this bad knee of mine has kept me out of it for twice a twelvemonth. Perhaps it might be worth my while,"

he added, hesitatingly, "to humble myself before the Shining One. Who knows but that he might help me, seeing that all the physicians have failed. How about a quarter of hung venison, my lord, and a gallon or so of the best apple-wine—just by way of a peace-offering?"

"The Shining One makes no bargains," answered Constans, sternly, in virtue of his assumed office. "Submit yourself to his will, and then perchance our lord may deign to hear. He grants his favors to his obedient children; he sells them to none."

"But, my father——"

"Our ways part here," said Constans, decidedly, for they had now reached the north gate of the citadel and he was beginning to feel more and more uncomfortable under those sharp eyes. "Farewell, my son, and remember that penitence precedes healing, whether of soul or of body."

Constans passed on, and the man stood looking after him with a certain malevolent curiosity.

"Now so surely as I am Kurt, the Knacker, there is more in this priestling than meets the eye," he muttered. "Is a blithe young chap, with such a pair of shoulders, to willingly prefer a black robe to a velvet jacket, a priest's empire over a score of silly women to a seat in a trooper's saddle, and the whole green world from which to pick and choose his pleasures? Bah! it isn't reasonable, and if this knee of mine will permit me to hobble into the presence of the Shining One some fine morning I will have another guess at the riddle."

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"To-morrow, now, is Friday," he continued, thoughtfully, "and my little doves have been teasing me to give them an outing. There is the certainty of a smile or even a kiss from the black-browed Nanna to recompense my good-nature, and a possible secret hanging in the wind. Finally, the off chance that the Shining One is not so hopelessly out of fashion as we have been led to think. In this backsliding age he should appreciate the honor of my attendance in person, to say nothing of the venison and the wine." Kurt, the Knacker, laughed silently under his curtain of black beard, and then stumped over to a bench in the gateway, sheltered from the wind and open to the sun. There he sat him down and proceeded to enjoy the pleasures of social converse with the warders on guard, an occupation pleasingly diversified by an occasional black-jack of ale and innumerable pipefuls of Kinnectikut shag. A highly respected man among his fellow-citizens was Kurt, the Knacker.

It was the hour of the weekly sacrifice, and Prosper, the priest, stood before the altar of the Shining One, performing the uncouth and oftentimes wholly meaningless ritual of his office. Constans, in his capacity of acolyte, stood on the right of the altar. He felt out of place and somewhat ridiculous; he was conscious that he performed his genuflections and posturing awkwardly, and there were all these women watching him. Especially the two in the front row, accompanied by the limping scoundrel to whom he had yesterday lent his arm on the Palace Road. The one who seemed the elder of the two scanned him with bold, black eyes, unaffectedly amused by his clumsiness; the other, whose face was hidden by a veil, looked at him but once or twice, yet Constans felt sure that she, too, was laughing at him. His position was becoming an intolerable one. Would the farce never come to an end?

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Now the service was over, and one by one the worshippers withdrew. Last of all the two women, escorted by the man who called himself Kurt, the Knacker. They passed within arm's-length of Constans, but he made as though to turn his head away; youth is proverbially sensitive to ridicule. He noticed, however, that the pilgrimage had not been of marked benefit to the lame man, for he limped as badly as ever. Then their eyes met, and Constans felt somewhat uncomfortable at being favored with a particularly sour smile of recognition. Still he need not concern himself. It was evident that these people were not true worshippers; it was mere curiosity that had brought them before the gates of the Shining One, and now that they had seen the show they were doubtless satisfied. Let them depart whence they came; it was but a passing incident.

The snow that covered the ground a week before had nearly disappeared under the influence of a three-days' warm rain. This morning had given promise of even more springlike weather, but as the day wore on it had grown cloudy and the air had turned chill. It had begun to snow again shortly before the hour of service, and so fast had the flakes come down that the fall was already over an inch in depth. Constans, turning the corner into the side-street to get a more extended view of the eastern sky, suddenly halted to contemplate a curious appearing mark in the pure white expanse—the imprint of a woman's foot.

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It was an exquisitely moulded thing; even the slender arch of the instep had been preserved in unbroken line and curve, and yet Constans wondered vaguely why it should seem so beautiful to him. He put out his own foot and compared the two, laughed, half understood, and was silent.

He went on a little farther, following the successive footprints as they led down the street. Once his heavy boot half obliterated one of the delicately marked prints; he backed quickly away, as though his clumsiness had been an actual offence. Then he knit his brows over the absurdity of the affair and stopped to consider.

Sophistry suggested that it might be the missing girl, Esmay, and certainly she who had walked here was the veiled woman of the temple worshippers; there were the footprints, broader and

heavier in appearance, of her companion, and the halting progress of the black-chapped ruffian, who had accompanied them, was also plainly visible. Constans followed the trail at a smart pace, for it was snowing harder than ever, and it would not take long to obliterate the marks. But three blocks farther on the three sets of footprints suddenly turned at right angles to the sidewalk and disappeared.

A mystery whose solution should have been apparent at once from the wheel-tracks parallel with the curb, but for a minute or two Constans did not realize their true nature. The ordinary vehicle in use among the House People was a springless cart, whose wheels were simply sections of an elm-tree butt, and these primitive constructions creaked horribly upon their axles, unless liberally greased, and left a track six inches or more in width. It is not surprising, then, that Constans was momentarily puzzled by the narrow, delicately lined marks that betokened the passage of a real carriage. For while Doom contained many examples of the ancient coach-builder's skill, they were not in general use. The old Dom Gillian occasionally employed a carriage in taking the air—at least, so Ulick had told him, but Constans had never seen it. For all that the check was but a momentary one; his wits had been sharpened by use, and now they helped him to the truth. He ran on at top speed.

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A course of a mile or more and he was entering a poorer part of the city a little north of east and close to the shore of the Lesser river. It was a region of tenement dwellings, a huddle of nondescript buildings, flanked by huge factories and sprawling coal and lumber yards—an unpromising region, surely, in which to look for Master Quinton Edge's particular retreat. And yet it would have marked the subtlety of the man to have set his secret here, where it would have been at once so easily seen and overlooked. Every labyrinth has its clew, but the fugitive walks safely in a crowd.

The wheel-tracks turned sharply to the right, going straight down a side street to the river-front. On the left were the ruins of one of the ancient plants for the manufacture of illuminating gas. The yard was but a wilderness of rusty iron tanks and fallen bricks; surely there was nothing here to interest.

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On the right, however, there was an enclosed area that comprised the greater part of the block. It was separated from the highway by a brick wall ten feet in height, and the general level of the ground was considerably higher than that of the street. Constans could see trees growing and the ruins of a pergola and trellises for fruit; it actually looked like a garden, and through the naked branches of the trees there gleamed the white stuccoed walls of a dwelling-house, with a flat roof, surmounted by a cupola. The estate, for it possessed certain pretensions to that title, looked as though it had been transported from some more favored region and set down all in a piece among these hideous iron tanks and dingy, cliff-like factories.

Constans quickened his pace; his imagination was on fire. Yes, there was a gateway, and surely the carriage had passed through but a few minutes before. Constans halted at the barrier and studied it attentively. It was snowing hard now, and he ran but small risk of being observed from the house.

The doors of the driveway were of heavy planking studded with innumerable bands and rivets, and they were suspended between massive brick piers. A structure of light open iron-work spanned the gateway and supported a central lantern, with a coat of arms immediately below it. The device upon the shield was three roundels in chief and the crest, an arm holding a hammer.

In the left wing of the gate proper a small door had been cut for pedestrian use. It had been painted a dark green, the knocker and door-plate being of brass. Constans by dint of rubbing away some of the verdigris succeeded in making out the inscription. It read:

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ARCADIA HOUSE
RICHARD VAN DUYNÉ
1803

Actuated by a daring impulse he lifted the knocker and let it fall. The rat-tat sounded hollowly, but there was no response. Constans looked longingly at the wall, but without some special appliance, such as a notched pole or grappling-hooks, it was unscalable. There were no signs of life to be seen in or about the house. Not a light in any of the windows or curl of smoke from a chimney-pot. The wheel-tracks leading through the gateway had already become obliterated by the rapidly falling snow; the silence was profound. The whole adventure seemed to be vanishing into thin air; the wheel-tracks having led him into this land of folly had disappeared after the accustomed fashion of those mocking spirits whose delight is in leading the unwary traveller astray. Involuntarily, Constans glanced over his shoulder; he almost expected to see some shadowy bulk stealing up behind him preparing to make its spring.

Yet as he retraced his steps to the temple of the Shining One he resolved that he would pay another visit to Arcadia House. "To-morrow," thought Constans, "I may find some one to answer the door."

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A MAN AND A MAID

In spite of that brave "to-morrow," it was several days before Constans found opportunity to revisit Arcadia House. A misstep upon an icy flag-stone had resulted in a sprained ankle, and for that there was no remedy but patience.

Yet the time was not wasted. Here was a fascinating problem to be solved, and, yielding to importunity, Prosper was finally induced to talk freely of the sacred mysteries of the Shining One. He was even persuaded to put the machinery in operation, outside the canonical hours, in order that Constans might test the theories derived from his books. One experiment interested them greatly.

Constans took a "live" wire and allowed its free end to hang in close proximity to a leaden water-pipe. Then he placed a piece of oily rag near by and saw it answer his expectation by bursting into flame. He looked triumphantly around at Prosper, to whom he had previously explained the nature of the experiment.

"Would the fire descend wherever the wire led?" demanded the priest.

"Yes," answered Constans, confidently. "Under the same conditions, of course—a broken circuit and inflammable material close at hand."

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The old man frowned. "It is wonderful," he said, grudgingly, "but it proves nothing. Is your viewless, formless electricity anything more or anything less than my god? What am I to believe? Is it the spirit of the lightning-cloud that thrills in this little wire, or have you learned how to bottle fire and thunder, even as a House-dweller who fills his goat-skins with apple-wine? Is the Shining One at once so great and so small that we can be both his servants and his lords?"

Constans would not be drawn into an argument, being as little versed in theological subtleties as was the old priest in scientific terminology. But he noticed that Prosper was studying the subject after his own fashion. Nearly every night now he would start up the machinery and spend hours in watching the revolutions of the giant dynamo. It was not unusual for Constans to fall to sleep, lulled by the monotonous humming of the vibratory motor and awake to find the machinery still in motion.

It was within this week that the *Black Swan* returned to port. On the fourth day after the accident to his ankle Constans managed to hobble to one of his posts of observation, and he discovered immediately that the galley was lying at her accustomed pier. It was vexatious! to have Quinton Edge return at this precise time. Annoying! that this fair field should be closed before he had had a chance to explore it. Well, it was fortune, and he must accept it; he was all the more eager now to make a second call at Arcadia House.

It was a dull, thawy afternoon when Constans found himself standing again before the closed door that bore the name of the inhospitable Mr. Richard van Duyne. He had brought with him a rope ladder, provided with grappling-hooks, and the mere scaling of the barrier should not present any great difficulty. It would be well, however, to reconnoitre a little further before he attempted it.

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Following the wall down to the river, he saw that it was continued to the very edge of the water, where it joined a solidly constructed sea-wall. There were the remains of a wooden pier running out from the end of the street proper, and Constans adventured upon its worm-eaten timbers, intent on obtaining a more extended view of this singular domain of Arcadia House.

A large and somewhat imposing structure it was, albeit of a curiously composite order of architecture.

Originally, it must have been a villa of the true Dutch type built of stuccoed brick, with many-gabled roof and small-paned, deeply embrasured windows. A subsequent proprietor had enlarged its ground-plan, added an upper story, and changed the roof to one of flat pitch crowned by a hideous cupola. Still a third meddler had tried to make it over into a colonial homestead by painting the stucco white and joining on an enormous columned porch. The final result could hardly have been otherwise than an artistic monstrosity, yet the old house had acquired that certain unanalyzable dignity which time confers, and the gentle fingers of the years had softened down insistent angles and smoothed out unlovely curves. It was a house with a soul, for men had lived and died, rejoiced and suffered within its walls.

A house—and such a house!—set in its own garden amid the incongruous surroundings of tenement buildings and malodorous gas-works. How to account for it, what theory could be invented to reconcile facts so discordant? In reality, the explanation was simple enough; as between the house and its environment, the former had all the rights of prior possession. In the early days of the settlement of the city the banks of the Lesser river had been a favorite place of residence for well-to-do burghers and merchants. But foot by foot the muddy tide of trade and utilitarianism had risen about these green water-side Edens; one by one their quiet-loving owners had been forced farther afield.

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Yet now and then the standard of rebellion had been raised; here and there might be found a Dutchman as stiff-necked as the fate that he defied. His father and his father's father had lived here upon the Lesser river, and nothing short of a cataclysm of nature should avail to budge him. The commissioners might cut up his cabbage-patch into building sites and reduce his garden to

the limits of a city block, but they could not touch his beloved Arcadia House, with its white-porticoed piazza that gave upon the swirl and toss of the river—a delectable spot on a hot June morning. Let them lower their accursed streets to their thrice-accursed grade; it would but leave him high and dry in his green-embowered island, secure of contamination to his fruit trees from unspeakable gas and sewer pipes. A ten-foot brick wall, with its top set with broken bottles, would defend his quinces and apricots from the incursion of the street Arabs, and wind and sky were as free as ever. Yes, he would hold his own against these vandals of commercialism, while one brick of Arcadia House remained upon another. So, let us fancy, quoth Mynheer van Duyne away back in *anno Domini* 1803, and when he died in 1850 or thereabouts, the estate, having but a moderate value as city property goes, was allowed to remain in *statu quo*; the heirs had ground-rents enough and to spare without it, and Arcadia House might be considered a proper memorial of the ancient state and dignity of the Van Duynes. But this is getting to be pure conjecture; let us return to Constans and the facts as he saw them.

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The main house stood close to the river, there being but a strip of lawn between the piazza and the top of the sea-wall. On the left, as Constans faced, an enclosed vestibule led to a secondary structure, which probably contained the domestic offices and servants' quarters. Still farther on, and under the same continuous albeit slightly lower roof-line, were the stables and cattle barns, the wood and other storehouses forming the extreme left wing. In its day, Arcadia House had been an eminently respectable and comfortable dwelling, and even now it presented a tolerably good appearance; certainly it might be called habitable. Constans, straining his eyes, for the afternoon was advancing, thought he saw smoke ascending from one of the chimneys, and this incited him to an actual invasion of the premises.

He chose the southwestern corner of the block as being farthest removed from the range of the house windows. A lucky throw made the grapples fast, and it took but an instant to run up the rungs. There was no one in sight, so Constans, shifting the ladder to the inner side, made the descent quite at his ease, and found himself in a little plantation of spruce-trees.

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The evergreens grew so thickly together that he had some difficulty in forcing his way through them. Breaking free at last, he stepped out into the open, and stood vis-à-vis with a girl who had been advancing, as it were, to meet him. Constans knew instantly that this could be none other than Mad Scarlett's daughter, and there, indeed, were the proofs—the red-gold hair and the tawny eyes, just as Elena had described them in her message and Ulick in his endless lover's rhapsodies.

She stood mute and wide-eyed before him, the color in her cheeks coming and going like a flickering candle. Constans naturally concluded that his appearance had frightened her. He retreated a step or two; he tried to think of something to say that would reassure her. Perhaps he might use Ulick's name by way of introduction. He ended by blurting out:

"Don't be afraid; I will go whenever you say."

Her lips formed rather than uttered the warning, "Sh!" She listened intently for a moment or two, but there was only the distant dripping of water to be heard, the air being extraordinarily still and windless.

"Come!" she panted, and, clutching at her skirts, led the way to a thatched pavilion some eighty yards distant, a storehouse, perhaps, or a building once used as a farm office. Constans tried to question, to protest, but for the moment his will was as flax in the flame of her resolution; he yielded and ran obediently at her side.

Arrived at the little house, the girl pushed him bodily through the doorway and entered herself, turning quickly to slip into place the oaken bar that secured the door from the inside. Constans swelled with indignation at this singular treatment. He was a man grown, not a truant child to be led away by the ear for punishment. Yet she would not abate one jot of her first advantage, and his anger melted under the quiet serenity of her gaze; in spite of himself he let her have the first word.

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"Did you think I was afraid for myself?" she asked, with a slow smile that made Constans's cheeks burn. "You see, I remembered that Fangs and Blazer are generally out by this time, a full hour before dark."

"Fangs and Blazer?"

"The dogs, I mean. They will track a man even over this half-melted snow, and old Kurt has trained them to short work with trespassers. You did not know that?"

"No," answered Constans, simply. "But then it would not have made any difference."

"You mean that you are not afraid?"

He had to be honest. "I'm not sure about that, but still I should have come."



**SHE STOOD MUTE AND WIDE-EYED
BEFORE HIM**

The girl's eyes swept him approvingly.

"Of course," she said, well pleased, for a woman delights in placing her own valuation upon the courage of which a man speaks diffidently.

"I am Esmay," she announced, and paused a little doubtfully.

"I know," assented Constans.

"Then you do remember? Even the bracelet with the carbuncles, and how you would not make up because I was a girl and knew no better?"

"It was a very foolish affair from beginning to end," said Constans, loftily, intent upon disguising his embarrassment. [Pg 157]

"Of course I knew you at once," she went on, meditatively. "You were so awkward in your ridiculous priest robes that morning in the temple of the Shining One. How Nanna and I did laugh!"

Constans winced a trifle at this, but he could not think of anything to say. She laughed again at the remembrance—provokingly. Then she turned on him suddenly. "Why have you come to Arcadia House?" she asked.

Constans hesitated, tried to avoid the real issue, and of course put himself in the wrong.

"It was on Ulick's account. I had promised him——"

"Oh!" The look was doubly eloquent of the disappointment inherent in the exclamation, and Constans thrilled under it. What delicious flattery in this unexpected frankness! He made a step forward, but Esmay in her turn drew back, her eyes hardened, and he stopped, abashed.

It had been a sudden remembrance of her childish threat—"a woman ... and some day you will know what that means"—that had tempted her to the rashness which she had so quickly regretted. For she had forgotten that a proposition is generally provided with a corollary. If she had become a woman he no less had grown to manhood, and that one forward step had forced her to recognize the fact. She was silent, feeling a little afraid and wondering at herself. Constans, in more evident discomfiture, blundered on, obsessed by a vague sense of loyalty to his friend.

"Ulick is away—on the expedition to the southland. He was anxious that you should be found, and I promised to do my best. He will be glad to know." [Pg 158]

"When is he coming back?" demanded Esmay, with an entire absence of enthusiasm.

"This month, certainly; indeed, it may be any day now."

"You must promise me that you will not tell him where I am or even that you have seen me."

"But—but—"

"Remember now that you have promised."

Constans felt himself called upon to speak with some severity to this unreasonable young person.

"You are giving a great deal of trouble to your friends," he said, reprovingly.

"My friends!" she echoed, mockingly.

"There was your mother and her message to your uncle Hugolin in Croye."

"Yes, I know," she broke in. "Then it was received—the message—?" She stopped, unable to go on; an indefinable emotion possessed her.

"My uncle has sent you to fetch me," she whispered. "You are his messenger."

Constans had to answer her honestly, and was sorry.

"No," he said, bluntly. "Messer Hugolin could not see his way to anything."

Her pride came to her aid. "Oh, it does not matter," she said, and so indifferently that Constans was deceived.

"But you cannot stay here," he insisted—"here among the Doomsmen."

"They are my father's people, and you have just told me that my uncle Hugolin does not want me."

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"And what does Quinton Edge desire of you?" he asked.

"I do not know," she answered, returning his gaze fearlessly, whereof Constans was glad, although he could not have told her why.

"Yet you are a prisoner?"

"It seems so, and my sister Nanna as well. But we have nothing of which to complain, and doubtless our master will acquaint us with his pleasure in good time."

"It is always that way," said Constans, bitterly. "His will against mine at every turn; a rock upon which I beat with naked hands."

"He is a strong man," answered Esmay, thoughtfully, "but I think I know where his power lies. It is simply that neither his friends nor his enemies are aware of how they stand with him."

But Constans did not even notice that she was speaking; the remembrance of his unfulfilled purpose seized and racked him. He had hated this man, Quinton Edge, from that first moment in which their eyes had clashed—ever and always. At first instinctively; then with reason enough and to spare; and yet this small world still held them both. How long were his hands to be tied? Once and again his enemy had stood before him and had gone his way insolently triumphant. He might be now in the house yonder, and Constans looked at it eagerly. A master passion, primitive and crude, possessed him.

The girl divined the hostile nature of the power which held him, and instinctively she put forth her own strength against it.

"Listen!" she said, and plucked him by the sleeve. Constans looked at her.

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"I am going to trust you," she went on, quickly. "The time may come when I can no longer remain in safety at Arcadia House. When it does I will let you know by displaying a white signal in the western window of the cupola. Then you will come?"

"I will come," he answered, albeit a little slowly and heavily as one who seeks to find himself.

Esmay opened the door and looked out. It was almost dark, and after listening a moment she seemed satisfied.

"You have a ladder? Very well, you need not be afraid of the dogs, for when you see the signal I will arrange that they are kept in leash. And now you had better go; they are surely unchained by this time, and any moment may bring them ranging about. Good-bye, and remember your promise."

They walked along together until they came to the plantation of spruce-trees. Constans could see that his ladder was still in place on the wall; his path of retreat was open. He put out his hand, and her slim, cool palm rested for a moment in his. She nodded, smiled, and left him, going directly towards the house.

Moved by an inexplicable impulse, Constans followed for a short distance, keeping under the shelter of the trees. Then suddenly to him, straining his eyes through the dusk, there appeared a second figure, that of a woman, clothed wholly in white, hovering close upon the retreating steps of the girl.

Constans felt his knees loosen under him, the ancient superstitions being still strong in his blood

for all of his studies and new-found philosophy.

"It is her sister Nanna," he muttered to himself, and knew that he lied in saying it. The old wives' tales, at which he had shuddered in boyhood, came crowding back upon him—grisly legends of vampire shapes and of the phantoms, invariably feminine in form, who were said to inhabit ruined places. A panic terror seized him as he watched the apparition gliding so swiftly and noiselessly upon the unconscious girl. Yet he continued to run forward, stumbling and slipping on the treacherous foothold of melting snow.

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Esmay had reached a side door of the main building; quite naturally she entered and closed the door behind her, while the white-robed figure, after hesitating a moment, walked to a far corner of the house and disappeared. Out of the indefinite distance came the deep-throated bay of a hound. Constans turned and fled for his life.

Safely astride the wall coping he looked back. All was quiet in the garden, and at that instant a light shone out at an upper window of the house.

"She is safe," he told himself, and that was enough to know.

As he walked slowly westward, the thought of Ulick came again to him. Had he really promised the girl that he would tell Ulick nothing? Ridiculous as it may appear, he could not remember.

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XVI

AS IN A LOOKING-GLASS

Arcadia House, while it certainly stood in need of the repairer's hand, was by no means uninhabitable, a fact which spoke well for the honesty of its old-time builders. Its oak beams, fastened together with tree-nails instead of iron spikes, were still sound, and its brick walls, unusually massive in construction, were without a crack. Most important of all, the roof, shingled with the best cypress, remained water-tight, and so protected the interior from the ruinous effects of moisture. In outward appearance, however, Arcadia House had sadly degenerated. The stucco that originally covered the outer walls had fallen away here and there, leaving unsightly patches to vex the eye, and in many of the windows the glazing had been destroyed either wholly or in part.

Some years before Quinton Edge had taken possession of this abandoned Eden. The summers in the city were usually warm, and the Doomsmen were in the habit of seeking the upper stories of the tall buildings for relief, just as in the twentieth century people went to the mountains for the heated term. Quinton Edge, having accidentally discovered Arcadia House recognized its advantages as a summer residence, and he had his own reasons for desiring the privacy that its secluded situation afforded. He was satisfied with putting three or four of the rooms into livable condition, and as for the rest it was only necessary to repair the wall surrounding the grounds and stock the storehouses with fuel and provisions to make of Arcadia House the proverbial castle. That it *was* his castle was his own affair, and he had taken care that only the fewest possible number should be in the secret. Old Kurt and a couple of negro slave women made up the ordinary domestic staff of the establishment, and until the advent of Esmay and Nanna, some three months before, Arcadia House had received no visitors. And he would be a foolish man who called upon Quinton Edge without an invitation.

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Esmay, after parting from Constans, paused a moment at the side entrance of the house. She wanted to look back, but a stronger instinct forbade it; she opened the door and passed into the hall.

It was a broad, low-ceilinged apartment, and served as a common living-room to the master of Arcadia House and his guests. A few embers burned on the hearth, and a solitary candle set in a wall-sconce strove with its feeble glimmer against the full tide of silver moonshine that poured in through the uncurtained windows facing on the river. Quinton Edge himself was sitting at the corner of the fireplace smoking a red-clay pipe with a reed stem. He rose as Esmay entered, detaining her with a gesture as she would have passed him.

"One moment, if you will."

The girl stopped and waited for him to continue. He considered a moment, looking her over coolly. And indeed she made an attractive picture as she stood there, the firelight glinting redly in her tawny eyes and her cheeks incarnadined with excitement. Quinton Edge told himself that he had made no mistake. Then he spoke:

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"You have waited most patiently for me to announce my intentions. Let me see; it is nearly three months since you came to Arcadia House?"

The girl made no reply. Alert and keeping herself well in hand, she would force him to the first move. And Quinton Edge realized that he would have to make it.

"It won't be any news to you that there are several people who would be glad to be informed of

your whereabouts. There's Boris, for one, and young Ulick—we spoke of them some time ago."

"But to no purpose, sir; you remember that."

"Perfectly. Still, in three months a woman may change her mind many times."

"But only for her own satisfaction."

"Then it is hopeless to expect a decision from you?"

"Evidently."

"In that case it may become necessary for me to act for you."

"Oh!"

The exclamation told its own story, and the girl in her vexation bit the lip that had betrayed her. Quinton Edge smiled.

"Don't distress yourself," he said, smoothly. "I am only giving you the warning that courtesy entitles you to receive."

Esmay reflected. Whatever his intentions concerning her, she could not be the worse off for knowing them. So she went on, steadily:

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"Since you have already decided upon my future, argument would be useless. But perhaps I may assume that you have acted with some small regard for my interests."

"Not the least in the world," returned Quinton Edge, and Esmay smiled involuntarily at frankness so unblushing. Whereupon and curiously enough, Quinton Edge became suddenly of a great gravity, the flippancy of his accustomed manner falling from him as a cloak drops unnoticed from a man's shoulders. He rose to his feet, strode to a window, and stood there for perhaps a minute looking out upon the moonlit waters of the Lesser river. When he turned again to the girl there were lines of hardness about his mouth that she had never noticed before. Yet, in speaking, his voice was soft, almost hesitating.

"Why should I tell you of these things, and then again why not? We are both children of the Doomsmen, and the matter concerns us nearly. Not equally, of course, but listen and draw your own conclusions."

"There are clouds in the political sky, and our little ship of state is in danger of going upon the rocks, coincident with the death of Dom Gillian, its old-time helmsman. And that contingency in the natural course of events cannot be long delayed.

"Now there are two nominal heirs—Boris and Ulick. Each deems himself the chosen successor to his great-grandfather, and each is incompetent to play the part. In the past the reins of power have been held by the man who stands between them. I am that third man."

"As everybody knows now."

"No; and for the simple reason that there are few to care who rules so long as the figure-head remains a presentable one. But let me continue.

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"Dom Gillian will formally nominate one of his grandsons as his heir. It makes no difference whether Boris or Ulick succeeds—the outcome must be the same. Both have personal followings, and that of the disappointed one will form a minority insignificant in numerical strength, but capable of being kneaded by strong hands into a compact mass."

"A revolution, then?"

"By no means. I accept the situation as it is and simply turn it to my own advantage—as third man. This makes it necessary that the disappointed one should become my absolute property. Now I hold the price that he will demand for the surrender of his rights and freedom—nothing less than yourself."

"I shall not affect to be surprised," said the girl, coolly. "But are you quite sure that I am valued at so high a figure? It would be mortifying for you to go into the market and find that your currency had depreciated on your hands."

"I am not afraid," he answered. "The passion with Boris and Ulick alike is genuine enough, albeit of somewhat different sort. As you care for neither, it should be a matter of indifference whose property you become."

The blood burned redly under the girl's brown skin. "No one but a woman could know how unforgivable is that insult," she said. Then, with a suddenly conceived appeal to the man himself:

"But why a bargain at all? You have the strength, the courage, the brains—why chaffer when you have but to strike once to win all? You stand between Boris and Ulick; crush them both in a single embrace and take their birthright of power."

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"Bah!" said the Doomsman, contemptuously. "Do you think that the mere possession of the wolf-skin is the object of the hunt? It is the game that amuses me and not the final distribution of the stakes. The game, I say, and it happens to suit my humor to play it in this particular way. You are simply a piece on the board, and I may win with you or lose with you, or conclude to throw you

back in the box without playing you at all—just as it pleases me."

"The means are at least nobler than the end," retorted the girl. "A lofty ambition, truly, to stand behind a screen and pull the strings of a puppet, who in turn lords it over a handful of rick burners and cattle reivers. Even my uncle Hugolin, Councillor Primus of Croye, cuts a better figure when, clad in his state robe of silver-fox fur, he presides over his parliament of shopkeepers."

"Granted," returned Quinton Edge, "but one and all dance together when I choose to pipe. Is it such a contemptible thing to rule a small world, if, indeed, it be the world? I take all that there is to be taken. Could Alexander or Cæsar do more?"

"I am beginning to comprehend," she said, slowly. "An ambition that confessedly overleaps all bounds is at least not an ignoble one."

He turned and searched her eyes.

"You will play the game with me?"

"No."

"Yet a moment ago you were considering it—the possibility, I mean."

"For the moment—yes. After three months of Arcadia House dulness almost any amusement would seem worth while. But, frankly speaking, it is the nature of the risk that appalls me. I cannot afford to lose my stake nor even to adventure it."

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"To speak plainly?"

"Well, then, you contribute to the common capital but one thing—your brains. Later on, if the play goes against us, you may have to throw on the table your liberty, and, in the last extremity, your life. But that is the utmost limit of your losses. I, on the contrary, must contribute myself to the hazard, and no man understands what that means to a woman."

"How long is it since the woman has understood?" he asked, mockingly, but Esmay was silent.

"Well, then, if I cannot have you with me I want you actively against me—the more balls in the air, the better sport for the juggler. And at least we understand each other."

"There is just the one question—perhaps an obvious one."

"Yes."

"Boris or Ulick? For of course you know which of them is to be the old Dom's heir."

"I do."

"I am to be informed of my purchaser's name—after the bargaining is over? And only then?"

"Since you choose to put it in that way—yes."

Neither chose to break the silence that fell between them, and Esmay, catching up her skirt, turned to go.

"Good-night," she said, but Quinton Edge did not answer. Apparently he had forgotten her very existence; he sat with feet out-stretched to the fire, his eyes fixed upon the curl of blue smoke that hung above his pipe bowl.

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Esmay went up to the room on the second floor which she shared with her sister. Nanna was already in bed and asleep, but she started up as Esmay entered, like a dog that has been listening in its dreams for its master's footsteps. "Are you coming to bed?" she asked, drowsily, and fell back among the pillows without even waiting for the answer.

Esmay, unconscious of the cold, remained seated at the window looking out upon the river, her mind busy with the ultimatum which had just been presented to it. That it was an ultimatum, she could not doubt; Quinton Edge had been in deadly earnest in confronting her with her fate—a double-faced one, as she thought, with a little shiver. She could not avoid seeing it, no matter which way she turned.

A waning moon in a clouding sky. Even as she looked the two faces seemed to start out from the uncertain shadows—Boris, the Butcher—involuntarily, she shrank back from the window—never that!

Ulick? Yes, she had been fond of Ulick; they had been comrades and friends for so long as she could remember. But Ulick in this new light—ah, that was different again. Strangely enough she found herself contemplating this last possibility even more fearfully than she had the first. If the "Butcher" but laid a finger upon her, surely her arm was strong enough to drive the dagger home. But if it were Ulick, what could she do but turn the weapon against her own breast.

Plan and counterplan, and the argument invariably came back to where it began—she must call upon Constans for the aid which he had promised to place at her disposal. Hardly two hours had passed since they had made the compact, and now she was come to ask for its fulfilment. What would he think of her? How interpret a precipitancy so foreign to the cool assurance of her bearing in the garden? She frowned; the instinct that urges a woman to any folly short of the

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supreme blunder of unveiling herself to masculine eyes took possession of her. But only for a moment, for again the imminence of the peril in which she stood broke over her like a wave. There was but one thing to do; the signal must be set this very night. The returning expedition from the south might even now be encamped at the High Bridge, and if Constans could help her at all it must be at once.

Without waiting to parley further with herself, Esmay went to the door opening into the hall and looked out. The hour must be close upon midnight; the house was quiet and dark.

A piece of white cloth had been the signal agreed upon, and a fluttering handkerchief should answer the purpose well enough without being too conspicuous to alien eyes. Nanna still slept, and Esmay, slipping into the hallway, stood listening for a moment. Then she went on boldly; the moon was still high, and she would not need a light.

It had been arranged that the signal should be displayed from the southwestern window of the cupola crowning the main roof. But the stairs to the third story and attic were in a wing; to reach them she must traverse a long corridor which led past the apartments occupied by Quinton Edge. Esmay noticed a gleam of yellow light upon the threshold of his half-closed door as she passed it on winged feet, but there was nothing extraordinary in that—it often burned there throughout the entire night. But he was talking to somebody; she could hear distinctly the opposition of the two voices. Who could it be? for none of the servants ever entered these rooms, and she had never known of any stranger being invited thither. She stopped and listened for a moment or two. But she could make out nothing distinctly, and then she flushed hotly to think that she had been tempted to eavesdropping. Let her be satisfied in knowing that Quinton Edge was in his room and busily engaged; at least, he would not disturb her.

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The upper stories of the house had not been occupied for many years, and it took all the girl's courage to carry her through the shadow-haunted garret and up the ladder leading to the cupola proper. But she accomplished the task of putting the signal-cloth in position, and, still shaking with cold and excitement, began to retrace her steps.

At the entrance to Quinton Edge's room she stopped again, not out of curiosity, but as though yielding to the pressure of an invisible hand. The door still stood ajar, but there was no sound of voices. Again it was the invisible hand that seemed to draw the door away, permitting the girl to look within. An empty room, save for the figure that sat at the table, his head buried in his hands, the whole attitude one of intense weariness and dejection. Even as she stood there he looked up, and she saw his face mirrored in the glass that hung suspended from the opposite wall. It was Quinton Edge's face, indisputably; but could she ever have imagined that such capacity of pain lay behind the mask she knew so well? The dark eyes seemed to seize and hold her fast; then she realized that they saw nothing beyond their own mirrored reflection. Again the head sank forward into the hollowed hands, and only the slow heave of the shoulders made certain that it was a living man who sat there in the silence.

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Noiselessly closing the door, Esmay regained her room and, all clothed as she was, crept into bed. Nanna stirred sleepily and put out a protecting arm. How blessed the comfort of that strong, warm clasp!

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XVII

THE AWAKENING

Constans climbed to his observatory on the roof of the "Flat-iron" as usual that next morning. It was a fine, bright day and so clear that he could see for miles without the use of his glass. And there was something to see—far away to the north he discovered a thin thread of smoke that must mark the spot of a newly extinguished camp-fire. At last the raiders were back from the Southland; they would be within the city boundaries by this time and should arrive at the Citadel Square by noon at the latest.

Glancing down into the fortress he saw that already tidings of the return must have been received. Torch signals had probably been sent during the night from the High Bridge announcing the fact of the arrival, and now all was bustle and excitement.

It was a colorful and inspiring scene—soldiers engaged in polishing their accoutrements or clouting up hitherto neglected rents in cloak or tunic; musicians tuning their simple instruments; negro slaves grooming horses; women busy over saucepans that bubbled upon extemporized furnaces of piled-up bricks; children and dogs on all sides, chattering, squealing, under everybody's feet, alternately and impartially cuffed and caressed. An air of joyous expectancy lightened every face, for now the long months of waiting and of anxiety were past; the outriders of Doom had returned from the Southland with goodly store of corn and wine and of fat beeves for future feasting. It was, indeed, chilled and aged blood that did not run the faster on this day of days.

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Outside of the White Tower stood a groom, holding the bridle of a horse whose housings were of the most gorgeous description, a blaze of crimson cloth and gold thread. The owner's spear, with

its pennon of embroidered silk, stood close at hand, its iron-shod shaft wedged tightly into a convenient crack in the pavement. Upon the banneret, Constans, with his glass, made out the symbol used by Quinton Edge, a raven in mid-air bearing a skull in his beak. Evidently he was to command the guard of honor who would escort the returned warriors down the Palace Road, and the hour must be close at hand. A few moments later and Quinton Edge himself appeared, issuing forth from the White Tower. A splendidly gorgeous figure he presented, for over his close-fitting suit of claret cloth he wore a surcoat of white velvet ornamented with gold lace and buttons of amethyst. His hat of soft felt was decorated with a white ostrich-plume, exquisitely curled and secured by a jewelled clasp, and in his left hand he carried an ivory truncheon tipped with gold, the emblem, doubtless, of his high position in the councils of the Doomsmen. Apparently he was in good-humor this morning; he chatted animatedly with those nearest to him, and once or twice he even laughed aloud.

A trumpet sounded, and, without much pretence at military smartness, the escorting party scrambled into their saddles and the cavalcade moved forward through the north gate and up the Palace Road. By noon at the latest they should return, and preparations immediately began for the feast that was to be given in honor of the long-absent warriors now happily restored to the society of their families and friends. A score or more of wine-casks were rolled out from the public stores and made ready for broaching. In the centre of the square the board flooring had been removed from a huge circular pit that measured twenty feet across by six or eight in depth; it was lined and bottomed with flat paving-stones. A fire of hard-wood had been burning in it for hours, the preliminary to a gigantic barbecue of fat oxen. Upon the open space in front of the guard-huts, slaves were erecting long trestle-tables to serve as the banqueting-board. The day had turned so warm that there would be no discomfort in dining out-of-doors, for all that the date was March 22d and the last snow-fall still lay a foot or more in depth in the side streets. The square itself had been thoroughly cleaned, or it would have been a veritable sea of slush. Astonishing! but as the sun's rays became more and more inclined to the vertical, it became apparent that the day would not only be warm but actually hot.

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Constans had grown tired of making his observations at long range; he resolved to descend and mingle boldly with the people in the square. He had only Quinton Edge to fear, and it should be easy to keep out of his way. Moreover, this was a golden chance for him to pick up some intimate information about the defences of the Citadel Square.

Carefully adjusting the details of his ecclesiastical costume, Constans prepared to descend. His last act was to cast a perfunctory glance in the direction of Arcadia House, and it seemed that his eye caught the flutter of something white. He raised the binoculars—it was true, the signal was there, a handkerchief tied to the lattice-blind of the cupola window.

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Constans frowned and reflected. It was only last night that the girl had asserted her entire ability to look after herself—it was like a woman to be so soon of another mind. And there was Ulick—Ulick who would have shed the last drop in his veins to serve her. Yet she would have none of him, and she had deliberately tied Constans's hands in exacting the promise that he should not reveal her whereabouts to the man who of all things desired to serve her. There could be no reasoning with this wilful young person; she would have her way in spite of all the masculine logic in the world, and he realized the fact with a growing resentment.

Yet there was his promise and it must be kept. He would go again to Arcadia House sometime during the afternoon or evening, for the matter was not one of absolute urgency. In the latter case two signals would have been displayed, and there was but the one. So, dismissing the matter from mind for the present, he made his way to the street and joined with the crowd that was continually passing in and out of the north gate.

With an air of easy unconcern, he directed his steps towards the entrance. A harsh croak greeted him, and he recognized the crippled sailor who called himself Kurt the Knacker. He glanced up to see that worthy ensconced in a snug corner of the gateway and surrounded by his accustomed cronies the warders on duty. Plainly, there had been more than one replenishing of the black-jack that stood on the settle beside him, for his face was flushed and the purple veins in his high, bald forehead presented an inordinately swollen appearance.

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"Hola! shipmet," said the Knacker, in a tone that was doubtless intended to be affable. "It is to be a brave show to-day and you are come in good time to see it. Seven thunders! but one always sees the black-jackets flocking thick as flies in a pudding when the smell of the saucepan is in the air. Your master yonder was of too proud a stomach to clink can with us, but you will be more amiable. There's a fresh cask on the trestles and not a token to pay."

Constans, following the direction in which a stubby forefinger pointed, caught sight of the tall form of Prosper, the priest. He was moving slowly along in the press and only a few yards away. Now Constans had no desire for a meeting with his ecclesiastical superior; so, without troubling himself to reply to the Knacker's hospitable invitation, he tried to edge forward and again seek concealment in the crowd. But Kurt reached out and caught his sleeve. "No skulking, reverend sir," he said, maliciously. "Which shall it be, a swig from my black-jack or a full toss of the horn? For drink you must, if you would enter here."

One of the guardsmen held out a full ox-horn of wine, and the Knacker seized it and forced it into Constans's hand.

"After all, the good malt is for stronger stomachs; wine is the tipples for women, boys, and priests.

It was not a prudent thing to do, but Constans was angry. Seizing the ox-horn, he dashed its contents full in his tormentor's face, and Kurt, the Knacker, half strangled, fell back coughing and breathing stertorously. It was a critical moment, but luckily the temper of the by-standers was in mood to be amused. A great roar of laughter went up, and under cover of it Constans managed to push his way on through the crowd and so reach the open square. Stepping into one of the empty guard-huts he quickly divested himself of cowl and cassock, and rolling them up into a bundle he tossed them into a dark corner. His under suit was made of the ordinary gray frieze worn generally among the Doomsmen, and now neither Prosper nor the witnesses of the fracas at the gate would be likely to identify him.

Constans gazed about him with lively interest. Yet so accurate had been his previous bird's-eye observations that he found but little to add to them. He noticed, however, that a banquette of earth, rammed hard, ran around the inside periphery of the walls, affording vantage for the defenders to discharge their arrows and other missiles over the parapet. But, as Constans quickly saw, this same terrace would give useful foothold to the besiegers should once the top of the wall be gained. Instead of being obliged to draw up their scaling-ladders, or risk the sixteen-foot drop to the hard surface of the enclosure, they had only to jump onto the banquette and from thence to the ground. He would have liked to investigate what engines of defence could be brought into service by the garrison, but there was nothing to be seen beyond two machines, sadly out of repair, which were intended for the casting of heavy stones through the force of twisted ropes. So Constans turned his attention again to the scene before him.

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A gang of carpenters were putting the finishing-touches to an elevated platform which stood near the entrance to the White Tower. A crimson canopy warded off the sun's rays, and the structure was probably intended for the accommodation of the more distinguished guests. A large chair stood in the centre of the dais, and over it a gray wolf-skin had been draped; certainly this must be the official seat of Dom Gillian himself. But as yet it stood empty.

How hot the sun was! And yet this was only the day of the vernal equinox; it was most extraordinary. Everywhere the gutters ran streaming with water, the snow melting under the unexampled heat of the solar rays like wax in a candle flame. The trees growing in the square were leafless, and the tropic sun's rays blazed mercilessly through their naked branches. Constans found himself panting for breath.

As the hours dragged on Constans felt a vague uneasiness pressing down upon him, and he could see that the people also were growing restless under the unaccountable delay. The laughter and talk little by little died away; men stood in silent groups staring through the open gate, up the long avenue of the Palace Road, shading their bent brows under their hollowed hands. Would they never come!

With noon a small diversion offered. Four negro slaves carrying a litter issued from the door of the White Tower. There was no mistaking that great head with its mane of coarse, white hair—the old Dom Gillian. With infinite difficulty the attendants succeeded in hoisting the unwieldy bulk upon the platform, and so into the great chair. The people looked on in silence; not a murmur of applause greeted the appearance of their lord. And with equal indifference did Dom Gillian regard his people; plainly he was wearied, for his hands rested heavily upon the arms of his chair, and he neither spoke nor moved. A slave stood on either hand wielding a fan; presently the gaunt figure seemed to collapse into a heap, the eyes closed, and Dom Gillian slept.

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Again the slow hours dragged along. The sun had already passed the zenith, the barbecue-fires were dying out, on the western sky-line rested a cloud in bigness like to a man's hand and of the blackness of night itself. Would they never come!

Far down the vista of the Palace Road a black dot stood out against the snowy background. A moment later it had resolved itself into the figure of a horse and his rider. The man was riding fast, heedless of the slippery, dangerous footing; now he was at the gate and the crowd pressed back to give him room. On and on, with the red drops falling from his spurs, until he drew rein at the very steps of the platform. And no man durst speak or move as Quinton Edge flung himself from the saddle and ascended to where the Lord Keeper of Doom still slept placidly in his great chair with the wolf-skin upon his knees.

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XVIII

A PROPHET OF EVIL

Standing at Dom Gillian's side Quinton Edge bent down and whispered a few words in his ear, inaudible even to those who stood nearest. And yet the people knew that woe had fallen upon Doom. Like flame upon flax the voiceless signal leaped from heart to heart; here and there in the crowd appeared little centres of disturbance, the strong pushing the weak forcibly aside that they might the quicker fill their own gasping lungs; an inarticulate murmur rose and swelled, like to the stirring of forest leaves under the breath of the rough north wind. Quinton Edge heard, and

turned to face the people.

"It is true," he said, and gripped hard upon the rail on which his hand rested. "A child's trick it was, but the Southlanders are men of smooth tongue and our brothers were encumbered with the cattle and perhaps overconfident now that their faces were turned at last towards home. Six-score brave men"—he stopped and swallowed at something in his throat.

"The ambushade was well-planned, and the Southlanders had enlisted the aid of the Painted Men, to their shame be it said. So our brethren found themselves hemmed in at every point. Yet they sold their lives at a good price, and they are mourning to-day in the Southland, even as we here. Not a Doomsman set out upon his long journey to the shadowland but that a Southron was forced to bear him company. It was well done—a good fight, the sword-point driven home, and then the dropping of the curtain. Hail! a hail! to our brothers who have passed beyond."

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A few wavering and uncertain voices took up the cry, but it quickly died away before the uplifted hand of Prosper, the priest. He had pushed his way through the crowd and was now standing in its outmost rank directly opposite the platform.

"There were six-score who rode away," he said, addressing himself directly to Quinton Edge. "Six-score, and how many have returned?"

An insolent question in the manner of its asking, but the Doomsman's answer matched it well.

"Four that I counted, but there may be a straggler or two to come in later. Does the Shining One no longer know where his own thunderbolts have struck, that he sends his hired servants to gather up the gossip of the market-place?"

"The All-Wise both sees and knows," retorted the priest. "It is the people you deceive who have need to look and listen, if haply they may understand. You have dared to take the name of the Shining One upon your lips; stand forth now like a man, if you would face him in his wrath."

During the past few minutes it had grown suddenly dark; the sun had disappeared and a curtain of opaque cloud was rapidly overcasting the sky; a peculiar, yellowish light had replaced the radiance of day.

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"And what does your god demand that his anger may be turned away?" asked Quinton Edge. "Doubtless the daily offerings upon which his faithful priests depend for their easy, unearned living. Sides of fat beeves and measures of wheat, not forgetting a cask or two of apple-wine or corn brandy."

But the priest, disdainful to answer the taunt, had turned and was speaking directly to the people.

"Is it that you seek a deliverer and find none? But how shall the Shining One keep faith with you who turn your feet away from his sanctuary and bring no victims to his altars? Has he not called to you daily, and have you not stopped your ears? And now that ye call in turn, shall he indeed hear? Already is your woe come upon you, children of Doom. Look and listen!"

A flash of lightning accompanied the priest's last words and the crash of the thunder came almost simultaneously. The obscurity was momentarily increasing, and the gigantic, nimbus cloud-band now reached far beyond the zenith, its slate-blue edges contrasting vividly with the green-and-saffron tints of the narrow strip of clear sky that still remained visible. And in another moment that, too, had disappeared; such was the darkness that a man could not see his neighbor's face, though their elbows might be touching.

"To your holes and dens!" shouted the priest, now quite beside himself in his fanatical exaltation. "He speaks again, he speaks again! Woe, woe to the city of Doom!" Once more the firmament seemed cleft in twain, and the earth trembled under the reverberations of the tremendous electrical discharges. The effect upon the overwrought nerves of the throng was instantaneous; as one man the crowd turned and made for the exits from the Citadel Square. Even the personal attendants upon Dom Gillian were affected by the panic, and leaped over the guard-rails of the platform into the mass of humanity below. In half a score of minutes the enormous square was deserted save for a few infirm and crippled stragglers, and Constans himself thought it prudent to withdraw to the shelter of one of the guard-huts from whose doorway he could still watch the progress of events.

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Only Prosper, the priest, remained in the open, standing there with uplifted hands and gazing steadfastly into the sable vault above him. Quinton Edge called to him, but he answered not. Then the Doomsman, leaning far over the balustrade of the platform, struck the priest sharply on the shoulder with his truncheon of office.

"Come up here and help me with the Lord Keeper. These dogs have all sought their kennels and left us to shift for ourselves."

Gathering up his long, black robe, Prosper ascended the steps of the platform and passed to the Lord Keeper's side. He looked eagerly into Dom Gillian's eyes, but the old man's face might have been a mask in its impassive stolidity. Plainly he had neither heard nor understood aught of all that had passed.

"It is too late," muttered the priest. "The crash of steel is now the only music to which the old lion will prick his ears, and the Shining One must strike for his own honor."

Suddenly the obscurity lightened. A downpour of rain was imminent, but the sky had lost its terrifying aspect of abnormality; the yellowish haze that in superstitious eyes presaged some dreadful convulsion of nature had drifted away before the rising wind—it would be a pelting shower and nothing more. Quinton Edge looked around, smiling.

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"So it was only a player's effect—a few fireworks and the rattling of a big drum—an opportune conjunction of bad news and bad weather that is hardly likely to occur again. The next time that the Shining One condescends to forge his thunderbolts——"

"They will fall from out of a cloudless sky," interrupted the priest, with a vehemence that in spite of himself shook the cool confidence of the Doomsman. Yet the latter flung back the challenge contemptuously.

"Words, words—painted bladders with which to belabor the backs of fools and children. It calls for a buffet of sturdier sort to convince a man."

The priest measured his adversary. "Let it be a blow, then," he said, coldly, "since a prating mouth knows no other argument than the mailed fist. But you shall not see the hand that smites, nor even know the quarter from whence it comes. Build high your walls and your bulwarks; they shall but prove the greater peril when they crumble under the impact of our lord's hammer. You will believe; yes, when trencher-mate and bedfellow are stricken at your side, and yet no man shall be able to say at what instant the avenger's shadow passed between, or catch the faintest sound of his retreating footsteps. All in his good time to whom a day and an hour and a cycle of the ages are as one."

A dozen big raindrops splashed down, and from the distance came the patter of the advancing hail. Quinton Edge drew himself up stiffly; the necessity of immediate action was a relief more welcome than he would have cared to own. He stepped to Dom Gillian's chair, and, putting his hands under the armpits of the old man, lifted him unresisting to his feet.

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"Help me with him to the White Tower," he said, with curt command, and Prosper obeyed in silence. Together they managed to get Dom Gillian down the steps and across the open space to the entrance of the tower, barely gaining the shelter when the storm broke in earnest, the rain coming down in great, gray masses as though the clouds had been literally torn asunder by the weight of their burden. For a few moments everything was blotted out by the deluge, then it lightened again with the coming of the hail, and Constans drew in his breath sharply as he saw a little cavalcade trotting slowly through the north gate from the Palace Road. First came a few of the escort-guard and behind them three or four troopers, survivors of the ill-fated expedition, followed by a couple of horse-litters, improvised from fence-poles and blankets. In these rough beds lay two grievously wounded men, and Constans gazed, half in hope, half in fear, upon their wan faces upon which the stinging hail beat down. Soldierly men they were, too, for they made no complaint, but Ulick was not one of them. A moment later Constans saw him bringing up the rear on a big bay horse. He had a bandage about his head, and looked thin and careworn, but he was alive, and Constans felt glad at heart for his friend. He managed to catch Ulick's eye as the train swept by, and for an instant the latter drew rein, bending low over his saddle-bow as he whispered to Constans, standing in the shadow of the guard-hut:

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"In half an hour at the old library," and then, with passionate eagerness, "Esmay—have you seen her?"

"Yes," answered Constans, and the next instant could have bitten his unthinking tongue in twain.

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XIX

IN QUINTON EDGE'S GARDEN

It was late that night when the friends finally parted. Their interview had been a trying one; it might have ended in a serious estrangement had Constans been of nature less straightforward or Ulick of disposition less generous. Friendship between men is a beautiful thing, but of such delicate poise that only the touch of a finger is needed to displace it. And the disturbing hand is generally that of a woman. Esmay had come between them, and it needed but the mention of her name that a certain constraint should at once manifest itself.

"We'll have to drop the subject, then, or, rather, leave it where it began," said Ulick, breaking the final pause. "Perhaps it's just as well that I don't understand the reason why—it's even possible that you don't know clearly yourself. I sha'n't ask you to tell me."

Constance flushed, and was angry with himself, at this evidence of a weakness so unexpected. "It can't go on in this way," he said, decidedly. "Neither of us could wish that, and it lies with me to make it plain—to her, you know. Of course, you must have guessed that there are certain contingencies——" He stopped abruptly, as the remembrance of what Esmay had said rushed back upon him. "I don't see that Boris is with you," he continued, gravely.

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"He lies under the shadow of the southern pines—one of the first to fall that morning when the storm of gray goose arrows drove down upon us. A good end and perhaps the better one."

Constans was silent. Here was one of his contingencies that existed no longer; with Boris out of the way, the decision that Esmay must make was enormously simplified. Or was it still more infinitely complicated? With a woman to consider, the question was not so easy to answer. Nor would he attempt it. He rose, and put out his hand, "I am going to tell her," he said, simply, and Ulick, in his turn, had no further word to say; so they parted.

It was not until noon of the following day that Constans found opportunity to set out for Arcadia House, for all that morning he had been kept in close attendance at the temple. The old priest had displayed a new and astonishingly practical interest in the mysterious power that had been for so long under his nominal control; he had even joined Constans in the latter's daily task of cleaning and polishing up the working-parts of the machinery, and, as they worked, he had questioned him searchingly.

"The Shining One may be a god or no," he said, cunningly, "but it is meet that I should know him better, if only to serve him the more faithfully. You, my son, are wise, and you will tell me what you have learned from your books, that it may be added to all that our fathers have handed down by word of mouth. So shall our lord have great honor, and the unbelievers be put to shame."

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Constans had no recourse but to obey, and for several hours they worked steadily, experimenting with the intricacies of switch-board and commutator, stringing various wires about the hall and noting the conditions under which they might be charged and discharged from the central source of power. Dangerous work, as they came to realize after Constans had narrowly escaped being burned by contact with a live wire. Yet undeniably fascinating, this uncovering of a great world secret, this sense of growing mastery over a power that could be none else than twin-brother to the thunderbolt. But the face of the old man gave no sign, no one could have guessed whether he now believed all or believed nothing. Certainly he was proving himself an astonishingly apt pupil, his years of practical experience with the machines admirably supplementing Constans's theoretical knowledge. It was not until mid-day that he gave the order to shut down the engines, and Constans was at liberty.

He walked rapidly in the direction of Arcadia House, for this was the hour of the principal meal with the Doomsmen, and the streets were entirely deserted. The abnormally high temperature of yesterday still prevailed, although the sky was clear, and everywhere could be heard the sound of running and dripping water. The snow, that twenty-four hours ago lay a foot deep upon the ground, was now a mass of slush, making locomotion exceedingly disagreeable. How hot the sun was! it might have been midsummer instead of the last of March; how oddly sounded the premature chirping of the birds in the leafless trees!

Arcadia House was once more in sight, and Constans's first thought was for the signal. It was still flying from the cupola window, but that fact, of itself, meant little. All or nothing might have happened in the twenty-four hours that had elapsed since its first setting.

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The rope-ladder was in its hiding-place, and Constans, by its aid, was quickly on the garden wall. Here he waited for an instant, to look and listen.

All was quiet, and there was no sign of life in the closely shuttered house. The snow in this exposed and sunny enclosure had entirely disappeared; there would be no fear of his footprints being noticed. The dogs—but Esmay had assured him that they would be kept in leash so long as the signal was flying. He wasted no further time in reflection, but descended into Quinton Edge's garden.

The plantation of spruce-trees screened him for the moment; then he ran swiftly across the open space and reached the shelter of the pavilion. It was empty, but he had expected that; he had previously set his answering signal at the window of a house overlooking the garden at the back, and he would now have to wait until Esmay should find opportunity to join him.

An hour passed, and there was no sign of her appearance. Constans grew restless, impatient, uneasy, until finally inaction became intolerable. Certainly Esmay should have come by this time, supposing that she had observed his answering signal. She might be absent, ill, a prisoner.

He looked searchingly at the apparently deserted house; the bold thought struck him to examine it more closely, even at the risk of discovery. He had his rope-ladder with him, and, at a pinch, could make a run for it. Along the northern wall of the enclosure there was a wind-break of evergreens that would protect him up to the sunken carriageway, and, surely, he could adventure thus far and then trust Fortune and his own wits for the next move.

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The piece of open ground was some seventy yards in width; he crossed it at speed and dived into the shadow of the trees, keeping close to the wall as he worked along. He reached the road without misadventure and dropped lightly down upon its stone-paved surface. It was cool and damp in this semi-subterranean causeway; the stone flagging was blotched with lichenous growth, and ferns flourished rankly in the wall crevices. Constans stood for a moment gazing up at the blank façade of the north wing, wondering how best to proceed. Then, suddenly, a face appeared at a window; Esmay herself was looking down upon him in wide-eyed astonishment. She hesitated, then motioned him towards the eastern or river side of the house, and he obeyed unquestioningly. Following the driveway around, he found himself before the pillared portico that masked the front of the main edifice; springing up the steps, he met her standing at one of the long windows that opened off the drawing-room of the mansion. She drew back, inviting him to enter.

"You are very foolish," she said, in a whisper, yet looked upon him approvingly as a woman always must upon the man who dares.

"I told you that I would come," he answered. "Yesterday it was the unexpected that happened, the return of the expedition. Between the storm and Ulick, you and the signal were clean put out of mind until too late."

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She flushed. "Then you have seen Ulick?"

"Yes; he is safe and well." He hesitated. How should he tell her the truth about the other? He ended by blurting it out.

"You know that Boris—he will not return."

"He is dead?"

Constans nodded. The girl turned and looked out of the window for perhaps half a minute.

"I was to have decided between them this very day. He who is my master had so determined, and that is why I sent for you. For indeed I cannot—" She stopped; it was so difficult to put into words what must be said. Then she went on, speaking softly:

"If it had finally come to that, I must have named Boris, for I could have gone on hating him just the same as before. With Ulick it is different, for he really cared."

"But now," interrupted Constans, impatiently, "it is no longer a question of choice, but of a decision."

"I have already come to it," she returned. "I must escape from Doom; I cannot stay here for even another day."

In their absorption neither noticed how the door leading into the central hall slowly opened. It remained ajar, its very attitude that of a listener.

"You want my help," said Constans, half to himself. He was casting over in his mind the effect that the death of Boris might have upon Quinton Edge's intrigues, and he could not but conclude that Esmay had become a factor more necessary than ever in their successful development. Ulick was now the sole heir to the old Dom Gillian, and he was hostile to Quinton Edge. Only through Ulick's passion for this slip of a girl could the Doomsman hope to control him. What an admirable stroke, then, to snatch the card from his hand before he had a chance to play it.

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"I will help you," he continued, aloud. "But where to find a boat?"

"There is a canoe which is generally kept moored at the garden dock; you can see it from the terrace. It is a good, stout dugout, and, oh——"

"Well?"

"There is Nanna, my sister; I cannot go without her."

"She is in no danger," said Constans, with calm indifference. "The boat will carry only two—is that it?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then; Nanna must remain behind."

"It is impossible to leave her; I have promised."

"No; it is her coming that is impossible, and because I say so."

The girl remained silent. Had she yielded to a will stronger than her own? The door seemed to hesitate; then it closed noiselessly.

Esmay crossed over to one of the windows opening on the garden grounds and flung the shutters open. The coolness of the later afternoon breeze fell gratefully upon her hot cheeks; the horizontal, reddish-rays of the declining sun emphasized the warm coloring of her hair and complexion, and brought out again those curious carmine flecks in her eyes of topaz that Constans had noticed once or twice before. An odd combination, but he realized now that he had thought it pretty. The girl divined the unspoken word and drew back a trifle.

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Retreat is the first and essential principle of feminine strategy, and in practice it should suggest the ambuscade to even the most thoughtless of masculine minds. But it never does. Constans stepped up a little closer.

"Nanna must go with me," repeated the girl, hurriedly. "You will help us to get out the boat and tell me in what direction Croye lies. We shall find our way, never fear, for I know the stars, and Nanna can paddle all day long as well as a man."

"And what will you do when you get to Croye?" asked Constans, gently. "Must you hear the whole truth about your uncle, Messer Hugolin? It is not that he is unable but unwilling to turn a hand in your behalf. The humblest shelter, the meanest food—I know what you would say. But not even a night's housing in the cattle-byre or a plate of broken victuals is to be had from Messer Hugolin unless one is prepared to pay, and roundly, too. Remember that I, too, am of his blood, and have

dwelt in his house."

The girl's eyes grew cloudy and troubled. "There is the town itself," she faltered. "Surely among so many people there must be some chance for a livelihood—there is work—"

"Not of the honest kind and for such as you," he retorted. "Must I make you understand? Look at yourself, then, in the glass behind you." Suddenly he took her hand between both his own. "Who would dare hint at work to those fingers so slimly white? But one may live delicately, even in Croye."

The girl recoiled as though from a blow, and Constans felt the shame of having actually struck one. "But not you," he stammered, and raged inwardly at himself. She forgave him in a look. "But, Esmay," he said, humbly. She smiled to him to go on.

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"You are thinking of the world beyond, but indeed you do not know it—its cruelty to the weak, above all to a woman. Here, at least—"

"Here the least of all," she interrupted, but would not look at him to make her meaning clearer.

"Yet you see how I could not let you go alone or even with Nanna," he urged.

"Yes, I understand that. What is it that you wish me to do?"

Constans started. Was he, then, prepared to make himself responsible for this young creature's future? Of course she could not remain longer in a position so dangerous and equivocal. But why should she not be reasonable? It was true that Nanna was quite capable of managing the boat; he had only to assist them to get away and give the word to Ulick that he might follow. Ulick would go to the end of the world to serve her.

A thoroughly sensible solution of the problem, and then in a twinkle Constans forgot that he had ever wanted Esmay to be reasonable, forgot the faith owed to a friend and the vengeance sworn against an enemy, forgot times and seasons and the peril in which they stood, forgot all things save that he was a man and she was a woman, and that he had suddenly come to desire her above all else in life.

"A woman, and some day he would come to know what that meant." Now he knew.

Esmay stood waiting for the answer to her question.

"You cannot go alone," he said, in a half-whisper, "and your sister's protection is useless. You will have to trust yourself to me."

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Esmay had turned away her head, but a treacherous mirror intercepted the confession in her eyes and flung it back to him who had compelled its utterance. Now a man may never yet have seen that look on a woman's face, but he need not fear lest he fail to recognize it when at last his time comes. Constans saw, and suddenly the primeval passion of the world seized and shook him. "I want you," he said, and would have taken her—then stopped, confounded and appalled.

Through the open window came the sharp, staccato yelp of a hound at field. Yes; the dogs were out, and already they were at work, ranging in great semicircles, alert with the joy of the chase. There was Blazer, with his tawny muzzle, and behind him Fangs, the great, black bitch, half mastiff and half bloodhound, the saliva dripping from her jaws as she ran. Constans drew a deep breath as he watched them. Already they were nearing the pavilion; in a few seconds at the farthest they would be giving tongue upon the striking of his scent. He must decide quickly then, and he turned to Esmay.

A black suspicion gathered in Constans's mind as he looked upon her mute agony and misinterpreted it.

"What is it?" he asked, with rising anger, but she answered no word. The memory of the ancient betrayal rushed back upon him.

"Perhaps another bracelet of carbuncles?" She shrank back as though from a blow.

"Esmay!" he said, roughly, and shook her by the shoulders, not being in fear for himself but intent upon knowing the truth, however incredible. Then as she still gave no sign he flung her from him and strode away, the flame of a fierce anger in his heart. To die here—the base fate of a runaway slave upon whose trail the master has set his hounds—no, it should not be! Yet, with only his bare hands, for there was not even a billet of wood lying about—well, if it must be— Then he bethought him of the boat that Esmay had told him was always kept moored at the garden landing-stage. He glanced out and saw that the canoe had disappeared. He turned to the girl and announced the fact. "If indeed it were ever there," he added. It seemed as though her eyes pointed to the door leading to the other part of the house, but he shook his head. "I would rather meet it in the open," he said, coldly.

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He considered a moment longer, and threw off his black soutane, having determined to take to the water, although it was truly a desperate chance, the current running like a mill-race with the ebbing tide, and, moreover, being choked with ice-floes. Ah, there was Blazer's bay, he must lose no time. Without another glance at that silent, rigid figure, he stepped quickly through the long window and gained the portico. Something snapped in the girl's throat, her lips quivered hysterically, and she laughed aloud, a flood of silvery sound.

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THE SILVER WHISTLE BLOWS

Constans remained motionless at the window. Every instinct of self-preservation urged him onward, but yet he stopped and listened to a girl's laughter. It ceased, and he sprang forward—too late! for already the blood-hounds were upon him.

Fangs, the bitch, was in the lead, and as she sprang Constans kicked out savagely, his heavy boot catching the animal squarely on the flank. The portico had no guard-railing, and the dog, taken off her balance, was precipitated to the terrace below. Constans shouted exultantly, but there was still Blazer with whom to deal. Before he could recover, the brute had him by the throat and was bearing him downward; man and dog rolled together on the stone-paved floor of the gallery. Something passed with the swift rustle of wind-distended garments, but Constans could see nothing, his eyes being blinded by the acrid foam from the animal's jaws. Fortunately, the high collar of leather that he wore prevented the dog's teeth from fastening on his actual throat, but that advantage could not endure, and already he could feel that the animal was shifting its hold for a better one. Then, as he despaired, his right hand struck upon something round and hard in the outside-pocket of his doublet; it was the handle of the loaded revolver that he had carried for a month past. A supreme effort and he managed to seize it; without attempting to draw it from the pocket he pulled the trigger. The report followed, and immediately he felt the dog's grip relax; he pushed the dead weight from off his chest and rose to his feet.

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Up from the river terrace came Esmay, and behind her ran Quinton Edge. Constans turned to meet them; then, as they gained the portico, he saw the girl's face go white and realized dizzily the danger that still menaced him. But he was past caring now, and so stood stupidly in his tracks as the great, black bitch crawled up behind him, her belly close to the ground, and crouching for her rush. He heard Quinton Edge shout and saw him raise his hand; the dog, recognizing her master's voice, even as she leaped, was quick to obey, arching and stiffening her back in mid-air so as to break the force of her spring; he saw her fall in a heap at his feet, and lie there whimpering. Whereupon, for a brief moment, the trees seemed to bow themselves before him and the sky grew black.

When again he found himself, he saw Quinton Edge bending over the dead hound and inspecting, with curious attention, the ragged hole in its chest. But the Doomsman asked no questions; he spoke, lightly and carelessly, as was his wont.

"Fortunate that I happened to be returning from an excursion on the river, for my pets are a difficult pair to manage, even for one who carries a thunderbolt in his doublet-pocket. You scored nicely on poor Blazer, but I venture to think that Fangs would have avenged her mate had I let her have her way." He stopped and patted the brute's huge head. "My compliments, old woman; doubtless this visitor of ours will always remember you respectfully as one who feared neither God, man; nor devil, but only Quinton Edge. Now be off with you." The hound licked her master's hand and limped away. Quinton Edge straightened up and passed his lace-edged handkerchief across his lips. Then, with smooth irony: "An honor, indeed, to entertain so unexpected a guest at Arcadia House; to what happy chance am I indebted?"

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"That I am here should be condemnation sufficient for your purpose," said Constans, slowly. "I have nothing to add to it."

He hardly troubled to look up as he spoke; exhausted and dispirited as he was, what did it matter what he answered.

"Then you do not even plead a first offence?"

Constans remained silent. Like a disobedient school-urchin, he told himself, glowering sulkily in the presence of his tutor. Between this man and himself lay an enmity that was deeper than the grave, and yet to Quinton Edge he was merely the petulant boy to be scolded and punished or, even more contemptuously, ignored. Was he never to stand before him as man to man?

"It is just as well," continued the Doomsman, "since there have been other eyes who have kept watch for me. I am not entirely uninformed concerning a romantic adventure of two days ago at the pavilion in the garden. But perhaps on this count the maid may choose to answer for herself, speech being a woman's prerogative, and oftentimes her opportunity."

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But Esmay, holding herself as straight and white as the portico column behind her, made no sign of even hearing, and Quinton Edge fell upon a sudden earnestness of speech and manner.

"Then since neither of you have a word to say, you must perforce listen to me of a matter equally concerning you, Esmay Scarlett, a daughter of the Doomsman, and you, Constans, son of Gavan of the keep. For to-day the fate of the world lies between us three—a ball that we may toss from hand to hand.

"You know both the strength and the weakness of Doom. We have lost heavily in the expedition to the south; every man in the reserve must now be called upon to fill up the ranks. Dom Gillian is fast sinking into the grave, where Boris already lies. Ulick, who must now succeed, in the

ordinary course, has only physical courage to recommend him. That is not enough if Doom is to remain mistress of the world.

"Yet if our weaknesses are patent, no less apparent are our springs of power. Here in Doom and here alone will you find that unity of action which makes for empire. Were the Stockaders and the House People to join hands they could overwhelm us in a night, but they will not, since jealousy digs an ever-widening chasm. Moreover, it is a strong position that we hold here in this wilderness of stone, when every brick is a man. There is no need for boasting; this is the truth, as you know.

"Yet there is one thing lacking—a man to lead and a brain to guide. Ulick may possess the strong arm, and doubtless I have the wits, but I fear that, like oil and water, we, too, shall never mix. Besides, I may grow weary of the business, or the time may come when I must turn my back upon it all. Yet I could not be content that chaos should reign in my stead. I must leave a man behind me, and that man is you, Constans, son of Gavan.

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"Nay, but hear me out. Apostate, renegade—I know what you would say. Yet what are these but words—mere words. You are alone in the world," and here for just an instant Quinton Edge dropped his eyes, although the even tones of his voice never wavered. "You owe no debt of gratitude to either Stockader or Houseman. A crust from one, a bone from the other; they would have done as much for a starving dog. You see that I have watched you longer than you have been aware.

"And so I offer you the first and last of the things that all men crave. The first is love, and she who stands there is fair, else why do I find you in my garden? The last is power, and it is the world that I put under your feet."

He stopped abruptly and seemed to catch at something mounting upward in his throat. Then he continued:

"There is still the blood-debt between us, and I promise you it shall be paid and to the last drop. The only condition is that you must leave it to another to name the day of reckoning; that privilege belongs neither to you nor to me. Rest assured that when that day does come, I shall be ready; ay, more than ready to pay my score."

Again silence fell between them for the space of a full minute. Quinton Edge turned to adjust the jabot of fine lace about his neck, and that he might have both hands free he laid upon a wicker garden table the object he had been carrying. Constans saw that it was a bunch of May-bloom, a glorious cluster of pink-and-white blossom.

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"I am waiting for my answer," said Quinton Edge.

Constans tried to command his voice, but he could not speak, and Quinton Edge turned to Esmay:

"We have both of us omitted to remember where courtesy is first due. Madam, I should have informed myself of your pleasure in this matter."

"No, oh no!" she stammered.

The Doomsman laughed. "Yet I must ask you to reconsider; nay, even to use what arts you possess to induce this short-sighted young gentleman to accept my generous proposition. For, mind you, there is a consequent upon his refusal—and yours."

The hidden fire in the girl's eyes seemed to leap forth, a bolt of fiery scorn that would have fused, upon the instant, metal less resisting.

"A consequent—of course. And it is——"

"A lofty one. He mounts either to Dom Gillian's chair or to the yard arm of the *Black Swan*. A spy's death for a spy—it is but justice."

Esmay turned to Constans.

"Surely it were shame enough for any woman to find herself made part of such a bargain. But my humiliation goes even deeper, for I must parade my poor wares before you like any huckster, beseeching you to buy. My lord, it is for your life, and I am but a flower that it may please you to wear to-day and cast aside to-morrow. Buy of me, my lord, and at what price you will—it is for your life. But be quick; he will not wait over-long." She plucked at his sleeve. "Do you not understand? The men are coming; you can hear the rattle of the sheaf-blocks at the mast-head of the galley—Constans!"

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But Constans looked only at his enemy, Quinton Edge. "I am ready," he said, coldly.

Esmay passed through the long window and so into the drawing-room. To her overly excited senses the signal was already sounding in her ears, and a gradual faintness mounted to her brain, even as water rises about the swimmer advancing through the shingle to the first shock of the surge. Then, in deadly truth, she heard Quinton Edge blow his whistle, and the darkness closed in upon her.

For the second time the Doomsman raised the pipe to his lips. It slipped from his fingers and fell to the garden-table at his side.

As he bent to recover it the subtle, uprising scent of the May-bloom struck him like a blow; a dark flush overspread his brow. He spoke, quickly, insistently:

"The canoe is still at the landing-stage. Go, while there is yet time."

He seized Constans by the shoulders, slewing him around and pushing him towards the steps that led to the terrace.

"Go, and forget all that you have seen and heard in Doom the Forbidden. You and your secrets are known; be content to leave my people with theirs. And to me my memories."

The madness of protest, of resistance, was still upon Constans, and yet he found himself yielding to this stronger will. Mechanically, he leaped to the terrace below, and from thence ran on to the landing-stage just as Kurt, the Knacker hobbled around the corner of the house at the head of a squad of sailors from the *Black Swan*. An arrow or two flew wild, but Constans quickly had the boat in the current, which was running out on a strong ebb-tide, and so was safe from further molestation. Half a mile down-stream he ventured to make a landing. The dozen or so of rifles and store of ammunition that he had left in hiding at this point were too precious a treasure to be abandoned without an effort. Yet hardly had he transferred the last case of cartridges to his boat than he became aware that the Doomsmen were close upon him, and this time he got a bruised shoulder from a spent cross-bolt by way of a parting salute. The canoe was heavily laden, but fortunately the wind had gone down with the sun, and the water was unusually smooth. Constans bent to his paddle, shaping his course to the southwest, the direction of his old home on the West Inch.

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How cool and pure the air! How clean and sweet the stars that shone above him! Little by little the fever and the fret of life departed from him, and he was at peace. He wondered now at the madness that had possessed him, at the passion that had thrilled him at the touch of a woman's hand. He had come so near to proving himself a traitor, a recreant to all that was sacred in his life. And then a hound had bayed, and a girl had laughed, and the shining bubble had vanished into the air. Beguiled, betricked, betrayed—base repetition of the ancient injury. What a fool he had been!

Then, his heart being sore, he tried to comfort himself after a man's fashion. It had been all a mistake from the beginning; he had never really loved this amber-haired enchantress; it had been the infatuation of passion only, and he had escaped; let him be thankful. Or even granting that love lay behind, was not all of life before him? One day had passed, but another was soon to dawn, a day for new purposes, fresh consecrations. In his present exalted mood, even his long-cherished vengeance upon Quinton Edge seemed a small, a contemptible thing. What were either his love or his hate in the world-drama that was being enacted under his eyes. Again, as in days long past, he thrilled to the thought of a new and larger life, the redemption of humanity, the establishment of peace and righteousness, the shadow of Doom forever lifted from the land. There were the rifles and ammunition lying at his feet, potencies irresistible; surely this was the fulness of time. What a splendid vision! How glorious his own part in it might be! And so, through the night, he dreamed and drifted.

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It was a week later that Esmay looked into Nanna's face bending over her, and knew that remembrance had come again. She had listened silently, as Nanna, between fits of weeping and stormy self-reproach, made her confession, of her eavesdropping at the door, of her jealous terror lest she should be separated from her darling, of her new-born hatred of this Constans, who dared to stand between herself and Esmay, of the final madness that had tempted her to the unchaining of the dogs. Yet, when it was finished, Esmay had put forth her hand and drawn the rough, tear-stained face close to her own. "You could not know, dear," she said, quietly, "and it was all for love of me."

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It was not until the end of another week, a sunny day, when she had ventured out for the first time, that Esmay found courage to ask the question that had risen so often to her lips.

"When did the *Black Swan* sail away?"

"That same morning," answered Nanna. "Although it's a living wonder that I should have cared to take notice of anything beyond your face that lay so still and white upon my arm."

"And our master—he carried out his purpose?"

Nanna looked puzzled. Then she answered, carelessly, "Does he ever fail in that?"

There was a pause, and Esmay turned again to look upon the shining river.

"He might have saved his life—and lost it," she whispered to herself. "I am glad for him. And for myself—for now he knows."

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OXENFORD'S DAUGHTER

Constans had now spent nearly a fortnight in the valley of the Swiftwater, and, while he had been hospitably received and entertained, he made but small progress in his mission; it seemed as though this second propaganda were also doomed to failure. There was neither unanimity nor enthusiasm among these rustic seigneurs; they were content to leave well enough alone, and the rest of the world could shift for itself, as in the past.

"Doom will not trouble us, and why should we concern ourselves about the flaying of a few fat burghers. Mayhap a little blood-letting now and then is efficacious in warding off the falling sickness, and in the end the churls get it back out of us. Your own worthy uncle, Messer Hugolin, has squeezed me more than once. As for your ideal republic, stuff of dreams, lad! Take an old man's word for it."

Piers Major, of the River Barony, spoke decidedly, yet withal not unkindly, for he had been blood-brother to Constans's father, and he liked the boy for his own sake. Constans had gone; to him last of all; unconsciously he had been counting upon his support, whatever else failed, and to be repulsed in this quarter was bitter indeed. The old man looked into the clouded face before him and continued, earnestly:

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"A dream, I tell you. Let the morning wind scatter these vapors; you are young, and the world is before you. Harkee, lad, for I speak for your own good—nothing less. There is the Greenwood Keep, and it still remains 'no man's land.' True, the house was badly gutted by the fire, but there is plenty of good timber in the forest, and every man among us will be glad to lend a hand to the reconstruction of your fortunes. Finally, there is your tall cousin Alexa, 'Red' Oxenford's daughter. Methinks she looks upon you not unkindly, and she bade me be sure to bring you to her coming of age to-day. The whole country-side will be present, and you may bag all your birds with one fairly shot bolt. What say you?"

Constans was silent; for the moment he was conscious of being allured by an offer so well and kindly meant. To restore the old home, to find himself again among his kinsmen and friends, contentedly sharing their simple, wholesome life, to plough his own acres and see the smoke curling upward from his own hearthstone—were not these things, after all, the actualities of life?—was he to be always turning his back upon them to grasp at clouds mirrored in running water, shadows that ever eluded his grasp? His cousin Alexa—undoubtedly she was a pretty girl, with her rose-leaf complexion and bright, gray eyes. He had met her on two or three occasions, and he was not wholly unaware of her shy pleasure in his companionship, impersonal as it had hitherto been. He might, indeed, stop and consider.

Yet the temptation passed as quickly as it had presented itself. There was that other work in the world to-day, and who was to take it up if he drew back? Others might be of gifts more competent, but at least he had come to know himself through hard experience, and knowledge so bought was not to be lightly flung away.

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"It cannot be," he said, shortly. "Believe me, that I am not ungrateful, but my own way is plain, and I must take it." He hesitated. "You are of my father's covenant," he continued, slowly.

"The blood-bond is between us," assented the other, heartily enough, and yet knitting his brows as he spoke.

"Then if I choose to exact the full obligation of brotherhood, even to sword-service——"

"It must be paid, and it shall be," said Piers Major, quickly, and still his countenance was troubled.

Constans deliberated. "I shall not require so severe a test of your good faith," he said at length. "Yet I may ask you to hold the question open, to give me a chance to prove that my plans are feasible and that action is necessary for the future peace of all."

"That I can agree to with all my heart. But, mind you, the argument must have a keen edge and weight behind it. We Stockaders are a stubborn generation."

"So, too, are facts," returned Constans, "and possibly you may have to deal with them rather than with my theories. It is a long time since the men in gray have needed to go afield in this direction, but the country around Croye is a dry sponge, and I happen to know that there were more empty saddles than full hands in the expedition that has just returned to Doom from the Southland. I stood on Harbor Hill last night, and there were lights in the Narrows."

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"It may be so," said the old man, sombrely, "but the graybacks should not have forgotten already the lesson we taught them at the Golden Cove the year of the red comet. But, Constans, lad, we should be on our way if we would not have the pretty Alexa furrowing her forehead over our empty seats at her birthday board. Hola! Willem; the horses!"

The way to Deepdene, Red Oxenford's stronghold, led through the forest, and the green drive was a pleasant place on this brightest of May mornings, there being the languor of coming summer in the fitful breeze. The two horsemen rode slowly, yet their speech was brief, each being absorbed in his own thoughts and questionings.

A couple of miles farther on and they came to the crossing of the Ochre brook. As they rode their horses into the ford, a wild dog that had been lapping at the brink started up with a snarl under the very feet of Piers Major's steed. Now such is the cowardly nature of the wood-dog that he will run from the presence of man if chance of escape be offered; yet if cornered he will show all the ferocity of a wounded boar. In this instance the dog could not retreat to advantage, and so he sprang at the horse, gripping the tender muzzle in his strong, sharp teeth, and hanging there like a rat on a terrier. The horse, maddened with pain, plunged and reared. His master drew his hunting-knife and made an ineffectual pass at the ugly beast.

"Hold!" shouted Constans. "Back in your saddle and leave him to me."

The pistol in his hand spoke once, and the dog, shot through the lungs, fell back into the water. A bubble of crimson foam floated for a moment on the current, and he was gone. [Pg 213]

"That was well done," said Piers Major, gravely. He had finally succeeded in quieting his horse, and they were again on their way.

"It is one of the ancient secrets," said Constans, and explained as best he could the mechanism of the revolver and the composition of its explosive cartridge. The old man examined the strange weapon with respectful attention; he had had proof of its powers.

"Have you ever killed a man?" he demanded.

Constans was obliged to answer in the negative, and the other seemed a little doubtful. "Look," said Constans, and, drawing rein, he took aim at a beech-tree a few yards distant. The bullet ploughed into the wood, leaving a small, round hole in the smooth bark. "See how deeply it has penetrated," he continued. "Think you that a man could endure to have this lump of lead drilled through heart or brain? Ay, and against it no cuirass of quilted cloth will avail, however well it may turn an arrow-point."

Piers Major smiled grimly. "If I questioned your assertion," he said, "you would doubtless invite me to stand up and put the matter to the proof. I am content."

"In a secret place, some three miles from here," went on Constans, "I have in store a dozen similar weapons, together with as many of a larger pattern—rifles as they were anciently called. Also abundance of ammunition. Put them in the hands of brave men, and would not the odds be in our favor, even if the Doomsmen out-numbered us?" [Pg 214]

"Yet may not our enemies provide themselves with the same means of offence?"

"No," said Constans, decidedly. "It took me a month's hard work to get what I have into serviceable condition. Besides, the weapons are useless without the cartridges of gunpowder and lead. Of these only a small quantity remained fit for use, and I have secured it all."

The old man's eye brightened. "Good," he said, laconically, and relapsed into his abstracted mood.

It was a joyous and inspiring spectacle that presented itself when they finally drew rein before the doors of Deepdene. On the smooth lawn within the stockade full a hundred horses were picketed, while their masters strolled about in the bright sunshine. For the most part they were well-built young fellows, clad in all the bravery of a rustic holiday. Constans and his companion paused only long enough to receive the salutation of those nearest, and then passed into the house to pay their respects to the host. They had been among the last of the guests to arrive, and now the signal was given for the festivities of the day to begin in earnest.

The sports were of the sort characteristic of such a gathering—wrestling and foot-races, target-shooting and bouts at cudgel-play and night-stick. Towards the middle of the afternoon, when the athletic prowess of the young men had been fully exploited, came the great spectacle, the bull-fight, and of this it will be necessary to speak somewhat particularly.

The pen, or corral, as it might more properly be called, was a circular enclosure of fifty yards in diameter, the ring being formed of stout post-and-rail fence. The victim, a wild bull, was first turned blindfolded into the enclosure and baited by the dogs until excited to frenzy. Then half a dozen of the bolder youths would vault into the ring armed only with their throwing-knives, and the real sport would begin. The master of the ring, having provided himself with a long pole to which a sharp knife-blade had been bound, would watch his opportunity to cut the thong that secured the blind-cloth about the animal's eyes. Woe now to him who was dull of eye or laggard of foot! [Pg 215]

The object of the game was, of course, to strike the fatal blow; but, skilled as were the young Stockaders in the art of throwing the knife, it often happened that a bull would be bleeding from a hundred wounds and still keep his feet. Commonly, too, he would manage to score upon one or more of his adversaries before succumbing, for while it was permissible for a contestant to leave the ring, he could only do so after he had thrown his knife and as a last resort against the bull's charge. When the animal's attention had been diverted by an attack from another quarter, the disarmed contestant would vault again into the ring and recover his weapon. Here, indeed, was a game that might well stir the coldest blood, since life itself was the stake for which it was played.

The company had gathered about the bull-pen, pressing closely against the barrier, that they might lose no part of the show. It should be a spectacle worth more than ordinary attention, for the bull was an animal of exceptional size and of a temper to correspond; the knowing ones opined that the contest would be a protracted one, and expatiated gravely upon the animal's strong points to their less-informed brethren. Wagers were being booked; there were endless arguments, asseverations, questionings; the smoke from innumerable pipes hung like a blue haze above the heads of the throng, and here and there a fretful child lifted up complaining voice. Already the sun hung in the zenith, and it was time to begin if the sport were not to encroach upon the dinner hour.

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At the north end of the enclosure a wooden gallery had been reared for the accommodation of the principal guests, and Constans, to his surprise, found himself included in this privileged number. Possibly the pretty Alexa could have explained the mystery of his invitation; certain it is that she favored him with a radiant smile when he made his appearance on the platform, a mark of encouragement which might have justified him in appropriating the vacant seat at the maiden's right hand. But Constans, being of a retiring disposition, and even a little indifferent to his opportunities, let the chance slip, and another who had been waiting anxiously upon the lady's nod was finally made happy.

A murmur of applause had greeted the entrance of the bull, and truly he was a magnificent creature, deep chested and of the true checkered marking in black and white. The customary baiting had been omitted, for the ugliness of his temper needed no external stimulus, and the young men were already in the ring when he appeared.

The preliminary encounter was a mortifying experience for the sextet of overconfident youth. One by one they launched their weapons and either missed outright or else scored but lightly; successively they had been forced to retreat beyond the barrier by the animal, whose agility in getting around the ring was marvellous. Unfortunately for the contestants, all the knives had fallen on virtually the same spot, and the bull proceeded to mount guard over them as though aware that their possession was the guarantee of his own immunity. The game was now indefinitely blocked, since it was certain death for a player to attempt the recovery of his throwing-knife, and the rules did not permit the substitution of fresh weapons. The crowd laughed ironically as the situation dawned upon them, and the discomfited players were compelled to submit to many a gibe. The bull remained master of the field, and the spectators, grown tired of waiting, began to express their disapproval audibly.

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Piers Major pushed his way to Constans's side. "A chance for you and your fire-stick," he whispered. "I have been talking to Red Oxenford and the others about it, and they are curious to see for themselves. Think you that you can drop that fellow where he stands?" and he nodded at the bull, who still kept watch over his spoils.

"Yes," answered Constans, confidently. Here was the supreme moment at last arrived; the very thought of failure was impossible; he must and would succeed in the task imposed. Obeying the beckoning finger of his host, Constans advanced to the edge of the platform overhanging the enclosure.

An excited murmur rose from the crowd below, and even the dignitaries upon the gallery jostled one another to obtain a favorable vantage-point. Alexa stood immediately behind Constans, her eyes bright with excitement, and her slim hand hidden in her father's huge fist. Without attempting to take aim, Constans raised the revolver and fired.

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The bullet struck the ground in front of the bull and threw up a spiteful puff of dust, at which the animal pawed disdainfully. But if the shot had missed its mark, the report of the explosion did full execution among the spectators. The women shrieked, and the men nearest the enclosure pushed back hastily among the crowd. For a moment a panic was imminent, but Constans quieted it with a word.

"It is only the bark of the dog," he said, smilingly, and his hearers somewhat shamefacedly resumed their places, but this time leaving a dear space in which he might stand and handle his weapon.

Constans took steady aim, and, to his surprise, missed again, the bullet flying wide. The failure nettled him. He made his preparations for the third essay with care, raising and lowering the pistol several times, until he was sure that he could not miss the mark. A third failure—the bullet clipping a splinter from a fence-post on the opposite side of the ring. A mist rose before Constans's eyes; what did it mean? Could he have deceived himself in thinking that he had mastered this secret of the ancients? Was it to fail him now, when all depended upon success? His hand trembled so that he could hardly draw the trigger. The hammer fell for the fourth time, but no explosion followed, the cartridge having missed fire. He had now but one shot left, and the whispers of disapproval and disappointment among the crowd were plainly audible.

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Without stopping to reflect, Constans leaped over the rail of the gallery to the arena below. As he jumped, the girl, Alexa, started, and a cry escaped her parted lips; it was a sigh rather than an exclamation, the voice of a crushed flower suspiring its last vital breath. And Constans did not hear.

For perhaps half a dozen seconds man and beast stood motionless, waiting upon each other. The bull tossed his head savagely, his tail twitching, and a cloud of dust and gravel rising under his impatient hoof. Constans, with finger on trigger, moved a step to the right so as to face him

fairly. Suddenly the great horns came down with a vindictive sweep, the shoulders heaved in the first impulse of the coming charge. Like the snap of a whip the report rang out clean and sharp, and the bullet went home at just the one vulnerable point in the thick skull—that at which the butcher aims his pole-axe. The bull pulled up short, the glaring eyes softened as though in wonder at this strange performance that had been enacted before him; then, as the people still held their breath, the brute sank quietly to his knees and rolled over dead.

A woman started in to laugh hysterically, but her voice was drowned in a mighty shout; like a wave the crowd passed over the barrier, and Constans grasped helplessly at half a hundred outstretched hands. A babel of voices arose; the arena, filled to overflowing with excited men and women, was comparable only to some gigantic ant-hill.

Fifty yards outside of the main palisade stood an oak-tree. Under the Stockader law no standing timber should have been permitted at a less distance than one hundred paces, but the oak was such a fine specimen that Red Oxenford had allowed it to remain—a fatal error.

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A bowstring twanged; the arrow sped to its mark—the fair young breast of Oxenford's daughter—and in her father's arms the maiden gasped and died; all this in the space of time in which a cloud of the bigness of a man's hand might pass across the sun. Down from the lower branches of that accursed oak dropped the lithe figure of a man garbed all in gray. "Stop him!" called a weak, uncertain voice, but no one moved. The man in gray waved his hand derisively and disappeared into the bush. An inarticulate sound arose from the closely packed throng in the enclosure, the exhalation of a universal sigh.

Red Oxenford had made neither sound nor sign. He stood motionless, his daughter's head cradled in the hollow of his arm; he stared stupidly at the girl's face, so pitifully white and small it seemed, with its virginal coronal of flaxen hair—then he fell in a heap, like to a collapsing wall.

Piers Major gently withdrew the bolt from the wound and held it up to view. Its message was plain to all, for none save the Doomsmen feathered their arrows with the plume of the gray goose. Only now the quills were stained to a darker hue.

"It is her blood," he said, and the shaft of polished hickory snapped like a straw between his fingers. "Her blood! and of Doom shall we require it." And at that all the people shouted and then stood with uncovered heads, while the young men bore away the body of Oxenford's daughter on their locked shields and gave it to her mother.



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"OF DOOM SHALL WE REQUIRE IT"

That night Constans rode out from Deepdene at the head of twenty picked men, leading them to the secret place where he had stored the guns and ammunition which he had brought from Doom. Two days of practice with the unfamiliar weapons, and on the morning of the third the little squad, reinforced by a company of two hundred men-at-arms, set out upon the northern road.

Towards noon they passed through Croye. It had been their intention to stop here for the mid-day

meal, but none cared to propose a halt after entering this strange city of silence. Ordinarily the central square would have been filled with a voluble, chaffering crowd, it being a market-day; now there was not a living thing to be seen, not even a hog wallowing in the kennel nor a buzzard about the butcher-stalls. Yet there were no traces of fire and sword, the houses had suffered no violence, and stood there barred and shuttered as though it were still the middle watch of the night.

"What think you?" said Piers Major to Constans. "Is it the plague?"

"No, or there would be fires burning in the streets and yellow crosses chalked upon the door-lintels. Those who keep so close behind their bolts and bars are living people, hale and strong as ourselves. But, assuredly, some great fear has been put upon them. Perhaps we shall know more as we go on."

The answer to the riddle was given as they turned the corner by Messer Hugolin's house. The strong-room on the ground-floor stood empty and despoiled of its treasures, yet the gold and silver had not been carried away, but lay scattered about in the filth of the street, as though utterly contemned by the marauders.

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And there, hanging from a cross-bar of the broken window, was the body of Messer Hugolin, Councillor Primus of Croye, dressed in his scarlet robes of office, and with a great gold chain about his neck. His head was bowed upon his breast, so that the face was not visible, and for this indulgence Constans gave inward thanks.

"Ride on," commanded Piers Major, shortly, and the cavalcade clattered forward. It is not worth while to linger where once Dom Gillian's tax-gatherers have passed.

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XXII

YET THREE DAYS

Esmay sat in the gardens at Arcadia House. It was the loveliest of spring days, and there were blossoms everywhere—the vivid pink of the Judas-tree, the white glory of the dogwood, and each Forsythia bush a cascade of golden foam. It was all so beautiful, and in that same measure it hurt so keenly. The girl flung herself face downward in the grass, seeking to shut out from sight and hearing the world that mocked her.

That same night Esmay went to Nanna and announced her intention of paying another visit to the "House of Power."

"Our lord cannot be wholly unmindful of his children," she said, "and light may come to us from the Shining One. Besides," and here her color deepened, "it is where he lived, he who was my friend. If I could but find some little thing that had been his—a glove or one of his books! Now do be a good Nanna and help me in this."

But the practical Nanna shook her head. "That mad, old graybeard, who considers it a contamination to even look upon a woman, is it likely that he will invite you into his sanctuary and set himself to answer your foolish questions? It is supposed to be sufficient grace for a woman if the Shining One deigns to accept the gifts that she lays upon his altar."

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"Then we will go dressed as men. There is everything we can want in the presses up-stairs, and I can steal the key of the wicket gate from out of Kurt's very pocket. Now, Nanna, dear——"

And of course Nanna yielded, for she saw that her darling's heart was set upon this thing. Quinton Edge was still absent in the *Black Swan*, and it would be an easy matter to hoodwink old Kurt; he was always fuddled with ale nowadays. To-morrow would be Friday, the day of the weekly sacrifice; they could make the trial then.

It was hard upon noon of the following day when the two women drew near to the temple of the Shining One. Nanna, clad in doublet and small-clothes, swung jauntily along, one hand on dagger-hilt and careless challenge in her snapping, black eyes, the picture of a swaggering younker. But Esmay, at the last moment, could not bring herself to don habiliments exclusively masculine. So she compromised by wearing a round jacket with a rolling collar and tucking away her hair under a boy's cap. A long rain-coat, for which the showery morning was an excuse, completed her outward attire and concealed her petticoats from casual view. Yet in any case her blushes had been spared, for they met nobody on their way, and the open space in front of the temple was deserted. Not a single worshiper had come to pay honor and tithe to the Shining One; the altar was empty of offerings, and the priest himself was absent from his accustomed post. Yet upon the ear fell the rumble and clang of moving machinery, and the eye, piercing through the half-lights of the archway, caught indefinite glimpses of the pulsing mysteries of wheel and piston-rod that lay within the shadows.

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"He must be within," said Nanna, leading the way. "Don't stumble around like that. Here, take my hand."

Prostrate in front of the switch-board they found the priest, a mere anatomy of a man, with his cheeks shrunken to the jaw, and his wasted limbs no larger than those of a child. Yet he was alive and conscious, the deep-set eyes glowing with suspicious fire as they turned upon his unexpected guests.

"Starving," said Nanna, briefly, and proceeded to force a few drops of wine from a pocket-flask between his lips, while Esmay ran for the basket of food which had been brought along as an offertory in their assumed character of worshippers. The stimulant acted powerfully, and within the hour Prosper was so far restored as to be able to partake of some solid food. Then he insisted upon getting to his feet, a gaunt and terrible figure in his rusty cassock.

"I have my work to do," he reiterated, stubbornly. "I must be preparing the harvest field for my lord's sickle, and already the time is ripe for his appearing. Behold and believe!"

With a firm step he approached the switch-board and turned one of the controlling levers. A flash of light, succeeded by a stream of crackling sparks, leaped from the free end of a broken wire at the other end of the building, and a pile of straw lying near it burst into flame. An expert in electrical engineering would have understood that the broken wire must be in proximity to a mass of metal, and that the powerful current was being visibly hurled across the gap. Esmay uttered a cry, and even Nanna shrank back. Prosper smiled.

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"Who can abide the displeasure of the Shining One? Who can stand before the flame of his wrath? A mighty and a terrible god, yet he would have left his servant to starve before his altar—you have seen that for yourselves. It is ten days now since even a woman has condescended to kneel at his shrine and make her offerings of meat and drink. I, his high-priest, may eat no common food, but how should the lord of heaven and earth keep such trivial circumstances in mind? He had forgotten, and so I must have died but for your opportune coming and pious gifts.

"One might argue that our lord employed you as the instruments of my deliverance," continued the priest, musingly. "I might think it, but that I know the Shining One of old. It is his pleasure to punish, not to help; to slay and not to make alive. Never has he given aught of grace to me who have served him faithfully for these threescore years. And to-day, if I should sit with him upon the death-chair, he would consume me as utterly as though I were the foulest-mouthed blasphemer in all Doom. What think ye, in all honesty, of the Shining One? Is he a god to be propitiated by sacrifice and offering, to be worshipped and adored—supreme, almighty, everlasting? Or are we but blind fools, trembling before a blind force that knows and sees and is nothing, except as we, its lords and masters, may compel it to work our will?"

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The muttering of thunder broke in upon the priest's last words. A storm-cloud was driving in from the west, low-hanging and menacing. The priest's face changed.

"He comes! he comes!" he continued, with fanatic intensity. "This is our lord, in very truth, who now stands before us, calling upon his people to turn to him ere it be too late. Yet three days, and Doom, Doom the Mighty, is fallen, is fallen! He has said it—yet three days."

The two women stayed neither to see nor to listen further. Hand-in-hand they gained the street and ran in the direction of the Citadel Square, heedless of the rain that was now beginning to fall. Several blocks away they paused, exhausted, compelled to seek shelter in a doorway from the fury of the storm. Some one was already there—a man. He turned as they entered, and Esmay saw that it was Ulick.

For several moments they stood side by side without exchanging a word, and, indeed, no speech would have been audible amid the almost continuous crashing of the thunder-peals. Then, as the first violence of the storm expended itself, Esmay heard her name uttered, and realized that Ulick was holding her hand in both his own.

"Don't!" she pleaded, and drew her hand away.

Ulick's face hardened. "I might have known it," he said, bitterly. "Yet he who has been false to friendship may betray love as well."

"He is dead," she said, and Ulick started.

"Constans—dead!" he stammered.

"Hanged at the yard-arm of the *Black Swan*. But Quinton Edge still lives."

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"You loved him?" persisted Ulick, the sense of his injury still strong within him.

The girl drew herself up proudly. "Yes, I loved him—that is for you and all the world to know. But be comforted; he cared not a whit for me. That, in the end, was made plain enough."

Ulick's face was pale. "But he still stands between us?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, simply.

The rain had almost ceased; Esmay made a movement to depart.

"There is nothing—no way in which I can serve you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing. I am going back to Arcadia House, but I shall have Nanna with me. There is nothing to fear."

He regarded her fixedly. "What can you do against Quinton Edge? He is the master—our master."

"I do not know; I have not thought. But I can watch and I can wait."

"Waiting! If that were all——"

"No, no! it could not be." She colored hotly, and he stopped, abashed.

"You must go now," she went on, gently. "Ulick, dear Ulick, I am sending you away, but, indeed, it is better so. And I shall remember—always."

He would have spoken again, but something in her face restrained him. He bent and kissed her reverently, as a brother might, and went out. And she, watching him go, found her vision suddenly blurred by a mist of tears. For there is something in every woman's heart that pleads a true man's cause, for all that she may not accept the gift he proffers.

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Nanna had disappeared into the house some few minutes before; now she returned from her journey of discovery, wearing an expression of gravity quite new to her. "Come," she said, "I want to show you something."

She drew Esmay after her down the draughty passage that led to the offices of the long-since-deserted dwelling-house. There was a large apartment at the end of the passage—the kitchen, to judge from the character of the fittings. The room had been formerly lighted by electricity, and Nanna pointed out a lampwire whose free end was dangling in close proximity to a lead water-pipe. Underneath was a small heap of oil-soaked rags.

"You remember what we saw at the House of Power?" said Nanna, significantly.

Esmay examined the wire carefully. At the broken end the insulating fabric had been stripped off and the copper scraped clean and bright with a knife-blade.

"I found this on a nail in the passage," went on Nanna, and held out a bit of cloth that had been torn from a garment. It was of that peculiar weave worn only by the priests of the Shining One.

Esmay looked at it with troubled eyes. "What does it mean?" she asked, but Nanna only shook her head.

"Of course, I remember what happened at the temple," said Esmay, hesitatingly. "We saw him turn a handle, and the wire a hundred feet away spouted fire. If a hundred feet, why not half a mile?"

"It is a trap," asserted Nanna.

"But for what purpose?"

Nanna was not to be moved. "A trap," she persisted. "I do not understand, but I can feel what it is just as do the wolverine and the fox. Come away."

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They walked down the street.

"What could Prosper hope to catch in such a snare—for whom could he have set it?" asked Esmay, putting into audible language the question over which both were puzzling. "Unless," she went on, thoughtfully—"unless this is only one of many."

Nanna nodded. "Dozens, hundreds of them, and scattered all over the city. It is the harvest-field of which he spoke."

As they passed a street corner that commanded a view of the Palace Road, Nanna caught Esmay by the arm and bade her look. Towering head and shoulders above the throng of idle men and gossiping women strode Prosper, the priest, and as he went he proclaimed the woe that must shortly come upon the city, a message to which none gave heed. But for all their mocking he would not forbear, and long after he had passed out of sight Esmay could distinguish the accents of his powerful voice rising above the din that strove to drown it:

"Yet three days, and Doom the Mighty—is fallen, is fallen!"

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XXIII

THE RED LIGHT IN THE NORTH

It had been Constans's original plan to cross the river some miles above Croye, and so avoid attracting the attention of the Doomsmen should any of their parties be afield. The expedition would then move cautiously down the east bank in the hope of surprising the guard at the High Bridge, and so gain entrance to the city. But Piers Major, at the council of war that first evening, brought about a reconsideration.

"Against the citadel," he said, shrewdly, "we should rather choose to direct an unexpected blow. The bridge may be carried by a rush, but not so the stone walls that guard the heart of Doom. In

that assault a man's life must be paid for each rung gained on the scaling-ladders. We have no batteries with which to hammer at the gate-hinges, and as for a siege—well, it is weary work starving out rats whose fortress is a granary in itself. Let us move, indeed, but cautiously, prudently.

"Splendor of God!" shouted Red Oxenford, and he sprang to his feet. A man of full habit and ruddy face he had been in his day, but since the death of the young Alexa he seemed to have aged and whitened visibly. His eyes were bright, as though with fever, and he went on with growing vehemence:

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"Are we, then, chapmen of Croye, calling to collect an overdue account—prepared to sit down in humble expectancy at Dom Gillian's door until it may please him to open it? Caution, expediency! he is no friend to Oxenford who would utter such words as these."

But Piers Major was not to be daunted. He put his hands on the shoulders of the angry man and forced him backward into his seat.

"Nay, but you have not heard me out," continued Piers Major. "It is a debt, indeed, for which we are pressing payment—only one of blood rather than of gold. All the more reason, then, that the settlement should be in full and the cost of collection kept small. Now, Dom Gillian has shut his door in our faces, and it is a strong one. If we so elect we may butt out our brains against it, and be none the better off.

"A fortress and a woman, there is always more than one way in which they may be taken. Let us find that back door, and some of us may quietly enter there while the others are parleying at the front. Once within the walls, the fire-sticks should quickly clear the house for us."

"Ay, man," broke in Oxenford, impatiently, "but all this is words, not deeds. What can we do so that Dom Gillian hangs from his own door-post before a second rising of the sun?"

"I propose, then," answered Piers Major, "that the score of men who are armed with the new weapons shall take boat down the river and make a landing to the south of the Citadel Square, remaining in hiding until the rising of the moon to-morrow night. The main body will force the High Bridge at the coming dawn, and should be able to drive the Doomsmen to cover within the next twelve hours. Then the frontal attack in force and the gun-fire from behind. If they follow each other at the proper interval, our victory is assured."

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"It is your idea that I should go with the flanking-party?" asked Constans.

"Naturally, since you alone know the city. We can reach the Citadel Square from our side without difficulty, for it is a simple matter of hewing our way thither. But with your party it must be the progress of the snake through the grass."

Without further parley the plan proposed was adopted. Piers Major would command the main body in person—about one hundred and fifty men in all. Constans selected Piers Minor, son of Piers Major, as his lieutenant, and, somewhat to his surprise, Oxenford elected to join the smaller command. "It is the better chance," he explained, grimly, "for my getting a face-to-face look at the old, gray wolf."

Fortunately, the question of transportation for the river party was quickly settled. One of Messer Hugolin's flat-boats, coming down from the upper river with a cargo of hides, had anchored for the night a half-mile up-stream; it was an easy matter to impress crew and vessel into service. The hides were tossed ashore, and by midnight the expedition was ready to start. The scow was fitted with two masts, carrying square sails, and, as the wind was directly astern and blowing strongly, the clumsy craft swept away from her moorings with imposing animation, leaving a full half-acre of bubbles to mark her wake.

"For the third time," said Constans to himself as he sat in the bow with his back to the squat foremast and watched the river flowing darkly by. Twice now had he measured strength with Doom the Forbidden, and twice had the battle been drawn, the issue left undecided. This time one or the other must fall.

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The long night wore away, and presently the sky was streaked with the pink and saffron of the coming dawn. A landing was made without difficulty, and Constans was soon leading his little band through the rubbish-encumbered thoroughfares to the appointed station. The men marched along in sulky silence, for their night's rest on the open boat-deck had been an uncomfortable one, and they wanted their breakfast.

Constans had determined to make use of his old quarters in the "Flat-iron" building, on the south side of the Citadel Square, and his relief was great when the last man passed within the shelter of its walls. Once mustered in one of the large rooms on the fourth floor, the haversacks and canteens were quickly requisitioned, and the men feasted gloriously upon oat-cake and cold coffee, brewed from parched grain, with a pipe for dessert. After this agreeable interlude, there was nothing to do but to wait, and the majority curled themselves up in some convenient corner and resumed their interrupted slumbers. Constans posted himself at a window overlooking the square, with the intention of keeping close watch on all that passed below. But, in spite of all his efforts, Nature insisted upon her rights, and he, too, slept.

Over at Arcadia House, Nanna, being wakeful with the torture of an aching tooth, happened to glance through the north windows of the room occupied by the sisters and saw a dull-red glow on

the horizon—a conflagration. She aroused Esmay, and the two girls watched it, wondering.

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"It is in the direction of the High Bridge," said Esmay, and Nanna nodded acquiescence. "And it is the morning of the third day," continued Esmay, and Nanna nodded again.

The fire was a long way off, low down on the northern sky-line. But every now and then a crimson streamer would leap upward almost to the zenith, showing how great and vehement the conflagration must be. As the two girls stood watching it, they heard a window flung up sharply, and Quinton Edge's voice calling to Old Kurt and bidding him saddle a horse with all speed.

Nanna's eyes glowed. "It is something big," she said, excitedly, and began scrambling into her masculine attire. "Something that is worth our while to know all about," she continued.

"But, Nanna——" began Esmay, doubtfully.

"Do you suppose that our master is going out to pick flowers? Help me with this buckle, little sister, and talk not so foolishly."

And forthwith Esmay submitted to this new Nanna in doublet and small-clothes, who spoke with authority and took such tremendously long strides. If great events were really at hand, it were well to be forewarned, and Nanna, thanks to the dash of wild-folk blood in her veins, would be both hawk and hound upon such a trail. So Esmay contented herself with an admonition to caution, and helped the impatient one to depart, stealing down with her into the great hall, in order to rebolt the outer door. She feared lest she might meet Quinton Edge as she remounted the stairs and flew along the corridor to her room, but she regained its shelter undisturbed. It had been many weeks now since the master had returned, but Esmay had only seen him at a distance, walking for hours at a time in the garden. Strange, that seemingly he should have forgotten her very existence, but neither sign nor message had come to her. Even his larger plans had apparently been laid aside; not once had he left the boundaries of Arcadia House, except for the weekly council meeting at the Citadel Square. But perhaps, again, this was the crisis for which he had been waiting; even as she meditated she heard his step in the hallway and his knock at her door; then it opened, and Quinton Edge stood before her.

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He did not appear to notice Nanna's absence, but crossed over to the window where Esmay stood. "Come," he said, and Esmay obeyed, being yet faint with terror lest his hands should touch her. And this he must have guessed, for he drew aside and passed out first, motioning her to follow. The door leading to his apartments stood open. Esmay hesitated.

"Yes," said Quinton Edge, and the girl turned and searched his face. She did not understand what she saw there, yet it contented her, and she crossed the threshold. Quinton Edge followed, reappearing almost immediately and carefully locking the door behind him. He descended the stairs and passed out to the eastern portico, where his horse should have been in waiting. It was not there, and Quinton Edge grew angry. "Kurt!" he called, once and twice and thrice. Then at last the delinquent appeared. The sullenness of sleep was still upon him, and when his master would have reproved him for his tardiness he answered back insolently.

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"Enough!" said Quinton Edge, and struck him across the mouth with his riding-whip. Then vaulting into the saddle, he spurred through the gateway, riding hard for the northwest.

Old Kurt gazed after his master. "Thirty lashes at Middenmass," he muttered, "and now this—this ___"

Three hours later a boyish figure scaled the wall and dropped into the sunken way. Fangs, who was sunning herself on the terrace, looked up with white teeth bared, then rose, wagging her tail in friendly greeting. But Nanna, with a hasty word to the dog, entered the house and ran up to Esmay's room. Great news indeed! But where was the child? Nanna stood stock-still, gazing stupidly around the empty room. "Esmay," she murmured, in a half-whisper, and passed out into the corridor. She went straight to the door leading to Quinton Edge's apartments. A tiny hair-pin of tortoise-shell lay on the floor. Nanna picked it up with a sob and regarded it fixedly. She knocked twice upon the door, but there was no response. She tried her strength against it, and shook her head. Nothing could be done here. She went down-stairs, and looked to see if the key of the wicket gate was hanging in its accustomed place behind the master's leather chair. It was there; she took it and let herself into the street. There was only Fangs, the great, black bitch, to watch her go, the dog whining and leaping upon the wicket gate as it swung back into place.

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XXIV

THE EVE OF THE THIRD DAY

A touch upon Constans's shoulder and a voice in his ear aroused him. He sprang to his feet; the sunshine was streaming through the glazeless casements, and Constans, being yet heavy with sleep, blinked against it as a man drunken with wine. Oxenford confronted him. "The attack?"

questioned Constans, and for the life of him could not help yawning prodigiously.

Red Oxenford laughed. "In that case I should have pulled your ear off instead of wasting time shouting into it. By the thunders of God, man, but you sleep soundly."

Constans was fully awake now. He glanced at the sun, which was high in the sky, and then at Oxenford's gaunt face.

"I have left you to do the watching alone," he said, apologetically.

"What matter?" was the indifferent answer. "For me slumber would not have meant forgetfulness, and the watching made the waiting so much the easier."

Constans stood by the window looking across the Citadel Square and directly up the Palace Road. "I see no sign of Piers Major," he said at length.

"Down in the square," replied Oxenford, laconically.

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In truth there was a most unusual activity pervading the stronghold of the Doomsmen. Already the long rows of guard-huts were tenanted by a throng of women and children, and the number was being constantly reinforced by fresh arrivals. Guards were pacing the walls, and a squad of the younger men were engaged in setting up the artillery machines for hurling stones so as to command the open space in front of the north gate. New ropes were being fitted to the torsion levers, and an ox-cart loaded with ammunition, in the shape of rounded boulders, creaked noisily through the gateway.

"The warning must have come down from the High Bridge at an early hour," said Constans, thoughtfully. "How long has all this been going on?"

"Only within the last hour," returned Oxenford. "I waited for the old gray wolf himself to seek his lair before arousing you. He has but just crawled into it—out of arrow-shot," he added, regretfully.

Constans could see half a dozen of the green-jerkined guards lounging about the entrance to the White Tower, evidence that Dom Gillian was resting within. There was nothing to be seen of Quinton Edge, but surely he would not be far away from the storm-centre. Probably he was directing the defence at the northern boundary or even at the High Bridge.

Slowly the day dragged on for the watchers in the "Flat-iron." It was impossible to form any conjecture as to how the preliminary conflict was proceeding; it was not even certain that it had begun. Piers Major had undoubtedly forced the passage of the bridge, but apparently he had been content with holding his advantage. He might not begin to move until late in the day, and he would proceed slowly and cautiously.

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From time to time a messenger galloped down the Palace Road. At once he would be surrounded by an eager throng and escorted to the guard-room of the White Tower, where Ulick had set up his headquarters. For it was Ulick who had been left in command of the citadel garrison and intrusted with the preparations for the impending siege. Twice Constans had caught him fairly with his binoculars, and he could not be mistaken in the features and carriage of his friend. His friend—one might say the only friend that he had ever had—and Constans felt his heart heavy within him, knowing that they must henceforth walk on diverging paths.

Constans found it difficult to keep his men under discipline. It was all-important that their presence should be unsuspected by the enemy, but it would have been betrayed a score of times had not his vigilance intervened. Red Oxenford, in particular, grew more and more unmanageable; he had neither eaten nor slept now for three days, and the strain was telling on him. Finally he announced that he would wait no longer. The north gate was open, and what should prevent his walking straight up to the White Tower and sticking his boar-spear into the gray wolf's hide? "And I will—by the seven thunders of God!" His voice rose into a shriek.

It took half a dozen men to gag and bind him; he lay on a truss of straw, his eyes fixed malevolently on Constans, whose orders had prevented him from carrying out a plan so eminently practicable.

The shadows were growing long when Piers Minor pointed out a cloud of dust far up the Palace Road. Later on they could distinguish the figures of men and horses. Stragglers and wounded began to dribble away from the fighting-line; they came running down the Palace Road, one by one, then in bunches of two and three and four. Piers Major, with his greatly superior force, was evidently driving the defenders back.

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Half an hour later the conjecture became accomplished fact. The Doomsmen, retreating with admirable steadiness, fell back upon the shelter of the citadel walls. Quinton Edge, with a score of mounted cross-bowmen, brought up the rear, and he himself was the last man to pass through the north gate.

Three hundred yards away the Stockaders came suddenly into view, but it was close to sunset, the time for the evening meal, and, as though by mutual consent, both sides laid aside their arms for the homelier utensils of the cuisine. Down in the Citadel Square a hundred little fires started up, and as many pots and kettles began to bubble cheerfully. The invaders contented themselves with building huge bonfires, intended for warmth rather than for cooking, since their light marching order precluded the carrying of anything more than cold rations. From far up the

XXV

ENTR'ACTE

There had been no final understanding between Constans and Piers Major as to the precise line of the attack upon the citadel. That must depend upon the successful carrying of the defences at the boundary and upon the duration of the skirmishing in the streets. Both had agreed, however, that a night assault offered the better chances of victory. The Stockaders had no siege artillery with which to batter down the gates at long range; they would have to march straight to the walls, and the darkness would be in the nature of a protection from the missiles of the enemy. The moon, a little past the full, rose about nine o'clock, but its light was liable to be obscured by clouds. One of the sudden changes characteristic of the month of May was in progress, and a cold wind was blowing from the northwest. It promised to be half a gale by midnight, and already the sky was partially overcast. The initiative lay, of course, with Piers Major, and Constans must use his own judgment in making the diversion in the rear.

"They are throwing up an inner barricade," said Piers Minor, at Constans's elbow. He looked, and saw that the space immediately in front of the storehouses was being enclosed by a barrier of earth and paving-stones. The Doomsmen were prepared, then, for the possible carrying of the main walls by assault. What could be the weak point in the defence?

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"The gate," suggested Piers Minor.

Constans levelled his glass and examined the barrier with attention. The vaulted archway through the walls was about sixteen feet long by ten wide and as many high. At the street end it was closed by a gate consisting of two wooden leaves, swung on hinges in the ordinary manner, and having as a central support a stout post firmly sunken into the ground. The timber construction was of the heaviest, but axe and sledge would make short work of it could they be brought near enough for effective use.

At the inner entrance to the archway was suspended a portcullis of wrought-iron bars. This was the real barrier, for, even if the attacking party succeeded in battering down the outer gate, they would find themselves cooped up in the passageway and exposed to missiles discharged both through the grating and from trap-doors in the vaulted ceiling. A well-conceived theory of defence, but its present practice was complicated by an unexpected difficulty—the portcullis, long unused, had become jammed in the ways and refused to descend. A squad of men were sweating at the task, but so far they had accomplished nothing.

"You are right," said Constans, letting the glass fall and turning to Piers Minor. "What can they be thinking of—wasting time in that hopeless tinkering? The one important thing is to close the passageway—if possible, by means of the portcullis; failing that, to block it up. If Piers Major but knew—nay, he *must* know."

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Piers Minor nodded; he understood the appeal.

"I am going to tell him," he said, imperturbably. "I will be careful about keeping out of sight until well away from the vicinity of the 'Flat-iron.' So as not to spoil sport for you," he added, smiling.

Constans accompanied Piers Minor to the street entrance, going over in detail the message that he was to bear to his father. A final admonition of caution, and they parted. It was still broad daylight, and Constans returned to his post of observation.

Of course, the expected happened. A report of the portcullis's unserviceable condition had been finally made to Quinton Edge, and already he was on the scene—a master indeed. The confusion, the contradictory babel of voices, dies away into order and silence, and, as Constans had foreseen, his orders were to suspend operations on the portcullis and proceed with all speed to the blocking-up of the archway. Choked to the ceiling with loose stones and other débris, it would be a formidable barricade to carry by assault.

Constans strode up and down the room, devoured by impatience. Piers Minor had been gone now upward of half an hour, and yet there was no sign of preparation in the camp of the allies. It would take possibly an hour longer to make the vaulted passage impassable; Piers Major must advance within half that time if he would take advantage of this secret weakness in the defence. Failing to do so, he would be thrown back upon the desperate adventure of the scaling-ladders, and the whole issue would then hang upon the effectiveness with which Constans could bring off his attack from the rear.

The restless fit passed, and Constans leaned out upon the window-sill, watching the darkening sky. A fierce revulsion seized him as he pictured to himself the scene upon which the morning sun would look—the kennels red with blood, the horrors huddled in every corner, all the dreadful jetsam cast up by the ensanguined tide of war. Of necessity, perhaps, must such things be—the endurance of a lesser evil that the greater wrong might be forever blotted out. And yet his heart

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was heavy.

He looked out again upon the ruined wilderness of stone that hemmed him in. How he hated this monstrous city of Doom, infernal mother of treacheries and spoils! How weary he was of wandering through its stony labyrinths, fit symbol of his own oft-thwarted hopes! A vision of green fields and quiet waters rose before him, he seemed to be walking knee-deep in the lush grass starred with purple asters and the sweet meadow-flag—it was the old home paddock of the Greenwood Keep; there was the copse of white beeches, and through it came the flutter of a woman's gown. Eagerly he watched as she came to meet him—Issa; then she turned her face full towards him, and he saw that it was Esmay. He sprang forward.

A roll of drums beating the charge, and Constans started. "At last!" he said.

Piers Minor, keeping as closely as possible to cover, worked his way slowly to the northward and towards the Stockader camp, on the Palace Road. But, being unfamiliar with the topography of the district, he insensibly kept edging into dangerous proximity to the Citadel Square; suddenly he found himself within a short block of its eastern front. He turned to retreat, and came face to face with a slender, black-eyed youth who must have been following close upon his heels. Discovered, he tried to dodge, but Piers Minor was too quick, and they closed. The youth struggled gallantly, but the Stockader had all the advantage in strength; in another moment Piers Minor had his antagonist crushed helplessly into a corner. He looked at the boy contemptuously.

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"Not a sound, mind, or I'll twist your throat as I would a meadow-lark's. Why were you following me?"

The black eyes snapped back at him unwinkingly.

"Let me speak, then—you hurt me."

Piers Minor loosened his hold upon the slender throat.

"Go on."

"You are a Stockader, and there is a young man with you, fair-haired and with dark eyes—Constans by name? Do you know him?"

"Well, and if I do?"

"Will you tell me where and how I can see him? Just a word, or, if not, then to send him a message."

"It is impossible," said Piers Minor, stolidly. "This is a time of war, and only for life and death——"

"It is a question of that," insisted the youth.

Piers Minor shook himself impatiently.

"Speak out, can't you? What is it that he would care to know?"

"Tell him, then, that last night Esmay disappeared, and yet still remains in Arcadia House. He will understand, for he knows Quinton Edge."

"A woman!" ejaculated Piers Minor, in supreme disdain. "Always that."

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"Yes, always that," retorted the boy, and Piers Minor burst into a laugh.

"You are a bold one," he said, half admiringly. "Well, I will tell him; I promise you that. And now what am I to do with you?"

The boy made a grimace. "We may part as we have met, with no one the wiser."

"I am not so sure of that," said the other, suspiciously. "You are a Doomsman, and you know me to be a Stockader—a spy, if you like. If it were for myself alone I might trust you, but so much may hang——"

He stopped abruptly and his eyes darkened. "The only sure way lies at my knife-point." He scanned intently the face which paled before his gaze, yet changed not in the smallest line.

"Good!" said Piers Minor, heartily. "Although, indeed, I could never have done it. Yet I must bind and gag you," he added.

The boy pouted. "No; I will not have you touch me." He tried by a sudden movement to slip under Piers Minor's detaining hand. The shock displaced his cap, a fastening gave way at the same instant, and a mass of long, black hair tumbled down upon the youth's shoulders. Even then Piers Minor, being of masculine slow wit, might not have guessed the truth but for a bright blush that overspread brow and cheek, a confession that even his dull senses could not misinterpret.

"A woman!" he said, confusedly, and blushed as unrestrainedly in his turn.

Beholding his embarrassment, Nanna was relieved of her own.

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"You will have to trust me, you see," she said, coldly.

The abashed Piers Minor murmured an indistinct assent.

"And you will not forget my message?"

"No, no! He shall have it at the earliest possible moment."

"Very good—it is understood, then. Now you may go."

Piers Minor had not a word to say. He had been meditating upon a thousand possible explanations, excuses, apologies, and his tongue would not utter one of them. He accepted his orders meekly, but as he turned to go he managed to stammer out, "Of course—to meet again."

Nanna, to her own infinite amazement, answered with a look that meant yes, and knew that he had not failed to so understand it. As she walked over to the Citadel Square she could feel that he was standing where she had left him and looking after her. She would have turned to fittingly rebuke behavior so indecorous, but something told her that her insulted dignity would be better saved by removing it to a greater distance.

Nanna entered the Citadel Square after some parley with the sentinels on the walls, who grumbled at the trouble to which they were put to let down a rope-ladder; but, being a daughter of the Doomsmen, she could not be denied.

A little crowd of women and elderly men gathered about an ox-cart in the centre of the square attracted her attention. They were listening to a speaker who, standing upright in the wagon-body, was haranguing them earnestly. Nanna recognized him—Prosper, the priest.

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It was the old story—repentance, the wrath of the Shining One, and the imminence of the judgment. The men of the garrison, absorbed in their preparations for defence, paid no heed; only this handful of old men and fearful women, who crept a little closer together as they listened and sought one another's hands. "To-day, to-day, even to-day, and Doom is fallen, is fallen!"

A disquieting thought flashed into Nanna's mind, the remembrance of those carefully arranged broken wires in the empty house not more than a block away from the Citadel Square. Then of those other wires in the temple of the Shining One, spluttering their wicked-looking sparks. She strained her ears to catch the humming drone of the engines in the House of Power, but there was no sound to be heard—they could not be running.

"Yet there will be mischief worked to-night if the priest has his way," said Nanna to herself, and shook her black-polled head safely. "I almost wish that I had told *him* of that, too." And then, unaccountably, she blushed again, for all that it was dark and no one was looking at her.

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XXVI

THE SONG OF THE SWORD

It did not take long for Constans to arouse and collect his men; tired of inaction, they were only too glad to respond to the summons. And at the last, Constans, unable to withstand the entreaty in Red Oxenford's eyes, ordered his release.

"But, with the others, you must wait upon my word," he said, sternly, and Oxenford, fearful above all things of being left behind, gave ready assent to the condition.

Under the south rampart of the citadel they halted. There were but two guards on duty here, and they were easily surprised and secured before they could give an alarm. As one by one the rest of the company ascended the scaling-ladder, they were ordered to throw themselves prone on the flat top of the wall, to await the final signal. Over at the north gate the clamor grew momentarily—there were blows of axes on wood, and clash of arms, and the confused crying of many voices.

"The snapping-turtle must be at his work," said Constans to himself. "Wait until his teeth show through that flimsy wooden screen."

Piers Major had advanced promptly upon receiving the message brought by his son. The chances of a frontal attack had already been discussed between him and Constans, and the latter had devised a formation which, in theory at least, should make such an undertaking feasible. In its basic idea it was the Roman *testudo*, described by Julius Cæsar in the Gallic Commentaries. The phalanx of marching men were protected from arrows, darts, and ordinary missiles by a continuous covering formed of their ox-hide shields, the latter being held horizontally above the head and interlocked. The overlapping shields bore a fanciful resemblance to the scaly carapace of a tortoise—hence its name; and, so long as the essential principle of unity of action was maintained, it might be reckoned an effective engine of warfare.

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As the *testudo* moved down the Palace Road and towards the wooden barrier of the north gate, it was to be observed that the front-rank men and the file-closers carried their shields in the

ordinary fashion, in order to ward off horizontally flying missiles. Once under the shelter of the walls, the leaders would immediately discard their now useless bucklers and begin to ply their axes, protected from overhead assaults by the overlapping shields of their comrades. The formation advanced steadily; there was a suggestion of terrific irresistibility in the very slowness of its progress; to the eager fancy it might have been the veritable recreation of some prehistoric monster, the illusion being heightened by the torchlight that flickered uncertainly over the rounded bellies of the shields of greenish leather and was reflected redly from their copper bosses.

The defence had been quick to recognize the character of the assault, and had done their best to repel it. The catapults had been brought into action, and their huge projectiles hurtled constantly through the air, but for the most part innocuously, the machines not being in the best of order and the artillerymen unpractised in their use. It was not until the *testudo* had advanced to within fifty yards that a shot discharged by a machine, worked by Quinton Edge in person, took effect, the missile striking the *testudo* on the left wing and disabling three men. Before the advantage could be followed up the files had been closed again and the formation had advanced so far that the catapults became useless, it being impossible to depress them beyond a certain angle. The front rank had now reached the barrier, and the axes fell furiously upon the wooden leaves of the gate. The Doomsmen on the walls renewed the attack with hand-weapons, the slingers and archers hurling their missiles vertically downward and the spearmen watching their opportunity for an effective body-thrust. The affair would be short and sharp, for the *testudo* could not be expected to hold its position for longer than a few minutes—it was not in flesh and blood to withstand indefinitely that fierce and deadly shower. Already there were gaps in the protective roof of shields—impossible to repair, for in that close-packed mass the bodies of the wounded and dead impeded the progress of those who would otherwise have taken their places. Yet the struggle went stubbornly on.

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A sharp-eyed youth who was lying next to Constans touched him on the arm, directing his attention to a squad of the defenders who were working to dislodge one of the massive coping-stones of the gateway arch. Already it was oscillating under the heave of the levers; if it fell, a score of men might be crushed beneath its weight, and the destruction of the *testudo* would be a certainty. Constans raised his rifle. It was a long shot, but he could not wait to take deliberate aim; he fired.

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The bullet had found its mark, for one man was fallen where he stood and another nursed a broken wrist. The workers at the gate were thrown into confusion and the stone settled back into its bed. The assailants redoubled their efforts, and the thunder of the axe-blows became continuous.

"Through! they are through!" shouted Constans, and sprang down upon the banquette. In his excitement he entirely forgot about the new weapon that had but just now rendered such signal service; he threw aside the rifle for the more familiar sword. And he noticed that his followers had acted under the same primitive impulse; the fire-stick might be given the honor of drawing first blood, but it was for cold steel to finish the work.

Shoulder to shoulder the men raced across the square to the gate. The attempt to block up the passage, had failed for lack of time, and the Stockaders were pouring through pellmell, intent on securing foothold in the open. The Doomsmen, forsaking the now useless walls, met them man to man; there was the clash of opposing bucklers, and through the din pierced the keen, clear ring of blades in play—the Song of the Sword.

The diversion in the rear came at the opportune moment. The Doomsmen had so far greatly outnumbered the Stockaders, and the latter were being forced back into the vaulted passage, thereby blocking it against the main body of their comrades. But now the Doomsmen, attacked from behind, were obliged to devote part of their attention elsewhere, the pressure at the gateway was relieved, and reinforcements, with Piers Major and Piers Minor at their head, made their way through and took active part in the struggle. Even then the defenders were slightly superior numerically to the invading party, and the issue remained in doubt.

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Constans felt himself carried into the thickest of the press; he fought on mechanically, thrusting and cutting with the rest, and yet hardly conscious of what he was doing. His mind would not work easily; he found himself dwelling upon inconsequential trifles—what had become of his cap? and how tall was that big fellow with the broad-axe who seemed so anxious to come to close quarters with him? He was not in the least afraid, but he wondered if it were possible for him to come out of all this alive. It seemed unthinkable that the ring of steel surrounding him could be broken by any mortal power; sooner or later it must contract and crush him. Even the momentary vision of Ulick, stripped to the waist and with a broad, red streak across his forehead, failed to arouse him. He could think only of a thresher with his flail as Ulick, bludgeoning right and left, won clear from the press of Stockader foes surrounding him and rejoined his own ranks. A confused idea that he wanted to speak to Ulick suddenly oppressed Constans; he half started to follow him. Piers Minor, at his elbow, held him back and shouted a caution.

"Keep up your guard, man, or that big chap will have you yet! And let them come to you—don't rush them!"

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In a hand-to-hand encounter there can be but little opportunity for strategy or leadership, except in the purely physical sense. Yet, on either side, the men fought as though animated by a common instinct, the Doomsmen striving to force the Stockaders back into the gateway passage, and the

latter endeavoring to cut their way bodily through the mass of the defenders and so divide its strength. For a while the tide began to run with the allies, and the Doomsmen were obliged to fall back slowly towards the interior barricade on the east side of the square that protected the women and children. Constans, panting from his exertions, snatched at this moment of respite to regain his breath. A moment before he had stumbled against a small keg that was rolling about under the feet of the struggling men; this he up-ended and mounted for a better look around.

It was true; the Doomsmen were really giving way, and the victory was all but won. Yet not quite, for even as he gazed the onrushing line of the triumphant Stockaders sagged backward at the centre, and the Doomsmen yell broke out. What was it? What had happened?

Emerging from the portal of the White Tower came half a dozen bearers carrying between them a chair in which sat a man—an old man with a shock of snow-white hair covering his massive head. And those shoulders needed no identification from the familiar wolf-skin that lay across them. This could be none other than Dom Gillian, Chief and Overlord of the Doomsmen, Father of the Gray People. He wore no armor and carried no shield, but his hand gripped a great war-mace studded with silver nails, fit emblem of the authority supreme that its own weight had created. But that had been full half a century ago.

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The old man made a movement as though to rise. Two of the attendants attempted to assist him, but he waved them back. Ah, the wonder of it as that huge bulk reared itself to full height! An ordinary man might stand comfortably under his out-stretched arm and barely join the tips of his fingers in measuring around the monster's girth. But there was more than mere bigness with which to reckon. The close observer might notice that his armpits and the corresponding parts under the knee were not hollow, as is ordinarily the case, but were filled with a solid mass of muscle and tendon. And this was Dom Gillian, with the weight of ninety-odd years upon his back. What manner of man must he have been in the noonday of his strength!

As though by common consent the conflict came to an abrupt end; the two lines drew apart and silence fell between them. Dom Gillian took two or three forward steps. He seemed to be uncertain of where to plant his feet, as is the natural consequent when one has not walked for a long time; but once squarely set, he stood solidly—like a column of masonry. The bent shoulders had straightened up and the chest had filled out; there was no evidence of decrepitude in the ease with which he manipulated his ponderous mace, swinging it from side to side in great, slow circles. Only Constans noticed that he kept his head turned constantly in one direction, where there was a great flare of light, a dozen cressets and link-torches burning together. Could it be that his eyesight had failed save for the mere distinction between light and darkness? It might be well to know surely, and, stepping down from his vantage-point, Constans forced his way to the front. Quinton Edge was speaking, and Constans listened with the rest.

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"If there is one among you," he said, with smooth distinctness, "who thinks himself a man, let him stand forth and make answer to our father, Dom Gillian, face to face, so that our lord may particularly inquire concerning these dogs of Stockaders who dare to show a naked blade in the inmost citadel of Doom the Forbidden. You have tracked the gray wolf to his lair, now send you out a gallant who will clip his claws."

Constans, intent upon his theory, noticed that Dom Gillian had turned his head in the direction of Quinton Edge's voice when he first began to speak, but almost immediately his attention had flagged and his eyes had wandered back to the lights. Now, as Quinton Edge stopped, the old man's face changed suddenly, the eyebrows contracting and the jaw setting itself rigidly. It seemed as though he were about to speak, but there was only that murmur in his throat, hoarse and unintelligible. Then Constans understood that this was no longer a man that stood before them, but merely a wild beast in leash. The monster seemed annoyed by the silence. He moved forward uncertainly for a few steps and stood still; one could hear him purring softly like a big cat.

"We are waiting," said Quinton Edge.

A man brushed by Constans and stepped into the open. It was Oxenford the "Red."

"This belongs to me—to none other," he said, and looked about him.

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No man moved.

"I am ready," he continued, and threw his upper coat on the ground behind him. Constans stood for an instant at Oxenford's ear.

"The old wolf is nearly blind," he whispered. "Take care not to get between him and the light yonder and you have a chance."

Oxenford nodded. His manner was quiet and collected, and his face, though pale, had lost the strained look that had characterized it for these last few days. "Stand clear!" he said, and Constans moved away and stood watching.

Man to man, Oxenford, though by no means a weakling, was yet outclassed in every particular of height, weight, and reach. But he possessed one inestimable advantage—that of agility. Quick footwork should save him at even the closest pinch—that and his wits. Then, if the giant were really blind!

Realizing the futility of trying to meet Dom Gillian with weapons similar to his own, Oxenford had

provided himself with a simple truncheon of lignum-vitæ, while in his belt was stuck a broad-bladed, double-edged knife. The latter was for close quarters, but it would require some manœuvring to get there, and Dom Gillian would ask opportunity but for one clean stroke.

The men faced each other steadily for perhaps a minute. Then Oxenford rapped his antagonist smartly across the knuckles and sprang back out of reach. The colossus, with a growl, swung his mace to right and left, striking at random, for Oxenford had cunningly contrived to turn Dom Gillian so that the light was at his back. Quinton Edge must have noticed the ruse, for he beckoned to an attendant and ordered that every available torch and cresset should be placed about the arena. But the affair was over long before the command could be obeyed.

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Again the giant struck out, and this time so strongly that he came near to losing his balance. Oxenford, rushing in, discharged a quick half-arm blow on the Doomsman's right wrist, and the mace dropped from the suddenly paralyzed grip. Confused and terror-stricken, Dom Gillian dropped on all-fours, groping about in the darkness for the weapon that had rolled away and out of immediate reach. Oxenford, drawing his knife, struck downward, aiming for the angle of neck and collar-bone. But in his eagerness he overshot the mark, the blade making only a trifling flesh wound, and the next instant Dom Gillian had him in his clutch. The two stood up together.

It seemed a long time, hours indeed, that Dom Gillian waited for his injured wrist to recover its strength, holding Oxenford easily in his left hand and shaking the other incessantly to restore the interrupted circulation. Even when at last satisfied that the wrist could be trusted to do its duty, he did not appear to be in any hurry; he seemed to be meditating upon the most effective use to which he could apply the advantage that he had gained. Then, suddenly, Dom Gillian bent down and grasped his victim by the ankles, swinging Oxenford into the air as easily as a thresher does his flail. With every muscle starting to the strain, the Doomsman whirled his enemy's body once, twice, and thrice, at full sweep about his head, then downward into crushing contact with the pavement. A final superhuman effort, and the inert mass was hurled clean over the heads of the on-lookers, falling with the dead sound of over-ripe fruit against the wall of the White Tower.

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A full minute passed, and still every eye remained fixed on Dom Gillian. He had not moved, except to turn his head again in the direction of the light—a dumb instinct like to the compass-needle that seeks the magnetic pole. A colossal statue, but Constans fancied that it was swaying at its base, then he saw the great chest heave convulsively and a bubble of reddish foam issuing at his lips.

But the man was dying hard; in another moment he had straightened up, and was resolutely swallowing back the salty, suffocating tide, beating the air with his hands as he strove for breath. Only for an instant, however, for now the tide had become a flood, and, with a little fretful moan, like to that of a tired child, Dom Gillian, Overlord of Doom, sank to earth, not falling headlong, as does a felled tree, but quietly settling into a heap, just as an empty bag collapses into itself.

The fighting had begun again; no man could say why or how. True, the Doomsmen had been disheartened by the fall of their champion, but they were not yet ready to yield themselves; they had retreated to the shelter of the interior barricade, and would make there a final stand. The Stockaders, flushed with anticipated triumph, drove blindly, recklessly at the barrier. Constans felt the blood singing in his ears, then a weight suddenly lifted from his brain; his eyes cleared and the fierce joy of conflict captured him. He forced his way to the front, gaining foothold on the barricade. Ten feet away stood Quinton Edge, and Constans's heart was glad. At last!

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A hand caught at the skirt of his doublet, and impatiently he jerked himself loose. Again the detaining grasp; he bent down to strike and looked into Ulick's eyes. Obedient to the unspoken request, he knelt down and tried to move his friend into a more comfortable position. The crushed chest sank horribly under his hands, and he was obliged to give over.

"Close to me," whispered Ulick, and Constans bent his head to listen.

"It is of Esmay," he said. "Nanna but just now told me—a prisoner—Arcadia House—you will go to her?"

"Yes," said Constans.

But Ulick had followed the direction of his eyes and seen that they rested on Quinton Edge.

"At once; it must be now—else too late."

Constans did not answer.

"Now!" reiterated Ulick, insistently.

"I cannot."

"Yes."

"I will not."

"Yes."

Constans's voice was hard; he rose to his feet.

"I have been waiting upon this chance for years—you do not understand."

"Yes—I understand."

"All along; it was you who loved her."

"But you—whom she loved."

"No," said Constans, sullenly.

"It is—true."

"No!" again cried Constans. Then, suddenly, it seemed that a great light shone about him. But the wonder of it lay not in this new knowledge of Esmay's heart, but in the revelation of his own. He loved her, he knew it now, and not as in that brief moment of passion at Arcadia, when even honor seemed well lost. For this was the greater love that draws a man to the one woman in the world who has the power to lift him to the heights whereon she herself stands. A supreme joy, that humbled even while it exalted, swept over Constans. "I will go," he said, and took Ulick's hand in both his own.

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The storm-centre of the fighting had moved away from them; above their heads the stars shone serenely. Constans could not speak, but he pointed them out to his friend.

Piers Minor, fighting in the press at the gate as became his stout breed, chanced to rescue a boy from being crushed to death. The lad had been crowded up against a projecting angle and was quite breathless when the Stockader, arching his back against the pressure, broke the jam by sheer strength and pulled the stripling out of his dangerous position. But what a fine color came back into the white cheeks as the twain recognized each other!

"You!" said Nanna, and at that moment she would have given all she possessed in the world for just a skirt.

"You!" re-echoed Piers Minor, and immediately a horrible dumbness fell upon him.

The thunder of the captains and the shouting filled their ears, but they heard not, the red light of battle danced before their eyes, but they saw not. Some miracle swept them clear of the struggle, and guided them to the shelter afforded by a half-completed barricade of ox-carts. And here Piers Minor, seeing that she trembled and edged closer to him like any ordinary woman, took on a wonderful accession of courage.

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"Little one!" he murmured, in his big, bass voice, and laughed contentedly, just as though death were not standing at his other elbow. But then Piers Minor was not a man to think of more than one thing at a time.

"I have seen Ulick," whispered Nanna, "and he promised to give the message to Constans. Surely he will do so—tell me?"

Piers Minor put his arm around her. "Of course," he answered, stoutly, without comprehending in the least who Ulick was or what the message could be about. But he did understand that she wanted comfort in her trouble, and so he said and did precisely the right thing. All of which was exceedingly clever for Piers Minor.

Some one brushed rudely against them, and Piers Minor turned in anger. But Nanna laid her hand upon his arm. "Hush!" she said, "it is Prosper, the priest."

The old man stood motionless for an instant surveying the wild scene before him.

"It is the third day," he muttered, "the day of Doom. The day and now the hour. So be it, lord; it is thy will, and I obey."

With the last word he wheeled and disappeared into the shadows. An intuitive sense of the impending peril seized the girl. "Come!" she panted, and dragged at her companion's sleeve. "It is the vengeance of the Shining One. But there is a chance—if we follow."

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Piers Minor did not hesitate. "As you will," he said, briefly, and Nanna flashed back at him a brilliant smile, hand-in-hand they sped through the now deserted passageway of the north gate.

For the last time Constans bent his lips to the ear of the dying man. "Ulick!" he called. There was no answer, and Constans felt that the hand that lay in his was growing cold. Then for one brief instant the soul looked out from the hollowed eyes.

"The sun!" he said, and smiled as one who, having kept the watches of a long night, looks upon the dawn. "The sun!" he cried again, and his spirit went forth to meet it.

Constans rose unsteadily to his feet.

The sun! A vivid glare beat down upon him. The sun! and rising in the west!

A vast shaft of fire shot upward to the zenith, and all along the western horizon pinnacles and roof-line stood out etched in crimson. Constans saw that the entire quarter of the city west of the Citadel Square was in conflagration, and the flames, borne on the wings of a northwest gale, came driving swiftly down. A rain of red-hot cinders fell about him.

A shout of terror went up from Doomsden and Stockader alike, and the fighting ended abruptly. Then began a rush for the gate, victors and vanquished mingled indiscriminately together, constrained only by the one common impulse to seek refuge in flight. To add to the confusion, fresh explosions were heard on the north and south, followed almost immediately by the appearance of flames in these latter quarters. Where, then, led the path to safety?

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Constans, running towards the southern rampart, where he knew he should find his ladder, saw a tall figure just ahead of him. He recognized Quinton Edge, but the Doomsden had reached and scaled the wall before Constans could overtake him. Yet he caught a glimpse of his enemy proceeding rapidly in a northeast direction. Constans followed immediately, tightening his belt for the hard run that lay before him.

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XXVII

DOOMSDAY

Prosper's start upon Piers Minor and Nanna had been a short one, and under ordinary circumstances he could hardly have retained his advantage. But in her nervous confusion Nanna made two wrong turns, and so many precious moments were wasted.

A quarter of a mile away from the citadel they were halted by the sound of a heavy explosion. Piers Minor spoke his astonishment frankly.

"Thunder on a cool night in May! Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"It is the voice of the Shining One," said Nanna to herself, and hurried on the faster.

"Yet the lightning must have struck somewhere," persisted Piers Minor, "for the sky is red. There! look for yourself."

Half a dozen blocks away to the westward they could see flames shooting from the windows of a warehouse. Its contents must have been highly combustible, for they were burning like chaff in a furnace draught. As they stood and watched the conflagration a second explosion occurred, and so close at hand that the ground seemed to rock beneath their feet. And with that Nanna's heart grew faint within her, for now she knew certainly that they were too late. The Shining One had spoken, and Doom was falling.

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Piers Minor looked at his companion with troubled eyes. What was this devil's work?

"The Shining One," she whispered, and clung to his arm. "See how his tongues of fire lick up the dust of Doom."

"But who is the Shining One?" demanded the young man, wonderingly.

"Listen!"

Deep under the crackling of the flames vibrated the diapason of the great dynamo. Piers Minor turned pale.

"He speaks," whispered the girl. "And now look, look!"

A little distance away stood one of the ancient telegraph-poles carrying a tangled mass of wire ends. The pole had been swaying dangerously in the rising gale; now with a loud crack it broke off close to the ground and fell so that the wires were brought into naked contact with a copper cable suspended on the opposite side of the street. Instantly the "dead" wires awoke to life, spluttering and hissing like a bunch of snakes; a cataract of yellow-blue sparks poured from the broken ends.

"The tongues of fire," said Nanna. "You may have seen them devour a single tree in the forest or suck out a man's life with a touch, but to-night they are hungry and they are eating up the world."

A terrifying conclusion that was not so far away from the truth. During the last few minutes the area of the conflagration had increased tremendously and the whole central portion of the city, including the Citadel Square, was now a vast furnace in which no life could possibly exist. For the moment the general direction of the wind had shifted, and the flames were not bearing down so rapidly as before upon the two fugitives. They would be in comparative safety for some time yet unless the gale veered back to its former quarter.

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"We can never get through to the north," said Piers Minor.

"There is no necessity," returned Nanna. "I know of a wharf on the Lesser river where the shad-fishers keep their boats. We can reach it from here in a quarter of an hour."

"Good," said Piers Minor, and waited for her to lead the way. Then, as she still held back, he went on, impatiently, "The wind may change at any moment, and it is foolish to wait."

"It is my sister," explained the girl. "She is here in the city—a prisoner——" Her voice shook and failed her.

"But what can we do?" asked the young man. "You do not even know—in Quinton Edge's house, you say? But that is a mile or more away, and the road is already blocked. It is impossible."

"Yes, I know, but suppose there should be a chance—the hand that has moved the Shining One to strike, may it not be lifted again to repair the evil?"

"I do not understand," said Piers Minor.

And thereupon Nanna described as clearly as she could the part that Prosper, the priest, had played in the impending tragedy. Surely he might be prevailed upon to avert the judgment from the innocent. He who had released the flames could as easily restrain them. Or, at least, Arcadia House might be spared.

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"But where are we to find him?"

Nanna pointed down the street. "There—in the House of Power."

"Come," he said, and they went on quickly.

At the entrance to the temple of the Shining One they stopped and listened. The air was all tremulous with the hum of the rapidly revolving dynamos, the thud of the reciprocating machinery, and the grinding of the badly lubricated shafting.

Piers Minor knew that he was horribly afraid, but for very shame he could not hold back. Together they stole a little way within the vaulted entrance and listened again. Nothing but the roar of the machinery. The vast hall would have been in utter darkness save for the glare of the conflagration; as it was, they could see clearly that there was nobody within.

"The little room beyond," said Nanna, and shivered. These were forbidden sights for a woman's eyes, and the god would be very angry. Yet it must be done. They joined hands like two children and went forward.

Now they stood, wondering, within the little room with its low ceiling and bare white walls. Could it be that so great a god as the Shining One could dwell here? An empty room, save for the oak chair standing in the middle of the floor and that curious-appearing board fixed against the wall, with its multiplicity of keys, knobs, and levers. That was all, and yet a vague terror laid its hand upon them; they remained motionless and speechless.

Something, some one had entered the room—slow footsteps and the rustle of trailing garments. Then the sound of a lever snapped to its connecting points, and the great, shining face flamed out of the darkness. In his intense absorption, the old priest saw nothing of the two who also waited there. Advancing to the centre of the room, he stood and looked upon the countenance of the Shining One, while a man might count twoscore. Then he spoke, slowly and hesitatingly, as one who excuses himself of grievous fault:

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"Let the Shining One be content—it is accomplished. And now, O father, have mercy. For the sins of thy people—a sacrifice——"

With unfaltering step he walked to the great chair and seated himself. Then, in a clear voice, "Lord—if indeed thou art lord——" There was the click of a switch-key; the man's body half rose from its seat and sank back again.

Piers Minor felt the girl's dead weight thrown suddenly upon him. "Nanna!" he cried, and she responded bravely, fighting with all her strength against the inflowing tide of faintness. One forward step, taken with infinite precaution, and then another. The stillness remained unbroken.

The great chair stood with its back towards them, and they could not see the seated figure. But Piers Minor caught one glimpse of a hand gripped hard upon the chair arm, and he saw that it was burned hard and black as a coal. Now the door was within reach and they passed out. In the little room, Prosper, the priest, sat upon the knees of the Shining One, and the great, white face looked down upon him.

Not an instant too soon had Piers Minor and Nanna reached the open street. The wind had shifted back to the northwest, and the fire, breaking out in one place after another from the gale-scattered brands, was coming down upon them in great bounds, as though it were some gigantic beast of prey. A suffocating smoke choked their throats and nostrils; they could neither speak nor breathe. Then, by the mercy of God, a fierce counter-current drove the smoke back a little way; they ran at full speed towards the south-east. Now they stopped an instant to refill their panting

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lungs, then on again, for the air about them was full of flying sparks that stung the unprotected flesh and even burned holes in their clothing of stout woollen. On and on, till their heads felt light as a child's toy balloon and the blood in their ears pounded like a mill-wheel. Piers Minor stumbled and fell.

"I am blind," he gasped. "Leave me." But Nanna would not give over, tugging at the man's weight until she had him to his feet again, with a convenient railing at his back. She picked up some water from the gutter with her hands held cup-wise, and dashed the liquid in his face. Piers Minor straightened up, and from his eyes the darkness cleared away.

"Courage!" she said, and he smiled back at her.

There was the shining of the river; now they could see the pier and the boats of the shad-fishers lying alongside. Piers Minor cast off the largest and most seaworthy-looking of the lot, and, without troubling to bail out the standing water, he brought the craft broadside to the wharf and held out his hand to Nanna. But she, looking to the northward, where the gilded cupola of Arcadia House shone out against the sky, neither moved nor spoke.

"Come," he said.

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The girl turned. "She is there," she said, and pointed to the north. "I must go to her—my little sister."

Piers Minor swung himself up on the wharf and seized her.

"You shall not," he said.

She tried to wrench herself free; she struck him full in the face. But Piers Minor only smiled grimly and held on the tighter. And then, to his astonishment, this tiger-cat became suddenly metamorphosed into a dove. Her breast heaved, and she turned her head away; he knew that she was weeping just like any other woman. Whereat Piers Minor smiled again, but not grimly, and held her a little closer.

"Listen," he said, and forced her gently to look at him. "It is impossible to reach Arcadia House; even now the fire is there before you. You must believe that Constans received the message and was able to get there in time. Believe it, because it is I who tell you."

She did believe, but, being a woman, she hesitated again—at the very brink of surrender.

"Let me go," she said, in a low tone, and Piers Minor was so astonished that he immediately complied, and stood looking at her helplessly. But when, coloring like a rose and with downcast eyes, she would have passed him, the masculine instinct of possession awoke again; he barred the way determinedly.

A little distance away an enormous brick storehouse was burning fiercely. A tremendous explosion threw a roof bodily into the air; a shower of incandescent particles descended and drove directly at the fugitives. Nanna felt herself lifted bodily off her feet and swept with a rush down the wharf. One little gulp of regret for her lost independence and she yielded—deliciously. The boat rocked from side to side, then it shot out upon the open river.

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Piers Minor had stopped rowing, for the sparks no longer fell about them. The spectacle of the burning city was a magnificent one. The inverted bowl of the sky shone as though it were made of copper, and the gale had flattened out the flames horizontally so that they resembled the flying masses of a woman's unbound hair.

Nanna's eyes filled with tears.

"It was my world," she said, softly, "the only one I knew."

"Nanna!" said Piers Minor. She let her hand rest in his, and the boat floated on.

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XXVIII

IN THE FULNESS OF TIME

The streets were as light as noonday, and Constans found no difficulty in keeping the dying figure in sight. But, run as he would, he could not gain a yard.

"Arcadia House," muttered Constans, under his breath, as he noticed the direction taken by the runner. What more natural than that a man should seek his own home at such a time? But Constans's brow was clouded as he followed in Quinton Edge's footsteps.

Arcadia House, and why? There could be but one answer to that question after Nanna's message, conveyed to him through Ulick's dying lips. Esmay had disappeared, and yet had remained in Arcadia House. He, who knew Quinton Edge, would understand.

Constans told himself grimly that he did understand. This insolent wanted the girl, just as he had

desired many another thing in life, and it had always been his way to take what he coveted. But this time—Constans set his teeth hard, and now, at last, Arcadia House was in sight.

During this last quarter of an hour the progress of the conflagration had been perceptibly slower, and the great sheaf of flame in the western sky had almost disappeared. It was like the lull that so often takes place in a storm, a period of sudden quiet in the element strife that should warn the prudent that the worst is still to come. To Constans it was the most fortunate of happenings, the comparative darkness enabling him to keep close upon Quinton Edge without risk of discovery.

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As though satisfied that he had arrived in time, Quinton Edge now slackened his pace, making for the gateway on the side street. Whereupon Constans determined to scale the wall at the rear and take the short cut through the garden, so as to intercept the Doomsman at the entrance. Once over the wall, the way was clear. Disdaining caution, he crashed recklessly through the shrubbery, the wet and tangled grass wrapping itself exasperatingly about his ankles as he ran. At the carriage-drive he stopped, flinging himself full length on the ground and close against the wall that marked the sunken way. The run had winded him, and he was thankful for the moment's breathing-space.

From where Constans lay he could command sight of the north terrace that connected the porticos of the river and western fronts. Suddenly it seemed to him that the terrace was occupied by some living thing. A moment before he had noticed a darker blur in the shadows at the river corner; it had appeared to move. He heard a soft padding on the flag-stones as of an animal moving cautiously. He strained his eyes, striving to resolve that dusky blotch into shape intelligible; then a new burst of flame lit up the western sky and he saw clearly—it was Fangs, the hound.

The dog stood motionless, her head thrown upward as though listening. She could not possibly see Constans where he lay, but the smallest noise must betray him.

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His revolver was in a side pocket, and he drew it forth with infinite care. Then he discovered that it was unloaded and that he had no more cartridges. His knife also had disappeared from its sheath; he realized that he was absolutely unarmed and helpless.

The hound leaped lightly from the terrace and began ranging in great half-circles. Constans looked on with fascinated eyes. It could be a matter of seconds only when she must cross his scent, and he knew that she would remember it—there was a blood-feud between them—the death of Blazer, who had been her mate.

The pass-key rattled in the lock of the postern-door, and Quinton Edge entered the sunken way. Fangs heard the noise, hesitated a moment, then tossed her black muzzle in the air and bounded forward to meet her master. Constans wiped away the sweat that was blinding his eyes and waited. Quinton Edge, with the hound by his side, went up the steps leading to the terrace.

Some one came forward to meet him—a slim, womanish figure dressed in white. Constans's heart gave a great bound, for who but Esmay carried her small head with so irresistible a grace. She held out her hands as Quinton Edge reached her side, but he crushed her into his arms and kissed her on the lips. They walked slowly along the terrace, turned the corner of the eastern portico, and disappeared. Constans, running up, was just an instant too late; he heard Quinton Edge calling the dog inside, then the sound of the closing door.

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By a supreme exercise of will Constans stopped short of the insanity that impelled him to thunder on the barrier and demand admittance. Yet he must gain instant entrance to the house, and he ran around the terrace to the river portico. As he had expected, the hall-door was fastened, but he had no difficulty in forcing one of the long windows of the drawing-room; he stepped into the dark and empty room and stood listening.

There was perfect silence everywhere, but he could not trust to it—eyes and ears might be in waiting at every turn, and, above all, there was the dog. He wondered that the hound had not already detected his presence in the house, and his pulse thumped at the thought; he fancied that he could hear deep breathing and the oncoming of padded feet.

The minutes passed, and the silence remained unbroken. Then the sense of his cowardice smote him; the jaws of the brute would be preferable to this intolerable inaction, and he went forward through the half-opened door and into the main hall.

This, too, was empty, and, having windows that faced the west, it was sufficiently well lighted by the conflagration to make the fact of its desertion certain. And Constans owed it to the friendly flames that he was once more provided with a weapon. There was a rapier hanging upon the wall, slender and yet strong, of very ancient make; in an instant he had it down and was trying the temper of its blade upon the hearthstone.

The touch of the cold steel was like a tonic; heart and blood responded immediately. Its discovery had been a fortunate chance, for again the illumination in the west died down the final pianissimo before the full crash of the orchestra—and the darkness returned deeper than before.

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Constans, with the rapier held shortened in his hand, found his way to the staircase and began the ascent. At the turn of the second landing he stopped, feeling instinctively that there was something in the way. When he could bear no longer to wait and listen, he put his hand down and felt beneath it the smooth, hairy coat of the hound's body. The dog was quite dead, and lying in a

pool of her own blood; there was a warm, sickly smell of salt in the air, and Constans's hand was wet when he fetched it away. Who had done this thing, and why?

He went on, with every sense on edge. He could hardly have mistaken his way now, for the door before him stood partly ajar, and there was a light in the room; Constans guessed that it must be the first of the private apartments belonging to Quinton Edge.

He looked in. The room was a large one and luxuriously furnished. An ancient hanging-lamp of brass hung from the ceiling, diffusing a soft radiance; the curtains that concealed the deep window-seat were closely drawn, and, had Constans made his observations with more care, he might have noticed that something moved behind them, an unwieldy bulk that gathered itself as though for a spring.

But he took no account of these smaller things, his eyes being full of Esmay only, and surely that was she who stood there in the shelter of Quinton Edge's arms; now she half turned her head, the better to look into her lord's face, and Constans could trace the outline of her profile—the upper lip, so deliciously short, and the exquisite curve of her throat. His breath came quick as he watched them, and his grasp tightened upon the rapier hilt. So she had deceived him, after all; she had played the traitress from the very beginning. Twice, now, she had smiled into his eyes and sold him for some piece of trumpery—a bracelet of carbuncles or a kiss from Quinton Edge's lips. Well, he could kill them both, and almost at a single stroke, since they stood with their backs to the doorway and were quite unconscious of his presence. But, upon further thought, he determined to wreak positive vengeance on Quinton Edge alone. It was shame to strike a woman, and unnecessary—it would be her punishment to live.

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Dispassionately he reviewed his decision and reaffirmed it; it was now the time for action. But he had delayed just a moment too long. Before he could take that first forward step the one who waited behind the window-curtains had passed before him, an ungainly figure of a man, who limped upon one knee and whose black beard fell like a curtain before his cruel mouth and lips—Kurt, whom men called the "Knacker." A knife was in his hand, and he struck once and twice at Quinton Edge.

"This for the thirty lashes at Middenmass!" he shouted; "and this——"

But here Constans's rapier passed through his throat, and he fell back, gurgling horribly and tearing at his windpipe.

It had all happened so quickly that the two living men could only stare alternately at each other and at the burden that lay in Quinton Edge's arms. A slim, white figure, with that red stain upon her breast—spreading, spreading.

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Constans gathered himself with a mighty effort. "Let me help you," he said, and between them they carried her over to the couch and laid her down. On a near-by table stood a ewer of water; Constans fetched it and began moistening the bloodless lips. They parted with a little sigh, and then the eyes of his sister Issa opened upon him. "Little brother," she whispered, and smiled.

Constans looked over at Quinton Edge, but he shook his head and stood back among the shadows.

"Little brother," said Issa again, and put out a wavering hand.

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XXIX

DEATH AND LIFE

It had been very quiet in the room for a long time. Constans had tried to make the dying woman more comfortable, but every attempt to move her had only resulted in the wound breaking out afresh. It was cruelty to persist, and so he gave it over, waiting for what must come.

Now it seemed that Issa slept, for her eyes were closed and the lines of pain had wholly disappeared from the smooth, white brow. Quinton Edge kept his place at the back, where he could see and not be seen; a statue could not have been more immobile. Constans, kneeling by the couch, still held his sister's hand in his, keeping watch upon the pulse that fluttered so delicately. Once or twice the heavy eyes had opened and she had smiled up at him—contentedly as a child resting after the long day's play.

Constans had not attempted to speak; his mind was still seeking its wonted bearings, and he was afraid. His sister Issa!—the little Issa with whom he had played at fox-chase and grace-hoops. Issa!—the maiden who had gathered her May-bloom in the long ago, and who had given herself and all for love of the stranger within her father's gates; yes, and who had died within that self-same hour upon her lord's breast.

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And yet if this miracle were indeed the truth it accounted for more than one thing that had troubled him. He remembered now the white-robed figure that had appeared to him in the gardens of Arcadia House and the superstitious terror with which he had watched it following

upon the unconscious footsteps of the girl Esmay. Then, again, the fair-haired woman who only a few minutes ago had come to meet Quinton Edge on the north terrace, an apparition so ravishing that Constans must needs confound it with the flesh-and-blood presentment of his own dear lady.

She was speaking now, almost fretfully. "Is the night never to be gone? The hangings at the window are so heavy. And where is my father?"

Constans rose and went to the window, intent on flinging it wide open. But Quinton Edge was there before him and stayed his hand.

"No," he said, and Constans obeyed, being greatly troubled in mind and uncertain of himself, even as one who wanders in a maze. This Quinton Edge must have perceived, for he spoke gently, making it plain to him that this was, indeed, the maid whom they had both loved and not some disembodied shadow from the underworld. And having come finally to believe this, Constans was comforted and desired to hear the matter in full. "Tell me," he said, and Quinton Edge went on:

"It was weeks and weeks that she lay weak and speechless upon a pallet of dried fern, her only shelter the thatch of a mountain sheepfold.

"There was no one among us who had any knowledge of surgery, and so I had to be content with simples—cold-water compresses for the wound and a tea made from the blossoms of the camomile flower to subdue the fever in the blood. So the days dragged by until the turn for the better came. Little by little I nursed her back to life again, and in time we came safely to Doom.

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"Arcadia House was a secure hiding-place for my treasure, and during all these years no one has even guessed at the secret. I had no need to trust my servants, for they knew nothing; the walls had neither eyes nor ears, and I kept my own counsel. Until to-day no man's eye but mine has looked upon her face.

"But even yet you do not wholly understand. Have you forgotten, then, that the body may be in health and yet the soul be darkened? She had come back to life, indeed, but it was the life of a butterfly in the sun, unconscious of aught else than the light and warmth that surrounds it. For her the past had been sealed; to me the future. Do you understand now? A woman grown and yet as a new-born babe in heart and mind. What was there for me to do but to bear my punishment as patiently as I might, the cup of love ever at my lips, but never to be tasted."

Constans kept silence for a little space. When he spoke it was haltingly.

"Then you think—you think——"

"She recognized you. Could you not see it—that note in her voice as of one who wakes from a long sleep? That was why I stopped you from throwing aside the window-curtains. The light of the burning city—it might have brought back the memory of that night at the keep."

"And for the same reason you have kept yourself out of sight," said Constans, coldly.

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The man trembled. "Yes; I am afraid," he answered, and Constans, for all his bitterness of heart, was fain to pity him.

A series of muffled explosions startled them. Quinton Edge moved softly towards the outer door. "The fire must be coming nearer," he whispered. "I will make sure of our position and return within a few minutes. Hush! she is sleeping again."

But when Constans went and stood by the couch, Issa was looking at him with wide-opened eyes.

"Constans—little brother," she said, weakly, and yet with an infinite content. He dropped to his knees beside her and tried to answer, but could not.

"Surely it must be close to morning now," she went on, slowly. "I can hear the doves cooing on the tiles, the wind is blowing over the water-meadows, and the lark is in the blue—ah, God! how beautiful this dear world of ours! It is the May-time, little brother, and the arbutus will be in bloom—the shy, pink blossoms that nestle on the sunny slopes of the rocks and at the roots of the birch-trees. We will gather them—you and I—and bring them home to deck our lady mother's chamber. The May-bloom—it is in the air. How sweet—how sweet!"

Constans, following the look in her eyes, saw a low table standing against the opposite wall. Upon it was a bowl filled with the delicate arbutus—fresh and fragrant as though but lately gathered. He went softly across the room and despoiled the bowl of a spray. She took it from him eagerly. Then the violet eyes clouded.

"I cannot remember—it must be that I am still so tired—it is strange. The morning—it cannot be far distant—now——"

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Quinton Edge at the threshold held up a beckoning finger, and Constans went to him.

"It is upon us," said the Doomsman. "The out-buildings are smoking already, and the lumber-yard on the north will become a furnace the instant that the first spark falls there. There is but one chance—the river. You will find a boat at the dock. The girl Esmay—ah, you could think that, too, of me. Yet it was natural enough."

Constans would have spoken, but the words tripped on his tongue. Quinton Edge interrupted him imperiously.

"She is there," he said, and pointed to a door leading to the interior apartments of the suite. "I could not leave Issa entirely alone on this last night. So I brought the girl here—for once, she trusted me. For once, you can do likewise."

Constans bowed his head. "But Issa," he said, thickly.

"She would be dead in our arms before we reached the stairs," returned the other. "Can you not leave her to me for just this little while longer?" His voice hardened savagely. "She is mine, do you hear—mine, mine. I have paid the price, double and treble, and now I take what is my own."

His voice rang like a trumpet in the narrow room. And yet, straight through its clamor, pierced the sound of a stifled cry. Constans turned instantly, but Quinton Edge, trembling, kept his eyes fixed on the floor.

Sitting upright upon the couch, Issa looked at the two men steadfastly, and then only at the one. The violet depths in her eyes had darkened to pools of midnight, and her lips were like a thread of scarlet against the ivory of her face. A miracle! but Constans would not look again, knowing that for him this hour had passed forever.

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Constans went to the inner door and opened it. Esmay was kneeling at the window; he went over and touched her on the shoulder. "Come," he said. She looked up at him, and he saw that her face whitened for all of the glare from the flaming sky that fell upon it. Yet she let him lead her, unresisting, into the other room, where Quinton Edge still stood motionless and looked upon the floor. Constans plucked at his sleeve, drawing him out into the full circle of the lamp-light. Face to face for the last time, and, though no word was said, each knew that there was peace between them.

"Go to her," whispered Constans, and pushed him gently towards the couch.

Now the room had fallen into semi-darkness, for the oil had failed in the lamp, and there was only that dull-red line along the edge of the window-curtains. And there was silence, too, for all that words could say had been said already.

The minutes passed, but the man had ceased to count them. The hand that lay in his was growing cold, but the knowledge had ceased to concern him; the brain no longer registered the messages sent by the nerves, and he was conscious only of an immense weariness, of an overwhelming desire to sleep. The maiden Issa's hair lay within the hollow of his arm, a pool of rippled gold; it was like looking down into an enchanted well; the waters seem to rise and meet him. The glow at the curtain-edge grew stronger; now it was a lake of liquid fire into which he gazed.

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The threshold of the door had warped and sprung, and through the crack crept a thin line of smoke; it raised itself sinuously, as does a snake; it darted its head from side to side, preparing to strike.

Descending the staircase, Constans saw that the time was growing perilously short. On three sides of them the buildings were burning, and Arcadia House itself was on fire at the southern wing. The hurricane, shifting back to the northwest, was at its wildest, and the air was full of ashes and incandescent sparks. As Constans and Esmay emerged from the shelter of the house, it seemed as though the universe itself was on fire. Could they ever hope to reach the river? His heart sank as he looked at that fiery rain through which they must pass. He turned to Esmay.

"It is the only way," he began, and then stopped, wondering that she should look so strangely upon him.

"I thought you dead," she answered, humbly. "It was the last thing I heard—the silver whistle and Nanna misunderstood my question."

"Oh," said Constans, enlightened, and at the same time subtly warned that he must not press her too far. "So you feared that it might have been my spirit that came to fetch you?"

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"No; not feared," she answered, and with such sweet confidence that Constans's heart thrilled to new courage. By God's splendor! this woman trusted him and he would save her.

Half way to the boat-stage they were caught in a whirlwind of choking vapor; they struggled onward for a few steps, and then the girl fell. With infinite difficulty Constans half carried, half dragged her down the last slope to the landing. The boat, a small canoe or dugout, was there, but he could find only one broken paddle. It was a mad thing to venture out upon the wind-lashed river with equipment so imperfect, but there could be no choice of another way.

The tide was running out strongly and Constans could do nothing more than keep the craft on a straight course and out of the trough of the heavier seas. He looked longingly at the opposite shore, so near to the eye and so impossible to attain against that wind and tide; he realized that they were drifting down into the open bay, and that would be the end. Yet he would fight for it, and now that the fresh air had aroused Esmay from her swoon, she crept to his side and sat there comforting him.

Four hours later the keel grated on a pebbly shingle, and Constans, looking about him with weary eyes, recognized the little bay, with its fringing semicircle of trees. Here was the very log upon which he had sat and dreamed of unutterable things that bright May morning in the long ago, a dream from which he had awakened to make first acquaintance with Quinton Edge.

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A little way up the grassy glade a fire was burning, and there was the savory odor of roasted meat in the air. Constans helped Esmay out of the boat, and with stiffened limbs they dragged themselves up the forest way. There was a little shriek, a rush of feet, and swishing skirts, and Nanna's arms were about her sister, while Constans was looking into Piers Minor's honest eyes.

Far in the north, a smoke as of a furnace ascended, and the sky was darkened. But here the sun shone brightly, the grass was green underfoot, the birds sang in the branches above their heads, and the smell of the spring-tide was in the air. Truly, life and light are sweet to him who has once walked in the shadow.

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XXX

THE STAR IN THE EAST

It was in October of the same year that Constans and Esmay stood one day in the court-yard of the Greenwood Keep, now restored and rebuilt.

His father's blood friends had helped generously in the rehabilitation of his fortunes, and Constans had worked hard with his own hands. Now the task was finished, and he had persuaded Esmay to ride over from the River Barony and pronounce in person upon its merits. For let it be known that Piers Minor had lost no time in bringing home his bride, and both he and Nanna had insisted that Esmay must live with them. And Esmay had accepted gratefully, for all that she was an heiress in her own right, through inheritance of her uncle Hugolin's estate, and could have bought and sold Piers Minor and Nanna, and all their holdings, ten times over. But all of her red gold could not buy love, and Esmay was wise enough to know this. Moreover, the River Barony was but twenty miles distant from the Greenwood Keep, and at least twice every week Constans rode over and spent the night. It was pleasant to hear him tell proudly of the progress of the work; how yesterday the roofing of the guard-house had been started, and how to-day they had turned for the first time the waters of the Ochre brook into the moat. Esmay always listened attentively, and it pleased her to think that Constans looked at her when he talked, even though his actual words might be addressed to Piers Minor or to Nanna. Listening always, but speaking seldom, for she felt that he was waiting purposely until some milestone of achievement had been passed, and she feared that he might consider her unwomanly. So the summer had gone, the great work was accomplished, and now they were viewing it together. They had seen everything, going in turn from lighting platform to calving-barn; from forge and smithy to my lady's bower. And Esmay had duly admired all and pronounced it good.

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Now they were standing in the great hall watching the martins as they circled around the red-capped gatehouse, and the white doves cooing in the eaves. A silence had fallen between them, and Constans, leaning against the window-casement, seemed to have forgotten of Esmay's very existence. Quietly she drew aside and left him, impelled by an irresistible desire to know if he would notice her absence and would follow her. Hardly had she stolen five steps away than she heard him start, and then turn to seek her. A sheer delight coursed through her veins, and she began to run.

"Esmay!" he called, but she would not stop, gathering up her skirts in both her hands, and trying not to look behind her. But he was quickly at her heels, and an inexplicable terror seemed to seize her; she looked about for a hiding-place; a door presented itself, and she clutched the handle desperately, but it refused to turn. Seeing her discomfiture, Constans believed that he was entitled to enjoy his triumph. He walked up with leisurely deliberation. "You are a goose," he said, and took her hands in his, as one who reproves a wilful child.

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She assented meekly.

"To run away like that—so foolish, when I had something serious to say to you. Why do you suppose I brought you here? Why should I want you to see the house? why did I build it at all? Be good enough to answer me."

She looked up at him with the most innocent expression in the world. "Why?" she echoed, as though mightily puzzled, and immediately the male creature became miserably bewildered, and lost his confident bearing in the twinkling of an eye. Had she really misunderstood him? had he been deceiving himself from the very beginning? He turned pale and dropped her hands, and she,

misinterpreting this relinquishment of ownership, felt the blood receding from her own cheeks. Two utterly foolish creatures, and yet their folly is not to be argued away by the wise men. For while it is the accepted theory that a woman always knows when she is loved (with which men please themselves), and *per contra* that a man is never unconscious of the favor in which he stands (with which women torment themselves), yet the truth is that neither man nor woman is ever certain of the fact until it is finally proclaimed in actual speech. So this is why lovers are always being asked to repeat and repeat again the magic words upon which all their happiness depends.

"The reason—you know—the reason why," he stammered, and then she came to his aid.

"Yes, I know, but *tell* me."

And thereupon he did tell her.

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A year later, and Constans and his wife sat on a high point of land that overlooked the waters of the Lower bay and the broad, salt sea beyond the dunes. Several of Constans's neat-cattle had strayed, and he had determined to ride to the fishermen's village below the Narrows to inquire if the estrays had been seen in that direction. Esmay had accompanied him, and they had been all day in the saddle and were weary. Nevertheless, they were satisfied, for the lost cattle had been recovered, and in the morning the herdsmen would be sent over to drive them home.

They had shared a frugal supper of bread and cheese and dried grapes, and now they were waiting until the horses should have cropped their fill. There was no hurry, the moon not rising for an hour yet, and it was useless to arrive at the Kills before the time of slack water. Constans had his back against a pine-stump, and Esmay's head rested on her husband's shoulder. They sat in silence, gazing out upon the gray sea, content in their present happiness and looking forward to a yet greater one in the near future. For to Constans Esmay had just made a wife's final confession, the secret being whispered into his inmost ear, though there was only the land and the sea to overhear.

Suddenly, on the darkened eastern sky-line, a bright light flashed out, in color like to a star, and yet incomparably more brilliant. And the light was not fixed, but continually changed its base, as was shown by the broad band of rays that now swept the surface of the sea and then traced their luminous way on the overhanging clouds. Another shift and the shining pathway reached to their very feet, illuminating with its radiance every object within its focus, down to the tiniest shell upon the beach. Esmay, startled, clung to her husband's arm.

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"What is it?" she asked, but he could not answer her.

Yet as they gazed upon the new star, insensibly they became comforted. Whatever this prodigy foretold, it could not be an omen of lasting evil. Had they not seen for themselves that, even in the worst of worlds, righteousness and justice and truth had been something more than names. Doom had fallen; for more than a twelvemonth the ruins had smouldered, and to-day they were but the harmless haunt of bat and badger. And the world relieved of that intolerable incubus, and recovered of its purging and cleansing sickness, had started once more upon its appointed path—slowly, indeed, at the first, but ever onward and upward.

"It is only one more of the things that we cannot understand," said Constans at the last. "But we who love need not fear."

He drew his wife's face to his own, and there, full in the radiance of the unknown star, he kissed her on the lips.

Early that same evening Sub-Lieutenant Jarvis, watch-officer of the electric cruiser *Erebus*, reported to his commander that a landfall had been made six points away on the port bow. Captain Laws immediately hastened to the bridge of the vessel and ordered that the engines be stopped and the customary signals shown. But no reply was received to the rockets displaying the red, green, and white colors of the Antarctic Republican Navy; apparently the country was not inhabited. Yet to make sure, the search-light was put in requisition. Up and down, from side to side, swept the giant beam, and now they could see that the land on the left rose gradually into a considerable headland. Beyond opened the wide waters of what must be a great bay. Captain Laws reflected for a moment, and then gave another order to his executive.

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Under half speed, and with a leadsman in the chains, the *Erebus* moved steadily towards the unknown coast.

THE END

TYPOGRAPHICAL ERRORS CORRECTED

The following typographical errors in the text were corrected as detailed here.

In the text: "It was only necessary to dampen these sponges to ensure a perfect discharge of the

electrical current passing through the head-rest ..." the word "ensue" was corrected to "ensure."

Some hyphenation was inconsistently used in the original. These have been retained as they appear in the original text.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DOOMSMAN ***

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