

LONESOME TOWN

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[image]

Only at the threat of her raised crop did he drop the grasped bridle rein.

LONESOME TOWN

BY

ETHEL *and* JAMES DORRANCE

AUTHORS OF

“Glory Rides the Range,” “Get Your Man,” etc.

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G. W. GAGE

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To
FATHER KNICKERBOCKER

WHO HAS WILLED TO HIS HEIRS FOREVER
THE GREAT HERITAGE OF CENTRAL PARK

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LONESOME TOWN

CHAPTER I—SOME PLACE LIKE HOME

The trail spilled into a pool of shadows at the bottom of the gorge. As if doubtful of following it, the lone rider in chaps and a flannel shirt drew up for a “breathing.” This was gratefully advantaged by his mount. Evidently they had come at speed, whatever the distance, for the reins were lathered and foam flecked the bit corners.

The man removed his white sombrero and mopped his brow with a purple bandanna. The fingers with which he combed back his moist thatch nicely matched the hair in color—sunburn brown. His head bulged slightly at the back, but was balanced on a neck and shoulders splendidly proportioned. His rather plain face was not covered with stubble or mustache—cheek bones high, jaw sloping in at an angle, nose straight, lips thin by contrast with their width.

While he rests in his saddle, every pore of him exuding healthfully to the midsummer heat of an unusual spring, meet “Why-Not” Pape, of Hellroaring Valley, Montana. But don’t expect to understand—not at first hand grasp—how one christened Peter Stansbury Pape some thirty-odd years before, had come by his interrogatory sobriquet. No more could you have seen in his expression excuse for the pace to which he had put his horse. His eyes—the best of his features—looked pleased and told of peace with the world; gray, with dark lashes and irises, they scanned the granite wall rising sheer from the trail-side. Sighting a bull snake that peered down at him from its crevasse, both of them smiled and one amiably winked.

You must have been something of a psychoanalyst—able to go below the surface of day-time and sleep-time dreams—to have realized the unreliability in this case of surface indications. Only by such super-sight could you have seen that Why-Not Pape merely appeared to be peaceful and pleased. As a matter of fact, his head and his heart were heavy with disappointment. But then, a subject so deep and personal shouldn’t be broached at this first formal introduction.

Meet also, if you please, Polkadot Pape, a cross-bred cow-pony who soon

could quip the interest of any horse-worthy he-man and who, by virtue of his weird and wicked style of beauty, could command the admiration of the fair. Had you stood on the trail before him and made the slightest friendly overture, he would have bent a foreleg—the right one—and offered you a hoof-shake without so much as a nudge from the rider who most times was his master-mind. Contrary to the suggestion of his given name, his coat was not dotted; rather, was splotched with three colors—sorrel and black on a background of white. The extra splotch took him out of the pinto class and made him a horse apart. And always he gaited himself with the distinctive style of the bold, black spot beneath his left eye. This late afternoon, however, despite the toss of his head and swish of his long white tail, his manner, like his man's, was superficial—the mere reflex from a habit of keeping up appearances. Circumstances over which he had no control darkened around him like a swarm of horse-flies.

Below a shadow pool lured. Beyond, the thin trail beckoned. Pape glanced upward. A white circle upon a dying elm—one of a group that struggled for their lives up over the rocks forming the east side of the gorge—caught his eye. Above he saw a second white circle upon a half-withered red birch; still higher, a third upon a bald cypress. Aware that no elm, birch, or cypress, alive or half alive or dead, reproduced perfect white circles on its trunk, he decided that these had been painted there with a purpose by the hand of man.

His desire to follow a trail so oddly blazed was indulged as quickly as born. The caress of one knee against saddle leather and the lightest lift of rein notified his tricolored steed. Polkadot sprang from the beaten path into an upward scramble over the rocks. The going would have advised the least astute of mountain goats to watch its step. But Dot was sure-footed from long practice over the boundary barriers of Hellroaring Valley.

When the white blaze faded out—when the trees ceased to be circle-marked—neither man nor mount would have considered a stop. From appearances, no one ahorse had left that gorge before by that route; probably no one would again. On and up they moved, enticed by the mystery of what might or might not be lurking at the top.

Across a flat bristling with rhododendrons and so small as to be accounted scarce more than a ledge, trotted the cow-pony; insinuated his way through a fringe of Forsythia brush just beginning to yellow; dug his shoe-prongs into the earth of a steep, but easier slope. Pape, looking back, could see through the tree tips a mountainous range of turreted peaks and flat-topped buttes, terminating on the north in a massive green copper dome. The height gained, he was interested by the discovery of an unroofed blockhouse of rough stone that literally perched upon a precipitous granite hump. Was it a relic of Indian war-path days? Had the flintlocks of pioneers spit defiance through the oblong loopholes inserted at

intervals in its walls? He wondered.

"You wouldn't be homesick at all, Dot, if your imagination had the speed of your hoofs," he leaned down to adjure his horse, after a habit formed on many a lonelier trail. "Can't you just hear those old-fashioned pop-guns popping? No? Well, at least you can hear the dogwood yapping? Look around you, horse-alive! Don't this scene remind you of home? Of course you've got to concentrate on things near at hand. But trust me, that's the secret of living to-day—concentration. Look far afield and you'll lose the illusion, just as you bark your shins when you mix gaits."

A shrill trill startled both; centered Pape's attention on the brush that edged the mesa to his right. But the quail he suspected was too expert in the art of camouflage to betray its presence except by a repetition of his call, closer and more imperative than the first.

"That bird-benedict must be sized like a sage hen to toot all that. Maybe he's a Mormon and obliged to get noisy to assemble his wives."

This sanguinary illusion, along with varied others which had preceded it, was dissipated a moment after its inception and rather rudely. The trill sounded next from their immediate rear. Both horse and rider turned, to see pounding toward them a man uniformed in blue, between his lips a nickel-bright whistle, in his right hand a short, but official-looking club. Of the pair of Westerners who awaited the approach, one at least remembered that he was two-thousand-odd miles away from the Hellroaring home range of his over-worked imagination; appreciated that he was in for a set-to with a "sparrow cop" of America's most metropolitan police.

Gasping from the effort of hoisting his considerable avoirdupois up the height and sputtering with offended dignity, the officer stamped to a stand alongside and glared fearsomely.

"What you mean, leaving the bridle path? Say, I'm asking you!"

"Horse bolted." Pape parried with a half-truth—Dot *had* sort of bolted up the rocks.

The official eye fixed derisively on the angora chaps; lifted to the blue flannel shirt; stopped at the stiff-brimmed white Stetson. "One of them film heroes, eh?"

"Film? Not me. You'll be asking my pardon, brother, when you know who—"

The officer interrupted with increasing belligerence: "Trying to play wild and woolly and never been acrost the Hudson River, like as not! You take an out-and-outer's advice. Put away them Bill Hart clothes and ride a rocking-chair until you learn to bridle a hoss. I've a good mind to run you in. Why didn't you mind your whistle?"

"Honest, Mr. Policeman, I thought you were a quail. You sounded just like—"

"A quail—*me*? I'll learn you to kid a member of the Force. You climb down offen that horse, now, and come along with me over to the Arsenal."

"Why Arsenal? Do you think I'm a big gun or a keg of powder?"

"The Arsenal's the 33d Precinct Station House. Fresh bird yourself!"

The officer's look told Pape even louder than his words that the time for persiflage had passed, unless he really wished a police court interval. He had indulged his humor too far in likening this overgrown, formidable "sparrow" to the most succulent tidbit of the fowl species. He brought into play the smooth smile that had oiled troubled waters of his past.

"No offense meant, I assure you. It happens that my hoss and I are from exceeding far across the river you mention—Montana. We've found your big town lonesome as a sheep range. Fact, we only feel comfortable when we're sloping around in this park. Parts of it are so like Hellroaring that—"

"I can pinch you again for cussin', young feller!"

"You can't pinch a citizen for merely mentioning the geographical name of his home valley, which same you can find on any map. As I was about to say, there are spots in this stone-fenced ranch that make us think of God's country. Just now, when we saw a trail blazed with white circles, we plumb forgot where we were and bolted."

The guardian of law and order continued to look the part of an indignant butt of banter.

"A blazed trail in Central Park, New York?" he scoffed. "You'll show me or you'll come along to the station!"

"Why can't a blazed trail—why not anything in Central Park?"

Peter Pape put the question with that grin, half ironic and wholly serious, with which he had faced other such posers in his past. To him, the West come East, this park was the heart of the town—Gotham's great, green heart. By its moods it controlled the pulse of rich and poor alike; showed to all, sans price or prejudice, that beauty which is the love of nature made visible; inspired the most uncouth and unlearned with the responses of the cultured and the erudite.

The human heart was capable of any emotion, from small to great. Any deed, then, might be done within the people's park.

CHAPTER II—A TIP FROM THE

TOP

Peter Pape swung from the saddle and, pulling the reins over Polkadot's head, led the law's "strong arm" down the heights over the way he had ascended on horseback. A glance into the hectic visage beside him offered the assurance that, while not yet under arrest, he soon would be if he failed to find those circle-marked trees.

"The town that owns this park, now, should be the last to blame us for mistaking our locale," he took occasion to argue amongst their downward stumbles. "It's like a regular frontier wilderness—almost. There's nothing much around to break the solitude except people—only about six or seven million of them per day. And there's nothing to break the silence except—Listen to that never-ending drone! Don't it sound for all the world like the wind playing through pines?"

"Sounds more like motors to me—Fords *and* automobiles a-playing over macadam," grumbled the guard.

But Why-Not Pape was not easily to be diverted from his dream. "And yon green dome to the north of the range—" he lifted eyes and a hand—"just couldn't look more like the copper stain on a butte within binocular range of my Hellroaring ranch house."

"Lay off of that irreverence. You can't cuss at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine—not in my presence, you can't!"

The topmost of the trail-blazing trees Pape offered as Exhibit "A" for the defense. The line of them, when sighted from below, looked to be leading, he declared.

An off-duty grin humanized the official countenance. "White paint spots tell the tree gang to saw down dying trunks and haul the logs to the saw-mill over in North Meadow. If you was to follow all of them as bridle signs you'd get yourself and that gingham nag of yours sentenced for life. This once I'm going to try to believe you're as green as you look. C'mon down to the path."

Their wait at the equestrian trail was not long. A traffic policeman, mounted on a well-groomed bay, loped toward them, evidently on his way back to stables from a tour of duty that, from his magnificent appearance, easily might have included several flirtations and at least one runaway rescue. At a signal from his fellow afoot, he drew rein.

"You'll be doing me a favor, Medonis Moore, if you'll shoo this bird outen the park," wheezed he of the whistle. "I got a date 'sevening and Night Court's

not me roudy-voo.”

“What’s he gone and done, O’Shay?”

“Called me a quail for one thing, which shows you at the start that he’s kind of off. I’m right many queer things, like my lady friend tells me, but never that—not a quail.”

“Nor a quailer from duty, eh Pudge?”

Ignoring the jibe, the weighty one went into detail. “He rode his horse up to the top of the bluff. Says he’s from somewheres far West. Framed up a foolish excuse about believing in signs like religion. Says them white spots on the doomed trees was no lost language to him, but a message from the dead that led him wrong. Get me—or him? Howsomever, I’m willing to leave him go this time on account his being good-natured.”

“Account of that date, don’t you mean?”

The sparrow chaser drew up with dignity. “Which or whether, will you do me the favor, Medonis, of shoeing him out?”

The colloquy had advanced of its own spirit, without interruption or plea from Why-Not Pape. Polkadot had improved the interim by nose-rubbing an acquaintance with the “Donis” mount. Here at last was one of his kind of whom he could approve. Even though the police horse showed to be too much groomed—was overly “dressy,” as Why-Not often said of human passers-by—his tail was not docked and he wore a saddle very near “regular,” certainly not one of those pads of leather on which most of the park riders posted up and down like monkeys on so many sticks.

“Come along, bo,” decided the magnificent director of traffic. “I’m weak, but maybe I can keep you on the crooked and narrow far as the must-you-go gate.”

With a friendly farewell to the “sparrow” who had a “date,” Pape rode off with his new, enforced escort, Polkadot and the officer’s bay fell into step.

“Paint that horse yourself?” inquired “Donis” Moore, with a grin.

This brought a laugh from Pape. “No, my friend; he was foaled as is, so far as his colors go. He’s just mixed a bit like me, and feels kind of lonesome in your cold New York.”

“New York cold?”

“You see, Dot and I came expecting the kind of time-of-our-lives we’d heard about. And we haven’t had it—not yet.”

The handsome officer, who presumedly had been nicknamed after Adonis by the Force, nodded understandingly. “Ain’t the trouble with your expectations, now? Would you be likely to hear of those times-of-lives, if they was the regular thing?”

“But we’re not looking for the regular thing. And why not expect? Don’t

you get what you go after? You, for instance—I should think you'd expect the limit that kind Fate could give. If I looked like you—"

There was a sincerity of admiration in Pape's lanky shrug and lapsing sigh such as "'Donis" Moore evidently wasn't fortified to resist. He turned his dark eyes and fine-cut profile to a more detailed study of his by-proxy charge.

Pape pursued the advantage. "Sound looking critter you're forking, officer. What you call him?"

"Hylan is his name—Traffic 'B."

"That's a new horse alias to me. Dot here does a polka when persuaded right. If Highland, now, does a fling, we might join them in a 'brother' act and put them on the stage."

"You'll be trespassing the dignity of our sacred mayor, as well as the people's park, if you ain't careful," warned 'Donis Moore. "H-y-l-a-n is what I said was his name and he don't own up to flings like you mean any more than our chief executive."

The Westerner looked interested. "Named your nag after your boss, eh? Not an untactful idea at all. Hope hoss Hylan explains to Polkadot what fine company he's in. First real acquaintance my poor brute's met up with since I rode him out of the home corral and into a baggage car which I couldn't hocus-pocus him into thinking was the latest in stables. I reckon it was too portable. He'll be glad to know that he is starting at the top in equine circles—with His Honor the Mayor's namesake."

"You talk kind of discouraged, bo. Just what's gone wrong?"

"Nothing's gone wrong. You see, nothing's started."

"Then why don't you start something?"

Pape's attention looked much more arrested than his person. "Start something?"

"Sure. Something, say, along the partic'aler line of your ambitions."

"The ambitions that have kept me on the move over the four States of my past range wouldn't lead me into any nice place in this burg of rules and regulations, I fear. Even out in God's country they had to make allowance for a lot I did. Here, seems like there's an Indian sign hung on me. Not a soul knows or cares who or what I am."

Evidently interested, the police rider checked his mount's manger-bound trot to a walk, for they were nearing their division of ways.

"Would you be satisfied, now, with folks knowing who and what you really are?" he asked impressively, throwing his weight on the right stirrup, as he leaned toward his charge. "Who and what do you want to be?"

"Who doesn't matter so much. *What* I want to be is gay—to get as much out of playing as I do out of working when I'm home."

'Donis Moore looked him over critically. "You want to be a gay bird and you ride around looking like the last shad in the Hudson!" Obviously pleased with his rôle of mentor, Donis' dark, handsome face lighted with his argument. "You see, bo, the people are right busy in this burg. They can't stop to chum with strangers. You got to get in step with them—insist on chumming with them as you swing along. First you got to look like what you want to be. Appertainin' to which, I'd get me some civilized togs if I was you—that is, if you happen to have any spare change in them corduroys."

"Change?" enquired Pape. "I let them keep the change. I could buy quite a chunk of this town—a whole cold shoulder of it—without straining my finances. I mean that and at present prices. What I haven't got is friends—not one among all these millions upon millions of effete folks. I'm wondering if the run of the cards wouldn't have been some different B. P."

"B. P.? How come? I ain't no Greek studjent any more than I'm a descendant of Anna Eva Fay."

"Before Prohibition," Why-Not accommodated. "But then, I wouldn't want the sort of friends whose innards I had to win any more than I'd want those I could win with my outards. Clothes don't make the man—or so the poets say."

"That dope's blank verse, young fellow. Leastwise, the opposite holds in N'Yawk. The wrong clothes unmake him." The cop dandy straightened, with an illustrative, downward glance over his own brass-buttoned magnificence. "I'm giving it to you right, bo. Unless you're a celeb, and have earned a sort of special license to dress contrary to form, you'd best flatter the people you wanta trot with by harnessing out as near like 'em as possible. You been wearing that broad-brim on Broadway? You *have*, eh? Don't you see that they just naturally take you for a steerer—likely think you're wanting to sell 'em stock in some gilt mine? Not meaning to hurt your feelings, I'll say that the piebald you're riding is the only O. K. thing about you. Happens to be a fawncy of our *au fait* cits. to ride broncs this spring. Seeing you're so careless about your cash, you'd best throw some into the talons of a tailor and a hatter and a near-silk-shirt grafter. Then, after you've got yourself looking something like the gay guy you say you wanta be, begin to act like him. *Do* something, if you get me, to make 'em notice you."

They parted at the "Remember the Maine" monument, the official mentor's argument duly paid for in thanks, and a "good-luck" hope exchanged.

What could he do to make New York notice him?

Peter Pape pondered the question as Polkadot dodged through Columbus Circle's whirligig of traffic—a feat which took all the skill acquired in cutting out steers from range round-ups. The disinterested source of the invited advice recommended its substance. Before he had walked his mount a block down *The Way* he had decided to follow it. Its first half—the acquirement of the outer ha-

biliments of sophistication—easily could be acted upon through the free coinage of gold. The second half—

How make the big town wish to be friends with him?

To himself he admitted the reason back of his confidence to the friendly Medonis of the Mounted. The very seriousness of his score-squaring mission to the “cold” burg, made him ambitious to be taken for that “gay guy” who must be haberdashed into his part—a Western gold-fish come East to flap his fins in the Big Puddle. He mustn’t forget that he now was a wealthy man, with no obligations except one voluntary vow and that to himself; that he still was young enough to feel as gay as any costume could make him look; that so far in life he had proved strong enough to do whatever he had decided to do.

So what—*what?*

The dusk of even this daylight-saving hour was thickening. Pape urged his mount into the rack of Times Cañon. There, toward the convergence of each street, clumps of vehicles spun forward, only to stop and lose all they had gained at the command of traffic signals. Various bound surface cars clattered through; clanged with self-importance; puffed with passengers. Pedestrians darted this way, often, to turn and dart back that, in what seemed a limb-regardless passion to get home in the fewest possible seconds. Like flour upon the other ingredients in some great mixing bowl, Evening was sifted over all, then stirred into a conglomerate, working mass—dough to be baked by dinner time.

The sensation rather than sight of an overhead flash caused the splotted horse to throw back his head with a snort and the rider to hang his gaze on high. Unexpectedly, as happen most miracles, a blaze lit the ungeometrical square and searched the lowering clouds—millions of watts bottled in bulbs—a fan-fare of nitrogen dyed red, yellow, blue, green and diamond-white—incalculable volts of power wired into legible array.

The gray eyes of the Westerner upheld, fascinated, to this sight of Broadway’s electric display, to him the marvel of the marvels of to-day. Always was his pulse stirred by it and his imagination set apace. As, when a child, he had pored over the lurid illustrations of his fairy-book, so now nightly he pored over this real-life picture. For him it lit a bridle path into byways of the unknown—into the highway of the impossible.

A moment before a problem had darkened his brow. Now the darkness was displaced by light. Over the suggested answer to the unanswerable he exulted. What was difficulty of any sort except illusion? His Fatness the Quail—that is to say, the park sparrow cop—to-day had accused him of believing too devoutly in signs. Yet *what* were signs for if not to point the way?

His chuckles evoked the curiosity of Polkadot. Back toward him wagged one white-tipped, enquiring ear. Willingly, as at all such requests of his

quadruped pal, he leaned to oblige.

“Why not?” He laughed aloud. “I ask you that, old hoss—*why not?*”

CHAPTER III—THE SKY SIGN

Peter Pape sighed a chestful of relief. They pulled on like ordinary pants. But of course that was what they were expected to do. Weren't they direct from the work room of the most expensive tailor he could locate in Gotham? Even so, he had inserted his silk-socked toes into their twin tunnels with some foreboding. They were different, these long, straight leg-sheaths of his first full-dress suit.

There. The secret is out. Our East-exiled Westerner had followed advice. Praying that news of his lapse never would wing back to Hellroaring, he had submitted himself to measurements for a claw-hammer, known chiefly by rumor on the range as a “swallow-tail.” The result had been delivered late that afternoon, one week since the signs of Broadway had directed him aright. The suit had seemed in full possession of the dressing room of his hotel suite when he had returned from his usual park-path sprint on Polkadot, an event to-day distinguished by the whipcord riding breeches of approved balloon cut which had displaced his goat-skin chaps. Somehow it helped to fill an apartment which hitherto had felt rather empty; with its air of sophistication suggested the next move in the rôle for which it was the costume *de luxe*.

The trousers conquered in combat, Pape essayed to don the stiff-bosomed shirt which, according to the diagram pinned on the wall picturing a conventional gentleman ready for an evening out, must encase his chest. His chief conclusion, after several preparatory moments, was that the hiring of a valet was not adequate cause for a lynching with the first handy rope. No. There were arguments pro valet which should stay the hand of any one who ever had essayed to enter the costume *de luxe* of said conventional gentleman. What those patent plungers of his real pearl studs couldn't and didn't do! With the contrariness of as many mavericks, they preferred to puncture new holes in the immaculate linen, rather than enter the eyelets of the shirt-maker's provision.

But we won't go into the matter. Other writers have done it so often and so soulfully. The one best thing that may be remarked about such trials of the

spirit is that they have an end as well as a beginning. At last and without totally wrecking the work of the launderer, Why-Not Pape's famed will to win won. The shirt was harnessed; hooked-up; coupled.

Now came the test of tests for his patience and persistence—for his tongue and other such equipment of the genus human for the exercise of self-control. This was not trial by fire, although the flames of suppression singed him, but by choking. Again he thought tolerantly of valets; might have asked even the loan of m'lady's maid had he been acquainted personally with any of his fair neighbors.

"They'd ought to sell block and tackle with every box of 'em," he assured the ripe-tomato-colored cartoon of himself published in the dresser mirror.

Smoothing out certain of his facial distortions, lest they become muscularly rooted, to the ruin of his none too comely visage, he retrieved a wandering son-of-a-button from beneath the radiator and returned to the fray with a fresh strip of four-ply. When thrice he had threatened out loud to tie on a bandanna and let it go at that, by some slip or trick of his fingers he accomplished the impossible. His neck protruded proudly from his first stiff collar since the Sunday dress-ups of Lord Fauntleroy days—before the mother and father of faint but fond memory had gone, literally and figuratively "West," leaving their orphan to work the world "on his own."

Around the collar the chart entitled, "Proper Dress for Gents at All Hours," dictated that he tie a narrow, white silk tie. Anticipating difficulties here, he had ordered a dozen. And he needed most of them; tried out one knot after another of his extensive repertoire; at last, by throwing a modified diamond hitch, accomplished an effect which gratified him, although probably no dress-tie had been treated quite that way before.

His chortle of relief that he was at ordeal's end proved to be premature. Peering coldly and pointedly at him from across the room, their twin rows of pop-eyes perpendicularly placed, stood his patent leathers. Clear through his arches he already had felt their maliciousness and, as the worst of his trials, had left them to the last. All too late he recalled the fact that brand new buttoned shoes only meet across insteps and ankles by suasion of a hook, even as range boots yield most readily to jacks. Prolific as had been the growth of his toilet articles since a week ago, that small instrument of torture was not yet a fruit thereof. Further delay ensued before response to the order which he telephoned the desk for "one shoe-hooker—quick."

Peter Stansbury Pape had emerged from the West of his upgrowing and self-making with two projects in view—one grave, one much less so. The grave, when its time came, would involve a set-to in the street called Wall with a certain earnest little group of shearers who, seeming to take him for a woolly lamb, *almost* had lifted his fleece. Animated by a habit of keeping his accounts in life

square, steady in his stand as the mountain peaks that surrounded his home ranch, his courage fortified against fear because he recognized it at first sight and refused to yield to it, he was biding the right time to betake himself “down-town” for the round-up reckoning. But of all that, more anon.

His “less so” was to learn life as it is lived along Gay Way, although he had made no promise to himself to become a part thereof. A sincere wish to explore the greatest Main Street on any map, whose denizens so far had shown themselves elusive as outlaw broncs to a set-down puncher, had moved him to acceptance of the suggestion of ’Donis Moore.

While awaiting the pleasure—or the pain—of the shoe-hook, he considered the indifference of his reception at the Astor, a hotel selected for its location “in the heart of things.” In the heart of things—in the thick of the fight—in the teeth of the wind—right there was where Pape liked best to be. But the room-clerk had seemed unimpressed by his demand for the most luxurious one-man apartment on their floor plan. The cashier had eyed coldly the “herd” of New York drafts which he had offered for “corralling” in the treasury of the house. Clerks, elevator boys, even the dry-bar tenders had parried his questions and comments with that indifferent civility which had made this world, said to be the Real, seem false as compared with his hale and hearty Out-West.

The reply to his first inquiry, anent hotel stable accommodations for the intimate equine friend who, as a matter of course, had accompanied him on an American Express Company ticket, had been more of a shock to him than the height of Mt. Woolworth, first seen while ferrying the Hudson. Mr. Astor’s palace, he was told, had a garage of one-hundred-car capacity, but no stable at all, not even stall space for one painted pony. There were more rooms in the “one-man” suite than he knew how to utilize in his rather deficient home life, but the idea of attempting to smuggle Polkadot to the seventh landing, as suggested by the boast of a more modern hostelry that it elevated automobiles to any floor, was abandoned as likely to get them both put out. He had tramped many side-street trails before he had found, near the river, the stable of a contractor who still favored horses. Only this day had he learned of a riding academy near the southern fringe of Central Park where the beast might be boarded in style better suited to his importance in one estimation at least.

It is a pleasure to state that money really didn’t matter with Pape; in any calculable probability, never would. That constitutional demand of his—why not, why not?—had drilled into certain subterranean lakes beneath the range on which his unsuspecting cattle had grazed for years; had drilled until fonts of oleose gold had up-flowed. For months past his oil royalties literally had swamped the county-seat bank. He had been forced to divert the tide to Chicago and retain an attorney to figure his income tax. Upon him—in the *now*, instead

of the hazy, hoped-for future—was the vacation time toward which he had toiled physically through the days of the past and through the nights had self-trained his mind with equal vigor.

The time had come. But the place—well, so far, America’s Bagdad had offered nothing approaching his expectations. Perhaps the fault had been in his surface unfitness for the censorious gaze of the Bagdadians. Perhaps clothes had unmade his outer man to folks too hurried to learn his inner. However, thanks to the official Sage of Traffic Squad “B,” he now had remedied superficial defects.

In truth, any one fairly disposed who saw his descent of the Astor’s front steps, would have conceded that. Despite the vicissitudes of preparation, the result was good. A tall, strong-built, free-swinging young man came to a halt at curb’s edge, a young man immaculately arrayed, from silky top of hat to tips of glistening boots. His attention, however, was not upon the impression which he might or might not be making. Having done his best by himself, he was not interested in casual applause. There was a strained eagerness in his eyes as, leaning outward, he peered up The Way.

The night was cloudy, so that the overhead darkness of eight-thirty was not discounted by any far-off moon or wan-winking stars. The sky looked like a black velvet counter for the display of man-made jewelry—Edison diamonds in vast array—those great, vulgar “cluster pieces” of Stage Street.

And high above all others—largest, most brilliant, most vulgar, perhaps—was a trinket transformed from some few bubbles of oil, the latest acquisition of one Westerner.

There it was—*there it was!* Pape chortled aloud from the thrill of first sight of it. Cryptic and steady it blazed, overtopping a quick-change series of electric messages regarding the merits of divers brands of underwear, chewing gum, pneumatic tires, corsets, automobiles, hosiery, movies and such. His heart swelled from pride, his pulse quickened and his mind lit as he viewed it. The while, his lips moved to the words emblazoned within its frame of lurid, varicolored roses.

WELCOME
TO OUR CITY
WHY-NOT PAPE

While yet he stood at the curb a limousine, doubtless theater-bound, was halted in the traffic crush before him. He saw a bobbed, dark head, bound by a pearl filet with an emerald drop, protrude; saw a pointing, bejeweled finger; heard clearly the drawled comment:

“More likely, some new food for the fat, dar-rling. Remind me to tell

mother. She gained whole ounces on that last chaff she choked down. The poor dear is losing her pep—starving worse than any Chinese baby that ever—”

The heavy car was crawling on toward its next stop. But Pape was spared any regrets in nearer diversion as he drifted along with the tide of pavement passers. In slowing to keep off the heels of a couple ahead, he eaves-dropped a woman’s demand of her escort:

“Now what, do you imagine, *is* Why-Not Pape? I do detest mysteries, although I suppose they’re the only way to get the public nowadays. Personally, I haven’t any use for women that won’t tell their ages, have you? I never read serial stories and simply can’t stand those suppressed men that some girls rave about. The reason you make a hit with me, Jimmie, is because you’re so frank, so natural, so sort of puppy-like. Oh, don’t bother getting sore! You know by this time that I—”

What was Why-Not Pape, indeed? Soon as the analytical lady strayed from the vital subject to that of her ingenuous companion, the author of the latest Broadway riddle passed on, a breaker on the edge of the down-sweeping tide of theater-goers, actor folk out of work and inevitable window shoppers. Of the several he overheard querying the new sign, none guessed—as none do in most real-life mysteries—that they were jostling elbows with the quite palpable solution. His upward stare attracted a direct remark from a pavement companion.

“You’ll read the answer in the newspapers soon. Nobody nor nothing is going to burn real money for long in that make-you-guess display.”

Pape was startled. Would the press take him up—possibly in time pique the public interest to such extent that he might need to blaze forth, within his rose-border, answers to the questions he had raised? If so, the coveted recognition might be considered won.

But he did not need to tell New York what or who he was, to congratulate himself. None would have excuse hereafter to regard lightly an introduction to Why-Not Pape. Even though inadvertently, already the city was welcoming him.

His one regret anent the bought-and-paid-for greeting was that it did not include the worthy Polkadot. He had considered a design of a light-pricked figure of himself mounted, the horse done in natural colors, only abandoning it when informed that black was not effective in Edison bulbs. At that, the bronc shied at a glare and down in his horse heart would not have liked such presentment had he seen and understood.

And the simpler conceit seemed to be attracting a sufficiency of attention. As well it might—well it might! So Peter Pape assured himself, beaming back and up at it. The Mayor’s Committee for the Entertainment of Distinguished Strangers couldn’t have done better by him. And any prima donna must have been pleased with that floral frame.

CHAPTER IV—DOUBLE FOCUS

A man of action does not loiter all evening returning his own howdy-doo to himself—not in his first evening outfit. At Forty-second Street Pape cast a last look at the sign in which he felt by now devout belief, doubtless one of the most costly and colorful ever flaunted before New York. Certainly it was self-advertisement raised to the Nth power and worthy any one's consideration. Yet the obligation to escort his new suit somewhere was on him.

Where? To one of the cinematograph houses inviting from every compass point? Unthinkable. To the dance hall up the street, decorated in artificial cherry blossoms, where partners to suit the individual taste might be rented by the hour? Not in these clothes of class. To one of the "girl" shows? He had seen sufficient of them to realize more interest in sisters in the prevailing demi-habille of the street. To some romantic play? The heroes of such, sure to be admirable in looks and conduct, always got him in a discouraged state of mind about himself.

In his quandary Pape had approached a dignified, sizable building of yellow brick and now stopped before a plain-framed poster which named the pile as the Metropolitan Opera House, within which Geraldine Farrar was singing *Zaza* that night—that moment probably. Grand opera! He was impressed by the conviction that he and his new suit had been led blindly by Fate, who never before in his experience had shown more horse, or common, sense.

He made for the box office. The hour was late, or so he was informed by the man at the window. The curtains had been drawn aside many minutes before; were about to close again. The fashionable subscribers were seated. Wasn't he able to see that even the S. R. O. sign was up outside?

Standing room was not what Pape wanted—not with those patent pincers on his feet. Matter of fact, he wouldn't have considered a stand-up view of anything. Before paying for the best orchestra seat they had—didn't matter about the price—he'd like to know who was *Zaza*, just as folks outside were asking what was Why-Not.

The look of the man at the window accused him of being mildly insane. "*Zaza's Zaza*" he observed, as he turned to his accounts.

“Naturally,” Pape replied. “But why not’s not always why. What I want to ask you is—”

“Leslie Carter play of same name set to music—not jazz—by French composer. House is packed to the roof to-night, as I’ve been trying to tell you from the start.”

Before Pape could offer other insistence he felt himself displaced before the window by a personage disguised in ornate livery.

“Mrs. Blackstone can’t attend. Sudden death,” said the personage. “She’d be obliged if you could sell these tickets and credit her account.”

“It is not Mrs. Blackstone herself who died?” was the official’s cold query.

“Indeed, no. She knows it’s late, sir, but she’d be obliged if you—”

“I’ll oblige her if the money changer won’t,” Pape interrupted. “I’ll take a ticket.”

The autocrat of the box office, however, shook his head. “Mrs. B’s box is grand tier. Can’t be split. Six chairs.”

From what so far had seemed a mere human huddle within one of the entrance doors, an eager figure hurried, just behind an eager voice.

“We are five person. How much dollar for five seats of thees box?”

At the little, oldish foreigner in large, newish ready-mades, Fate’s unhandyman looked; then on past the emotionful face to following emotionful faces. The human huddle had disintegrated from a mass of despair into animated units which now moved toward the box office as toward a magnet. Sounds of as many magpies filled the dignified silence—two French women and three men venting recitatives of hope that yet they might hear the Leoncavallo masterpiece. But them, too, the ticket man discouraged, doubtless the more emphatically because of their attire, which was poor, if proud.

“Too much for your party, I’m sure. One-hundred-fifty.”

“But not for *my* party,” Pape interposed. “I’ll take the whole half dozen.”

The sole so-far thing to impress the assistant treasurer was the roll from which the emergency cash customer began to strip off bank notes. The recitative of hope souged into a chorus of disappointment as the moneyed young man clutched his half dozen tickets and started for the inner door. Scarcely could he restrain himself from out-loud laughter as he halted and turned to command:

“Get a hurry on, party! At one-and-fifty there’d ought to be better *parlez vous* places inside.”

Perhaps his inclusive gesture was more comprehensive to them than his words; at any rate, his grin was eloquent.

To his sublet box by way of the grand staircase Peter Stanbury Pape, grand opera patron, strode at the usher’s heels; into it, himself ushered his agitated, magpie covey of true music-lovers. Well to one side he slumped into the chair

assigned to him by common consent and found an inconspicuous rest for the more tortured of his feet.

Leaning forward, he undertook to get his bearings; concentrated on the dim and distant stage set, where a lady chiefly dressed in an anklet and feathered hat—presumably Zaza of the title role from the way she was conducting herself—seemed to be under great stress of emotion set to song. Before he could focus his glasses—one of the pairs for all hands round which he had been persuaded to rent at the foot of the stair-case—the orchestra took control and the red velvet curtains came together between the intimate affairs of the great French actress and those of the many—of the great American audience.

After curtain calls had been duly accorded and recognized and there no longer existed any reason for the half-light cloak of a doubtful song-story, the vast auditorium was set ablaze. And with the illumination uprose a buzz of sound like nothing that Pape ever had heard—more like the swarming of all the bees in Montana within an acre of area than anything he could imagine.

Full attention he gave to the *entre-acte* of this, his first adventure in Orphean halls. Regretting the trusty binoculars idling on his hotel bureau, he screwed into focus the rented glasses; swept the waving head-tops of the orchestra field below; lifted to the horse-shoe of the subscribers and then to the grand tier boxes with their content of women whom he assumed to be of society, amazingly made up, daringly gowned, lavishly bedecked with jewels, ostrich feathers and aigrettes. A sprinkling of men, black-togged on the order of himself, made them the more wondrous dazzling. A moving, background pageant of visitors paid them court.

After a polite, if rather futile, attempt to mix his English, as spoken for utility in Montana, with the highly punctuated, mostly superfluous French of his overly grateful “party,” Pape left them to their own devices. These seemed largely to take the form of dislocating their necks in an effort to recognize possible acquaintances in the sea of faces which the gallery was spilling down from the roof. Remembering his advice to Polkadot over the value of concentration on the near-by, he centered his attention upon those labeled in his mind as the “hundred-and-fifty simoleon” class. His thoughts moved along briskly with his inspection.

Women, women, women. Who would have imagined in that he-man life he had lived on ranches West that the fair were so large a complement of humanity or that so many of them indeed were fair? Had he lost or gained by not realizing their importance? Suppose his ambition had been to furbelow one such as these, could he have given himself to the lure of making good on his own—faithfully have followed Fate’s finger to rainbow’s end?

However that might be, now that he was freed from slavery to the jealous jade by the finding of that automatically refilling pot of liquid gold, might he not think of the gentler companionship which he had lacked? The chief thing wrong

with to-night, for instance, was the selection by chance of the women in his box. They did not speak his language—never could. Had there been a vacant chair for him to offer some self-selected lady, which one from the dazzling display before him would she be?

Perhaps the most ridiculous rule of civilized society—so he mused—was that limiting self-selectiveness. In the acquirement of everything else in life—stock, land, clothes, food—a person went thoroughly through the supply before choosing. Only in the matter of friends must he depend upon accident or the caprice of other friends. How much more satisfactory and straightforward it would be to search among the faces of strangers for one with personal appeal, then to go to its owner and say: “You look like my idea of a friend. How do I look to you?”

And, if advisable in casual cases, such procedure should help especially in a man’s search for his mate. Take himself, now, and the emptiness of his life. His bankers had told him he could afford whatever he wanted. Suppose he wanted a woman, what sort of woman should he want?

Beauty? Must she be beautiful? From the quickening of his pulse as he bent to peer into fair face after fair face with the added interest of this idea, he realized that he enjoyed and feared beauty at least as greatly as the most of men.

Class? In a flashed thought of his mother, a Stansbury of *the Stansburys* of Virginia, he decided on that. Class she must have.

And kind she must be—tested kind to the core. Tall, healthy, strong, of course. Graceful if possible. Gracious, but not too much so. Frank and at the same time reserved. Educated up to full appreciation of, but not superiority to himself. Half boy and at least one-and-a-half girl.

That would be plenty to start on, even for the most deliberate and calculating of choosers, which he felt himself dispositionally as well as financially fitted to be. From what he knew of the difficult sex in the rough, he should need time and study to decide accurately just how real were appearances in a finished feminine, trained from infancy, so he had heard, to cover all inner and outer deficiencies. Plenty of time and a steady nerve—that was all he should need to learn her nature, as he had learned the tempers of the most refractory of horses. By the time he was satisfied as to these mentally outlined points, others doubtless would have suggested themselves.

Pape was pleased with his theories, the first dressed-up ones he had evolved on the subject. If all men would go into this vital matter of self-selectiveness, there would be fewer prosperous lawyers, he congratulated himself. Better have a care before marriage than a flock of them—of another sort—after. Firstly, a choice made from personal preference, then the most direct course toward acquaintanceship, a deliberate inspection, a steady eye, a cool nerve—

Suddenly Pape stiffened, body and mind. His gaze fixed on a face within a box on his own level, some ten or so away, just where they began to curve toward the stage. The face was young—childlike in animation and outline. Its cheeks were oval and flushed, its lips red-limned and laughing, its eyes a flashing black. And black was the mass of curls that haloed it—cut short—*bobbed*.

A brilliant enough, impish enough, barbaric enough little head it was to catch and hold the attention of any strange young man. But that which particularly interested Pape was the filet that bound it—a filet of pearls with an emerald drop.

She wasn't noticing him—she who had thought of him but once and then only as some new sort of anti-fat foodstuff. But another of her party, through lorgnetted opera lenses, was. Pape, focusing his rented pair for close range, returned this other person's regard. The moment seemed long and different from other moments during which, round glass eye into round glass eye, they two looked.

At its end Pape rose and left his hundred-and-fifty-simoleon box. His exit was retarded, but not once actually halted, by the conversational overtures—somewhat less comprehensible than before—of his unknown guests. He moved as if under outside control, hypnotic, magnetic, dynamic.

True, he did have a doubtful thought or two on his progress through the foyer. She might not get his advanced idea of to-night instantaneously and might be too conventional to act on it, when explained. She might not give him the benefit of every doubt, which he was more than ready to give her, at first glance. There might be an embarrassing moment—particularly so for him. She might be married and taking her husband seriously. Speaking literally, he just *might* be thrown out.

But all such thought he counter-argued. What was the use of conviction without courage? Husbands were likely to be met in a one-woman world; were inconvenient, but not necessarily to be feared. And if she doubted him— But she had the best eyes into which he ever had looked, with field glasses or without. Why shouldn't she see all that he was at first glance? As for possible embarrassment, wasn't he dressed according to chart and as good as the next man? This was, beyond doubt, his one best opportunity for the test of his theory of self-selection. Why not seize it?

CHAPTER V—ONLY THE BRAVE

Reaching the box which, according to his count of doors, should contain her, Peter Pape tried the door; opened it; stepped into and across the small cloak-room; looked through the brocaded hangings of the outer box. There she sat, just behind the bobbed youngster, an example of how different one black-haired girl can look from another. Her eyes, of the blue of tropic seas—calm, deep, mysterious—opened to his in surprise. He felt the other eyes in the box upon him, five pairs in all. But he looked only into hers—into the eyes that had summoned him.

Quick at detail, he appreciated at a glance more than the general effect of her. Her gown was of silver lace, a moonlight shimmer that lent a paling sheen to her shoulders and arms. She wore no ornaments, except a cluster of purplish forget-me-nots. As if one could forget anything about her! Forget those long, strong lines of her, not too thin nor yet too sturdy—those untinted cheeks of an oval blending gently into a chin that was neither hard nor weak—those parted, definitely dented lips, their healthful red indubitable—that black, soft, femininely long hair, simply parted and done in a knot on her neck?

More than at the greater distance, she looked the sort he liked. Did she like the looks of him? He could not voice the question direct, as in his calculations, with eight ears beside her own to hear. But he concentrated on the silent demand that she try to do so as he crossed to her with hand outstretched.

“I am so glad,” said he, “to see you again.”

Her hand relaxed in his clasp. She rose to her feet; drew up to the full height of her well-poised slenderness. Her expression was neither welcoming nor forbidding; rather was the puzzled, half-ashamed and wholly honest look of a child who can’t remember.

“Didn’t you ask me to come?”

He bent to her with the low-spoken question; met her eyes as seriously as through the lenses a moment since; waited breathlessly for the test of just how fearless and frank was she. With hope he saw a faint flush spread forward from her ears and tinge delightfully her pallor. Already he had felt the agitation of it in her finger-tips. Relief came with her first words.

“Yes, I know I did,” she said.

She knew. Yes, she *knew*. And she had the courage to say so. She not only looked—she *was* the sort he liked.

Whether from suggestion of his hand or her own volition, she stepped with him to the back of the box. He did not give her time to deny him, even to himself alone. With inspired assurance he urged:

“I have crossed a continent to meet you. Don’t let your friends see that you failed to recognize me at first. It takes only a moment to know me. Give me that moment.”

“Am I not giving it?” She looked still puzzled, still flushed, still brave. But

she withdrew her hand and with it something of her confidence.

Would she deny him, after all, once she understood? She mustn't be allowed to.

"Give me the moment toward which I've lived my life," he said. "You won't regret it. Look at me. Recognize me. Trust me."

During the grave glance which she slanted slightly upward to his six-foot-flat, she obeyed; studied him; seemed to reach some decision regarding him, just what he had to surmise.

"The surprise of meeting you—here—at the opera—" she began hesitantly. "Seeing so many people, I think, confuses me. Somehow, personalities and places get all scrambled in my memory. Do forgive me—but you are from—"

"Montana, of course," he prompted her.

"Oh!" She considered. Then: "I've been to the Yellowstone. It was there—that we met? I begin—to remember that—"

"That I'm a personal friend of Horace Albright, the superintendent," he supplied, quick to seize the opportunity she had made to speak a true, good word for himself. "Every one of the Spread-Eagle Ranger force, from Jim McBride down, calls me by my first name, so you see that I am no tusk-hunter. You can't have forgotten the snap of the air on those early-morning Y-stone rides or the colors of the border peaks in the afternoon sun or—"

"Or the spray of Old Faithful, the painted colors of the cañon, the whole life of the wild. Never. Never," she contributed. "I was fascinated with the breadth and freedom of your West. Out there I felt like Alice in Wonderland, with everything possible."

His eyes reproached her. "Everything is possible everywhere, even in your narrow, circumscribed East. I am glad that you remember the worth-while things. Perhaps, if you try—"

"Jane dar-rling, do you want to sit brazenly in front or modestly in back for the second act? That first was enough to put the Mona Lisa out of countenance. But I've heard that a little child saves the second."

The interruption came from the bobbed-haired girl, who, from her repeated glances their way, evidently thought their aside somewhat protracted.

So "Jane" was the favorite, old-fashioned name she glorified! Pape was further thrilled by the touch of her hand on his arm.

"Do forgive me and help me out," she said low and hurriedly. "Some hypnotist must have given me mental suggestion that I was to forget names. I am constantly embarrassed by lapses like this. Quick—I'll have to introduce you."

"Peter Pape." Gladly he supplied the lack.

With considerable poise she announced him as "a friend from the Yellowstone," who had happened in unexpectedly and been reviving memories of that

most delightful summer she had spent in the West. If she accented ever so slightly the “revived memories” or flashed him a confused look with the pronouncement of his name, none but he noticed. And he did not care. Whether deceived by his high-handed play or playing a higher hand herself, she hadn’t thrown him out. Now she wouldn’t—couldn’t. He was her “friend” from the Yellowstone—near enough home, at that, since Hellroaring Valley was right next door. She was committed to his commitment. His theory was proving beyond anything he could have hoped, had he wasted time on hope after evolving it.

In turn she named Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Allen, a middle-aged couple who supplied ample dignity and chaperonage for the younger element of the box party; Mr. Mills Harford, a genial, sophisticated and well-built young man, who would have been called handsome by one with a taste for auburn hair, brown eyes and close-cropped mustaches; Miss Sturgis, her little cousin—she of the bobbed hair, filet of pearls and affectionate address.

Even in her grown-up, down-cut evening gown of Nile-green, the girl didn’t look more than fifteen—couldn’t have exceeded nineteen without violating all laws of appearances. Despite her excessive use of make-up—blued-over eyelids, plucked brows, darkened lashes, thick-pasted lips and high-colored cheeks—Cousin “Irene” was quite beautiful. And her manner proved as assertively brilliant as her looks.

“Mr. — Pape?” she demanded thoughtfully. “Have I met you before or heard of you—?”

His hand on his heart, he bowed toward her. “Why-Not Pape.”

She stared at him much as she had at the sign.

“You don’t claim to be— Don’t tell me that you are— Then you’re *not* a breakfast-food?”

“Nothing so enlivening. Not even anti-fat,” he apologized in broad-smiling return.

“Oh—*oh!*” she gasped. “You *couldn’t* have overheard what I said in the car coming down?”

“From the curb, Miss Sturgis.”

“And you recognized me here in the box and that’s why—Dar-rling—” the endearment was drawled with a brief glance toward her relative—“isn’t that just too *utterly* romantic?”

“I hope, Irene, not *too* utterly.”

Jane’s quiet reply started a smile wreathing around the little circle, evidently of amusement over the child-vamp’s personal assumption of all honors.

Samuel Allen interposed in a tone of butter-melting benignity: “Any friend of Miss Lauderdale is more than welcome to our city so far as I am concerned.”

“Rawther! And welcome—thrice welcome to our midst,” the madcap again

interpolated, seizing one of his large, brown hands in both her white, bejeweled, small ones.

“Dee-lighted!” Pape breathed, returning the extra shake.

Indeed, he felt delighted. She was *Miss Jane Lauderdale*, the reserved, long-haired relative of this short-haired enthusiast. And she wore no engagement ring—not any ring on any finger. He could only hope that she had no “understanding” with the good-looking chap ranged beside her. If so, she’d have to be made to mis-understand. She was more flustered over his acceptance of the unconscious invitation of that long, strange, magnified look than she had at first appeared. That showed in the tight clutch of her fingers on her feather fan. And she was taller than he had calculated—just enough shorter than he for ideal dancing. One thing about her he needed to decide, but couldn’t. Did she or did she not know that she didn’t know him?

But he must pay attention. Irene, continuing to baby-vamp him, waved him into the chair beside that into which she had sunk. Although of necessity she had dropped his hand she released neither his interest nor his eyes.

“You must be just a terribly important person to be flashed all over Broadway in that rosy wreath. I don’t blame your friends, though, for feeling a bit extravagant over you. We were talking about the sign before you came in—were guessing what kingdom you belong to, animal, vegetable or mineral. Millsy Harford here held out that you were more likely some manufactured product than anti-fat. Isn’t it all quite too funny for anything?”

“My folks used to say, from the rate of speed at which I grew up—” Pape applied to his ready store of persiflage—“that I was more like a vegetable than a boy. I always thought I was animal, judging by my appetite, you know. But my life’s been kind of lived with minerals. Maybe I’m all three.”

“How interesting.” Mrs. Allen, a lady faded to medium in coloring, age and manner, turned from an over-rail inspection of some social notable among the horseshoe’s elect to survey him through her lorgnette. “Just why, if I am not too personal, are you called ‘Why-Not?’”

“My nickname about the headwaters of our greatest river, madam.”

From her look of vague perplexity Pape turned his glance around the group until it halted for a study of Jane Lauderdale’s face—again Irish pale, tropic-eyed, illegible. He chose his further words with care.

“Guess I was the first to ask myself that question after the boys hung the sobri. on me and nailed it there,” he said, addressing himself to none in particular. “I made the interesting discovery that there wasn’t any answer, although there are limitless answers to almost every seemingly unanswerable question. You see, when I find myself up against the impossible, I just ask myself why not and buck it. I’ve found the impossible a boogey-boo.”

"You call yourself, then, a possible person?"

He was not to be discourteased by Jane's quiet insertion.

"Everything worth while that I've got in the past I owe to that belief," he maintained. "It happens that I want some few extras in my near future. That's how I'll get 'em, from realizing that nothing—*absolutely nothing*—is impossible."

Considerable of a speech this was for him. Yet he could see that he had made something of an impression by its delivery. One moment he marveled at his own assurance; the next wanted to know any good and substantial reason why he shouldn't feel assured. He had made himself, to be sure. But probably he had done the job better than any one else could have done it for him. At least he had been thorough. And his efforts had paid in cash, if that counted.

A stir in the house—rather, a settling into silence—presaged the parting of the curtains on Act II. Mills Harford who, as had developed, was the host of the evening, began to rearrange the chairs to the better advantage of the fair of his party. The interloper felt the obligation at least of offering to depart. Irene it was who saved him. With a pout of the most piquantly bowed pair of lips upon which female ever had used unnecessary stick, she dared him to wish to watch the second act with her as much as she wished him to.

Pape could not keep down the thrill she gave him—she and the situation. To think that he, so lately the wearer of an Indian sign, should be begged to stay in such a circle! Only for a moment did he affect reluctance. During it, he glanced across at the box that was his by right of rental, with its content of brightly attired "true-lovers" blooming above the rail; smiled into the challenge of the precocious child's black eyes; sank into the chair just behind her.

"Your friends over there look better able to do without you than I feel," Irene ventured, with an over-shoulder sigh. "I don't know who in the world they are, but—"

"No more do I, Miss Sturgis."

"You don't? You mean—"

"Righto. Just met up with 'em in the lobby. They hadn't any seats and I had more than I could use without exerting myself."

"How nice! Then they have only half as much right to you as I have. You see, I, as well as Miss Lauderdale, have met you before."

"Down Broadway, you mean, and although you didn't know it?"

She nodded back at him tenderly. "And although separated by circumstances—I in the car and you on the curb. From my cousin's descriptions, I adore rangers. Don't I, dar-rling?"

"No one could doubt that, eh, Jane?" Harford made answer for Miss Lauderdale, whom he had relieved of her fan with as much solicitude as though each ostrich feather weighed a pound.

"I do really. *Why not?*" Low and luringly Irene laughed. "You must look awfully picturesque in your uniform of forest green, your cavalry hat and laced boots."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm a cowman, not a ranger," Pape thought advisable to state in a tone calculated to reach the ears of her responsible for his presence in their midst. "But most of the park service members are my friends. I live on the edge of the playground and know them right well."

The young girl refused to have her enthusiasm quashed. "Well, that's just as good. You have their spirit without being tied to the stake of routine, as it were. I detest routine, don't you? Or *do* you? On second thought, you're much better off. Don't *you* think he is, dar-rling?"

In the dimming of the auditorium lights, she leaned closer to him; seemed to transfer the fulsomely drawled term of endearment from her relative to him; added in a cross between murmur and whisper:

"Isn't dar-rling a difficult word—hard to say seriously? Fancy caring that much for any one—I mean any one of one's own sex. Of course, I hope really to love a man that much some day. That is, I do unless I go in for a career. Careers *do* keep one from getting fat, though. As I am constantly telling my mother—" "S-sh!"

Pape was relieved by Mrs. Allen's silencing sibilant.

CHAPTER VI—JUST AU REVOIR

The great audience caught its breath and hopefully returned attention to the affairs of the French actress who so had shocked and fascinated them at the first act's end. Stripped almost to the waist, the daring and tuneful Zaza had left them. More conventionally, not to say comfortably clad, she reappeared.

Pape, as deficient in French as in appreciation of opera arias, applied himself hopefully at first to getting the gist of the piece, but soon concluded that he must be clear "off trail in his lingo."

Out in Montana, the most meteoric stage luminary never would think of singing a perfectly good wife and mother into handing over husband and father merely because his eyes had gone sort of blinky star-gazing at her. No. Such a

translation didn't sound reasonable at all; was quite too raw for the range. Better give his ears to the music and buy a Hoyle-translated libretto to-morrow.

Settling back in his chair, Pape allowed his gaze and mind to concentrate, after a habit acquired of late in Central Park, upon the nearby. She had an expressive profile, the young woman whom he had self-selected. If facial traits had real connection with character, that protruding chin, although curved too youthfully to do justice to its joints, suggested that she would not retreat unless punished beyond her strength. If young Irene only would take one good look at her cousin's chin she must give up in any contest between them.

But then, Irene's mental eye was on herself. To her, evidently, all other women were more or less becoming backgrounds.

That she should be so near him, Jane; that he actually should get—oh, it wasn't imagination—the fragrance of her hair; yet that he should be so far away! ... She'd be annoyed and he must not do it, but he felt tempted to train his hired glasses on her, as she had trained hers on him only a few minutes since. He'd have liked again to draw her eyes close to his through their lensed aid and study out the answer to that teasing question—did she or did she not know that she didn't know him?

One thing was clear in the semi-gloom. Her neck and shoulders and back looked more like marble than he'd have supposed live flesh could look. And her lines were lovely—not too padded over to conceal the shoulder blades, yet smooth. Above the narrow part of the V of silver lace, a small, dark dot emphasized her whiteness. Was it a freckle or a mole?

Another than himself seemed interested to know. The handsome Mr. Harford was leaning forward, elbows on knees and chin cupped in hand, his eyes closed, his lips almost touching the beauty spot. Had he given up to the welling wail of Zaza's attempt to out-sing conventions or was his attention, too, on that tantalizing mark?

Whether or no, Pape felt at the moment that he must prevent the imminent contact if he did not live to do anything else in life. He, too, leaned forward. But his eyes did not close. They remained wide open, accurately gauging the distance between a pair of sacrilegious mustached lips and—

Tragedy was temporarily averted or, as it turned out, supplanted. An usher appeared between the curtains; in subdued tones asked for Miss Lauderdale; held up a square, white envelope.

Jane arose and passed into the cloak room. Mills Harford followed her. Pape in turn, followed him. Observing the girl closely as she tore open the envelope and read the enclosure, he saw alarm on her face; saw the sudden tension of her figure; saw her lips lengthen into a thin line.

"Chauffeur brought it. He is waiting down stairs for an answer," the usher

advised her.

“Tell him,” she said, “that I’ll come at once.”

The usher bowed and vanished.

“Anything wrong, Jane?” Harford asked.

“I can’t stay for the last act. Aunt Helene has been—has sent for me.”

As if fearful lest he should insist upon knowing the contents of her note, she crumpled it in one hand; with the other reached for a brocaded cape that hung on one side of the mirrored rack; allowed him to anticipate her and lay it about her shoulders.

“I’ll go with you,” said he.

“No.” She paused in her start toward the corridor and glanced into his face uncertainly. “Tamo is waiting with the car. You must see the opera out. The Farrar probably has thrills and thrills saved for the *finale*.”

“Not for me—without you. Of course I’ll go with you, dear.”

The ardor of the handsome chap’s last pronouncement seemed to decide her.

“Of course you won’t.” She shook his hand from her shoulder as if offended. “You are giving this party. You owe it to the Allens to stay. Explain to Irene and the rest that I—”

“At least let me put you into the car.”

“No.” Positively, she snapped this time. “I don’t need you. I don’t want you, to be frank. You’re coming up to the house to supper, all of you. Perhaps then I’ll explain.”

“You’ll explain on the way up—now.”

Harford looked to have made up his mind; looked angry. He took her elbow rather forcefully and started with her into the corridor.

On the sill she stopped and faced him defiantly. “I won’t explain until and unless I wish to. You can’t use that tone with me, Mills, successful as you may have found it with others. Mr. Pape is going to put me into the car.”

And lo, the Westerner found himself by her side, *his* hand at her elbow. He had felt electrified by her summons. Although not once had she glanced toward where he stood just outside the curtains, uncertain whether to advance or retreat, she apparently had been keen to his presence and had felt his readiness to serve.

Their last glance at Harford showed his face auburn as his hair. They hurried down the grand stairway, passed the regal doorman and queried the resplendent starter. His signal brought the Sturgis limousine, parked on Broadway in consideration of the emergency call. The driver, a Japanese, was alone on the seat in front.

Jane had not volunteered one word on the way down, and Pape was mindful to profit by the recent demonstration of her resentment of inquiries. Now,

however, he began to fear that she had forgotten his existence entirely. A nod from her kept the chauffeur from scrambling out. She let herself into the car and tried the inside catch of the door as if to make sure that she was well shut in—alone.

But Pape's habit of initiative overruled his caution. He had fractured too many rules of convention to-night to be intimidated at this vital moment. With the same sweep of the hand he demanded a moment more of the driver and pulled open the door.

"Of course I'm going along, Jane dear," said he.

She gasped from shock of his impudence; a long moment stared at him; then, with a flash of the same temper she had shown Mills, returned him value received.

"Of course you're not, Peter dar-rling."

"Why not?"

Stubbornly he placed his shiny, large, hurting right foot on the running-board.

"Because you're not a possible person. You're quite impossible." And with the waspish exclamation she leaned out, took him by the coat lapels and literally pushed him out of her way. "I know that I don't know you at all. Did you think you had deceived me for one instant? I am not in the habit of scraping acquaintance with strangers, even at grand opera."

"But—but——" he began stammered protest.

"It was partly my fault to-night. I did stare at you," she continued hurriedly. "You looked so different from the regular run of men in black and white. Maybe my curiosity did invite you and you showed nerve that I learned to like out West by accepting. I couldn't be such a poor sport as to turn you down before the rest. But it's time now for the good-by we *didn't* say in the Yellowstone." She turned to the speaking tube. "Ready, Tamo. And don't mind the speed limit getting home."

From the decision of her voice, the man from Montana knew that she meant what she said. Never had he found it necessary to force his presence upon a woman. He stepped aside, heard the door pulled to with a slam; watched the heavy machine roll away. Its purr did not soothe him.

"Not good-by. Just *au revoir*, as Zaza'd say."

That was all he had managed to reply to her. In his memory it sounded simpering as the refrain of some silly song. He hadn't played much of a part, compared to hers. What an opponent she would make at stud poker, holding to the last card! She was a credit to his judgment, this first woman of his independent self-selection.... Good-by? The word she had used was too final—too downright Montanan. Although far from a linguist, as had been impressed upon him during his late jaunt overseas, he had learned from the French people to

prefer the pleasanter possibilities of their substitute—of *au revoir*.

As to when and where he should see her again—The shrug of his shoulders said plainly as words, “*Quién sabe?*” The lift of his hair in the street breeze caused him to realize his bare-headed state. A thought of the precipitation with which he had left both hat and coat on his hundred-fifty-simoleon hook brought a flash of Irene and the outraged glance she had cast toward his departure. She had said that she “doted” on all Westerners. Perhaps if he returned to the Harford box on the legitimate errand of bidding his new acquaintances a ceremonious good-night she might come to dote on him enough in the course of another half hour or so to invite him to that supper which—

In the vacuum left by the sudden withdrawal of the evening’s chief distraction, he gave up for a moment to his pedal agony. He’d a heap rather return at once to his hotel, where he could take off his new shoes. At least he could loosen the buttons of the patent pincers. This he stooped to do, but never did.

Lying beside the curb to which, from his stand in the street, he had lifted the more painful foot, was something that interested him—something small, white, crumpled. The overbearing Miss Lauderdale must have dropped it in her violent effort to shove him from the running-board. Had her flash of fury toward him been as sincere as it had sounded? Had she left him the note, whether consciously or sub, by way of suggestion? Under urge of such undeveloped possibilities, Pape strode to the nearest light and smoothed out the crumpled sheet. It bore an engraved address in the eight-hundreds of Fifth Avenue, and read:

JANE, dear:—Have just discovered the wall-safe open. That antique *tabatière* you entrusted to my care is gone. I can’t understand, but fear we have been robbed. Don’t frighten Irene or the others, but do come home at once. Tamo will be waiting for you with the car. Please hurry.

AUNT HELENE.

So! She had been robbed of some trinket, the very threat of whose loss had stopped the blood in her veins. Perhaps her predicament was his opportunity to advance a good start. He had all details of the case literally in hand, down to the engraved house address.

Jane had proved herself the honest sort he liked in acknowledging that first, probably involuntary invitation of her eyes. At least it had been the invitation of Fate. Was this the second—*her* second?

Why not find out—*why not?*

CHAPTER EMERGENCY MAN

VII—THE

“Sixty-fourth and Central Park East. Otherwise Fifth Avenue, boss.” The driver of the pink-and-gray made the announcement through the open window behind the wheel seat as he drew up at the park-side curb. “Where away, now?”

“Nowhere away. We’ve arrived. How much says the clock?”

“Dollar twenty—to you.” The overcharge was committed with the usual stress of favoring the fare.

Why-Not Pape reached across with two green singles. “Keep the bonus, friend robber. Likely you need it more than I. If you’ve any scruples, though, you can overcome ’em by telling me what building that is, the dingy one with the turrets, back among the park trees.”

“Arsenal they calls it. Police station.”

Succinct as his service, the licensed highwayman of city streets stepped on the gas and was off to other petty pilfering. Police stations and overcharges probably did not seem suitable to him on the same block.

“The Arsenal, eh?” Pape queried himself. “Ain’t the Arsenal where Pudge O’Shay threatened to take me to tea the afternoon Dot polkaed up those sacred rocks to the block-house?”

He crossed the oily asphalt, smeared with the spoor of countless motor vehicles; turned south a few steps; half way between Sixty-fourth and Sixty-third streets located the eight-hundred-odd number in which he was interested. A brownstone house, not particularly distinguishable from its neighbors it was, entered by a flight of steps above an old-fashioned or “American” basement. Noting that the ground floor was dark and the second and third illumined, he turned back across the Avenue and stopped in the shadow of the wall that bounds Central Park.

Between jerking into his hat and coat in full face of the astonishment of his own opera-box party and accomplishing the trip up in the fewest possible minutes which could cover the roundabout traffic route prescribed during “theater

hours” he had not found time to think out just what he was going to do when he arrived at his destination. Now that he was on the scene of his next impertinence, he appreciated that its success demanded a careful plan. His self-selected lady’s dismissal of him had been so definite that he needed some tenable excuse for having followed her home. Stansbury caution warned him that an offer of assistance would, without doubt, be ignominiously spurned. But Pape initiative was in the saddle.

He had about decided on the most direct course—to rush up the steps, ring the bell, ask for her, tell her that he had come to give her the note and trust to subsequent events—when the front door of the house he was watching flew open. A hatless man bounded down to the sidewalk; straight as though following a surveyed line, headed for the entrance of the Arsenal.

Pape stepped back and waited until the heavy on-comer was about to enter the park, then sprang out and blocked the way.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he demanded.

From surprise or alarm the man backed a step or two. “To—to the police station,” he answered nervously.

“Why didn’t you telephone? that would have been quicker. You seem in a hell of a hurry.”

“The wires are cut, sir.”

“Who are you anyway?” Pape’s demand was uttered with a note of authority.

“I am Jasper—the Sturgis’ butler. Mrs. Sturgis has sent me to bring a detective.”

With a short laugh Pape approved the born butler’s habit of subordination. “You’re in luck, Jasper. I’m the very man you’re looking for. Lead me to the case.”

His location—he well might have been coming from the Central Park station house—favored him. The Arsenal could be seen a few yards within the wall. Although he had no shield to show, nor named himself a sergeant of the Force, the butler seemed satisfied with the assertion and his own misconclusions. Dutifully, he led the way back to the house which he had quitted in such a hurry.

“This rushing about gets me in the wind, sir,” complained Jasper *en route*. “I fear I am growing a bit weighty. And what a comfort is the telephone. Things like that, sir, you never miss until they’re gone. Ah, sir, excitement like this is bad for the heart.”

Opening the door with a latch key, he conducted his find across the reception hall, up a broad flight of stairs and into a formally furnished drawing-room. From between wide doors, half opened into a room beyond, appeared a woman of medium height, whose looks made unnecessary any introduction as Irene’s mother. If her mauve crape dress revealed rather too distinctly her plump out-

lines, it softened the middle-aged beauty of her face and toned with the magnificent grayish pearls she wore.

"Is this the detective, Jasper?" she asked, but did not await an answer. "I'll ring when I want you again."

She turned to the stranger as the butler passed out of the room. "Thank you for answering our call for help so promptly Mr. —"

"Pape, madam."

"Won't you take off your coat and be seated, Mr. Pape? This is in some respects an unusual robbery, and your investigation probably will take some time."

He followed her suggestion with alacrity, using a nearby Davenport to rack his hat and overcoat. It would be an advantage, he considered, to be in possession of as many facts as possible, before Jane appeared to expose him. Facts might help him in some way to induce her to go on playing the game as she had in the Metropolitan box.

"Best begin at the very beginning, Mrs. Sturgis."

He seated himself in a chair opposite that into which the matron had sunk, and leaned toward her with frowning concentration. Too late he remembered that the Arsenal detectives, if any were there assigned, did not sit around at all hours in evening clothes. But if she noticed at all his attire, it was with approval, judging by the confidential smile she bent upon him.

"This is a manless house, except for the servants," she began in the modulated voice of those "to the manner" born. "I have the misfortune to be a widow. This evening my daughter and my niece went to the opera with old friends of the family. I have no liking for operas of the 'Zaza' type so remained at home. But I promised the young ladies to stay up, as they wished to bring their friends back with them to supper."

Stopped by a thought, she indicated an ebony cigarette outfit that topped a tabaret near his chair. "Men think so much better when they smoke," she suggested. "If you prefer cigars, Mr. Pape, I'll have some brought in."

"Please don't trouble. My chest's full of 'em."

With a forced smile, she watched the "detective" produce one of his own regardlessly purchased cigars, light it and puff with manifest pleasure from its fragrance.

"This afternoon," she proceeded, "Miss Lauderdale, my niece, returned from a visit to an old woman who had been her governess years ago when her father was—well, before he lost his money. She brought back a jeweled snuffbox of antique design which had belonged to her great-grandfather. In some way not yet explained to me it had come into possession of this upper servant. Although its intrinsic value is not great—the rubies set in its cover are small, not worth more than a thousand dollars, I should say—Miss Lauderdale seems to set great

store by it. She asked me to lock it up in a secret safe built in my library wall until she should want it again.”

From his very light experience with operatives of the force—really none at all except with those of the printed page—Pape considered that he should begin asking questions if he was to sustain the part. He matched his finger-tips in pairs—in most “sleuth” stories they did that; cleared his throat—also inevitable; observed somewhat stupendously:

“I see. You opened the secret wall safe and within it installed the heirloom snuffbox. At what hour, Mrs. Sturgis, was this?”

“About five o’clock.”

“And you found the safe cracked, might I ask—its contents gone?”

“Not at all. You anticipate me. What jewelry I keep in the safe was all there. Some of it, at my daughter’s coaxing, I had withdrawn for her to wear to the opera. She is entirely too much of a child to be allowed such adornment, but you know our young ladies these days, Mr. Pape.”

He nodded, but none too assuredly in view of his fathomless ignorance of “our young ladies these days.”

“And after taking out this jewelry for Miss Sturgis, you are sure that you locked the safe—shut it securely and turned the dial?” he asked, quite as the professional he was trying to emulate would have pursued the case. “Sometimes you women folks—”

“I am not the careless sort. I locked the safe.”

From the matron’s composed manner, he well could believe her.

“It was about nine o’clock,” she continued, “when, having changed to the gown I meant to wear to supper, I wanted these black pearls.” She indicated the two pendants in her ears, a ring and the vari-sized strand about her neck. “With purple or lavender, you see, they make the second mourning effect which I shall always wear for my dear husband. Again I came downstairs to the safe. Imagine my astonishment and fright when I found it open—the door full an inch ajar.”

“But you’re wearing the pearls, madam?”

“That is the strangest part of it!” Moved at last by her nervousness, Mrs. Sturgis arose, crossed to a window that overlooked Central Park, clutched the curtains and drew them apart. For a second or two she stood looking out, then returned to her chair. “Mr. Pope, not a single piece of my jewelry was missing. The cash drawer had not been disturbed, though it happened to contain a considerable sum of money. A sheaf of Liberty Bonds in plain sight lay untouched. Absolutely nothing was gone except Miss Lauderdale’s heirloom snuffbox. Of course that’s no great financial loss, but she is much upset by the loss and I can’t help feeling my responsibility. Tell me, what do you make of it?”

His chin cupped in one hand, Pape tried to look that shade of study denom-

inated as “brown.” Next he puffed viciously at the plump middle section that was left of his cigar—women, he had noticed, always harkened with more respect to a man who puffed viciously at a cigar.

“Strange—passing strange,” he muttered. From a pocket of his figured white waistcoat he drew his watch and looked enquiringly into its face. “You say it was about nine o’clock when you discovered this theft? It was after ten when you sent the butler after—after me. Just to keep the tally straight, madam, may I ask what you were doing in the interim?”

Mrs. Sturgis’ brows—black as her daughter’s, but unplucked—lifted slightly, as if she were surprised by the question. However, after a momentary pause she answered, “At first I was uncertain just what to do. Finally I decided to summon Miss Lauderdale from the opera house. She, as the only loser, was the person most concerned. She returned just now and insisted that the police be called in. She was even more upset than I when we discovered that our telephone was out of commission. She sent Jasper at once to—”

Pape managed an interruptive glower of disapproval that would have done credit to the most efficient “bull” of the Central Office.

“You’ve wasted valuable time,” he declared. “In robberies, it is advisable to get the authorities on the scene of the crime at the earliest possible moment.”

“But in this instance the circumstances were so peculiar and I—”

“I know. I know, madam. Circumstances always are more or less peculiar.” Pape had deemed a touch of official discourtesy not out of place. “What I want to know next is—that is to say, the person I’d like next to interview is this niece of yours who has been deprived of her snuffbox.”

CHAPTER VIII—EMPTY

Pape, the while, had grown most anxious to know the exact whereabouts of the young woman in the case. He found it nervous work, this expecting her appearance every minute—this playing the detective when she, with one glance, could detect him. Would she or would she not expose him? The full imperativeness of the question was in the gaze he bent upon the matron.

“Miss Lauderdale will soon be down, I am sure. She went to her room to

change her gown.”

“And why, pray, should she bother changing her gown at a time like this? The one she had on was very—I mean to say, wasn’t the one she had on becoming?”

This demand Mrs. Sturgis met with an increase of dignity. “We thought it might be necessary for her to go to Police Headquarters or whatever it is you call the place where one swears to complaints. I’ll send her word to hurry if you wish.”

Pape did wish. However, the sending of word to that effect proved unnecessary. Even as Mrs. Sturgis was crossing the room to ring for Jasper, Jane entered, dressed in a black and white checked skirt and loose white silk blouse. At sight of the caller she stopped short.

“Well, I’ll be —”

“Oh no, you won’t, Miss Lauderdale—I believe?” Pape’s advance had interrupted her ejaculation. “You’re too much of a lady for that and far too good a sport to—to be in despair over your loss. The game is young yet and I am here to win it.”

Although his tone was pompous, the eyes he fixed on her outraged expression were urgent, imploring.

Yet at the moment she did not look much as though she had dropped the note as summons No. 2. Twice her lips opened in angry hesitation. But her aunt interrupted before she actually spoke.

“I was just about to send Jasper up for you, my dear,” she said. “Mind your nerves, now. This is an operative who has come over from The Arsenal to solve our mystery. Mr. Pope, Miss Lauderdale.”

“Pape, you mean,” Jane corrected, then bit her lip.

“Of course, I mean Pape. I am so bad at names, Mr. Pape. Here I’ve been calling you Pope. But, Jane dear, how could you know?”

The ensuing slight pause was shattered by the soundless insistence of a pair of gray eyes addressing a pair of tropic blue: “Play my game. It’s a good game. Why not—*why not* play my game?”

“Jasper told me.”

Her compliance was brief and cold—but still compliance. With his wide smile Pape thanked and thanked her, triumphed over her, caressed her. Jane refused to smile back. But she did blush—slowly, deliciously, revealingly blushed. At that moment she looked, after all, as though she *had* meant to drop the note. He wanted to accuse her of it and be sure.

But there was Mrs. Sturgis to be considered. Readjusting his expression into lines professional, he returned to the case.

“Suppose, madame, we take a look at that safe.”

Mrs. Sturgis led the way into the room from which she had appeared on his arrival. It was a library, its far end one huge window of many colored panes and its walls lined with book-shelves except where family portraits in oils were hung or where the fireplace and its mantel interfered. An antique writing desk in the window, a magazine-covered table off center, a pillow-piled couch and a scattering of several comfortable-looking, upholstered chairs comprised the furnishings, the rich old mahogany of which was brought out by the glow from a companionable fire of cannel coal.

To a corner of this room repaired Mrs. Sturgis and there pressed her palm against an autumnal colored leaf in the wall-paper design. A shelf, laden with books moved out, one volume, by chance, falling to the floor. Another touch—exactly what or where Pape did not see—caused a panel to slide back, disclosing the nicked face of a wall safe. With assured fingers she began to turn the dial—to the right, to the left, then a complete turn to the right again. Every movement added evidence of her boast of precision. Seizing the knob, she pulled upon it hard and harder. The door of the safe, however, did not yield.

“Peculiar!” she ejaculated, all the well-bred softness whittled off her voice. “Never before have I made a mistake on that combination. I know it like my own initials.”

“Mind *your* nerve now, Aunt Helene,” advised Jane from just behind, her tone, too, rather sharp.

For such a sweet-looking girl, she certainly could sound sour—malicious! Not another word or glance had she spared to him, the double-barreled interloper. She was playing his game—yes. But was it because he had asked her or for reasons of her own? This dame he had self-selected would seem to be an intricate creature.

So Pape reflected as he picked up and held in his hands the book which had fallen. But he, at least, was simple enough; with his very simplicity in the past had solved more than one intricate problem. He would, if she permitted, try to solve her.

Again Mrs. Sturgis turned and twirled; again tugged at the knob, but with no more effect than before; again faced about with consternation, even superstition on her face.

“There must be something wrong here,” she half-whispered.

“That we already know,” Jane agreed, “else why the detective in our midst?”

In Pape’s hands, suppose we say by accident, the volume he had rescued from the floor opened upon one of O. Henry’s *immortelles*—“Alias Jimmie Valentine.” To him the work of the lamented Mr. Porter ever had been fraught with suggestion for more than the “kick” that, unlike home-brew, is always to be found at the bottom of his bottle—at the *finis* of his tale.

The latest in amateur detectives, thus opportunely reminded, decided that he must rise to the occasion. And he had reason to hope that he could, once upon a time having been shown some tricks of the tumbler profession by a professional.

“Why else should I be in your midst,” he offered cheerfully, “if not to open your safe for you?”

Mrs. Sturgis at once gave him the benefit of doubt; made way for him; took a stand beside her skeptical-looking niece. But Jane’s contempt over his essay was frank—really, made her look downright disagreeable.

Pape made up his mind to disappoint her evident expectations if within his powers so to do. He knelt down; wedged his head into the vacancy left by the swinging shelf; pressed his ear close to the lock; began to finger the dial. There was more than hope in his touch; there was also practice. In his ranch-house out Hellroaring way he long ago had installed a wall safe of his own in which to deposit the pay-roll and other cash on hand. And one day it had disobligingly gone on strike; but not so disobligingly that a certain derelict whom he had fed-up on he-man advice as well as food—one who had followed the delicate profession of “listener”—was beyond reach.

This turned-straight cracksman, without admitting his former avocation, had solved a pay-day dilemma by conquering the refractory dial and later had given his benefactor a series of lessons in the most-gentle “art,” that the emergency might not recur. Pape, miles and miles from the nearest town which might afford an expert, had been convinced by the experience that a safe is unsafe which cannot be opened at the owner’s will.

In the course of present manipulations, the “under-graduate” considered what he could say or do to the contemptuous half of his audience should he fail, but reached no satisfactory conclusion. Indeed, he felt that the only real way of venting his chagrin would be to wring her graceful, long, white neck for doubting him before he failed, a proceeding quite beyond consideration of any man from Montana. So he must not fail. Yet how succeed?

Just as he was reminding himself for the seventh time—seventh turn—that “slow and careful” was also the watchword for this sort of acquaintanceship, an electrifying response to his light-fingering sounded from within — a click. Turning the knob, he pulled out the door. The yielding hinges completed an electric circuit and an incandescent bulb lighted in the roof.

Pape sprang to his feet and back, as much amazed over his feat as the dazed-looking Miss Lauderdale. Then, at once, he got control of himself; straightened his cuffs, as his teacher always had done after turning the trick; remarked most calmly:

“The thief must have been changing the combination in the hope of delaying the discovery of his crime and been frightened into such a panic that he

didn't take time to close the door."

Mrs. Sturgis again bent to the safe. She had reached well into it when, with a poignant cry, she put both hands to her eyes and started back. "It's there again! This is getting too much for my nerves. Was I mad before or am I going mad now? Jane—Mr. Pape—*it isn't gone—at all!*"

The girl next applied to the cavity in the wall. Her face set in an apparent effort to "mind" her nerves. She reached in and drew out an oblong box of gold beautifully carved and set with small rubies in a design of peacocks. From her expression—no longer disagreeable, but beautiful from an ecstasy of relief—Pape judged this to be the "stolen" heirloom upon which she was said to set such store.

That her aunt might be absolutely reassured, Jane Lauderdale handed her the *tabatière* so recently accounted missing. That good lady, however, looked weak, as if about to drop the jeweled box. Pape relieved her of it; led her to a chair.

"I—I don't understand."

Like a child utterly dependent on grown-ups for explanation, she glanced from one to the other of the younger pair.

"Except for that famous precision of yours, it would seem easy enough," Jane offered with more clarity than respect. "You must have pushed the box aside when you took out the pieces Irene wanted to wear. Your hands were full and you neglected to close the safe. When you came down again for your black pearl set and found the door open you thought at once of my snuffbox and jumped at the conclusion, since it wasn't in the place you remembered putting it, that it wasn't there at all. Cheer up. You wouldn't be the dearest auntie in the world if you weren't human."

Pape seconded her. "The most precise of us are liable to figments of the imagination, madam. All's well that ends that way. A snuffbox in hand is worth two in the —"

But Aunt Helene wasn't so sure. She interrupted in a complaining voice, as if offended at their effort to cheer her.

"I never jump at conclusions—*never*. If I was startled into jumping at the one you mention, Jane, it seems strange that I selected these black pearls so accurately. *Doesn't* it? And I'd almost take oath that the box wasn't pushed to one side—that it stood, when I found it just now, exactly on the spot where I first placed it. And then, Mr. Pape, the trouble with the combination—"

"Don't worry any more about it, poor dear," Jane begged with a suddenly sweet, soothing air, the while laying a sympathetic palm against her relative's puckered brow. "I've noticed that you haven't seemed just yourself for days. Perhaps these headaches you've complained of mean that you need eyeglasses. It's only natural that a strain on the optic nerves should confuse your mind, which

usually *is* so precise about all—”

“Nothing of the sort, Jane. You can’t mental-suggest me into old age!” snapped the recalcitrant patient. “My eyes are just as good as yours. And I feel positive that I am quite myself.”

“Then why, Aunt Helene, didn’t you go with us to hear Farrar to-night? You aren’t usually so squeamish about—”

“Of course not. It was indigestion, if you must know. Certainly it had nothing to do with my optic nerves. You shouldn’t accuse me of jumping at conclusions, Jane, with all your irritating, positive ideas about other people’s—”

“It is my opinion—” the unofficial investigator thought advisable at this point to remind them that an outsider was present—“that your remembrance of the combination figures and the various turns was absolutely correct—absolutely. But you may have jolted the delicate mechanism of the lock when you shut the door. You *may* have slammed it.”

He received two glances for his pains to maintain peace, a quick, resentful one from the niece and a long, grateful one from her aunt.

“A beauty, isn’t it?” he continued buoyantly, looking at Jane, but referring to the snuffbox in his hands, lowered for closer inspection into the light of the electric lamp. “I don’t wonder that the thought of losing it distressed you, my dear Miss Lauderdale.”

“Associations, my dear Mr. Pape.”

Her brevity, cut even shorter by her accent, evidently was calculated to inform him that, although she had played, she didn’t care much for his game. For a young person who could warm one up so one minute, she certainly could make one feel like an ice-crusher the next! Since that’s what he was up against, however, he proceeded with all his surplus enthusiasm to crush ice.

“The sight of this heirloom takes one right back to the days of old, doesn’t it, when ladies fair and gallants bold—”

“You wax poetic from hearsay, Mr. Pape? You don’t look exactly old or wise enough to have lived in those good old days.”

“Miss Lauderdale, no. I don’t claim to have staked any ‘Fountain of Youth.’ In fact, I ain’t much older or wiser than I look and act. But I’ve read a bit in my day—and night. The courtly Colonial gent, if I remember aright, first placed the left hand on the heart—so.” Then he bent gracefully, not to say carefully, so that the seams of his satin straight-jackets should not give—thus. With his right hand he next snapped open his jeweled box and passed it around the circle of snufflers of *the* sex, who would likely have swooned at the thought of a cigarette as at the sight of a mouse—in this wise.

“Oh don’t—don’t you *dare* open it!”

Pape, who duly had pressed his heart, bowed with care, if not grace, and was in the act of pressing the catch, felt the box snatched from his grasp. In his fumbling, however, his thumb had succeeded. As Jane seized her treasure the lid sprang back. One look she gave into it, then swayed in the patch of lamplight very like the limp ladies he had been mentioning. A face of the pure pallor of hers scarcely could be said to turn pale, but a ghastly light spread over it. Her eyes distended and darkened with horror. A shudder took her. She looked about to fall.

“It is—empty! See, *it is empty*,” she moaned.

Pape was in time to steady her into a chair. Aunt Helene hovered over her anxiously.

“What’s gone wrong with you, childie? You’re the one that’s in a run-down state. Here’s your box, Jane dear. Look, it isn’t stolen at all. Pinch yourself. Waken up. Everything’s all right.”

But Jane did not return her relative’s smile; clutched both fat arms of the chair with both slim hands; stared ahead fixedly, as if trying to think.

“It is,” she repeated under her breath, “*empty*.”

From his urgent desire to relieve and help her, Pape intruded into her painful abstraction.

“Then it wasn’t the box you valued, so much as its contents,” he stated to her. “From the shock you have shown on finding it empty, I gather that the safe has been robbed after all. Will you tell me of what?”

Her lips moved. He had to lean low to hear her sporadic utterances.

“I have failed—in a trust. It meant more to me than—it will kill him—simply kill him. He trusted me. I can’t understand—who—”

A sudden glance of virile suspicion she flung up into the young Westerner’s eyes.

“Who and what are you?” she demanded. “Answer me!”

CHAPTER IX—SNUFFED

So unexpected was the girl’s attack that Pape felt at a loss how best to meet it. At his look of confusion, she continued in quick, fierce tones:

"I can't see how my affairs concern you. How dare you question me? Why are you around, anyhow, here and at the— How did you happen to open that safe so easily? Who and what are you—I insist on an answer?"

"My dear, don't let excitement make you unreasonable," Mrs. Sturgis intervened. "Mr. Pape is a detective from the Arsenal. I've told you that. Jasper brought him over after I—"

"He isn't. I know very much better. He is nothing of the sort." The girl arose and straightened before him, all strength now. "I suppose you expect me to tell you all about everything like a little—like a ninny. Well, I won't. I won't tell you anything. *You tell me!*"

"Don't mind in the least. Fact, I'd gladly tell you a lot about the who and what of Peter Stansbury Pape, but you're not in a mood to hear. Out in Montana, where I hail from, we think a lot of straight friendship. If you could trust me, Miss Lauderdale, perhaps I'd be able to demonstrate the sort of friendship I mean."

"Well, I can't trust you."

"Pardon me. Yes, you can."

He faced her with an emphasized look of that sincerity which before had compelled her. But she shifted her eyes stubbornly and insisted:

"It's very strange that on this particular night, when I was to be robbed of something that matters more to me than—It does seem very strange, your forcing your way in as you did."

"He didn't force his way in. I tell you I sent for him," said Aunt Helene.

Pape, however, nodded in agreement. "It was and is strange. I ain't contradicting you, notice. Everything to-night seems mighty strange—to me, as well as to you. If you'd just stop to consider that all friends are strangers to start with, if you'd yield to your instinct, which won't lead you astray in my case, if you'd tag what's worrying you so that I could know where we're headed for—"

Again Mrs. Sturgis interrupted, this time from excitement within herself. She seized Jane's arm by way of claiming that difficult young relative's attention.

"It has just occurred to me what—Jane Lauderdale, do you mean for one minute to tell me that you've found—"

"I don't mean to tell anything."

The click of the girl's voice silenced further importunities. Mrs. Sturgis clasped her hands tightly from nervous suppression, her continued mutterings clipped by a knife-like look from Jane.

"I do think you ought to tell if by hook or crook you've found— There now, don't flare up again! I don't wonder, poor dear, that you're upset. Just remember that I'm upset, too. And I can't help feeling a little hurt that you don't show more confidence in one who has done her best to keep you from missing the mother who— But there, we won't speak of that now. What do you make of the case Mr.

Po—Pape? What does your professional instinct tell you?"

In truth, Why Not Pape's "professional" instinct had not been very communicative. But the result of his unprofessional investigation—Jane's distress, climaxing in her suspicion of him—had brought him through a conclusive mental process. There had been a robbery and a peculiar one. Money, bonds and valuable jewelry had been passed by in the theft of an unnamed something vitally precious to a girl whom he had offered to befriend.

Already much valuable time had been lost through Mrs. Sturgis' incertitude, her summons of Jane and Jane's unwitting summons of himself. His impulsive participation was delaying the more expert search which should have been instigated at once. The thief might have escaped through his interposition of himself. He felt that he ought to make amends if the time for such had not already passed.

Through this mental summary, accomplished during the moment that followed the matron's demand, Pape managed the appearance of a man in deep study. At its conclusion—

"Looks like an inside job," he declared.

"By inside you mean— Please don't suspect any one within my household." Mrs. Sturgis' color rose with the advice.

"I have no right to suspect any one—not yet, madam. I am considering only known facts. Your safe has been robbed within the last few hours of the contents of this heirloom snuff-box. I assume, Miss Lauderdale, that you are ready to swear your treasure was inside the box when you entrusted it to your aunt?"

"You may—" Jane crisply. "I am not given to figments of the imagination."

"I congratulate you, miss. The safe was opened by no ordinary robber, as proved by the valuables left. Somebody who appreciated the contents of—of Miss Lauderdale's treasure committed the theft and in such a hurry that he or she did not wait to extract the contents, but took box and all. Later this person, not knowing that Mrs. Sturgis had been to the safe in the meantime and discovered the loss, found opportunity to replace the now-empty box and, in the hurry of closing the door, jarred the mechanism of the lock."

Mrs. Sturgis nodded; looked really quite encouraged. "That could have been done while I went up stairs to dress after sending to the Metropolitan for my niece. But I do hope you're not going to make the mistake of accusing my servants. They've been with me for years."

"I am not going to accuse any one, although servants have a way of making less honest friends who use them. I simply say that no professional turned this trick. The case is one for Central Office men. Even if it were in my line, I could not, under the circumstances, take the responsibility of it myself."

"Under what circumstances, Mr. Pope—that is, *Pape*? You don't intend to

leave us—to desert us just when—”

Pape silenced Aunt Helene’s protestations with a creditable gesture. “The lack of confidence in me—even suspicion of me—shown by Miss Lauderdale makes it impossible for me to proceed. I have gone as far as I can in a case where I’m not to be given a hint of the nature of the stolen article which I am asked to replace. Since, however, I’ve been called in, I must discharge my obligation as an officer of the law. Where is—oh, I see it. May I use your phone, Mrs. Sturgis?”

“Certainly. But w-what are you about to do?”

“To call up Headquarters and have a brace of bulls—beg pardon—a span of detectives sent up at once. We shall hope that they look more worthy of Miss Lauderdale’s confidence.”

With this dignified declaration Pape strode across the room to a telephone cabinet in the corner; sat down and lifted the receiver. But he never heard the response.

One ringless hand brushed past his lips and cupped the mouthpiece, another pressed down the hook. Jane’s face, again disagreeable, strained, strange, bent over him. At just that moment he recalled that the line was said to be out of commission, a fact which they two appeared to have forgotten. Deeming the point of distance from Aunt Helene an advantage, he decided not to remind Jane, lest he silence what she was about to say.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she quavered. “I don’t want a detective—any detectives.”

“Oh, yes, you do.” Pape spoke in a tone authoritative from his sincere wish to get her the best possible advice in the least possible time. “Of course I’ll see it through, too, if you want me to and ask me to. But I must have help on the case. Just let me get a good man detailed, then don’t worry. We’ll get a rope on your petty thief sooner than—”

“No. I won’t have any one from Central Office. I can’t have the matter made public. When I thought the box stolen among other things I was willing. But I’ve changed my mind now I know that only the—that it— Oh, you don’t understand and I can’t explain! But it isn’t a petty theft, Mr. Pape.”

She leaned lower over him. Her voice dropped into a whispered rasp.

“You’d forgive me for not knowing whom to trust if you could realize that what was in that box means everything to me and that I’d never get it back if its real value became known. Can’t you imagine something whose loss means the completest kind of ruin to me and to one who—”

She pressed her teeth into her lower lip, whether to stop its quivering or its admission he did not care. He felt his sensibilities scorched by the blue blaze of fears which had burnt the doubt of him from her eyes. His original ideas of how to learn this lady he had self-selected seemed somehow thrown into the discard.

They were much too slow, much too steady, much too cool as compared with hot, dizzy, instantaneous realization like this. One didn't learn *the* woman. One just knew her. And knowing her as *the* woman, one served her.

Without superfluous words Pape's lips swore their oath of allegiance— fervently kissed her hand. The click of the receiver being returned to its useless hook punctuated the small ceremony—that and the distant tintillation of an electric bell.

"Thank goodness, they're back at last, the folks for supper!" exclaimed Aunt Helene and started for the stair-head.

Jane started after her. "One minute, Auntie. I want to ask—to beg a favor of you."

Pape followed them to their stand in the hall, glancing hastily about for his hat and overcoat. He decided that he must escape. The returning quartette—Irene especially—could not be expected to play his game as had the strangely hostile, compliant and altogether enigmatic Jane. Stripped of his professional mask, he would lose the advantage he had gained with Aunt Helene, even did her niece deign to let him hold it for long. Perhaps he'd better forget his hat and coat. Yet how to get out without passing the party—

"If you'll point the way to the back-stairs, madam—" he began. "It would be better if your friends did not see me. As the sleuth on the case I don't want to be recognized."

Jane interrupted, her one hand grasping his arm, her other Mrs. Sturgis'. Rapidly Jasper could be heard pad-padding through the lower hall to the street door.

"There's no need for you to be named as a—a sleuth, Mr. Pape. Aunt Helene, what I wanted to ask—to implore is that you don't mention the theft at all. As the only loser, I insist on working it out my own way. Won't you promise, please?"

"But, my dear, there must be some explanation to Harford—my hurrying you home and all—"

"You won't stop at a white fib for me, Aunt Helene? I'll tell a million for you about anything—whenever you say. Listen. You had an attack of—what was it? Headache from your eyes?"

"Nothing of the sort. Indigestion. *Why* do you insist that my eyes—"

"Indigestion, then. Anything you like. You didn't wish to spoil Irene's evening, but couldn't be alone. You feel better now, but—quick, come back into the library. Stretch out on the couch. Mr. Pape, help me—help her!"

There was no time to enquire into the advisability of Jane's plea. As the street door thudded shut and light voices waved upward, her tug on the matron's plump elbow was released in an imperative gesture to Pape.

He, nothing loath, snatched up the surprised lady and deposited her upon

the pillow-piled couch before the library grate. Jane, with rapid movements, completely enveloped her with the rare old Kiskillum rug which had draped its foot, sternly tucking in the dimpled, pearl-adorned hands which *would* strive upward to smooth a really unruffled coiffure.

“How does making a fright of me help?” Aunt Helene complained.

Pape did not answer. He was looking about for the stray bottle of smelling-salts which, for sake of realism, he should be pressing to her nostrils. Before he could locate any such first-aid, however, the daughter of the house had achieved the second floor and dawdled delightedly into the room.

Straight for the Westerner she came head-on, soft exclamations floating from her like the sea-foam tulle from about her throat.

“Do you know, I *knew* you’d stick around until I came! Harfy is *fee-urious*—his mustache does look so bristly when he gets in a rage. But I believe in trusting each other, don’t you? Do you or don’t you, Why-Not Pape?”

Through his mumbled response Pape realized wretchedly that Mrs. Sturgis had been raised to a sitting posture by strength of her astonishment. He heard her demand:

“Irene, you know — Jane, where in the world could she—”

Also he heard Jane’s hurried, low-voiced explanation.

“I was trying to tell you a while ago. Don’t you remember that I said how strange it all was? You see, he’s an acquaintance of mine from the Yellowstone. He was at the opera to-night. That’s why he is wearing evening clothes. But here come the Allens. Now, *please*—”

Mrs. Sturgis was obliged to take it at a gulp. She sat like some ruffled chicken doctored for the pip in her straw-heap of rug, smoothing her plumage, winking from smart of the idea and greeting her friends. Evidently she was none too taken with the impromptu rôle thrust upon her—would have preferred the thriller of lady-assailed-in-her-castle—but she played it with all due languor, not forgetting a line, even on Irene’s demand that she invite Mr. Pape, who to her still must look somewhat like a mere operative from the Arsenal Precinct, to join the supper party.

Pape’s first weak thought was to refuse. The patent pincers at the moment gave him a twinge, as they had several times during recent excitements. Really, he owed it to his feet to go home. But that wouldn’t sound either a legitimate or romantic excuse to a lady exacting as she was young and fair. The fear that if he went now he might never get back decided him to accept.

Despite his inspirational superiority to all slow-but-sure methods, he found himself unable to advance one step that night toward the girl to whom he had made a vow of service. Mills Harford was a substantial barrier, although the “bristles” of his mustache relaxed to show boyishly charming smiles. By everybody,

Jasper included, "Harfy" was accorded absolute right to seat Miss Lauderdale at table, to serve her, to engage her attention.

Then there was the difficulty of Irene.

"They teased me like everything for letting Cousin Jane snatch you out of the box to-night," she confided to Pape. "You see she took me by surprise. I won't let her grab like that again. Don't you ever worry. Nothing is impossible to Rene, either."

He did worry, though. In her he caught his first glimpse of the perquisites of "our young ladies to-day," and he couldn't help worrying. Why should he? And yet, looking into ardent Irene's eyes, why not?

When Pape descended the brownstone steps to the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue, it was not late from the standpoint of the company to whom he had said good-by. But he smiled to think how Hellroaring Valley had been wrapped in slumber hours and hours before.

He crossed the asphalt to the park side and made his way toward Fifty-ninth Street. He did not want a cab. A walk to the Astor was just what he needed, he felt. It would help him to straighten out some of the tangles which the experiences of the night had left in his brain.

He looked off to his right upon the expanse of bare trees with their background of tall, still-lighted buildings. To him came the memory, as if from some far-away day, of the alone-ness in the midst of city throngs which had kept him loping his piebald over park bridle paths.

"Strange," she had called this night's experience. Yet she could not appreciate how strange was the fact that he was not lonely now. He should never be lonely again. Had he not met her? And did he not recognize her—Jane?

Probably she did not yet recognize him. She had snuffed his offer of service in the finding of that unnamed treasure which she had lost, just as she had snuffed his personal interest in her by her rather rude dismissal of him before the Metropolitan.

But what she did or said or thought was only her side of it—not necessarily his. He stood committed both by word and wish to accept the situation as she presented it, to trust her wholly in return for her refusal to trust him, to help her whether she wished his help or no.

And this because he, Peter, had met her, Jane!

CHAPTER X—THE OLD PARK

LADY

Central Park, even with its horde of transitory inhabitants, looked more than ever like home to Peter Pape this late afternoon. Feeling the necessity of a private conclusion or two, he loped Polkadot into what he hoped would prove the less used path. His thoughts, like the pinto's hoof-beats, were of a rather violent, not to say exclamatory sort.

Three whole days since he had met her, and not once since had he seen her! Considering the emphasis with which he had interpolated himself into her acquaintance that opera evening, the length of the unbroken after-pause seemed incredible. Here was he, lonelier than before receipt of the advices of 'Donis Moore, in that now he knew what earlier he only had suspected he was missing.

He felt as forlorn as looked a bent old woman who stood beneath the trail-side shade, leaning against a tree. Out of date was her nondescript bonnet of the poke persuasion, rusty her black silk dress, ineffectual her attitude. Too primitive for the Society into which he had cantered must be his Far-West methods, since rusted over were his hopes and resultless his to-day.

Sight of a sheep herd browsing over "The Green" sufficiently surprised and pleased his pastoral eye as to brighten temporarily his mood. He polkaed Dot down to a walk.

A flock of Dorsets in the Great Garden of New York Town! More than a hundred horned heads he estimated them, not counting the wobbly-legged lambs trailing the ewes. Although oil was Pape's bonanza, cattle was his stock in trade, yet he felt none of the cowman's usual aversion for the wearers of fleece. He was, as a matter of fact, a "mixed" rancher, with sheep of his own on the Hellroaring reaches. He rejoiced that these animals, at least, could enjoy the company of their kind and graze to their taste. Indeed, a more satisfactory pasture could not have been found for them, except for the fact that an over-used auto-road "unfenced" that side of it next the bridle path. The condition, precarious both for the sheep and the drivers of cars, hung heavily in his consideration until he caught sight of the dog that was on guard.

"What d'you think of that, horse-alive?" he made demand of Polkadot. "A police hound instead of a collie—a Belgian, at that—close-herding the woollies?"

When one of the fattest of the mutton-heads waddled into the auto-greased roadway in an ambitious expedition toward the grass-tufted border along the path, Pape pulled his painted pony to a stop and watched with active interest.

"Quick, Kicko, round her up!"

The shouted command came from the flock-master, appearing at a run around the far side of the band.

Unmistakable as the breed of the dog was the intelligence of his work. With warning, staccato yelps he dashed from among the more discreet of his charges, cut off the stray from her goal, snatched her by a mouthful of wool out of the path of a speeding car, then nipped her into a return rush to the safety of The Green.

“Great work, Kicko! Here, boy, I want to shake!”

Pape, enthusiastic over the best bit of herding he ever had seen done under adverse circumstances, rode toward the dog hero, swung out of the saddle and met him more than halfway in the paw-shaking, ear-scratching formalities that followed.

The master, a stout, middle-aged, uniformed expert, showed himself as pleased with the introduction as his canine assistant. He gave his name as Tom Hoey of the Sheepfold, the gabled roof of which could be plainly seen a short distance south and nearer the park wall. Willingly enough he contributed to the information fund of the easy-going stranger.

Yes, Kicko was a police dog, the gift of a returned army captain and the only herder of his breed in captivity. The park collie, in active service for years, had been about ready for retirement at the time of the foreigner’s arrival. A short chain attached to the swivel collars on the necks of both had enabled the old Scot to teach the young Belgian the trade of disciplining woolly quadrupeds instead of two-legged humans.

“I, for one, don’t hope to meet a better policer in this world and I sure don’t expect to in the next,” the owner boasted. “He’s got a whole repertory of tricks that he’s worked out for his own amusement, besides knowing by heart all the dog A-B-C’s, such as shaking hands, speaking and fetching things. One of the most useful things he does is going for my lunch noontimes. He brings it nice and hot in a tin pail from my house by the wall yonder. There’s just one trouble about him, though—eh, old side Kick? If he meets up with one of the many friends he’s made, or even if he takes a special shine to somebody new—Kicko’s one fault is his sociability—he’ll like as not present my meal to some one that ain’t half as hungry or as entitled to it as I.”

“We’ll meet again.”

So Pape assured the shepherd pair on continuing his ride. He wished that all the folks he met were as friendly and as easy to understand as they. By comparison, for instance, each and every member of that dressed-up party of Gothamites into whose midst he had insisted himself the other night seemed doubly complex.

His attitude had been plain as day; theirs, both separately and as a whole,

incomprehensible. And since that evening, the conduct of all had been as misleading as his had been direct. This was the afternoon of the third ineffectual after day. It was all right for handsome fellows like the traffic cop to advise him to do something that would “make ‘em take notice.” He had done it—done it so well that they had noticed him enough to decide not to notice him. To him the situation seemed to call for some deed even more noticeable. Again, *what?* Leaving the pace to the piebald, he brisked along in review.

At the enthusiastic hour of six A.M. that morning after sighting Society, he had risen and rigged himself to do and dare on the high-seas of adventure. Any idea of adhering to the original “slow and steady” stipulation of his experiment not already quashed by first sight and sound of Miss Lauderdale must have been ruled out by sub-consciousness during his brief sleep. Slow and steady would have been proper enough in almost any other conceivable case of discovering whether a woman was *the* woman. But as applied to Jane, any method other than gun-fire quick seemed somehow a reflection on her. An excellent rule, no doubt—slow and steady. She, however, was super-excellent—an exception to any rule.

Realization that he was essaying rather an early start had struck him as he steered a course through Mr. —or Mrs. Astor’s fleet of scrub ladies, tugging at their brush anchors over the seas of Jersey-made marble, evidently about ready to call it a night’s voyage. He had left his berth without any call, as six A.M. long had been and doubtless long would remain his hour for setting sail into the whitecaps of each new day.

So transformed was The Way outside that he scarcely could recall its nocturnal whiteness or gayety. Strict business ruled it. Luggage-laden taxis sped toward or from the ports of early trains. Surface cars demanded blatantly, if unnecessarily, the right o’ way. Motor trucks groaned hither and yon with their miseries of dripping ice, jangling milk cans, bread, vegetables—what not. Only the pavements were empty at that hour. Blocks and blocks of them stretched out, practically uncontested.

A moment he “lay-to” for an upward survey of the greeting he had bought from himself to himself, which last evening had seemed the howdy-doo of Destiny. It wasn’t so conspicuous in daytime with the lights off, although the contractor had been clever about blocking in behind the incandescents so that the letters within the bouquet border still were legible. Even had they not been, he shouldn’t have felt disappointed. To every electric sign its night, as to every dog his day! Wasn’t he now the gayest dog that ever believed in signs? And wasn’t this to be his day?

More often than not breakfast to Pape was a matter of bacon, coffee and buckwheat cakes. Although the more expensive restaurants along The Way were,

like the lobby of his hotel, still in process of being scrubbed out, he soon found a chop-house ready to “stack” for him. At table he ate rather abstractedly, his mind and most of his fingers engaged with the sheaf of morning papers collected during his walk.

Yes, the curiosity of reportorial minds to the number of three had been sufficiently stirred by the mystery of the new sign to give it mention. One touched the subject only to drop it, frankly suspicious of some new advertising insult. Another treated it in jocular vein, with that grateful spur-of-the-moment wit which occasionally enlivens columns thrown together under such stress of time. A third declared its ignorance of the whyfore of Why-Not Pape, but had no objection to his, her or its being welcomed to the city. The question was raised, however, of just what awful thing W. N. Pape could have committed in his past to need the moral support of so rare and roseate a reassurance.

When the last drop of coffee had washed down the last scrap of wheat-cake, the man from Montana further treated himself to a series of chuckles. Was the joke on him or on the Big Town? Which or whether, it was catching on. And there was one small assortment of A1 New Yorkers who would enjoy the joke with him—who knew the kingdom, gender, case-number and several other etceteras of Why-Not Pape. That is, they would enjoy it if not too suspicious of him. Just about how suspicious they were was the next thing he needed to know.

That supper party at the Sturgis house had run its courses smoothly enough, at least on the surface. But their see-you-again-soons had a haziness which he could not break through. It is true that Irene had met the mention of his favorite pastime of horse-backing in the park with a far from hazy hint that they “co-ride.” But that possibility he had preferred to leave vague. He had “pulled out” creditably, he hoped—with all the good-form he remembered having been taught or told about.

The evening’s paramount issue had increased in importance overnight—that matter of a safe robbed of unnamed loot. What could the stolen treasure be—of a size that could be hidden in a snuff-box, yet so valuable that its loss was tragedy?

Jane Lauderdale was a number of wonderful things. Was she wonderfully unreasonable or more wonderfully distrustful of him? There was a chance that overnight she had had one of those changes of mind said to be the pet prerogative of the fair. Just perhaps she now would be willing to accept the service he had offered—service which he meant should be hers whether she wished it or not.

The next impending question regarded the hour at which young ladies got up of a morning in this woman’s town. This he put to the sleepy-eyed blond cashier of the restaurant.

“You trying to kid me, customer?” was her cautious reply. “If no, it depends

upon where said lady lives. Fifth Avenue in the Sixties? Ain't you flapping kinda high? I'd say anywheres from ten A.M. to twelve noon. Why not jingle up her maid and ask? Oh, you're welcome and to spare. Keep the change."

Before entering the nearest cigar store to act on this suggestion, Pape remembered that last night the Sturgis' phone had been declared useless—its wires cut. He called for the repair department of the company. The voice with a rather dubious "smile" at the other end of the line agreed to enquire just when the number would be restored to service.

"Say, Useless," came the answer in a moment, "that line's in order. Hasn't been out. I just got an O. K. over it. You must have got wrong information from one of our centrals. Excuse, please."

He would have "excused" with more pleasure if his simple question had not started a series of others more involved. How did a 'phone fallacy fit into the robbery plot? Why had the wheezy butler, Jasper, been sent afoot to the nearest police station if the wires had not been cut? Did Jane know or did she not that the line was in order when she stopped him in his attempt to call Headquarters?

He decided not to "jingle her maid" at once but to await the hour first suggested by the "blond" cashier before asking answers. Jane Lauderdale looked the kind of girl who would have arisen by ten A.M. At any rate, he would give her benefit of doubt. But no mental preparation during the interim, as to what tack her temper might take, in any way prepared him for that morning's second shock.

Jasper answered—there was no mistaking his voice. Pape followed the announcement of his name with a comment over the speed with which the telephone had been fixed, to which the born butler replied smoothly, impersonally, non-committally.

"Yes, Mr. Pape. The Telephone Company is exceedingly efficient, sir."

The request for speech with Miss Lauderdale was met with equal competence.

"The family is all out. They left early this morning for the country, sir, to seek a few days of peace and quiet."

"All of them?"

"Yes, Mr. Pape, all of them."

"What's their address?"

"They left no address. They never do, sir, when they go for peace and quiet. Good day, sir."

With which, actually, that sebacious, ostentatious, fallacious importation had hung up on him.

To Pape's daily inquiries since Jasper had replied with consistent politeness, if with consistent lack of information. The Westerner hated him for his very

perfection in his part; was inclined to the belief that America was no place for an intelligence limited to being a butler.

What about his—Why-Not's—peace and quiet? Wasn't *he* entitled to any such? Indignation had flung with him out of the booth that first morning; had matched his pace since; was riding with him to-day.

In the interval Pape had made efforts other than over the Sturgis telephone to locate geographically the rural resting-place mentioned all too vaguely by Jasper. His first visit to that mountainous district known to the Metropolitan Police as "below the dead-line" was not in the squaring of certain overdue accounts of his own which had been the basic impulse of his Eastern exile, but in the hope of locating the other members of that Zaza box-party.

In a cloud-piercer near the corner of William and Wall Streets he found the office suite occupied by ex-Judge Samuel Allen and associated attorneys, evidently an affiliation of standing "at the bar"—a phrase which, since Volstead, is no longer misunderstood as meaning anything but "in the Law." He gained admittance into the reception room, but, so far as achieving audience with the head of the firm, the legal lair proved more impregnable than the ranger-guarded Yellowstone to a tusk-hunter.

The "line-fence" was ridden by thick-rouged, thin-bloused office girls who doubtless had been instructed that all unexpected callers were suspicious characters and to be treated accordingly. Once the judge was in court, which court no one seemed to know. Pape left his name. On a second visit he was allowed to "dig his spurs" into chair rungs most of an afternoon under the hopeful glances of the "dolls," while awaiting the end of an alleged conference, only to be told with none-too-regretful apologies that Mr. Allen, having been called to attend the directors of the Hardened Steel Corporation, had departed without knowing that Mr. Pape awaited him. A third time—

But it is enough—was more than enough for him—that he never broke through the barrier of too-red lips with their too-patent, stock lies; never caught even a long-distance glimpse of the jurist of small person and large personality.

Failure to find the likeable Mills Harford came more quickly and saved a deal of time. "Harfy's" trail showed plainly in the City Directory and his "ranch" proved to be another of those "places of business" where everything but business was attended, a real-estate office in one of the block-square structures that surround the Grand Central Terminal. Mr. Harford had departed on a yachting trip around Long Island, Pape was told—a statement which he had no cause to doubt.

Although Peter Pape had signaled Broadway in general with what he liked to call the "high sign," his desire for adventure had particularized. He could not be satisfied to go on to a next, with the first only begun. He finished what he started, unless for some reason stronger than his will.

More than by the beauty of Jane Lauderdale's face, he was haunted by its look of fear. The little drama at the Sturgis house that night could not have been staged for benefit of himself, whose presence there was purely accidental. Its unaccountable denouement had terrorized the aunt as well as niece. Much more was unexplained than the nature of the stolen treasure and the cause of that false report anent the severed telephone wires.

To epitomize the present state of mind of Why-Not Pape, "making 'em notice him" had boiled down into one concentrated demand that the high-strung girl whom he had self-selected and later approved by instinct instead of rule—that Jane Lauderdale should notice his readiness to do or die in her service.

He had the will. Whither was the way?

Nights and days had passed since he had pressed that thrilling kiss of allegiance upon her finger-tips. Yet here was he strolling aimlessly down The Way, after having stabled Polkadot for an equine feast *au fait* and himself dined at a restaurant near Columbus Circle. The bright lights could have no allurement for him. Signs were dull indeed that one didn't wish to follow.

The wish formed in his mind for some friend with whom to talk. Not that he was given to confidence with men or cared to engage any feminine ear, save one. But he would have appreciated a word or look of simple sympathy—a moment of companionship that he knew to be genuine with—

He turned squarely about and started back the way he had come. The very sort of friend he needed!

Kicko would be off duty by now and likely as glad as he to improve their acquaintance, so pleasantly begun. If Shepherd Tom was about they could smoke and talk sheep. There was a lot about woollies these B'way folk didn't know—that, for instance, they could take care of themselves for eight months of the year and cost only seven cents a day for the other four. Yes, he and Tom Hoey could talk sheep at the city's Fold. He would seek that "peace and quiet" which he hoped Jane had found in the deepening shade of the only part of Manhattan that at all resembled his West; was more likely to locate it there than along the avenue of amperes and kilowatts.

His ambition seemed to be shared before announced. Scarcely had he turned into the roadway leading from Central Park West to the Sheepfold when he met the police dog coming out. All that he had hoped for was Kicko's greeting. The more conveniently to vent his feelings, the astute, sharp-featured Belgian placed upon the ground the small tin bucket which he was carrying, evidently the lunch pail of his favorite "trick." Soon picking it up, however, he issued a straight-tailed invitation to "come along." Pape realized that he had some definite objective—probably was taking supper instead of lunch to Shepherd Tom. He accepted.

Many a lead had the whys and why-nots of Peter Pape's nature forced him to follow, but never so interestedly had he followed the lead of a dog. And Kicko showed that he appreciated the confidence. He would dash ahead; would stop and look back; would set down his precious pail, most times merely to yap encouragement, twice to return to his new friend and urge him on by licking his hand.

When they left the beaten path for the natural park and approached a hummock marked by rocks and a group of poplars whose artistic setting Pape had admired in passing earlier that afternoon, the police dog's excitement grew. Beside a dark mass, hunched-over close to the ground, Kicko dropped the bucket with a final yelp of accomplishment.

At once the dark mass straightened into human shape. Pape stopped and stared. Almost at once he recognized the poke-bonneted old lady with whose forlorn appearance he had compared his own state. Then she had stood leaning against a tree at the foot of the hill. Now she looked to have been digging in the woody earth. A considerable mound of soil lay beside the hole over which she had crouched and she brandished a trowel against Kicko's exuberant importunities. Her back was toward Pape.

As he hesitated over whether to advance or face about, disliking both to startle her and to be caught in what might seem the retreat of a spy, he overheard what she was saying to the dog. He shivered from an odd sensation, not like either cold or heat, that passed up his spinal column and into his neck.

"No, you don't, you wriggly wretch! I know perfectly well what you've got in that bucket of yours this time of day—nothing but the saved-up old bones that they don't want you to bury in the flower-beds about the Sheepfold."

When Kicko, as if acknowledging himself caught, seized the handle of his pail and shook it toward her appealingly, she took off the lid and laughed aloud at his ruse. In the regardless embrace which she threw around his scraggy neck, she spilled what showed to be a collection of more or less aged bones.

"Just because you're so attractive, I'll *maybe* let you have your way," she informed him seriously as though addressing a human. "If I don't find what I'm after, you may bury your precious *debris* as I scoop back the dirt. But you'll have to wait until I— Back, now! I tell you, you've got to wait until I'm sure this isn't the place where—"

Pape didn't stand still longer. Her voice—sweet, strong, familiar—lured him. He forgot his question to advance or retreat. He advanced—and rapidly. By the time he reached her he had outstrode all his consideration for her age and forlorn state. His hurry made him rough. He stooped over the lowered poke bonnet; unclasped the two arms from about Kicko's neck; literally, jerked the woman to her feet.

Well proportioned, for so old and ill-clad a lady, did she show to be as she sprang back from him, surprised into height, straightness and lissome lines. The face within the scoop of the bonnet was pale from passion—surprise, anger, fear—or perhaps all three. She was—

“Jane!” he exclaimed.

“*You!*” cried she.

He stared at her, his tongue too crowded with demands to speak any one of them. He continued to stare as she fell back to her knees and, with her trowel, refilled the hole she had dug. Before he realized what she was about, she had picked up a pile of wilted plants that lay nearby; had down-doubled her tallness, straightness and lissomeness into her former old-lady lines; with a rapid, shuffling walk, had started down and around the hummock.

“Just a minute, Miss Lauderdale,” he called. “I didn’t mean to startle you. Can’t we have a word or two or three?”

She did not answer, did not turn—only hurried away from him the faster. He set out after her; recrossed the bridle path; entered the deepening shadows toward the heart of the park.

Kicko, who had shown in his whines a spirit torn by regret to forsake either his bones or his friends, now caught up with Pape, briefly sniffed his hand, then trotted after the bent, dingy, scuttling figure merging into the gloom beyond.

The dog’s appeal she heeded, but with a well-aimed stone.

“Go back,” she ordered him. “Don’t you dare follow me. If you do—if anybody follows me—I’ll find a policeman and get you both arrested for annoying me.”

Kicko, tail between legs, skulked back in the general direction of his treasure pile.

Pape, too, heeded to some extent her warning, evidently meant more for him than the dog. But, although he slackened his pace, he did not turn or skulk. There were reasons a-plenty why he felt justified in pursuit.

CHAPTER XI—DUE EAST

The greatest of parks has its bright sides, many-faceted as the Kohinoor, croquet

grounds for the old, benches for the parlorless tenement young, shaded arbors for the love possessed, pagodas for picknickers, May poles for the youngsters, roller-skating on the Mall, rowing on the lakes. Just as a jewel catches the light from only one direction at a time, however, this emerald of the city has also its shadows.

Already Why-Not Pape had realized this of his adopted range; knew that, despite the scattering of such policemen as could be spared from pavement-beats outside and the greater number of electric lights upon whose surveillance the City Fathers appeared to place their chief dependence, serious crimes occasionally occurred in Gotham's great, green heart. Even during his short stay he had noted in the daily news tales and tales of outlawry that would have called out posses in Montana—of women held up afoot or in taxis, of men relieved of their valuables at gun-point, of children kidnapped for ransom, of a region of caves occupied by bandits, of footloose pickpockets and mashers.

An inclusive thought of the possibilities of the region in the dead dark of a moonless night was what had started him after the bent, black figure scuttling into the fast-dropping gloom ahead. She had repulsed him even more ungratefully than she had the dog—as scornfully as though there were no Metropolitan Grand Opera House at Thirty-ninth Street and Broadway, as though her Parian pallor had not turned the hue of the ardor with which, a few nights ago, his lips had pressed her hand. But, whether her denial of him was from whim or necessity, he could not permit her to cross the park unguarded at that hour.

And surely there was enough else that was strange about this, their third encounter, to have overcome the prideful hesitation of the most ill-treated man. Hours back, in mid-afternoon, he had seen her in the witch-like disguise of an old herb-hunter, trying to locate some particular spot without arousing the suspicions either of passers-by or of the authorities. Her quest had kept her long past the most fashionable dinner hour. Doubtless she had waited until dusk before beginning the actual digging with her trowel in order to decrease the chances of interfering in what must be a violation of the most sacred park regulations.

The sagacity of the Belgian dog in bringing his bucket of bones to be buried where the burying was easy suggested that he had met up and made friends with her before in a like past proceeding. Now that she was headed in the general direction of her Fifth Avenue home, why didn't she go to one of the nearer exits, hail a taxi or take a street-car around? Granting some reason why she preferred to walk, why not by the foot-path along Traverse Road, only a few rods below? That would have brought her out of the park almost opposite the Sturgis home.

But she was not keeping to any of the paths; seemed rather to avoid them as she hurried due east across the meadow known as "The Green."

Casting off speculation as unprofitable for the nonce, Why-Not Pape kept

after her, trailing with care lest she realize that her biped protector had more doggedness than the rebuked canine. It wasn't an extremely romantic way of "Seeing Nellie Home," but certainly had speed and mystery. Perhaps, at that, romance would end the evening, as it did in books, plays, pictures!

When about halfway across the park, the girl changed her course southward toward the truck road. Pape, hoping that she meant to take the beaten track the latter part of her strange retreat, increased his pace in order to cut in ahead of her. Not that he intended to force an interview upon her in her present mood—he had too much consideration for himself to invite another command which he must break. He wished merely to conceal the bulk of himself in the first convenient shadow, there to wait until she had passed, then again to follow at a distance discreet, but sufficiently close to enable him to be of service in case of need.

By running the last hundred yards, he realized this scheme; reached the traverse first; lowered himself over the stone abutment; dropped to the flagging at the bottom of the cut. The road he knew to be one of four which cross-line Central Park as unostentatiously as possible to accommodate the heavy vehicular traffic from East Side to West and back again. Much as he resented every reminder of the fallacy of Polkadot's pet illusion and his own—that this was a bit of home—he appreciated that Father Knickerbocker, even for the sake of giving his rich and poor this vast melting pot, could not have asked "business" to drive around an oblong extending from Fifty-ninth to One-hundred-tenth Streets. It was something to rejoice over that, while utility was served, the roadways were sunk so deep that the scenic effect of the whole was scarcely marred.

During his wait close against the shadowed side of the wall, Pape's thoughts sped along at something the recent pace of his feet. The look on Jane Lauderdale's face when he had surprised her at her digging just now was that same look of fear which had haunted him since she had opened her restored, but emptied heirloom box. The strangeness of her behavior afterward, the cruelty of her suspicion of him, her denial of him to-night—all only emphasized that pitiable, terrorized look.

Had her object then and now the sameness of her look? Was she seeking over the expanse of the park that mysterious, stolen something which formerly had been contained in a snuff-box? If so, what clew could she have found that it might be cachéd beneath the poplars?

Buried treasure! The *motif* had inspired thrillers since thrills had been commercialized. But treasure buried in Manhattan's heart? So improbable was the thought that, except for one thing, he might have adjudged the eccentric-acting Miss Lauderdale to be mildly mad—the one thing being that he knew she was sane.

He did not, therefore, waste time doubting the entire defensibility of his

self-selected lady. She had good reason for covering her personality by the garb and gait of a crone before essaying her hunt; for feigning to gather herbs while the daylight lasted; even for refusing to recognize him after that first startled monosyllable which had been the extent of her half of their interview. In bonnet and black she had every chance of being considered inside the law in the Irish, mother-loving eyes of most of the “sparrow cops,” although literally well outside. Dressed as the upper-crust young beauty he first had met three nights ago, she would have attracted—and deservedly—her “gallery” in no time.

Come to consider, her crooked course home was also logically straight. Her disguise would have aroused suspicion in a taxi and made her conspicuous in a streetcar. Since she knew her park, the cross-cut home was preferable.

As the mystery of Jane and Jane’s tactics decreased, however, the correlative mysteries increased—of the selective robbery, the lied-about ’phone wires, the park as a cemetery for something literally “lost” and the direction, or misdirection of the chief mourner’s search.

A culminative interrogation point to add to his collection was her next lead. She entered the Traverse quite as his trailing sense had foretold at a spot where the wall was easily negotiable. There he waited, assuming that the rest of her route home would be direct and planning, now that he had been assured of her presence in town, that later in the evening he would telephone the most direct and forceful plea of which he was capable for an immediate interview.

But again she upset his calculations.

Instead of following the asphalted footpath that hemmed the cobbles on one side of the cut, she picked her place and scaled the south wall. Although the section confronting him was higher, Pape lost no time in following her example and gained the top to see her dodging past one of the scattered lights. Darkness had settled. Appreciating how easily he might lose her in that unfamiliar section of municipal tumble-land, he decreased the gap between them.

A veritable butte loomed in her path, but this she took like a mountaineer. To Pape she appeared to be executing some sort of an obstacle race with herself. In his self-appointed capacity of rear-guard there was nothing for him but to follow. Being something of a climber himself, he reached the top just behind her, despite her advantage of a trail which he had not been able to find. Rounding one of the boulder-formed crags that gave picturesqueness to the baby mountain, he pulled up short.

Jane was standing some few yards ahead, her bent back toward him, a quaint, distinct silhouette in the reflected light from Fifty-ninth Street. As she did not once glance over-shoulder, she evidently considered his pursuit thrown off. She may have paused to steady the pulses disturbed by her lively climb; perhaps was enjoying the electrical display which so fascinated him.

Indeed it was worth a long-time look, that fairyland of The Plaza, as seen through the framing fringe of trees, with its statues and fountains agleam; the hotel-house of fifty-thousand candles, all lit; the lines of Fifth Avenue's golden globes stretching indefinitely beyond; on all sides, far and near, the banked skyline of bright-blinking, essentially real palaces of modernity which yet were so much more inconceivable than Munchausen's wildest dream. And that foreground figure of an old woman on the crag—it might have been posed as a fanciful conception of the Past pausing to realize the Present—straining to peer into the Future.

Into this picture, changing and marring it, intruded a man. Up over the far side of the abutment and straight toward the girl, as though expected, he came. His appearance was the most distinct shock of the evening to Pape.

"A rendezvous!" he told himself with sinking heart. "She had to get rid of me—she had to hurry—in order to keep a rendezvous."

Her irregular course, her disregard of traveled paths, her assault of this rock heap—everything in the adventure except how she came to be rooting among the poplars now seemed explained. Mentally he flayed himself for his stupid assumptions and sense of personal responsibility for her safety. He turned to descend the way he had come—no need for her to know what a following fool he had made of himself.

A certain quality of alarm in what he at first had thought her greeting of the man stopped him. Then forward he sprang, like a fragment blasted from the rock. He closed the gap between and laid on the collar and elbow of the lounge who had accosted her a violent grip.

"What shall I do with him—drop him over or run him in?"

More calmly than might have been expected, he turned to the little old lady of his pursuit, the while holding the fellow precariously near what might be called, by phantasy of the night-lights, a "precipice."

"You—again?" Whether from dread or relief, Jane shuddered. "Are you everywhere?"

"Why not?"

His captive ceased squirming to whimper. "Leave me go, officer. I wasn't meaning no harm to the old girl. Just thought I could help her down onto a safer footing. Likely you had a mother onct yourself. For her sake, have a heart."

"He knows I'm not old. He has troubled me before. If you'll hold him a moment to make sure that he doesn't follow, I—I'd be much obliged."

Jane, seeing her opportunity, took it; was off with the agility of a Yellow-stone doe; gained a trail and disappeared down the side of the butte.

Pape did more than obey her admonition to hold and make sure. That the meeting was rendezvous rather than coincidence persisted in his fears. Odd, oth-

erwise, that she should come straight to the spot where the man was waiting, as if for her. Even in her complaint that he had troubled her before she admitted previous meetings. Perhaps his own second appearance of the evening was forcing both to play parts: had made a sudden change of plan seem advisable to her; would irritate the man into an attempt to deal out punishment for the interference. Would the two meet afterward at some second-choice point? Pape decided to “look in”; by way of a start, dragged his captive under an electric light which cast a sickly glow over the flattened dome of the butte.

At once he went on guard against the “fightingest” face he ever had glimpsed, set atop the bull-neck of a figure that approximately matched his own in height and weight, if not range iron. The fellow’s features were assorted for brutishness, nose flattened as from some past smash, lips thick, eyes small, ears cauliflower, hair close-clipped. That a woman of Jane Lauderdale’s type should have anything in common with so typical a “pug” was incogitable.

For a moment, the pale eyes in turn studied him through their narrowed, close-set shutters, evidently “marking” for later identification. Then, in an unexpected, forceful shove the inevitable bout began. Had Pape not already braced himself against just such a move, he must have toppled off the rocks. As happened, he let go his hold and swung his body into balance.

“Hell’s ashes, you’re no cop!”

The aggressor’s exclamation was punctuated by two professionally ready fists. The right one led with a surety that was in itself a warning. Only by an instinctive duck of his head did Pape limit its damage to a sting.

A decade or two has passed since Montana, while still carrying “hardware” for hard cases, learned that differences of opinion may be settled by the use of more natural weapons; that punishment may be exacted without calling in the coroner. Even had this metropolitan fistic opening missed in point of impact, Why-Not Pape would have offered satisfaction without thought of recourse to the gun nestling under his left arm-pit.

Nature had been the Westerner’s trainer, a silver-tip grizzly his one-best boxing instructor. With an awkwardly efficient movement, he advanced upon his more stealthy challenger. His arms carried close that he might get all possible leverage behind his punches, he waited until well within reach, then issued a series of short-arm jabs.

The other, evidently trained to the squared circle, depended upon his far-reaching right, which again he landed before his bear-like opponent could cover. Beyond an involuntary grunt, however, its effect was nil. The Pape jaw seemed of hewn oak. In another breath the bear-cuffs began to fall, swift, strong, confusing.

The New Yorker tried a run-around, for the butte top had not the ring area to which apparently he was accustomed in his “leather pushing.” A punishing left,

delivered from an impossible angle, cut him off. He had no choice but to walk up to the medicine bottle whose stopper was out. He fainted, but Pape seemed not to understand what was meant by such tactics—only hit the harder. He attempted a “one-two”—with his left to jar Pape’s head into position for a crushing right—and met a method of blocking which appeared to be new to him—not so much blocking, in fact, as getting a punch home first. One proved enough; carried the “ice” to the Gothamite; stretched him for a couple of counts of ten. The silver-tip’s pupil had won.

Pape did not wait for a second round. He was satisfied that his knock-out would hold sufficiently long for any of Jane Lauderdale’s purposes or his own. Down in the direction which the girl had taken over the rocks he scrambled, but could see no sign of her. She had not, then, stayed to witness the fight, although the whole encounter had taken but a moment. Whether or not he had saved her an unpleasant scene, he had lost her. Was it always to be thus—touch and go? He wouldn’t have it. He’d beat her at her own game.

Directly as he could calculate and at his top speed, he set out for the Arsenal gate; there took a stand on about the spot from which he had intercepted Jasper at the somewhat less exciting start of this same chase several evenings ago. Surely she now would make straight for home, whatever may have been her reason for visiting the butte!

His eyes, searching for a poke-bonneted figure in black, soon were rewarded. Through the pedestrian gate near which he stood in deep shadow she came. Watching her chance with the traffic, she darted across the greased trail of the avenue and, once on the opposite sidewalk, turned south. Pape continued to pursue along his side of the street, determined to finish his task of safeguarding her until the front door of her aunt’s house should shut her—only briefly, he hoped—from his sight.

But what spirit of perversity was ruling her? Toward the steps of the Sturgis brownstone she did not turn; did not give them so much as a glance. Briskly as before she continued down the avenue until at the Sixty-third Street corner she again turned east.

Was the house to be gained by some rear entrance from the lower street—one made advisable by the disguise she wore? From its mid-block position, this supposition did not seem tenable. Pape decided to take no chances, except with the traffic. Crossing the street with a rush, he gained a point a hundred or so feet behind her, then timed his steps with hers. Due east they walked, at a good pace, but without undue hurry. She seemed fully reassured. Although she inclined her young face and bent her young back to the old part, she did not glance back as though nervous over possible pursuit. The block was lined mostly with homes—of the near-rich, he judged from the look of them. Of the few people who passed

none gave more than a casual glance at the actively shuffling "old lady."

They crossed what the street sign told Pape was Madison Avenue; passed several apartment houses and more residences. Across Park and Lexington, still due east, the tone of the section fell off. From Third Avenue onward it went continually "down." Pape kept one eye on the figure he was following and the other on his surroundings, figuratively speaking. Both were interesting. This was his first excursion into the far East Side and he was surprised by the mid-width of Manhattan Isle.

They came to a block lofted with tenements on one side and shadowed by huge, cylindrical gas tanks on the other. Children swarmed the sidewalk thick as ants over a home-hillock and screamed like Indians on rampage. Washings left out for overnight drying were strung from one fire-escape to another of the scaly brick fronts. As though laving the cross-street's dirty feet, the East River shimmered dimly in the lights from shore and from passing steam craft. Beyond loomed that isle of punishment dreams come true—the Blackwell's which politicians would rename "Welfare."

Thoughts murky as the water at the foot of the hill came to Peter Pape. Could Jane Lauderdale be seeking the river for surcease from some disappointment or fear more direful than he had supposed? Why should she be, with youth, beauty and devotion all her own? And yet, why not? Others as young, fair and fondly desired had been depressed to such extent. His heart swelled with protective pity for her. His pulses beat from more than the speed with which he closed the distance between them to about twenty feet, that he might be ready for emergency.

They had come to a building which broke the tenement line, a relic residence of by-gone days. With a sudden turn, the little old lady undertook the steps. So close was Pape that he pulled the Fedora over his eyes lest she recognize him. But he need not have feared. She did not look back. Her attention was focused ahead upon some one who sat on the small Colonial-type stoop—some one who had been waiting for her.

"Home, dear, at last!" Pape overheard the greeting in a deep, rich voice. "I couldn't imagine what was keeping you. I almost risked starting out in search of you. Did you—"

He heard no more. But he saw more than he wished. The some one arose, a tall, strong, masculine outline against the flickering gas light from inside the hall; clasped an arm about her shoulders; lowered a fine-cut profile, crowned by a mass of lightish hair, to her kiss. The pair entered the house together and closed the door.

Sans preface, the volunteer escort reached the crux of his conclusions. He had seen his "Nellie" home, yes. And the anticipated romance had come at

evening's end—romance with another man!

CHAPTER XII—WHAT A WELCOME!

At exactly ten of the clock next morning Peter Stansbury Pape, Esquire, garbed in the form prescribed by the chart on the wall of his Astor suite, was admitted for the second time to the Sturgis brownstone. He had awakened with the idea. His mind, which last night had felt shell-shocked out of its normal functions by that “home-at-last-dear” bomb, must have worked it out while he slept. The telephone, Jasper of the jowls and a certain exuberant “young lady of to-day”—all seemed to approve it. Even Aunt Helene, who received him, wore a manner that went with her *ante-meridian* negligée, pliable and gracious as its material of rose-hued Georgette.

She was so glad to see him again, although he was a very naughty person to have permitted her to believe him a detective the other night. Yes, her niece had explained all about him after he had gone. Still, she supposed that he meant well—her pet charity was to believe the best of every one. And she was so relieved that all of them had lived through the excitement that she could have forgiven a worse crime than his effort to help under false pretense. She had narrowly saved herself a complete nervous collapse by a few days absence from the scene of the robbery—that robbery of nothing at all except a keepsake of such inappreciable value that its loser would not name its name. Her niece, Miss Lauderdale, always had been a rather secretive, sentimental girl, and had since regretted, she felt sure, the worry she had caused them.

“We never permit ourselves to forget that she is an orphan, poor dear,” added the matron. “Irene tries to make everything up to her. Really, she is fonder of her cousin than she could be of any one short of a twin. And I am very glad to have it so. Jane has such a good influence over Irene. She is much older, you know.”

“And has Miss Lauderdale no—no brothers or—” the visitor began.

“No near relative except ourselves, nor money enough to assure her independence. But we are only too happy to have her need us, to love her and

provide for her. She is—” Mrs. Sturgis hesitated and seemed to be choosing her words with a nice regard for the delicacy of the subject. “She is perhaps just a bit strong-minded for the taste of men, our dear Jane. But strength is a splendid quality in a woman if applied in the right direction. Don’t you think so? Perhaps you don’t, though, being a tower of strength yourself. Anyway, Jane Lauderdale is a dear girl—and *so* dependable.”

Mrs. Sturgis *did* hope he was enjoying to the full his stay in New York. Yes, her daughter would be down directly and it *was* nice of him to ask the child riding. She did not often consent to her essaying the park. Irene’s daring was her real reason for keeping their horses in the country, although she pretended that it was for the horses’ sake. He, being such a friend of her niece, came well recommended. Miss Lauderdale had told state secrets about him—had admitted at Irene’s demand that he was the most superb horseman she had met in the West. That pronounced him capable of taking care of a woman if any one could. Irene rode well, to be sure. But there always was a risk about a rented mount. And there were so many unexpected turns along the park bridle paths and such whizzing of cars and shrieking of sirens. She hoped that he had selected a safe mount for her child.

“I thought some, ma’am, of having Polkadot, my own friend horse, saddled up feminine,” Pape advised her. “But he ain’t used even to the skirts of a habit coat. Besides which, it might have put his Roman nose out of joint to see me forking another. No telling what a jealous horse will do.”

“Any more than a jealous woman,” she contributed.

“Can’t say as to the women. But I reckon that, jealous, they ain’t agreeable or safe, either. I’ve made a practice of sloping along at the first eye-flicker of that sort of trouble. But you cheer up, Mrs. Sturgis. The filly I picked as a trailmate for my Dot this morning is as reliable as the hobbies in the riding school.”

Despite her manner—and, positively, she was treating him like an eligible—the mother’s black brows had lifted semi-occasionally during his speech, he presumed at his choice of language. Although he jotted down a mental note of the necessity of increased care to weed out his unseasonable crop of hardy range vernacular, somehow her presence made him worse. He remembered having read somewhere that the choice of topics in a refined duet of mixed sexes should be left to the lady. The thought proved restful; left him some spare time for self-communings.

Why hadn’t Jane Lauderdale at the very start of the game told him that she was married? Worse he wouldn’t—couldn’t—believe of her. To do her justice, she hadn’t exactly encouraged him, yet she scarcely could have helped seeing with both eyes bandaged the weak state he was in.

When she had thrown open a top-floor-front window of that old, scaly,

painted-brick retreat of hers last night, had she observed him standing in the shadow of the odorous gas tank opposite? If so, did she understand the hard-dying hope which had kept him stationed there an hour, with five minutes thrown in to benefit the sickening doubt which had been tricked into certainty?

If she had seen and understood, did she pity or exult over his observances and deductions? The building was four stories and an attic high. The variance in window curtaining proclaimed it a "flat" house containing at least four separate sets of tenants. As proof, a young mother had emerged with a wailing infant onto the third floor fire-escape landing; a party of four, shirt-sleeved and kimono-clad, could be seen playing cards at a table just within the windows of the second-floor front; the shades of the first were jerked down when the gas was lit. And surely none who could afford the space of an entire house would have endured the district.

That beneficial five minutes which failed to benefit he had thrown in after the top floor lights had been suddenly turned out. He'd never have known the stubbornness of his hope that she would reappear, except for hope's slow death. Undoubtedly she who was known to him as Miss Lauderdale had settled for the night in the home of the tall, blond man who had kissed her in the doorway. He knew where one member of the Sturgis family, at least, went for peace and quiet!

A question had been asked him; had been repeated with a slight crescendo of the modulated voice which had played accompaniment to his tragic reminiscence; recalled him to the here and now. From the matron's surprised look and her wait for some sort of response, he realized that automatic answers didn't always satisfy. What was it she had asked?

"You have a family tree, Mr. Pope—I mean Pape? Pape *is* such an odd name, isn't it?"

"Sure—that is to say, certainly, madam. A forest of the same."

She frowned in face of his attempt at elegant diction and intent to make her smile.

"I fear you don't quite grasp my meaning. It is the Pape lineage I mean. You can trace it back, I suppose?"

Just here was Peter Pape's cue to spread out all his Stansbury cards upon the table, but in trying to match this mother in rose-hued negligée, he overplayed the hand.

"Oh, we go back to the days long before kings and queens or even jacks, Mrs. Sturgis—clear to Adam and Eve and the apple orchard."

This time she beamed. "Indeed! And you have an escutcheon?"

Before he could assure her, the daughter of the house clattered in high-heeled boots through the doorway.

Irene wore white cloth breeches and a black suede coat, no hat at all and a

radiant freshness that took his breath. In the stress of recent doings and undoings, he had forgotten the spectacular beauty of this particular young lady of to-day. Crow-haired was she, bright-cheeked, brighter-lipped. The slight unevenness of her dazzling display of teeth but added piquancy to her smile. She was both strong-built and lithe of body. And as to her mind, never an incipient doubt of her super-desirability weakened that. Truly, she was a vital and vitalizing creature, Irene.

It was not unpleasant to have a beautiful girl greet him with frank cordiality. After recent roughnesses of his experience—Well, not since that floral-wreathed sign first had blazed its reassurance into his nostalgic gaze had he been made to feel so welcome.

“Oh, you poor man—you poor, dear, bored-to-death man!” she offered with both her hands. “Has my maternal mamma been talking you to pieces about my virtues? I’ll bet you have, at that, you darling villainess!”

Freeing one hand, she shook her ivory-handled crop at her protesting parent, then almost at once re-seized Pape’s sunburned paw.

“It’s your very own fault I took so long to get ready. Do I hear you asking why, Why-Not? Because your groom rode up on the most satiny black that ever stopped before our domicile, instead of the regular roan I expected. I was all toggled out in my new tan covert, but of course had to change in order to be becoming to the black. I’m *never* late!”

“*My dear!*”

There was incredulity in Mrs. Sturgis’ voice.

“You mustn’t get nasty, dar-rling. You know that I’m *almost* never, except to punish people. And of course Mr. Pape and I haven’t got far enough along for me to need to punish him—*not yet.*”

Although nothing seemed to be expected of him, Pape sought for a seemly retort. “Let us hope that we never get that far along.”

“Let us hope that we get there soon,” she corrected him. “Come, shan’t we be on our way?”

Mrs. Sturgis followed them to the street door; showed a becoming anxiety; hoped, even prayed, that they’d return safely.

“Safely and anon—don’t expect me sooner than anon.”

Irene tossed the promise with a finger-flung kiss from the saddle into which she had swung with scarcely a foot-touch upon the stirrup held for her. Pape instructed the groom as to his return to stables on the other side of the park. They were off on the most parade-effect ride in which he, for one, ever had participated.

The girl pulled in close enough to keep talking during their necessarily sedate pace down the avenue toward The Plaza entrance to the park.

“You were a dear to keep calling up while I was in the country. Oh, don’t

look so innocent!”

Her charge made him hope he wasn't showing in his face the strange something that happened to his spinal column each time she called him “dear”—he felt so sure that she only was leading up to that adorably Yankee-ized “dar-rling” of hers.

“I'm sorry if I—glad if I look innocent.”

“You ought to be. Any modern man ought to be.” She laughed more happily than he could manage to do at the moment. “And don't you deny calling me—don't you deny anything! It won't do a bit of good.”

Believing that it wouldn't—not with Irene—he didn't.

“You see, Jasper's butlering job depends upon his accuracy,” she continued. “Well he knows if he lost me one single message from one single only man I ever loved—”

“We trust that all your only-ever men are single?” he persiflaged into her pause.

“Most. Never cared for the back-door and porch affairs—one has to be so discreet. You don't yourself, do you, Why-Not?”

In her query Pape saw an opening for the idea which had wakened him up. Not that he would have pried into the affairs of Jane Lauderdale through her discreet-and-proud-of-it young cousin any more than he had crossed the cobbles of that soiled East Side street last night to question her fellow-tenants on the fire escape. No. He knew he couldn't and wouldn't do anything so deliberately base as that. But if Irene must babble, it was only fair that she babble upon a subject that interested the semi-silent member of the colloquy. So—

“No, I don't like side-porch affairs,” he admitted, “although I've got the reputation of being discreet.”

“That's why you're so nice-nice,” enthused Irene. “The man's being good gives the girl all the better chance to be bad. Oh, I *hope* I've shocked you! Come across, B. B.—that's short either for ‘Blushing Bachelor’ or ‘Brazen Benedict.’ *Haven't I?*”

“You'll shock me worse if you don't hold in until that traffic cop blows his horn.”

With the warning, Pape reached over and himself curbed her black until their crossing into the bridle path was whistle-advised.

Probably she considered that the time had come to start “punishing” him, for, once in the park, she literally ran away from him along the East Path which so far he had traveled alone. But Polkadot, asserting his indignation in none too subtle snorts, soon overhauled the rented horse, then showed his equine etiquette by settling to a companionable walk. His man, too, after one look into the flushed, exultant, impish face beneath the cloud of wind-tossed curls, forgave.

"The trouble with you, W. W., is simply this," he propounded, referring to her late allegation in superior vein.

"W. W.? Explanation!" she demanded.

Attempting a look of polite surprise, he obliged. "Inclusive for 'Wicked Wife' and 'Wiley Wirgin.' I am here to say that, as your sex is run nowadays, it is hard to tell which are which. In this woman's town none of 'em seem to want to wear the marriage brand. Many a Mrs. calls herself Miss. You keep too close to your mother, likely, to be yoked without her knowing it. But how could an outsider know, for instance, whether or not your cousin, Miss Lauderdale—"

"Jane married? What an idea!" As expected, Irene interrupted on getting the general drift of his remarks. "Not but what she's plenty old enough. She's *twenty-six*—think of it! Maybe I oughtn't to tell her age. Still, any one can see it on her face, don't you think so—or *do* you? And it isn't as though you were interested in her instead of me. Jane is considered still very attractive, though. A good many men have admired her even since my day and degeneration. Do you know, I never can resist adding that 'degeneration' to 'my day'! It's trite, I know, but it's true—too-trite-true. Jane has a whole raft of women friends. She's always off visiting them. She is down at Hempstead Plains now with one of them."

Pape rose in his stirrups, as it turned out, merely to hold back a low-hung bough which had threatened to brush the girl's artfully tousled locks.

"Fortunately," she babbled on, "Mills Harford still wants to marry her. Mother and I both think she ought to snap him up. Don't you? Harfy has money and he isn't bad looking, although I myself shouldn't consider him as a suitor. I guess he knows that." She transferred her glance from him to the path ahead. "Here's the longest straight-away in Central Park," she cried. "I don't want to leave you again—better come along!"

Bombed again! Pape pressed one hand against his brow as he shook Dot's rein, a signal to follow the spurt to which Irene had put the academy mare. He wasn't given to headaches from any pace of his horse, but a sudden hurting sensation had shot through his brain.

Jane Lauderdale wasn't, then, married so far as her relatives knew. And she was covering her whereabouts from them as she had tried to cover from him. By no tax of the imagination could he think of the peeling old brick house on East Sixty-third Street as the "place" of any of those elite "women friends" mentioned; yet even could he do so, why one with a husband or other male attaché who would wait and kiss their fair guest at the door?

Incidentally, Polkadot won the brush over this tangent, coming up from the rear at an "I'll-show-you" pace. Willingly enough he waited for the black mare where the bridle path again became winding.

Irene, on catching up, looked him over with irritation that proved to have

nothing to do with the comparative speed of their mounts, as just counted against her.

"I don't believe you were listening to me at all back there," she charged. "I *dote* on deep, dark natures, but this doesn't seem to me the time or place to get mysterious. Come out of it and pay me 'tentions!"

He undertook to obey. "I'd be tickled pink to pay you anything that—"

"You're a deeper and darker color than pink already," she interrupted, "but you don't look tickled at all. Here, see for yourself!"

From her breast-pocket she produced a flat vanity case covered with the black suede of her coat; flipped open a small mirror; held it above the horn of his saddle where he could look into it. His countenance was, indeed, nearer beet-red than pink. After a wicked moue over his discomfiture, she took out a "stick" and proceeded openly, calmly, critically, to rouge her youth-ripe lips.

"I'll pay you," she proposed with a smile, "anything that you consider fair for the thoughts that brought that blush."

"I was just wondering if—thinking that—" he floundered. "What a similarity of coloring there is among you, your mother and your—your cousin, you know, and yet how different you are."

"You're cheating, Why-Not. You know you weren't thinking anything so banal. Do you expect me to pay for that?"

She pulled her trim little black closer to his rangy piebald and leaned over toward him. And he bent toward her; somehow, couldn't help it. A moment her eyes glittered close under his. Her blown black hair strove toward his lips. A pout that would have tempted the palest-corpuscled of men curved the lips so carefully prepared—for what?

Peter Pape's corpuscles, as happened, weren't pale. Then, too, he lately had been bombed out of some few; traditions and restraints. He caught his breath; caught the idea; caught her arm.

"Child, do you know that—Do you understand—"

"You *are* nice-nice!"

With complete understanding, she awaited his pleasure and, possibly, her own.

Irene had shown selectiveness in the set for the scene. The path at that point was low-leaved and lone. Nothing broke the silence except the siren-chorus of invisible cars. Nothing marred the woodsy fragrances except the reek of gasoline. Nothing held Pape back except the realization that, once he had kissed this almost irresistible young lady of to-day—

At that, only Polkadot saved the situation. Whether intolerant of his propinquity with a mere hireling, whether sensing the predicament of a man-master who never had brushed stirrups with a woman unless on some picnic

ride with a crowd along, or whether too fed-up on stable fodder to endure such inactivity one second longer, at any rate, the painted pony forewent all equine etiquette; bolted.

Not until they had made a flying turn at Harlem Mere and started cross-park toward the West Path did Pape's strong hand at the rein dictate that they let the trailing black catch up. When again the two horses, as nicely matched for contrast as were their riders, paced side by side in form—

"You all right, dar-rling?" panted Irene, from excitement and exercise beautiful as the favorite "still" of a picture queen.

"Right as—as you nearly had me wrong."

At his serious look, she laughed up at him shamelessly. "You missed your chance that time. And a miss to me is as good as many miles."

"Don't you mean," he asked, "that a Miss is as bad as a Mrs.?"

The rest of the ride he insisted on playing the heavy respectful. He wasn't to be baby-vamped into making love to any girl; to that he had made up his mind flyingly but firmly. Tempting, indeed, was she. But until he should commit himself to temptation, she should not over-tempt him. Even in this, their "day and degeneration," he claimed the deciding vote of the male. Why not?

After that *he* chose the topics of conversation, favoring one introduced that day by the girl's own mother—genealogy. Irene's answers were considerably less animated than his questions.

Yes, "family" was the hobby-pace of her only mamma. She, herself, didn't care a Russian kopeck from what a man came, so that he was present when she wanted him. Still, if Pape aspired to get along with parent-Helene, he'd have to trump her genealogical lead. Could he and would he produce a family escutcheon?

If there was one to be had in town! So he promised with hand-on-heart. He had been born and bred and all that, he declared. And he had reasons for wishing to be properly installed as a friend of the Sturgis family. Would an escutcheon really need to be laid within range of the maternal lorgnette? If so, just what was an escutcheon most like?

Ha, he began to see! It was, then, an authenticated something which one emblazoned on what he owned to show that he owned it, like the interrogation point which he branded on his cattle back home? He explained the significance of the name of the distant Queer Question Ranch back in Hellroaring Valley, a name derived from his own whys and why-nots. He'd see what he could do toward authenticating a creditable escutcheon and exhibiting the same to mamma.

They had curved around North Meadow, had skirted the silver circle of the receiving reservoir and were approaching The Green, before Pape's absorption in this self-selected topic was broken. He had cast a surreptitious glance toward a

clump of poplars that disputed possession of a hillock with an outcrop of granite. Beneath them he had seen what caused his heart to take one quick flop, then stand still.

What next occurred was better understood by Friend Polkadot than Friend Girl. The horse received a knee-pressed signal, the meaning of which was clear, if not the particular reason therefor. Just why Why-Not should wish to rid himself of a riding-mate he had seemed to find so delightful—

However, Dot was enough of a soldier never to argue actual orders. He promptly went lame. And he rather enjoyed doing so. The trick had been dear to him ever since the petting lavished upon him during his recovery from a real injury years ago. He slowed to a stop; up-held his fore-hoof; himself demanded “tentions.”

“What’s matter, old hoss?”

Perfect in his part of this play to retire from trail company no longer congenial, the Westerner flung himself off-saddle, accepted and examined the pitiful “paw.” Even when the supposed victim winked and drew back his upper lip in a wide horse grin, there showed no change in the poker face of the Montana man.

“Is it a sprain? Does it hurt so much as all that?” Although Irene would doubtless—and justly—have been furious to know it, her concern was the one real factor in the incident.

“He may have slipped on that bolt of his back yonder.” Pape wasn’t used even to suggesting lies and his voice sounded as unconvincing to himself as though pitched from the vicinity of Washington Square. “Serve him right if he did. At that, I’m afraid our ride’s ended for to-day. Fortunately—” He paused in a search of the surroundings, presumedly to get their exact bearings; in fact, to convince himself that he had seen what he had seen. “Fortunately the stable I’m using lies just over there on Central Park West.”

“And I was just about to propose that we make the reverse round.” Irene pouted like the spoiled child she was. “I’d set my heart on a real sprint between my mare and your cocksure charger. It would have been so sort of symbolic of life to-day, you know—a race of male versus female.”

Her heart for horses, however, soon softened in pity for Polkadot. Pape liked her cordially as he hated himself for the endearments and consolations she showered upon that supposed unfortunate.

“Don’t you worry one little bit, Polkadot dar-rling,” she urged, leaning to one of the pinto’s forward-flicking ears. “If it isn’t all right by to-morrow-day, Irene will come around herself and rub it well for you.”

When Dot, having received no “cure” signal, limped more noticeably than before as they neared his stable-hostelry, she added in her sweet-lisped baby talk: “Just a few steps more, booful boy. Don’t ‘oo care. You’ll be all well to-

morrow-day.”

Considering the tenderness of her mood toward the four-footed fakir, her change was sudden and radical toward the biped of the pair when she grasped that he intended to send her home in a taxi.

“You’re not going to *take* me?” she demanded through the down-dropped sash of the door he had closed.

“If you’ll excuse me, no, Miss Sturgis. I am very sorry to miss the pleasure and sorrier if I seem discourteous. But I—I owe a duty to a friend.”

She looked with a hard glance straight into his eyes, her lips thinning. “Then you think more of your *horse* than you do of me?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” he temporized.

She pressed the point. “You may think I lack reserve, Mr. Pape. Sometimes I myself feel that I am too impulsive and too—too honest.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” he repeated. It was the best he could offer and he was in doubt about that.

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t,” she snapped. “But why don’t you assume a virtue if you have it not—why not be a little bit honest yourself? Why not answer the truth? Heaven knows I might better learn it now than later. Tell me, Why-Not, is it only Polkadot for whom you are deserting me?”

Pape tried unobtrusively to give the chauffeur the start signal; shifted his weight; cleared his throat.

“Well, it isn’t exactly—not entirely on account of the horse, although a man’s cayuse is his cayuse and that’s that. No, miss. You see, we were kind of late starting, owing to your change of—of habits. And I have a friend that I’m sort of committed to help because she—he—”

But his impromptu defense merged into her high-pitched scorn which, in its turn, merged into tears before she was through.

“I knew it. I *divined* it. And me meriting a man’s whole soul! Kindly tell the driver to start at once. As for you, Peter Stansbury Pape, I think you’re *contemptible!*”

Grooms were caring for the horses on Pape’s return to the stable. The “cripple” he miraculously cured by a word and a touch. In his dressing room, he hurried into street clothes.

Out in the park, beneath that clump of poplars—

Talking was all very well in its way. But at last he had sighted something to *do!*

CHAPTER XIII—IN HER SERVICE

Perhaps never had Peter Pape felt in more of a rush to reach any given spot. Yet, once there, he seemed in a greater rush to get away. Scarcely did he pause in his brisk walk along the pavement outside the park wall to study the details of the scene beneath the poplars which so had interested him—three laborers dressed in jeans, each equipped with pick or shovel, digging in the shade under direction of a dapper-dressed, slight-built stranger. But in the sprinkling of curious bystanders, men and women who decorated the wall like rail-birds, there was no sight of her whom he rather had expected to find among those present.

The total absence of Jane Lauderdale, either in the bonnet and black of East Sixty-third Street or in the modish morning frock which might have attired her dual self, decided his next move. By passage of several minutes, a picked-up taxi and a dollar bill, he was mounting the front steps of the old, scaly far-East mansion. The front door standing open, he seemed tacitly invited to enter without formality of a ring. Upon undertaking the flight of stairs within he congratulated himself that he was not superstitious. Every step of the weathered wood squeaked, scrooped or screeched as if in ill-omen. Never had he climbed so foreboding a stair-case, albeit never so determinedly.

Just why he had come did not matter. There was plenty of time, as he told himself, to argue that out afterward. Impulse had mastered him, the same sort of impulse that would have started him burning the trail back home to warn a pal whose mining claim had been jumped or whose cattle were being rustled toward the Canadian line. Actionful resentment had moved him, as during the previous winter when he had discovered poachers attacking the Yellowstone buffalo herd and had skied forty miles in blizzard weather to warn the Spread-Eagle Rangers. So far as he cared to figure in the emergency, a bent-back, ill-clad old lady—no matter who else or what else or whyfore else she might be—had preëmpted that poplar patch and owned therefore the exclusive digging rights thereto. In the event that she herself had not instigated the present activity, he was here to

warn her.

Whom he should meet at the top of his climb was problematic. If it was the blond-mopped man—Well, they both might be taking chances.

A moment did he pause before the door of the fourth floor front. Suppose a maid attended his knock, for whom should he ask? “Miss Lauderdale” might not be known in the house—mention of the name might betray an incognito. Reminding himself, however, that a servant was the difficulty least likely to be encountered in that tenement, he knuckled up his hand and knocked.

His first rap did not bring response; had to be repeated more peremptorily. He could hear low voices within. Then there was silence. Perhaps the occupants of flats did not answer unexpected knocks. His hand was fisted for a third when the knob turned and the door opened a crack.

No face appeared; nothing but a voice—a woman’s, hard and impatient.

“Yes. What is it? Who do you want?”

Pape was returned to the quandary of the maid possibility. Before he could decide what to answer the suction of wind from the hall drew around the edge of the door a fluttery bit of black skirt.

“I want you, Jane,” he hazarded.

Curiosity, surprise or exasperation ruled her—perhaps a combination of the three. Her young-white face in its old-black bonnet followed the skirt around the door edge, high as his own and so close that her breath, warm and sweet as a summer zephyr off a clover field, blew upon his cheek.

“*You?*” she gasped, as before, out under the trees.

“Again,” he finished for her with the briefest of bows.

She narrowed the crack and moved across it, evidently to protect the room from his inspection. Not exactly a “welcome to our happy home” was her next offering, although in her natural tones.

“So you followed me home last night, after all! How dared you? What is the meaning of your espionage?”

His courage was lit by the blaze of her look.

“There’s a particular meaning to it that I hope you won’t find so unwelcome. I’ve whizzed hereward to inform you that a gang of grave-diggers are exercising their muscles ‘neath the shade of the sheltering poplars where you and Kicko were planting bones last evening.”

He felt gratified at the importance of his news, as shown by its effect on her. Her lips paled as they parted. The pansy-black irises widened within the blue of her eyes in her concentrated stare. Lines lengthened her face more suitably to the poke of the bonnet that framed it.

“Who—*who?*” she demanded, her voice scarcely more than a rasp.

“That I didn’t linger to learn. I saw them as I was polkaing past upon my

trusty steed just now. Thought you mightn't know."

She turned her head and spoke as if to some one within the room.

"Oh, what shall we do? If they've solved the cryptogram—if they find—"

She checked other disclosures; again faced the volunteer messenger, now frowning.

When no suggestion as to what they could do came from the person who would seem to be the other half of her "we," Pape made cheerful offering: "The taxi-hack that conveyed me cross-town is ticking time down in the street. It is at your service, miss or madam, with or without yours truly."

She gave him a startled glance, whether for his mode of address or his offer, he could not be sure; then spent a moment in urgent thought.

"*Would* you wait for me a few minutes?" She all at once announced her decision.

Without need of his answer, without a verbal thank-you or suggestion of apology, she closed the door in his face and, by way of insult to injury, turned the key inside.

Seeing nothing better to do, Pape leisurely descended the stairs. The steps protested stridently as before, but more intelligibly now.

"She doesn't look it," shrieked the top one. And: "She doesn't—doesn't—*doesn't!*" repeated the several next. "But she wouldn't let you in—in—in," the hard-tried middle ones. "There's something queer about it all—something queer—something queer," creaked the ground-floor last.

Within the stipulated "few" minutes Jane joined him out on the Colonial portico of long-ago grandeur. Her complete change of costume—the dingy black doffed for a small, smart sailor hat and a gray tweed that did credit to her tailor as well as herself—proclaimed her something of an artist at the alias act. Also did it quash any hope which may have been left in him that the East Side flat-house was a place of temporary sojourn. Evidently she kept a wardrobe there. The man who had greeted her so tenderly last night called the shack "home." Jane was always going off on these visits to her many woman friends—so Irene had said.

Such deductions halved his attention during the reflexes of handing her into the taxi and instructing the driver regarding the return trip. There pended a somewhat important question. Of this he reminded her by a level glance, his foot ready to leave the running-board and his hand ready to shut the door from the outside.

"I am not such an ingrate as to make you walk," she answered.

During the cross-town ride there was but one exchange between them.

"Jane"—Pape turned to her daringly, the humor twitches about his mouth defying any serious attempt which she might make to put him in his place—"I

have to call you Jane, you see, because it is the only part of your name of which I feel sure."

As before, at a similar suggestion, she gave him a look of startled resentment. Then, with a faint but very sweet smile—

"Peter," she bade him, "pray proceed."

He did. "Should you mind telling me, Jane, whether what you are digging for in the park has any connection with the theft of that something you valued the other night?"

"I guess—I don't mind," said she, thoughtfully. "It has connection."

"Is it— Of course refuse to answer if you wish, with the assurance that there can be no hard feelings between us. Is it, just possibly, buried treasure?"

"Just possibly it is."

"Central Park, if piled up with hay, would be a right sizeable stack. By comparison, any treasure which might have been contained within that snuff-box would be needle-sized."

The girl looked intolerant, as if at stupidity on his part.

"The treasure which I hope to unbury before those grave-diggers you saw can unearth it for some one not entitled to it is larger than all the park."

Even at this, Pape didn't doubt her entire sanity. She had mentioned a cryptogram; merely was being a bit cryptic herself.

"I see," he assured her.

"I hope you don't," she assured him.

"That," he finished, "you don't trust me."

"Trust you? Why should I trust you?"

A moment her blue eyes blazed into his. He was feeling quite scorched by her scorn. Probably he looked wilted. At any rate, her next move amazed as much as it refreshed him.

One of her ungloved, ringless hands slipped into his that lay idle on the leather of the seat; the fingers curled around it.

"I'd like to trust you. I don't mind admitting that." She turned so directly toward him that again he felt her clover-field breath across his cheek. "But you'll have to excuse me for the present. I just don't dare."

He held her hand hard, pulsant palm to pulsant palm. But he took his eyes off the temptation of her face; a second or so stared straight ahead, trying to resist—trying to answer for himself the question of her.

Who and what was she—this woman of his first, deliberate self-selection?

"Trust—is a thing—some people have to—be taught," he said, steadily as he could. "You will trust me—in time. There is only one—quick way—to learn."

Having gone that far, he gave up; realized that he couldn't resist. His eyes swept back to the temptation of her face. His two arms swept around the temp-

tation of her form. His face swept down until he yielded, in a serious kiss, to the temptation of her lips.

“Learn, Jane. Learn,” he insisted into the panic of emotion he felt her to be in. “Your distrust has made it hard for me to trust you. But I find I do. I trust you with my soul. Don’t say the angry things you might. Wait. Learn.”

At her first effort to be free, he released her; leaned to his window; knew without turning that she was leaning to hers. After they had swung into the wide avenue that bounds the park on the west, he spoke quietly.

“I’d suggest that we land here. By looking over the wall you can see without being seen.”

Without turning, she nodded. Pape dismissed the cab and guided his silent companion north a block. He pointed out the group of poplars to her by their tops, claiming what he called “the wild, or wilderness eye for location.” When they reached what he considered a vantage point, however, she drew back, reluctant to look.

“If they’ve solved it—if they’ve found it, I’m lost—lost,” she said. “Another hour last night and I’d have known. If you hadn’t come along—”

“Ain’t I trying to make up for that?” he asked her.

Without meeting his demanding eyes, she set her lips; stepped close to the V-topped wall; peered over. For a space both studied the scene of activity.

“Won’t take them long,” she commented. “They’re just common laborers—Polakers, no doubt. The short, dressed-up man must be the boss. Wonder whether I’ve seen him before. Wait, he’s turning! His face is strange to me. One of their hirelings, of course.”

The silencer which Pape put upon certain questions exploding in his mind—pertinent questions such as what was the nature of “it,” who were “they,” why should another hour last night have made all “known”?—was the result of a new-made decision on his own account. He would teach this determinedly untrusting young person by demonstration; would aspire only to such confidence as she saw fit to volunteer. The hope that telepathy already was at work strengthened him to meet manfully her calm, cold gaze when at last she faced him.

“You say you want to make up for—” She caught her breath and started afresh. “I am willing to—to learn—if I can. But some women might consider that you owed quite a bit.”

“I am—” and he bent his head, the better to see her lips—“very deeply in your debt.”

In spite of her flush, she continued crisply. “Very well, I am going to ask you for part payment.”

“And I am only too willing, Jane, to pay in full.”

She studied his serio-flippancy; evidently decided to value his statement

above his smile.

"I need about one hour of dusk to finish in there. I could finish to-night if that gang could be driven off now, before they find—what I hope to find first. Can't you—won't you try to frighten them off?"

"I? What right have I—"

One of two things was certain. Either she thought very little of the courage of the four or very much of his frightsomeness. He did feel indebted to her, though; appreciated the born-and-bred conventionality which she had overcome at his request. When he compared the scathing, stereotyped things she might have said with the fact that she had said nothing at all—well, despite the confusions since that Zaza night, including the man over on East Sixty-third Street, she was—she must be the sort she at first had seemed. He shrugged off his own dubiousness and looked as hopeful as he could.

"Once you pretended to be a detective," she encouraged him.

"Got a supper out of that."

"Last night you were again taken for one."

"And had a scrap that was lively while it lasted."

"This much you may assume. Something important—something more valuable, really, than any treasure that could be buried in the whole length of Manhattan Isle—something more than you possibly could imagine is at stake. It doesn't matter what or why or how, but try to do what I ask. Get those hired looters out!"

"Get them out?" he objected, "Girl-alive, they have a right to be digging in there or they wouldn't dare to come in force and in daylight. I'd need some authority to object before I could— Will you stay right here?"

Instead of vaulting the park wall, which at first had, seemed to be the one possible response to her demand, Pape lifted his hat and sauntered down the avenue as though bound nowhere in particular.

CHAPTER XIV—THE CREDIT PLAN

The Sheepfold in Central Park is a U-shaped structure of red brick walls and a

low roof that is mostly gables. One of the wings is winter quarters for the Dorset flock. The connecting curve, the lower half of which is an archway, houses in the upper Shepherd Tom and his family. The remaining wing, although built for a different purpose, is now used as a garage for the motor cycle police. Within is parking space for all the machines in regular use in the park and some extras.

Into this garage strode Why-Not Pape, a man in a hurry. His only introduction to the policeman in charge was rather extravagant, if wordless—one made in brute Belgian. He returned Kicko's greeting—the fact that he and the police dog were friends did the rest. It was amazing how easily his coup was carried out as planned, backed by the dog's infallible memory.

"Which are the spare fire-crackers?" he asked the uniformed garage keeper with bluff authority. "I'm in a gasoline hurry to get up the line."

His wait had more intensity than length. He counted upon a long-standing claim among safe-workers, of which he had been assured by that piece of human flotsam out at Hellroaring, that the "big box" in the New York Police Headquarters would be the easiest "cracked" in the city were there anything in it worth stealing. He knew it to be a fact that many never-solved robberies and murders have been "pulled" within the shadow of precinct stations; had seen substantiated in the day-by-day news the theory that the best "hide-out" is under the arresting arm of city government. And his act upon deduction meant nothing against the police. He simply wished to profit for once by his knowledge of human nature reduced to the Nth degree. Even unaided by the dog, he had expected to carry through by daring of a first-draft sort.

"What's the case, sergeant?"

With the question the attendant member of the force waved a hand toward the sheaf of ten machines which are kept unassigned to particular "speed cops"—an emergency motive-power reserve.

Without necessity of an equivocation as to who he was, without flashing the badge of authority which he did not have—merely by using that slang term for the noisiest of motor vehicles which was in common usage in the Yellowstone as well as in New York, Pape had declared himself in his part.

"Big," he answered. "Bigger than all the park."

Frowning and abstracted from a hurry to be off that was by no means assumed, he wheeled one of the emergency machines into the open doorway.

"Want any help?"

The rookie was ready; had grasped the handles of a second cycle.

"No. Do I look like I needed help?" In earnest now he frowned, but not abstractedly. "Don't want any uniforms following me. Ain't that kind of a case."

Without meeting other obstacles, Pape was off upon the marked official machine. About one minute lasted his ride upon this steed, fleeter than Polkadot at

his best. As though for the first time noticing the diggers among the park poplars, he stopped with a toot of the cycle siren. Dismounting, he dropped the standard, parked the machine at the side of the road and advanced upon the despoilers. On the way he charged himself that in this “kind of case”—three burlies and a boss to one uniformed objector whose only authority was a woman’s service—mind more than muscle would be needed.

He was met by the thin-faced man. “S’all right, officer. We ain’t looking for Cap’n Kidd’s treasure.”

Pape smiled more inwardly than outwardly, although he felt that he well could afford to do both on being mistaken, a second time within the last few minutes, for a plain-clothes man.

“Who are you and what you up to?” he demanded.

“Name’s Welch—Swinton Welch, contractor. I’m digging a ditch to put in a sub-surface drain. Want to see the permit?”

Producing a worn paper from his breast pocket, the small boss flourished it.

“Sure. Show me.”

“It’s O. K., else I wouldn’t have the navvies at work.”

“Likely it is,” countered Pape, “but show me just the same.”

With somewhat less of a flourish the paper was presented. Pape saw at a glance that it was written on an official form of the Department of Parks, then scanned it closer.

“What—” his demand was louder, gruffer, more combative than before—“*what* you say you’re doing?”

“Just like the paper says—digging for a drain.” The sharp-faced boss also grew more combative.

It is to be remarked that the Italian laborers had stopped work on the instant of interference. They always do. A shovel wasted—Fortunately the stream of cars on the roadway below flowed on without a ripple of curiosity as to the party on the hillock. The pedestrian paths were further away and, at this hour, preëmpted by the inevitable babies, mothers and nurse-maids. In the great, green mixing-bowl of all races within the world’s most democratic city, no man concerned himself with the by-play near the boundary except those directly involved.

Pape scowled over the operation, with never a glance toward the stone wall, from over the top of which a pair of black-irised blue eyes probably were watching him—a pair of rose-lobed ears were listening. To make “learning” easier he pulled another loud stop in his voice.

“What you going to drain to where?”

“Don’t exactly know myself yet. Going according to orders,” offered Mr. Swinton Welch. “One shovelful at a time is my motto. Don’t make no mistakes

that way. What's eating you, bo? I tell you it's all O. K. or I wouldn't be—"

The alleged contractor was stopped in the middle of his defense by the glare lifted to his face from the sheet of paper. An unofficial, yet official acting thumb was jerked over-shoulder.

"Out!" bellowed a voice of command—Pape's. "You don't go wrecking this park with an order that's a year old, signed by a commissioner that's already in the discard—leastways you don't while I'm above sod. Call off your men and beat it!"

"I'll call off nobody nor nothing." Evidently the "boss" wasn't amenable to being bossed. "I know my rights and I'll stand on 'em in spite of all the plain-clothes crooks out of Sing Sing. That permit's good until it's been used. If you had half an eye in your head you'd see that it's never been canceled."

Pape folded the slip and tucked it into his coat pocket. "You'll get off lighter if you call it canceled," he advised. Turning to the laborers, he added: "Go home, you—no matter what lingo you speak. Beat it—make tracks—vamoose!"

The huskies did not look to their foreman for advice. To them the voice of him who had appeared upon the thunder-bike was fuller of authority than a noon whistle. Shouldering their implements, they straggled toward the nearest exit. Their wage? The boss of their boss would produce that. Sufficient unto the day was the pay thereof. Weren't they muscle workers—weren't they therefore always paid?

"You give me your number—I dare you—your number!"

The small foreman had lost the sangfroid of his type. Like a cockroach inadvisedly investigating a hot griddle, he danced toward the taller man.

"You don't need to dare me twice. My number's a darned good one for you to know. I'm 23—that means *skidoo!*"

Pape's sidewise spring he had learned from one of his Hellroaring cayuses. It brought within his reach this second disturber of Jane Lauderdale's peace and quiet. Only one wrench did he need to apply to the wrist of the hand which he had interrupted on its way into a side pocket of a sack coat.

"Not *this* morning," he objected.

The foreman, gone startingly white from pain after the recent red of his chagrin, of necessity permitted his hand to be withdrawn empty. And he had no power to prevent Pape's reaching into the pocket and confiscating a snub-nosed automatic. He did, however, risk some contentious comment.

"Nothing a real citizen loathes like you plain-clothes pests. I'll show you up proper in court, you big bully. I got a permit from a judge to carry that gun, I'll have you know."

"But not to use it on me. I put quite a value, I'll have *you* know, on my birthday suit-of-clothes."

The “pest’s” chortle was pitched to carry reassurance to and over the park wall.

Removing and pocketing the cartridges, he returned the “permitted” weapon’s frame to its owner. In consideration of his utterly unofficial status, he probably would have found an attempt to enforce New York State’s anti-pistol law embarrassing. At that, the fellow probably did have a permit—he had been told that such were easy enough to get. He would, he felt, be satisfied if the “drain” excavation was postponed until Jane had that coveted hour for the finish of her own mysterious investigation.

Perhaps the small boss regained some of what would seem constitutional bravado from the fact that his license to carry concealed weapons had not been demanded. At any rate, he started fresh protest.

“Say, if you’d any idea who I was working for—”

“I know who I’m working for. That’s idea enough for me *and* for you.”

Pape sat down with his back against the trunk of the most aged and sturdy poplar. He looked as likely to stay there as the tree. The foreman, with a final sputter of indignation, stamped off down the hill, having made no secret of his objective—the nearest telephone. The Westerner saw him pause beside the motorcycle and make note of the number on its P. D. plate—a last amusing touch to a uniquely pleasurable experience. Small satisfaction would Welch get if he tried to trace and punish the particular “cop” who had ridden that particular police “firecracker” that particular afternoon. Kicko alone could give him away and Kicko was too much of a Belgian to tell on a friend.

Some minutes after the foreman had disappeared in the general direction of Columbus Circle, Pape arose and sauntered toward the park wall. He did not trouble himself further about his steed of raucous breath, steel ribs and rubber hoofs. A “sparrow cop” would happen upon that sooner or later and trundle it back to the Sheepfold garage. The Force could take for granted that its plain-clothe’s borrower had found necessity to abandon it in course of duty. Plainly labeled as a piece of city property by its official number plate, it was safe enough.

He scaled the wall at a calculated point and gave himself completely to the joys of victory when he saw her who had sent him into the arena seated on a shaded bench a short distance above. He joined her. Gallantly as some champion of old he handed her the trophy brought back from the fight—the venerable drain-building permit.

“This is all the authority they had for daylight digging,” he remarked.

“Then—then they haven’t deciphered it?” she breathed with manifest relief, after a moment’s study of the official sheet.

“It? Just what—” he began to ask, then stopped.

Let her tell him if and when she liked. Until and unless, he would continue

his rudderless, questionless course.

“Don’t you see,” she was generous enough to add, “if they had solved the cryptogram, they never would have been using this? With their influence they’d have secured a special permit. It may be that one of the gang saw me digging there last night and assumed that I knew more than I really do. There have been signs recently that I was followed by more than—than yourself. That man on the knob last night—Don’t you suppose he had watched me—trailed me—lain in wait for me to take from me whatever I might have dug up?”

They? Their? The gang?

These succinct demands Pape did not put in words although, telepathically, he did not restrain his curiosity. Probably she got something of his vehemence and decided that something was due him. She abstracted her attention completely from the passers-by and gave it to him.

“You were fine, Peter Pape, *fine*. After dark to-night I’ll come back and finish my search. If I’d stopped to think—except for my desperation, you know—I never should have asked you to put those people out, it was *so* impossible. But you were inspired with the one-best idea. You handled the expulsion act as artistically as—as an actor in his big scene.”

Now, had there been time for Pape to foreplan his curtain speech he might have continued to be artistic. But Jane’s applause seemed to go to his head. He honestly had meant to continue histrionically suppressed, unasking, admirable. Yet he didn’t; just couldn’t. He stretched his arm along the back of the bench until his finger-tips touched the tweed of her sleeve. Perhaps the contact was unnerving. Perhaps her eyes were too earnest. Perhaps her faint, wistful smile was falsely promising. At any rate, he proceeded to do what he had determined not to do.

“It was quite a stunt. I admit it,” he said. “Don’t you think you sort of ought to—That is, don’t you want to reward me?”

“Reward you?”

She drew away from him and his suggestion.

“Of course I don’t mean just that.” Pape’s eyes were on her lips. “You paid me beforehand. What I wish you’d do is to get me in your debt again. The credit system is the one for me. I can do anything to make good when I’m deep in debt. Will you—won’t you——”

“*Odious!*”

A second or so he blinked into the blast of her interruption. By its flare he saw her interpretation of his bad beginning. He tried an extinguisher.

“Wait a minute. Don’t flay me before you understand. I’m not such a jasper as to mean to exact—What I wish you’d do—What I want to ask—Jane, have a little mercy on me. Tell me who and what to you is that man living in your flat.”

From the look of her, judging dispassionately as possible, all was over between them. She got to her feet, as he to his. She looked strengthened by righteous rage, he weakened by unrighteous humility. She made the only utterances—and they did not help much, being rather fragmentary.

“You think that I—You have assumed that he—You believe that we—So *that* is why—”

In the pause that preceded the lash of further language, Peter Pape realized what it was to be a dumb brute. He felt as must certain dogs he had tried to understand—faithful, well-intentioned, unequal to explaining themselves. He knew that he did not deserve chastisement at the beloved hand, yet could not resent or avert it. Like a dog he leveled his eyes on hers and looked—silent, honest, worshipful.

And Jane Lauderdale proved to have a heart for dumb brutes.

A taxi with flag out had slowed at her gesture. She was about to enter it. In quiet, crisp tones she gave her address to the driver; then these instructions to Pape:

“Get the next cab that comes along and follow me to East Sixty-third Street. Under the circumstances you will excuse me for preferring to ride over alone. I’ll wait for you on the stoop.”

She did. And without a word she preceded him up the three screeching, scrooping, shrieking flights, which were not nearly so uncommunicative as his guide.

“Life’s a shaky thing. But love is worse—worse—worse”—the first. And the scroopy second: “Things get queerer every step—queerer—queerer.” Shrieked the third: “Look out. Like as not he’ll leap and lam you. Look out lest he leap and lam!”

The fourth floor front was empty when they entered. Pape noted its quaint consistency during the moment she left him alone—an oblong room fitted sparingly with Colonial antiques, with a round rag rug over the boards of its floor, with several old, interesting engravings on its walls. He merely glanced at the horsehair Davenport to which she had waved him; turned and stood with face toward the sliding door through which she had disappeared.

Soon this door was drawn open. Forward she led by the hand the man. A tall, fit specimen he was, his face clean-shaved and strong-featured, his hair a tawny mass which probably once had been auburn, but now was blond from a two-thirds admixture of gray.

The light of devotion irradiated the girl’s uplifted face as she stopped before him. She looked like a slender white taper beside some shrine, her lips the live red, her eyes the blaze blue, her hair the waving suggestion of its lighted tip.

“Dear,” she said to her companion, “I want to introduce Mr. Why-Not Pape,

the Westerner I told you about.”

The man’s smile was cordial, beautiful. He stepped forward with outstretched hand.

“Welcome to our city, Why-Not Pape,” he quoted from the Times Cañon sign which, patently, had been part of Jane’s tale.

But Pape didn’t—just couldn’t meet the advance. He stood stubbornly still before the Davenport, his arms stiff at his sides, his suffering eyes upon the lit taper—upon Jane.

And into her devotional mood seemed to return that gentling comprehension of dumb brutes.

“I beg your pardon,” she said to him. “Mr. Pape, my father.”

CHAPTER XV—THE LIMIT OF TRUST

Not until Jane was finishing an account of his disposal of the “grave-diggers” did Pape feel sure that the splendid old man was blind. Suspicion had come from the uncertainty with which he had veered toward the chair placed for him, from his indirect gaze toward the girl, from the hand outstretched for the touch of her hand. Conclusion surprised from the Westerner a low, sympathetic exclamation which Jane heard, evidently understood and chose to answer openly.

“Yes,” said she, “my father has been unable to see since the war. France, you know, and mustard gas.”

“Do you suppose—” Curtis Lauderdale himself put the question—“that otherwise I’d permit my dear girl to conduct this search against our enemies?”

“But the war—at your age, sir?” murmured Pape. “Weren’t there enough of us who were young and free of family responsibilities to go into service?”

Again that rarely beautiful smile from eyes which appeared somehow to see more than was visible to those blessed with sight. “I was willing for you youngsters to do the actual fighting. But I felt called upon to take some part. What are two eyes compared with the inner knowledge that you did your bit? I only helped to make trench life easier, along with many other K-C’s and wearers of the ‘Y.’”

“And how did they—get you?”

“Enemy gas bombs didn’t respect non-combative insignia or uniforms. One of them blinded me and the gray horde got—well, one more American prisoner. I was later than most getting back home.”

There was a vitality in his manner—a throb of pure joy in his voice—which eased the poignancy of the younger man’s pity and reminded him that one mercy amid the heartbreaks of the big fight would seem to be the compensation seen by those whose gaze has been focused forever inward.

Pape turned from father to daughter. “But your aunt, Mrs. Sturgis, told me that your father was—”

“Yes.” Again Jane divined his perplexity. “Aunt Helene thinks that dad ‘went West,’ as they say, in the war. She was very much against his going. And when he came back so late and so—so much the worse for wear, he and I decided that she and the rest should continue to believe the report which had preceded him across the Atlantic, at least until after we forced—”

She did not hesitate; just stopped, having said what she evidently considered enough. As she showed no curiosity over the when, where or whyfore of auntie’s confidence, Pape forced upon her no report, either of that interview or the canter through conversational and Central Park by-paths with Cousin Irene. Rather, he gave to the charm of personality in the older man—a magnet toward which he had turned willingly since Jane’s justification in that quiet “my father.”

“But since you are freed, sir—now that you are back—”

Jane’s eyes stopped him, so dark with suspicion was their blue.

“I don’t know just what is back of your interest, Why-Not Pape. But it will do no harm, whichever side you are on, to admit a truth about my father known to both his friends and foes. He is under a shadow—an undeserved disgrace which culminated in an indictment. Until that shadow is dissipated it is better that none should know he has come back. What I decided to trust you with before you found it out for yourself, was the identity of the man with whom you thought that I—”

“I am too grateful—” in his turn Pape interrupted—“ever to let you regret that trust.”

He spoke as he felt, with revealing sincerity. His look held hers; the thrill of his voice the moment.

The blind man lightened the pause. “The only thing I had to thank our enemies for was the loss of my identity. We thought advisable that it stay lost to all but Jane. My sister-in-law, kind as she has been to my girl-child, must have been more relieved than grieved over the alleged finish of one supposed to have disgraced the name. Why my daughter has seen fit to let you, a comparative stranger, into the secret which we have guarded so carefully—”

Why? Judging by Jane's set look at the implied criticism, she either could not or would not explain. The interloper's eyes, still fixed on hers, reiterated the counter-demand, why not—*why not?*

Her father, as though sensing much more than he could see, reached out and stroked her soft, parted, night-black hair.

"Never mind, Jen-Jen," he said. "The fact that you do a thing makes it right enough for me."

With sudden penitent fervor, she seized and kissed his hand. "I don't know, daddy dear. It is hard to be sure about forced, snap judgments. I hope this Westerner is what I've told you he looks. I am glad to have brought him here to have you help me decide. And I haven't exactly let him into anything. Of his own force—curiosity, superfluous energy or whatever it is that animates him—he has sort of dashed into my life. He knows about the theft of grandfather's cryptogram and that I'm trying to follow it from memory in my park hunt. But, of course, the enemy knows that or they wouldn't be watching me or—*Oh*, I do hope that it's all right—that he's all right! Now that he has trailed me here, that he knows who and where you are, so much depends upon his integrity. If he is against us and is clever, wouldn't he pretend just the same to be with us?"

Had she forgotten his presence in their midst or was she super-acutely remembering it? Pape wondered. He felt as nearly futile as was constitutional about further attempts to convince her of his fealty. On the part of the Self-Selected, if not on his, that slow-but-sure method would have to do. Time and acts would tell—time and acts and this high-priest of hers, for love of whom she had lit into a devotional taper.

He—her father—proceeded at once to fulfill her prayer—to "help her decide."

"Dear," he proposed, "would it be too much to ask you to serve us tea? If it is, just forget my bad habit. But that last Orange Pekoe you got is delicious. And there are a few fig-cakes left in the box. I'll try to entertain this latest acquisition of yours while you're bringing the water to a boil."

He did try—and succeeded. As soon as the girl had left the room, he began in a lowered tone:

"I was glad to do what I could for my country, even at the cost. My misfortune I have learned to look on as the *fortune* of war. My keenest regret—" he gave a sightless glance toward the closed door—"is the loss of seeing Jane's face. From her babyhood up, I have so enjoyed Jane's face. I keep wondering and wondering whether it has changed or aged from the years and the suffering I've caused her—whether it is less or more lovely than when I last saw it that day I kissed it good-by."

"It is," said Pape with conviction, "more lovely. It must be. You or any man would need to be a patriot, sir, to love and leave such a face. It reminds me of

one I didn't have to leave—one that led me over that long road Over There to and through hell.”

“And whose face was that?”

“My mother's.”

The old man looked arrested and pleased. He nodded, as though in realization of a hope.

“Tell me,” he bade the younger, “what Jane looks like to you.”

Well it was, perhaps, that he could not see the embarrassment he had caused. Indeed, Pape didn't feel up to the sudden demand upon his sparse supply of fine language. He couldn't have felt less adequate, he was sure, had he been called upon for an extemporaneous critique upon the Sistine Madonna in the presence of its creator.

And yet there were reasons and reasons in this case why he should try to satisfy the eagerness of the fine old face bent his way in a listening attitude. The pathos of eyes from which the soul of sight had gone, the worthiness of the subject and a certain longing within himself to express to the next most interested person the appreciation which so far he had been unable to confide even in her who had inspired it—all urged him to make an effort.

He drew a deep breath; wondered how far away she was; hoped, then feared that possibly she would overhear. He feared, lest he fall short of the flattery which must have been poured, her life long, into her ears. He hoped that she might the sooner get an idea of his reverential admiration.

“Ever been to the Yellowstone?”

At his abrupt question the old man chuckled.

“Boy,” said he, “I knew our West before you were born. I was one of the first whites into the Park, then a wilderness. Jane tells me you're from Hellroaring. I was one of the party that named the region.”

“You don't tell me that you are—Why, of course! I should have known. We have a peak named after you. Your hand, old scout!”

The grip that answered was one of the sort Pape understood, a strong, firm, promising pact to the West that had come East. Surer at least of his visible audience, he roweled into the subject of the moment.

“In terms of our Yellowstone, then, your daughter's eyes remind me of Morning Glory Geyser. Could I say more for their color, sir?”

“No. The same sun that whitened the Glory's spray seemed to make the deeps of its pool a stronger blue. And her hair, young man, is it—?”

“Black as the jade of Obsidian Cliffs,” Pape supplied, then corrected himself. “Yet that don't seem an altogether proper simile, it is so soft. Of course, I've never touched it, sir, but I've an idea that the mountain moss, where we find the giant violets, would feel harsh to the hand that had smoothed your daughter's hair.”

“It would that. Thank God they didn’t blind my sense of touch! My fingers never tire of seeing Jane’s soft hair.”

“Then your fingers must be able to see her lips, too, for they are as definitely dented as those of an antelope doe. And they’re as healthy a red as ever they could have been in her childhood—red as the sun when it gets over into Idaho. And the Teton Range itself can’t beat her for clean, strong lines. I’ve never seen a woman who was such a blend of delicacy and power as your Jane. Still or in movement, I admire to watch her.”

Lauderdale leaned back into his chair with a sigh of satisfaction. “I used to call her ‘Little Lynx.’ There never was such a child for sinuousness. Ah, what a treat you’re giving me, Mr. Pape, to help me see again the beauties of my beautiful girl! Tell me—” The father’s voice lowered without loss of eagerness. His hands quavered forward, as though to supply the lack in his misted, striving eyes. “I want to know particularly about the expression of her face. Has the trouble I’ve brought upon her shadowed its brilliant paleness? Has it still that rare repose, with only a lift of the eyelid, a twitch of a corner of her lips or a quiver of her chin, to show the emotions beneath?”

Pape drew back from the he-man habit of hiding his heart; then, after a thought, leaned forward again. Why hide from this one man who could be her true lover, yet no rival to himself? Why not show what he felt? He closed his eyes, the better and more companionably to picture Jane. He felt that they two, both sightless now, saw the same vision as he spoke.

“I ain’t what you’d call up in art, sir. But I saw in Paris the finest statues in the world, or so they told me. The quiet of those still, white people sort of got on my imagination. Their suppression seemed to spoil me for the awful animation of the average face. Likely that’s why your Jane’s got me at first sight, although I hadn’t thought it out up to now. Hers is the first female face I ever was glad to watch in vain for a smile. There couldn’t be a marble paler or purer or with features finer lined. Just as I used to thank Heaven, looking at those statued ladies, that they couldn’t relax from their perfection, I feel like praying that Jane never will relax into a smile—until she smiles on me.”

A crowded silence fell between, but did not separate them. Its most vital question the Westerner next answered bluntly, after his way.

“It ain’t impudence, my calling her by her first name, Mr. Lauderdale. I haven’t had a real good opportunity as yet to ask your daughter to marry me. You see, we haven’t met any too often—this is time the fourth and only a shade less perturbed than the former three. But rest assured that I’ll take advantage of the first chance. Our ‘happily-ever-afterward’ is all settled so far as I am concerned.”

“I see.”

Although in one way the blind man’s quiet statement wasn’t true, in an-

other he looked as though it was.

At a call from the rear room, Pape sprang to open the door and relieve Jane of her laden tea-tray. On turning, he noticed that the father's one hand gripped the other in his strong, firm, Westernwise clasp, as though in self-congratulation. He looked as though he now felt sincere in the welcome extended earlier for form's sake to one Peter Stansbury Pape. Just why? Well, why not?

CHAPTER XVI—AN ACCEPTED ALLY

"Mr. Pape has been painting your picture with a brush dipped in colors of the Yellowstone," observed Curtis Lauderdale as he sipped the fragrant amber brew which his daughter had poured and passed.

The girl flashed their guest an indignant glance. "Attacking dad at his weakest point? For that I should paint him an awful picture of you."

"With a brush dipped in colors of the truth?"

At her threat and Pape's meek retort, the old man's eyes continued to beam their way, as only sightless eyes can beam.

"You needn't, Jen-Jen. It doesn't matter what Mr. Pape looks like. Men show less on the outside what they are than women. I'd rather see him as he is inwardly. Already I know that he has both an imagination and a sense of humor. And he is direct with the *skookum* talk, which doesn't lend to lies. As for his exterior, I imagine him as moderately sizeable and well-muscled and plain, or you wouldn't have brought him around."

"Immoderately plain," she corrected, still with a punishing air.

"Good. Then I've got him—" her parent with a chuckle. "Now it seems to me, if he's done for us all you say he has, that we owe him some explanation."

At once Jane's quasi-disapproval of their quickly established fellowship turned into real.

"Explanation has been our downfall, dad," she warned. "You know your failing. You trust too much and too soon. You seem to have got worse instead of better—positively—since you went to the war."

"She's right, Mr. Lauderdale," Pape advised. "It is too soon to trust me in

skookum or any other foreign language. But you seem shy some sort of help which I'd like to supply if I can. Why waste time explaining? You're entitled—on face value, you know—to the best I can give. There'll be plenty of time to explain after we've horned off all these nesters that seem to be rooting around your ranch."

"Another good quality—generosity," commented the older man in an argumentative way to his daughter. "Don't you think, dear, that it would be safe enough to tell him a certain amount of the truth, even though he should prove to be an active agent of our enemies? If on the other side, he'd know it anyhow. If on ours, he'd be at a serious disadvantage without some of the facts. We are in no position to despise an ally, Jane, and—"

Pape was determined that her confidence should not be forced, even by her father. He interrupted briskly:

"Which or whether, let me trust you folks first. I am almost as much a stranger to you as you to me—and no more given to explanations than our young friend here. I feel kind of called to tell you who I am and why I'm stranded in this Far East of New York. You may scent something in common in the sad little story of my life, for I, too, am on a still hunt for an enemy or enemies unknown."

He offered his tea cup for a refilling, climbed to his feet and steadied the china across to the white marble mantelpiece. There he stood and drank the beverage between the deliberate lines of his opening. He began at the beginning—or thereabouts—of Peter Pape. Over the early days of his stock-raising struggle to those of comparative, present success on the Queer Question Ranch he passed in fair style and with reasonable rapidity. Thence he slowed down to the near past and its sudden, oleaginous wealth.

As is so often the case in oil, he, as owner of the land, had been the last to suspect the presence of this liquid "gold" beneath his acres. Only the fact that he loved his ranch and would not sell the heart of it had saved him. Price proffers had risen slowly but surely until they reached figures which caused him to suspect, not the worst, but the best. He had drilled on a chance to a ceaseless flow of fortune.

His account carried its own conviction and fulfilled his preface except for one point. Where had he any cause, in this generous deal of Fate, to be resenting or seeking to punish enemies, unknown or otherwise? The blind man pointed the omission.

"Notwithstanding the enough-and-to-spare that I've got, sir, they stung me, these sharpers, through a lot of poor folks who couldn't afford even a nettle prick. Before I got hep to what was up I had sold a small tract for which I had no further use to an alleged student of agriculture who had interested me in a new scheme for making alfalfa grow where nothing much ever had grown before. When my

wells began to gush by fifties and hundreds of barrels, the backer of this fake farmer organized an oil company on the strength of his buy and floated stock right and left.”

He paused to clinch and thump a fist upon the mantel-shelf; then glowered unreasonably at the nervous quivers of the wax flowers within the glass case which formed its centerpiece.

“When widows with orphans from everywhere and some of my friends from nearby cow-towns began to write and ask me about their promised dividends—Well, folks, in time I got wisened to the fact that my name had been used along with the fame of *Queer Question* production. I asked myself a question that didn’t sound as queer to me as to the bunch of sharpers that I soon put it to. After I’d gathered them in and the Federal Court had helped me hand ’em what was over-due, I started on a long, long trail after the big guy that had planned the crooked deal. I’m still stalking him. He’s lurking down in that gulch of Wall Street to-day or I’m clean off the trail. You see, friends, the Montana Gusher Oil Fields, Inc., hasn’t even a smell of oil. When I find the promoter—”

“Montana Gusher—was that the company’s name?” Jane’s interruption was more than interested; was voiced with suppressed excitement. She turned toward her father. “You remember my telling you of Aunt Helene’s narrow escape from buying a block of worthless oil stock a year ago? She was only saved by—”

“Child, child, don’t name names,” the blind man reproved her. On his face, however, was the reflex of her startled look.

“It’s all right to say ‘child, child,’” insisted the girl vehemently. “You never would believe ill of any one until it was proved at your expense. Doesn’t it strike you as strange that *he* should have been the one to know all about these far-away oil fields without time for investigation—that *he* was able to dissuade Auntie against the smooth arguments of a salesman whose claim on him as a friend he had acknowledged? Do you suppose the promoter of Montana Gusher could have been—”

“Wait, Jen-Jen. You’d better be sure before suggesting such a charge to this young man. You can see that he is in earnest. If you should be wrong—”

“You’re plumb right about my being in earnest,” Pape cut in. “But I’m willing to go into all details before asking you to name me that name. I shouldn’t have minded so much had it been my bank account that was tapped. What they did me out of, though, was the good-faith of my friends and neighbors. When they made *me* look like the robber of widows and orphans instead of themselves—Well, if ever I get a rope around the scrub neck of that—”

On account of an interruption he did not finish the threat. A peculiarly tuneful auto siren sounded up from the street through the open windows. Jane got to her feet with such suddenness as to jeopard the entire China population of

the tea-table. She crossed to one of the windows; held the Swiss curtain before her face; looked out and down.

"I thought I couldn't be mistaken." Her report was low-spoken, but tense. "The Allen car has stopped in the street, across from the house."

"Not—Sam Allen couldn't have found me over here?" The blind man also arose. With hands out, he swayed after her. "You must be mistaken, Jane. Look again!"

"How could I be mistaken? They are out of the car now. They're looking at the house number. What—*what* can this mean?"

Jane drew in from the window; leveled upon her parent a look of acute alarm; saw and remembered Pape. With an attempt at naturalness she explained:

"Mr. Allen was my father's lawyer and one of his oldest friends. We are surprised by this visit because he isn't supposed to know even that dad is alive, let alone his address in New York."

"You said 'they,' Jane," her father puzzled. "Who else—"

"Mills Harford is with him."

The old man seemed shaken anew. "How could Harford know that we're here unless Jasper—"

"No, dad, not Jasper. He is faithful as the moon. You know that. It strikes me as more possible that—" In a return rush of suspicion she faced the Westerner. "Mr. Pape met both Mills and Judge Allen at the opera and later at Aunt Helene's. He is the only person who, to my knowledge, has discovered my disguise and our whereabouts."

Pape returned her look steadily and rather resentfully. "That is true, Miss Lauderdale. But I have had no communication with either of them since, although I did visit both their offices with the hope of locating you. Only yesterday I was told that Harford was out of town."

The blind man threw up his hands intolerantly. "Out of town, was he, and leaving a love-letter a day at the Sturgis house for Jasper to deliver, all written at his club? Do you think that hare-hound would go out of town so long as he suspects that Jane is in it? What are they doing now?"

"Crossing straight toward our steps—" the girl in low, quick tones from the window. "Judge Allen probably recognizes the house, despite its condition. He was here several times in granddad's day. He won't have to ask the way up."

"But, Jane, they mustn't come up here—mustn't get in. What shall we do?"

"I don't know, dad. Let me think. Meantime you, Mr. Pape—"

Again the Westerner heard that persistent suspicion of him in her voice and saw that she had whipped from out her blouse a very small, very black, very competent-looking something which he was glad to know she wore.

"You are not to show your face at the window and you are not to cross the

room when they knock," she told him. "If you so much as cough—"

Pape eyed her interestedly and decided that she meant the implied threat. The puzzle of the Lauderdale's, far from being solved, was growing more intricate. Why should these two delightful and, he felt sure, innocent persons so fear the prospective visit—the old man from his lawyer and friend, his daughter from the personable and wealthy young real-estater whom Irene Sturgis had declared to be her most ardent suitor? Truly, the case was one for a show of blind, dumb and deaf faith.

The increase of tension as heavy steps began to scroop up the stairs seemed to emanate from the figure of Jane Lauderdale. Straight and strong she stood in the center of the room, her face more marble-like than the mantel. Her head was thrown up in an attitude of alert listening. The black something in her right hand continued to command the suspect of circumstance.

He, although in a somewhat easy attitude, demonstrated that he knew how to behave when "covered." He did not so much as glance toward the window. And he showed no tendency to cough. His one deflection was a scarcely audible whisper.

"If I should have to sneeze, you won't shoot me, Jane? If you do, you'll miss a lot of love."

At the first light rap on the door, Lauderdale's knees seemed to weaken and he sat down upon one end of the Davenport. The younger pair stiffened; held their breath; eyed each other.

A second knock sounded, then a more imperative third. An advisory discussion outside, too low-voiced for intelligibility, ended in a fourth demand for admittance, knuckled to carry to the rear of the house and waken any sleeper within.

At each repetition the blind man had shuddered and gripped harder the arm of the Davenport. Now he flung out a summoning hand toward his daughter. She, with her trio of eyes on their silent guest—her own blazing blue pair and the single black one of the gun—crossed and bent to her father's rasp:

"If they should force the lock—should batter down the door—"

Jane made no attempt to reassure him. At a step toward them of the stranger she retraced her steps and gestured him back with the pistol, silently but most significantly.

Pape, the while, threw a trusting smile into the three eyes, then strode straight toward them. Close to Jane's ear he whispered:

"You won't shoot me. You can't. You'd lose too much good faith."

Despite her outraged gasp, he continued toward the door that was being importuned. Another smile he threw over-shoulder to reassure her of his confidence.

And Jane didn't shoot. Probably she couldn't. No report shocked the air. Nothing sounded except a gruff demand from the inner side of the door.

"Who's there? Wha'd'you want?"

From outside: "Old friends. We wish to see Miss Lauderdale."

"Who?"

"Lauderdale—Miss Lau-der-dale."

"Who in holy Hemlock directed you here, then? My name ain't Lauderdale. Never will be. Stop the noise, will you?"

There ensued further low-voiced consultation without. A moment later footsteps began a descent of the stairs. Scroop ... scream ... screech.

Not until the musical siren announced the departure from the block of the would-be visitors, did Pape relax from his listening attitude at the door. On turning he saw that Jane, too, had slumped, limp and white, into a chair, the very black and ominous something with which she had threatened him dropped into her lap. A look half-dazed, yet wholly hopeful was on her face.

"Thank Heaven—thank you, Peter Pape—they've gone!"

"But they'll come back." Her father's voice echoed none of her relief. "Allen and Harford must have reason to suspect that you, at least, are here in the old house. Otherwise they'd not have come. If my presence, too, is suspected, it won't be long until that other pack comes to hound me down. Jane, you can't go on with this search, vital though it be. Come what may, you shan't be sacrificed. It's no business for a girl alone and unprotected. We'll have to give it all up, dear. I'll go away somewhere—anywhere."

"But Jane ain't alone and unprotected." Pape crossed the room and faced them both. "Looks clear enough to me why I sloped out of the West and into the far East just in the nick o' time. I'm hoping the reason will soon get clear to you."

The girl's lips moved, although she did not speak. She looked and looked at him. Her father, unable to see, worded the demand of her eyes.

"Exactly what do you mean, Mr. Pape? What do you offer and why?"

"Why? Why not?" he asked in turn. "From this moment on, just as from the same back to that Zaza night, I am at Miss Lauderdale's service. I have a trusty bit of hardware myself—" in substantiation he drew from somewhere beneath his coat a blue-black revolver of heavy caliber—"and I am not so slow on the draw as some. If this pack you say is trailing you is determined to get itself shot up, it would be better for me to do it than for her, wouldn't it? And while we're waiting for the mix-up, I could dig for whatever it is she is looking for. Oh, you needn't tell me what that is! I've worked blind before. You folks just tell me when and where to dig and I'll dig!"

The girl turned to her parent. "I think, after all, I'll tell Mr. Pape—"

"I think it is time—high time, Jane." He nodded in vehement approval.

Rising, she faced their guest; spoke rapidly, although in a thinking way.

"You've earned the partial confidence that dad wished to give you, Why-Not Pape. This old house belonged to my grandfather. He grew eccentric in later life. The more this East Side section ran down, the tighter he clung to it. Toward the end, he fitted up this top-floor flat for himself and rented out the others. From sentiment my father didn't sell the house, although we could have used the money. We are not rich like the Sturgis branch of the family."

"That is, we are not unless—"

"I am getting to that, dad." With a shadow of her former frown, Jane cut off her parent's interruption. "My grandfather's other particular haunt was Central Park. He knew it from Scholars Gate at Fifty-ninth and Fifth to Pioneers at the farther northwest corner. He played croquet with other 'old boys' on the knoll above the North Meadow, sailed miniature yachts for silver cups on Conservatory Lake and helped the predecessors of Shepherd Tom tend their flocks on The Green. He had an eccentric's distrust of banks and deposit vaults and chose a spot in the park as the secret repository for the most valuable thing he had to leave behind him. The only key to the exact spot is a cryptogram which he worked out and by which he expected my father to locate his inheritance."

Pape filled the pause which, evidently, was for the weighing of further information. "So this cryptogram or map was in the stolen heirloom snuff-box the night that I—that we—"

"Yes. My grandfather, on his death bed, tried to tell me where he had hidden it, but he waited a moment too long. For years father and I hunted in vain. Not until the other day—the day of the night on which you and I met, Peter Pape—did I come upon it quite by accident in the attic space of this house. It was in the old snuff-box. I took both to Aunt Helene's that night, hoping to find time to study and decipher it. And I did read it through several times, memorizing a verse or two of it and some of the figures before the opera. I asked my aunt to put the box in her safe, not telling her its contents. The rest you know."

Although Pape felt the danger of his "little knowledge," he drove no prod; simply waited for her to volunteer.

"A number of people knew of our long search for grandfather's covered map, among them an enemy through whom we have been deprived, but whose name we do not know. How he could have been informed just when I found or where I placed it, I cannot conceive. Possibly the safe has been under periodic search, although we never suspected. Possibly some one within the house is in the employ of this unknown enemy and saw me give it to my aunt for deposit or heard that I had turned over some valuable. I was unforgivably careless."

"An inside job?" Pape queried. "I thought so."

"But not through Jasper—I'd stake anything on that!" the girl exclaimed.

“He was our own butler in better days and is loyal, I know. Since that disastrous night, I’ve been trying to work out the verses of the crypt from memory before its present possessor would get the key to a translation. ‘To whisplers of poplars four’ was the second line of one of the verses. That is why—”

The rising of Curtis Lauderdale interrupted her. He crossed, with a nervous clutch on this chair and that, to where Pape stood in the room’s center.

“There’s very great need of haste,” he said. “Now that they are watching Jane’s movements—Since they’ve trailed her here—Mr. Pape, I cannot afford to mistrust you, even were I inclined to do so. My dear girl here blames me for trusting people, but since I must trust her to some one, I’d rather it should be you. I accept and hold you to your offer to see her safely through to-night. Much more than you could imagine hangs in the balance. This may be our last chance.”

“I never acknowledge any chance as the last until success, sir.” Pape again grasped the forward fluttering right of the blind man. His left hand he extended to the girl. “I’ll try to deserve your father’s confidence—and yours, Jane.”

“Near the four poplars, then, at dusk,” she consented.

Also she gave him a smile, all the lovelier for its faintness and rarity.

That moment of *au revoir*, in which they formed a complete circle, palms to palms, Pape felt to be his initiation into what was to him a divine triumvirate. “At dusk!” There was nothing—quite nothing which he could not accomplish for the common, if still unknown cause that night, then, at dusk.

CHAPTER FOUR

XVII—POPLARS

HAD Peter Pape been at home in Hellroaring the late afternoon of this crowded day in New York, he doubtless would have saddled Polkadot and climbed to some lonely mesa for meditative fingering of the odd chain into which he had forged himself as a link. Instead, he locked himself in the Astor suite, little used hitherto except for sleep. The telephone he silenced with a towel wrapped around the bell. He closed the windows against distractions from the street and switched off the electric fan, the whirr of which sounded above the traffic roar.

Yet with all these aids to concentration, his résumé of facts newly given

out in the affairs of his self-selected lady reached no conclusion. Varying the metaphor, no point or eye could he see to that needle, greater than Central Park itself, which would sew the fate of the Lauderdale. The best he could do in preparation for contingencies ahead was to throw a diamond hitch around his resolve to do and dare unquestioningly in the service to which he now was sworn—to advance from initiate into full membership of the triumvirate.

He planned by the clock. At six sharp, he rang for dinner upstairs. Seven found him again in the garb worn from the West, which appealed to him as more suitable than any of the “masterpieces” tailored for less important functions than that of to-night.

The blond floor-clerk, whose hall desk stood near the entrance door to his suite, awaited his approach with an “Indian sign” of warning. But she and he couldn’t have come from the same tribe; at least he did not grasp its import until later developments translated it for him.

“Oh, Mr. Pape,” she lisped, as, actually, he was about to pass her by without his usual breezy greeting, “you’ve had three calls s’evening. You’re getting so popular. But I must say I don’t wonder at all.”

“Three calls—and for me?” He was halted by honest amaze. “How come? I mean, from whom and what about? Say, was one a lady’s voice, sort of cool, yet kind, soft yet strong, gentle yet—”

“No such riddle voice helloed you,” snapped the girl. “Three adult males they were that wanted you and one of them none too kind or soft or gentle, at that. I told ’em what I thought was the truth. Personally, you know, I make a specialty of the truth when it doesn’t do any harm. I said that you hadn’t been in since morning. They didn’t appear to have any names, no more than messages to leave.”

“Saves time answering.” Pape got underway for the elevator. “Greetings and thank-yous, ma’am, and many of them. If any more males call me, I may not be in *until* morning.”

“You *do* lead the life!”

Her exclamation faded into her stock-in-trade smile. But curiosity was in the baby stare with which she followed him to the grated door. A queer customer among the Astor’s queer. At that, though, as she admitted to her deeper self, she was “intrigued” rather than “peeved” by his utter lack of interest in what she did with her blond self when off duty.

Swinging across the rotunda six floors below, Pape was startled to see a face he recognized—that “fightingest” face of the bully with whom he had gone the single round on the park butte-top. A clockward glance reminded him that he was in considerable of a hurry. He had adequate time to keep the most important appointment of his recent life, although none to spare. The pug probably had

been one of those to call him on the 'phone. But wonder over how and why he had been located by his late antagonist must be deferred until some moment less engaged.

Next second Pape heard what he instantly surmised to be the voice of a second of the three inquirers—that of Swinton Welch, boss digger at the four poplars. Now, he really felt indebted to the dapper sub-contractor who, together with the “grave diggers,” on the sacred spot, had put him in stride for the vast progress of his day. Moreover, he was interested in the possible connection between Welch and the unnamed battler he had overcome, as indicated by their joint wait at his hotel. Although he located Welch at once leaning against the news-stand, he felt he should not stop, even for a word of thanks or a pointed question. Tilting the brim of his sombrero over his eyes, he made for the Broadway entrance.

“There he goes, Duffy!”

From close behind, the thin voice of the thin boss answered several of the queries which Pape might have put without need of his putting them. So, the name of his adversary of the night before was Duffy! There was some connection between him and Welch. Both were waiting for him.

A heavy hand clamped his shoulder. “Hey you, what’s your hurry?”

Shaking the clutch, Pape turned forcefully just as Welch joined Duffy. With but a fragment of a prefatory plan, his arms flung out flail-like and brought his two untimely callers into violent collision. A short-arm jab just below the curve of Duffy’s ribs doubled him over his undersized partner with a yap of pain. Before the lobby crowd realized that anything untoward was being punched, Pape’s identity as aggressor had been lost by his dash for the revolving exit.

Almost was he within one of the door’s compartments when again halted—this time by a slender youth with an eye-brow mustache.

“I beg pardon, but isn’t this Mr. Why-Not—”

That is as far as the probable third of the “adult males” got with his mannerly question. Perhaps the weariness of his voice and the weakness of his hirsute adornment gave Pape the idea. At any rate an unoccupied arm chair stood ready. Seizing the man’s slender shoulders, he seated his third caller therein with more force than courtesy.

“So glad to meet you, Mr. Pape,” this in a sort of gasp. “I’ve been here to see you several times. A small matter of business. I’m from the—”

Pape did not wait. He was not nearly so much concerned over the source of the youth as that Welch and Duffy soon would be up and after him. He had no time for further bouts with one, two or three, regardless of a constitutional disinclination to shirk battle. He pushed through the revolving door and into the traffic out front. On the opposite side of Broadway, he dived into the up-tide of pedestrians.

One observation disturbed him as he eased himself into an empty taxi, with an order to stop at the Maine Monument. Although all others of the varied sky-signs were alive, flaunting the wan daylight with their artificial blaze, the rose-wrought welcome to Why-Not Pape was dead. He'd find time in the morning to set off a less artificial blaze of indignation before the electric company for their neglect. Surely they could spare him as many kilowatts as that sausage maker or this movie maid! His need of the hired cheer of the sign no longer was urgent, now that he had been hand-clasped into the Lauderdale triumvirate. Still, the sign that had lit his way to Jane was worthy of perpetuation.



Before night-fall no likely place was left in the near vicinity of the poplars four for any old lady's "laborer" to dig. From the shadow of the park wall, where crouched a poke-bonneted figure, sounded an order to cease work.

"Hope has died hard, harder even than you have dug, you human steam-shovel. I guess it's no use." Jane's voice was as forlorn as she looked when Pape swung up at her call.

He leaned upon the man-sized spade which he had purchased at a small hardware store near Columbus Circle just before keeping their rendezvous. He mopped from brow, neck and hands the sweat of toil as honest as ever he had done.

"So far as I've been able to discover," the girl continued, "this is the only group of trees the length and breadth of the park that answers description. But evidently they are not the ones of grandfather's rhyme."

Pape drew some few breaths calculated to steady his pulse to normal. "Being only one of the laboring class and uneducated as most over the ultimate object of my labors—in other words, never having glimpsed the word-map of that crypt, I can't be of much mental assistance."

"Oh, I shouldn't mind telling you the lines if I only could remember them," Jane conceded. "One distinctly says to dig near the 'whisper of poplars four.' Confound grandfathers and their mysterious ways! Despite your willingness and energy, Mr. Pape—"

"Peter, if you please, Jane."

"Peter, we shall have to give it up. If you'll smooth back the earth you've disturbed, I'll take off my two score years and ten."

"You mean to retire my little old lady of the park?"

"Must, I'm due to return to Aunt Helene's to-night from my—my visit. I have on my gray suit under this loose old black thing and a hat in my bag. If you'll escort me to the house, I'll be that much more obliged."

Tugging at the strings of the poke bonnet, she stepped toward the cover of a nearby black haw whose flat-topped, branch-end clusters of bloom gleamed like phosphorus over a dark sea. He turned back to his task with his consistent superiority to intelligent inquiry. Muscularly, at least, he had earned her confidence. So far free from interruption more staying than a chance glance or careless comment, they seemed about to end an evening successful in its unsuccess, when there sounded a verbal assault.

“You’re under arrest—the both of you—and caught with the goods, at that!”

To Pape’s ears the Irish accent had a familiar sound. Straightening to confront the two uniformed figures now materializing from the dusk and the hillock’s crest, he executed a signal which he hoped would be understood by his companion as a suggestion that she “slide out”—leave him to wriggle from the clutch of the law as best he might.

“Arrest? And for what, if you have time to swap me word for word?” he put demand.

“For the messing up and maltreating of Central Park in violation of enough statutes to hang and then jail you for a year. Don’t bother denying or it’ll be used again you. We been watching a whole half hour. You haven’t a chance at a get-away, so come along nice and companionable.”

The last admonition was shared with the bent old lady, who was too dim-sighted, evidently, to have seen her laborer’s telepogram and now appeared from around the misnamed white-blooming black haw.

“We wouldn’t like to be rough with a lady.”

The suggestive warning came from the second officer. At his voice, Pape sprang forward and peered into two familiar faces—into the chiseled smile of ’Donis Moore and the fat surprise of the “sparrow cop,” Pudge O’Shay. He couldn’t decide at the moment whether to be sorry or hopeful that these two friendly enemies should be the ones again to catch him at misdemeanor within the sacred oblong of the park.

Jane didn’t like, any more than they, that they should be “rough” with her, to judge by the readiness with which she gave up the possibility of escape and ranged alongside the Westerner, quite a bit less humped and helpless looking, however, than in her approach.

“I’ll say this is a pleasure—to be pinched by the only two friends I’ve got on the Force,” offered Pape with his hand. “How are you to-night, ’Donis Moore? O’Shay, greetings!”

“No shaking with prisoners!” The gruffness of the foot policeman was remindful of that previous meeting in which his whistle had been mistaken for a quail’s.

Adonis ignored proprieties and gripped the proffered hand.

“What you up to now, Montana—unhorsed and scratching up our front yard?”

“I’m a-digging,” Pape returned.

“A-digging for what?”

Jane supplied: “For an herb called Root-of-Evil.”

“I see. Herb-roots for mother, eh?” Moore squinted a confidential wink toward the Westerner. “If you’d taken my advice, you’d be throwing something better than dirt around for some one younger and—”

“But I did take your advice. This is what it led me to.”

“Not in them clothes, you didn’t. Why don’t you hire out to the Sewer Department, if excavating’s your line? Sorry, but you and mother is in Dutch with us.”

There came a growl from Pudge. “Not Dutch—German, and with more than us. Report of your doin’s was ’phoned the station. They sent me out to round you up. I happened on me handsome friend here off-duty and brought him along for good measure. I was minded to leave you go that other time, you cheerful lunatic. But now I’m a-going to take you in. Watch ’em, ’Donis, whilst I go ring for the wagon.”

At this mention of the auto-patrol vehicle, behind the gratings of which the lawless and unfortunate are exhibited, like caged wildlings, through the city streets, Jane stepped toward Pape. He felt her hand steal into the crook of his elbow, as if for protection from such a disgrace. Although personally he had no objection to wagoning across the park to the Arsenal, he vibrated to her mute appeal.

“As a favor, Moore, would you mind walking us to your calaboose?” he asked. “I give you my cross-my-heart-and-hope that we’ll not try to get away. Don’t refuse on mother’s account. She’s mighty spry on her feet.”

Pudge O’Shay continued to grumble. Being a sparrow cop was no job for a flat-foot, especially a fat one, he declared. He was tired and sorry for himself out loud. After a small controversy, however, he withdrew his objection to the stroll, if not taken at speed.

The procession started along No. 1 Traverse, the shortest route to the Arsenal. The arresting officer led. The prime culprit, his young-old accomplice clinging to his arm, followed. The dismounted officer brought up as rear guard.

“Got a permit for your automatic?” Pape was able to ask Jane in a murmur well below the scrunch of feet.

“No. But I’ve got the automatic with me.”

“Slip it to me!”

He did not explain the request. Whether he meant to force a gun-point escape and needed her pistol to supplement his own against their two captors

or whether he feared some such desperate initiative on her part, he left her to wonder. Watching their chance, he whispered "Now!" Next second he had safe inside his own coat pocket that very small, very black and very competent looking something with which she had commanded him in vain earlier in the day.

"Just try to trust me, Jane," was his response to the unquestioning obedience which had produced it from the blouse beneath her old-lady black.

"To try to trust you is getting easier, Peter."

The guarded admission sounded sweeter than the rhododendrons smelled. He felt happier going to jail with Jane than ever in his life before; was luxuriating in sentimentality when a roar like that of flaunted Fate lacerated the air. Pape started and stared about; saw that they were nearing Fifth Avenue and the menagerie that flanks the Arsenal; assumed that some monarch of the wild caged there had but vented his heart. A calming hand he placed over the girl's two which had gripped his arm.

"Just a moth-eaten old lion dreaming of his native jungle and talking in his sleep."

"But you don't understand what it might mean, that Nubian roar. It may be another clew to point the location of—of what grandfather buried in the park, you know."

Through the gloom he stared down into the gloomier scoop of her bonnet.

"Say," he enquired, mildly as he could, "you ain't going to ask me next to play Daniel and to dig in that lion's den?"

"Hush. Don't make fun. This is very important. If we can find four poplars over on this side of the park, within earshot of the menagerie lions—The first crypt verse starts off like this:

"List to the Nubian roar
And whisper of poplars four."

"I wish I could remember more accurately! It rhymes about bed-rock and crock, height and might and fight, then trails off into figures. But I am certain about those first two lines. Maybe we're getting close. With that Nubian roar as a center, let's walk round and round, in widening circles, until we list to the whisper of poplars four."

Pape's perplexity had not been eased by his steady stare into the poke.

"Very nice," he said, "that stroll round and round, provided we don't go too fast and get dizzy. But we can't start at the present moment."

"Why not?"—she, this time impatiently.

"You forget, my dear young lady, that we are arrested."

That was true. They were—and before the door of their jail.

CHAPTER XVIII—TOO READY RESCUE

Before the desk sergeant of a metropolitan police station friendship usually ceases. It did tonight in the Arsenal, otherwise the 33rd Precinct. By not so much as the ghost of a grin could the be-mustached official in a uniform striped by decades of service have detected even a speaking acquaintance between captors and prisoners.

The “case” was Pudge O’Shay’s and he made the arraignment, Moore having subsided into a wooden arm-chair tilted against the wall.

“These are the grub worms that the ’phone message was about,” announced the sparrow cop.

“Mind telling me who sent in that get-your-gun alarm?” Pape asked with a naïveté that masked the effrontery of his request.

The sergeant stared at him in amazement. “None of your business, you human mole.”

“Then I’ll tell you,” was his easy-manner counter. “A sharp-faced little crook named Swinton Welch.”

“Easy there with the hard names, young fellow! Swin Welch is a friend of mine and no person’s going to call him a crook to my face, much less a prisoner.”

“Thought so,” said Pape with a grin. “If he ain’t a crook, how about the folks he’s working for?”

Ignoring him, the sergeant opened the blotter.

“Name?”

“Peter Stansbury—”

“Never heard about a little rule of ladies first, I reckon,” interrupted the officer. “If the ship was sinking you’d make the first boat, I bet. Answer up, mother.”

For the first time the poke-bonneted head of the less aggressive prisoner lifted sufficiently to show the face within.

“Well, I’ll be—”

He was—struck dumb, if that was what he had been about to say. Next minute, however, he must have remembered that sergeants are supposed to be superior to shock. At any rate, he began the routine questions.

The red, soft-curved lips of youth answered readily from the shadow of the antiquated headgear. Even “How old are you?” had no terrors for one who had voted at the last election. Her “more than twenty-one” suggested the folly of pressing the point.

“Are you armed?” asked the officer in charge when the skeleton biography was completed.

Jane’s startled glance at Pape told him at least that now she understood the commandeering of her automatic—that some penalty was imposed for the bearing of weapons without permit. With a word and wag of chin she replied in the negative.

“Not having a matron here to search you, I’ll have to take your say-so.” The sergeant, after a meditative tug at his gray mustache, waved her back.

Pape was pedigreed with scant ceremony and his answers recorded as he gave them, even to “Hotel Astor, residence.”

“Frisk him, Pudge!” was the concluding order.

Because Jane’s automatic was first found and placed upon the desk the more personal “hardware,” a 45 Colt snugly fitted into its arm-pit holster, was almost overlooked. The sparrow cop’s triumph on drawing it forth was weighty as his figure.

“You go right well heeled for a guest of the hoity-toity,” remarked the sergeant, also pleasurably excited. “We’ll just book you for a double felony under the Sullivan law.”

At the threat, “mother” took a step toward her companion, evidently appreciating that this last charge was due to the service rendered in fore-disarming without fore-warning her. She looked ready to confess her ownership of the black gun, as she was trying to get the sergeant’s attention around the interposed bulk of Pudge O’Shay. But she paused when she saw Pape hand a yellow pig-skin card-case to the officer.

“Before you ’phone your friend Welch the glad news that you’ve got a double-barreled Sullivan on me,” he requested, “calm yourself by a look at this.”

The sergeant obliged; aloud read sketchily from the filled-in courtesy card signed by his chief, the commissioner of police.

“Peter S. Pape, deputy sheriff, Snowshoe County, Montana. Permitted to carry arms while in pursuit of fugitives from justice.”

His pleased expression faded; rather, appeared to pass from his face to that of the prisoner. And indeed, Pape felt that he had reason to be pleased. Only that week, in preparation for any trail’s-end contretemps, he had taken the precaution

of presenting at Police Headquarters his credentials from the home county sheriff. Sooner than expected, if somewhat otherwise, preparedness had won.

“You’re not going to tell me you thought them fugitives was buried on the far side of the park?” the sergeant grumbled.

“Wish they were. Say, if you think there’s any chance of your friend Welch dropping in for a social call, I’d like to swap a few words with him.”

“Leave up on Swin Welch! He’s harmless—ain’t been west of Weehawken in his life. Where does this old—that is to say, young lady come in?”

“She came in merely as a spectator to cheer me whilst I did my digging exercise. You can have nothing against her.”

Obviously the sergeant was troubled.

“Wish the lieutenant was here,” he was heard to mutter.

Adonis Moore made his way to the desk. “The sheriff is giving you the right dope, serg. All the while Pudge and I was watching, his lady friend didn’t move as much as a clod.”

“She wouldn’t need to move more’n a clod if she’d take that bonnet off her head,” his superior commented. “We can’t let her out now. She’s already booked. But likely she’ll make short shrift of the magistrate in the morning. The sheriff I’ve gotta hold on the park despoliation charge. There ain’t nothing in his card allowing for that. He’s entitled to have his guns back, but—”

“But how about a thousand dollars cash bail for the two of us on the misdemeanor?” Pape stepped forward to propose, his hand suggestively seeking the inner pocket of his corduroy coat. “The price is a bit high just for the practice of my daily physical culture, still I’ll pay.”

His confident expression faded the next moment when his hand came out empty of his well-stocked wallet. In changing to rough-and-readies, he had forgotten to transfer from his tweeds the price of adventure in a great city. Except for several crumpled small bills and certain loose change in his trouser pocket, he was without financial resource. His attempt at a hopeful glance in Jane’s direction weakened under the thought that, even were she not a self-declared poor relation, she wouldn’t be carrying ten century notes on her person.

“I’ve got telephone and war-tax money, anyhow,” he observed cheerfully. “Lead me to a booth and I’ll have Mr. Astor chip in the ante. Sorry on mother’s account about the delay. She ain’t used to late hours in police stations.”

“It might take quite a while to convince the hotel that you are you,” Jane demurred.

“As it did you, Jane?”

She ignored his *sotto voce* aside. “Why not let me send for collateral, Mr. Sergeant? I live just across the avenue.”

“Oh, you do, eh?”

“That is, my aunt does. They wouldn’t have a thousand dollars in the house, but you’d take jewelry, wouldn’t you, if it was worth several times the amount?”

Assuming his consent and thanking him with a radiant smile, she motioned Adonis Moore to one side and advised with him a moment in an undertone.

“Be sure to ask for Miss Sturgis, not Mrs.” Her final direction held over Pape’s protest. “Under no circumstance alarm my aunt. And don’t say who is in trouble—just that a good friend of hers needs jewelry bail. She’ll be thrilled by the mystery. She’ll manage.”

The ensuing wait seemed to try the chief culprit more than his young-old lady “friend.” While she sat at comparative ease in the absent lieutenant’s desk chair behind the railing, he paced outside. His interest in the sergeant had lapsed on that worthy’s refusal to discuss Swinton Welch’s connection with the case and he leant only half an ear to the preferred discussion of the latest crime wave which had dashed up to park shores from the ocean of post-war inactivity.

The entrance of Irene Sturgis was “staged”—anticipated, timed, well-lit. After her first burst into the room, she stopped short beneath the electric glare, unbelievably lovely in a blush-pink evening wrap over a gown of vari-tinted tulle. Her back-thrown curls, her heightened color, her parted lips and wide eyes—all proclaimed her utter astonishment at the scene before her. Her surveying glance began with the “costumed” Westerner standing before the high oaken desk of arraignment, swept to the bent old lady in black, on to the gray-mustached sergeant and the pompous arresting officer, then back to its starting point.

“Oh, don’t you look dar-rling in those clothes?” she exclaimed on her way to Pape, “I never saw *anything* quite so heroic. I didn’t *dream*, Why-Not, that you were the ‘good friend’ in need of bail. I am just too *happy* about it for anything—oh, not that you are in trouble, of course, but that you’d send for me. I’ve always been *crazy* to see the inside of this Arsenal. Police courts and jails and insane asylums just *fascinate* me. Don’t they you—or *do* they? Maybe I have a morbid tendency, but I enjoy it. It’s always the unexpected that really happens, isn’t it? I wasn’t in an expecting or hoping mood at all to-night and here you, of all people, go and get yourself arrested and send for me and—and *everything!* I forgive you for the past and love you all the more in trouble. But that’s as it should be, isn’t it? How could any true woman resist you in those clothes and in this—”

Of necessity she paused for breath—paused verbally, not materially. Reaching Pape, she lifted a look of utter adoration that would have made almost any man’s heart do an Immerman flop—lifted also two bare, soft-curved, elbow-dinted arms about his neck.

“I didn’t mean a word of what I said this morning at the end of our ride,” she confessed in an aside voiced *a la* the histrionics of yesteryear. “Of course I couldn’t seriously call you contemptible, when my deeper nature knows there’s

a noble reason back of all that you do. You'll forget it except as a lover's quarrel, won't you, dar-rling? It is in need and affliction, don't you think, that one's real feelings should come to the surface? I'm not one bit ashamed to tell you that I've been perfectly *miserable*. Haven't you been, too, Why-Not?"

"I ain't just comfortable," he admitted, untying the lover's knot at the back of his neck.

"Mother," her blue eyes on the red flame of his countenance, looked as though she believed him, but as though she didn't feel "just comfortable" either. In truth, her heart, too, had done some sort of a flop, then had dropped as if dead. She shrank further back into her rusty mourning garb, but did not miss a movement of the two baby-soft hands of her cousin, the one holding the Westerner's arm, the other stroking the same member as though to limber up its strain.

"What dire deed have you done, dar-rling?" The girl's voice was intense from the thrill of her rescue role. "Tell Rene all—at least all. It is such a revelation that you should appeal to me first in trouble. You *always* will, won't you—or will you? But then, *of course* you will."

With the eyes of three of the police upon him, Pape's situation would have been trying enough. Faced also by the amaze which he could better imagine than see in the shadow of that bonnet-brim, he felt desperate. Truly, Jane's wish to avoid alarming her aunt had brought real trouble upon him—more real than any he could explain to this child vampire.

"There ain't much to tell, Miss Sturgis," he began. "Not anything serious enough to—"

"*Miss Sturgis!*" she interrupted reproachfully. "After I've rifled my jewel box to make up the hush money and after all that's been between us! Are you *ashamed* of the deeper feeling you showed this morning on our ride? If you don't call me Irene instantly, I'll let them lock you up in a deep, dark, dank dungeon and keep you there until you do."

With a laugh of tender cruelty, she tripped toward the desk in her tip-tilted slippers; there laid upon its flat top a limp, beaded bag which had been swinging from her arm.

"You look so kind, Mr. Chief, I don't see how you *can* be so mean," she coaxed him. "You really didn't know you were capturing and torturing an innocent man, I feel sure. But you'll right the wrong now, won't you, for *my* sake if not for his? See what I've brought to assure you of his worth."

The sergeant opened the bag, dumped its contents upon the desk before him and took up a piece of jewelry for examination.

"The emerald drop on that fillet is a princely ransom in itself," Irene assured him. "But I brought my mother's black pearls for good measure. Just look at them—the platinum settings alone are more than the thousand dollars' worth

that the nice-looking policeman said you required!”

Perhaps the sergeant found her pleading eyes and smile more inducing bail than the valuables offered. But he began a perfunctory examination of them. The while, the girl’s gaze encompassed the bent, black figure inside the rail. With an unsmothered exclamation, she started forward, then stopped short.

“*Jane—not really?*” she cried. “Did he send for you, too? And how did you happen—to come—in costume? I think when you were getting up this party you *might* have invited me. You know I *dote* on fancy-dress almost as much as police courts.”

Jane came slowly through the gate and straightened before her young relative.

“The ‘party’ was quite impromptu,” she said, pushing back her bonnet to show a smile more grave than gay. “It was I who sent for you, not Mr. Pape. Part of the bail is for me. You see, dear, I am arrested, too.”

“Arrested—*you?* I guess I don’t understand. How does it come that you are here when you’re visiting the Giffords in Southampton? And how in the world did you and Why-Not-You two were hauled up—*together?*”

Her final utterance was in a tone fictionally describable as “tinged by the bitterness of despair.”

As Jane seemed disinclined to explain, Pape tried to ease the moment. “We happened to meet near the Maine Monument. I was out for—for exercise, you see. Your cousin here showed me some new ways of getting the same.”

“Sure, blame it on her, Adam,” Pudge O’Shay made grumpy interposition. “Remember, though, that this ain’t the first evening I’ve caught you trying new ways of exercising in the park.”

Jane turned toward the sergeant. “Can’t we settle about the bail and be off, sir?”

He coughed, bent for a moment’s scribbling; made answer direct to Irene.

“Here’s a receipt for your jewelry, miss. I’ll take a chance on its value. While I don’t congratulate anybody on getting pinched, I’m glad that your friends, if they must cut capers, have you to help them out. Thank you for breezing into this gloomy old place.”

“Good for you, you nice old barking dog that don’t bite!” enthused the girl. “I *thought* you weren’t half as cross as you look. I don’t know what my friends have done to get the law down on them, but I *do* believe in their innocence of motive and so may you. My cousin is the stormy petrel sort, with the best intentions in the world, but *always* getting herself and others into trouble. And Why-Not Pape—He’s just from the West, you know, and I haven’t had time yet to teach him how to behave in a city. In a way you have done me a favor in pinching them, as you so cleverly put it. It is *something* for a true woman to be given the

opportunity to show by her actions just how much she—You get what I mean, don't you—or *do* you?"

Others in the room got it rather more forcefully than he. Pape suppressed a groan at the flush which had blotted the pallor of Jane's face. Fast though he had worked, this infant fiend worked faster. Hard though he had tried, she had upset all his gains with a laugh and a sigh. Desperate though he felt to protest her claim on him, the fact that she claimed him discounted any protestation he might make. His West had schooled him in deeds, not words. By deeds he would—he *must* prove the truth.

Characteristically Irene rewarded Adonis Moore. He was a "dear" of a horse cop and wore his uniform just "scrumptiously." He must keep an eye out for her when next she rode over park bridle-paths. She thanked him for her friends, therefore for her. It was these acts of simple human kindness that made the world worth while. Didn't he agree with her—or *did* he? She only hoped that others were as appreciative of *her* efforts as was she of his.

Even for Pudge O'Shay, whose case it was, she had a cordial *au revoir*. She had noticed from first glance that he looked worried. But he mustn't worry, not one tiny bit. Worry made one thin and he had such an imposing appearance—so official—just as he was. He must rely on her. Surely he could—or *couldn't* he? She had taken the case in hand now and would return the two out-on-bails to court if she had to carry them. He was merely loaning them to her over night. Wouldn't he try to remember that?

"Good-night, you nice persons, one and all!"

She shook hands with the uniformed three before attaching herself, dangle-wise, to Pape's weak right arm.

"Come along, crooks," she advised the "pinched" pair cheerfully. "This paper declares me your custodian—says it will cost me the family jools not to produce you in court at ten of to-morrow morn. No matter how guilty you be or be not, I shall produce!"

CHAPTER XIX—TEN OF TO-MORROW MORN

Not until the police court arraignment, held shortly after the prescribed hour next morning, had Peter Pape been impressed by the personality and power of ex-Judge Samuel Allen. Pinkish were the little jurist's cheeks, modest his mustaches and by no means commanding his chubby, under-height figure. Yet at that bar of "justice" in the magistrate's court, he had proved a powerful ally.

Mrs. Sturgis' first act after Irene's return home with her out-on-bails the evening before had been to send for the judge. He had pointed that the truth must not come out in open court—that the romance of a new search for Granddad Lauderdale's mysterious legacy would be seized upon by reporters and given undesirable newspaper publicity. Personally, he appeared more amused by the escapade than shocked, as was the matron, and had refused to take it seriously for a moment. He had undertaken to fix things along the lines of "silence, secrecy and suppression" if the two culprits would promise to go and sin no more.

And with a neatness and dispatch that made his nondescript looks and mild manner seem a disguise, he had made good his promise. The complicity of Miss Jane Lauderdale had been dismissed in a whisper and a wave of the hand. Caught at digging in sacred ground on a bet, her companion's case was only one more illustration of the efficiency of the park police. This plea, to the utter astonishment of Peter Pape, had been briefly outlined by the jurist and a fine of ten dollars set. A word from the magistrate had persuaded the press representative present to crumple his sheet of notes and promise not even a brevity of a case which, less expertly suppressed, would have been worth headlines. By the magic of political affiliations between attorney and magistrate, Irene was returned the ransom jewelry and her two prisoners were freed.

Not until the chief culprit found himself standing alone on the curb before the antiquated court-house did he appreciate the serious consequences to himself of the contretemps. The two girls, with whom he had not accomplished a single word aside, had just driven off in Judge Allen's soft-sired car. He had not been offered a lift, not even by Irene. As for Jane, she had given no sign of recognizing his existence beyond her two rather abstracted nods of "good-morning" and "good-by." Until now he had tried to ascribe this manner to her idea of propriety in court proceedings, as also Irene's mercifully subdued air. That both should desert him the moment they were free was enough of a shock to hold him on the spot, pondering. The cut had been unanimous, as though foreplanned. So smoothly had it seemed to sever all connection between them that he did not realize it until staring after the numerals on the tail-plate of the automobile.

She had "quit him cold," his self-selected lady. True, she had done so several times before. But it mattered more now. He had declared his fealty; to some extent, had proved it; had hoped that he was gaining in her esteem. Now he was dropped, like a superfluous cat, in a strange alley. He felt as flattened-out as the

cement of the pavement on which he stood. Into it, through the soles of his boots, his heart seemed to sink from its weight ... down ... down.

But as his heart sank, his mind rose in a malediction strong as his pulse was weak:

“To hell with the perquisites of our young ladies of to-day! Do I say so—or *don't I?*”

His plans for the morning, which had included a start at that “round and round” stroll in search of four poplars within earshot of the park menagerie, were scrambled as had been his breakfast eggs. Not even the shell of a plan was left. The divine triumvirate was reduced to its original separateness—a blind father over in the East Side yellow brick, a daughter luxuriously ensconced on the avenue, a Western stray-about-town, lonely and alone.

And the worst of it was that he could not see just how to right himself; could not blame Jane any more than Irene or himself. Loyalty was a thing to live, not to talk about. After his statements to Jane, both direct and through her father, he looked, in the light of cousinly disclosures, an arrant philanderer—the sort of man who was willing, in Montana sport parlance, “to play both ends against the middle.”

The tongue of the bobbed-haired youngling had run according to form. Her belief in her own desirability had put him at a serious disadvantage. He could not follow the cousins, demand a hearing and assert unmanfully that he didn't love the one who said he did, but did love her who now believed that he did not.

Just as a peach was as much the down on its cheek as the pit, the response he craved from Jane must have a delicate, adhering confidence over its heart and soul. If she did not know the one-woman-ness of his feeling for her, then the time had not come to tell her. He wouldn't have wished to talk her into caring for him, even were he given to verbal suasion. Trust was not a thing to be added afterward. It must be component, delicate, adhering—part of the peach. She did—she must already trust him. But she must have her own time for realization.

As for Irene, he'd have to boomerang the extravagant utterances and acts of that perquisitory young admirer back to their source as little like a cad as possible. He felt sure she would not have seized on him had she known the havoc she wrought. She must not be unduly humiliated.

If only folks were wholly good or wholly bad, therefore deserving of absolute punishment or absolute reward as in the movies, life and its living would be less of a strain. So philosophized Peter Pape. If, for instance, Jane were a perfect heroine, she would have loved and trusted him at first sight, as he had her. If he were a *reel* hero, either caveman or domesticated, he'd have conquered her by brawn or brain long ere this pitiable pass. Mills Harford, as rival, would have been ulteriorly and interiorly bad, rather than a likeable, fine chap much

more worthy the girl, no doubt, than himself. Judge Allen, as builder of barriers between them, should be a long-nosed, hard-voiced, scintillating personage, instead of the rosy, round, restrained little man he was. And “the young lady of to-day”—There would be needed a long explanatory sub-title between a close-up of that guilelessly guilty, tender torment and one of her prototype, the histrionic, hectic vamp of yesteryear.

Still stationed on the curb, Pape gained strength from these theories to advance into consideration of his most effective and immediate course toward the end of his present adventure. He had decided that he must continue his attempt to serve in the disintegrated triumvirate, that he must again force his presence upon Jane if she did not send for him soon, that he must fail absolutely to recognize the insidious claims of Irene, when he became conscious of the purring approach of a sport car. On hearing himself hailed by name, he looked up and saw that the man behind the wheel was Mills Harford.

“Have they come or gone?” the real-estater asked.

“Both.” Pape’s mind still was somewhat afield.

“Just my luck to be too late. Mrs. Sturgis might have ’phoned me sooner. Seems to me I should have been sent for first, whatever the scrape. Tell me, she got off all right—Miss Lauderdale?”

“Why not?” Pape nodded, his mental eye upon the good and bad in this rival to whom the baby vamp in the cast had erroneously assigned the successful suitor rôle. “We both are loose,” he added. “She got off scot-free and I, fortunately, was able to pay my fine. Mr. Allen fixed everything. He’s a capable somebody, the judge, a valuable acquaintance for anybody restricted to life in an overgrown town like N’ York. He has a new client if anything else happens to me.”

At these assorted remarks Harford’s manner changed. The concern on his handsome face made way for a positive glare as he leaned over the side of the car toward his informant.

“Can’t say I’m greatly concerned in what may or may not happen to you in the near or far future, Pape, but I’ll contribute gratis a word or two of advice. Remember that you are in the semi-civilization of N’ York Town, not the wild and woolly. Be a bit more careful.”

“Ain’t used to being careful for my own sake.” The Westerner all at once felt inspired that the occasion was one for a show of good-cheer. “Like as not, though, I’d better take your advices to heart, especially as they’re gratis, for the sake of my friends and playmates.”

Harford snapped him up. “At any rate, in the future don’t involve women. If you must run amuck, run it and muck it alone. If you make any more disturbance around Miss Lauderdale, you’ll hear from me.”

Now, this sounded more like “legitimate” than the movies. The potential

villain's sneer and tone of superiority brought out the regular impulses of a hero like a rash on Pape. Only with effort did he guard his tongue.

"Wouldn't take any bets on my being in a listening mood, Harfy," he made remark.

"You'll listen to what I have to say, I guess, mood or no mood," Harford continued. "Your debut into a circle where you never can belong was amusing at first. But any joke may be overplayed. This one is getting too tiresome to be practical. I've tried to keep to myself what I think about an oil-stock shark like you catapulting himself into such a family as the Sturgis', but if you want me to illustrate—"

He had slid over on the seat from behind the steering wheel. Now he half rose, his hand upon the latch of the car door, as though about to descend to the pavement. But he did not turn the handle.

With synchronous movements Pape stepped to the running board, clapped two heavy hands upon the real-estater's immaculately tailored shoulders and sat his would-be social mentor down upon the seat with what must have been a tooth-toddling jar. That mention of oil stock had been several syllables too many in strictures to which he was not accustomed.

Only Jane and Curtis Lauderdale had direct knowledge of his wrong-righting mission to the East and they, he felt certain, had not spoken with Harford since he with them. The question was pertinent how this handsome, fiery-pated young metropolitan, so frankly and unexpectedly showing himself as an out-and-out enemy, had happened on the connection. To wring the facts out of him then and there would have been a treat. Yet neither the time nor set was propitious for measures as drastic as their slump to type in character and motivation made imminent.

"Having just been before the august court, I ain't homesick to return," Pape said, easing, but not foregoing his shoulder hold. "So if you'll just postpone that illustration until a more suitable time and place for me to illustrate back what I think of your dam' impudence, I won't get hauled in again and you hauled out of a reg'lar back-home bashing up."

By way of agreement, Harford threw off his hold and moved across the seat. That he made no further effort to leave the car did not deceive Pape as to his courage or capacity. His coloring bespoke a temper of fierce impulses and physically he looked fit, a few pounds heavy, but strong-framed and plastered with muscles.

Pape dismissed the present opportunity by stepping back to the pavement. "Let's hope our trails will cross soon in a get-together place. I'm mighty interested in oil stock and I've got to get exercise somehow."

"Where did the others go from here?" Harford enquired, with an abrupt

resumption of his accustomed *savoir-faire*.

“Heard the judge say ‘Home, James’ to his chauffeur”—Pape, adaptably. “I wouldn’t have been here to answer your questions if he hadn’t plumb forgot to ask me to climb aboard.”

The forward movement of the sport car made safe Harford’s back-thrown jibe:

“He didn’t forget, Pape. He *remembered* not to ask you to ride. It’s been a generation since Judge Allen has appeared in police court. He’s through with you, as are the rest of us.”

“Oh, no, he ain’t,” the ranchman called after the car, with what outward cheer he could exact from his inner confidence. “He’s only begun with me—he and the rest of you.”

In retrospect the maliciousness of the rich real-estater’s snub gained upon him. So he was not and never could be of their sort—was a social ineligible!

He didn’t feel that way. In blood, brain and brawn he always had considered himself anybody’s equal. And what else mattered in the make-up of he-man? He owed it to the expanses from which he had come—limitless space, freedom of winds, resource to feed the world—to show Harfy, the Sturgises and even the Lauderdalees just what, from what and toward what he was headed. He owed it to the graduate school of the Great West to prove the manliness of its alumni. He owed it to all the past Peter Stansburys and Papes who had done and dared to demonstrate that the last of the two lines had inherited some degree of their courage, good-faith and initiative. Before to-day he had been asked as to his family tree. He must show these Back Easters some symbol of the myriad horsepower of the roof of the continent, a share in which had strengthened him to defy difficulty and command success. Why should he? For certain he wouldn’t be Why-Not Pape if he let them twit him twice! He’d show them—by some sign, he’d show them that he, too, was born to an escutcheon rampant!

As he started toward Lexington Avenue and a disengaged taxi, he searched the sea of resource for the likeliest channel through which to bring his promise-threat into port and the anchorage of accomplishment.

CHAPTER XX—ONE LIVELY ESCUTCHEON

Interrogatory argument had forced most answers in Pape's career. Now two of a pertinent order forced an italicized third which, under limitations of the moment, was unanswerable.

Why delay a reappearance before his self-selected lady?

By way of excuse, why not realize on that well-bred dare of Aunt Helene—why not make good on his agreement to match the Sturgis coat-of-arms with that of the house of Pape?

After which, what?

Even more alive than was he must his escutcheon be. Just how dynamically alive, he'd be able soon to demonstrate, unless the West Shore Railroad's fast freight from Chicago had met with delay. He'd ask no recourse to the weighty tomes of ancient history or the public library's genealogical records. His showing must be more representative of the last of the line than that and up to the second.

The flags of all the taxis he sighted were furled for earlier fares, but a flat-wheeled Fifty-ninth Street surface car bore him cross-town. The checker at the door of Polkadot's palatial boarding-house further taxed his time.

"Gent here asking for you, Mr. Pape, not more than half hour ago.... No, he wasn't small or sharp-faced—not partic'aler so. No, he didn't have no cauliflower ear. What I did notice was his wat'ry voice and what might pass for a mustache if you had magnifying eyes.... Said he'd just stick around."

So! His trailer of the moment was neither Welch nor Duffy, but the youth of the slightly adorned lip. The nature of that small matter of business which had brought him to the Astor last evening might better remain a mystery since mysteries were the order of the day and attempted solutions were likely to land one before a magistrate.

Pape hurried into the stable and the whinnied greeting of his three-hued best friend. His change into riding clothes took no more time than was needed by the groom to put Polkadot into his leather. He was riding out the main "gate," his mind upon the plan that had come with the speed of inspiration, when—

"Pardon my persistence, Mr. Pape, but that's what I'm hired for."

He had "stuck around," the thin-voiced, thin-mustached, thin-visaged weakling; was blocking the exit; now incensed Dot by a curbing hand on the bridle rein.

Hurriedly Pape considered whether to jump the horse past the human barrier or to temporize. Fearing delay from more entanglement in the city's red tape, he made an overture.

"If persistence is what you're hired for, how much to give up?"

"To give up—just what?"

"Whatever you're hired to run me down for. At that it looks to me as if you were working on the wrong job."

The youth straightened with some show of self-respect. "Right or wrong it's regular—a steady job for life if I do my part."

"For life?" Pape snorted. "You don't mean to say you're going to persist after me *for life*?"

"Until you come across, sir—"

"You trying to pull a polite hold-up? I'll ride over your remains, son, if you don't drop that bridle and let me—"

"Until you pay what you owe, I mean."

Pape tweaked a sunburned ear in puzzling the thickened plot. "Haven't I said I was more than willing to pay you—"

"Pay the company, not me, Mr. Pape."

"The com—What company?"

"The New York Edison Company."

Indignantly the Westerner stared down into the vacuous face of this latest impediment to progress.

"You're an agent for—for phonographs?" he guessed. "Sorry, but I've got more of those sing-tanks around home than I can spare ears to hear 'em. Lay off my horse! You can't sell me anything this afternoon."

"B-but, wait a minute!" The Edison emissary continued to earn his salary by the way he hung on. "You've already bought all I'm asking you to pay for. Unless it's inconvenient—if you'd only take a minute off and settle—"

"Inconvenient—*unless*?" Pape was beginning to fear a loss of self-control.

Polkadot was equally vociferous, if less intelligible, for he detested alien hands upon his harness.

Pushing back his stirrups, Pape leaned over the horn of his saddle to demand: "Say, do I look like a dodo that was just loafing around for a chance chat with a persistency specialist like you? Now you tell me in not more than one short word what you want me to settle for or I'll—"

"Juice," interrupted the mild-mannered youth, obedient to the syllable.

"Juice?" As though a button had been pushed, light flooded Pape's mind. He straightened, began to laugh, then stopped again to query the collector. "So you're from— So they sent you to— So *that's* why—"

His pause was to tickle Polkadot's back-wagging ears—to share that responsive pal's quiver of mirth. When again able to articulate—

"How much? Let's see your persistency passport, if you brought one. Humph! Not much to waste all this two-man time for. Say, you go back and tell your skimpy electro-factory that you persisted just long enough to prevent my making an attack in force upon their main office."

"An attack—why?" the youth asked gently.

"*Why not?*" demanded Pape. "Maybe you can tell me why all the current

is running to Goldfish Movie and Yutu Corset signs—why last night at 7:15 they were blazing and not a letter of Welcome-To-Our-City was lit, nor a rose of my wreath blooming for me! If they call that service—”

“You can’t have service without paying the bills, Mr. Pape. Just what I was trying to tell you at your hotel last evening. Your sign burns up credit, I tell you. It won’t light up another night until—”

“Until I fuel up, eh?” Already Pape had pulled from pocket a wallet fat with bills freshly parked for ransom against any possible expense of New York justice. “This will cover the bill with a couple of centuries in advance for a few days future service. Express my apologies to Mr. Edison. Explain that the reason you couldn’t make me dig up last night was because I had an engagement to dig down. You might add that it was with some one to whom the welcome sign had made me welcome. You can say for me that my career since he howdy-dooded me in watts and kilowatts would make a live-wire ad. for the concern. The facts ain’t ready for rose-wreathed publicity yet—not yet awhile—but they would turn the president of a gas company into an enthusiastic rooter for electric signs.”

Pape chuckled from more than appreciation of his own pithy remarks—with more than satisfaction at overly paying an over-due bill, as he waved a hand in cordial *au revoir* and started out the stable. He considered this elimination of his eye-brow mustached caller—the out-speeding of his third shadow, so to say—a good omen. With like conclusiveness would he in time dispose of the tack-faced Welch and Duffy of the vegetable ear, not to mention any foes unidentified as yet, such as the ring-leader of the plot against the Lauderdales and his own quarry in Gotham’s underbrush, that promoter of Montana Gusher oil stock.

He felt convinced that luck again was with him when, at the end of his ride to the wharf-studded bank of the Hudson River, he found that for once the West Shore Road had not disappointed a consignee. In one of the high-fenced, unroofed pens of a wholesale butcher stood twenty-five or thirty sleek steers, red spotted with white, upon the rump of each the interrogation brand of the Queer Question Ranch.

The range smell of the beasts caused Dot’s nostrils to quiver from delight over the reminder of home; caused his hind-hoofs to polka about the yard and his fore to lift in a proffered horseshoe shake to the beef handlers, one and all. And Pape himself felt hugely pleased over the showing of his product in this “foreign” market, for which they had been bred and fed.

Dissatisfied with the returns from shipments to the established stock-yards of the Middle West—those of Chicago, Kansas City and Omaha having proved in turn equally deficient—he had conceived a plan of shipping direct by fast freight to the seaboard Metropolis. His hopes were based upon New York’s reputation of paying for its luxuries and the fact that absolutely fresh beef was a luxury.

He soon had found an eager distributor and there promised to be no lack of consumers who were able and willing to pay. In time he hoped to gain for "Montana beef" as ambitious a place on high-class menus as that so long and honorably held by "Virginia ham," "Vermont maple syrup," "Philadelphia squab" or "Long Island duckling."

At the moment, however, his interest was not centered in the commercial origin of the project; rather, in "showing" the town, inclusive of one particularly jealous gentleman snob. From the foreman of the yard he borrowed the services of a couple of transplanted punchers who looked efficient and to whom he confided the nature of an impromptu act. Personally he selected and cut-out of the bunch its finest specimen—a huge red steer with wide-flung horns, whose Queer Question brand was distinctly burned.

Polkadot, a-quiver from the exercise so remindful of home, was all capers, grins and hee-haws by the end of the task. The yard employees, turned rail-birds for the nonce, were vociferous in their applause over the skill of man and mount. Only the steer showed irritation.

"Not a bad idea," observed the foreman to Pape. "Bold, but not bad at all—this eat-ad. of beef on the hoof."

The Westerner stared at him a moment, then decided to let the surmise stand. These metropolitan cowboys scarcely would appreciate the importance of the purpose to which he meant to put the brute, even did he care to explain. Under his direction the two punchers "hung their strings" about the horns of the elect, one on either side. His own rope he neatly attached to the left hind hoof, to act as a brake in case of an attempted stampede. The small procession got under way.

Although at the start their pace was no more than that of a reasonably brisk funeral procession, they attracted the attention of the West Side youngsters, to whom they appeared to have much of the interest of a circus parade. At once, as if a growth sprung from asphalt and cobblestone fields, a veritable swarm of under-fifteens surrounded the outfit. Well it was for these embryonic rooters of the ward that Polkadot disdained to use his dancing feet for anything so *gauche* as kicks, for they banked about his rear-guard position, in order the more intimately to admire his color splotches and prancy step, and even took drag-holds upon his silken tail, as well as Pape's stirrups, that they might not fall behind.

"Taking him to a bull fight, mister?"

The question was variously couched, but unanimously excited.

Except for this darting, swooping, whooping escort, the early advance of Pape's escutcheon toward Fifth Avenue was accomplished without undue excitement. At Columbus Circle, however, the roving "wall" eyes of the beef-brute sighted the green of South Meadow. Doubtless its appetite was hurting for fresh

grass after the long journey on cured food, his brain confused by the blur of strange sights and sounds, his muscles aching for the Montana-wide freedom so suddenly curtailed at the gate of a cow-town shipping pen.

Whether actuated by one or all of these impulses, or merely moved by inherent wildness, the red executed a flank movement that had nothing to do with steak. In terms of action he showed a desperate desire to throw off his rope shackles and bolt into Central Park. The press of vehicular traffic aided him by hampering his guard. Could they have spread out triangularly, they might have held him helpless. An attempted swerve tangled the puncher on the left in his own rope and forced him to dismount to save himself a spill. He on the right was prevented from closing in by regard for the young lives and limbs of their admirers.

Relieved of the three-ply pressure, the steer essayed a headdown rush to accept the gift of the grass. This soon was tautened into a three-legged run, through Pape's hoof-hold from behind. At that, the captive had the over-plus of power and might easily have controlled their course except for ramming into a street car which had slowed down that the motor man might enjoy the show. In the moment in which he stood stunned, the unhorsed puncher regained his rope and saddle, his fellow cleared a way and Pape quit his drag from the rear. The steer stampede in Manhattan's heart was under control. The lively Pape escutcheon again was headed toward its destination.

In front of the Sturgis house a groom was holding three saddlers. Pape's wonder as to who might be riding with whom was answered. Scarcely had he and his aides stopped his hoofed exhibit when Jane Lauderdale, in a crisp gray riding suit, appeared from the vestibule. She was followed by Irene and Mills Harford. The trio stood at the top of the stone flight and gaped with sheer amazement at the unexpected delegation.

Irene was first to recover her sangfroid, probably because endowed with an excess of that quality.

"Only look who's here!" was her lilt of greeting as she clattered down the steps. "The possible person back again and— *How* in the world did you suspect, Why-Not, that I am keen about cows? This specimen is a perfect dar-rling. I could just hug her to death."

"You could that—to your own death. Look out. Don't come closer than the curb."

With the warning, Pape threw a snake-like wriggle into his rope which loosened its noose-hold upon the hoof of the seemingly subdued steer. Coiling it upon his saddle horn, he swung to the asphalt and saluted her, army fashion.

Jane, from a stand halfway down the steps, added only the inquiry of her eyes.

Harford it was who strode forward with demand. "What's the big idea, Pape? You trying to make a spectacle of us for the benefit of the neighbors?"

Pape answered them inclusively. "No pet cow knocks at your gates, but a steer rounded up and cut-out at Mrs. Sturgis' request. Is the lady in?"

"Aunt Helene? Impossible!"—Jane, with a gasp for exclamation point.

"Ignore the practical joker," urged Harford. "Let's leave him to do his ridiculous worst and go on with our ride."

Ignore him, eh? The word interested the Westerner. That was what he had decided to do to the claims of Irene. But one attempt promised to be about as successful as the other to judge by the clutch of resentment within him and the clutch of that young woman's fingers upon his arm. He faced another moment when heart's ease and fate hung upon a thread of most uncertain feminine spin.

CHAPTER XXI—IGNORING IRENE

In her self-sufficient egoism Irene Sturgis had no mercy. She continued to ravel the thread.

"At times, dar-rling, you get too terribly eccentric for even me to—to swallow." She gulped at the midway modified metaphor. "If you'd sent me a bunch of orchids now, by way of suggesting your gratitude for last night's rescue from limbo, or if you'd brought around a pinkie ring with a birthstone set—diamonds are for April, you know—which mother *might* let me keep if I coaxed her and explained how it humiliates me always to be borrowing jewelry—I'd not have lifted a questioning lash. But to steer up a ton of beef—"

She paused to survey again the bulk of his assumed gift, but not long enough for successful interruption. "Still, one shouldn't look a gift-cow in the mouth, I suppose. What does one feed her—him, Why-Not, and where will it sleep? His eyes are so wild, poor pretty, she looks as if it hadn't had a good night in a week. Nice moo-moo—nice bossy!"

Despite her liberty with genders, none of her hearers failed to grasp her meaning.

"Irene" Harford interposed, "have you forgotten what your mother told you

to do—rather not to do—regarding—”

His stern tone made the acquisitive little creature’s fingers tighten on Pape’s arm; also made him lean toward her with the sympathy of a shared resentment. So the family had settled it in council—at Harford’s suggestion, doubtless—that Irene, as well as Jane, must cut the Montana ineligible.

His shoulders shrugged for a bit of ignoring on his own account and his speech was all for Irene. “The critter’s too hoofed to take in to your mother, but if you’d ask her to come out on the steps—”

“Aren’t you too *cute*?” the girl enthused. “I’ve heard about old-time, old-country suitors listing their oxen and asses when asking their lady-love’s hand. I *hope* mother will get the thought back of the deed. She’s got to, even if she don’t. She’ll be startled to small bits, but I’ll drag her out and—”

Her hand slid up to his shoulder and she stood on tip-toe to confide hurriedly: “It’s all right, their telling me what not to do. When it comes to you, Peter dar-rling, I *know* what to do. Fortunately I have the courage of my corpuscles and I’m almost as keen about your cow as I am about—”

Before Pape suspected her intention, so all too unaccustomed was he to demonstrations of such sort, she had pressed her ripe-rouged lips against his paling own in a kiss that spoke the perquisitory passion of one young lady of to-day.

Ignore Irene? Not any more than certain other somebodies should ignore him!

As she darted off, he felt moved by the initiative of desperation toward one of the witnesses. He anchored Polkadot by dropping the reins over his head; strode toward the foot of the steps where Jane was leaning against the balustrade; lifted a look straight as a board to hers. Despite the expression of repose-at-all-costs so becoming to her perfect features, despite the frank scowl of the more favored suitor standing literally and figuratively on the same level with her, he spoke from the heart.

“Jane,” said he, “everything I have and everything I am are at your service.”

“Steer and all?” She put the question in a curiously unimpassioned voice that made him ache with its reproach.

“Steer and all—you’ll see,” he declared. “You can’t afford to doubt me, any more than I could afford to doubt the power that beast represents. Look at me with your own eyes and you’ll see that I am as incapable as the red of deceit or double-dealing toward you. Trust me, unless—You don’t *want* to doubt me, do you, Jane?”

Evidently Mrs. Sturgis was not accustomed to being dragged out on the pavement fronting her town house—at any rate not in negligée. The protests which bubbled from her lips and spilled down the steps with this latest caprice

of her daughter, however, were of no avail. Irene had a firm grip on her arm and defied any attempt to assert maternal authority with a cluster of long-stemmed red roses which she brandished in her free hand.

Although Jane's lips had moved twice, as if from desire to make Pape some reply, she was deterred by the outburst from above. He, too, turned to meet the new issue, in this case a conventional matron forced to behave in an unconventional way. Her several glances were directed down at the steer, up at the windows of such fashionable neighbors as might or might not be peering through front blinds, across into the easy, amiable grin of the Westerner voted to be too "wild" in recent family council. Her attempt to discountenance him with a stony stare combined rather pitifully with the outraged decorum and flush of fright on her face.

"Mr. Pape, w-what does this m-menagerie mean?"

"It means, madame—" with his sombrero Pape dusted a section of the pavement cement in his bow—"that I have the honor of fulfilling your urgent request. In yonder bovine I present for your inspection a copy of the Stansbury-Pape escutcheon—verily the fruit of my family tree. I trust he may meet with your approval as a genealogical guarantee."

"But Irene said—I must say that I—I don't understand."

"Ma'am, Irene herself doesn't understand, therefore cannot explain. Pray allow *me* to elucidate."

He included the rest as hearers by a mandatory glance, all except the perquisitory person. She was sidling, fascinated, toward what was to her the latest in love tokens.

Drops of curiosity were wearing away the stone of the matron's stare.

"By bovine—it's so long since I studied Latin—are you referring to that wicked-looking cow, young man?" she demanded.

"He don't look feline or canine or even equine—I ask you, does he, now?" Pape waved a prideful hand toward his fellow Montanan. "You enquired if I had a coat-of-arms. You remember? You seem to set store on the insignia of a fellow's who, whence and whither. Yonder steer, ma'am, wears my escutcheon."

"Wears it? I—I don't seem to *begin* to understand you."

"Then it is well that I am here to help you understand. Your necessity is my opportunity." Pape thoroughly dusted another block of cement. "Note, if you please, the interrogation mark burned into the hair of the red's right rump and the odd angle at which it is placed. That is the shield of the house of Pape."

Whether at his words or the hand on her elbow which was inviting her closer to the hang-head exhibit in the street, Mrs. Sturgis laughed with a nervous note.

"But that is absurd! A question-mark a shield?"

“Pardon me—no more absurd than any new idea before demonstration.”

All whimsicality disappeared in the serious set of the Westerner’s face. He straightened; demanded Jane Lauderdale’s attention with a look; continued:

“To take nothing for granted, but to question everything has become my shield. With it before me, the fights I find necessary are forewon. Nobody can take me by surprise or press through my guard. Nothing—positively nothing that I want is impossible to obtain.”

This rather extravagant sounding claim Harford contested—Pape had hoped he would, while fearing he wouldn’t.

“Dear me,” he exclaimed, “you seem to be a sort of natural-born New Thoughter.”

“Not born—*made*.” The ranchman’s look slashed through the space between him and the Gothamite. “Out in Montana, Harfy, that escutcheon means a lot—to stock rustlers and brand-blotters and oil share fakers. Make a note of the fact that Why-Not Pape queer-questions every man that gets in his way. Few—and I don’t think you—can answer straight.”

“You don’t think—You take that back, you ill-bred bounder or I’ll—I’ll—”

With a spring from step to pavement, Harford squared off to make good his unfinished threat. His face and eyes went as red as his hair. His fingers tightened as if to the curve of a throat.

Pape met him with a well-pleased look.

Forgetful of the metropolitan scene, of those possible eyes and eyes of behind-shutter neighbors and of the fears of their own fair, the two closed in that desire-to-conquer conflict which, from primordial times through the hazy stretch of days-after-to-morrows-and-morrows, ever has been and ever shall be the lust of love. There was no preliminary feinting. From its start the fight promised to go the limit which, in this case, would be the finish.

A suppressed shriek escaped Mrs. Sturgis, then she rushed to her niece and demanded that the two be separated and the scandal of a street brawl before her house averted. Jane did not answer in words, but she threw off the clutch with which her relative was both urging and staying her, and started toward the passion-flaring pair.

Denied his throat hold by queer-question tactics, Harford settled back to a slugging match in which his heavier weight might lend him an advantage. Again, as on the park butte-top in a recent electric-lighted mill, Pape adopted grizzly form.

If any one of the excited group heard, none attended certain regardless utterances with which Irene, the while, had been wooing to win her glare-eyed gift of gratitude. Poised daintily on the curb’s edge, she was endeavoring to regale the steer with a whiff of the long-stemmed red roses which she had brought from

the house.

“Here bossy, poor old bossy, see what Rene has brought out for you. My *nice* moo-moo. Oh, don’t shake your horns! Why not enjoy the little things in life while you may? C’mon, have a sniff on me!”

Leaning far out, she continued to tease his nostrils with her offering as the two punchers steadied the beast with remindful pulls upon the “strings” which they had about his horns.

“Sook, bossy! That’s cow language, if you get me. You’re an absolute *darling* and I know it. You can’t scare me off with those mean glances. Understand me, I like ’em fierce. The fiercer the fonder.”

Now, it is highly improbable that the beef-brute took her dare or even grasped a word of it; more likely that the fresh scent of the roses rewoke his longing for what he had smelled and striven toward and failed to attain on his first whiff of Central Park. Or perhaps their color was wholly responsible—perhaps it acted as a red flag upon inherited bull instincts.

At any rate, the Stansbury-Pape escutcheon threw up his part with a violent coördination of horns, head and heels. And he let out a bawl that announced to the humans about him and their neighbors all his return in spirit to the wild. The tumult of the moment opened with a wild-eyed charge upon the nearer of the attendant punchers. So sudden was this that it could not be avoided—both mount and man “bit” the asphalt. In falling, the unfortunate had sufficient presence of mind to throw off the hitch of rope about his saddle horn and save himself being burned in the tangle of hemp.

Half free, the red torpedo started in ponderous pursuit of a Fire Department runabout that chanced at the moment to clang a right-of-way for him up the avenue. The puncher still attached braced his cayuse to throw the steer when the slack of his rope was taken up. This proved a tactical error. While he did not over-rate the strength and willingness of his mount, he did that of the lariat. At the severance of its strands, the reddest wearer of the Queer Question Brand was quite free and going strong in the general direction of Harlem. The trailing length of one rope and fragment of the other seemed to urge him into increased efforts to outrun them. His head held high. His horns tossed threateningly. His nostrils snorted acceptance of the invitation of the grass.

At the beginning of the steer’s initiative the issue of East vs. West had been unanimously postponed. Pape had sprung to his thrown aide, dragged him from under the floundering horse and made sure that the leg which had been caught was not seriously injured.

“Jane—Mrs. Sturgis, won’t you—”

His appeal to the New Yorkers, started in words and finished in gesture, consigned the man injured within their gates—had they had any gates—to their

mercy. Ordering the puncher of the tactical error to follow, he lofted into his own saddle and was off in pursuit of his imported beef on the hoof.

Scarcely three minutes later—certainly not more—Mrs. Helene Sturgis stood deserted upon her front steps, staring up the world-famed highway after the strangest chase which she, at least, had witnessed in its history. She was all a-tremble from the various and violent protests she had shrilled—to Jane, to Harfy, to Irene. Her hands were clutched together in remonstrance over what had been. Her face was drawn with terror over what was. Keen was her dread of what might be. A prairie steer scarcely could run amuck in the heart of New York without spreading more or less havoc. And the responsibility—would her own innocent child, through participation in the pursuit, be forced to share in that?

On the sidewalk below, the injured puncher was feeling his leg, the pain wincing his weathered face. She heard some one come out the door above.

“Jasper?”

“Yes, madame.”

She had the butler help the man into the house and herself followed up the steps. At the top she turned; shivered in the warm spring air; lifting hand to brow, again strained her gaze up the Avenue.

That her niece, whom she expected always to be dependable, should have caught the epidemic wildness of this Westerner—that Jane should have leaped her horse and started at top speed after him! And that Mills Harford, after following and overtaking her, should prove too afraid of her temper forcefully to stop her! Worst of all that her own Irene should join the disgraceful and dangerous street race and actually outrun the other two!

A hand against a heart heavy with foreboding the matron pressed as she looked.... The cow-creature—it was swerving from the straight-away.... Was it about to—Yes, it *did* clear the park wall at a bound.... The two hurdling after probably were Pape and the puncher. A mother’s hope that the next horse to top the hazard might be Jane’s died in a groan as she caught the red flash of the roses to which her daughter had clung through all the excitement of the start.... Would she land safely on the other side—this young lady of to-day who once had been her babe-at-breast?

Evidently Jane, too late to save the situation, but in good time to save herself a possible fall, had come into some degree of discretion. She and Mills were turning in at a convenient gate.

What was it the Why-Not person had said? “Nothing—positively nothing is impossible.”... Perhaps it would do no harm to go inside and pray. There was nothing else a woman of yesterday could do. It might help to bring them all back alive and unbroken as to bones. These modern young folks, what were they

coming to—more appropriately, where were they going?

CHAPTER XXII—BEEF ON THE HOOF

Often the entrances to Central Park had spanned a couple of thousand miles for Peter Pape and his “Friend Equus.” Now it seemed to do as much for the Montana bovine. In the expanses he sighted freedom. Off the spring breeze he breathed the joy of life. More riotously tossed his horns. Faster and harder pounded his hoofs in a fresh access of speed.

Through the early afternoon lull, his passage was terrifying, indeed. Slow-strollers and bench-warmers suddenly became animated into record retreat. Nursemaids shrieked as they trundled baby-carriages behind protecting tree trunks or snatched toddlers out of danger’s path. An equestrian pair who came cantering along took the nearest bank like chamois. Fortunate was it that the season and hour were not later, when the great, green melting-pot would have been brimful and possibilities of casualty greater.

So far, any interference along the way had served but to accelerate the steer’s stampede. The one pedestrian on the avenue who had dared seize the snake-writhing lariat that trailed from its unyielding horn-hold had been thrown to a fall on the oiled asphalt before he could snub the rope about a tree. A policeman on beat who had essayed the same feat farther along had let go in time to save himself a worse sprawl. Now the rope was suffering a rapid curtailment as it frayed against shrubs, trees and rocks.

When Polkadot had cleared the stone wall with inches to spare, landed lightly and gone on without losing a stride, Pape turned to wave orders for the transplanted cowboy to spread out. Not until another day did he understand the disappearance of his aide—that he lay stunned at the base of the wall where he had been thrown. Instead, he saw Irene Sturgis coming over the top.

A thrill caught him as she closed up with all the recklessness of a cow-girl—a thrill that forced forgiveness for all the heart-wrenching wrongs she had done him. A flashed thought of Jane brought both relief and regret. If only she, too, had leaped to saddle and followed him—had yielded to the impulse of interest

regained or never lost! Deeds, not words told the heart. He tried to be glad that she had thought first of herself, yet was sorry that he did not rank before the first in action's hour.

Polkadot's pace, however, soon outran vain regrets; caught up with hopes ahead. Through the scattered trees that fringe the park and across the bridle path led the steer. Down the asphalted roadway he pounded with such disregard of entitled traffic that drivers reached for their emergency brakes. A congestion of cars which forced Pape to pull up momentarily gave the runaway a gain upon his owner-pursuer. By the time egress was effected the big red had crossed the Mall and entered the meadow beyond.

As acre after acre of turf unrolled ahead, the too-live-stock loosened to the going. Pape put the pinto to an emulative gallop. Only a glance to one side did he spare when the shrill of a whistle located the fat figure of Pudge O'Shay, both hands and feet animated by a frenzy of outraged authority.

"No Queer Questioner stops for a quail—quit your tooting at us!" Pape shouted as, far from keeping "off the grass," he urged his mount to deeper digs and an appreciable increase of speed.

At sound of hoof-beats behind, he turned, thinking to reinstruct the puncher. Instead, he saw that Irene, luckier than he in crossing the road and Mall, was closing up. The red roses still clutched in her waving hand bespoke excitement's forgetfulness.

The steer changed his direction, although not at order of the jumping-jack in police blue. From the traverse road and out over the meadow directly toward the outlaw a second woman rider had dashed. A shout from behind her announced a male escort who followed, but could not detain her. Straight on she came, a slim streak of black and white that blent in the color of courage. And as she came, a single-syllabled cry from before greeted her—a salute from one man's heart of fear-full gratitude.

"Jane!"

Deeds, then, did speak for his self-selected one! The climacteric impulse of woman to follow her man, to do and dare for him, if need be to die with him had conquered her tutored calm in this emergency. The repose of her face was a mask. Her spirit now dared his own. Why? Why not? Thank God, *why not?*

The rider behind her was Mills Harford. That Pape had seen at second glance. But any hope of him as an active aide in recapturing the run-amuck was gainsaid by his efforts to get the girl out of the chase. He caught up with her, argued with her, tried himself to turn about her mount by force. Only at threat of her crop did he drop the grasped bridle rein.

Pape decided if possible to draft him into service against the bovine enemy. "Spread out and turn the steer!" he shouted across the meadow. "Head him

this way so I can rope him.”

Harford looked around as though he had heard. Then, instead of following directions, he rode full tilt after the beast, brandishing his hat and shouting in a manner calculated to continue the stampede.

Whether he had misunderstood through ignorance of range practice or was deliberately attempting to make more serious the predicament of one for whom he had that day shown such cordial dislike, Pape had no time to ponder. He swung Polkadot into an oblique course on the chance of preventing the runaway’s escape into that roughest cross-section of the park which begins just north of the Seventy-second-Street “parallel.”

The syncopated patter of hoofs just behind him told that Irene, too, had swerved and was carrying on. Ahead, Jane urged her mount after Harford and his ill-conceived move.

For several minutes the four-party pursuit pounded over the keep-off meadow, whose grass was being held in reserve against the hot waves of next summer, when it would be thrown open to furnish cool green couches for thousands of tenement swelterers. So unseemly was the interruption as to draw gapes of amazement from such onlookers as held the border walks and bellows of command from outraged policemen.

The pinto’s full-speed-ahead was reminiscent in terms of motion of Hell-roaring days and deeds. With full realization of what the man-master expected of him, he winged across intervening spaces like a compact tornado. Pape unlimbered his lariat for a throw calculated to bring down the red for hog-tying.

While passing Jane, he shouted an order that she pull up and keep out of the scrimmage likely to attend the fight’s finish. A dozen rods farther on and almost within rope reach, he called to Harford.

“Out of the way—I’m going to hang my string on him!”

“What’s that?”

The real-estater, who was showing superb riding form, turned in his saddle and leaned to listen, as though he had not heard. But he scarcely could have failed to see the noose over Pape’s head circling rounder and faster with his onward rush. His next move was unaccountable. As the Montanan’s rope slithered suddenly straight ahead from an aim calculated to pick up the steer’s hind hoof for a fall, the Gothamite spurred his mount and cut directly across it. The throw fell short, borne out of line by the body of Harford’s black thoroughbred. In the moment lost to free it from entanglement the steer took to the rocks with the agility of a mountain goat.

At last Pape whipped his gun from its under-coat holster. Infuriated by this second exhibition of what was either extreme stupidity or deliberate malice, he was tempted to throw down on the human rather than the splendid Queer

Question specimen, now well up the height, which he had wished to take alive.

But he did not press the trigger. Although a steer more or less was incidental in his life and cruelty to animals was not to be weighed in the same scales with the catastrophes possible in a continuance of the stampede, second thought had advised the improbability of inflicting a vital wound in that huge body with a revolver shot from the rear. Anything short of a *coup de grace* would serve only to increase potential dangers.

Through the untangling and winding of his rope the Westerner voiced no complaint of Harford's interference, but his face went chalk-white beneath its burn and his jaw set hard. His one direct glance read triumph in the New Yorker's grin and decided him to finish the battle begun on the Sturgis front steps whenever and wherever he could spare the time. Just now—

“Wait for me here—all of you,” he commanded the three.

Straightway he put Polkadot to the height.

There is an abruptness and complexity about the upheaval of primary rock marking the park's center that has been of advantage to renegades since that great playground's inception in the late 50's. Although lately most of the caves have been electric-lighted and railings placed on the more dangerous cliff-edge paths, there remain dribbling recesses and shadowy spaces between trap-rock boulders which suggest hide-outs. This physical condition now favored the Queer Question outlaw; enabled him to disappear from sight before Pape had resumed the chase.

The painted pony, used to rocky going about the borders of the home ranch, did not hesitate over essay of the goat trail into the park's rough heart taken by the red. In the upward scramble, his rider shifted weight in the saddle according to the conformation. Ultimately, if by devious ways, they gained the highest point in Manhattan's eight-hundred-forty acre “paradise”—the snub-nosed pinnacle that lies off Seventy-ninth Street.

Drawing rein, Pape rose in the stirrups and scanned the upturned region. From near to far, until his gaze encompassed the bench-studded walks and auto-crowded roadways on its skirts, he noted all details. So remindful of his own Yellowstone in physical features was this tamed wild-wood—and yet so different!

Within its comparatively cramped quarters more love—as that emotion is known to park-habitueés—than he had seen in the whole vast West was on display. The turfed stretches were safety-razored, rather than allowed to grow nature's full beards. The only furred creatures in evidence—except chipmunks and squirrels—were worn about the shoulders of fair bipeds instead of prowling on four feet, uncured, through the underbrush. From the steel framework of a new sky-scraper that rose like a fire-stripped forest on the east to the turreted peaks of a range of apartment houses on the west, the scene invited comparison in detail.

But Pape had no time for detail except the one of a live dash of sorrel. The vital greens of grass and trees were ripe, the deep blues of lakes, the silver of sunlight on the distances and the more mysterious regal purple of shadows. So far as concerned any splash of tabasco red, however, he might better have been seeking a maverick on the outreaches of Hellroaring.

Twice had he shifted his point of survey when he was rewarded by sudden sight of the steer upon a rhododendron covered mound, not more than a city block away. Unconcernedly the long-horn trotted onto the scene, glanced about, then slowed to a walk and began to browse. The hope of recapturing the fine creature uninjured before he injured others re-awoke in Pape. A cautious approach, a forward swish of rope, a forceful reaction— Unless luck all lay with his too rampant escutcheon, the chapter might be closed.

But luck this afternoon seemed to favor quadrupeds. Just as Polkadot slithered toward the green mound—just as, almost, he had borne his man-mate within roping distance, he chanced to misplace a topply boulder and sent it crashing down the side of a rock-ribbed gorge, on its way sounding an alarm above the plash of a rainbowed waterfall. Again the steer was off. Again the bone-risking pursuit for man and beast was on.

Around hillocks, hurdling boulders, dodging cones and knobs that were too slippery for climbing, ran the race. Once the brute leader miscalculated the space between a striped maple and a pignut hickory; for a moment was caught and held in a vise-like grip. But before his pursuer could close in, he had managed to wriggle free, shy only some few tufts of short hair, with no loss of determination to retain the freedom so energetically won.

Bellowing as if in self-congratulation, the steer bore away in an untried direction—one that led up a second summit almost as high as the “top of the park.” That this already was preempted by a group of busy beings and a couple of two-wheeled tool cars of the miniature Noah’s Ark sort used by highway contractors, did not concern the runaway. The red flag that waved above one of the supply wagons as a warning of blasting powder, however, did. With lowered head he charged, scattering the workers in as many directions as they numbered.

Pape did not stop to consider the danger of an explosion should the steer ram into the explosive. He spurred forward, his rope again circumscribing his head, ready for a throw the moment opportunity offered.

But the red took no chances of so soon ending his lively afternoon. Having learned to beware of enemies vehicular through his earlier impact against that Columbus Circle trolley, he dodged between the carts and bore off to the westward.

Pape, in his following rush across the butte-top, glimpsed a face that almost caused him to draw rein. Distorted by surprise and annoyance was the expression

of the man crouched behind the powder cart, but not enough so to mask one of the hirelings of the Lauderdale enemy.

And the trees then whispering on the breeze-swept height were poplars! No time to stop to count them—no attention to spare for speculation as to whether the roar of a menagerie-imprisoned Nubian would carry that far. Nevertheless, the concentration of the rider, if not the pace of his mount, slackened somewhat through the continued pursuit of their wide-horned quarry.

“And a bunch of beef shall lead them,” paraphrased Pape close to one of Dot’s obligingly back-waggled ears.

An hour before he had assured Jane Lauderdale that his steer, as well as he, was at her service. Now that vicarious promise had been redeemed—the beef-brute sure had served her! The opposition party, probably with the stolen cryptogram in hand, had decided on this particular butte top as the likeliest location of treasure buried by eccentric grand-sires and were getting underway some larger scheme of excavation. And he, in pursuit of his too-live-stock, was started on another pursuit of Swinton Welch and his crew.

Pape felt keen to turn in deed, as well as thought. Despite the red’s service rendered, he breathed a prayer that something would happen to the beast—anything drastic enough to end his career as pace setter to the queerest of questioners.

Answer to this prayer came with the unexpectedness which all afternoon had been marked—an answer decisive as the bluff-edge ahead. In his head-down rush the excited animal had not seen until too late the precipice that marked trail’s end. With a conclusive back flop in midair, he disappeared.

Hot on his hoofs, just out of rope reach, pounded Polkadot. But he, with super-instinct, sensed the drop in time to swerve on the shale of the brink. Frantically he then began a struggle to overcome its shift.

A lake lapped the bottom of the void—one of the several that add their quiet blues and rippling whites to the color scheme of the park and of a Sunday furnish exercise for as many enthusiastic “crab-catchers” as there are flat-bottomed row boats to rent. Pape saw it from cliff’s edge. He did not shiver—time for that if they went down. Flinging from the saddle, he spread his length upon the ground, digging in with toes and elbows to increase the weight of the drag made by his body. As determined to save his equine pal as himself, he threw all the strength of his arms into a steady pull upon the reins.

CHAPTER XXIII—THE MAN BEHIND

Pape's ride down from the height of No-Man's Land was rapid as his advisedly devious course would allow—rapid from his desire to communicate his steer-led discovery to Jane Lauderdale with the least possible delay and devious for two reasons. He did not wish to attract the attention of the treasure blasters until after the girl had looked them over. And he did not wish to fall into the hands of the police who had hauled his run-amuck escutcheon out of the lake and taken him in charge.

On reaching the meadow where he had asked his quondam pursuit partners to await him, he could sight none of them. He concluded that they had cut for the nearest bridle path to avoid any such accounting to the park authorities as had been exacted after last evening's irregularities. Stansbury caution advised that he do likewise, but the Pape habit of riding rough-shod by the short-cut trail overruled.

A demand upon him strong as physical force or a voiced cry caused him to turn and peer into the mouth of a sort of gulch into which the green tailed off. There he saw some one gray-clad, dismounted, waiting—Jane, silently calling him.

Spurring to her, he found that the three had thought it advisable to take cover in a small glen, irregularly oval in shape, that would have served excellently as a bull-ring had its granite sides been tiered with seats. Harford and Irene still sat their saddles, the girl holding rein on the horse ridden by Jane, who evidently had reconnoitered that he might not miss them on his promised return.

Pape's heart quickened from appreciation of her fealty. He decided if possible to "cut out" her alone from her undependable "bunch" and show her the discovery to which the beef-brute had led him—the latest operation of the Lauderdale enemy.

"Why Not! So you're safe?" The glad cry was Irene's, as she pressed up to him. "But my pet cow—don't tell me you let him get away?"

"The 'dar-rling' is on the road to the calaboose—pinched for all sorts of crimes," returned Pape unfeelingly. "You'll need a larger crop of bail weeds than you possibly can gather to make good your claim to him."

She, with a voice throb of regret: "That's what I get for not following. A girl's got to keep on the heels of her live-stock, be he man or cow, *these* rapid days. Think of me sitting here, losing out as if I'd been born a hundred years ago—*obeying* a mere male!"

Jane had remounted and now rode up.

"But if the steer is arrested," she asked, "how do you come to be free? Did you disown him?"

"Didn't have to." Pape's speech was that of a man in a hurry. "Trail's-end for the red was an air pocket over a toy lake. He made a magnificent splash and started swimming for the other shore. In the water he was about as dangerous as a pollywog. Proved easy pickings for that active little arrester of last night, Pudge O'Shay. Another policeman sat in the stern of his commandeered row-boat, over-working a piece of rope. I wish 'em joy taking my escutcheon in."

He omitted report of his own desperate feat of saving Polkadot and himself a similar high-dive off the bluff edge. More authoritatively he turned back to Irene.

"Likely his fate will make you feel some better over that obey oversight. If you'd like to get the habit, you'd do me a favor by hunting up the village pound and paying the dues put on that shield rampant o' mine. Here's a roll that ought to be a gent cow's sufficiency. And you'd favor me further by taking the family friend along."

"You mean—"

"*Your* Harfy. Maybe you can impress him with the desirability of obeying orders. Got to confess I failed."

"You precious puzzle!"—the young lady of to-day. "You aren't—Oh, you are—you *are!*"

"Are I—just what?"

"Jealous, you silly! Haven't I told you that Harfy long ago gave up hopes of me, that he is as naught to me—ab-so-lutely naught more than a friend who—"

"At that, he's more to you than he's shown himself to me," Pape interposed with point.

Harford pulled up his mount's head with something the decisive fling of his own. "I admit that I give orders better than take them. Come, Jane. Come, Irene. Maybe I can get you out of this mess yet without unpleasant consequences."

"And maybe, Jane, the consequences ain't going to be so plumb unpleasant," Pape contested her attention with something the seriousness he had shown at the foot of the Sturgis' steps. "In a certain some one else's little matter of unfinished

business that's demanding my time and attention right now, I have pressing need of one assistant. Are you—do you feel—well, willing?"

"But, Why Not, why not *me*?" Irene prevented immediate reply from her cousin; spurred her mount close beside the obviously fastidious Polkadot; at last dropped her battered-looking bunch of roses to clasp the Westerner's arm. "You *know* that I—And I *know* that you—Don't you, dar-rling—or do you? I am sure that I'm not *ashamed* of—of—*You* know. That is, I ain't if you aren't. Of course Jane is calmer than I, but who wants to be calm nowadays? *I'm* the one that's willing and then some to tag along with you into difficulty and danger and—"

Harford, heated of face and manner, interrupted.

"No one's going to tag with him into any more difficulty or danger. You girls are going to keep your agreement, aren't you? You're both coming peacefully along with me, now that I've let you wait long enough to see that this person, rightly entitled 'The Impossible,' is safe."

"Let us wait—you let us?" Irene flared. "A dozen of you couldn't have forced me to desert him, Millsy Harford—not whilst I had *my* health and strength!"

Despite her ardor, Pape managed to free his arm of her hold. With his eyes he re-asked the question put to Jane. He could see that she was confused, annoyed, justifiably suspicious of the youngster vamp's proprietorship.

"Don't you worry about any unfinished business of Miss Lauderdale," Harford added with augmented insolence. "I think she will concede that I am more competent and quite as willing as you to attend any and all such. On my advice she has given up her search for a mythical needle mythically buried in this park haystack. Haven't you, Jane? *Haven't* you, dear?"

Pape, while listening to the man, looked to the woman; gained her gaze, saw her lips form to an unvoiced "No." Fresh love for her and fresh hate for him—fresh suspicion and the courage thereof possessed him.

"Meantime, I suppose, your hirelings are tumbling up this park haystack according to the directions of that cryptogram you took from Mrs. Sturgis' wall-safe?"

"You damned blighter, you dare accuse me of theft?"

Pape laughed into the snarled demand. "And why not accuse? I don't like you and I don't trust you. Miss Lauderdale's unfinished business is safer in my hands than yours. You lie when you say that she has transferred it to you. She knows who is the better man. In case you're not sure, I am ready to show."

"No readier than I, you weak fish out of water." Harford's voice shook into higher, harder notes. "You couldn't very well call me a thief and a liar without showing. As I told you this morning you'll have to answer to me if you raise any more of a row around Miss Lauderdale. When will you give me a chance to—"

"Now?" Pape suggested.

“You don’t mean here, before the girls, in a public place where the cops are likely—”

“*Why not?*”

So the Queer Questioner’s battle-cry!

Lightly though he laughed, he was heavy with hate, again moved by that battleful mania which is the sanity of love. To him specific insults did not matter so much. The importance of the whys, wheres or whences grew all at once negligible. To have it out with the man who contested his claim to his woman—to bring him down just on general principles—to wring him and rend him and trample him, if need be, into acknowledgment of his supreme impertinence—that was his present task.

A thought-flash of the moment before had thrown rays of suspicion several ways through Pape’s mind. Mills Harford knew of the Montana Gusher swindle, as indicated by his jibe of that morning about an “oil-stock shark.” Being a real-estater of considerable success, he might be a principal in that fraud. Certainly he did not seem the man to have been a victim.

The idea that this “most prominent” suitor of Jane might be the leader of the anti-Lauderdales was suggested by his bold attempt to deter the girl from further investigation. That she herself considered him a friend was in itself significant. He could not better have covered in perpetrating an inimical act toward her than by first having won her confidence with flattery as expertly administered as though he were indeed one of those villainous “perfect lovers” with whom honest heroes have to cope on stage and screen.

As an intimate of the household, Harford probably was in position to know the worth of the late eccentric’s buried “bone.” He might well have instigated that “inside” safe job at the Sturgis’ and been responsible for the trailing of the poke-bonnet lady to the East Sixty-third Street hide-out, this last particularly pointed by his later appearance there with his lawyer. And here in the glen, just as the out-croppings showed plain the way to treasure’s lead, he was ready to prevent Jane by force from continuing her park prospecting while the excavations were underway on the heights. All the circumstantialia were suspicious.

Why not now? In view of possibilities, it had not taken one of Pape’s predisposition for action long to decide that the then and there were none too soon for adjustment of their relative status. He and his self-selected could spare time, he guessed, for a bout that would settle—well, what it would settle.

“Climb down. Let’s get it over before some ladylike rule of this old-woman town of yours trips us up.”

Pape was in the act of dismounting, in accordance with his own suggestion, when Harford executed a surprise that nearly crowded him to a fall. The attack was abetted by the inherent hostility of a thoroughbred horse for cross-breeds of

the range. As though trained for just such participation, the blue-blood rammed into the piebald, bringing his rider within tempting reach of the enemy ear. A whack more dizzying than dangerous followed the equine impact.

“So that’s—the game?” Pape gasped during his recovery. “You’ve got—edge on me—with your—polo punch. But swords or pistols! I’m ready for—any old fight that’s fought—Harfy *dar-rling*.”

He threw back into the leather, where he felt as much at home as any man and jabbed his right foot back into its stirrup. Swinging his calico cayuse he pressed back the horses astride which the two girls sat—Jane with pale, set face, like a marble of avengement; Irene glitter-eyed and high-hued from excitement. For a duel of chevaliers this particular squared-circle hidden by Nature must be cleared. When the fair audience was crowded to one side in “reserved” quadruped standing room, West whirled and bore down on East.

Fights of diverse sorts had place in the variegated past of Peter Pape. Rough-and-tumbles, knock-down-and-drag-outs, rim-fires or lightning-draws—all such he had survived. But no past emergency had he battled by fists on horseback. Once he had accepted the challenge, however, the form of fight looked fairer than at first blow, since it was unlikely that its instigator had more experience in stirrup battling than he. As for rules, he, for one, felt quite as hazy as he would have in some tilting bout of lance-laden knight of old. They would have to make up the rules as they went along, he supposed.

“At ’em, Dot!” he wirelessly the freckled ear laid back in rancor against a brushed-teeth nip of the over-groomed enemy mount. Not a heel urge did the piebald need, any more than a jerk of the rein which, already, Pape had twisted about the saddle horn. With a horse keen to knee pressure as was this cow-pony, he had the advantage of both hands free for swing or jab.

Straight at the aristocrats went the rough pair. Polkadot landed a shoulder impact that all but toppled the spindle-legged black. The while, his man-mate’s bruising left, accomplished contact with the Harford nose. At the “claret” which oozed from a feature perfect enough in outline to have been inherited from classic Greek, Irene uttered a cry in which sounded fear for the family friend and admiration of the person impossible. Jane sat her horse, silent and outwardly composed, except that the color had left even her lips.

In the break-away, the black kicked out viciously. But the pinto, with skill acquired in growing-up days when he had trained with an Arizona outlaw band, flirted his vari-colored rump out of harm’s way. Already the battle was bi-fold, the two men its instigators, their mounts responsible for footwork.

On the second engagement, not counting that initial surprise attack which had bordered on the foul, Harford handled his thoroughbred into a position of such advantage that he drove a right to Pape’s jaw. Rocked from crown to toe,

the Westerner saved himself a fall by going into just such a clinch as he would have tried had they been balanced each on his own two feet instead of his horse's four.

There was something superstitious in the look which distorted Harford's good looks, as he found himself held helpless while his opponent rallied—a look which suggested that he had put his all into that upper-cut and was worse nerve-shocked than was its recipient physically over failure to bring decision. There being no referee to command a break, Pape came out of the clinch when he was ready, with the “spinner” aid of a horse that turned ends on signal—and all within the space of a blanket.

The break-away, unexpected by the Eastern immaculate, reduced him sartorially to a plane with the Westerner. His stock and part of his striped silk shirt remained in the Pape paws, torn from his neck and back when Polkadot had capered. His dishevelment now matched that which Pape had acquired in his struggle against momentum upon the cliff.

The equine pair also seemed possessed of battling madness. For a time they fox-trotted about, keeping their riders beyond each other's reach, while they fought an instinctive duel of their own. The black proved a fore-and-after—pawed out ladylike blows with slender forefeet, then lofted his heels in a way that jarred the human aboard him more than the wary target. At a familiar knee signal, Polkadot suddenly rose on his hindlegs as if for that bronco evolution known as sunfishing.

“Look out—he'll topple back and crush you!”

The outcry was forced from Jane.

As at once transpired, it proved unnecessary. The piebald had no intention of falling back upon his man-pal. Instead, he hopped forward on hind legs until he had the black cornered, then flung down with all his weight. The thoroughbred, crushed to his knees, escaped by sheer agility the sharp-shod hoofs; wriggled his fringe-bedecked neck and satin shoulders from out the commoner's clutch.

Dumbly infuriated by his failure and urged by an imperative signal, Polkadot pressed such advantage as was left him. By sparing the black no time to recover, he gave Pape his opportunity. Head to tail the horses met with terrific impact. For the second or so in which both staggered, a stirrup each locked crushingly.

Followed two fist blows from Pape, so nearly simultaneous that no on-looker could have been sure which did the work. He himself knew that his right had led by enough of a count to jolt his rival's head into fair position for his gnarled left. Far out from saddle he leaned to put into that follow his last ounce of power. The blow landed nicely under the Easterner's cleft chin. As the horses sprang apart, Harford toppled and fell.

What would have been a clean knock-out of which no fistic specialist need have been ashamed was spoiled by a mishap. The falling man's right foot did not clear the trap-like stirrup of his English saddle. The behavior of his thoroughbred too, was unfortunate. In a frenzy of alarm the black sprang forward, then dashed for the entrance of the glen, dragging his rider. Probably the fact that Harford was clear out, his body inert, saved him an immediate hoof wound, but there was scarcely a chance of his survival if hauled over the rocks of the entrance. His horse, however, did not reach that barrier. Having his rival dragged to injury or death was no more a part of Pape's program than was murder a component of his hate. Before the black had covered two rods, Polkadot was after him, for once dug by the spurs which he had every right to consider worn for decorative purposes only. One hundred yards of green, with the sharp teeth of the rock trap but fifty farther on, brought the racing beasts neck and neck—brought Pape to an equestrian exploit conceived on the way.

He kicked his right foot free of the wooden stirrup; encircled the saddle horn with his knee; throwing his weight on the left stirrup, leaned low. To retrieve a grounded hat or handkerchief from the saddle at gallop pace he regarded as a simple form of exercise. To seize and loft an unconscious man of Harford's build was difficulty multiplied by his dead weight of some hundred-seventy pounds.

"Impossible!"

Pape's jaw set with the thought-challenge which had taken him over the top of so varied contretemps—the word applied to him with such significance by the snob whom he was about to save.

Why not achieve the impossible now as heretofore? He put the demand on his tried muscles, risked two bounds of the black in making sure that his grip upon the collar of Harford's coat was firm, then heaved upon his burden. The initial inches of clearance were hardest—broke his nails, tortured his fingers, almost snapped the sinews in his arm. Not until his right hand was able to join his left did he breathe again.

And just in time was his double hold secured.

So quickly did the black horse swerve that the calico could not synchronize. For a moment Harford's body and the taut stirrup were a strained connecting link. Then Polkadot edged nearer and Pape was able to lift the unconscious figure to a position of partial support across his mount's forequarters.

But the stirrup still held, its iron shoe having been forced into the leather of Harford's boot and fastened as in a vise. They might be coupled together until the black ran down unless—

The stretch of strap gave Pape an idea. Quick almost as the thought he drew his gun; took three shots; severed the link. Turning, he rode the doubly burdened

piebald back in the direction of the two girls, while the thoroughbred sought exclusiveness in the far reaches of the glen. Probably because of the frequent back-fire of motors and the blow-out of tires which at times make Central Park suggest a West Virginia mining town on fusillade day, the curiosity of no sparrow cop had been excited by the gun reports.

Much more gently than he had gathered up his enemy, Pape now lowered him to the turf and flung out of saddle to a kneeling position. A cursory examination showed Harford's fine-featured face to be somewhat marred by fist blows. But his body, so far as the emergency first aid could determine, was intact. The last fear of a possible skull fracture was dissipated when the brown eyes quivered open and the flaccid lips began to move.

"He's trying to speak, Why Not," exclaimed Irene, a moment ahead of Jane in dismounting. "Listen, *do!* In the novels I've read they always say the most *important* things when they're coming out of—of a hiatus or whatever you call it."

Pape leaned close enough to grasp part of the effortful mumble.

"Didn't steal—anything. Sorry called you—names. Irene loves—"

That was as far as Harford got at the moment. And it was well, as the perquisitory miss demanded the context of his utterances.

Now, the telling of lies was abhorrent to Peter Pape. Seldom did he consider recourse to the slightest misrepresentation even when straight-out talk made complexities. But he found himself tempted by an inspiration as to how he might repay both enemy man and enemy girl for the trouble they had caused him with the same slight elaboration of the truth.

"It is your name on his lips," he informed the romantic miss. "Irene'—*you* were his first thought. You're the one he wants, my child, the one he calls for."

"Oh! *Oh!*" she murmured, her dark eyes expanding. "Then I haven't been wrong—Harfy *has* cared for me in secret all along?"

She knelt down beside the fallen family friend; hovered over him in an egoistic ecstasy.

"Poor dar-rling—*how* you must have loved me to have hidden it so well! And all the time I thought that you—Oh, it is *thrilling* that you should have pretended to regard another, when in reality your *grande passione* was for me alone! If you'd been killed, I *never* could have forgiven myself—that is, I couldn't if I had found out afterwards. When I think what you must have *suffered*, I wonder how I ever can repay—"

"You've got a darn' good chance right here and now," interrupted Pape, as a finishing touch to his ruse for punishing them and cutting-out Jane from the "bunch." "He's coming around fast—ain't in any physical danger if his heart is cheered up. 'Tis better far for him that you two shouldest be alone when he

comes clean to. You stay here and nurse him—you owe him at least that much. When he's able to ride make for the bridle path and home. The black is quieting down. You can catch him without trouble. And don't be afraid of pouring out your love and affection upon the poor man. It is your bounden duty as a woman and a vamp. Love may save his life."

"But you, Why Not?"

A sudden fear lest she lose the old in the new acquirement strained her face.

"I'll bear up some way. I, too, still have my health and strength." He tried to mask his triumph in a dark, desperate frown. "Come, Jane. You and I are no longer needed here."

He forestalled protest by remounting; gave the older girl a half-humorous, wholly-apologetic look; led the way toward the heights.

Five minutes later they dropped rein in a clump of warty-ridged hackberry bushes and started on afoot. On the way he made succinct report of his discovery during the pursuit of the red. At that, he had not prepared her—indeed, was far from prepared himself—for what they soon saw from cover at the edge of the mesa.

The stage was set as on his dash across it in pursuit of the run-amuck. But the actors—half a dozen in number, inclusive of Swinton Welch, and none in laborer's garb—were now grouped about one of the supply carts. Attention centered upon a man who sat the tail of this cart—one who had not been about during Pape's preview. His pudgy hands held open before him a sheet of paper from which he was reading aloud.

The pair in the bush stared at this man in amazement too breath-taking for speech. Then their glances met, as if to read substantiation, each in the other's eyes.

So, then, it was true! The *generalissimo* issuing instructions was the long-time friend and family counselor, ex-Judge Samuel Allen.

CHAPTER XXIV—LOST YET WON

With the stealth of a Blackfoot brave, Peter Pape approached the powder cart in temporary use as a rostrum. Jane he had left where her safety no longer troubled him. His entire attention reached forward. Having gained the cover of a venerable cottonwood whose drooping catkins fringed the shafts of the lowering sun he stopped and deliberately listened, excused by the necessity of discovering just what was underway.

The slow, accented perusal of the apple-cheeked little big man of law was holding the attention of his assortment of thugs to a degree favorable for a surprise assault.

“Eighteen and twelve will show
The spot. Begin below.
Above the crock
A block will rock,
As rocks wrong’s overthrow.”

To the last word the verse carried to Pape’s ears, metered to match the two lines recited to him by Jane from her memory of the mysterious, stolen cryptogram. There seemed no reason to doubt that Allen was reading the rhymed instructions of the late Lauderdale eccentric.

Swinton Welch was first to offer thin-voiced complaint against the poem’s ambiguity.

“That third verse strikes me as the hardest yet, judge. What do you reckon them figures mean? I don’t see as there’s any way to decide whether they stand for rods or yards or feet. Eighteen from what? Twelve to which? Or do you suppose, now, it means that the spot is eighteen-by-twelve?”

With a wave of one chubby hand the lawyer dismissed these demands. “When quite a young man I knew the writer of this rhyme. It is characteristic that he should have put everything as vaguely as possible. He’d have made a wonderful detective, he was such a genius at involving instead of solving things. I’m relying quite a bit on my own gumption in the selection of this place. But I feel sure that I am right at last. We’re on a height, surrounded by the requisite number of poplars, aren’t we? The noises we hear from the city, spread about on every hand, might be called by poetic license any kind of a roar. And the whole place is shelved with rock. Since we can’t seem to solve those figures, let’s blow off the entire top if necessary and trust to the integrity of the ‘crock.’ You arranged for the acetylene lights, Duffy?”

“They’ll be here before dusk.”

Pape could not see the speaker from his cover point, but recognized the voice of him of the vegetable ears recently bested in combat.

“Have you thought about the crowd the flare’s going to attract, Mr. Allen?” the pugilist wanted to know.

“I’ve arranged for the police to stand guard over us.”

The complacency with which the lawyer made this assertion had a nerving effect upon Pape. His frame straightened with a jerk. His muscles tightened. His thoughts sped up. If the police were enlisted with the enemy through political “pull” of the ex-judge, it behooved him to decide at once upon the exact nature of such changes as he, personally, might be able to effect in the afternoon’s program. Perhaps too close upon decision, he acted.

“I have permits from the commissioner to cover every emergency,” the lawyer continued. “I can promise you that there’ll be no interference this time, even—”

“*Except* from me!”

The correction issued from behind the cottonwood and was followed immediately by the appearance of Peter Pape.

Samuel Allen’s assurance gurgled in his throat and the apple-red faded from his cheeks as he slid from his seat on the cart-tail to face the unfriendly, blue-black eye of a Colt.

“The—the impossible person!” he stammered.

“The *possible* person, don’t you mean, judge? It’s time you got the general little scheme of me, even though I do look mussed up this crowded afternoon.”

Pape’s jocularly was a surface effect. The serious coöperation of his every thought and muscle would be needed if he won against such odds. With his gun he waved back two of the crew who, evidently more accustomed to the glance of the unfriendly eye than was the jurist, were edging nearer. Still grinning with pseudo-pleasantry, he tried to guard against attack from behind by backing toward the second of the ark-bedded carts.

“This morning, Allen, you got me out of limbo through your drag with the law,” he continued. “Didn’t hope for a so-soon opportunity to refund that debt. But don’t think I ain’t ready with the interest.”

“The only way to keep you out of new trouble is to leave you in the old,” snorted the small big man. “If this gun-play is for my amusement, I’ll say that your methods are as perverted as your sense of humor. You’re about as practical as a Bolshevik. Pray desist. Also—pardon my frankness—get out while you can—out of trouble that doesn’t concern you in the slightest.”

“Pardon *my* frankness—” Pape, too, could feign politeness—“but this trouble does concern me in the greatest. I hate being in your debt. I feel I should take this chance to pay and save you!”

“Save me—from what?”

Although the Colt still held his gaze, the jurist put the question with man-

ifest relief. Argument was his stock in profession—perhaps he hoped from that.

Pape couldn't restrain an out-loud chuckle, so near did he seem to the consummation of his promises to Jane. "Just you hand over Granddad Lauderdale's crypt and those *carte*-blank permits and I'll save you from being your own lawyer defending a charge of before-and-after burglary. Urge 'em upon me, judge, then call off your crew and vamoose pronto—which is roof-of-America for get out quick yourself."

Allen sent a glance of appeal among his hirelings, but elicited no response. To them there was, in truth, a stronger appeal in the careless way the Westerner handled his "hardware." They looked to be gunmen themselves, but of the metropolitan sort that shoot singly from behind or in concert before. Certain was it that some one would get punctured did the revolver speak and each was concerned lest he be the ill-fated human "tire."

Allen seemed left to his own devices. Crumpling the cryptic sheet in one hand, he started slowly forward. Pape lifted his foot for a stride along the cart-side. But some time elapsed before the sole of his boot again met mother earth. With the suddenness of most successful attacks on a rear guarded overconfidently, the one leg which, for the moment, supported his weight was jerked from under with a violence that pitched him face forward.

As he fell his revolver exclaimed, but only an indignant monosyllable. A veritable avalanche of humanity descended upon him, hard in effect as the rocky ground in their attack with gun butts and fists. For a second time he had miscalculated odds; seemed at last to have met defeat. In the act, as it were, of seizing the Sturgis' loot, he was put out by a blow from a leather black-jack brought down upon his defenseless head by an expert hand.

Some minutes must have passed before his brain again functioned. In the interim he had been "hogtied," despite the fact that, literally, the knots were not tied according to the Hoyle of the range. The first thing he noticed on opening his eyes was that Judge Allen had been stripped of his coat and the left sleeves of his outer and under shirts cut away to give place to a bandage. Evidently his instinctive pull on the trigger had sent a bullet into his preferred target, although lack of aim had made it a wing shot.

That the moment was one in which he would best "play Injun" was Pape's first cautionary thought. Not even to ease his painfully cramped limbs did he attempt to move a muscle. After his first roving look, his eyes fixed, with an acquisitive gleam at variance with his helplessness, upon something protruding from the inside pocket of a coat that lay upon the ground near his hurting head.

The something, or one very like it, he had seen before—a folded document engraved in brown ink. The coat also he recognized as that torn off the wounded lawyer.

He next discovered that his ears, as well as eyes, could function. Without moving, he allowed them to be filled with sound notes upon the disaster which had overtaken him.

The ex-judge: “—and I congratulate you, Duffy, on as neat a turn-table as I’ve ever seen.”

Even more than to the unctuousness of the voice did Pape object to the jurist’s punctuation by boot upon that section of his own anatomy within easiest reach. His indignation, however, was diverted by the assurance that it was his enemy of the cauliflower ear who had brought about his fall.

“Easier than throwing a seven with your own bones, your honor,” Duffy answered. “Wild-and-woolly here was too tickled with himself to notice me under the cart tightening of a bolt. All I had to do was lunge out and grab an ankle.”

“Hadn’t you better go and let some doctor look at that arm, judge?” The concerned voice was Swinton Welch’s. “I’ll direct operations until—”

“You think I’m going right on taking chances on your weakness, Welch?” Allen’s counter-demand snapped with disapproval. “I’ll see this thing through, no matter how it hurts. Send for a surgeon if you know one who don’t insist on reporting gun-shot patients. Come, let’s get this animated interruption stowed away before the police arrive. Questions never asked are easiest answered.”

“Leave us throw him in with the powder,” suggested a scar-faced bruiser new in the cast, so far as Pape recalled.

And so they might have disposed of him had not Duffy advanced a better proposition. Nearby was a sort of cave where he had “hidden out” on a former emergency, he declared. It was dark and dribbly as a tomb—an ideal safe-deposit for excess baggage.

“To the tomb with the scorpion, then!”

Beneath his pudginess, the little lawyer seemed hard as the rocks he was so anxious to blast. With a gesture, he ordered one of the crew to help him on with his coat.

Pape relaxed the more as three of them laid hold and carried him across the flat. Duffy acted as guide and the lawyer, who assuredly was taking no chances, went along to satisfy himself as to the security of the hide-away. Several yards inside the narrow mouth of Duffy’s “sort of” cave they dropped him upon the rock floor; left him without further concern over when, if at all, he should return to consciousness.

For reasons which had filled him with such elation as nearly to expose his ’possum part, Pape approved their selection of the cave. Now the hope of victory out of defeat came to him with an admission of Allen from the entrance:

“I do feel some weakened by this wound. Guess I’d better rest here a little while. You fellows go back and start turning rocks. Try the tilty ones first and

use powder, when necessary, just as if I owned the park. Remember, I've got the permits."

For five minutes or more Pape waited without any effort to free himself except from the puddle of drippings in which they had chanced to deposit him. Since all seemed quiet, he made sibilant venture.

"Jane ... *Jane!*"

The shadowy figure which at once appeared from out the darker recesses assured him that luck had not entirely deserted him—that the safe-deposit vault selected for him was the same in which he had honor-bound the girl to watch and wait his summons. On entrance of his pallbearers, she had retreated into the depths of the "tomb," quite as he had hoped she would. And now—in just a minute—he'd show them how alive was the dead man they had buried.

She knelt beside him; was bending over him.

"Oh, Peter—it is you, then? Are you hurt—wounded?" Her whisper was guarded as his own had been.

"Yes—wounded sore but only in my feelings—over being outwitted."

"It's just as well I didn't know you in the gloom. I'd have thought you dead and died myself. I was near-dead of nervousness already. Knowing you were armed, I feared when I heard the gun report that you had shot some one and been captured. I couldn't have stayed here doing nothing much longer, despite my promise. Don't know just what I'd have done, but—"

"But that's been decided for you," he supplied, in an ecstasy over the confession back of her words. "You are here to un-hog-tie me. The key-knot is pressing the small of my back, or I don't know the feel of one. See what you can do."

She leaned over him, her hands clasped over his helpless ones. "Only if you promise me," she bargained with a vague, tender smile which he just could see, "that you won't go back at them again. Otherwise you're much safer tied—hog or human."

"I'll promise anything if you'll just lower those lips one half an inch. I think I can reach the rest of the way."

But she evidently decided to free him without the promise and trust to his discretion. Helping him turn over, she busied herself with his bonds. Long and strong as were her fingers, however, they made no impression upon this particular key-knot, tied to stay tied with some sailor-taught knack.

"Feel in my coat pocket," he suggested. "If they've left me a couple of matches—"

She did. And they had. A stroke across his boot top lit one. The odor of burning hemp did not offend their nostrils; rather, was more grateful than the most subtle incense from the freedom promised in its fumes. After the fourth and last Lucifer had been burned to a char, the girl was able to fray and sunder

the rest of the rope. The “key” turned, Pape made short work of the other knots, shook off his bonds and gained his feet. His first act of freedom was to seize and kiss the two taper-tipped, nail-broken, burnt-finger hands which had liberated him.

“Sweet pardner!... Precious pal!”

Pape always remembered his “grave” and the ensuing silence within its dank dark as the most cheerful place and the livest moment of his life.

Only the moment, however, did he allow himself.

“I’ve got to reward you by leaving you again, but not for long. Don’t bother promising this time. Just wait until I bring the real tenant of this tomb.”

Samuel Allen, while seated upon a boulder of trap-rock that divided the opening, watching the start of the delayed excavation, felt himself seized without warning from behind. Before he had time to utter more than a gasp he was dragged back into the cave. Perhaps pain from his injured shoulder made him speechless. Possibly surprise at the assault of the “scorpion,” just now unconscious and soundly trussed, had something to do with his inefficiency. He still seemed incapable of protest when the captive-turned-captor searched his coat pockets and extracted their contents.

Jane, the while, had taken advantage of her absolution from oath to follow guardedly; with automatic ready now appeared from darkness into the light of the entrance.

“If he so much as whines, shoot him—and shoot to kill this time!” Pape directed. “He deserves punishment and on two counts, I think. Just a minute. I want to make sure.”

Stepping nearer the opening, he began to run through the letters and documents taken from the jurist’s coat.

“Jane Lauderdale! Can it really be you, my child?” At last Allen drew upon his font of sebaceousness. “I hope that you, too, are not in the power of this impossible—”

“She isn’t. I’m in hers.”

Pape had overheard; now wheeled around. A glance had satisfied him that the cryptogram at last was in hand. The brown engravings, the familiar look of which had held his eyes when he lay trussed in the open, had confirmed his first suspicion of them. Folded with the crinkly parchment was other detailed proof.

“You’re under arrest, judge!” he snapped.

“How so? You’re no officer and I—You can’t—”

“Oh yes, I can. Some few of the impossibilities that are my pet pastime ought to be accredited to the deputy sheriff of Snowshoe County, Montana. Out with those dimpled wrists!”

With one length of the rope so recently misused on himself, Pape impro-

vised handcuffs; with another hopped the ankles of the jurist.

Unnerved by his helplessness, the little great man began to whimper. "You tried to murder me out there. Now you—you—arrest me for what?"

"Ask the man behind the Montana Gusher oil fraud—your dishonorable self. We're going to give you opportunity—a little time alone with the crook."

The accusation left Pape's lips with the assurance of a theorem. The legal tricks played in Western courts against his earlier fight to protect his good name long ago had convinced him that some legal mind was master of the plot. The jurist's morning skill at court jugglery had brought its flash of suspicion. But not until he had discovered Allen as the Lauderdale enemy had there recurred to him Jane's exclamation, clipped by her father, that some one they knew might be the promoter of the oil fraud. Later had come the first sight of tell-tale stock certificates in the small culprit's pocket, their worth as clinching proof assured by his recent examination at the mouth of the cave.

For the moment Allen seemed staggered by the charge. He looked as though he should find himself exceeding poor company.

Pape turned to Jane. "Once more may I borrow your gun, dear? Some one of his plug-uglies seems to have appropriated mine own. Come."

"Don't leave me, child. Don't go with the wild-man," Allen urged the girl. "He'll only lead you into more trouble. He can't escape my men once I start them searching for him and the price he'll pay for trussing me up like this—"

"It's worth a goodly price to show you how a truss-up feels," Pape interrupted. "Of course I can't hope you'll stay caved much longer than I, once the gang misses you. But I won't have trouble re-pinching you, not while I hold these certificates of your guilt. To think, Jane, that my trail's-end should run into yours this way! It looks—don't get scared, now—but it does look a whole lot like Fate."

She regarded him, serious-eyed, yet with faintly smiling lips. "It looked a whole lot like that to me the day you told dad and me about your search for—"

The suggestion of a smile vanished as she turned directly toward the wretched-looking little big man. "Wasn't 'Montana Gusher' the name of that oil stock you stopped Aunt Helene's buying, Judge Allen? Ah, I thought so!"

With a glance of contempt for the obviously guilty "family friend," she followed Pape out of the cave. From the shadow of the wall they looked out over the flat.

"We can't continue Western style," he observed with manifest regret. "See the mounties? They're here under instructions to report to his Honor the Judge and do his bidding. There's a limit, as I learned awhile back, to what one can tackle in Gotham single-handed—that is to say, with hope of success. We'll need an injunction to stop that stunt. Let's go get it!"

Almost were they across the open space which they must cover to reach

their horses when a shouted command to halt told that Allen's gang had sighted them. Instead of obeying, Pape snatched Jane's hand and urged her into a run.

They gained a moment in the one lost to the enemy while Swinton Welch explained to the police lieutenant the necessity of capturing them. They reached their mounts, climbed their saddles and were on their way before the pursuit started from the far side of the flat. A second time that afternoon the consecrated precinct of Gotham's pleasure place staged a race—this one quite official, with former pursuers turned quarry.

CHAPTER HUNTED

XXV—HUNTERS

Really surprising was the detailed topographical knowledge which the western trail-blazer had acquired during recent adventures. He picked their way through the tumbled terrain of the park heights as if from a map. That he knew the up-and-down maze better than the officers now after them was demonstrated when they gained the path that represents the ultimate democracy of horsemanship by a scramble down a rocky slope with none of the pack in sight.

His immediate objective he confided to Jane in case accident should separate them. A moment of straight riding would take them through the Womens Gate into West Seventy-second Street. There he would slip into the Hotel Majestic and a telephone booth to enlist legal reinforcements.

Both overlooked, however, an important factor in Central Park's equipment—the net-work of wires spread over its length and breadth for facility of the authorities in imminent cases more or less like that of the moment. Only when a man and woman riding ahead of them were stopped and questioned by the police guard at the gate did Pape suspect that an alarm had been telephoned ahead of them. His plan was abruptly altered. Turning the horses, as if to continue an objectless canter, they started back over the path gained with such difficulty, trotting until beyond official view, thereafter breaking into the gallop of a pair of "renters" anxious to get the most possible out of their five-dollar hour in the saddle.

Cañon after cañon gaped in the apartment-house mountain range on their

left, marking streets passed. Their hope grew that, unmolested, they could pass out Pioneers Gate at the northwest corner of the park.

But that hope, too, was outsped. Hoof-hammering behind caused both to glance over-shoulder at a bend. Three of the city's mounted came pounding after them.

Pape looked about to make sure of their location. The bridle path spilled into a pool of shadows at the bottom of a gorge; granite walls rolled back from trail-side. Recognition of the region which he had been exploring with Polkadot on his first clash with law and order aided in what was of necessity a lightning-changed decision.

"Can't make Pioneers Gate." He signaled Jane to draw rein. "We'll take to—bush—turn the cayuses loose—hide-out until they've given us—up."

He swung from saddle with the last panted period, expecting the girl to follow his example. When, on her delay, he hurried to her assistance, he saw that she was leaning upon the nose of her saddle, her lips pale as her cheeks. Bodily he lifted her to the ground and found her a temporary rest against a path-side stump. After turning the horses about, he looped their reins and, with a back-to-stable slap upon Polkadot's splotched rump, started them down-park.

White-circle death sentences painted upon withering elms, poplars and birches pointed the course over which he half-carried the "sweet pardner" exhausted by excitement too long sustained. When they came upon a brush-fringed depression, which at home he would have called an elk bed, he bade her take to cover; himself crawled back to spy out the movements of the pursuit.

At the top of the last rise in the bridlepath, the police riders met the empty saddlers. They sounded greatly disturbed. From such scraps of loud-pitched conversation as carried, Pape pieced together their assumption that the fugitives had abandoned their mounts for a short-cut to the west wall. He saw two of the trio dismount and begin combing the brush in that direction, while the third remained on guard over the five horses.

All of this was fortuitous in that it promised time for them to reach a definite objective which he had in mind—a place where the spent girl might rest and both hide until darkness draped the park for their escape. His sense of semi-security weakened, however, on noticing that a police dog was of the party; that the "mounty" on hostler duty was sending the animal up the brushy hill on the east—their side of the path. Slithering back into the depression, he awaited for several long-drawn minutes the alarm-bay of the canine officer, dreading the worst, yet not wishing to share that dread unnecessarily.

Jane first felt the spell of the two brown eyes focused upon them through a patterned veil of brush. Nervously she caught his arm; pointed. Soon a long, black-tipped nose rent the veil, sniffing through a fountain spray of vine abloom

with pale blue, bell-shaped flowers.

The police dog had located them. But why the delay of his bayed alarm? A moment more and he answered for himself. With suppressed whines and insinuating wriggles there broke from the clutch of the vine none other than Kicko of the Sheepfold, his sense of duty evidently overcome by delight at the reunion.

Pape's joy transcended the Belgian's. Never had he bestowed a more fervid embrace than that which encircled the ruffed neck. Jane, too, patted their four-footed friend and bedecked his collar with a spray of the flowering vine which had been torn down by his impetuous entrance.

"Pin one of those blues roses on me," Pape asked; when she had done so, added: "Out home we call that 'matrimony vine.' I wonder whether its use here as a decoration is any sort of sign that—"

"I wonder," Jane interrupted more crisply than he would have thought possible in her wilted state, "whether Kicko will lie low like a good dog instead of a police officer while you explain about those papers you took from the judge?"

Because he believed absolutely in signs—hadn't a sign pointed his way to her?—Pape was willing to wait for the answer to his question. Indeed, he had not earned her answer until after the Granddad Lauderdale riddle had been solved. With a shrug and a sigh he took from his pocket the sheaf of brown engravings.

"These, as you may have surmised, are certificates for stock in the Montana Gusher Oil Company. See." He opened and handed her one. "They are signed with names of dummy officers, as were the others. But they are blank as to owner and number of shares—right strong evidence that the honorable Samuel is the man behind the fraud—that his fat little neck is the one I came East to wring."

Jane nodded. "I was waiting to see Aunt Helene and make sure before I told you what I suspected. You see, it was a good while ago when a salesman interested her in the stock. She was about to invest when Judge Allen interfered. Rather, he told her that he knew the stock wasn't worth the paper on which it was engraved. Except that my time has been—well, a bit full since yesterday afternoon, I'd have got the facts at once and given them to you for what they were worth. In predicaments like ours, the rule of *noblesse oblige* should hold."

"Do we need rules to hold?"

Illustratively Pape seized with one hand the slim, ringless fingers still caressing the spray of matrimony vine—his other had a firm grip on Kicko's collar. His touch, voice and eyes were full of appreciation for her good intentions. It was hard to have such a good—or bad—memory about the absolute justness of one's desserts; hard to crush those blue bells within her pink palms and not entirely forget—She was so appealing in her languor and dependency that there seemed ample excuse for his asking the right to protect and sustain her. Looking at the matter in this tempting light of the underbrush, he might be expected to owe her

an explanation of that kiss in the cab—to tell her that to him it was their betrothal.

And yet—

Although Why-Not Pape rarely questioned opportunity, there were some times and some women and some hopes—Rather roughly he dropped her hands; next offered her a memorandum which he had found folded inside the sheaf of stock-certificates—a list of names, with figures set down opposite.

“The writing is his beyond doubt—Judge Allen’s,” she declared after a moment’s scrutiny.

“Clinches the proof of his guilt in the oil deal. It is a ‘sucker list’—the names of stock biters and the price per bite. It is—” In his pause Pape gave the girl a look that was at once exultant for himself and regretful for her. “It is your family friend’s ticket to the Atlanta pen.”

To distract the very natural distress which he saw in her face, he forced cheer to lighten the murmur of their exchange.

“But let’s get to the famous cryptogram, lost and at last regained. Now we can read it as a whole.”

Allowing the jealous Belgian to wedge himself between them, Pape spread out the wrinkled sheet upon the hairy back; in guarded tones read:

List to the Nubian roar
And whisper of poplars four.
They tell of bed-rock
Where rests a crock
Brimful of Fortune’s store.

’Tis on a height
The vault you’ll sight
Of buried might.
’Twill lead you right,
Bring delight,
Win the fight.

Eighteen and twelve will show
The spot. Begin below.
Above the crock
A block will rock,
As rocks wrong’s overthrow.

List, then, the Nubian roar.
List whisper of poplars four.

Climb, then, the height.
 Read signs aright.
 Count eighteen—twelve.
 Take heart and delve.
 Obey. You'll want no more.

For moments the three of them—counting Kicko—pondered in silence. Two, at least, were considering the crypt's applicability to the height of Judge Allen's selection. It seemed a possible place, except for slight discrepancies, such as the absence of any particular "roar," an uncertain number of poplars among the pines and the lack of a "vault," except for the rock-tomb of Pape's untimely—proved so—burial. In both the hope grew that, should they make good their escape with the incriminating evidence against the little lawyer-leader, the gang's work on the flat would be suspended until after recovery of the documents. Even should Allen force the search, on being freed, they were well ammunitioned for rebuttal in court.

One by one—in silence this time—Pape again scanned the enigmatic lines.

"I'm here to say," he made comment, "that granddad went in for inexpensive verse. I'd say free, except that it rhymes."

"Free? We've paid a greater price than you imagine, Peter Pape. And if all we are to gain is the unmasking of Sam Allen—"

"We're going to gain everything—more than you can imagine from the little you love me yet," he reassured her, not to mention himself. Then, again, he took himself in hand. "I, for one, am getting in something of a hurry," he tacitly apologized. "If you'll hold to our side-kick here, I'll take another scout."

As before, he wriggled over the rim of their hideout; was gone ten minutes or so; on his stealthy return made report:

"They've driven off our nags, but left a horse-cop on patrol. A pair of patrolmen are snooping along the west wall and the northwest gate is doubly guarded. The Allen pull sure has pulled fast and many, this early evening. There is nothing to it but to lie low here until night. Mighty sorry for you, precious pal. I know you're about all in. But they ain't going to pinch Miss Jane Lauderdale, of *the* Laurdaldes, twice in the same twenty-four hours—not in my extant company."

"I'm afraid they're going to have a chance." The girl caught at his arm. "The dog—didn't he join you?"

"Kick? No. How did he get away?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry! He wrenched himself from me. I thought—I *hoped* he only wanted to follow you. Didn't dare call out for fear—"

"Another false friend, eh? Looks like this is our day for uncovering 'em. The pup had a flea-bite of conscience, I reckon."

Jane disagreed. "Not intentionally—*please*, not Kicko! Don't make me doubt everybody. It's only that he likes a 'party.' The more the merrier is his motto, if he has one."

"And he's gone for the more?"—Pape, rather grimly. "Well, they mustn't find us here, that police 'party' of his, whatever the motive back of his invitation. The sooner we move on the safer. As a matter of fact, I'm headed for another place—a perfect hide-out. If you feel able let's be stepping lively. If you don't, I'll enjoy stepping for you—that is to say, toting you."

They started up the hillside, keeping in the brush wherever such grew, skulking low-backed across the open spaces. Although the girl scrambled after him, evidently determined not to be a drag upon the hand to which she desperately clung with her two, she lost her footing on the rock when near the top and fell face forward. Her urgent little moan that he go on without her was denied strongly by the pair of arms that gathered her up, and clasped her like a woman, not a baby, against a heart hard-hammering from more than the violent exercise. Thus did he step for her—"tote" her to sortie's end.

She felt herself deposited upon a wooden step. Looking up, she recognized the stone block-house literally "perched" upon the top of the precipitous granite hump up which they had come.

In the inspirational light of a refuge of to-day Pape had remembered that olden fortress which he had been surveying when detected by the "quail" cop, Pudge O'Shay.

Straightening to the sheet-iron door, he tried the knob, then the comparative strength of his shoulder. But the protection so generously accorded park rovers of earlier wars seemed denied them. Investigating through one of the oblong loopholes, he saw that the door was fastened with a spring lock which could be opened without a key from inside. Straightway he gave his consideration to the fifteen-foot stone wall.

Never had the Westerner aspired to plaudits as a human fly, yet no Hell-roaring cliff had been sheer enough to forbid his ascent. Pulling off his boots, he essayed the latest in difficulties stocking-footed; after several slip-backs, went over the top. The door thrown wide, he gathered Jane up and stumbled with her over a slab-like doorsill that wobbled under their weight.

"Odd," murmured the girl looking about, "that I should be hiding from the law in this favorite relic of Grandfather Lauderdale! One of his foibles as a Grand Army veteran was to come here at sunrise on victory anniversaries and run up a flag on that staff. Some sentimental park commissioner gave him a key and he never missed an occasion."

"Might have left some furniture scattered about—a few *chaises longues* and easy chairs," Pape complained. "Still, you ought to rest easy on the fact that those

get-'em specialists will never think to look for us in here.”

After making sure that the door had latched itself, he doffed his coat and spread it for her to sit on, with her back to a cleaner-than-most section of the wall. Although only the cuff of one out-flung sleeve formed his seat, he felt more comfortable, by contrast with recent rigors, than in all the long stretch of his past—or so he claimed to Jane.

The hour was the veribest of the whole twenty-four group, he reminded her. Wouldn't she enjoy it? Evening was lowering shadows into the park. Didn't she feel sifting into the roofless block-house the atmosphere of rest-time and peace? Outside the trees were full of birds, as busy about going to bed as the families of any flat-house in the city. Couldn't she imagine with him that the dulled clatter rising from the streets was the rush of some great waterfall of the wild or of winds through a forest or of hoofed herds pounding over a distant plain?

Soothing was Pape's illusion that he was back in his limitless West, but rudely was it broken. Slowly, soundlessly he got to his feet; approached the sheet-iron door; with every sense alert, listened. A sharp knock had sounded from without. No illusion was this. Jane, too, had heard. She had straightened against the stone wall, in her wide eyes and tightened lips the reflex of his thought.

Peace, safety, rest-time? Evidently, not for them!

Had some member of The Finest outwitted them? Was the block-house to prove, not a refuge, but a trap?

CHAPTER XXVI—HOUSE OF BLOCKS

For a moment silence tortured. Then sounded an imperative tapping against the locked door.

Pape, standing within arm-reach of the handle, felt something hard and cold slipped into his grasp; realized that Jane had re-armed him; appreciated her mute suggestion that it would be better, were they known to be blocked within, to take his chance of overcoming a single enemy than to wait until reënforcements arrived.

A second he considered the automatic, before placing it in his pocket ready for emergency in case his arms and fists could not decide the issue. To throw open the door and drag inside the disturber would be the best beginning to fight's finish. He waved the girl toward the far wall; soundlessly turned the latch; flung back with a jerk to admit—

Their pursuer was official, yes, although not so much so as they had feared. With a bound he entered just below Pape's ready fists—and on four feet instead of two.

"Kicko—you scoundrel!"—Pape, sternly.

"Precious pup!"—Jane, caressingly, from the floor seat into which she had collapsed from very weakness of her relief.

Pape mounted the wobbly doorstep and peered outside. No accompanying officers loomed through the fast-falling shadows. Either the dog had outsped them or had deserted them temporarily for some reason canine and less comprehensible. On relating the door and facing about, he saw that reason.

The Belgian, his tail waving like a feather fan, trotted toward the girl, swinging from his mouth a shiny object which explained why he had bumped against and scratched at the door, instead of barking for admittance. In Jane's lap he deposited the tin lunch pail, to carry which to his master at noon-time was his dearest duty and privilege.

More than curiosity as to its contents—an animal eagerness almost as unrestrained as the dog's, returned Pape to his former seat upon the cuff of his coat and hurried his removal of the lid. Three hovered gratefully over the removed contents of that pail. Certainly two were ready to believe that the errand of the third had been as innocent as it now looked. They gave the quondam deserter benefit of every doubt, if only the dog's share of the benefits he had brought.

"You've vindicated yourself, Towser," remarked Pape. "The lady in this case was right. She looks to me like one of the perfect kind that always is—right, you know. *She* said, old side-Kick, that you'd gone to bring a party. And you sure have brought one—some party, this! From the depths of the heart of my inner man, I crave your pardon."

The Belgian's grant of grace was as prompt as moist. His anxiety centered upon a less subtle exchange.

"Oh, I am so hungry—that's mostly what made me collapse!" Jane sighed. "You see, I've formed the bad habit of eating once in a while. I'd quarrel over a crust of stale rye bread. But boiled-tongue-and-mustard sandwiches, potato salad, apple pie—Peter, let's *begin!*"

It did not take the three of them long to demonstrate that there was one luncheon of which Shepherd Tom never should get a crumb. Between bites Pape remembered aloud the herdsman's rather dubious admission of Kicko's propen-

sity at times to present the precious pail to the “wrong” person. In this case, however, even he must have admitted that the wrong was the right. As the edge of their hunger was dulled they deducted the possibilities. Either the police dog had missed his master at the noon hour or allowed himself to be distracted by some canine caprice. Happening into the excitement of the posse, he had relinquished the pail to join the chase. Afterward, having found preferred friends rather than enemies to be the quarry, he had remembered duty neglected and broken away to retrieve his pail.

The three-from-one meal ended, the girl took off her hat and settled back against the stone wall with a smile the more æsthetic for its physical content. The dog, although fuller of good-fellowship than of food, emulated her smile in spirit if not in expression, stretched out across their feet, gaped his mouth and flopped his tail. The man was able to delight the more in that rare smile on Jane’s reposeful features because released from crasser cravings. He leaned low toward her in the dusk, as though to be under its downshed radiance.

Her beauty seemed to intensify—to be taking the light and making the darkness. Small wonder, he thought, that blind eyes ached again to behold that face, pure as marble alive, tender of line, yet strong—eyes the purple of a royal mystery, lips the color of life, hair a black, lustrous veil draped to reveal, rather than conceal.

“You look,” said he, “like the spirit of evening—the spirit that lures a fellow away from the rest of the world and contents him with one warm hearth-fire, one steady light, one complete companionship. Every man who battles through his day hopes for that spirit at his eventide. I have battled a bit to-day, Jane, and I—I can’t help hoping—”

“You believe in spirits, then?” she asked as if to cover, even in that sympathetic light, the suggestion of his broken words.

He nodded. “Assorted kinds—liquid, ghosts—and you.”

“Then maybe you won’t laugh at my fancy—” her voice lowered superstitiously—“that Grandfather Lauderdale’s spirit is hovering around inside this block-house—*now*.”

He did laugh, but softly. “Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Oh, he wouldn’t like any such formality! I can just see him sizing you up for himself with one glance of those blue, cliff-browed eyes of his. He used to tell me my inmost little-girl secrets before I could confide them to him, he was so second-sighted. The first time he brought me here was at one of his flag-raising dawns. I was very small, but I’ll never forget him, my tall, strong old fire-eater whom everybody but me thought queer, with his magnificent head of thick, white, curling hair. A sort of glory lit in his face from the rising sun and the tears staggered through the furrows of his cheeks when the flag caught the

breeze—spread out its full assurance of the freedom he had fought to win.”

“Never mind that introduction. Already you have presented him to me. Howdy, old-timer! Right glad to meet you.”

Pape, his grin gone, reached forward and grasped and shook the empty air.

“As I grew older,” Jane continued, “I came with him often. One time was when they planted a bronze tablet in the outer wall as a tribute to the outpost service which this house rendered in the War of 1812.”

“They did, eh? A tablet—for the War of—” More than before Pape looked interested. “Maybe it ain’t granddad’s spirit, after all—maybe only the ghost of association.”

“No, I’m sure it is he. Wait. Perhaps he has a message for us.” Still with that vague smile on her lips, Jane closed her eyes and spoke dreamily: “He *has* a message. It is for me. He wants me to give you what I’ve wanted to give you all along, my entire confidence—to tell you that I’ve trusted you from first glance, no matter how I’ve acted—to tell you just what is the improbable-sounding treasure that we’ve been hunting so desperately, lest our enemies find and destroy it—to tell you how and why the possession of it will clear my father’s name and restore us to that ‘fortune forevermore’ promised in his cryptogram. You’ll be incredulous at first, Peter Pape, but all will work out once we have possession of—Listen, closely, now. That crock of the first verse holds—”

Pape, despite her allegedly mystic instructions, interrupted: “Don’t want you to tell me! Won’t hear it!”

“Why-Not Pape,” her eyes flashed open, “you’re a—At least, you *might* be said to be mulish, the way you stick to a point.”

“Did granddad’s spirit dictate that?” he enquired mildly.

“No. That’s thrown in on my own account. It is ridiculous for you to be risking life and limb, reputation, money and comfort, for something whose very nature you don’t know.”

“But I do know for what I’m risking all those little things.”

“For what, then?”

“For you.”

The pause that ensued may be utilized for the admission that Pape was not as superior to curiosity as his stand would suggest. Indeed, he had speculated, so far as his intelligence and knowledge would take him, over the exact nature of the hidden hoard. He had heard of gold and jewels buried by eccentrics of little faith in modern banks and presumed that something such was deposited in the missing crock. Once Jane had said that the buried treasure was “bigger than Central Park itself.” Just now she had declared the desperation of their hunt due to fear lest their enemies “destroy” it. Destroy what was bigger than Central Park itself? She had added a new and confusing touch to the mystery.

"I set out to give you the common or garden variety of service," he explained his stand. "That's a kind that don't need to understand, that digs ditches and wages wars and wins women. Don't load me down with knowledge now. Let me go all the way to trail's-end—the crock—just trusting that it will lead me to you."

He bent that she should not miss his promising smile—twilight was mixing with starlight by now.

"Isn't faith best proved without words, dear?" he asked her. "If you have any in me, this would seem a right good time to prove it. Cease worrying. Trust me. Rest. Isn't everything snug and *au fait*? You have most everything you need—even a chaperone."

"Meaning Kicko or that hoot-owl?"

"Meaning granddad's spirit."

"Oh ... all right ... I'll try."

After a time—

"Jane, tell the truth and shame the devil—don't you prefer me to that wall?"

"Why—why—"

"Please prefer me."

Perhaps his arm did more than his words to persuade her. At any rate, with her head resting against his shoulder, she made admission.

"I do—prefer you to a stone wall, you know."

"And aren't you going to prefer me to everybody and everything? I don't wish to seem to be making love to you, Miss Lauderdale—not just yet. You must admit that I have been very slow and steady."

"Slow and steady—*you*?"

"But it would help to get that settled now. Aren't you going to prefer me, Jane?"

"I am. That is, I do now—did in fact from that first night when I picked you out of a grand-tier of faces as the one man who—"

"Wait a minute! You say *you* selected *me*?"

He took her by both shoulders; held her away from him; peered, startled, into her eyes.

"Of course. But it was more instinct than reason that made me—"

"Well, if *you* selected *me*—" and he replaced that head of hers, veiled in soft, fragrant black, against the spot preferred to the wall—"I'm helpless."

"But not hopeless, I hope?"

"Hopeless, when I've kissed you once and have hopes that—? Say, I want to be slow and steady, to give you time to realize without being told that you're going to marry me. But if you self-selected me, Jane Lauderdale, maybe you'll notify me as to the soonest possible moment when I'm due to kiss you again."

She drew far enough away to peer into his eyes. Faint-smiling, yet wholly

serious, she considered. Then—

“Peter Pape, why not now?” she asked him.

Pape had other reasons than the girl’s weariness for persuading her to try for a snatch of the sleep she might need against possible strain on her nerve and endurance ahead. He wished to weigh—well, several interesting observations.

For long after she had accepted his knee as a pillow, the rock floor as a bed, a live-fur rug for her feet and his coat for her coverlet, he pulled on his pipe; returned the dark scowl of the down-drooping night; thought. The while, out-loud observations which had seemed to soothe Polkadot on that previous trip to the block-house recurred to him. More or less monotonously he crooned them over her like a lullaby.

“Don’t you hear the dog-wood yapping, dear?... Can’t you just imagine those old-fashioned pop-guns popping?... Nothing to break the silences save the shriek of ten thousand auto sirens.... No one around but people—millions of ’em! Don’t it make you think of a little old home in my great new West, where we’re to go one day—so like and yet so different?... And Friend Equus is to go along, my heart, all the more appreciative after his clash with the tame.... Yes, and you too, Police Pup—if Shepherd Tom can be persuaded to let you resign from the Force. He just may be willing after to-day’s mis-delivered lunch.

“Then list to the Nubian roar—much more like a lion it sounds than the rumble of city streets.... List the whisper of poplars four—there would be four, except that two have been white-circled into stumps.... Count eighteen—twelve.... Take heart and delve.... Above the crock the block will rock.... That block did rock—did rock—and rock—”

He leaned low; listened. Jane’s gentle, even breathing reported her asleep. He was more pleased than by any of the wonderful things she had done while awake—even than by that voluntary kiss, so precious as compared with her involuntary first. She did really trust him and rest in his protectorate, else could she never have been lulled by his murmurings into unconsciousness. She must indeed have been spent, when the growls and spasmodic foot work of the live fur rug did not disturb her. Kicko, evidently, had lapsed into dog dreams of chases and fights.

The moon must be rising. Into the block-house was shed a weird, indirect light. Then more and more direct it grew until, over the top of one wall, appeared a large, round inverted bowl of a candle-power that dimmed the kilowatt signs along the Gay Way.

Earlier in the evening, when he had spoken of waiting for darkness, under cover of which to attempt an escape afoot, Pape might have complained at the illumination of the sky. Now he beamed back at the moon. And his complacency waxed with her light, although he realized that bold young Dawn would be up

to flirt with the pale night queen long before her departure; that any attempt to escape from the park would not be blanketed that night.

Let Luna reach the steps of her throne, he bade himself in thought, that each corner of the old refuge house might be lighted. Let Jane have out her sleep—happy he to guard her gracious rest. Let the Nubian roar of power that was not leonine grow faint and die. Let the city and the city's Finest go off guard.

Time enough, then, to test application of the eccentric's cryptogram, copper-plated line by line, to a locality unsuspected by their enemies and chosen by themselves quite through chance. Not a doubt shadowed his mind as he awaited the zero hour. The lines fitted, every one.

"List' to the Nubian roar"—to the night noises of the surrounding metropolitan monster, uncaged in Zoo, never-sleeping, ever-pacing.

"And whisper of poplars four"—the branches of two staunch old rustlers among the pines made silver lace of the moonlight just outside the wall. Doubtless the two that had been sentenced to death had been very much alive at the time of the cryptogram's composition.

"'Tis on a height"—where was one so high to the hoary-headed veteran as this on which he delighted to raise his country's flag?

"Eighteen and twelve will show"—Jane had named these very figures as the date on the memorial tablet placed in the wall without. Not rods, not yards, not feet did they stand for, but a date.

"Begin below"—and below was a block that rocked "as rocks wrong's overthrow!"

Not until the inverted bowl of the moon was a central ceiling light did Why Not Pape move to answer the queer questions in his mind. Gently he then lifted the coat-coverlet off the woman below; wrapped it into a roll; with it replaced the pillow of his knee. A low command he gave the police dog to lie still. Swiftly he crossed to the threshold stone, tilted it far enough to one side to assure himself it was a thin slab and muttered in a sort of ecstasy:

"Count eighteen—twelve,
Take heart and delve."

His maximum of strength was required to turn the stone upon its back on the floor of the block-house. Across the earth upon which it so long had lain scurried the crawling things that thrive in under-rock dampness. Down on his knees dropped Pape and, with a slate-like fragment of rock which had broken off in the fall, began to remove the soft soil. Soon the emergency implement met obstruction. No longer needing advice to "take heart," he cast aside the slate and began scooping out the earth around this object with bare hands.

A heavy touch upon his arm shocked him into an over-shoulder glance. The Belgian stood bristling just behind him; had tapped him with a paw insistent for a share in the digging job. Willingly enough Pape accepted his efficient aid down to the top of an earthen pot of the Boston bean variety. More excited than in past hunts for seldom-found gold pockets of his early prospecting days, the Westerner pushed aside the dog; worked his two nail-torn hands down and down the smooth-curved sides. With a slow tug, he lifted what he could no longer doubt was the crock of the crypt. Reverently as though he were an acolyte bearing some holy vessel to an altar, he carried it across the room and placed it at the feet of the low-seated high-priestess drawn up against the wall.

“Am I dreaming?” she wondered aloud.

“Am I?” he answered by asking. “Or do I see a tall, strong old man, with a shock of white hair and a laugh on his lips, raising a flag on yonder pole?”

He removed the lid and she the contents of that crock of “fortune forevermore.”

And thus was fulfilled one of the wild Westerner’s wishes—that he should not know until he had found the object of his search. Thus, through deeds and not words, he learned the nature of Granddad Lauderdale’s buried hoard.

No helping of “a thousand on a plate,” as doughboy might have expected, did Jane serve from the pot. No stream of gold fell through her fingers, to puddle between them on the stone-flagged floor. No packets of bank-notes crinkled in her grasp. No king’s-ransom jewels blinked in the night-light after their long interment. Yet was the girl’s prediction proved true that he scarcely could believe at first the nature of their find. Stupidly he stared. Only slowly could his mind, face its surprise and its enormity.

CHAPTER XXVII—“FORTUNE FOREVERMORE”

At ten o’clock next morning a taxicab carrying three fares drew out of the Fifth Avenue “pass” and stopped before the Sturgis house. A woman and one of the men alighted. The second remained seated, his waiting rôle evidently prearranged, as the pair did not so much as nod back at him. Ascending the stone

flight, they rang the front bell, as strangers might. In due time the door swung open.

“Miss Jane—thank Heaven you’re alive and back again!” Jasper’s exclamation was fervent beyond all rules of butlership. “Mr. Pape, good morning, sir. Your arrival is timely, too. They have been telephoning in all directions to locate you. Such excitement, Miss Jane, as we’ve been suffering!”

“*They*, Jasper?” The girl faced about in the vestibule.

“The madame, Mrs. Sturgis, and Judge Allen. He has had a fall and broken his shoulder, we fear. Mr. Harford, also, was in some sort of accident. An automobile struck him, I believe.”

“Accidents all round, eh?” Pape enquired. “Ain’t that odd?”

“Indeed, yes, sir—odd and unfortunate.”

Distressed as he looked, Jasper might have joined in the exchanged smile of the younger pair, had he known how fortuitous, if odd, was this gathering of those persons concerned in the pending crock’s-bottom settlement. Indeed, since the lid had been lifted from the bean pot of fabulous store, circumstances had worked with them.

Their exit from the block-house and the park had been shared with that of the many young couples driven from Eden at the strokes of midnight. With the crock between them wrapped in Pape’s coat, they had sauntered out Pioneers Gate unmolested by the law so lately hot at their heels. Straight to the yellow brick on East Sixty-third they had whirred themselves and their find; had seen triumph complete in a pair of outward-blinded eyes which could reflect glad sights from within.

Only an hour off after breakfast did Pape ask for the rescue of his equine pal from the granite-spiked corral that flanks the mid-park stables. This was effected by a ransom payment insignificant as compared with the paint-pony’s joy. He was then ready for the business of this first day of real togetherness with his self-selected—she who admittedly herself had selected him.

Of the quartette in the luxurious living-room upstairs, Irene Sturgis was the first to exclaim their unannounced entry.

“Jane—and still with *him*—the impossible person!”

The histrionic horror in her voice brought Mills Harford to his feet; contrary-wise, sank Mrs. Sturgis into the depths of a wing-chair; broke up the council of war under way beside the couch on which lay the wounded little judge.

“Good morning, one and all!”

The cheer of Jane’s greeting was not reflected in the faces of those addressed.

“We hardly hoped to find you bunched up and waiting for us like this,” Pape added with something of a flourish. “Saves sending for you.”

The matron straightened on the edge of her chair and, with a precise expression, inspected first him, then her niece. "You two spent the night together, I assume?"

"Most of it, auntie, at a spiritualistic seance in Central Park."

Pape chuckled. "The most inspiring I ever attended."

"*Jane*—and you the girl I counted on as so reliable! My Irene is steady by contrast. You pretend to go visiting friends and only let us know your whereabouts when you get arrested. One night in a police station-house and the next—I presume—at least, I *hope*, for all our sakes, that you thought to marry this—this young man before bringing him here."

"Marry, mother—that *brute*?" Irene slithered from her seat on the arm of the chair recently vacated by the handsome real-estater. Throwing herself upon her cousin's neck with a freshet of real tears, she wailed: "Oh, my poor dar-rling—our *poor* old Janie! No matter what your mistakes, you are more to be pitied than punished. Don't lay your neck on the altar of matrimony for this outlaw. I am sure there's a good man and true somewhere in the world for you, even though he does seem a long time showing up. Don't be overcome by this Wild West stuff. I know full well that he has his fatal fascinations. I was once but a bird held in his snake-like spell, until my Harfy saved me from the high seas of his tyranny and the burning blast of his—"

"Enough, Rene. Loose me. You'll drown me with brine if you don't smother me first," begged the object of her anxiety.

The more Jane struggled, however, the tighter did the bob-haired cousin cling.

"But, you poor thing, I know he'll turn on you one day and beat you up! You saw how he treated my Harfy—a man and his superior in every way—how he rained blow after blow on his priceless pate. What *wouldn't* he do to a weak woman in his power? Don't you go and get desperate just because—Luck in love always seems to run my way, don't you think so—or do you? Harfy was so nice-nice when he was coming to and so suppressed. I *dote* on suppression. Do you—or don't you? He just gazed at me with all his *soul* when I asked the question I knew he was too used up to ask me. And we're going to have the biggest church wedding of any girl in my set, with all the trimmings, just as soon as mother can manage it. Aren't we, dar-rling?"

"It seems—that we are."

In the admission, her challenged fiancé looked neither into the black eyes of his perquisitory young lady of to-day nor the blue ones of her upon whom he had pressed his heart and hand on every available occasion in their near past. His expression was that of one who acknowledges himself vanquished—and by a victor fairer than the fight.

“Since, madame, you approve and even urge my suit for your niece’s hand”—and Pape frowned deeply before the disdainful matron—“I’ll go one better than Harfy by admitting without being told to that I have assented. Although we aren’t married yet-yet, Irene, we’re going to be right soon-soon. That was as unalterable from the first as the laws of gravity—or of levity. By way of trimmings, we have a score or two to settle first with three of you folks, which is why we came.”

“Ah!”

The pudgy jurist had risen painfully on one elbow and now sent the warning word in company with a look—same sort—Mrs. Sturgis’ way.

“Thank God we are not too late, Helen,” he added after a throat-clearance, “to save dear Jane from this schemer. As I hoped, the formalities of our marriage law have not been complied with. This leaves you free to act as the foolish girl’s nearest of kin. It will be easy to secure an order from one of my friends at court restraining her further activities by committing her into your care.”

“It will take more than an order from such friends at court as you will have after to-day to restrain Jane,” Pape suggested pleasantly.

“Clearly she has acted under undue influence from you so far, young man,” Allen continued with impressment. “Were you half as clever as conspicuous you’d have got the ceremony over before coming here to threaten her family. As the husband of an orphaned young woman you might have had something to say, but—”

“Orphaned?”

With the interruption Pape crossed to one of the Fifth Avenue windows and there busied himself with a quite unnecessary readjustment of the shade.

The lady of the house was apparently too disturbed to resent this new impertinence.

“You know how I dread the courts, Samuel. Let me first try suasion.” In emotional appeal she turned to Jane. “For sake of the dear, dead sister who was your mother, I beg you, as one who has tried to take a mother’s place, to give up this ill-timed attack of folly and this impossible man. Perhaps you inherited the tendency, for she also made a sad mistake in choosing her mate.”

“She did?” the “orphan” asked quietly, her eyes on the velvet hangings of the hall door.

“In marrying a Lauderdale—practically a pauper despite the family obsession of their claim to vast estates in the Borough of the Bronx—she ruined her life. She, too, became obsessed through his power to control her thoughts. Her life, as well as his, was one long nightmare of crown-grants, wills, deeds, what-nots. She died of it, dear, just as your father afterwards went down under disgrace and gloom. Now you, child, stain your white hands with this black magic. Excited by

the craze for adventure of this person, you let yourself be led into indiscretions that bid fair to ruin you. Why not give him up now—this morning? I'll stand by you no matter what is said."

"Me, too, dar-rling," chimed in Irene. "I'll soon be a matron, you know, and I'll find you some adequate male, up-to-date though honest, whom we'll persuade to forget and forgive."

Aunt Helene, her breath regained, pleaded further: "Listen to this before you leap, my child. Despite what your grandfather left in the way of puzzle-charts, Judge Allen and I, acting in your interest, have at last satisfied ourselves that there is nothing—quite nothing of the slightest material value to you buried in Central Park. We didn't intend to tell you so soon, but all last night the judge had a crew of men working at a spot indicated in the cryptogram."

"And how did he get the instructions of the cryptogram?" Jane enquired. "No one saw it before it was stolen but me."

"*Jane*, that you should speak to me in that suspicious tone! Had I been given opportunity, I should have told you that yesterday the contents of your antique snuff-box were secretly exchanged for the large reward which I offered in your name, presumed by the thief who stole it from my safe."

"You don't say, ma'am? So! It was, eh?" The Westerner was rather explosive from acute interest.

The matron ignored him. "The judge, Jane, followed directions and discovered a crock—large and open topped, like the sort dill pickles are made in. But, alas, it contained nothing but a half-witted old man's keepsakes—scraps of his unutterable poetry, ribbon-tied parcels of yellowed love-letters, pressed flowers and a wisp of some woman's hair. Were your father alive, I'd feel I should take some of my own fortune and make restitution of his frauds upon the collateral heirs. But since he's dead and gone, I don't exactly feel—"

"Not altogether gone, Helene, yet not in need of your restitution!"

At the voice, Mrs. Sturgis smothered a scream; turned; stared.

Through the portières that closed off the hall stepped Curtis Lauderdale, led from the taxi by the driver thereof in answer to Pape's signal from the window.

Verily an apparition did he look to the four who had accepted the report of his death. Mrs. Sturgis, with hands grasping behind her, was backing as though from a ghost. The little jurist did not move, but all the apple color had departed his cheeks. Irene's red-rouged lips could not pale, but at least her mouth was agape. Harford stiffened, as though preparing for attack.

One on either side, Jane and Pape crossed to the latecomer and lined up the triumvirate. Accurately the blind eyes fixed on Allen. In direct address the long unheard lips began to speak.

"We meet again, Sam, my trusted counsellor and cherished friend. With

your mask torn off, you look more changed to me than I possibly can to you. Oh, don't waste time with denials! I'd need to be blinder than mustard gas could make me not to see you as you are. For years you traded upon the gullibility of my father. You persuaded him that fortune would build bigger and faster if he withheld proof of title to our Bronx estates and let the Guarantee Investors develop a property that has belonged to the Lauderdale's since the grant of King James. You overcame his needs and his children's needs with false promises of rich reward when he eventually would claim the improved acreage. And after letting him die in half-crazed poverty, with his mysterious instructions unfound and our title proofs buried with them, you advised me to raise money from the collateral heirs and institute a court fight to establish our rights. And it was you, I feel sure, who brought these heirs before the Grand Jury that indicted me for fraud just after I had sailed for Somewhere in France."

A moment Lauderdale paused in the controlled fury of his accusation, brushed a hand across his eye-lids and moistened his lips.

"But the crookedest lane has its end, Sam Allen. My chief treasure you could not take from me—a glorious girl child born to retribution. To her aid came this real-man sample from out the West. Working together they have recovered every necessary document, even to my parent's last will and testament. We are ready and able now to right the most grievous wrong ever perpetrated in the medium of New York real estate—to force your company to turn over a thousand acres in the heart of the Bronx and to make restitution, under your guarantee, to innocent purchasers, even if it breaks you as you would have broken—"

He was stopped by the grasp which Pape had put on his arm.

"Don't dump all the onus on the judge, Mr. Lauderdale," he advised. "We mustn't forget that he is a lawyer, hence full of wriggles. Best leave his punishment to me and that more easily proved charge of the Montana Gusher oil-stock fraud. There is one among those present, to approach the subject guardedly, who is more directly responsible for the Bronx realty steal than His Honor."

Even Jane, close as she had been to the queer questioner throughout recent developments, was startled by his statement. What sort of a lone hand was he playing?

Allen's pudgy palms clasped. Aunt Helene eyed one, then another of the group, as though bewildered.

Only Pape's gaze did not wander. It turned from the blind man's face to fix upon that of Mills Harford. At the silent accusation, Irene sprang toward him, no longer a kitten, but a flare-eyed mother-cat in defense of her own.

"Don't you dare accuse my Harfy, you cave-brute!" she cried. "Just because he makes *money* out of real-estate isn't any reason to jump at the *conclusion* that he—"

“Right, Rene.” Pape had a sympathetic grin for her vehemence. “I was only considering your Harfy as a possible witness to the truth. Cross my heart, I ain’t got a thing against him personally, now that he has consented to take you instead of—”

“You horrid, hateful thing!” she screamed. “What do you *mean* by ‘consented to’—”

“Stand corrected, miss, soon to be madame. Now that you have consented to take him instead of aspiring to me.”

“Beast! However could I have thought you nice-nice?”

“Can’t say, unless it is that I am—sometimes.”

Jane broke up their sprightly exchange with the serious demand: “But the some one more directly responsible?”

“Be done with innuendo, young man!” Mrs. Sturgis rose to her feet, with every inch of her scant height counting. “A gentleman—one of whom we say ‘to the manner born’—makes no accusation without proof.”

“I don’t need to make accusation or present proof to you, madam.”

“You’re not trying to insinuate—”

Many lights had Pape seen in women’s eyes, but never one as startled, angry and afraid as that flashed him by Aunt Helene. Next moment she attempted a light laugh that ended with a nervous crescendo.

“You, too, must be mad.”

“At least that,” he admitted cheerfully. “You’ve known why for several minutes past. You acknowledge the judge here as your advisor, don’t you?”

“I certainly do.”

“Better ask his advice, then, without further delay. I’ve an idea he’ll tell you to come across clean—admit that you are The Guarantee Investors, Incorporated, who have been trying to grab off the Lauderdale’s Bronx ranch and put Jane here out of the heiress class. Come, madam! Any woman who can rob her own safe and give the alarm and play-act the grief of a whole wake afterwards certainly ought to get a great deal out of a confession scene. Suppose you take your family-friend tool and your in-law-to-be into the library for a conference. Just possibly I—the outlaw-that-was—can show Mr. and Miss Lauderdale reasons why they should listen to a plea for mercy.”

Before Pape had finished, the small jurist was on his feet in acceptance of the suggestion. The wilt of guilt drooped the matron into the arms of her child. As one woman they were supported toward the door by Mills Harford.

“It was all my poor husband’s idea, not my own,” Aunt Helene was heard to defend to an interlude of sobs. “And with him, as with me, it was all because we did so want our poor Irene to have the fortune her beauty deserves. We knew how impractical the Lauderdale’s were. He didn’t believe they ever could make

good their claim to the Bronx estate. We both thought it would be better for our own dear child to have it than some outsider. When he realized that he couldn't live to see the plan through he charged me to carry it out. Of course I meant to make proper provision for Jane if—"

The door closed behind them.

When the triumvirate stood alone, low-voiced and happier exchanges passed.

"How did you know, son?"

"Didn't know. Aunt Helene seemed too good to be true, so I just stayed on a busted flush and finished a winner. Why not?"

"Why not, indeed?" Jane showed sufficient knowledge of the game to pay over what was due the taker of the pot.

"Welcomed at last to Lonesome Town—welcomed with open arms!" exulted he who so recently had had to welcome himself.

And that very night Broadway saw new reason to believe in its signs. Out over Times Cañon winked a re-lettered electric message that lit the imagination as does every such happy ending and happier start:

CONGRATULATIONS
MR. AND MRS. WHY-NOT PAPE

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LONESOME TOWN ***

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