

The Lake Mystery

BY
MARVIN DANA

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**“Mine—mine ... and I must leave it all—must leave
it all—soon! Oh, so soon! God!”** *[Page 7.]*

The Lake Mystery

BY
MARVIN DANA

Author of
The Woman of Orchids, A Puritan Witch,
Within the Law, etc.

FRONTISPIECE BY
J. ALLEN ST. JOHN

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THE LAKE MYSTERY

PROLOGUE

THE MISER

THE Dresden clock on the mantel struck twelve in soft, slow, golden notes. As the gentle echoes died away, Horace Abernethy, sitting huddled in a morris chair before the fire of logs, stirred feebly. Presently, he sat erect, moving clumsily, with the laboriousness of senility. But there was nothing of the aged in the glances of his keen, dark eyes, which shone forth brightly from out the pallid parchment of his face. His intent gaze darted first toward the clock, to verify the hour of which the gong had given warning; it went next to the closed window on the right of the fireplace, over which the shades had not been drawn. The unsheltered panes were spangled with raindrops, and, as he watched, a new gust beat its tattoo on the glass. The old man drew down the tip of his thin, beaklike nose in a curious movement of disgust, then stroked petulantly the white cascade of beard that flowed to his bosom.

“Curse such weather!” He snarled, in a voice querulous and shrill with years. He stood up with sudden alertness, surprising after his first awkward slowness; a brisk gesture of the head threw back from his face the luxuriant white curls of hair. “But, in spite of it, I must go again, and so make an end of the job—else—death might take me unawares.”

Abernethy glanced aimlessly about the long, low-ceiled room, now lighted only by the glow from the fire. After a little, he advanced to the center, where a concert-grand piano dominated the scene. In a moment more, he had lighted the tall lamp that stood at hand. A sheet of music in manuscript was lying on the rack. He seized this, and scanned it eagerly, muttering the while.

“Curious it should work out so,” he exclaimed, at last; “curious, and infernally clever, too!” He seated himself before the instrument, still holding communion with his thoughts. “Yes, it will do—capitally—and it has the spirit of the thing. It chants the curse.”

Suddenly, as he ceased speaking, the old man lifted his arms in a quick, graceful movement. The long, clawlike fingers, supple still, fell vehemently on the keys, in a clamor of melancholy music. There was only a single strain of melody—that written on the page before him; but he played it again and again, as if obsessed by its weird rhythm, played it blatantly, tenderly, with reluctant slowness, with

masterful swiftness. And, as he went on and on, he abandoned the simplicity of the written score. In its stead, he multiplied harmonies, superimposed innumerable variations. The musical rapture revealed the decrepit old man as a virtuoso. The treatment of the theme showed him to be at once the scholar and the creature of vivid emotional imagination, while the physical interpretation of the dreaming that drove him on displayed a technique astonishing in one so burdened with years.

But ever, throughout the wildest extravagances of his fancy's flight, there was no failure of that first morbid rhythm, of that first monotonous melody in minor set on the sheet before him.

This was the score on which he built the ordered sequence of his improvisations:

[\[Listen\]](#)

The player ended with a harsh clangor from the keys, and whirled about on the stool to stare intently toward the wall opposite the fireplace. Now, his pallid face in the glimpse that showed above the beard, was faintly flushed from the bodily strain of playing. But the fire burning in the dark eyes proved that the emotion within still maintained its vigor undiminished. Springing up, he drew his tall, thin form to its full height, and stood thus motionless for a long minute, gazing fixedly at the wall before him. Then, again with the swift movement of the head by which the white curls were thrown back from his brow, he strode forward, and came to a stand facing the naked wainscoting of the wall.

In the long, barren room, devoid of other ornament, this paneling was of itself sufficient to command attention. Beyond a few scattered chairs, a solitary table with its lamp, the irons of the fireplace, a cabinet for music, the piano and the high lamp standing beside it, there was nothing in the place, not even so much as draperies to mask the ugliness of the window-shades. Such scarcity of furnishing was emphasized by the size of the apartment, which was fifty feet in length and half as wide. Doubtless, the occupant had preferred the space thus free from aught that might in any wise hamper the resonance of the music. Be that as it may, the ornateness of the wainscoting was made conspicuous, since only the piano offered another interest. Of black walnut, it ran to a height of at least seven feet out of the ten that measured the wall, and, extending around the four sides of the room, gave to the aspect of the place a quality of melancholy so extreme as to be almost funereal—an effect in no way lessened on closer observation, since the deep carving was merely a conventional labyrinth of scrolls.

The manner in which Abernethy scanned the wall opposite him was too intent

to be explained by any ordinary concern with woodwork long familiar. Moreover, his eyes were glowing fiercely; the talonlike fingers writhed curiously where they hung at his sides; the shaggy white brows were drawn low; from time to time, the tip of the thin nose was thrust downward in the movement peculiar to him. It was plain that he was in the grip of profound feeling, though he stood mute before a stark space of wall.

The old man bestirred himself abruptly. His right arm was raised with swift grace; the dexterous fingers played for a moment silently, yet firmly, on the crowded traceries of the carving. A flurry of wind brought the rain clattering noisily against the window-panes, but the musician gave no heed; the clock rang softly from a single stroke of the gong, but his ears had no care for the hour. He was muttering to himself now, brokenly, despairingly, the while his fingers wandered over the intricate design of the paneling:

“Mine—mine ... and I must leave it all—must leave it all—soon! Oh, so soon! God! The torture of it ... mine—all mine! Ah!”

Without warning sound the panel on which his hand rested had swung outward, until it stood like a door, wide-open. An ejaculation of eagerness burst from Abernethy’s lips, as he peered within the opening thus revealed through the wall. A large plate of polished steel glimmered in the dim light that came from the lamp beside the piano. A figured knob in the center of this plate proclaimed the fact that here was a cunningly contrived safety-vault.

The old man’s arm again reached forth with that astonishing quickness which characterized his every movement. Now, the agile fingers seized the knob of the safe door, twirling it with practised certainty of touch. Presently, the methodical adjustment complete, he tugged briskly on the knob, and the door swung outward. An exclamation of delight burst from Abernethy’s lips; his form grew suddenly tense. With febrile haste, he put both hands to the lighter inner doors, and pulled them open. A small electric torch lay ready to hand just within, on which he seized. Immediately, its soft radiance revealed the whole interior of the recess.

The space was well filled with canvas bags, of the sort commonly used to contain specie. Their appearance there, thus hidden and protected, left no doubt of the fact that they were the old man’s chief treasure. For that matter, there was nothing else inside the vault, not even ledgers, or papers of any sort whatever. It was quite evident that Abernethy had no hesitation in trusting his other valuables to less-secret places of security. Here, he concealed with such

elaborate precaution only actual coin. And now, secure from all observation at midnight in this remote region, where the isolation of time and place were intensified by the downpour of the tempest, the aged musician gave free rein to his consuming passion, stripped from his nature the last mask of hypocrisy, gloated and adored at beck of that devil who was his master.

Abernethey nimbly caught up two of the bags, and bore them to the table that stood against the wall to the right of the vault, where he set them down with a softness of movement which was like a caress in its tenderness. Then, he sank into a chair beside the table, and began untying the cord that held shut the mouth of one of the bags. It was only a matter of seconds until the sack gaped open—he paused now, to stare about the room with furtive, fearful eyes. His scrutiny was directed principally toward the windows: his lips were drawn in a snarl as he realized that the shades had not been pulled down. He sprang to his feet, and darted to the nearest, where he arranged the shade to his satisfaction, mumbling and mouthing the while. Afterward, he made a round of the room, very swiftly, yet using all care to render himself secure from observation by anyone without. A glance at the doors having shown him that all these were shut fast, he at last strode back to the table, where the money-bags awaited him. The chair was drawn close; into it, Abernethey sagged heavily, as if in sudden relaxation from the taut energy that had urged him on hitherto. For a half-minute, he sat crouched over the table in an attitude of utter weariness, almost of collapse. But abruptly, he aroused himself from the clutch of lethargy. Once again, he held himself upright; again, his eyes searched the room craftily, alight with emotional fires. Finally, his arms rose swiftly, swooped forward and downward, until the talonlike fingers closed on the bags, which he drew tight to his breast where it pressed against the table. In this posture, which was like an embrace, he remained moment after moment, tense, alert, movelessly alive in every fibre of him. Then, putting term to the rapturous pause the old man sighed faintly, as one who, with infinite reluctance, awakes from ecstasy. He sat rigid, and pushed the two bags a slight distance from the edge of the table. For another little interval, he stared at them, half-doubtfully, in the manner of one returning slowly to reality after the illusions of a dream. A second sigh was breathed from his lips, not blissful now, but weighted with bleak despair. Presently, he tossed his head impatiently, and began fumbling with the string of the second bag. This yielded speedily, as had that of the first. In another instant, he had poured forth the contents of the two sacks; on the table before him lay twin heaps of gold.

Afterward, for more than an hour, the miser gave full play to his vice. Before the smoldering fires of the metal, he worshiped devoutly, abjectly. His soul

prostrated itself in adoration beneath the golden glory that he so loved and revered. At times, he plunged his fingers within the heaps, listening raptly to the clinking song of the coins as they were moved haphazard by the contact; at times, he sat dumb, crooning softly, as if these bits of metal had been sentient things to hark to his hymn of praise. Other vagaries were his, innumerable follies, nameless abasements before this, his most sacred shrine.

Of a sudden, Abernethy sprang to his feet. Leaving the glittering piles on the table, he hurried to the piano, where he seated himself with face turned toward the altar of his worship. The supple fingers touched the keys anew; the melancholy air which he had played before sounded once again. But now, it was rendered simply, without extremes of emotion on the part of its interpreter, without variations in its harmonic forms. Instead, the old man played it slowly and gently throughout, repeating it monotonously many times. The morbid rhythm stood forth ghastly in its naked, sordid truth. It came as a hopeless confession of despair, the ultimate fact in the vice that was his master.

Abernethy went back to the table, stacked coins until he had the measure of a bagful, and thus divided the gold, which was then returned to the sacks. Next, he brought forth other bags from the vault, until the table was covered. This done, he went out of the room, to reappear after a minute, wearing an old soft hat and a rain-coat with capacious pockets, in which he stored, one by one, the bags of gold.

“Two more trips will do it,” he muttered to himself, as he turned to close and lock the vault. “I must dictate that letter tonight.” Under the touch of his hand, the section of wainscoting swung back into its place. There was not even the suggestion of a crevice to hint of the hiding-place behind the carved wood; the miser turned, and went hastily from the room.



The Dresden clock on the mantel had just sounded the hour of four with its golden notes when Abernethy reentered. The water ran in a stream from his hat; all around him on the floor, as he came to a stand inside the door, drops from the rain-coat formed a growing pool. With a gesture of weariness, he cast off the hat, then freed himself from the coat, which he threw down on the floor with a carelessness which of itself was sufficient evidence that the treasure of gold was no longer there. He went forward to the fireplace, where he sank down into the morris chair, huddling without movement, as one exhausted. It was half an hour

before he had rested enough for further exertion. Then, clumsily and with many groans, he stood up, and once more left the room. He returned soon with a phonograph and a box of rolls, which he set on the table. After he had arranged the machine, he began to dictate a letter into the receiver. His words came distinctly, swiftly, without ever any trace of hesitation. As soon as the first roll had been filled with the record, he paused to insert another, and then straightway continued with similar precision. When, at last, the miser made an end, he had used many rolls, and the first gleam of dawn was beating weakly on the drawn shades of the room.



CHAPTER I

ADVENTURERS' PACT

SAXE TEMPLE regarded with pardonable pride the supper-table laid for four in the parlor of his bachelor apartment. Then, as a knock made known the first arrival, he went to the door, and opened it eagerly. At sight of the tall, soldier-like figure standing on the threshold, his face lighted.

“Roy Morton, by all that’s good!” he cried.

“Hello Saxe, old man,” came the answer, in a musical monotone surprisingly gentle from one so stalwart. “Got your letter, and here I am. Incidentally, I’m tickled to death over the idea of some real excitement. I haven’t had any since a jolly fight in Mexico with a detective, who thought I was an absconder from the States, and tried to hustle me across the border.” Morton thrust out a rather heavy chin, so that in a twinkling his face grew threatening, savage; his kindly blue eyes paled, the lids drew closer. “I had colored souvenirs of his earnestness scattered all over my anatomy for a fortnight. But I didn’t have to have a doctor to patch me up, and he did, so I was satisfied. In fact, I got the doctor for him as soon as he apologized for his mistake.” Morton chuckled at the memory. His face was again all amiability.

Saxe laughed. “You still wear a chip on your shoulder in order to entice somebody into a scrap,” he said.

“Nonsense!” Morton exclaimed, huffily. “You ought to know that I don’t want anything violent. I always try to steer clear of trouble. It’s only when something comes up that a man must resent for the sake of his self-respect that I ever resort to brute force. Why, I——”

Saxe ruthlessly interrupted:

“Oh, certainly, you’re a man of peace, all right! Only—ah, here’s one of them.”

Saxe sprang to his feet, and hurried to the door, on which an imperative knocking sounded. As he turned the knob, the newcomer pushed his way into the room unceremoniously, a man as tall as Morton, but whose six feet of height bulked much larger by reason of the massive build and large head, thatched shaggily with thick, iron-gray hair. The face showed rugged ugliness,

emphasized by muddy skin. His voice was wheezy from climbing the stairs.

“Well, and what’s it all about? What and why? Filibustering? Abduction? Sunken treasure? Count me in on the scheming, strategy, conspiring, plotting. But leave me out when it comes to donning the diving-suit, or engaging in the merry sword-play at the head of the stairs, or any aviation. Well, well, it’s like old times to be together.” He had shaken hands with the two men while speaking, serenely disregarding their verbal greetings, for his huge voice boomed over theirs. “No cigarette,” he concluded, waving away the offered box, as he sank down beside Morton on the couch. “I prefer a man’s smoke.” He drew forth, prepared and lighted an especially fat and black cigar. “The doctor says I smoke too much,” he added, comfortably, after inhaling a startling volume of the smoke.

Saxe smiled unsympathetically.

“It’s eating so much and taking no exercise that makes you puffy.”

Billy Walker snorted indignantly.

“I only eat enough to keep this absurdly large carcass of mine properly stoked,” he declared. “Of course, I don’t take violent exercise. I want my strength for brain-work. You can’t use the same vital force in two ways. If I wanted to be intellectually foolish like you and Roy, why, I’d consume my energy in keeping hard as nails. I, however, prefer intelligence to biceps—where’s Dave?”

“That’s the answer,” Saxe exclaimed, as a knock again sounded.

A moment later, David Thwing, the third and last guest, was in the room. He was the only short member of the group, but he was broad across the shoulders, with a stocky form that promised unusual strength. He might have been good-looking, but for the fact that his nose had once been disastrously smashed and never rightly repaired. Its present outline was as choppy as the Channel seas in a gale. It gave to his face a suggestion of the prize-ring.

Now that the party was complete, Saxe bade his guests take their places at the table.

“No explanations till we’re done with the meal,” he announced, in answer to the questions of his friends.

It was only when the table had been cleared of all save decanters and glasses and smoking materials, that he at last stood up to address his friends. A certain formality in his manner arrested their attention, and they regarded him with a

sudden increase of curiosity.

“It’s now six years since we left the university,” Saxe began. “In the last year, we made a boyish pact. We agreed to answer the call of anyone of us who became embarked in adventure of a sort to require the assistance from the others. So I have summoned you in accordance with the terms of our agreement; you see, I really have a sort of adventure to offer you, though perhaps you’ll think I’m a bit selfish in the matter, for the profit will be all mine. Roy, however, has made money enough so that he doesn’t need any more, and Billy always did have more than he could spend, with his foolish ideas of just learning things, instead of living them. Dave is reasonably poor, but, too, he’s reasonably honest, and so he’s better off without the temptations of great wealth. I’ve come to the conclusion, after careful reflection, that I’m the only one of the quartette who actually is in want of money. My tastes are luxurious, and, too, I have ambitious projects in the direction of operas that I wish to write. I can’t give myself to such serious work while I have to turn all my energies into musical pot-boilers to soothe the savage breast of the wolf at the door.”

“The metaphor is mixed,” Billy Walker grumbled. “The purpose of pot-boilers is to soothe the stomach, not the breast. But what could be expected of a composer essaying oratory?”

Saxe accepted the criticism without rancor.

“Anyhow, I’ll let that stand by way of introduction,” he continued. “The pith of the matter is this: I’ve had some money left to me, a tidy sum in fact.”

Instantly, there came a chorus of congratulations from his friends. But the host waved his hand for silence, while he shook his head lugubriously.

“I’m not exactly ready for congratulations yet,” he declared, when they had fallen silent again. “It’s true, I’ve had some money left to me, but the deuce of it is, I don’t know where the money is.”

Exclamations burst forth anew, eager questionings.

“The simplest way of explaining the whole affair,” Saxe went on, “is to make it known to you in the form in which it was made known to me:

“The morning of the day on which I wrote to you, I received a letter. That letter was the first warning I had of this possible adventure. Now, I’ll read the letter to you, and then you’ll have the same knowledge of the whole matter as I have. By way of preface, I need only say that the writer of the letter has since died, and I have been formally notified by his lawyer concerning the old man’s will, in exact

accordance with the terms of the letter he wrote me.”

The young man took from his breast-pocket a typewritten letter, and proceeded to read it aloud. From the first word to the last, the auditors sat silent, almost without movement, save now and then for the relighting of cigar or cigarette.

The letter ran as follows:

Saxe Temple, Esq.,
New York City.

Dear Sir:

It will doubtless astonish you at the outset to receive a letter of this length from one who is a complete stranger to you. It will astonish you still more when you learn the contents of this communication. I shall, however, set forth the facts in such wise as may enable you to grasp them understandingly. For your opinion concerning them or me I care little. I am, in fact, making use of you as a sort of sop to conscience on finding myself face to face with death.

All that you need to know is this:

I am a musician. All the love of my life has been given to music—with two exceptions, of which I shall write later on in this letter. As to the music, I have loved it as an amateur, for I was of independent means with no need to mix in the sordid struggle for money. I have never written for production. I have been content for the most part merely to study, to apprehend as best I might the work of the masters. What I have myself composed has been of a wholly desultory sort, fragments of fragmentary ideas. I have fashioned now and then the *motif* of a theme. I have scientifically worked out by an application of mathematical laws, based on ratios of vibration, certain new things in the way of harmony. All these I have left to you unconditionally. I dare hope and believe that you will be able to make some use of the material. If you do so, pray spare yourself the pains of giving me any credit—if your honesty be over-nice—or worrying your conscience if you chance to be dishonest. I have no idea that I shall be messing around anywhere in your environment after I am once dead, and the world’s praise can be less than nothing to me after I have gone from earth. But because you are a musician and, as I have come to believe, an earnest one, I have decided to make you heir to my musical legacies certainly—to my money perhaps. I’ll explain the “perhaps” presently.

But first I must tell you of the love that rivaled my love for music. This was for your mother. On that account my thoughts have been directed to you with special force. On that account this letter to you and all this letter implies.

Your mother as a girl possessed a wonderful natural voice and, too, the soul of a musician. It so chanced that she and I were neighbors and we met often socially. I was only a few years older than she, and I was already skilled in music, for I had devoted myself to the study of it from childhood. I recognized the supreme worth of her voice at the first hearing. I fell in love with your mother then—as a man with a woman, yes—even more as a musician in love, with a glorious instrument of music. It soon became evident that while she liked me, she could not love me as a wife should love her husband. I realized the truth, and though I suffered as an emotional temperament must suffer in such case, I did not despair. The musician in me triumphed over the man for I rejoiced in the glorious gift that she would manifest to the world. So I merged my passion for the woman in the enthusiasm of the *maestro* for his pupil. I offered myself as her teacher and she accepted me in that capacity. For two years I taught her. Under my training, her method became perfect. Her soul, too, grew, so that she had sympathy and understanding.

Then, just when she was all prepared for her triumph and my own, she fell in love with your father. She married him. In spite of all my prayers, my reproaches, my supplications, she abandoned her career for love's sake. Her husband was opposed to his wife's appearing in public as a singer. She yielded to his wishes without remonstrance. I believe she was happy in her way because she loved your father sincerely, and she counted no sacrifice too great for love.

You, as a musician, can apprehend perhaps the suffering I underwent in consequence of this disappointment. It sickened me of my fellows—made me a recluse. It was in my life of retirement that I developed my third love—that of the miser for gold. I secretly transformed all my possessions into gold, which I kept in a secret safe here in my house. Oh, the hours of night during which I have worshiped before the shining heaps! But enough has been written at one time and another over the raptures of the miser, a rapture without justification in reason, yet more masterful than any other. I shall not weary you with explanation or excuse. The statement of the fact alone is sufficient.

Now at last I find myself the victim of a disease that must end my life course within a few days, perhaps hours. It becomes necessary then for me to dispose of my wealth. I am without relations with the exception of a distant cousin and her daughter, who are already well-to-do. To this daughter I have left my house here and the land that goes with it—a thousand acres—which has some value today and will have more very soon, as the region is being opened up.

For the bulk of my wealth, which as I have said is in gold, I have selected you as a possible heir, but you must do your part. I have thus chosen you because I dare hope that by it you may be helped in accomplishing something of worth in the art of music and so atone in some measure for the loss occasioned by your mother's abandonment of her career. The condition which I have imposed on this legacy is merely to test you as to your perseverance and your intelligence. In the event of your failure, half of the money will go to the girl, and the other half to the founding of a musicians' home.

After my death you will be notified by my lawyer, who has my will duly drawn in accordance with the conditions I here roughly explain. At once then, you will come to this place and here conduct a search for my treasure-chest, which contains three hundred thousand dollars in gold. If you discover this within a month from the day of my death, this treasure shall be yours absolutely. If you fail in the quest the seals of my description of the hiding-place, which has been deposited with my lawyer, will be opened and the treasure secured, to be divided between my young kinswoman, Margaret West, and the establishing and endowing of a home for disabled musicians.

Because you are the son of your mother whom I loved, and because you are a musician of promise, I have thus chosen you as my possible heir. If you are as acute as I think, you will easily discover the necessary clues to the hiding-place of the gold. In the hunt you have full liberty to use any means you wish, with the privilege of residing in the house here with your helpers—if you employ them—during the length of the time allowed you.

Yours truly,

HORACE ABERNETHEY.

As he finished the reading, Saxe folded the sheets, and replaced the letter in his pocket. Then, he sank back into his chair, and surveyed his friends quizzically.

“Well?” he demanded.

David Thwing beamed happily through the heavy lenses of his eyeglasses, as he spoke:

“And so you want us to go with you, and of course we will.” He gazed benignantly on his fellow guests, then opened his mouth, and trolled in a musical baritone, “A hunting we will go!” Roy swung into the measure with a nicety of accord in the tenor that told of old-time practice. Saxe added his bass, and the song rang out in an harmonious prophecy of success.

As the refrain ceased, Billy Walker expressed himself whimsically:

“This comes as a great relief to me,” he explained, grinning cheerfully. “I’m all tied up with commission for erudite essays I’ve promised to write. I’ve been unable to figure any way in which I could fulfill my obligations. Now, by cutting the whole thing, the difficulty will be removed. I shall simply disappear with you. Saxe, old boy, I thank you. When do we start?”

“And you, Dave?” the host questioned eagerly, though this friend had already given consent for the three.

“I haven’t a blessed thing to do,” was the contented answer. “Apart from the pleasant thrill incident to this questing for hidden treasure, your wish for my assistance gives me a new feeling of self-respect, due to the fact of having something in the nature of business to attend to. When do we start?”

Roy Morton nodded amiably, as Saxe turned in his direction.

“Of course,” he declared. “When do we start?”

“You’re trumps, all of you,” the host declared, gratefully. “I knew I could depend on you, but to have your assurance takes a weight off my mind all the same. I’d feel infernally helpless, alone on the job. With you chaps standing by, I know we’ll win out. As for starting, well, time is important—there’s a bit less than a month now left to us. I’ve looked up trains. There’s a good one that starts in the afternoon. I know it’s awfully short notice, but, if you could manage to make it tomorrow, why—” he halted doubtfully, to stare at his friends.

“Tomorrow it is!” boomed Billy Walker; and the others echoed agreement.



CHAPTER II

THE SECRETARY

IN THE performance of her secretarial duties, May Thurston duly drummed on her machine the remarkable letter to Saxe Temple, in which the old miser made known his intended disposition of a golden treasury. Because she possessed an excellent New England conscience, the girl maintained silence, despite the urgings of a feminine desire to share the secret. This reticence on her part was the more admirable inasmuch as, just at this time, her affections were becoming strongly engaged by a suitor.

Hartley Masters, the man in the case, was a civil engineer employed in the neighborhood with a survey for an electric road. On one occasion, he had stopped at Abernethy's cottage for a glass of water from the well. The master of the house was absent at the time, but the secretary was present, and, by some chance, out of doors that pleasant May morning. Conventions seemed rather absurd in that remote region. The young engineer admired the charming face and slender form, and hastened to engage her in conversation. She responded without reluctance, rather with pleasure in this diversion from the monotony of her days. Afterward, a considerable intimacy developed between the two. May Thurston had much of her time free, and Masters contrived so to arrange his work as to take full advantage of her leisure. That his heart was touched seriously may be doubted, but his courtship lacked nothing in the evidences of intensity and sincerity. He made a deep impression on the girl, who was both ingenuous and tender. Masters was the first to whom she had given more than the most casual heed, and, almost at the outset, she found her affections engaged. She regarded him as astonishingly handsome—as, in truth, he was—in a melodramatic fashion of his own, with huge dark eyes, long-lashed and glowing, a sweep of black mustache, and thick, clustering hair, which was always artistically tousled. In fact, the whole appearance of the man was blatantly artistic, in the bohemian acceptation of the word, and he was scrupulous to wear on all occasions a loose bow of silk at his throat. He was tall, too, and broad enough, but there was too much slope to his shoulders, his neck was too long, his head bulked too large for harmony. His voice was agreeable, his manners were suave, quickened by a jauntiness, which was perhaps assumed to harmonize with the insouciant air of the cravat. May Thurston, who had read her Byron, thought of him as *The*

Corsair, and her heart fluttered.

It is easily understood that the secretary's keeping silence concerning her employer's remarkable testamentary plans showed her the possessor of some strength of character, as well as a sense of honor. She even managed to keep her own counsel after Masters openly declared his love, and besought her to become his wife—at some vague time in the future, when he should have arrived at a position of independence. She yielded readily to his ardor, and had plighted troth, all a-tremble with maidenly confusion and womanly raptures. Then, a few days later, Abernethy died. She felt now that she was at liberty to reveal the circumstances of the will to her lover. As they strolled on the lake shore, the evening of the day after the miser's death, May told the story, to which Masters listened with absorbed attention.

“Mad as a hatter!” he ejaculated, contemptuously, as the girl brought her narrative to a close. Yet, though his voice was mocking, there was manifest in his expression an eagerness that puzzled the girl.

She would not permit his comment to go unrebuked:

“No,” she declared firmly, “Mr. Abernethy was not mad. He was eccentric, of course—very! That was all, however. He wasn't crazy—unless every miser is crazy. He had a sense of humor, though, and he didn't quite know what to do with his money. So he finally worked out the scheme I've told you of.”

“Then, he really did it as a sort of joke,” Masters suggested eagerly.

“As much that as anything else,” May answered, and her tone was thoughtful. “There was sentiment on account of Saxe Temple's mother and the old love-affair. And, of course, this young man's interest in music made it seem like a good disposal of the money. But I have a suspicion, too, that Mr. Abernethy really enjoyed hiding the money—making it hard for anyone else to get hold of it, you know. That idea appealed to his miserly instincts, I think. How he hated to leave it! ‘No pockets in a shroud!’ I've heard him mutter a hundred times. It was horrible—and pitiful.”

“Yes, miserliness is an awful vice,” Masters agreed. His tone was perfunctory, although his inflections were energetic enough.

There fell a little silence between the lovers. Where they sat on the west shore, beneath the rampart of wooded hills, it was already deep dusk, but out on the open space of water shone a luminous purple light, shot over with rose and gold, a reflected sunset glow over the eastern mountains. May Thurston stared happily

at the wide, dancing path over the water that led to the newly risen full moon, and she dreamed blissfully of the glory of life that was soon to come to her beside the man who had chosen her as his mate. Masters, on the contrary, while equally enthusiastic in his musings, was by no means sentimental, as he gazed unseeingly across the lake's level, now wimpling daintily at touch of the slow breeze. The young engineer's thoughts were, truth to tell, of a sort sordid, even avaricious, covetous; and, at last, after a period of profound reflection, he uttered his thought:

"May, dearest," he said softly, with a tender cadence, "what a shame it is that that old miser didn't think of us!"

The girl faced her companion with a movement of shocked surprise.

"Think of us!" she repeated, confusedly. "Whatever can you mean?"

Masters turned, and regarded May with intentness, a fond smile showing beneath the curve of his mustache. His voice, as he spoke now, was softer than usual:

"Why," he said, "I was just thinking on the hardness of fate—sometimes. Here was this old man, with more money than he knew what to do with, and here are we without a penny. There was nothing money could do for him, except gratify a vice—the madness of the miser; and money could do everything for you and me, sweetheart. The thought of it made me say it was a shame the old man didn't think of us!"

"Well, after all, we couldn't expect him to," the girl said placidly, with the sober sense characteristic of her. "Of course, it would have been nice to have his fortune, but we must be patient, Hartley." She turned her face again to the east, and looked out into the deeper purples of the distance, beholding again fair visions of the happiness to come.

The man's tones were somber, as he replied:

"I tell you, May, it seems to me like no man's money."

The girl aroused herself from dreaming, and for the second time regarded her lover with puzzled inquiry.

"What do you mean by that, Hartley?" she demanded.

"I mean," came the deliberate answer, "that this hidden fortune of Abernethy's doesn't really belong to anyone at this moment."

"Nonsense!" the secretary exclaimed briskly, confident as to the fact out of her

stores of business experience. “The money belongs to the estate. By due course of law, it will go to Saxe Temple, if he fulfills the condition under which it has been left him. If he fails, it will go to the girl and the musicians’ home.” She smiled contentedly, pleasantly conscious of her own erudition, and looked out over the lake again, watching idly the frolic dance of the swallows to the movement of the waves.

“On the contrary,” Masters continued argumentatively, “at this very moment, the ownership of that gold is problematical. Nobody exactly owns it, although theoretically the title to it is vested in the surrogate’s court, or whatever they call it in this wilderness. As a matter of strict fact, that gold has become hidden treasure. To be sure, the old man has left directions as to who shall have it if found, and who shall have it if it’s not found. But, suppose now, someone else were to find it—not Saxe Temple?” The girl uttered an ejaculation, and faced her lover with startled surprise, meeting the fire of his gaze bewilderedly. “Suppose I were to find it?”

May Thurston sprang to her feet, and regarded the speaker with an expression of sheer amazement, which swiftly changed to one of dismay. The softly-tinted rose of her cheeks flamed suddenly to scarlet; her luminous eyes, usually so gentle, sparkled dangerously. She stared fixedly at the man for a few seconds. At first, he encountered her gaze steadily enough, smiling. But, presently, under the accusation in her look, the smile passed from his lips, and his eyes fell. The girl continued to observe him indignantly for a few moments more. Then, at last, she spoke; and now there was more of sorrow than of anger in her voice:

“Hartley!”

The exclamation was a reproach, and as such the young man recognized it. He rose quickly, caught May’s hands in his, and spoke tenderly in justification of himself, his eyes again meeting hers boldly.

In the days that followed, Masters showed a wily patience. He recurred to the subject of the miser’s gold again and yet again. The girl’s reluctance slowly grew less, as she found herself unable to combat the ingenuities of his reasoning. Finally, she reached a point where she no longer opposed his wishes, although she still held to her own conviction as to the wrongfulness of that which he proposed. The man felt that he could trust to her neutrality, so reluctantly conceded. With this for the time being, he rested content.

CHAPTER III

THE ASSEMBLING

THE dwelling in the wilderness contained only two servants, a woman of fifty, who performed the duties of housekeeper and cook, and her husband, slightly older, who did the small amount of outdoor work required about the cottage, but, during the open weather, was chiefly concerned with the care of the two motor boats, which had been the miser's single extravagance.

After the funeral, the lawyer of the deceased ordered Jake Dustin and his wife to remain at the cottage for the time being, to await the outcome of the bequest. May Thurston, also, was retained as the one person most conversant with Abernethy's affairs. These arrangements made, the attorney returned to Boston, holding himself in readiness for another visit to the cottage at any time when his presence there might be required in connection with the inheritance. Masters, naturally enough, rejoiced in the situation thus created, which left him entire freedom in the prosecution of his illicit search for the treasure. He realized to the full that his best opportunity would be limited to the short interval before the arrival on the scene of others, who would inevitably regard his presence with surprise, if not with actual suspicion. For the moment, however, there was none to offer any hindrance. Jake was engaged in overhauling his engines within the boat-house, which was situated a full hundred yards from the cottage; he had neither eyes nor ears for the actions of Hartley Masters who, in his opinion, was merely "sparkin' that Thurston gal mighty clus." Mrs. Dustin, for her part, was absorbed, as always, in a relentless warfare against matter out of place, which she consistently loathed as dirt. As she invariably talked aloud to herself, she gave ample warning of her whereabouts at all times, and it was no difficult thing to evade her.

Yet, despite the advantages of his situation, Masters, to his chagrin, learned nothing concerning the treasure.

The young man's failure was pleasing, rather than otherwise, to May Thurston, who, at intervals, kept alongside him in the quest, though always without affording him other assistance than the doubtful comfort of her presence. Despite the fact that his specious arguments had silenced her, she was by no means convinced as to the propriety of his undertaking. Her conscience still spoke

clearly, even while she abandoned controversy with Masters for love's sake.

A telegram from Mrs. West came to May, in which it was announced that the widow and her daughter, Margaret, would arrive at the lake on the day following. The lawyer had advised Mrs. West concerning the death of Abernethy and her daughter's inheritance of this property, together with the possibility of another fortune, should Saxe Temple fail in his search for the secreted hoard of gold. On receiving the telegram, May was in a flutter of pleasureable excitement. Notwithstanding her devotion to Masters, the isolation of this life in the wilderness was a weariness to her spirit, and she joyously looked forward to the coming of the heiress, a girl presumably of about her own age, who might afford her that companionship she so craved.

Masters, on the other hand, was filled with an impotent rage against the promptitude of Mrs. West's answer to the announcement of Abernethy's death.

"The vultures flock to feed on the carcass," the engineer sneered, with an angry tug at the flowing length of his mustache.

May's lips set primly, as she stared at the handsome face of her lover with rather less than her usual admiration for his romantic air. It occurred to her active intelligence that Hartley was hardly the one to scorn those who came lawfully to claim their own, while he was unlawfully seeking the property of another with such feverish eagerness. But, with feminine wisdom, she held her peace, while Masters went on fuming futilely against fate. With the aid of time-tables, she calculated the exact hour at which Mrs. West's arrival might be expected, since the message had neglected to state this, and then sought Jake, to whom she gave instructions that he should go down the lake in one of the motor-boats the next morning to meet the ten o'clock train, north-bound, at the station three miles away. When, that night, Masters, still grumbling, kissed her good night, her lips were passive, which had not been their wont.

Masters reappeared early the next morning, for he was aware that in a few hours his best opportunity to search would be past. He utterly ignored the fact that his engineering work was being neglected to an extent that must soon involve him in serious trouble with his employers. The possibility of wealth had suddenly come to dominate his thoughts, and it allowed no rivalry. He was pale, as if after a sleepless night, and his thatch of hair was tangled in a confusion real for once, not contrived with studied pains. His great, black eyes were glowing, as he encountered May at the cottage door. The girl sighed as she noted the haggard appearance of his face and the tenseness of his movements, usually so briskly

graceful. A certain latent fierceness in his expression caused a thrill of apprehension in her heart. She was shocked that he could enter thus whole-souledly into a nefarious project for the sake of gain.

“Where’s the old woman?” Masters questioned curtly, after a scant phrase of greeting.

“In the kitchen,” May answered.

“I must hurry,” the engineer continued, alertly. “But, anyhow, I have almost four hours clear. They can’t get here before eleven, I guess.”

“If the train’s on time, they should get here about half-past ten,” May corrected. There was a note of warning in her voice. “Don’t let them find you—” she broke off, ashamed to finish her thought aloud.

Masters laughed shortly.

“No fear! I’ll watch out; but hold them back as much as you can,” he bade her. Without more ado, he entered the house.

She heard him go quickly into the music-room, shutting the door behind him. For a moment, she rested motionless, irresolute, her face troubled. Then, with a gesture of annoyance, she turned away, and went toward the waiting launch.

The north-bound train arrived hardly a minute behind its schedule. May, waiting eagerly on the station platform, scrutinized the few passengers as they clambered down from the day-coaches. Then, her attention was caught by the activities of a colored porter at the vestibule steps of the Pullman. Beside him, on the cinder path, were three valises of heavy leather, somewhat battered, but of undeniable dignity. As the man adjusted the portable step beside the track, two women appeared above him on the platform of the car. May had no doubt as to their identity. She noted the simple elegance of Mrs. West’s traveling suit, the modish air of the daughter’s. She observed, too, the radiant loveliness of the girl’s face. A subtle premonition of sorrow obsessed her, as she stared half-resentfully at the beauty of Margaret West, elusively revealed from within a mesh of gray veil. She fought against the mood, and went forward to greet the strangers.

The manner of the two travelers was so cordial that the secretary quickly forgot her presentiment. Mrs. West proved to be a handsome, though rather delicate, woman, of perhaps fifty years—in voice and manner, and in nature as well, a true gentlewoman of a type now somewhat out of fashion. As May had already learned from her late employer, this lady had, throughout her life, enjoyed ample means, though not great wealth. The daughter, Margaret, resembled the mother,

but in her slender form was the grace of youth.

“There’s no doubt that it’s still a real wilderness hereabouts,” Margaret declared, after the first greetings had been exchanged. “I thought it might have changed, since our visit ten years ago.”

“And it’s still all wilderness for the way we have yet to go in the motor-boat,” May answered, smiling. “Here is Jake—Mr. Dustin, you know. He’ll carry your valises to the landing.” She indicated the embarrassed boatman, who was hovering doubtfully near. With attention thus thrust upon him, he grinned sheepishly, then turned to the luggage.

“Chris will help him,” Mrs. West said.

May looked in the direction of the speaker’s nod, and started in astonishment. In her absorption with the two women, she had observed neither the coming nor the presence of this man. Now, she regarded him curiously. Evidently, from his appearance, as well as from Mrs. West’s words, he was a servant, and May guessed that he must be as well an old and highly esteemed family retainer, since he thus made one of the party on this trip. He was a short man, rather absurdly fat, though not in the least heavy of movement, or wheezy of breath. But he had a general roundness, of a sort almost infantile, incongruous with perfect baldness. His tiny black eyes twinkled benignantly. A somewhat suggestive redness of the skin made the caricature effect of a Bacchic Cupid. For the rest, he was neatly dressed in black, and he smiled genially on May, and touched his hat decorously, at the reference to himself, with a respectful, “Yes, Miss.” Then, he stooped alertly to the luggage, seized a bag in either hand, and waited expectantly for the more sluggish Jake to point the way.

May had wholly forgotten her first impression long before the cottage landing was reached. She found Mrs. West kindly and interested, while Margaret displayed a democratic friendliness that was inexpressibly grateful to the lonely girl. But, at the last, all her apprehensions came crowding back. It was at the moment when they emerged from the boat-house, and started toward the cottage.

“Why, who is that?” Mrs. West asked, with a note of curiosity in her voice.

May looked up, to see Hartley Masters, as he stepped briskly out from the front door of the house. At sight of the party on the shore, he halted abruptly, in seeming confusion; then, after an instant of indecision, he swung sharply to the right, into a path that ran along the lake to the south.

“Oh, it’s Mr. Masters,” May answered, a bit falteringly. “He’s an engineer at

work near here—he calls—sometimes.”

Some stress in the speaker’s voice caught the attention of Margaret. She regarded the troubled face of the secretary intently for a moment; then, she stared speculatively after the tall figure of the engineer, as it passed swiftly into the concealment of the forest.



CHAPTER IV

EVE OF BATTLE

MASTERS came suddenly on May Thurston that same afternoon, as she chanced to be alone on the cottage porch. When he appeared so swiftly out of the wood, which was thick behind the house, the girl realized that he must have been lying in wait for this opportunity to meet her unobserved. The stealthiness of the act revolted her anew, and the disagreeable impression was in no wise relieved by the engineer's conversation or manner.

"Nothing—I found nothing at all!" he declared, curtly. His large eyes were glowing with anger. "I can't understand it." His tone was full of rebellion against the injustice of fate.

"But—" May began. Her voice was hesitating, timid.

Masters went on stormily, disregarding her.

"I mustn't give up though—just because they've come." He nodded toward the cottage. "You must introduce me, at once. Then, get them outside, to look about—and I'll have another try at the gold."

The girl was dismayed by his persistence. She wished to point out the danger of discovery, but the engineer would listen to no protests, and, in the end, his inflexible will beat down her resistance.

So, presently, Masters was duly introduced to Mrs. West and her daughter. His manner was now all suavity. He devoted himself to making a good impression, and in this he succeeded, for he was in fact usually attractive to women, though not to men, who regarded him with latent suspicion, or open hostility, according to their various natures. In this instance, his handsome face, graceful, frank manner and lively chat diverted and pleased the mother, while the more susceptible daughter found herself near to blushing under the earnest regard of a stranger so romantic of appearance and so respectfully, yet obviously, an admirer of her own charms. Indeed, though Masters was very discreet, his manner somehow caused the trouble in May's heart to swell, for now it was leavened with jealousy. Yet, there was nothing overt, to which she might take exception. It was, rather, an intuition that warned her. But, when she again found herself alone with her lover, she was confronted with offense in his first words:

“We must keep our engagement secret from them.”

Though May had had no thought of any present publicity for her romance, this peremptory command came with a shock.

“Why?” she demanded. “What do you mean, Hartley?”

Masters became fluently plausible. His seeming candor disarmed criticism.

“Margaret West is a pretty girl,” he explained, smiling, at last, “and she is evidently aware of the fact. If she thinks I’m dangling, so to speak—a victim to her charms—she and her mother won’t wonder any at my hanging around the place a good deal—and it’s Miss West’s place now, you know. It wouldn’t do for me to make myself too much at home here just as your fiancé, she might be jealous.”

His smile over this none too delicate pleasantry was so caressing, his voice was so tender, he was so tall, so stalwart in picturesque fashion, so good to look on altogether, that May quite forgot her first instinct of indignation. After all, doubtless, he was right.

“But you won’t let her think you really serious?” she stipulated.

Masters’ face instantly grew grave; his voice took on a dignity almost rebuking.

“No, little girl,” he said, gently; “that wouldn’t be fair to you, or to her, or to me. But we’ll keep our secret for a time.”

And to this, albeit reluctantly, May consented. That reluctance must have become open revolt, could she have known the inner workings of her lover’s crafty and unscrupulous brain. For the fact of the matter was that the engineer had no sooner set eyes on Margaret West than new, daring plots began to shape themselves in his imagination. His heart thrilled at sight of her; his interest deepened second by second. He experienced, indeed, an attraction strange, dominant. The emotion was the more impressive inasmuch as it was totally unlike that with which May Thurston had inspired him. He had admired the secretary in rather a placid fashion; he had enjoyed her dainty appearance, he had been agreeably entertained by her lively intelligence; most of all, he had received flattering unctio to his vanity from the ease of his triumph over her heart. The case of Margaret was radically different. Even in the first interview with this girl, he found himself subject to a spell hitherto unknown in his experience of women. Being by no means a fool, he guessed that here in truth was one actually to possess his love.

That realization worked no sort of regeneration in the moral nature of the man. On the contrary, since he was essentially selfish, it served only to spur him on toward bold speculations as to all possible gains for himself. Since he knew the terms of the Abernethy will, a new scheme flashed on him within five minutes of his introduction to Margaret. If he should be unable to find the hidden treasure for himself, he would strive his utmost to prevent the success of Saxe Temple in the quest, since failure on the heir's part would mean Margaret's inheritance of one half the gold. By this means, although he would not secure the full amount of riches, he would at least become possessor of a moiety—for he would marry Margaret West. He felt no pang of regret for May Thurston, whom he planned to betray so basely. His sole concern was for his own advantage: the securing of the woman and the money that he desired fiercely. That he would succeed in this preposterous ambition, he did not doubt for a moment, confident of the favor with which the softer sex usually regarded him. He took the first step in his conscienceless scheme when he gazed with respectful admiration into the eyes of Margaret West; he took the second when he charged May Thurston to keep secret the troth he had plighted her.

On the morning after the coming of Mrs. West and Margaret, the secretary received a telegram from Saxe Temple, with the announcement that he and his friends would reach the lake that same afternoon. So, there now remained for the engineer less than one day of liberty in which to prosecute the hunt for the treasure. For all his audacity, Masters knew that he could not dare to carry on the search during the interval even, except with utmost caution, lest he arouse the suspicions of the widow or her daughter. He had passed most of the time since their coming in racking his brain with vain conjectures as to a possible clue, with the hope of making actual investigation at a more propitious time. Now, however, the telegram warned him that his period was at an end. The presence of the heir and his associates would effectually halt the engineer's operations, and he realized the fact with bitterness of spirit. Thereafter, he must perforce do what he might skulkingly, ever cautious to avoid any least guess by anyone as to his purpose.

"But I'll keep an eye out," he confided to May, sullenly. "If they find a hint anywhere, I'll beat them to the goal, after all, you'll see!"

She shrank at his words—something that was fast coming to be a habit with her.

"But Mr. Temple has the right to it, you know," she expostulated, weakly.

"If he gets it!" Masters retorted with a sneer that lifted slightly the luxurious

mustache. "Only, I'll see that he doesn't. And, anyhow, I believe that he must be a pretty namby-pamby sort of chap. Fancy his bringing a band of helpers!"

"Mr. Abernethy particularly said that he might do so," May reminded her lover.

"It seems a bit cowardly, just the same," Masters maintained. "I'll win out yet. I tell you, May, the fellow is handicapped: he fears failure."



Saxe Temple arrived at the foot of the lake in mid-afternoon, and with him came Roy Morton, Billy Walker and David Thwing. Jake was awaiting the incoming train, his weather-beaten face aglow with anticipation. The terms of the will having become known to him, he had developed what might be called a sporting interest in the issue. After years of monotony, excitement had jumped into his life. Therefore, he now advanced toward the four young men with suit-cases, who had descended from the Pullman, and bobbed his head energetically, his clean-shaven face wrinkled in a smile.

"Mr. Temple and party, I ca'c'late?" he remarked inquiringly, looking from one to another.

"I am Mr. Temple," said the heir, with an answering smile, as he stepped forward. He indicated his companions with a gesture. "These are my friends, come to help me on a bit of business I have in the neighborhood. You know about it?"

Jake beamed joyously.

"Well, now, I've got quite some suspicionings, as it were," he admitted, cautiously. "I hope you've left everybody well to hum?"

"Oh, I believe some in the city are complaining," Saxe replied, with apparent seriousness; "but the general health is about the average."

"Jest so!" Jake showed himself gratified. "Well, I'll lead ye over to the motor-boat."

Billy Walker groaned stertorously.

"And we're not there even yet!" he exclaimed, aghast.

"Oh, putty nigh," Jake made assurance; "only a matter o' three mile on the lake. We'll git thar in a jiffy, in the *Shirtso*."

“The what?” Saxe questioned.

“That’s the ornery name old man Abernethey give a perfec’ly good boat,” Jake replied, complainingly. “He said as how it meant kind o’ lively.”

“The name must be *Scherzo*,” Saxe explained to the unmusical and bewildered Billy Walker; “the motor-boat, you know.”

But Billy was not appeased. He kept at Jake’s side, as the party moved toward the landing, a furlong to the east from the station, and expressed his sentiments vehemently, though not lucidly, so far as the boatman was concerned.

“I’m given to understand,” he said severely to the puzzled Jake, “that your craft is not merely a plain, slow-going, safe-and-sane-Fourth launch, but, on the contrary, one of those cantankerous, speed-maniacal contraptions that scoots in diabolical and parabolical curves, and squirts water all over the passengers. If so, I think I’ll walk—though I’m not fond of walking.”

Jake seized eagerly on the one intelligible phrase in Billy Walker’s bombast.

“Nary squirt!” he declared, with emphasis. “Old man Abernethey, he was ailin’ jest like you be, and I learned to nuss the *Shirtso* keerful—mighty keerful, yes, siree!”

The others, who had overheard, laughed impudently at this naïve reference to the invalidism of their friend, whose physical inertia was equal to his mental energy.

At sight of the motor-boat, Roy Morton gave critical attention, scanning it with the supercilious manner of one versed in the mysteries, as, indeed, he was. Unbidden, he ensconced himself at the engines, in the seat with Jake. Soon, however, his coldly inquiring expression softened to radiant satisfaction, as he noted the smoothness of the start, the delicate adjustment from speed to speed, the rhythm of the perfectly tuned cylinders. Of a sudden, as he turned to stare at the wizened face of the old man at his side, Roy’s eyes grew gently luminous; a smile that was tender curved the lips above the belligerent chin. He knew that Jake loved his engines, knew perfectly that the old man fairly doted on them, cherished them even as a lover his mistress. Because of the sympathy that he, too, had with such things, Roy respected the boatman mightily, began then and there to grow fond of the brown and shriveled face.

Billy Walker, for his part, after the first few moments of suspense, became convinced that his anticipations of disaster were little likely to be realized in fact, and thereafter he gave himself over to delighted contemplation of the wooded shores, which on either side sloped gracefully to the water’s edge. David

Thwing, too, gazed about on the newly budded beauty of the wilderness with a content made keen by over-long sojourning in the places builded by men. It was only Saxe Temple himself, alone in the stern chair, who looked around with eyes that just then recked naught of the scenic loveliness, despite the appeal in such vistas to one of his beauty-loving temperament. But his whole interest, now, was centered on the quest that had brought him to this remote region. His roving glance was searching all the stretches of lake and forest wonderingly, hopefully, fearfully. Here was the place in which he must win or lose a fortune, according to the decree of the old man's whimsy. The desire of his dearest dreams surged in him, the challenge of ambition, the ideals of art. This wealth, once achieved, would give freedom to work according to his loftiest aspirations. A sudden fierce resolve burned in him. He would succeed, notwithstanding all difficulties in the path. Fate had given him opportunity: he would wrest from it victory as well. His face set itself sternly in lines of strength ... and, then, without any warning, the *Scherzo* swung around a densely wooded point of the shore that had seemed almost to bar the narrow channel, through which they had been passing thus far. Now, just before them lay broad reaches of placid water, a mile in width there at hand, much wider in the distance beyond. Low mountains loomed undulant afar, whence the descending forests ran to a shore that wound hither and yon in innumerable inlets, coves and bays, broken often by cliffs.

Yet, even now, Saxe Temple gave no heed to the loveliness of the spectacle. Instead, his whole care was fixed on an uncouth, rambling structure that blotched a clearing visible along the west shore, a mile away. It was the only dwelling to be seen anywhere, as far as eye could reach. The seeker had no doubt that now, at last, he had his first sight of Abernethy's cottage—that spot in which his cunning must meet—and master—the cunning of a dead man, who had made grim jest with the gold he loved.

CHAPTER V

THE SEARCH BEGINS

AN UNWONTED activity prevailed in the miser's cottage. The presence of Saxe Temple and his companions brought into the isolated dwelling a varied and bustling atmosphere, which, at times, came near confusion. The one member of the party who permitted naught to disturb his tranquillity was Billy Walker, and that because of a chronic aversion to every form of physical exertion. He contented himself with holding a sort of informal court on the porch, sitting at ease with his massive frame sprawled in a commodious wicker chair. Mrs. West remained with him much of the time, while Margaret by turns joined them, or moved about here and there as an interested observer of the other three men, who were already busily searching the house.

On occasion, Margaret and May Thurston wandered away together in long strolls by the lake shore, or over the hills through the forest. By the circumstances of such companionship, a considerable degree of intimacy was soon established between the two girls, which was inexpressibly comforting to the secretary. She would have delighted to tell this new friend of the engagement that existed between herself and the engineer, but she had passed her word not to do so, and it never occurred to her as possible that she should break it. At times, Masters joined the girls in their rambles, but that avaricious gentleman, though eager to press his suit with Margaret could not often bear to absent himself from the scene of operations that had to do with the treasure. So, for the most part, he either joined the group on the porch, or gave himself over to loitering hidden in the woods, at a point a few hundred yards to the south, where a thick screen of undergrowth effectually offered a barrier against observation from the cottage. By such espionage, he was sure to be instantly advised concerning any discovery of a clue, as it would create excitement among those on the piazza. He would have preferred to remain constantly among the searchers, but this was patently impossible. Masters was by no means lacking in shrewdness, however great his shortcomings in the way of respect for *meum et tuum*, and he was both sensitive and sensible enough to know that his company was not especially agreeable to Temple and his friends in their exploration of the house.

It was, in truth, rather curious to note the various opinions held in reference to the engineer by the four men engaged in seeking Abernethy's treasure. Masters

had been introduced to them by May on the morning after their arrival at the cottage, and had shown himself as friendly as possible. But, in accordance with the usual effect he had on men, the impression created by him on each of the four was distinctly unpleasant. Saxe Temple felt an intuitive dislike, which he was at no pains to explain. Billy Walker regarded the engineer with a mingling of amusement and disdain, ill concealed, and he did not scruple afterward to describe the visitor as a peculiarly obnoxious romantic pirate, with a flamboyant veneer of the *Quartier Latin*. But he refused to take the fellow with much seriousness. In this respect, he differed from Roy Morton, who made it a rule to be uniformly suspicious of all things and all persons, and lived up to this rule with finical fidelity. He immediately characterized the engineer as a completely base and designing person, one of whom all decent and honest men might well beware. He proved his contentions quite to his own satisfaction by physiognomy, by phrenology, by chiromancy, by the sixth sense and by the fourth dimension. David Thwing, who was ordinarily a kindly soul, made some small effort to combat the severity of Roy's strictures, but the philanthropic attempt failed dismally of appreciation—which result troubled David not at all, since his heart was not in the task.

Ensued a week of feverish activity on the part of Saxe and his friends, in which Billy Walker was as busy as any, although his toil was exclusively mental, while his body remained in its customary lethargic condition. By day and by night, he devoted himself to examination of the problem that confronted his friend, and by day and by night the other three carried out his every suggestion. Unfortunately, however, for Saxe's hopes of inheritance, their first hurried search of the cottage resulted in naught save weariness and dismay. Of anything in the nature of a clue, they found no least trace.

Billy Walker delivered the final decree in a council held by the four, after dinner on the seventh day. It had so chanced that the friends were alone together in the chief room of the cottage, which was the music-room.

"I've addled my wits in vain," Billy Walker confessed, dolefully. "Until there shall have been an accumulation of new intellectual energy on my part, I shall be able to offer you no theory as to the actual hiding-place so ingeniously selected by the late lamented Mr. Abernethy—to whose ashes, peace! While I am thus recuperating, however, you, my children, shall not be idle—oh, by no manner of means. On the contrary, you shall be very busy, indeed, after the method prescribed by inexorable logic."

"I'm beginning to think that a little luck just now would help more than a lot of

logic,” Saxe declared, gloomily.

“Listen to the oracle, anyhow,” David Thwing urged, in his always kindly voice. “You see,” he went on whimsically, “Billy is a specialist in thinking: he doesn’t do anything except think. So, we must respect his thinking. Otherwise, we could not respect our friend at all.” David’s big, protruding eyes, magnified by the heavy lenses of his eyeglasses, beamed benignantly on his three companions.

The one thus dubiously lauded grunted disdainfully.

“Panegyrics apart,” he resumed, in his roughly rumbling tones, “there appears at this time but one course of procedure. To wit: Tomorrow morning, you must start on an exhaustive search of the whole house. Hitherto, you have made only a superficial examination. This has failed miserably. Now, the scrutiny must be made microscopic.”

There could be no gainsaying the utterance. As the speaker had declared, it was the command of the inevitable logic presented by the situation. The hearers gave grumbling assent to the wisdom of the suggestion—with the exception of Roy Morton, who, curled lazily in the depths of the morris chair, was staring vacantly at the elaborate carving of the wainscoting, and smoking an especially fat Egyptian cigarette. Now, he suddenly sat upright, and his gaze was turned on his companions, who had looked up at his abrupt movement. Roy’s eyes were hard; his chin was thrust forward, in the fashion characteristic of him when the spirit of combat flared high, which, to tell the truth, was rather often. He spoke with apparent seriousness, but Thwing, who had been through some adventures of a violent sort in his company, noted that a significant excess of amiability in his tones, which was always to be heard on critical occasions, was now wanting.

“There’s only one simple and sure way to success,” Roy declared authoritatively. “We must burgle.”

There were ejaculations of astonishment from his curious hearers.

“It’s this way,” he explained blandly, fixing his steel-blue eyes grimly on the wondering Billy Walker. “We must rifle the lawyer’s safe. Of course, the lawyer whom Abernethy employed has exact instructions as to how to come on the treasure. All we have to do, then, is to break into his office, carrying an oxy-acetylene blow-pipe, cut open the safe, find the secret instructions, copy them off, and afterward duly retrieve the gold at our leisure; besides,” he concluded, with great complacency, “I know a first-class safe-blower, to help us on the job. I did him a favor once. He’ll be glad to do me a kindness, in turn.”

A chorus of protests came from Saxe and Billy, to which, at last, with much apparent reluctance, Roy yielded, and definitely, though sulkily, withdrew his ingenious predatory plan. But David, the while, chuckled contentedly, for he was apt at a jest—and, too, he had known Roy more closely than had the other two.

Since the working schedule had been thus happily determined on the side of law and order, the friends gave themselves over to an interval of social relaxation for the remainder of the evening, during which period, at the suggestion of David, the subject of the treasure was taboo. Roy, who was fond of music, and had himself once possessed no mean measure of skill on the violoncello, now besought Saxe to try the piano, for hitherto their whole attention had been given to the business in hand, to the exclusion of all else. David, also, who doted on music, though without any technical training, added his entreaties. Billy Walker, who esteemed music about as highly as a cat does water, was complacent enough not to protest, which was the utmost that might be expected of him under the circumstances. Saxe went to the piano very willingly, for he was in a mood of nervous tension that craved the emotional relaxation of harmony.

Saxe played with a good degree of excellence in his technique, although he was far from being such a master of the instrument as had been the dead owner. But the essential charm of the younger man's interpretation lay in the delicate truth of his sympathy. His intelligent sensitiveness seemed, indeed, catholic in its scope. Whether he toyed daintily with a graceful *appoggiatura* from Chopin, or crashed an astonishing dissonance from Strauss, he equally felt and revealed the emotion that had been in the composer's soul. Hardly had he begun, when Mrs. West entered from the porch, and after her came Margaret. Presently, May made her appearance, with Masters at her side. Only Jake and his wife, in the kitchen, remained unattracted. They had already heard from their late master sufficient music to last them a lifetime. The audience was sympathetic enough to encourage the player, and Saxe remained at the piano for a long time, to the satisfaction of all his hearers—even that of Billy Walker, who was shamelessly dozing.

Finally, the musician's attention, during a pause, was attracted to a stack of music, which was lying on top of a cabinet, at the right of the piano. He rose, and, going to it, began glancing over the sheets. His eyes lighted with admiration as he noted the various compositions in the collection. In this examination of the music, he realized, as he had not done hitherto, the virtuosity of that dead miser who had made him the possible heir to wealth. For here was naught save the most worthy in the world of musical art. There was not a single number of the

many assembled that was not a masterpiece of its kind. In its entirety, the series presented the very highest forms of musical expression, the supreme achievement, both intellectual and emotional, in the art. For the first time, Saxe felt a gust of tenderness toward the lonely old man, for the sake of their brotherhood in a great love. And, then, at the very bottom of the heap, Saxe came on a single sheet, which drew his particular attention.

The page showed a few measures written in manuscript. This fact alone was sufficient to make the sheet distinctive in the collection, inasmuch as it was solitary of its sort. Every other composition was from editions by the best publishers. With his newly-aroused interest in Abernethy, it befell that Saxe was pleased thus to come on a composition which, he made sure, must have been from the pen of Abernethy himself. Yet, as he scanned the few bars, the young man experienced a feeling of vivid disappointment, for the work was by no possibility of a kind to compel particular admiration; so, at least, it seemed to him just then. With a sense of disillusionment concerning the quality of the dead miser's genius, Saxe carried the sheet of music to the piano, where he placed it on the rack, then began to play. As the first chord sounded, May Thurston, seated in a chair near the door, made a movement of surprise. Afterward, as she rested quietly in her place, there lay on her face a look of melancholy that was very near dejection.

The music that Saxe played was this:

[\[Listen\]](#)

Thus, Saxe Temple played the few simple phrases, over which the old miser had lingered so long one desolate night. But, now, a vast difference appeared in the manner with which the music was sped. Abernethy had rendered the composition with astonishing intensity of emotion. He had interpreted the harsh measures with exquisite, though melancholy, tenderness; he had clanged them forth with the spirit of frantic appeal, with hot passion in the uncouth numbers, with crass, savage abandonment—again, with the superimposing of mighty harmonies, vast, massive, dignified. Now, the genius was gone from the reading. Saxe Temple felt no least degree of sympathy for this crude, unpleasant fragment. On the contrary, the piece affected him only disagreeably. To his musical sense, this creation by the miser was peculiarly offensive. Yet, through some subliminal channel, the stark sequence of the rhythm laid thrall on him, so that he ran over the score not once, but many times. Nevertheless, he always set the music forth nakedly, unadorned by any graces of variety in the interpretation, undraped by ingenious Harmonies. He played merely the written notes, played

them with precision—reluctantly; and, when finally, he had made an end, he still sat on at the piano, staring toward the written page, as one vaguely troubled by a mystery.

It was May Thurston who broke the little interval of silence that followed after the music ended:

“I’ve heard that before, Mr. Temple,” she said; “many, many times.”

Saxe whirled on the piano stool to face the girl.

“Yes,” he said, and there was a note of bewilderment in his voice; “I should imagine so. As it is in manuscript, it was probably composed by Mr. Abernethy himself. But I must say that I’m greatly disappointed in it. I can’t discover any particular merit in it. You know, he left me all his manuscripts. I’ve had no time to look at them, however, as they only arrived the day we left New York. So, I was especially interested in this, to learn something of him, and this teaches me nothing at all concerning him, or, if it does—” He broke off, unwilling to voice his candid judgment of the manuscript’s merits. He turned to Roy, who lounged in a window seat, smoking the inevitable cigarette. “What did you think of it?” he demanded.

“Perfectly ghastly!” came the sententious answer. “I was wondering what on earth you were up to—and hoping for the best. Yes, ghastly!”

May Thurston laughed, but there was little merriment in her notes.

“That’s exactly what it is—ghastly!” She shuddered slightly, and glanced across the room toward Margaret, as if in quest of sympathy. “It is ghastly. It got on my nerves frightfully. Mr. Abernethy was forever playing it, along at the last—and I used to enjoy his playing so, too! I love music, and he was simply wonderful. I’ve heard most of the great players, and it seems to me that he was as good as any of them. His technique was magnificent. He told me once that, since many years, he had had an absolute mastery of the instrument physically. He had only to think and to feel the spirit of the music. He said that the sympathetic response of his body was wholly automatic.”

“That is the ideal, of course,” Saxe agreed, with a sigh. “I only wish that I had attained to it myself! Perhaps, he weakened a bit at the last—when he did this, you know?” He looked at May inquiringly, as he made the suggestion.

But the girl shook her head, resolutely.

“No!” she said, with an air of finality. “Up to the very day of his death, there was

no breaking down of Mr. Abernethy's mind. Yet, he was always playing that piece at the last. Only, he played it in a thousand ways—never twice alike—and always ghastly!" Again the girl shuddered slightly.

"That's curious," Saxe said. He swung about on the piano-stool, and sat staring somberly at the written page.

Billy Walker innocently cleared the atmosphere. He sat erect, rubbing his eyes brazenly.

"Now, I liked that piece," he declared, genially. "It's got some swing to it, some go—yes, rather! Best thing you've played, if anybody asks me."

"Nobody did," Roy retorted, sourly.

As a matter of fact, Billy Walker, though totally tone-deaf, had been granted a considerable capacity for the enjoyment of rhythm. The composition that distressed May Thurston by its ghastliness had cheered him with the steady drumming of its chords; the law of compensation works in curious ways.



CHAPTER VI

THE SIXTH SENSE

“WHAT I don’t like about women,” exclaimed Roy Morton, with an inflection of disgust, “is the kind of men they like.”

It was the morning of another day, and the exhaustive search commanded by Billy Walker as the mouthpiece of inexorable logic had begun. The voice of the oracle could at this moment be heard from the porch, where he was engaged in pleasant conversation with Mrs. West, while his three friends were busy with the actual work of investigation. They were in the small room opening off the hall, on the ground floor, which had been used by the late owner of the cottage as a sort of office. There, he had kept all of his business papers—at least as far as the knowledge of his secretary went. A flat-top desk in the center of the room contained a number of drawers, and in one corner stood a small iron safe. Under the terms of the will, every freedom was accorded to the searchers, and now safe and drawers had been opened for their convenience by May Thurston, who thus followed the instructions she had received from the lawyer. At the moment when Roy made his rather bitter remark concerning the nature of womankind, he had just observed, through a window that looked out to the south, a trio strolling along the lake shore. The three were Margaret, May and the ubiquitous Masters. It was the presence of the engineer that had aroused the indignation of Roy, and had caused him thus cynically to stigmatize feminine indiscretion in friendship. Himself a devotee of the fair sex, though shockingly irresponsible as an eligible bachelor, it irked him mightily that the requirements of his present relation to Saxe were such as to hold him there, poring over a motley of sordid bills, receipts, and other financial memoranda, the while a scoundrelly nincompoop (so he secretly termed the engineer) strutted abroad with two charming girls.

David laughed at the disgust in his friend’s voice, for he, too, had observed the passing of the three, and he understood perfectly the jealousy that underlay Roy’s displeasure in the situation. He paused in his task of conning the year’s milk bills of one Eleazer Sneddy, lighted a cigarette, and inhaled the fumes with a sigh of deep gratification.

“I wouldn’t mind being in his place myself, Roy,” he said, placidly.

The grumbler scowled at his too penetrant crony. Saxe looked up from a sheet of

foolscap, covered in the minute handwriting of the miser with long columns of figures by which were set forth details of the expenditures for a month in the matter of postage. He, too, paused, welcoming any diversion from the uncongenial labor, and lighted a cigarette with manifest relief.

“Be in whose place, Dave?” he questioned, idly.

Roy attempted a distraction from the topic.

“Huh!” he sneered. “This adventure isn’t what it’s been cracked up to be—no gore, no gold, no anything, except a parcel of musty papers. I have just finished the thrilling items of tenpenny nails in the matter of shingling the cottage; I suppose that poor old miser had a spasm every time he paid for a pound of them. In fact, I’m sure of it, because I get psychosympathetically those same spasms in going over the charges.”

“Psychosympathetically is good,” David generously declared. Then, he turned to Saxe. “Roy just saw Masters out for a walk with the girls, and it stirred him to envy, naturally enough. It did me, too, for there are certainly two unusually nice girls.”

Roy’s gloomy face lighted in an instant, marvelously. His eyes grew very blue and soft, his lips curved in the smile that made all women like him.

“Peaches!” he ejaculated, with candid enthusiasm. “But what a revelation it was when little Miss Thurston took off her spectacles. A demure angel appeared where before had been a dumpy New England schoolmarm.... I have discovered the important fact that spectacles on a short woman take exactly two inches from her height.”

“Have you informed Miss Thurston of your interesting discovery?” David inquired.

“Not yet,” was the answer; “but I shall, at the first opportunity. It’s a crime for any woman not to be as beautiful as she possibly can, every moment of her life. Think of the wholesome happiness that loveliness gives to every observer!”

“Except the other women,” Saxe suggested.

Roy disdained the interruption:

“And yet,” he continued, energetically, “there are women, good women, mind you, who give away soup, but look like frumps, and actually believe that they are doing their duty. Why, sirs, they minister to the bellies of a dozen, perhaps, while they shock the finest sensibilities of the souls of a thousand who have to

look at 'em. And they believe that they have done their duty. It's shameful. Are bellies more than souls?"

The thoughts of Saxe were busy with the other of the two girls, Margaret West; and now he spoke of her, reverting to Roy's diatribe concerning the chief duty of women.

"Margaret West certainly fulfills all her obligation," he observed. There was a quality of repressed admiration in his voice, which set the observant David to thinking. "She is beautiful at all times. It's a delight to look at her."

The others nodded agreement, but, in the same moment, Roy grinned sardonically.

"Beware!" he advised, mockingly. "Remember that that girl, so young and seemingly so innocent, is your deadly enemy. Don't let the spell of her loveliness lull you into a fancied security, in which you may be caught off guard. Again, I bid you beware."

"What on earth are you raving about?" Saxe demanded, in genuine astonishment, "but you're merely joking, of course—though I must say that I don't exactly see the humor."

"Perhaps my language was a trifle extravagant," Roy conceded; "but as to the essential fact, why, I stand by what I said. Margaret West is, naturally, your enemy. There can't be a shadow of doubt as to that."

"Margaret West my enemy!" the incredulous Saxe repeated, in a voice that was indignant. "Why, man, the idea's absurd."

Roy wagged his head, sapiently.

"Human nature is human nature," he vouchsafed. "Money is power. There are a dozen truisms that I might utter very aptly at this present juncture, but I refrain. It so happens, however, that, in the event of your failing to discover the hiding-place of the gold so artfully concealed by the late lamented, this same Margaret West will fall heiress to exactly one-half of that gold. Therefore, inevitably, she is your enemy. Such is the law of our civilization, in which gold plays the vital part."

Saxe was frowning. He turned to David, with open impatience.

"Did you ever hear the like of that nonsense?" he demanded.

David smoked thoughtfully, and paused for a few seconds before he answered.

Then, he smiled his usual kindly smile, as he spoke decisively:

“Of course, it does seem a bit preposterous, first off,” he admitted. “But, you see, the common facts of experience lend color to Roy’s argument. Miss West is a charming girl, and doesn’t seem a bit the sordid, avaricious type, and yet—well, you never can tell. Women are kittle cattle, and there’s a pot of money concerned. I’m thinking she wouldn’t be quite plain human, if she didn’t want you to fail. Of course she does—she must—yes, Roy is right enough, Miss West is your natural enemy.”

Saxe was silenced, and, in a manner of speaking, convinced as well. He was forced to admit the plausibility of the reasoning of his friends, although his feeling was still bitterly opposed to any admission that their contention was just in this particular instance. It occurred to him that, were the case reversed, he would undoubtedly desire the seeker’s discomfiture with all his heart, would, in fine, regard the seeker as his natural enemy—just as Roy had designated Margaret West to be his natural enemy. Nevertheless, something within him forbade that he should esteem this girl as one hostile to himself. The color in Saxe’s cheeks deepened a little. Of a sudden, it was borne in on his consciousness that there existed a most cogent reason why he could not regard Margaret West as an enemy. It was because he so earnestly desired her as a friend. In that instant of illumination, he realized that never before in his life had he longed for the friendship of woman as now he yearned for that of Margaret West. A strange confusion fell on him. He did not quite understand the emotion that welled in his spirit; it was something new to his experience, something subtle, bafflingly elusive—and very, very sweet.

Saxe was recalled to the business of the moment by the pained voice of Roy:

“Digging the drain cost six dollars and ninety-eight cents.”

“Sounds like a department store,” was David’s amused comment. “I learn that, on the sixteenth of last January, nine cents was expended in the purchase of the succulent onion.”

Roy groaned with dismal heartiness.

“I embark on an adventure. I crave adventure, I seek it in far places and near, wherefore I come hither with my bold companions, a-hunting a chest of gold. Forthwith, I become an uncertified private accountant. What hideous degradation! I tell you, Saxe, I’m mighty sick of this job. I’d just as lief be assistant bookkeeper in a tannery.”

“Why tannery?” David inquired. He pushed the heap of papers aside, and lighted another cigarette, highly pleased with the diversion.

“Because a tannery happened to be the most disagreeable place I could think of at the moment,” was the simple explanation. “Smells, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” David admitted. His jagged nose wrinkled violently, as memory smote his olfactory nerves.

Saxe seized on a topic that promised some measure of distraction from his crowding thoughts:

“Myself, I don’t think much of this method.” He waved a hand contemptuously toward the litter of papers on the desk before them. “It seems to me that we’re just losing time in wading through all this trash. But what shall we do, instead? This is a part of the exhaustive search.”

Roy sprang up with an exclamation of impatience.

“No Christian gentleman, not even a miser, would concoct the diabolical idea of preserving a clue to his gold pots amid trash of this sort; besides, I have a presentiment.”

“Oh, a presentiment!” There was a note of scoffing in Saxe’s voice.

But David, in the years since their graduation, had journeyed with Roy through strange places, and so had come to know the whimsical nature intimately, with a consequent respect for some seemingly fantastic idiosyncracies. Now, he stared at his friend expectantly, with no hint of derision in the look.

Roy smiled quizzically, as he met David’s earnestly inquiring gaze:

“You’re not so skeptical, eh, Dave?” he said.

David smiled wryly, and shook his head. In his gentle, goggling eyes was reminiscence.

“It’s borne in on my consciousness,” Roy continued, rather pedantically, “that the clue isn’t here, and it’s not to be found by tedious, disgusting ransacking of scraps, like these we’ve been wasting our time on here, but, on the contrary, will be revealed to us in some much more curious manner. In fact, I feel that we shall succeed, but that our success will come in an apparently chance suggestion from some one of us, which will really be in the nature of an inspiration. You see, Dave,” he concluded, staring at the other intently, “the idea of the hiding-place is well compacted as a thought-form, for the old man was thinking of his treasure

and its concealment hour after hour, day after day. The influence is here, ready to affect anyone sensitive enough to be susceptible to such vibration. For my part, I'm sure some one of us will presently become obsessed by some seemingly absurd idea—an idea, in all likelihood, quite irrational—that idea will lead us to victory, and to the Abernethy gold.”

Saxe laughed, a bit sourly. Roy's psychic gasconading would have been more amusing with another theme. It seemed, in truth, rather heartless jesting, when a fortune was the issue. To suggest that wealth must await the vagaries of a thought-form's impact on somebody's consciousness, which wouldn't know even what had hit it! Of all preposterous things! It was brutal, too.

David sprang to his feet, his big, brown eyes shining alertly through the eyeglasses.

“Praise be!” he cried. Instantly, thereafter, he proceeded to the execution of a clog-dance, which he performed with astonishing precision and swiftness, while Roy clapped the rhythm with foot and hands.

Saxe looked on in unconcealed disgust. At the conclusion of the *pas seul*, he lifted his voice in complaint:

“Well, of all the heartless, unsympathetic wretches! If it was your money, you might not feel so devilishly tickled.” He glared at the unabashed two accusingly.

David strode forward, and clapped his friend on the back.

“Hold your hosses!” he cried. A crisp note of authority was in his voice. “Why, old fellow, this is just what I've been waiting for.”

“Indeed!” Saxe exclaimed, with sarcasm. Then, he shrugged his shoulders resignedly. He found himself fairly bemused by this madness on the part of his friends.

“It's this way,” David went on. His manner proved that, however extravagant in his credulity, he was quite sincere. “I've been about more than a bit with Roy, and in some infernally tough places, too, let me tell you.” Saxe nodded assent. “Well, the fact of the matter is simply this: From experience, I've learned that, when Roy has a hunch, it goes—that's all. He has sensed things, as he calls it, and our acting on the knowledge we got in that way has saved our lives—more than once—so, here, I've been waiting for his sixth sense to get busy, and it has, at last. I was beginning to get discouraged. Now, everything's all right. Roy's got his hunch.”

Before Saxe could voice utter disbelief in a trust so fantastic, he was interrupted by Roy himself. That intermittent seer, who had been smoking with an expression of infantile contentment on his face, sprang lithely and noiselessly to his feet. While Saxe and David stared curiously, he leaned close to them, and whispered:

“There’s somebody listening. Look out of the window, Saxe.”

Roy had been sitting for some time with his back to the one window in the room, while the other two had been facing it. There had come no sound from without. Now, instinctively obedient to the command, Saxe darted to the window, which was open, and thrust out his head. Close to the wall of the cottage, within a yard of him, stood Hartley Masters in an attitude of absorbed attention.

Without attracting the notice of the eaves-dropper, Saxe drew back, and turned to his friends. He nodded affirmation of Roy’s surmise. In the gaze with which he scrutinized the amateur psychic, there was a curious commingling of bewilderment, respect and chagrin.

David threw back his head, and laughed joyously, scorning the listener, and spoke his mind:

“When Roy gets a hunch—watch out!”



CHAPTER VII

HAPHAZARD QUESTING

MASTERS, who was not minded to let the value of a small weekly stipend stand between him and the possession of riches, had now abandoned even the pretense of work. He let it be known, casually, at the cottage that he was temporarily idle, while awaiting orders. As a matter of fact, he was awaiting the dismissal that now could not be long delayed. To May, however, he confessed the truth, that he had chosen to sacrifice a paltry certainty for the sake of possible wealth. She had protested against the recklessness of his conduct, but her pleas had fallen on deaf ears. Masters went his way of crafty greed without a moment's faltering. He had exulted on learning from the conversation overheard among the three friends that the systematized search was to be abandoned in favor of a foolish fancy—as he deemed it. While Saxe Temple and his companions loitered in expectation of some psychic guidance, Masters would give himself to the quest with an energy that must win him the victory. It was in a very cheerful frame of mind that he betook himself to the cottage on the following morning. Upon his arrival, however, he was at once confronted with a new phase of the situation, which filled him with rage.

The engineer found Mrs. West and Billy Walker chatting cozily on the porch, as usual. Mrs. West beamed kindly in her greeting, for she enjoyed the breezy manner of this handsome young man. Billy merely grunted. To judge from the expression of his face, the utterance were better inarticulate.

Masters leaned his long length against a pillar at the head of the flight of steps, and joined genially in the conversation for a few minutes, despite the manifest grumpiness of Billy Walker, who, never a courtier, was at no pains to conceal his distaste for the engineer's society. Mrs. West, however, was amiability itself, and Masters was minded to ignore the superciliousness of the other man's manner, though fully conscious of it. He felt that, under the circumstances, he could ill afford to be too finical over such a trifle, notwithstanding the irritation to his vanity. So he rolled a cigarette from the chip tobacco and wheat-straw paper which he affected, and chatted jauntily with Mrs. West. When he deemed that a sufficient interval had elapsed, the engineer prepared the way to continue his delayed search of the cottage:

“I’ll just take a look inside. Miss Thurston promised me a book.”

Forthwith, he reprobated himself for having employed this particular ruse, for Mrs. West said:

“Miss Thurston isn’t in the cottage, Mr. Masters. You will find her down at the boat-house.”

Masters thanked her with his most winning smile, and strolled away toward the lake. Mrs. West looked after him with a femininely appreciative smile.

“What a delightful gentleman Mr. Masters is!” she remarked innocently to Billy; by way of answer, there came a rumbling, luckily again quite inarticulate.

Forced thus by his own error to postpone the anticipated investigation, Masters was in no pleasant mood as he made his way to the boat-house, with the intention of venting his spite on the girl who loved him. But even this relief was not to be vouchsafed him yet. On the contrary, his displeasure was swiftly to become wrath, venomous by alarm; for, as he drew near the boat-house, he heard a chorus of merry voices. Instantly, he realized that the other men were here where he had expected to find only May, and possibly Miss West. Fury mounted high at the thought. A fierce, unreasoning jealousy bit at him. So great was his emotion under these confederate causes that, for once, he forgot discretion, and passed with hasty steps around the boat-house, totally heedless of the distraught expression on his usually debonair countenance.

As the engineer rounded the corner, a scowl bent his brows at sight of the scene before him. The summer morning was of bland sun and gentle airs to set the care-free in a mood for lazy delights. The group of four, it was plain, had yielded to the soft seduction of the hour, for their faces were radiant. Roy Morton was sitting, in a boyish attitude, on the top of a snubbing post, about which his long legs were twined for security’s sake, while May Thurston cuddled at his feet, her face uplifted, her eyes rapt, as she listened to some tale told from the book of his adventures. The spectacle infuriated Masters, and new fuel fed the flame as his eyes fell on the other two. These had their backs to the newcomer, who approached immediately behind them. Margaret sat at the edge of the dock, leaning against a post, in a posture of perfect comfort peculiarly exasperating to the observer. A little to the right, and so placed as to face the girl, Saxe sat, with his feet folded under him like a Turk. Masters noted, even in this gusty moment, that his rival was an especially good-looking young man, of the shaven, clean-cut type most esteemed by the contemporary illustrator. The engineer appreciated the type of which he himself was the exemplar, and appreciated it

indeed at its full worth, but, having a fair degree of intelligence, he knew that women admired also the vigorous, wholesome and cultured man, of the kind there before him. Though he had not the least fear for his own prowess where the hearts of women were concerned, he could not disguise from himself the fact that here was one who might easily prove a dangerous rival were the opportunity given.

Saxe had just done with explaining to Miss West the reason for the new era of idleness, which the day had inaugurated for himself and his two companions. With Billy Walker, the era was merely continued.

It must be confessed that Saxe had cast a reconnoitering glance toward Roy before beginning his recital, and that he held his voice lowered throughout the telling. He knew that this confidence to the girl, whom, to a certain extent, at least, the others distrusted, might be deemed by them the height of folly. But he was past respecting their opinions in aught that concerned her and him. So, he told her freely of the decision to abandon systematic search, in favor of a recondite dependence upon occult inspiration. Margaret's interest in the narrative was of the sincerest, and it delighted him. Her manner of receiving the information was proof enough to his mind that she harbored no least desire for his failure in this undertaking. His heart was in a glow of happiness, as she bent a little toward him, her face all eagerness, her limpid eyes dazzlingly blue in the brilliant light. She met his gaze squarely, as she voiced her protest against the course adopted:

“Oh, but, Mr. Temple, the time's so short—less than three weeks now—it isn't safe!”

The two were in this attitude of absorbed intimacy when Masters' glance fell upon them. The evident intensity of their interest in each other capped the climax of his rage. He strode forward, with a sneer arching the heavy mustache. At the sound of his steps, the group looked up, and, in varying fashion, each of the four showed unmistakable signs of dissatisfaction at this interruption of the conversation. Masters so far forgot his manners as to make no response to the rather curt nods with which the two men greeted him. Instead, he halted abruptly, and stared, glowering, at Margaret and Saxe. After the first moment of astonishment at the engineer's discourteous manner, Saxe's expression of animation died out suddenly, to be replaced by a set severity that augured ill for him who should challenge it. Roy's jaw shot out a little, and the veil dropped over his eyes, which, a moment before, had been mild and deep. Margaret could only regard the malevolent face of Masters with sheer amazement, as his

wrathful eyes met hers.

It was May who saved the situation. She sprang to her feet with a little cry, which might have been of pleasure or of pain. With the intuition of a loving woman, she seized instantly on the fact that something had thrown her lover from his customary poise. Without a particle of hesitation, she employed the first ruse suggested by her woman's wit:

“Oh, you did come, after all—in spite of that horrid tooth!”

She had no least idea as to the cause that had put the man in this tempestuous temper, but she realized the necessity of restoring him to some measure of self-control ere he should commit himself hopelessly by a violent outbreak. The fiction concerning the tooth rose to her lips without conscious volition on her part, the grimace with which Masters faced her, though merely a physical symbol of fury, might well have had its origin in a spasm of pain.

As he met May's dismayed and imploring eyes, sanity rushed back on the engineer. By a stern effort, he fought back the flooding wrath. His face worked a little, then settled into a grim repose. While the others waited in silence for the outcome, he suddenly smiled, crookedly.

“I had a frightful twinge while I was coming through the woods, but that didn't matter so much, because I was alone, and could make faces, and say just what I wanted to. But I do think it was unkind of fate to visit the worst twinge of a jumping toothache on me at the very instant when I stepped into the presence of company; forgive me the face I made, please.” His big eyes were shining gently now, where before they had been blazing. His demeanor was convincing to the unsuspecting Margaret, who, having once experienced a jumping toothache, was prepared to accept it as full justification for any desperate deed. Of the others, May felt a profound relief in finding that he had so swiftly made use of her offered help, and, for the moment, this satisfaction contented her; Roy adjusted his jaw in a less-belligerent fashion, as contempt took the place of anger; Saxe found himself smiling, genuinely amused over the fancy of so piratical-seeming a person in the throes of toothache. Neither of the men, however, had the slightest doubt that May had offered an ingenious excuse to account for the engineer's savage manner; and forthwith, Saxe and Roy began to wonder mightily as to what, in fact, had occurred to destroy so completely the ordinary suavity of this young gentleman whom they cordially detested.

Mrs. West sent her servant, Chris, in quest of Margaret, and, soon afterward, May and Masters also went to the cottage, without troubling much for an excuse,

so that the two friends were left alone together on the dock. But, before they had time to voice their common astonishment over the scene that had just passed, they were confronted by Jake, who, as they looked up at his approach, bobbed his head at them, and winked with a fine air of mystery. When he spoke, he addressed himself directly to Roy, for the love each of them bore to niceties of mechanism sealed their sympathy.

“Well, what’s new, Jake?” Roy demanded, amiably.

Another series of bobbings and winks emphasized the importance of the forthcoming communication. Then, finally, he spoke in a husky whisper, for secrecy’s sake:

“Thought I’d look in on ye, and tell ye I got an idee.”

“Capital, Jake!” Roy’s tone was distinctly encouraging. “What’s it all about?”

“It’s this way,” Jake began, with manifest pride in the importance of the coming revelation. “You see, I know somethin’ ’bout the house up thar—” he nodded over his shoulder in the direction of the cottage—“that you chaps don’t. That’s what!”

At this preamble, Saxe, who had been giving only desultory attention to the old man, quickly ceased looking out over the lake, and gave ear to what the boatman was saying, while Roy, too, displayed a new interest. Jake was plainly gratified by the effect he had wrought on his hearers, and he proceeded with a note of pride in his voice.

“That’s one thing ’bout that-thar cottage that you ain’t onto, and, thinkin’ as how you wa’n’t likely to be, I says to myself, says I, I’ll jest put ’em wise, seein’ as how ye come, to a kind o’ standstill, as it were.”

“Thanks, Jake,” Roy said. “We surely need any help we can get at this stage of the game. Go ahead.”

The cottage was an uncouth structure. It had originally been a story-and-a-half building, and to this Abernethy had added a sort of wing to make the music-room, and eventually this portion had become the principal bulk of the edifice, for domestic offices had been joined to it, and a second story set above, in which were a number of bedrooms. It was in reference to this second story on the wing that Jake now came with tidings for the treasure-seekers.

“Si Hatch did that-thar job,” he said, with a wheezy chuckle of amused reminiscence. “Si means well, but, ’tween you and me and the lamp-post, he

ain't wuth shucks as a carpenter and j'iner—no, siree! Well, bein' a cussed fool, Si misca'c'lated somehow, and left 'bout two-fut space at the forrerd end 'tween the outside wall and the lath to that side o' the bedroom. I s'posed, o' course, the old man'd be madder'n a hornet, but he only jest grinned some, and says to me, says he, it'll save that much floorin' for the bedroom, yes, I snummy, he did! Mighty clus, the old man was." Jake paused, and regarded the listeners with merrily twinkling eyes. "Might so be as the gold's in thar," he concluded. "O' course, 'tain't likely, but it might so be." He stood silent, awaiting comment.

"We're tremendously obliged, Jake," Roy declared promptly; and Saxe added a phrase of appreciation.

"Do we have to tear the house down to get into the space?" Roy continued.

Jake shook his head vehemently.

"Not a bit on it," he declared; and he forthwith gave vent to another chuckling series of explosions.

"You see, the old man was clus, as I said. That's right, he was gorrammed clus—meanin' no disrespect. You know that-thar closet in the front hall upstairs, by the bedroom door. Well, the old man said they wa'n't no earthly use o' wastin' good timber puttin' a back to that closet, with plasterin' and all. So, he jest had paper put up. You break away the paper, and then you can sidle right in'tween the outside wall and the lath o' the bedroom; thought it might be wuth while jest to look in, as it were."

"Indeed, we shall look in," Saxe declared, "and we're tremendously grateful to you, Jake, for the tip, because we need a lot of help, I'm thinking."

Roy nodded assent.

"We appreciate the kindness, old chap," he exclaimed. "And let me tell you that I'm going to show my friendship by getting you a decent berth, after this wild adventure is over and done with, where you'll have the chance of your life. Your skill with engines is wasted here; it's 'way off in Cuba, but it'll be worth your while. Would you like that?"

"You bet ye!" was the sententious answer of the boatman, as he turned to lead the way toward the house. Presently, he chuckled yet once again, contentedly, and added: "My old woman allus has been a-pinin' to travel in furrin parts."

CHAPTER VIII IN THE RECESS

AT THE house, no one was visible with the exception of Billy Walker, who, on the porch, reclined in a large rocking-chair, displaying his customary masterly inactivity, the while he contemplated the tip of a particularly black cigar, which he had not troubled to light for the sufficient reason that there were no matches nearer than the hall. The information concerning the recess within the walls was duly imparted to him, and he followed his two friends and the boatman to the closet in the hallway upstairs. The others were inclined to jeer at Billy Walker for this surprising show of activity on his part. But it was a jibe from Roy that put the lethargic one on his mettle. It came after Jake had cut through the paper in a panel from floor to ceiling, by which was revealed a black opening into the space beyond.

“And, above all,” Roy said, entreatingly, “don’t, I beg of you, Billy, let your rash impetuosity lead you to squeezing in here. Remember your paunch, and be warned in time.”

It is certain that, until this moment, Billy had had no slightest thought of thus venturing into the opening. But human nature is often contrary, and, though ordinarily Billy vastly preferred taunts to physical exertion, in this instance it so chanced that his friend’s remark touched him in a sensitive spot. He said nothing at the time, however, contenting himself with a sudden, valiant resolve. So, after candles had been brought, and his two friends had squeezed themselves, one after the other into the opening, Billy Walker, in his turn, essayed an entrance—to the considerable astonishment of Jake, who remained in the hall.

“Better take a candle, sir,” he suggested; and he offered one already lighted.

It was accepted, and, holding it high before him, Billy surveyed the region into which he meant to venture thus intrepidly. By the flickering light, he beheld a very narrow passage, in which, toward the farther end, he could distinguish the deeper shadow that he knew to be Roy, who had been the second to enter. There could be no doubt as to the person’s identity, since there was no room in which one person could pass another unless by climbing.

At sight of the limited space, Billy was assailed with pangs of regret that he had

so vaingloriously undertaken the adventure. Nevertheless, he felt that it was now too late to retreat, and, with a sigh of disgust, he thrust himself forward. He had observed in his brief examination that there was no flooring, but merely the naked joists, over which he must make his way very cautiously, stepping accurately from one to another. Warily, then, he went forward, using every caution. It was by no means pleasant going, because of the precarious footing, and, too, because of the fact that his broad shoulders were unduly constricted by the walls on either side. Disaster came when a nail caught in the sleeve of his coat, just as he gave a lunge forward. The unexpected restraint threw him out of balance; in recovering himself, he dropped the candle. On the instant, his imagination was filled with glaring visions of the house in flames. Alarmed he stooped his heavy body swiftly—too swiftly, alas—for his feet slipped from the narrow supports. He fell heavily. His hands and arms shot through the plastering that ceiled the room beneath. The violence of the impact was such that a large square of the plastering broke away, and went clattering to the floor of the room below. But, before the noise of its falling sounded, Billy Walker had heard another sound, a sharp cry of surprise, or fear. Through the rain of plaster, his eyes caught one glimpse of a darting figure; his ears distinguished from out the other din a scurry of steps over the polished floor. Even in the turmoil of the moment, Billy automatically noted these things. But, at the time, he gave no heed whatever to them, his one desire just then was to escape from this horrible predicament without the loss of an instant. To that end, he immediately began to back out, with never another thought to the candle, which, however, had been extinguished by the fall.

Slowly and wrathfully, Billy Walker made his laborious retreat on hands and knees backward from the scene of his exploits. His friends, startled by the noise behind them, had managed to face about, and to hurry toward him, and now they stood, one behind the other, peering at the prostrate one; at first in amazement over his presence there at all; then, in alarm over his condition; finally, reassured, in hilarious enjoyment of the catastrophe that had befallen him. Their presence and comments did not tend to soothe the outraged feelings of the victim as he wearily crept, retrograde, into the closet, and at last scrambled to his feet in the hallway. Jake was so discreet as to say nothing at all, which reticence gave him a place for all time in the unhappy man's esteem, despite the fact that the disaster had come from accepting the proffered candle. The others, unfortunately, were not so restrained, and their remarks came near to offending Billy Walker; certainly, they increased his exasperation against the event that had made him ridiculous. But, after a little, he contrived a diversion:

“I hope that plastering didn’t hurt anybody when it fell,” he exclaimed, of a sudden.

Jake shook his head.

“Nope!” he declared. “Thar wa’n’t nobody downstairs, I guess, Marthy’s out at the back, lookin’ arter her flower garden, and thar wa’n’t nobody else round when we come up.”

“But there was someone in the room downstairs,” Billy persisted. “I heard a cry, just as my fists went through the plastering, and then, along with the other noise, I heard the steps of someone running out.”

“Was it a man or a woman?” Roy asked.

Billy shook his head.

“Really, I haven’t the least idea,” he answered, “You see, I was pretty well occupied at the moment with my own affairs, and I didn’t pay a particle of attention to anything else.”

“Anyhow, I don’t see that it matters much,” Saxe declared. “It’s plain that you didn’t hurt anyone seriously, or we’d have heard of it before this; it didn’t wound Mrs. Dustin, or Chris, for here they both come now.” He waved his hand toward the stairs, and the others turned to see the two hurrying up.

Mrs. Dustin was voluble, and mightily relieved to learn that her precious Jake had suffered no harm. The mild, black eyes of Mrs. West’s servant twinkled with amused excitement, when he was informed as to the nature of the happening. They, too, were puzzled on hearing that someone had been in the music-room at the time of the accident.

The three friends went down to the porch, which was still deserted. Billy, who had cast a disgusted glance on the litter in the drawing-room in passing, sighed lugubriously, as he sank back into the rocking-chair.

“No more thrilling adventures by field and flood for me,” he boomed. “I have had my bellyful, all at once. Let the cobbler stick to his last, and let me stick to my chair. I got too confoundedly energetic, and I’m old enough to know better. I’ve messed up the place shockingly, which means so much extra work for the industrious Mrs. Dustin, whose amiable, but foolish husband got me into this idiotic scrape. You would have found that there was no gold in the place without my assistance; and, unfortunately, I’ve incurred a financial penalty for my misplaced intrusiveness—into the plastering—and when the repairs of Miss

West's ceiling shall have been accomplished, it will be my melancholy duty to foot the bill. Oh, misery!"

The others laughed with the unfortunate, who was now again restored to his usual good humor. But, presently, Saxe spoke in a puzzled voice:

"You really must have been mistaken, Billy, about having heard someone down below you, in the music-room."

Billy Walker snorted indignantly.

"I may possibly be a trifle languorous physically in some ways on occasion," he retorted, "but I assure you that my ears are quick enough. I was not mistaken. I heard just what I told you I heard, and I saw, too."

The others were unaware that Billy did not exaggerate the excellent quality of his hearing, and, in consequence, they found themselves at a loss. It was Roy, the suspicious, who finally voiced the idea that was bound to find lodgment in their minds. When he spoke, it was in a tone of conviction:

"The ubiquitous Masters, of course!"

Saxe nodded assent.

"Spying again," he agreed. "We know that he's capable of it." He turned to Billy Walker, inquiringly.

"The fellow is undoubtedly open to suspicion, after what you caught him at the other day." Billy admitted. "Equally of course, we haven't a shred of evidence against him."

"That doesn't matter a bit, as long as we have the moral certainty," Saxe argued. "But the real gist of the problem is: What on earth is the fellow up to, anyhow?"

"It's just pure cussedness," Roy asserted, his face hardening. "One look at him is enough to warn anyone that he's spoiling for mischief. He's a rotter, that's all."

Billy Walker shook his head, authoritatively.

"You're wrong, as usual," he announced, with unpleasant frankness. "As a matter of fact, our friend, the enemy, has a motive other than sheer devilry."

The others regarded the speaker in surprise, whereat Billy Walker nodded his head vigorously a number of times, and looked very wise indeed.

"Yes," he continued, with much complacency. "After you had told me the incident of his listening to your talk together, I grappled with the problem of the

engineer's not minding his own business, and I presently came on the obvious solution of the puzzle." He paused, expectantly.

"Well, what was it?" Roy demanded, impatiently. He was still smarting a little from Billy's sweeping statement as to his own habit of inaccuracy. Saxe, too, showed a keen curiosity in his face.

"The simple truth of the matter is this," the oracle resumed, when he felt that he had sufficiently whetted their interest by delay. "This man, Masters, has a mind to lay hold on Abernethy's treasure himself." He stared triumphantly at first one and then the other of his hearers.

The effect on them was enough to satisfy the purveyor of information. Roy fairly gaped in amazement, while Saxe manifested first astonishment, then incredulity, which he voiced baldly:

"Absurd!" he cried.

But Billy Walker was prepared to maintain his contention with arguments, and forthwith he did so. And, at the last, Billy made a shrewd suggestion, which, by a totally different method, arrived at the conclusion already reached by Roy through his vaunted sixth sense.

"You may have wondered a little," the oracle said, "that I should have made no particular remonstrance when you incontinently gave up the search commanded by immutable logic. Well, as a matter of fact, I myself would have suggested the uselessness of further effort along those lines. You see, the affair lies thus." He paused for a moment, and pursed his lips, as one preparing for didactic discourse. "This chap, Masters, is on terms of considerable intimacy, I judge, with the girl who was the secretary of the late Mr. Abernethy. Moreover, he was here, on the spot. There can be no question that, sooner or later, he learned the facts from her concerning the last will and testament of the eccentric miser. Thereupon, he determined to go treasure-hunting on his own account. He was on the job instanter, so to speak. In fact, I'm quite willing to eat my hat, which is an especially indigestible variety of Stetson, if the cottage has not already been searched with great thoroughness by our industrious antagonist." Billy stared at his two friends contentedly out of his small, dull eyes, and his heavy face wrinkled into a smile.

The result of his words was all that he could have desired.

"The infernal sneak!" Roy exclaimed, violently. His eyes grew hard, his mouth set, with the slight forward push of the jaw. In Saxe's face, too, anger was plain.

“To think of a nice girl being fooled like that!” Roy continued furiously, after an interval of silence. “But we’ll land the robber somehow. If we don’t, I’ll find some excuse for beating him up.”

“Never mind the pummeling,” Billy counseled. “Just you keep your eyes open that he doesn’t beat you—to the money. For the present, that’s more important than jealous rows.” At this remark, which showed that the scholar was more observant than might have been supposed in a field so foreign to his usual investigations, Roy blushed for the first time in many years, and Saxe was so rude as to titter aloud.

It was at this moment that David appeared from around the north end of the cottage. Forthwith, he was made familiar with all that had happened during the period of his absence, together with the lively suspicions entertained against the engineer. When the tale had been told, David took a few minutes for reflection before he spoke.

“I’m willing to believe anything against that ornery critter,” he remarked at last, with his big eyes twinkling; “but I am, before all else, a just man. You’ve got to leave Masters out on this last deal. As a matter of fact, he has a perfectly good alibi; I wanted a line on the rascal, and so I fairly forced myself on him this morning—to his disgust. But he didn’t think it quite prudent, I guess, to be out-and-out rude to me. For the last two hours Masters and I have been together, strolling chummily over the hills and far away.”



CHAPTER IX

THE GOLD SONG

AS MRS. WEST, with Margaret and May Thurston, had gone for a stroll soon after the departure of David and the engineer, the mystery concerning the identity of the person in the music-room at the time of Billy's misadventure remained unsolved. The subject afforded the friends much opportunity for speculation, all of which resulted in nothing definite. Margaret and her mother showed not the slightest irritation over the way in which the property had been damaged; on the contrary, they were seen to smile whenever their gaze touched the broken place in the ceiling, which remained the mute witness to an inglorious achievement. Saxe, while awaiting the development of another idea for the quest, devoted himself assiduously to Margaret. He made no effort to conceal his infatuation—or, if he did, the attempt was futile. He was, indeed, so flagrant in his court as to fill the engineer with an ever increasing fury of jealousy, which threatened ill to one or the other of the two young men. On his part, Saxe was made miserable by the affability with which Margaret accepted the attendance of the engineer on her. It seemed monstrous that her instinct should leave her unwarned as to the vicious character of the fellow. Saxe felt that he, as a gentleman, could give her no least word of admonition under the circumstances. He could only do his best to keep at her side every moment, and in this he succeeded remarkably well, though by no means to the extent of his desire. As for the disposition of the girl herself, she showed neutrality between the two men in a manner that, while equally objectionable to each of them, must have commanded the admiration of any unprejudiced observer.

Roy devoted himself with good grace to May Thurston, who welcomed him candidly, for her heart was deeply wounded by the patent defection of her lover. Masters had glibly assured her that it was the part of diplomacy just now for him to conceal their real relation by his attentions to Margaret, but his reasoning was not altogether convincing to her intelligence, and the voice of instinct told her that her love was being flouted before her very eyes. In consequence, she greeted this new admirer gladly as a sop to her pride and, presently, as Roy exerted himself to the utmost toward making a favorable impression, for the sake of the genuine pleasure his company gave her. Being a sensible young woman in the main, the inevitable comparisons that soon began to arise in her mind between

the two young men did much toward tearing loose the roots of love from her heart, leaving the soil there freshly tilled for the planting of other seed.

Mrs. West played her part excellently as chaperon by giving her society much of the time to David and Billy. She was so good to look on in her well-preserved charms, and so wise and sympathetic in her conversation, and so untiring a listener, that the two men found themselves very content.

The other three members of the household, Jake, his wife, and Chris made an amiable trio in the kitchen, where Mrs. Dustin, who, as Jake bore witness, had always “hankered to go a-travelin’,” was never weary of hearing the newcomer’s tales of strange places whither he had journeyed. For the first time in his life, Chris found himself appreciated at his full worth, perhaps beyond, not as a servant but as a man, by those who, while of a humble walk in life, were yet not of the servant class. He expanded under the novel and pleasing influence, and developed a gift of narrative that surprised himself. He felt a new sense of his own importance, which did not in the least lessen his devotion to Mrs. West and Margaret.

On the third night after the episode in the recess, the ladies had retired to their chambers for the night, and the indefatigable Masters, also, had taken his departure from the cottage, but the four friends still remained in the music-room, where Saxe had been playing. They were smoking and chatting in care-free fashion of many things—but not of the treasure which they had set out to find, though that lay ready at the back of the mind of each.

Saxe lingered at the piano. Now, he was idly giving forth bits of various compositions as they chanced to rise in memory. It was while in this mood of desultory reminiscence that he suddenly became aroused to knowledge of the fact that he was monotonously drumming a tedious strain, which had neither melody or harmony to justify the choice of it at all, much less this senseless reiteration. For a few seconds, he found himself bewildered: he could not recall what the music was, either the name of the composition or the name of the author. Nor could he recollect what manner of association he had ever had with the barren phrases, that he should thus subconsciously carry them in memory. He was disagreeably impressed by the event, because he prided himself on the clarity of his mental processes, and here he found himself completely baffled. Then, in a flash, remembrance came, and with it an even greater wonder.

This was the music that had been written by the old man of whom he was the doubtful heir. Even while he mused, he had been continuing the harsh fragment,

and now he gave careful ear to it, seeking some explanation of the reason why it had persisted in memory, to issue in his playing without volition on his part. But there came no suggestion as to that cause from the uncouth strain. He played it once again, without any hint of understanding, then ceased, wholly at a loss; it was another who afforded the clue that had eluded him.

As the echoes died away, Billy Walker rumbled a comment from his luxurious huddling in the depths of the chair:

“Sounds like money—heaps of money—gold, you know, all in stacks, being counted—clink, clink! Clink, clink!”

Saxe whirled on the piano-stool, an expression of amazement on his face as he stared at his unmusical friend.

“By heavens, Billy,” he cried excitedly, “you’ve got it—you’ve got it exactly! That’s what it is; it’s the clink, clink, clink of the gold-pieces, as they’re piled up.” He was astounded by this perspicacity on the part of one who had no soul for music, yet had succeeded here, where he himself had failed. He had no particle of doubt that this explanation as to the meaning of the music was the true one. He played the piece once again, emphasizing the accent in the bass a little, so that the effect was even more pronounced. There could be no mistake.

Roy spoke with sudden appreciation of the fact:

“Why, that’s the piece you played the other night—the weird one. I’d been wondering where I’d heard it. It’s the one that got on Miss Thurston’s nerves so, because the old man was always playing it toward the last. It’s enough to get on anyone’s nerves, for that matter, but Billy hit the idea all right.”

David Thwing, nodding energetically, turned his protuberant eyes on Billy.

“Yes, you hit it, old man,” he exclaimed. “You got the idea we were all looking for, and couldn’t quite catch hold of. Bully for you! But how in the world did you ever come to do it? You, a music sharp!” He burst into a mellow peal of laughter, in which the others joined.

Suddenly, Saxe sprang to his feet, with a display of emotion that was contrary to his habit, for he had schooled himself to a certain phlegmatic bearing that masked the native susceptibility of his moods. Now, however, he forgot restraint in the agitation of his feeling, and addressed his friends with a vehemence that astonished them. His swift gestures and the changing play of his features revealed the volatile artistic temperament, which was ordinarily shrouded within a veil of imperturbable calm.

“I know, I understand it all now,” he declared eagerly. “In this music, the old man crystallized his besetting sin. This composition of his is the song of gold; it is the miser’s song. In it, he translates into musical terms the vice that corroded his soul. In it, he expresses the sordidness of that vice, even as he himself knew it out of dreadful personal experience. And, somehow, he put into the music the strength of the spell that was laid on him. It is there—some malignant fascination which each and every one of us has felt in a fashion of his own. That is why it so gripped Miss Thurston, and why it affected her so disagreeably. It has in it a subtle, irresistible suggestion of the hideous. The ignominy and the power of greed alike sound in the monotony of its rhythm, its harshness, its fearful simplicity. It is uncouth, it is as if it were calloused. Yet, it is full of vital, frightful emotion. It is a statement of ghastly truth, it is a confession of degradation, it is a wail of utter despair. In short, it is the heart-song of the miser, written by the brain that looked into the heart and learned its hateful mystery.”

The others had listened in tense silence, surprised beyond measure before this outbreak from one always hitherto so tranquil, so serene amid the varying stresses of affairs. It was the revelation of their friend in a new light, wherein he showed with an impressiveness strange to them. They watched him intently as he stood there before them, all animation, his handsome face flushed in the passion of the moment. A little sigh of appreciation issued from the lips of each as, with the last words, he sank again to the piano-stool, and dropped his hands to the keys. So, once again, he played the music of that dead man who had given himself to a gross, an evil worship. Still under the influence of deep emotion, the player now abandoned himself to the theme, and wrought on it with all his skill in music, with all the feeling of repulsion that held him in thrall.

There was not in this improvisation the power, the mastery, that had marked the frenzied interpretation by which the composer had amazed the night. But Saxe Temple was not wanting a large measure of skill, and to this he added the sympathy of the true artist, surcharged with a profound emotion. The uncanny spell of the music laid its hold on them all as he went on playing, gripped them, sent weird visions reeling before their fancy. Even Billy Walker for once was beguiled into a curious receptivity, so that he saw vistas of crouched specters, which ceaselessly shuffled golden coins to and fro, in a frenetic joy that was the madness of anguish. May Thurston, asleep in her chamber, turned uneasily, and her dreams grew troubled.

When, at last, Saxe had made an end of playing, there followed a long silence. It was Billy Walker who broke it. His great voice rang through the room, harsh,

compelling:

“It’s there,” he said, with simple finality. “It’s there—the clue!”



CHAPTER X IN THE WOOD

THE others received the astonishing pronouncement of Billy Walker with varying emotions, of which the chief was a candid incredulity.

“How in the world do you justify that remarkable statement?” Roy demanded, breaking the silence of surprise, which had at first held the three.

For a moment, Billy showed traces of embarrassment. Then, swiftly, an expression of relief showed on his heavy face, and he spoke glibly enough:

“The conclusion to which I have come,” he declared ponderously, “is compelled by exact reasoning from all the facts in our possession. The late Mr. Abernethy unquestionably left for his heir some sort of clue as to the hiding-place of the money. Having in mind the whimsical nature of the man, we may well believe that, in a case such as this, the clue would be of an especially curious kind. Next, we have the fact that Mr. Abernethy was a musician. He was devoted to that art beyond anything else, excepting only his passion as a miser. Now, our search through his effects and his house has discovered only a single thing having a real, vital bearing on his personality, and—more than that—on the very object of our quest here, money. In consequence of all these facts, I am led to the conclusion that this page of manuscript offers us the clue for which we have hitherto been hunting in vain.” The speaker paused, to stare from one to another of his auditors triumphantly.

Roy uttered an ejaculation of impatience.

“Reason is a good thing sometimes, and sometimes it isn’t. This, I’m thinking, is one of the times when it isn’t. The trouble with your whole argument, Billy, lies in an additional fact; that a sheet of music can’t tell you where a certain hole in the ground may chance to be.”

“Why not?” Billy’s question came tartly.

Roy replied with a hint of disdain in his voice, such as is often characteristic of the musical person in speaking of his art to one unlearned.

“The reason would be obvious to you, if you knew anything of music,” he declared.

“Then, it’s lucky I don’t,” was the other’s retort; “because, in some way that we don’t know yet, the clue we need is set down on that manuscript. It is logically certain, and, if you musical sharps can’t guess as much, it’s fortunate I’m along to give you the pointer.”

David, also, expressed himself as skeptical of the announcement made by Billy:

“If it had been anybody except Billy who had been hit by this idea, I should feel quite differently about it,” he asserted, chuckling in response to the glare of indignation with which the oracle received the words. “Of course, you know my feeling in the matter. I’m expecting some sort of inspiration to hit us; I have been, ever since Roy had his hunch. But Billy isn’t of the sensitive temperament, which is receptive to impressions of a psychic sort. If Roy had received this idea, without a bit of reason to back it up, I should have had high hopes—or if it had come to Saxe even, because he has the sensitiveness of the artistic temperament.”

“Or even if it had come to your delicately susceptible self, I suppose,” Billy suggested, acrimoniously.

David nodded assent.

“With all humility, yes,” he answered, unabashed. “And you needn’t be peevish, Billy, for the simple reason that you’d be furious if anyone were to accuse you of being a psychic subject. Eh, wouldn’t you?”

Billy growled assent.

“That sort of thing’s all rot,” he affirmed, with emphasis. “I arrived at the fact easily and sanely by the exercise of a rationalizing intelligence.”

“Precisely!” David agreed. “And that’s why I don’t attach the slightest importance to your statement.” At this heterodox confession, Billy was too overwhelmed with disgust to pursue the argument farther.

Saxe did not share in the avowed disbelief of Roy and David. While the others were engaged in disputation, he had gone to the stack of music, and had looked through it until he came upon the sheet of manuscript. Then, he returned to his seat on the stool, placed the music on the rack, and devoted himself to scrutiny of the writing. He felt, somehow, that he dared not reject the suggestion that here was the very thing he sought as the guide to fortune. Nevertheless, though he studied the page with anxious intensity, he could perceive no possibility of any hint to be derived from the simple score of notes. There was nothing set down in the way of diagram, or combination of letters which by twist of ingenuity might

be made to suit his need. Nothing showed beyond the phrases of a composition naked in its simplicity. Reason told him that any trust in this manuscript were delusion. Yet, he hung over it, absorbed, even while he chided himself for his interest in a thing plainly worthless to the purpose.

It was Billy Walker, turning in disgust from the debate with David, who first observed Saxe's absorption in the manuscript, and his vanity was at once consoled by this mute support. He got up lumberingly, and crossed over to the piano, where he stood looking down at the music. His action caused David and Roy to perceive what Saxe was doing, and forthwith, despite their skepticism, they, too, rose and went to the piano, there to stare down curiously at the manuscript on the rack.

Here is a copy of the sheet on which the four adventurers were looking down:

[\[Listen\]](#)

The four stood in silence for a long minute, gazing down at the manuscript page with keen discouragement. Saxe was the first to speak, shaking his head dispiritedly:

"It means nothing," he said, with melancholy certainty in his voice. "There is no possibility of its meaning anything. For a moment, I was foolish enough to hope that Billy had really got the right idea, but he hasn't. This is a plain bit of music, nothing more."

"Of course!" Roy agreed, with a contemptuous inflection. "My personal opinion is that the power of ratiocination is not always what it's cracked up to be, Billy."

David, once again, shared the general disbelief.

"No," he declared, "the idea won't hold water. There is no way to convey meaning by the score of a musical composition except the emotion that the author has experienced himself, and wishes thus to interpret to his hearers. The old man meant in this case to tell us of the spell that the love of gold lays on the miser. He has done that. Billy was the one who called our attention to the fact. He must be content with that much glory. His other idea was just poppycock."

Billy Walker was unconvinced.

"I know nothing about music," he conceded. "But I have the God-given gift of reason, which is not vouchsafed to the brutes—or to all human beings, I regret to say. Reason convinces me that the clue lies somewhere on this sheet. I reaffirm my conclusion. Since I know nothing of music, the remainder of the work must

be done by you. It has now become your responsibility. I have done my part.”

The dignity and the earnestness with which this declaration was made impressed the doubters in spite of themselves. When Billy had ceased speaking, they remained silent, vaguely hesitant, though quite unconvinced. Saxe, perhaps, more than either of the others was desirous of accepting Billy’s idea as true, but he was unable to justify it by anything tangible. His was, after all, the chief interest in the issue, and he was eager to seize on even the most meager possibility that offered hope of success. So now, he was anxious to believe, and racked his brain to find some character of subtle significance on the page before him. It was in vain. He could discern nothing beyond the obvious meaning of the score as the symbol of a musical composition.

Thus the matter remained for a week. Billy Walker retained certainty as to the correctness of his judgment; David and Roy maintained their attitude of skepticism; Saxe continued his mood of willingness to believe, along with a total incapacity to find an atom of evidence in support of it. He sat for hours before the manuscript, hoping for some inspiration to come, but his thoughts remained barren. He realized, with poignant regret, that time was slipping away on swiftest wings, yet he felt himself powerless before the problem, on the solving of which his fortune was conditioned.

Nevertheless, not all his time was given to the quest. A part, even the greater part, was bestowed on Margaret West—on her in person, when opportunity served, on her in thought, when absent from her. His failure to make any progress in the search for the treasure would without doubt have caused him vastly more distress of mind, had it not been for the fact that most of his energy was devoted to the girl. Worry over money could not affect him to desperation, when he was constantly titillating over the secret of a maiden’s heart. He was assiduous in his attentions, but he could not win from Margaret any sure indication of preference. She was as amiable as the most exacting lover might require, but she displayed none of that coyness or confusion for which Saxe looked as a sign that her heart was engaged. He did not dare over-much, for the brief length of their acquaintance seemed to forbid. But this restraint caused him torment on account of jealousy, since Masters appeared soon as an open rival in the wooing of the girl. Margaret’s treatment of the engineer was of such a sort that it drove Saxe nearly to desperation. She was unfailingly as amiable to the one as to the other of her suitors. It was, to Saxe, utterly inconceivable that any woman could be guilty of such folly as to love a man like the engineer, yet the girl’s attitude toward Masters filled him with alarm, so that he pressed his own

suit with more insistence, and came to hate his adversary exceedingly.

Masters, too, suffered under the curse of jealousy. His love for Margaret was a sincere passion, and the hate Saxe bore for him he returned in overflowing measure. Through all his emotion of love, however, there remained in undiminished vigor his desire to possess himself of the gold hidden by Abernethy. And, presently, there grew in him a desperate resolve, brought into being in part by greed, in part by hatred of his rival.

May Thurston was another in the throes of anguish, and that from no fault of her own. Her love for the engineer had involved her in almost unendurable humiliation. His ostentatious worship of Margaret West at first filled May with the agony of outraged affection, then forced her to the wrath of revolt against such treachery. This mood endured. The little hypocrisies of loving, which Masters attempted on the rare occasions when the two were alone together, did not deceive her in the least. Yet, the final break between the two was delayed for lack of courage on her part to accuse him openly of his guilt. The matter stood thus between them when, one morning after a sleepless night, May got from her bed before sunrise, dressed herself hurriedly, and left the cottage, hoping that the freshness of the dawn might serve to soothe her wearied nerves. She wandered aimlessly hither and yon through the woods bordering the shore, and did indeed win some solace for her soul in the radiance of the summer day. She was about fifty yards distant from the cottage, descending the slope that ran to the shore, when she heard a slight noise among the bushes in front of her. She halted instantly, curious to know what manner of creature might be at hand, and welcoming any distraction from the distress in her heart.

Herself hidden by a screen of foliage, she peered forth cautiously, searching with her eyes the thicket beyond. At first, she could distinguish nothing, and, after a little, became convinced that she had been deceived by the dropping of a rotted branch. She was on the point of advancing again, when another and louder sound arrested her. It issued from a place somewhat farther to the right than that she had scrutinized, and now, as she watched intently, she made out the dim form of some object moving slowly within a clump of high bushes, from the center of which grew a thick-leafed sapling. Another minute of inspection convinced her that the object was a man, and immediately an intuition bore upon her that it was Masters himself. Sure of his identity, she went forward quickly, following the impulse of the moment, and called him by name.

Masters—for it was in truth the engineer—whirled and faced the girl with an expression of terror, which, however, vanished so swiftly that May afterward

found herself wondering if in fact she had not merely imagined it. Moreover, he smiled on her with more tenderness than he had exhibited in his manner for days, and his voice, when he spoke, was caressing:

“You, May!” he cried. His tones indicated a joyous surprise over the unexpected meeting. “You, too, are rivaling the lark this morning, like myself. I woke up three hours ago, and, when I found there was no chance to get to sleep again, I decided to commune with nature. I’ve been trailing a wonderful moth, but I’ve lost it at last, I’m sorry to say. It was a beauty!” He paused from the flow of words, which had been perhaps a trifle too rapid for entire sincerity, and regarded the girl with a glance that was at once fond and quizzical. “And did you, too, have a touch of insomnia?” he inquired.

May nodded, rather listlessly. For some reason that she could not understand, she was not convinced by the specious suavity of the engineer’s utterance. At the back of her mind was a belief that the man was lying, though she refused to allow the accusation place. Her instinct revolted against the disloyalty of the fellow. Nevertheless, her heart was moved to a last struggle in behalf of the love to which she had once so joyously surrendered herself. She determined on an appeal to that better nature which she believed the engineer to possess:

“Hartley,” she said softly, “I wish you to do something for me—no, for yourself. I want you to give up this mad idea of securing the gold Mr. Abernethy hid.” The gaze of her dark eyes was full of affectionate pleading.

The reply of Masters was prompt, without any least trace of hesitancy. He put out his hand, and took hers, pressing it tenderly.

“Dearest,” he said softly, “you have been right, and I have been wrong. I see it now. I was carried away for a little while by my longing for money. I wanted it for you, not for myself altogether—you must know that. Now, I have repented. It was my conscience that kept me awake last night. I have already abandoned the idea of trying to get hold of a fortune that doesn’t rightly belong to me. Can you forgive me, dearest? I’ve been a little mad, I think.” He paused, and, in the silence that followed, drew her to him, and kissed her very gently on the forehead.

May accepted the embrace—knew not, indeed, how to refuse it, although it failed to thrill her with that rapture which she had once known in his arms. Instead, she sighed in a confusion of emotions, which she herself was far from understanding. As a matter of fact, however, this was the beginning of the end. At last, under the stress of doubt inflicted persistently on her higher nature, the

physical attraction exerted by Masters, which, unknown to her, had been the impelling cause for the activity of her imagination in making him an ideal, this potency of sex charm was overwhelmed by the essential antagonism between her soul and his. A certain shyness held her mute, so that Masters was well content with the effect he had secured; but, in this, his self-confidence and the seeming passivity of the girl led him far astray. In truth, May felt assured that Masters lied, and the failure of personal contact to yield any emotion save an actual dissatisfaction set the instinctive disbelief in bold relief. When, soon afterward, they separated, May was secretly aware that her first romance had come to an inglorious end.



CHAPTER XI

THE SHOT

IT WAS in the evening of this same day, at dinner, that the element of tragedy was first injected into the situation. In addition to Mrs. West and her daughter, May Thurston, and the four young men, there was present Hartley Masters. He had been invited frequently to dine at the cottage, and had for a time accepted every invitation. Latterly, however, the evidences of strained feeling between him and the other men had become so pronounced that he had usually offered some excuse for declining the kindly hospitality of Mrs. West. Another reason that influenced him in this was his own lack of confidence in his self-control, since the incident at the boat-house, which he had had some difficulty in explaining satisfactorily to May. Nevertheless, tonight, he had chosen to rely on his powers of self-restraint, and had accepted at once when Mrs. West suggested his remaining for the evening meal.

The construction of the cottage was such that the dining-room was at the back of the house. On the left, as one entered the hall, was the large music-room, which occupied the entire ground floor of the added wing. On the right, the first room was that which had served Abernethy as an office. Beyond this came the dining-room, with one window at the back, and one on the north side. Mrs. West sat at the head of the table, in such a position that she faced the window to the north. Margaret sat opposite her, while Saxe was placed at her right hand. Beyond him was May Thurston, and beyond her Roy. Billy Walker was beside the hostess on the left, and then David Thwing, while Masters filled the place next to Margaret.

The conversation at the table went pleasantly enough, despite the latent hostility between the engineer and the other men. The antipathy of Saxe and his friends was certainly not shared by either Margaret or her mother, unless they concealed their feeling with much skill, for the daughter addressed herself to Masters much of the time, and Mrs. West often included him in the conversation. By tacit agreement the subject of the miser's gold was not touched on by anyone, and the desultory talk ran the usual gamut of art, literature, the drama, and those innumerable topics that serve as the transient vehicles for individual wit and seriousness.

It chanced that a decanter stood on the table, close to the edge, just by Billy Walker's right elbow. As he turned to address David on his left, his right arm was moved carelessly, and the decanter was jolted from its place. It poised for a second, balanced on its bottom edge, then fell over the side of the table toward the floor. But the time, brief as it was, had been sufficient for action on the part of Saxe. Naturally of exceeding rapidity of movement, although he held this under restraint ordinarily, so that he appeared rather languid than otherwise, an instantaneous responsiveness of his body to any command of the will had been cultivated by the years of exercise at the piano. So, now, on the instant when he perceived the touch of Billy's elbow to the decanter, he darted in a single step from his seat to a position behind Mrs. West's chair with arm outstretched, and in the same second, his nimble fingers had closed on the neck of the falling decanter, to which they clung tenaciously. Before he could again straighten himself, there came a thud against the east wall of the dining-room—with it the sharp crack of a rifle, fired from close at hand.

Saxe stood erect—stared dumbfounded at the others. They stared back at him, wordless for the moment, stupefied. Each looked at first one and then another, unable to surmise as to what had come upon them. It was Masters who finally broke the oppressive silence. The engineer's face was of a dead white, and as he spoke he tugged nervously at the luxuriant mustache:

“Some hunter's been mighty careless,” he declared; and he smiled, rather feebly, on Margaret, who had looked up at the sound of his voice.

“He sure was some careless,” agreed David who, at times, relapsed into an early dialect. “Shootin' promiscuous-like!” He goggled at the startled company through his thick lenses.

Forthwith, a babel broke forth, a confusion of exclamations, in which were voiced alarm, wonder and anger. It was Saxe, still on his feet, who first bethought himself of the thud heard from the direction of the east wall. At once, he went to the sideboard, which was against the wall on that side. Only a brief search was necessary to reveal the hole which the bullet had pierced in the top drawer of the sideboard. Saxe uttered an ejaculation that brought the others crowding about him. He exhibited the opening left by the bullet's passing, then pulled out the drawer, and found the missile itself imbedded in the back. Roy and David, who had become familiar with deadly weapons on the frontier of the Northland, dug out the bullet, and immediately proceeded to learned discourse anent its character and the caliber of the rifle from which it had been sent. Billy Walker took no interest in this discussion, and, having stood on his feet for a

longer time than was his custom, returned to his seat at the table, where he disposed himself with a sigh of relief. The ladies, too, went back to their places, but Saxe, David and Roy, with Masters, ran out of the cottage to search for the person who had fired the shot. From the place in which the bullet had lodged, it was evident that the rifle had been fired from some point on the ridge back of the cottage, and up this the four took their way, scattering as they went to cover a line of considerable length. They made a pretty thorough examination, but came on nothing to indicate who the culprit might have been. The underbrush was thick along the slope, yet the range of space shown by the direction of the bullet was so small that they were enabled to beat the coverts with completeness. In the end, it was the general agreement that some hunter had fired at a squirrel on the slope, probably in ignorance that a dwelling lay beyond the screen of foliage. Afterward, he had gone on his way, without any realization of possible peril from the shot.

The dusk was falling ere they abandoned the hunt, and started on their return to the house. It was just before they reached the cottage that David, who was blest with more humor than are most, threw back his head, and laughed long and heartily with the mellow peals that made those who heard him usually laugh for sheer sympathy before inquiring the cause of his mirth. At the sound, Saxe and Roy smiled expectantly; but Masters only looked on curiously.

“There’s a bit of comedy in this near-tragedy,” David explained, after he had put a period to his merriment. “When you get back to the house, Saxe old man,” he went on, more seriously, “it’s up to you to get down on your marrow-bones, and say, ‘Thank you!’ to your indolent friend, Billy Walker.”

“Why?” Saxe demanded, in astonishment.

“For the simple reason that he came all-fired close to saving your life. In fact, I haven’t any doubt that he actually did save it. If not that, he saved you from a nasty wound.”

“I don’t understand yet,” Saxe said, perplexed.

“It’s just this,” David explained. “From the location of the bullet in the sideboard, I’m strongly of the opinion that you were exactly in the line of it, so that, if you had been sitting in your place at the table, you would have had it clean through the chest. You jumped to catch the decanter Billy knocked off the table with his elbow. That movement on your part saved you. It was Billy’s awkwardness that caused your action; so it’s up to you to thank him for saving your life. And, as a matter of fact, though I laughed, it’s not exactly a subject for

mirth.”

Saxe’s expression had grown very grave as he listened. There comes always to the normal man a shock on realizing the imminence of death for himself. The fact that the peril is past alters the nature of the shock, but it hardly lessens it. So, in the present instance, the young man, whose great risk was thus suddenly brought home to him, felt the thrill of deep emotion, in which thankfulness for the fate that had intervened in his behalf was strong. He said nothing for a few moments, nor did Roy, who, in his turn, was affected as he understood the danger that had menaced his friend. Masters uttered an ejaculation, which was indeterminate as to meaning.

They found the others still in the dining-room, and immediately learned that Billy Walker was quite willing to sacrifice his modesty on the altar of fact; for he greeted their return with a roaring statement:

“Saxe, my boy, I saved your life, and I hope you’ll do me credit. From a study of the range of the trajectory of the bullet, I have learned that, had you been in your place at the table, the bullet would have penetrated your breast at a vital point. My clumsiness was the first cause of your escape—examine for yourself.” He waved a hand toward the sideboard.

Saxe, his face still grave, nodded assent.

“I appreciate it, Billy,” he said, “and I’ll not forget it, you may be sure. Dave, too, thought of it.”

“Pooh, no thanks to me,” Billy declared, embarrassed by the emotion in his friend’s voice. “It was only by accident that I interfered—not by volition.”

“I know,” Saxe agreed. “But the fact remains that you were the instrument of salvation, and that is what I shall always remember.” He looked toward Margaret West as he spoke, and saw that her face was very pale. He wondered how much of that pallor—if indeed any of it—had been caused by his own peril. For a fleeting second, the girl’s limpid blue eyes met his, then they were veiled by the thick lashes. He found himself unable to read the meaning that had lain in them. He went to his chair, seated himself, and afterward twisted about to mark the precise line in which the bullet had passed. There could be no manner of doubt: its course had been such that he could have escaped only by a miracle, had he been in his place. There could have been only a slight variation in the direction of the bullet, dependent on the position of the marksman. That variation could by no means have been great enough to save him from a grave, probably a mortal, wound. Saxe shuddered, as the narrowness of his escape was again, and thus

visibly, borne in on his consciousness. He looked about the cheery room and into the faces of the others with a sort of wonder in the realization that he was still of the quick, not of the dead. The wine of life took on new flavor. His gaze went again to Margaret.

All went into the music-room presently, still talking of the event that had been so close to tragedy—all except May Thurston. Without attracting any attention, she quietly slipped away from the others into the out-of-doors.

There are times when one finds it well-nigh impossible to analyze the workings of the mind, and it was so with this girl tonight. Suspicion had come to her—suspicion sudden, terrible, irresistible, and she knew not whence it came. She fought against it in an effort of reason, but she fought in vain. She could not flee its clutch, strive as she would. In the end, she made abject surrender, and fled forth into the night, to learn whether suspicion taught her truth or a lie.

May Thurston was a girl of much more than average intelligence. Native shrewdness had been sharpened by years of association with men of ability, to whom her secretarial skill had made her valuable. She had drawn from them something besides her weekly stipend: she had assimilated a faculty for logical deductions made with lightning swiftness, which is not characteristic of women, and is rare among men. Often, in fact, its possessor confuses it with intuition, because the rapidity of such automatic reasoning is so great that its method readily escapes the attention of the one using it. In the present instance, the girl in her distress was totally unconscious of the fact that she had reasoned with exactness from a group of circumstances within her knowledge. Yet, this was the case, and to such reasoning, doubtless, rather than to intuition, was the strength of her suspicion due. Intuitive perception she had to the full, and to it, it is likely, she owed some measure of the belief that now obsessed her, but its origin had been in the reasoning power alone, which she had exercised involuntarily, even unconsciously.

The first fact on which she builded had been the expression of terror on Masters' face, when she chanced upon him in the wood at dawn. Now, she could no longer believe that fancy had played a trick on her. On the contrary, she was sure of the emotion he had shown, and, too, sure of the sinister significance of it. It meant guilt. Masters was not a timid girl, to be filled with fright at the unheralded coming of another in the forest. She believed, rather, that he possessed an abundance of physical courage, whatever his lack of the moral. Nevertheless, at her call, he had shown abject fear. The signs of it had vanished in the twinkling of an eye; but they had been present for an appreciable length of

time. Since there could have been nothing else to cause him alarm in that place, this must have been the fear of discovery, which only guilt could explain. What that guilt might be, it were easy to guess, if one took thought of the event that had so recently befallen, where death had been avoided by the merest hazard of fate. May did not formulate her reasoning in such wise, but this was the nature of it. From it, she drew the conclusion that drove her forth alone into the night. As she went her way up the slope, intuition whispered that the hideous suspicion was truth.

The moon was just thrusting its bulk of gold over the wooded ranges of the eastern shore, and its radiance flooded the ascent, up which she mounted with a step that was unfaltering, though the heart was sick within her. She could see very clearly, and guided her course without hesitation toward the point at which she had encountered the engineer.

When she reached the bit of underbrush in which she had stopped short on first hearing Masters, May peered through the purple dusk, and readily made out the outline of the sapling beneath which the engineer had stood when she accosted him. She at once made her way quickly to a position immediately below its canopy of branches. It was well foliated, yet not so thickly as to prevent her from observing freely. If, at this moment, anyone had asked her what she expected to find there aloft, she would have been utterly unable to make a coherent explanation, and indeed it must have been instinct, rather than reason, that now guided her in the search, for, without understanding in the least why she did so, she stared up into the branches with fixed intensity, her heart beating like the sound of battle-drums in her ears. Presently, then, her gaze fastened on a line of shadow, high among the branches, and on this she held her attention concentrated, though there seemed nothing in the appearance to justify an absorption so complete. It was, perhaps, instinct again that caused her to feel the importance of this variation from the green black of the foliage. Whether that, or the leaping processes of reason, she was impelled to search out the meaning of the shadow aloft among the branches. She laid hold of the lower branches, and easily swung up into the tree.

May mounted swiftly until the shadow was within reach of her hand. Yet she could not distinguish it clearly on account of a branch, which held a screen of leaves between it and the moon. Putting out her hand, she bent the bough aside, so that the light shone on the thing that had drawn her to the spot. She saw a rifle!

The weapon had been fastened to the trunk of the sapling, at a point where one

of the larger branches made a fork. The stock had been secured in a position that permitted easy adjustment, by means of two ropes, which ran to other branches, so placed that tightening cords would vary the mark toward which the rifle was aimed. Masters, from his technical skill as an engineer, would have found little difficulty in making the arrangement to his satisfaction. May realized at a glance that there could be no doubt as to the actuality. Hartley Masters had deliberately attempted to murder Saxe Temple. A wave of loathing swept over her as she grasped this final confirmation of the hideous thing she had suspected. In the flood of abhorrence for the crime, the last remnants of her love were overwhelmed.

Only one thing baffled her in the understanding of the event. She saw clearly that, the position of the seats in the dining-room being familiar to the engineer, it had been simplicity itself for him so to dispose the rifle in the tree as to have it trained on the spot occupied by Temple's breast as the unsuspecting victim sat at table. It was hardly likely, moreover, that any other would be exposed to peril, since the smallness of the room was such that there was not sufficient space between sideboard and chairs on that side of the table for Mrs. Dustin to pass in her service of the meals. The deliberate malignity of the plot was appalling to May, as she considered this naked revelation of it. She was pallid, shuddering, nauseated.

The one thing that puzzled her for a time was the means by which the criminal had been able to secure the discharge of the rifle in his absence. It was plain that he had devised some method, so that he himself should be above suspicion, in the possession of a perfect alibi. It would, of course, be absurd for anyone to bring an accusation against him, when it was the common knowledge of all that he had been seated at the very table with the one against whom the attempt had been made. Yet, she failed to penetrate the method employed by him in firing the piece, and for a long time she puzzled over this in vain.

Then, at last, her eyes were caught by a fragment of cord, which hung from the trigger of the rifle. A brief examination showed her that the loose end was charred by fire, and immediately she guessed the nature of the device that had been employed. She knew that Masters in his work had had much experience with explosives, and, in consequence, with fuses of various sorts. She understood on reflection that he had used in this instance a fuse of such length as to permit his lighting it a long time before the moment of firing. Afterward, he had been able to leave the rifle unattended, confident that at the instant designed by him it would be fired automatically by the burning of the fuse. But, a minute

later, it occurred to her that the trigger required to be pulled backward in order to discharge the weapon. The parting of the string she had discovered could by no means effect this. She had let the obscuring branch swing back into place while she meditated. Now, she again thrust it out of the way, so that the light shone in brightly, as she bent to another scrutiny of the rifle. Her investigation was instantly rewarded, for she perceived a coil of spring, which ran from the trigger to one of the branches. Its blackness had hidden it from her eyes hitherto. The discovery made all clear. The cord had held the trigger forward in its usual place, acting against the power of the spring. Then, the burning of the string by the fuse had left the trigger unprotected against the pull of the spring, which, suddenly effective, had fired the rifle. The ingenuity of the scheme confounded the girl, as she sat staring at the evidences of treachery. Yet, in that moment of anguish, she was moved to murmur a prayer of thankfulness that the knowledge of her lover's character had come to her in time to save her life from misery and degradation as his wife.

After a long time crouched there in the tree, May bestirred herself slowly and clambered down, leaving the rifle as she had found it, with the bit of charred string hanging, and the spring holding the trigger pulled, as it had been at the moment of the shot. It did not occur to her that it might be wiser to carry away these proofs of attempted murder. Indeed, in that first understanding of the guilt of Masters, she was too distraught to think clearly. She could only feel the vicarious shame that was hers by reason of him to whom she had accorded her love. Nor did she just then speculate much as to the exact motive that had actuated the engineer. She took it for granted that he had been influenced to his course by motives of greed, as was the fact in the main. She supposed that he had thought the murder of Saxe Temple would cause a delay in the search, by which he might profit to the extent of finding the treasure himself. It did not occur to her that an older and more primitive passion than greed, even, one more savage, too, might have driven him on to the crime. In her horrified amazement over the deed itself, she quite forgot the jealousy that had sprung in her heart by reason of her lover's devotion to Margaret West. Yet, at that very moment, the man who had just striven in vain to redden his hands with the blood of a fellow creature, was with Margaret West in a bowered nook of the shore, pouring forth the story of his love in passionate phrases.

CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET VAULT

MAY passed a sleepless night, wearying her brain in a futile endeavor to see her path clearly. She felt that, for the sake of what had been, she could not bring herself to accuse Masters before the others, or even privately to his face. Yet, her manifest duty lay in some step that should prevent another effort by him. She was convinced that he would dare no more, when aware of the fact that there was a witness to bear testimony as to his guilt, and in this she probably reasoned justly. In the end, she decided to write him a note, informing him as to her knowledge, and warning him against further pursuit of his evil plans, or of herself. She would have the missive in readiness to hand to him on the occasion of his first appearance at the cottage.

When she had thus determined, it was time to dress, for the day was two hours old. As soon as she was clad with her accustomed nicety, she wrote the letter to the engineer, and then descended to breakfast, pale and wan, with heavy shadows under her eyes, but vastly relieved that, at last, she had reached a decision as to her conduct of the affair.

The letter thus prepared was not destined for delivery that day. Masters did not appear at the cottage. As a matter of fact, even his egotism was convinced of the sincerity and unchangeableness of Margaret West's rejection of his suit. He found to his despair and wrath that the girl was totally irresponsive to his most ardent pleadings. The disappointment to him was the keener because it was so wholly unexpected. The girl had shown pleasure in his society from the first, and he had anticipated an easy victory, despite his jealousy of Saxe. Nevertheless, she repulsed him with a finality not to be denied. His failure was the more exasperating to him by reason of the fact that the cause baffled his every effort of understanding.

The truth of the matter lay in a paradox concerning magnetism. Masters possessed in an unusual degree the magnetism of sex. At the outset, Margaret had felt this, without in the least apprehending the nature of the attraction exerted on her. She attributed it rather to his handsome face and buoyant manner, allied with his undoubted cleverness. Later on, as the man's passion for her developed, this same force in him, which had charmed in its subtler

manifestations, became offensive to her sensitiveness. Still without any suspicion of the cause, she felt herself repelled, where before she had been attracted. By so much the more as his desire waxed and was revealed, by so much the more he grew repulsive. In the end, he became altogether detestable to her, and in dismissing him she made her feeling plain.

So, Masters did not come that day to the cottage, and the note that lay warm on May's bosom was undelivered. Yet his dual lack of success in love and in murder did not suffice to quench the spirit of the man. Greed and passion inflamed his hatred of the rival who threatened to destroy his hopes. As he went from Margaret at her bidding, his brain was already busy with new schemes by which to possess himself of the miser's gold and of the woman he loved. The first step toward such consummation must be the death of Saxe Temple. He was furious against the fate that had saved his enemy at the first trial; he was determined that at the second there should be no escape.

The night following that on which the shooting had occurred, Roy Morton passed through an experience that afforded him grounds for apprehension, although he kept the affair secret for a time, in the confident expectation of making further discoveries without assistance from his friends.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when he suddenly awakened out of a sound sleep. He attributed this awakening to a subtle warning from his never-sleeping sixth sense. Nevertheless, it is a fact that, in the course of an adventurous career, he had acquired the habit of sleeping very lightly, so that he might be aroused instantly by the slightest sound of an unwonted sort, and it is probable that, on this occasion, some noise disturbed him. Be that as it may, he abruptly found himself broad awake and listening intently.

There was no sound anywhere within the cottage. Through the open window came the rhythmic chant of myriad insects, the rustling of leaves caressed by the night wind—nothing more. Roy was inclined to believe that he had been aroused for no adequate cause. Yet, he was disinclined to dismiss the warning of his precious sixth sense without further investigation. He got out of bed, threw a bath-robe over his pajamas, and set forth on a tour of investigation. There was still some moonlight shining through the windows of the hall, by which he was able to assure himself that nothing extraordinary was visible, nor did he hear any unusual sound. He descended into the lower hall, and there, too, his examination failed to show aught amiss. He moved with great caution, in order to avoid giving warning of his presence to a possible intruder, and peered into the office and the dining-room. Everywhere, he found all in order. He betook himself

finally to the door of the music-room, which he found almost closed, but not quite. He pushed it open with much care, and bending forward, looked into the room. On the instant, his eyes were attracted by a light that shone clearly against the east wall of the room. By this illumination, he perceived a man, who knelt, holding a pocket-torch in his left hand, while his right was thrust into an opening in the wall.

Roy Morton stared in unqualified amazement. For the moment, his interest was centered on the aperture in the wall of the room, rather than on the man who knelt on the floor before it, with his arm thrust into the recess up to the shoulder. In that instant, Roy was seized with the conviction that he had stumbled upon the treasure of Abernethy by means of a monition from his sixth sense, and his heart was filled with gladness, both for the sake of his friend's fortune thus at last secured, and for the sake of his own pride in being the active agent in that consummation. He had no doubt whatever that the man crouched on the floor was Masters, though the face was unrecognizable in the shadow. He even suffered a little pang of jealousy that the fellow should have succeeded in discovering the golden treasury, while he and his friends had so signally failed. He comforted wounded vanity, however, with the trite reflection that all is well that ends well. It seemed, indeed, that the affair had now become simplicity itself, since there remained only to watch the operations of the thief, and ultimately to possess himself of the gold in his friend's behalf.

It appeared to the observer that the position of the man on the floor left him subject to great disadvantage under attack, and that, therefore, it were wise not to delay action. Roy desired to capture the marauder single-handed for the sake of his own greater glory. He had no question as to his ability to overcome the engineer in a hand-to-hand contest, despite the fellow's excellent physique. With the idea of taking his enemy by surprise, he pushed the door farther ajar, to make space for a leap forward. Notwithstanding his caution, the hinges creaked with a sudden, harsh noise, which crashed through the silence of the night. In the same second, Roy sprang.

At the sound of the opening door, the torch had clicked into darkness—there was the slithering of rubber-shod feet across the floor. As Roy came upon emptiness where had been the man, he heard the rustling of the drawn shade of a window. He saw dimly against the outer light the silhouette of the thief in the opening. Before he could move, it had vanished. He was after it with all speed, but, by the time he stood on the ground outside, he could neither see nor hear aught to give an idea as to the direction of the flight. He went forward blindly, moving here

and there haphazard, pausing often to listen. There was no reward to his efforts, and, after a few minutes, realizing the uselessness of longer search, he returned to the cottage, where he entered the open window.

It was just as he dropped to the floor that a cheering thought came to Roy. The man had carried away nothing in his flight. At the moment of the door's creaking, the hand had been withdrawn from the cavity within the wall, and it had been empty. Evidently, the depredator had been interrupted just when he had succeeded in coming on the secret place of the gold. As he realized this, Roy went forward quickly in the direction of the piano-lamp, found matches, made a light, and turned eagerly toward the recess in the wall. As he knelt in the place so recently occupied by that other visitor, there was light enough to see clearly, and he beheld the safe set behind the wainscoting. The steel doors stood ajar; the first glance showed that the receptacle was empty.

Amazement was Roy's dominant emotion for the first few moments. It gave place to chagrin. He strove to disbelieve the evidence of his eyes, but disbelief was impossible. The safe was empty. He thrust his hand within, and felt about carefully, even as the man had done—only to find nowhere so much as a scrap of paper that might have held a clue. The shock of the disappointment stunned him. For a long time, he sat before the opening in the wall, squatting motionless on his haunches, nursing a swiftly rising rage.

Roy stood up at last, with an ejaculation of disgust. Then, curiosity laid hold on him, and he began a careful examination of the vault's mechanism. He pushed the inner doors of steel shut, but without turning the handle to shoot the bolt. Afterward, he scrutinized the portion of the wainscoting that was swung outward to reveal the safe. He moved it to and fro, a little way slowly, finding that it was very delicately balanced, so that it responded to the lightest touch. He inspected the bolts with which it was fitted, and sought to understand exactly the method of their operation, but this persistently escaped him, notwithstanding his knowledge of mechanical appliances. It was while he was pulling at one of the bolts that the impetus of his effort sent the section of wainscoting into its usual place as a part of the wall. Roy tried to catch it in order to prevent its closing, but he was just too late. He tugged at a projection of the carving, only to find that the masked door resisted his strength. He realized that the bolts had been thrust into their sockets by some device automatic in the act of closing. Greatly annoyed, he began a hunt for the secret spring by which the operation of the bolts must be controlled. In this he failed. Try as he would, the wainscoting rested there before him in an immobility beyond measure exasperating. He went over the entire

surface with painstaking care, pressing or pulling at each hollow or projection, and always there was the same irritating lack of response. Roy, with his chin thrust forward belligerently, toiled on in countless futile experiments, only to confess defeat. He was worn with fatigue from the monotonous labor when at last a distant sound startled him, and he looked around, to discover that day had come. Fearful lest he be discovered there, he fled to his room, disgusted by the fiasco. For the first time in his life, he sneered at that delusive faculty, the sixth sense.



CHAPTER XIII

THE CLUE

TO THE astonishment of Roy Morton and May Thurston, this day also passed without the appearance of the engineer at the cottage. The girl, at first experiencing some alarm over this protracted absence, was afterward filled with relief, when it occurred to her that Masters was keeping away because he had finally abandoned his evil intentions. She felt convinced that the failure of his attempt to murder Temple had brought him to realization of the heinousness of his conduct. The thought afforded her great satisfaction, since it relieved her of any necessity for action against him. The change in the situation so cheered her that she accepted with animation Roy's invitation to walk, and the two passed a particularly agreeable hour in strolling through the woods, finding each topic of conversation charming, and almost forgetting that such an one as the engineer encumbered the earth.

There came another development in the evening, when the four friends were smoking and chatting, as was their custom after the ladies had retired for the night. They were in the music-room with Saxe at the piano, where he had been playing from time to time. Now, however, he had ceased, and rested motionless, with his eyes fixed on the sheet of manuscript left by Abernethy, in a wearisome wondering as to the message that might lie concealed within that bare presentment of the song of gold—as he had come to call the composition. Billy Walker had steadfastly maintained his belief that the clue to the treasure was hidden there, and Saxe was impressed by the idea, although his reason declared it folly.

Presently, Billy aroused himself from the luxury of the morris chair, where he had been communing with an especially black cigar, heaved himself erect with a groan, and crossed the room to the piano. He stood for a little while in silence, staring down at the written page on the rack.

“What's that?” he demanded. He pointed to the three measures that stood alone at the head of the sheet.

[\[Listen\]](#)

The phrase to which Billy Walker pointed was scrawled in a fashion that was

rather slovenly as compared with the remainder of the manuscript. Hitherto, in spite of the many times he had studied the manuscript, Saxe had given small heed to this fragment of writing, which preceded the song of gold. Now, however, at his friend's instigation, he examined it with scrupulous care before he spoke. Then, he shook his head in discouragement, as he struck the notes on the keyboard.

"It doesn't mean anything, Billy," he declared.

"But what's it there for, if it doesn't mean anything?" the other persisted.

"Why," Saxe answered, "I suppose it's simply that the old man had some sort of an idea, and jotted down a note concerning it. You see, it's at the top of the page. He did nothing more with it. Afterward, he used the same sheet to write the gold song on. He was a miser, you know."

"Yes, I know," Billy conceded. "All the same, I think, in this instance, he would have been comparatively extravagant. I still believe that the bit there has some significance."

Saxe shook his head emphatically.

"It can't mean anything," he repeated, drearily. He was fast yielding to discouragement.

For a long minute the two were silent, regarding the manuscript intently, with knit brows. Then, of a sudden, Billy's rough voice boomed forth a question:

"Aren't there letters on a staff of music? What are the letters there?"

Saxe smiled, in some disdain.

"Much good may they do you!" he said; and his tone was sarcastic. "The letters are, B, E, D, A, C. Might be a word in Magyar, for all I know. It isn't from any language more common, I fancy."

Billy snorted indignantly.

"It's not altogether impossible that it should be a word from some language or other," he answered, stoutly. "But we'll investigate it more closely on an English basis first. Now, what—exactly—does that Italian word mean, there over the music. And what's it doing there, anyhow?"

Saxe laughed outright at the utter simplicity of the question from the musician's standpoint.

“It’s a word to guide the player in his interpretation,” he replied. “It means that this particular phrase should be played with great slowness.”

Billy pondered this statement for a time, then vented a lusty sigh of disappointment. Presently, however, his expression took on animation again, for curiosity had hit on a new point of interest.

“What are those two vertical lines doing there in the middle?” he asked, eagerly.

Saxe shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

“They, too, mean nothing—absolutely nothing!” he exclaimed. “They’re in the same class as ‘Bedac’.”

“According to my theory concerning this affair,” Billy asserted with an air of dogmatism, “you are wrong in thus dismissing, one after another, the possibilities of the situation. Now, we have before us a manuscript, which is undoubtedly the work of the man who left this gold to you, if you could find it. He explicitly stated in his communication to you that the clue to the hiding-place was clear enough. You might infer, since the money was left you in this fashion, that the clue would be of a musical sort. He was a musician. Music was his one specialty. It is also your own specialty. It is, then, the most natural thing in the world to suppose that, in one way or another, music would play a chief part in this matter. Following the sequence of facts, we come next to one that follows logically in the line of argument. For we come upon a piece of music, which is in manuscript. It is actually, we are convinced, a piece composed by the late Mr. Abernethy. We have ascertained from his secretary that it is written in his own handwriting. Finally, we are sure that it is the only thing coming directly from him that there is in the house, which offers by its individuality a possibility of having a cryptic meaning of the sort required by us in the prosecution of the search.

“I repeat my firm belief that in this page of music lies the clue to the late Mr. Abernethy’s secret. If I am right, then any single character on this sheet may be of vital importance. You sneer at ‘Bedac,’ which at first glance seems gibberish, and nothing more. There remains the possibility, nevertheless, that it may have a meaning of prime importance to you. A fortune may depend on your learning the meaning of that word. Don’t dismiss it after just one glance. Don’t sneer at it—and those two vertical lines! You say, they are void of purport. The fact is that they don’t belong there—from your musical standpoint. Well, they’re there, notwithstanding. The late Mr. Abernethy put them there. Perhaps they stood for something to him, in spite of the fact that they don’t to you. Anyhow, don’t sneer

at them—yet. Wait, at least, until you’ve really studied them. As far as our present knowledge goes, this paper must hold the clue. I tell you, it’s worth working on—hard!”

The harsh, sonorous voice in this long harangue had soon cut short the desultory chat between Roy and David, who had listened almost from the beginning with attention, while smiling a little at the earnestness of the speaker in pursuing his argument.

“Well, Billy,” David remarked, “you’re the one to work out the problem on logical lines. You’ve told the rest of us often enough that we can’t reason.” The other two nodded assent, smiling cheerfully on the nonplussed oracle.

“I’m horribly handicapped by my ignorance of music,” he confessed, wryly. Then, his rough features settled into lines of resolve, and his voice fairly roared in the echoing room: “But, by the Lord! I’ll do it—I’ll work that thing out, if I have to learn music first!”

There came a shout of laughter from the three; the vision of Billy Walker thus engaged was too ludicrous! Notwithstanding their merriment, there came no relaxation of the set purpose in the speaker’s face. It was evident that he was wholly sincere in his announcement. Indeed, no sooner had the mirth exhausted itself than he craved a first lesson.

“Tell me about the letters that are on the staff,” he besought Saxe, who good-naturedly complied, with a smile still on his lips.

“Then, that’s all the letters there are in musical notation,” Billy exclaimed, when the instructor paused. There was distinct disappointment in his voice. “Only, A, B, C, D, E, F, G. That’s bad. Yet there are two vowels, A and E, and E is the most important vowel.” He fell silent, standing moveless before the piano, with his gaze fixed on the manuscript in a brown study. “Bedac!” he muttered, after a little; and Saxe, hearing, smiled again. “And those vertical lines!” he mused aloud. Saxe kindly volunteered some information as to the purpose served by bars to separate the measures. When he ceased, Billy propounded a question, which was an affirmation: “Then, there is a measure with nothing in it?”

“Oh, in a way!” Saxe replied. “Only, this isn’t really a measure. It’s merely a mistake the old man happened to make—that’s all.”

“Why isn’t it a measure?” came the crisp demand.

“Because, if it were really meant for a measure, it would contain something, either notes or rests, or both.”

“You may thank your lucky stars I’m not a musician,” Billy declared, and he snorted loudly in contempt. “You’re hide-bound, so to speak, by the technique of your art. Thank heaven, I have an open mind. Because the thing is different, you assert that it can’t possibly have any meaning. For my part, on the contrary, the fact that it’s different is just why I suspect it to be of importance. I give the late Mr. Abernethy credit for some cleverness. Also, I deem him to have been capable of a bit of originality. The manner of his will suggests that possibility, at least. If he amused himself by evolving a musical cipher, I’ll warrant he didn’t construct a mere tonic sol-fa—whatever that may be—which any piano-banger could sing at sight to this tune here. I’ve always thought that much knowledge of technique was deadening. Now, I know it. The critic knows technique perfectly; the genius never does. Here, I’ll take it. You’ll do no good, muddling over it!” With this pronouncement, Billy Walker rudely leaned forward, and snatched the sheet of music from the rack, and stalked away with it to the morris chair, leaving Saxe well content with such ending of the inquisition.

It was a half-hour later. Saxe had joined Roy and David, and the three were talking pleasantly of many things as they smoked. Throughout the whole time, Billy had remained huddled in the easy chair, his cigar, unlighted, clenched firmly between his teeth, his fierce, shaggy brows drawn down, his little, dull eyes set steadfastly on the sheet of music, which lay on his knees. Occasionally, there sounded an unintelligible mumbling from his lips, or a raucous grunt of dissatisfaction. Then, with disconcerting abruptness, the scholar lifted his head, ran his hands roughly through the bristling, unkempt thatch of hair, and exploded into Gargantuan laughter.

The three regarded him in perplexity, smiling a little under the contagion of his merriment. He gave no heed to their questions for a full minute, but continued his rollicking mirth.

“Well, I’ve made the first step toward the treasure,” he announced, at last. The rolling volume of his voice was more thunderous even than its wont.

Came a chorus of ejaculations and questions from the others, as they sprang to their feet, and crowded about him.

Billy waved his hand imperiously for silence.

“But it’s only the first step, remember!” he warned. “The first step! And, incidentally, it proves that I was right about the value of this document.” He flourished the music aloft, in a gesture of triumph.

“Tell us! Tell us!” was the cry.

Billy regarded his friends quizzically.

“It’s only the first step that I have taken, remember,” he admonished. “But, as Saint Augustine said, it’s the first step that counts. The miser’s gold is somewhere at the bottom of the lake.”

There followed an interval of astounded silence. It was broken by Roy with an exclamation of bewilderment:

“But—” he began. Then, he halted in confusion. He had been on the point of saying something concerning the secret vault in the music-room, and had checked himself only just in time. The others, however, had given no attention to his utterance, and he sighed with relief. It had flashed on him that his own knowledge in a way corroborated the statement by Billy, inasmuch as he found the vault empty.

“How? How?” Saxe was clamoring; David added his insistence.

Billy Walker preened himself with all the pride of a great discoverer, as well he might.

“It was simplicity itself,” he assured them. “It was only necessary for me to learn music, and the matter soon became clear.” Saxe and the others fairly gaped at the naïve assumption on the part of their friend that, in five minutes, he had mastered the art, but they did not care to question his complacency just then. “Being unhampered by over-much technique,” the oracle continued, with buoyant self-satisfaction, “I was able to investigate with an open mind, examining all the facts.” He paused to grin exultantly on the expectant trio, and then resumed his explanation:

“I had before me two determined facts, which gave no information in themselves, but required perhaps only the addition of other facts to become significant. Now, observe this lone bit of music at the head of the page.” He held up the sheet, so that the others could note the phrase at the top.

“The first fact of which I was possessed,” Billy went on, “thanks to the tuition in music afforded me by Saxe, was this: that the letters of the fragment are, B, E, D, A, C, in such order. At the outset of my logical examination, I attempted variations in this order, as offering the simplest solution of the puzzle. After some experimenting, I became convinced that the secret was not concealed in a changed sequence of the letters. Next, then, I set myself to a consideration of the second fact. This consisted in the knowledge that the bit of music contained a measure that was not a measure. That is to say, there was the marking of a

measure by two vertical lines, but nothing in that measure, neither notes nor rests. This impressed me as of importance in all probability. The same fact that led Saxe to disregard it, led me to scrutinize it with particularity.” Again, Billy paused, to allow his hearers a moment in which to meditate on the shrewdness of his reasoning. When he went on speaking, his voice carried a note of increased contentment:

“Above this measure that is no measure, this measure that is empty, I perceived a pointer, of a size sufficient even to have attracted the notice of my friend here, hide-bound in technique as he is—but it did not. The pointer directed attention straight to a letter—a letter placed exactly over the measure that isn’t a measure because it’s empty. That letter thus pointed out is L. It fitted very well into the blank place with the other letters. So, where before we had only, B, E, D, A, C, we now have, B, E, D, L, A, C.” Billy ceased speaking, and surveyed the others happily.

“Well, why don’t you go on?” David demanded, impatiently.

Billy regarded the questioner in genuine astonishment, tinged with contempt. His gaze darted to the other two, and, on realizing that they, as well, were still uncomprehending, he groaned.

“Non-rationalizing nincompoops!” was his candid murmur of reprobation. “Oh, well, I shall explain, if it be possible to your understanding,” he said gently, with an assumption of infinite patience. “As you musical sharps are aware, the musical notation comprises only seven letters, namely——”

“Oh, never mind that!” Saxe cried. “We know!”

“Pardon me,” was the retort. “You only know it as a matter of technical knowledge, not as a fact from which to reason. The point is that there’s no K in the musical scale.”

“Well?” The monosyllable snapped from Roy. His face was set intently, the chin a little forward, the eyes hard.

“The thing is simply this,” Billy answered, beaming. “The late Mr. Abernethy, on account of the lack of the letter K in the musical notation, was compelled to resort to an expedient. He could not indicate the word ‘Lake’ on his cipher, since he was without either L or K. He evaded the difficulty by employing the initial letter from a word of direction, Largo, which provided the necessary L, and he got around the lack of the letter K by using the French word for Lake—*lac*. This fragment at the head of the sheet spells for us, ‘Bedlac’.” He pointed to the

phrase again, as he concluded.

“So, we have only to do a bit of translating from the French *lac* into the English lake, and then to amplify by supplying the obvious preposition and article, and the writing declares clearly: ‘The Bed of the Lake.’ It now remains for us to study this page until we learn just where under the water of the lake out there the gold is lying. Somewhere, somehow, this music tells!”



CHAPTER XIV

THE EPISODE OF THE LAUNCH

THE clue discovered by Billy Walker was accepted without hesitation. No secret was made of the information thus obtained as the first progress in the search for the gold, and an air of excitement prevailed in and about the cottage. Jake, especially, was all agog with interest in the new development, and took an active part in the subsequent operations, since the four friends now spent much of their time on the water, hoping by some fortunate chance to come on a suggestion for further guidance. They went cruising out of sheer desperation, having no precise idea to follow until more should be learned from the manuscript. All pinned their faith to the music left by the miser. Each spent hours in study of the scrawled notes in the quest of added discovery, but all efforts were futile. Even the redoubtable Billy himself admitted humiliating defeat. Yet, he was in no wise cast down by the failure of the moment. He was sure of ultimate victory for the orderly processes of reason. Roy, on the other hand, retained his confidence in the final revelation that had been foretold by his industrious sixth sense, and David shared this optimistic trust in the occult. As for Saxe, when day after day passed without a hint of new knowledge concerning the gold, he might easily have become hopeless, had it not been for the diversion of interest offered by his love-affair. For now the manner of Margaret West toward him was such that sometimes he dared believe it possible to win her.

May Thurston was assured by the continued absence of Masters that he had abandoned further vicious effort. In this view, the girl did the indefatigable scoundrel less than justice. As a matter of fact, the engineer was very busy indeed. He had kept away from the cottage because he feared that May might have guessed his agency in the attack directed against Saxe, although he had taken the precaution to remove the rifle and its accessories from the sapling on the day after the shooting. He suspected, too, that May would learn from Margaret the truth concerning his treachery in love—in which suspicion he was quite wrong—and he deemed himself safer out of the injured girl's sight. So, he kept himself hidden from the household of the cottage, while still devoting himself to malevolent schemes. Hope developed in him that he might yet win Margaret West—if only Saxe were out of the path. In addition, the removal of this rival would allow him another chance, even if brief, to search for the

treasure. He was determined that Saxe should die, straightway. To that consummation, he set himself with cold-blooded ingenuity.

It was on a splendid morning a week later that the four friends were taking another trip in the motor-boat, to examine the extreme northern end of the lake. Jake was at the steering-wheel, as always, for the abundant sunken rocks and shoals forbade a stranger as pilot in these waters. Roy sat beside the boatman, as his custom was, while Saxe and David were in chairs behind, and Billy, puffing his black cigar, lounged contentedly in the stern.

Saxe shook his head impatiently, as the smell of gasoline, instead of the balsamic fragrance of the shore, afflicted his nostrils. He spoke of the annoyance to David, who agreed that the scent was unusually strong in the boat that day.

“Must be a bit of a leak somewhere,” David vouchsafed. He called a question to Roy, who merely shook his head by way of answer. “They wouldn’t get the smell up there, anyhow,” David continued, to Saxe. “You see, it’s floating round in the bilge right under us, so that we get the worst of it.”

Saxe had just time to wonder, without much real concern, whether or not it were quite prudent of Billy to be smoking where so large a quantity of gasoline was loose—then, the catastrophe came—came with lightning swiftness—a huge burst of flame enveloped them.

In that first second of horror, common instinct driving, the five men plunged into the lake. The motor-boat sped on, the engines still throbbing. Saxe, as he rose from the leap, and tossed his head to clear the water from his eyes, chanced to be facing in its direction, and could see only a swirling mass of flames, darting onward toward the shore. Then, a cry startled him to concern over his companions. He turned quickly, and, to his relief, saw four heads appearing above the water. In the same instant, relief yielded to fear, for one of them vanished below the surface. It was David.

Saxe, who was a practised swimmer, shot forward to the rescue in a powerful racing stroke. As he raised his head from the water a moment later, horror gripped him anew—now, only two heads were showing. Billy had disappeared. But his emotion changed to delight as he covered the short distance between him and the place where David had sunk, for suddenly two heads rose above the water. He saw David supported in the arms of Billy, who was treading water in a lazy fashion all his own.

That was the end of the actual peril. Saxe aided David on the side opposite Billy, and the two had no difficulty, since David, though unable to swim, retained his

coolness, leaving himself limp to the control of his rescuers. The land was less than a hundred yards away, and thither the five wrecked men went, and clambered out upon the shore, bedraggled, dripping, scorched, half-angry, half-dazed by the suddenness of it all, but wholly thankful for their escape from the dual dangers of fire and flood. The chief mourner was Jake, who lamented with tears over the loss of the boat he had learned to love.

Presently, the others began to rally Billy Walker on his unsuspected skill in the water.

“When in the world did you ever learn to swim?” Roy demanded. “You didn’t know how when you were in the university.”

“No such thing!” Billy retorted, huffily. “I could swim before I was seven years old.”

“But you never did swim during all the time I’ve known you,” Saxe exclaimed, astounded by the revelation.

“Certainly not!” was the crisp reply. “Why should I? Each person has just so much energy to draw on for his use, for all purposes whatever. I don’t fritter my energy away on trifles, like swimming for mere amusement. I prefer to employ my vital forces in intellectual pursuits.” He paused to grin maliciously at the others. “That’s where I differ from you chaps—yes! But, when the occasion arises, why, then I swim.”

Roy and Jake made a trip to the ruins of the motor-boat, which had beached itself on the north shore, a quarter of a mile to the east of the point reached by the men. Meantime, the three others started at a leisurely pace to the west, skirting the shore until they rounded the lake, and turned to the south on their way to the cottage. Their rate of progress was so slow that within a half-hour Roy and Jake rejoined them, and with this completion of their number the speed was quickened. It was a full five miles to the cottage, but the sun and the breeze soon dried their clothing; the paths by which Jake led them wound through charming forest stretches; they were happy anew over the gracious gift of life. So, they swung forward with free footsteps through the miles. Even Billy Walker, who ordinarily would groan if required to stroll the distance from the cottage to the boat-house, seemed for once to have put off lethargy, for he marched at the head of the procession with Jake, and set the pace smartly.

The full significance of the disaster was not revealed until the afternoon of the next day, when Jake returned from a second inspection of the wreck. His round, wizened face displayed evidences of excitement, and his tiny eyes were

snapping, as he rushed into the presence of the four friends, who were taking their ease on the landing-stage of the boat-house.

“I found out somethin’!” he announced. There was a note of savageness in his voice that puzzled the hearers. “I been up to see the *Shirtso*, and I found out somethin’!” He stared with gloomy eyes at Roy. “I found out what caused that-thar leak o’ gas. The feed pipe was cut!”

“You mean—” Roy questioned, tensely.

“The feed pipe was cut,” Jake repeated, There was rage in his voice now. “And somebody done it a-purpose—cuss ’m!”



CHAPTER XV

THE CHART

IT WAS the belief of Saxe and his friends that the person guilty of the outrage against them was none other than Hartley Masters. Now, at last, Roy confided to his associates the adventure in the night, when he had discovered the presence of the safe hidden within the wall. The others flouted him as he had anticipated over his failure to capture the intruder and his subsequent inability to learn the secret of the spring in the wainscoting. They accepted without hesitation his assurance that the night prowler had been Masters, and their wrath flamed hot against the engineer, who in his later effort had not scrupled to attempt the murder of five men. They determined to take active measures against the fellow for the sake of their own safety. Roy volunteered to wage a campaign against the enemy, to seek out his whereabouts, to trail him, to get evidence against him, and finally to make him prisoner. The others, meantime, would continue their quest for further clues to the treasure. First of all, they busied themselves with hunting for the concealed safe, after its exact situation had been indicated by Roy, and three days passed in fruitless experimenting on the intricacies of the carved wainscoting.

Roy visited the hamlet at the foot of the lake, where was situated the hotel in which the engineer had been a guest. He learned, to his disappointment, that Masters had taken his departure a week before. He assured himself that this departure had been a real one by inquiries at the station. Further questioning of residents elicited the information that the engineer had thereafter been seen by none. Nevertheless, Roy was far from being convinced by this information that the engineer had actually taken himself off. He was, on the contrary, almost, if not quite, certain that Masters had merely made use of the train for an ostensible departure, in order to avoid the possibility of his presence in the neighborhood appearing as evidence against him in the event of any suspicion that might arise. Afterward, as Roy imagined, he had returned to some out-of-the-way place in the forest, where he could eat and sleep unmolested, and thence spy out the land for the execution of his villainous projects. Doubtless in his employment as an engineer, he had often lived roughly, and the season of the year would make life in the open no hardship. Roy, therefore, set himself to a search of the countryside, hoping somewhere to chance on a trace of the enemy's camp. In

this, he was unsuccessful. After two days of weary tramping, it occurred to him that he could serve his purpose equally well by strolling in pleasant paths with May Thurston at his side.

This improved method was adopted. Roy told the girl nothing as to his desire of finding Masters, but he told her other things a-plenty; and the two of them grew daily more content.

It was Margaret West who finally hit on the spring that moved the wainscoting, for Saxe had let her know the story told by Roy, and she had amused herself by seeking to master the mystery. Actually, beyond her satisfaction in having succeeded where the others had failed, nothing was accomplished, since the vault was empty, and no hint as to the disposal of the gold could be gleaned from its bareness. Yet, new knowledge of the secret was soon to come.

Billy Walker's pride of intellect had been aroused to the utmost by the difficulty of the task that confronted him. Hour after hour, day after day, he pored over the manuscript, of which the cryptic significance ever escaped all efforts of his ingenuity. It seemed to him that he had, in fact, scrutinized every possible aspect in which the writing might be viewed, and still the veil lay impenetrable over the mystery. He would have been in despair, had he been of a humbler mind, but his intellectual egotism would not suffer him to confess defeat, even to himself. So, he persisted in the struggle to solve this baffling problem—did indeed but strive the harder as the days passed. The others admitted that the difficulties were too great for their overcoming. Billy replied to their lamentations with braggart boasting that he would yet conquer. Nevertheless, at the last, he owed the hint he needed to Saxe.

The four men were lounging on the porch of a morning. The languor of summer had grown within a few days, and the four were taking their ease. Billy Walker was crouched in the deeps of a huge chair; David sprawled on a heap of cushions; Roy stretched lazily in a hammock, reminiscent of long siestas in the southland. Saxe alone showed any evidence of alertness. He sat erect at the head of the steps, with the manuscript of the gold song lying on his knees. Ostensibly, his attention was fixed on the music. From time to time, he jabbed the score impatiently with a pencil point. But often, he shot glances of longing toward the stairway, by which, sooner or later, Margaret West must descend. Silence had fallen on the group. A sense of discouragement was in the air. The only sounds were the gossiping of the English sparrows about the eaves, the faint rustling of leaves when the breeze stirred them, the distressful grunt that accompanied any change of position by Billy Walker, the whish of a match as someone lighted a

fresh cigarette.

The real activity was on the part of Billy, whose mind, while his body lolled, was nimbly busy over the miser's manuscript, which his imagination held visible before him. Then, presently, he craved the stimulus of a sight of the actual. He hoisted his cumbersome bulk out of the chair, and went stiffly across the veranda to where Saxe sat with the music. There, he stood for a minute looking down at the notes. His beetling brows were lowering, a low rumble of displeasure came from his heavy lips, he thrust a hand vehemently through the rough shock of hair, his small eyes, with the whites tainted by jaundice, fairly glared down at the elusive script wherein lay knowledge of Abernethey's gold.

Of a sudden, wonder grew on his face. Doubt, fear, hope, joy, followed. He bent awkwardly, but swiftly, snatched the paper, and immediately stalked off into the cottage and up the stairs to his bedroom, without a word of explanation or apology. Saxe shrugged his shoulders, and smiled whimsically. The others paid no attention whatsoever.

It was a half-hour later when Billy returned to the porch. His manner was wholly changed. He was radiant with a supreme triumph of pride. The others did not look up, as he again seated himself in the easy chair. But the man was so surcharged with exultation that his mood sent its challenges vibrant to their souls. Presently, one turned to stare at him, and then another, and then the third. He met their gaze with eyes that were aglow, and a smile of delight bent the coarse lips. He nodded slowly, as in answer to their mute questioning, and spoke:

"Well, my dilatory friends," he began genially, "your confidence in me, which has enabled you to retain your calm while yourselves accomplishing nothing, was not misplaced. After a considerable period of unremitting toil over the manuscript left for our guidance by the ingenious deceased—by the way, Saxe, that song of gold, as you call it, is perfectly good music, isn't it?"

The three were gazing on Billy Walker with wide eyes. Their astonishment was so great that, for the moment, they did not question the leisurely manner of the sage's introduction. Instead, Saxe answered the seemingly irrelevant interrogation obediently.

"It's perfectly good music—in the sense you mean—yes."

"Then," Billy declared, "I take off my hat to the late Mr. Abernethey. The reason for this burst of enthusiasm on my part lies in the fact that out of a perfectly good piece of music, he has made, also, a perfectly good chart—for our guidance to the treasure. As to the chart, I myself speak as an authority, since I have found

it.” Billy regarded his friends with an expression of intense self-satisfaction.

Roy was sitting up in the hammock now, with his jaw thrust forward a little, and his eyes hard in the excitement of the minute. David was goggling, with his mouth open in amazement over the unexpected announcement. Saxe betrayed his emotion by the tenseness of his features, the rigidity of his pose, the sparkle in his keen, gray eyes.

It was evident that the successful investigator was hugely enjoying the sensation he had created. He delighted in the importance of his accomplishment, gloried in the stunning effect of it on his companions. He smiled broadly, chuckled in a rumbling fashion of his own, and finally lighted one of his black cigars with irritating slowness. He rather hoped that someone might exclaim with impatience against this wanton delay, but none did. They endured the suspense in apparent calm, moveless, expectant. So at last, Billy deigned to proceed with the account of his achievement in solving the mystery contrived by the miser.

“I owe the final suggestion by which I won out to Saxe,” he declared frankly, with an appreciative nod in his friend’s direction. “He, however, really deserves no credit, since what he did was merely by chance, without any intention, and would never have amounted to anything, if it hadn’t been for the fact that I happened to see what he had done, and to take advantage of it in an orderly and logical way. Only, I wish it understood that he served as the unconscious instrument of destiny in the matter, and as such unconscious instrument he should be recognized. Probably, I should have arrived at the fact in time without his aid, but to it I owe success on this present occasion.”

“What in the world did I do?” Saxe demanded, in amazement.

“I’ll explain in a minute,” Billy replied. “I have in mind first to exhibit this to you.” He held up a sheet of paper, which he had drawn from his pocket. It was of about the size of that on which Abernethy’s composition had been written. It showed two irregular lines running across it, drawn by pencil. “Glance at this, if you please,” he directed.

The others did so; but their bewildered expression showed that they were still unenlightened as to the bearing of the scant diagram on the revelation concerning the hidden gold. Billy chuckled again in contemplation of their failure to comprehend. Then, he brought forth a second sheet, and held it, also, for their inspection. In this instance, the paper was turned with its greater length horizontal, and the two lines of the other sheet had been joined, so that the one irregular tracing extended over the full page.

David slapped his thigh with violence.

“By the Lord Harry, it’s a map!” he cried, in glee. “A regular map, Billy, my boy!” His eyes bulged forth until they threatened to jump from their sockets.

Roy’s jaw shot out a bit farther.

“Yes, it’s a map,” he agreed; and his voice was strangely gentle, as it usually was in his moments of greatest excitement. “It’s a map. Bully for Billy!” His face lighted with a charming smile, and his eyes grew soft as he turned them to the rough-hewn face of the discoverer, who appeared highly gratified.

Saxe took the sheet of paper out of his friend’s hand, and studied it with eager eyes. For the first time in days, hope leaped in his breast.

“Yes, it’s a map,” he declared, echoing the others. “But I don’t understand. Tell us, Billy.”

Billy actually preened himself, in an ungainly manner peculiarly his own, and assumed a most pedantic air, as he went forward with the explanation:

“Saxe was sitting here, with his eyes fixed on the old man’s manuscript, but with his mind elsewhere. I was here in my chair, with all the power of my brain concentrated on that same manuscript, trying to get some suggestion for working out the tangle. Was it merely restlessness under repeated failure, or was it an instinct that moved me, or just chance? Anyhow, I got up, and crossed over to Saxe, and stood looking down at the music, although I had every line of it clear in memory—as clear as the written page itself. But, this time, in spite of the perfect recollection I had of it, I saw something new. That’s how the thing started. It was Saxe’s doing.”

“Oh, do get on with the explanation,” Temple urged. “What was it I did? I haven’t the shadow of an idea.”

“It’s simple enough,” Billy said. “Just absent-mindedly, you sat there with a pencil in your hand, and made ticks over certain notes. As I looked down at the sheet, my attention was especially caught by these, for the excellent reason that they had not been there before. Without any volition on my part, I stood there considering the pencil marks. Within a half-minute, the great idea hit me. In the first rush, I was sure it was the right one; but I wanted to be alone to work it out. So, I just swooped down on the manuscript, and carried it off to my room. Now, to present the case in orderly sequence, here is what we may term Exhibit A.”

Billy took from his pocket a third sheet, which he gave to Saxe. This proved to

be the original manuscript of the music, with the pencil markings made by Saxe. The heir of Abernethy examined the page closely, but his expression of bewilderment did not pass. Roy and David left their places to look over the other's shoulder. For nearly a minute, the three held their gaze curiously on the sheet. Then, of one accord, they looked up, to meet the amused glance of Billy Walker.

"Well?" they demanded, in a single voice.

"You have observed the pencil marks?" came the question; and the three nodded assent.

This is the manner in which the manuscript had been affected by the absent-minded action of Saxe:

"In pursuance of the idea that had come to me," Billy continued, "I next made a tracing. I took a piece of tissue paper, and laid it over this manuscript. I could then see quite clearly, so that it was easy to make the outline I wished. I started at the beginning, with the notes checked by Saxe, from which I had received the hint as to what to do. I started my pencil at the first top note in the first line of the composition. Then, I drew the pencil straight to the second top note, then on to the third, and so forth in order. Thus, I drew an irregular line with the pencil, from one note to another, using always the highest notes. In this manner, I drew the line indicated by the first half of the music, and I liked that so well that I kept right on, and made the second irregular line, as indicated by the second half of the music. By the time this was accomplished, I was sure that I had finally got the right idea, and that our victory over the old man's cunning would be won. It was, of course, obvious that the two irregular lines I had secured should be joined in one. You have seen the result. Consider Exhibit B." Billy spread out the two papers showing the outlines he had drawn, and pointed to that containing two lines.

It had this appearance.

Billy completed his account of the matter with no diminution in his air of elation:

"Here, then," he said, waving aloft Exhibit C to emphasize his meaning, "I present to you the chart which the late Mr. Abernethy left us as a guide to the spot where the treasure lies secreted. It is plain enough for even your eyes to read, I fancy. The pencil outline is to serve us as a map, which we are to follow to the gold. It represents—roughly, I take it—the sky-line of the country round about. As I had only just completed the drawing before I came back to you, I've

had no time to compare it with the hills hereabouts; but I'm certain none the less. It's a matter of inference. There remains now only the task of finding out what marks the precise point of the hiding-place on this line. It seems to me that some one of you with knowledge of music ought to work out that trifling detail. If not, of course I can do it—in time.”



CHAPTER XVI

THE HOLD

BILLY'S vanity was well content with the compliments accorded him by his friends, who gave the appreciation that was justly his due for persistent effort when they had wearied. It was David whose enthusiasm led him to suggest an immediate trip on the lake, to learn whether or not they could identify the features of the topography shown by the chart.

The launch, to which they had been reduced by the loss of the *Scherzo*, had a speed of twelve miles an hour at its best and under Jake's guidance it carried them swiftly enough northward to the broadest part of the lake, whence they might readily study the shore in all directions. Already, each had familiarized himself with the chart, so that it was held clearly in a mental picture, while he looked about over the sweep of sky-line critically, seeking some resemblance in the rise and fall of mountain and hill and in the curving of the shore to the irregular tracing made by Billy from the music. As the boat ran in a wide circle, first one and then another caught here or there some trick of configuration that sent him eagerly to compare it with the chart in Billy's hands. But, in each instance, the hope was doomed to swift disappointment, for vital divergence was revealed between the two. There was some disagreement, too, as to whether or not the map had reference to the windings of the shore, or to the crests and valleys of the hills and mountains, as they showed in relief against the sky. Billy Walker was certain that the chart had been drawn to represent the sky-line, and Saxe was of the same opinion—chiefly, perhaps, because of the other's reasoning in which he had come to have great confidence, if not absolute reliance. Billy argued that the sky-line would be the natural guide on which to depend, inasmuch as it was bolder, less open to doubts. The indication received from this, he pointed out, could be at once applied to the shore, since the first knowledge gleaned had declared that the treasure was at the bed of the lake. Both Roy and David, however, maintained that the chart should be taken as copying the indentations in a portion of the shore-line. David offered evidence in support of this contention to the effect that, whatever the sky-line might show as to itself, there could come from it no hint as to the distance from the shore at which the gold was lying. Billy admitted this, and then to his adversary's chagrin, exposed the fact that the like difficulty must exist in the event of the

map being of the shore-line itself—which was not to be gainsaid. It was Saxe, who, at last, made the discovery of importance. He had been staring fixedly at one point of the horizon for a full minute; then, he moved over to Billy's side, where he alternately regarded the chart and the horizon for a considerable interval.

“Look here, Billy!” he exclaimed, abruptly. “Just take a squint at Mount Tabor, over there; I learned the name from Jake the other day.” He pointed to the west, a little to the north of them, where one of the highest of the peaks of the distant mountains loomed in naked majesty.

Billy obeyed the request, and readily distinguished the peak to which Saxe had called his attention.

“Well?” he questioned.

“I want you to notice, too,” Saxe continued, “that the peak is flat on the top for some distance, and that there's nothing of much height to the south.”

Billy nodded in assent.

“All right,” he agreed. “Go on.”

“Now, look farther north, about two miles, or perhaps more. You see another mountain, which seems to be almost the same height as Mount Tabor, and is flat on top in the same way?”

There was hardly any delay before Billy answered:

“Yes, I see it. Next?”

“Well, then,” Saxe continued, with animation, “you must bear in mind the fact that those two peaks are the highest on the whole extent of the western shore of the lake. It is, I imagine, very likely that anyone in search for a striking object in the landscape would select them at the outset as guides, on account of their conspicuousness. It's my belief, after looking pretty closely, that Mount Tabor is shown by the two G's above the staff in the beginning of the gold song. Try it running north from Mount Tabor, and compare it with the chart, and see if you don't find it brings you all right to the second high mountain, which is marked by the two G's of the second half of the music. And then, keep on, until you come to the mountain top, much lower, but also hog-backed, which seems to me to be indicated by the final C's of the score.”

Billy needed no urging. Before his friend had ceased speaking, he had brought his whole mind to bear in considering the similarities to which Saxe called his

attention. For five minutes, he examined first the undulant horizon line and then the chart, which he held out-spread before him. He and Saxe were in the stern seats, while Roy and David had places forward, discussing the shore-line, and giving no heed to what was going on behind them. Suddenly, the voice of Billy Walker boomed forth in its fullness:

“By Croesus, Saxe, you’ve got it! You’ve pinned the map to the mountains! Bravo, my son!”

At the outburst, Roy and David faced about, startled. They saw the unwieldy bulk of Billy swaying with the motion he had imparted to the launch by leaping to his feet. He was a figure of joy, with his little eyes glowing, his bare head a tangle of wind-tossed hair, his harsh features softened by radiance. Even Jake had turned in his seat at the wheel, and was rigidly expectant.

“Praise be!” Billy ejaculated, as he waved the chart high in a gesture of triumph. “One of you, at last, has come to my help. Saxe has run the chart to earth—literally.”

At that, there was a lively display of interest. Jake stopped the engine, and left the launch to drift lazily, while he joined the others for a study of the map in connection with the horizon line discovered by Saxe. Roy and David were inclined to be somewhat skeptical at the outset, but they were presently convinced, as they perceived the exactness of the correspondence between mountains and chart. There was jubilation on the part of all.

Jake introduced a topic that was lying in the mind of each.

“But I don’t understand yet jest where ’bouts that-thar money of Mr. Abernethy’s might be,” he remarked. “What about it?”

“Our esteemed friend has touched on the very *crux* of the matter,” Billy declared, with a noisy sigh. “We have now attained to all the knowledge that we require for our purposes—with a single small exception—we don’t know where the gold is. Nevertheless, the chart will tell us. It’s there—somewhere—Saxe has done nobly in coming to my assistance. It seems to me that, now, it’s the turn of either Roy or Dave.” Billy laughed, and then assumed an expression of elephantine demureness. “Roy is something of an expert in occult things,” he suggested, with his eyes twinkling. “It might be a good idea for him to try his powers on this. The divining rod, in the hands of the gifted, will locate precious metals, as well as water, under the surface of the earth. Doubtless, it will do as much for gold under water. It is probable that Jake can inform us as to where witch-hazel is to be found in the woods. With a twig of that for wand—I believe

it is the accepted wood—let Roy go wandering over the lake in the launch; let him hold the divining-rod in his hand until it shall dip toward the water. Let a buoy be floated there to mark the spot, and there will we dredge, and there will we bring up the old man's treasure."

Roy sniffed, while Saxe and David smiled over Billy's bombast. But Jake took the suggestion seriously, and nodded his approval.

"Allus hearn it would find gold and silver," he said, "but I hain't never seen it done. It's fine for water, though, and that I know, havin' seen it work many a time. It bent, and they dug, and the water come, and that's all they was to it."

Two hours after he had retired that night, Billy Walker was rudely awakened out of a sound sleep. In a dream, which had been of a curious, but most agreeable heaven, where he was dining on dishes that were puzzles, each one to be solved before it could be eaten, he was instantaneously transported to a vile groggery of the water-front in a seaport town, where a horde of rascallions pounced on him with intent to shanghai. He awoke to behold in the moonlight Saxe, who sat on the edge of the bed, jolting him violently to and fro. When his brain was sufficiently clear, he demanded the meaning of this outrage. The first words from his friend were consolation enough.

"Billy, I've found the place!"

There was no need for apology, since the disturber of his slumbers had brought to Billy Walker the news he most desired. Instantly, he was questioning.

"Quick! Tell me! How'd you find it! Where is it?"

Saxe laughed happily.

"I must give you one final lesson in music, to enable you to understand. It's so simple! I can't guess why I didn't get it in a second."

"The most obvious thing is often the most obscure," came the oracular paradox.

"A hold in music," Saxe explained, "is a mark which shows that a certain note is to be sounded for a time longer than is demanded by its value otherwise."

"Well?" There was excitement in the harsh whisper.

"Wait until I've lighted the lamp," Saxe said. In a moment it was done. "Now, take another glance at the gold song itself—not the chart." He pulled the sheet from a pocket of the dressing-gown that he wore over his pajamas, and held it up before Billy's face for inspection.

[\[Listen\]](#)

“That shaded half-circle,” Saxe went on, “with a period in the concavity, over the second measure of the second half of the gold song, is a hold—a hold—a hold, Billy! Don’t you understand? Isn’t it plain? That marks the spot where the gold is—I know it does. That’s the place where we pause, where we hang on!”

“Of course!” Billy Walker’s voice had a tone of complete satisfaction. “You’ve done splendidly, Saxe. With much training, I believe I might be able to make something out of your intellect. The chart will show just what part of the shore is indicated by this hold. The gold will be at that point—probably, close to the bank, but certainly under the water, for the first lesson read, ‘The Bed of the Lake.’ We shall find it without Roy’s divining-rod, after all.”



CHAPTER XVII

MASTERS AGAIN

IN THE hour preceding dawn, Roy gave over his fight against an unaccustomed nervousness that had kept him awake, rose, took a sponge bath, shaved, and dressed himself for the day. He stole from the room, and quietly let himself out of the house, in confident expectation that the outdoors charm of dawn would soothe the unrest of his spirit. A slight noise arrested his attention as he went toward the north end of the cottage. He was wearing tennis shoes, of which the rubber soles made no sound on the ground, and he went forward with caution, his curiosity aroused, for he was certain that he caught a sibilant whisper. Already, there was a rosy grayness stealing on the air, so that he could see, though dimly. As he came to the corner of the house, he halted, and peered covertly forward. He could distinguish a shadow that moved a little. As his eyes grew accustomed to the twilight, he made out that there were two forms there, one much the larger. Again, his ears detected a faint whispering, too indistinct to be understood. Then, one softly spoken phrase came clearly:

“Come away—they’ll hear us.” It was the voice of the engineer.

Roy’s muscles tensed for the leap forward. But he remembered the fact that as yet there was nothing in the way of direct evidence against Masters. He and his friends believed in the man’s guilt, but there was no proof. Now something might be said that would serve to convict the engineer of his crimes. Roy determined to listen, to learn what he might. The two who had met thus mysteriously moved toward the north-east, going swiftly toward the shore of the lake. At a safe distance behind them, Roy followed.

The couple halted in an open place on the lake shore, where a cliff dropped sheer to the water some thirty feet, as much more to the bottom of the lake. Roy contrived to make a slow progress to a point in the undergrowth above them, hardly a rod away, and here he was able to understand every word spoken between them. And now, fire of wrath, kindled by jealousy, burned fiercely in Roy’s bosom, for there came to him the voice of the smaller of the two persons, and it was the voice of a girl—the voice of May Thurston. Strangely, the idea that she could be the one thus to meet the engineer by stealth had not occurred to him hitherto, and the shock of the discovery came near to robbing him of his

self-control. Indeed he made a movement to dart forth, but again his action was checked by the command of reason, though through evil seconds he fought against obedience. Then abruptly, his mood changed as he caught the significance of the dialogue between the speakers:

“I knew it was you,” May was saying, in a voice vibrant with horror, which she strove to repress. “I knew it was you that first time, for I went up there, and found the rifle in the tree where you had been when I met you in the morning. I supposed, of course, that you understood how I knew, and so you wouldn’t dare to try again. And I thought you had gone. Thank God, I couldn’t sleep tonight, and came out in time to see you light that fuse—in time to put it out before you could stop me. I shall tell them everything in the morning, the first thing.”

There was a note of finality in her voice. It was evident that whatever tenderness she had felt for this man had been overwhelmed beneath the flood of her loathing for his crimes. Masters must have understood perfectly the uselessness of all effort to persuade her from her purpose, for he wasted not an instant in argument; instead, he acted.

Before Roy could make a movement to interfere, the engineer had leaped forward. His long, powerful fingers closed in a strangling grasp on the soft, white throat of the girl, sank viciously into the tender flesh. May’s eyes protruded, her arms straightened out in a spasm of physical anguish, but no sound issued from the parted lips. Almost in the same second, Masters shifted his grip with lightning speed to her waist, lifted her easily, and swung her from the cliff out into space. Then, he went crashing off into the wood, running blindly, ere yet came the splash made by the girl’s falling body as it entered the water.

Perhaps Masters did not hear the second splash, which followed after the briefest interval. If he heard, and thought of it at all, he probably deemed it caused by some rock his movement had set rolling over the cliff. Assuredly, he never dreamed that there had been at hand a man to plunge after his victim, to save her from the death to which he had assigned her. In his intimacy with May, he had learned that she could not swim. In that deep water, where the naked cliff rising vertically offered no hand-hold, she, in her dazed condition, could have no chance to escape alive out of the peril into which his cruelty had cast her. Such was the engineer’s belief, and his feeling was merely of satisfaction in thus having rid himself of the witness who knew his blood-guiltiness.

Even as his body clove the air in the long dive to the water, Roy was conscious

of a pang of regret that he must suffer the enemy to escape. Then, he was beneath the surface, groping vainly. As his head shot clear again, his eyes glimpsed May's head just disappearing near at hand. In a moment, he had reached her, was in time to seize her before she sank again. He was at home in the element, and, as the girl was unconscious, and so offered no resistance by a struggle, his task was all the easier. He quickly brought her to the shore, at a point where there was a break in the cliff, and the ground sloped sharply to the level above. He did not pause until he had carried her in his arms to the top of the bank. There, he laid her face downward on the ground, then lifted her by the waist, so that the lungs might empty themselves of water. Afterward, he chafed her face and hands, and soon, to his great relief, she showed signs of returning consciousness. As she had been immersed for so brief a time, she speedily made a complete recovery, save for the weakness consequent to the shock of the whole experience. Indeed, her wretchedness was rather from the violence of the engineer's attack than from the little water she had swallowed before her rescue by Roy.

It was after the first confused questioning on her part, and Roy's account of his presence on the scene, that she gave an explanation of the events that had led to the attempt against her life. She, too, had sought relief from wearisome wakefulness by wandering abroad in the night. While she was close to the cottage, yet in the shadows of the wood, she had heard a sound that attracted her attention, and had watched carefully. There was a long silence before her interest was rewarded, but at last, she made out a movement on the north wall of the cottage itself, which was only a little way from her. Observing closely, she perceived that the object was a man, who was descending a ladder. It needed no more to fill her with alarm, and with fear came suspicion, which was almost certainty, as to the identity of the prowler. At first, however, she remained quiescent, doubtful as to her right course of conduct, anxious, if it were in any wise possible, to avoid alarming the household. During her period of delay, the man disappeared with the ladder, but he returned immediately, and forthwith she saw a match struck. It was extinguished at once, but, as the flame died out, she beheld a glowing spark, which remained against the wall. Even as she stared, it seemed to mount upward very slowly. She believed, then, that the desperate man had determined to set the cottage on fire, and a new horror gripped her, so that the scream she attempted did not pass her lips. In an instant, she had reached the cottage—she caught the spark between her palms, and smothered the fire. Before she had time to understand the situation, she was hurled backward, and found herself in the arms of Masters, who was whispering fiercely in her ear to be

silent. Without giving him any heed at first, she mechanically examined her smudged hands, and found that she held in them the charred end of a cord. As she drew the length of this to her, it came readily, and she was aware that it had broken from its fastening under the impact of the man's leap on her. She knew, also, that this thing she was holding was a fuse. Her quick intelligence grasped the truth that the treacherous engineer, who now embraced her so roughly, had again sought to destroy his enemies. She was so agitated by the realization, so distraught by the thought that she was lying helpless within the criminal's arms, while he held a hand over her mouth to silence her shrieks, that she even welcomed the suggestion overheard by Roy as to their moving to a greater distance from the cottage. The remainder of the incident was already known to her savior.

As she ended her story, May, overwrought, began crying softly. There are times when the simplicity of direct physical contact avails more than any magic of words to tell sympathy and love. It was so in this instance. Wet and bedraggled as he was from his descent into the lake, Roy drew into his arms the crouched form of the girl, and held her closely, while from them the rivulets slid silently away downward, to seek again the lake from which they had been ravished. The girl was first startled, then soothed, then wondrously content. The dawn came, stealing softly, and the light fell on them as a blessing.



CHAPTER XVIII

DUX FACTI FEMINA

ROY was aroused to sudden consternation, when a lull in his ecstatic emotion let him once again think of mundane things, for it flashed on him that the explosive to which the fuse had been attached still remained in Saxe's chamber. In a word he explained the matter, and the two hastened to the cottage, where after a quick embrace they separated, May going to her room, to change into dry clothing, and Roy running to his friend. He entered Saxe's chamber cautiously, yet moving rapidly, lighted the lamp, and looked about him. At once, his eyes fell on the bomb, which rested on a bureau, near the head of the bed. From it extended the remnant of fuse, which ran out through the open window. Roy drew this in, took up the bomb carefully, for he was not sure how sensitive it might be, and made his way out of the room, without awakening the sleeper. Within a minute, the instrument of crime was reposing innocuously on the bed of the lake, whither Roy had tossed it from the cliff. On his return to the house, he aroused his friend, and told of the latest attempt on the part of the engineer. Saxe was profoundly impressed by the narrowness of his escape from death, or mutilation. Nevertheless, his feeling was less by far than it must have been, but for his midnight discovery concerning the miser's cipher. Without pausing to dress, he hurriedly related the fact to Roy, who was equally impressed. To make the matter wholly clear, Saxe would have exhibited the music to Roy, showing the place occupied by the hold, but the manuscript had mysteriously disappeared. The two hunted through the room thoroughly, although Saxe was sure that the sheet had been left on the bureau when he returned from Billy Walker's room. There was no trace of it anywhere, and presently they abandoned the search, to stare at each other in bewilderment. It was Roy who first reached a solution of the puzzle:

“It was Masters took it—of course!” he declared, savagely. “He's been snooping around, heard us talk of it probably, and, when he got here tonight, he simply swiped it.”

“But it'll do him no good.” Saxe protested.

“But he thinks it will,” Roy retorted. “Anyhow, he's made off with it. Perhaps he thought it would tie us up—and so it will. We must have it back.” His jaw shot forward, and his eyes grew hard.

Saxe, however, smiled, and shook his head in denial.

“Not a bit of it,” he asserted. “I can reproduce that music in ten minutes, every mark on it. I know where the hold was, exactly. For that matter, I don’t need the music. The chart will do just as well, for I know the place on it, too. But I’ll do the music over for Bill and the rest of you. I’ll do it as soon as I’m dressed, before I come down to breakfast.” And as he said, so was it. When he appeared at the breakfast-table, he carried with him an exact duplicate of the old miser’s manuscript.

There was much lively interest on the part of all, when the adventure of the night was made known, and May on her appearance was hailed as a heroine of melodrama. To the astonishment of all save Roy perhaps, the girl was more radiant than they had ever seen her hitherto, and the color in her cheeks and the brilliance of her charming eyes, now undisfigured by the businesslike lenses of the secretary, rendered her beauty so striking that the men regarded her with new admiration, while Margaret West, from the instinct of a woman whose own heart is full of tenderness, regarded her friend with a gentle suspicion that there remained something of the adventure yet untold.

Roy was eager to devote the day to a search for the capture of Masters, but the others were opposed to this. It was finally decided that the quest for the hiding-place of the treasure must be carried on without a moment of delay, since the matter of the short time now remaining, only a week, could not be ignored. As to the evil devices of the engineer, it would be sufficient to take precautions against them by keeping watch through the coming night and afterward until the end of the hunt for the gold. So, as soon as breakfast was done, the four friends set out in the launch with Jake for a survey of the territory indicated by the hold.

This, as was clearly apparent from examination of the manuscript, was on the lake shore at a point opposite one of the low peaks. It was easily distinguished by its nearness to the second of the highest summits, as it was at the first point of rise after a long descent. The course brought them again to the north end of the lake, to a place close to the extreme end. There was a cove here, which ran inland for a half-mile. Within the curve of the shore, a few small islands were scattered, and outside the miniature bay a larger island stretched, one of the chief on the lake.

It was Roy who now assumed charge of the expedition, by right of his varied experience in wild places, which had included the tracking of cattle-rustlers and outlaws. He directed that first a landing should be made, and the shore at the

point indicated gone over carefully for any slightest trace of footsteps, or other marks, which might show operations in connection with the removal of the treasure. If found, such a trail would doubtless guide them in their further quest of the gold at the bottom of the lake. They spent three hours at the work, and finally abandoned it in despair, for their investigation had been exhaustive, without revealing aught.

Billy Walker delivered himself forcibly, when at last a council was called. Since he had toiled steadfastly with the others, notwithstanding his distaste for physical exertion, there could be no question as to his sincerity when he argued against any further effort in this direction.

“I’ve learned from Jake,” he explained, “that the late Mr. Abernethy understood the management of his boats perfectly, and on occasion used them without taking any one along to help him. It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that he would have transported the money to its hiding-place in one of the power-boats. He had no horse, and his feebleness was such that he could not have lugged all that weight of gold, even if he divided it into small amounts, for this place is four miles from the cottage—almost as far as we walked the other day. Now, we know that the treasure is at the bottom of the lake. That was the first thing the manuscript taught us. I’m sure he brought it here in the boat. There is no reason why there should be any mark on the shore. I say this: We’ll go back, and have luncheon. Then, we’ll return here, and institute an orderly, exhaustive search of the lake bottom. We must rig up some sort of grappling irons, and anyone so wishing can become a diver, and search the bottom that way. Anyhow, we know the gold is down there. It’s up to us to find it. I will say, I think the old man has done his part.”

This plan was duly carried out. As soon as the young men had left the luncheon-table, they scattered to gather the necessary materials for their equipment in the next stage of the undertaking, following the suggestions of Billy Walker.

Saxe had just descended the steps of the porch when he heard his name called. He turned, and saw Margaret West, standing half-way between him and the shore, a little to the south from the cottage. At the moment, there was no one else visible. Saxe hurried toward her, his face flushed with pleasure at the summons. Recently, she had seemed a bit more distant in her attitude toward him, and he had been tortured by those alarms that are the heritage of all lovers. At this moment, however, her face was radiant, and her limpid blue eyes were sparkling with eagerness. As he came near, she spoke, and there was a thrill of delight in her voice, which set his heart bounding.

“Oh,” she said, clasping her hands on her breast in a quaint gesture of emotion, “I hope, I really believe that I may be able to help you.”

“You!” Saxe exclaimed, in manifest surprise. “Why, what do you mean? Help me—how?”

“It’s about the gold,” Margaret answered. There was timidity in her tones now, as if his evidence of astonishment had distressed her. “I think, I’m almost sure, that I know something you ought to know.”

Saxe’s amazement increased. Somehow, at the back of his mind, there had always lingered the abominable statement made by Roy as to this girl, that she was his natural enemy, that she must be such by the circumstances of the case, since his success would be her direct loss of a large sum of money. He had scorned the idea when it was presented to him; he had never for a moment allowed it entertainment; his love for the girl was sufficient to deny the possibility of her being in any way influenced by sordid things. Yet, always, the thought had lurked in the background for the reason that it had once been voiced by his friend. Now, at her display of interest in his behalf, his first emotion was wholly of surprise from the unexpectedness of the event, and this was followed swiftly by joy that thus she should have proved Roy’s saying false. The new feeling was undoubtedly shown in his face, for, as she regarded him intently, Margaret’s expression grew lighter again. She went on speaking with new animation:

“You know, I was here once before, when I was a little girl, visiting my cousin. He was different then—not lively, or gay, or anything like that, but I don’t think that the miserliness had got such a hold on him. Anyhow, he went about with me a great deal, and we really had ever so good times together. He often took me out in the launch. One time in particular is the thing I must speak to you about, for he took me up in the neighborhood where you were today. I’m sure of that, for I know just where you went from what you said at luncheon. Do you wish me to go on?”

“Do I wish you to?” Saxe cried. “We need all the help we can get. Of course I wish you to. The only thing is that I wonder you’re willing. It doesn’t seem right that you should rob yourself by giving assistance to your natural enemies.” He smiled whimsically, as he thus paraphrased Roy’s accusation against the girl.

“Nonsense!” was her energetic retort. “I’m not quite so poor as to worry over the money part of it. It seems to me that you ought to win—I think my cousin meant you to. Besides, I’d like to see you do it, just to disappoint Mr. Masters. But let

me tell you, I'm still afraid of him. He's a desperate man, who'll stop at nothing, even murder, as you know. And he's mad to get that money. So, I want to help you, and to beat him. But, of course, my idea may amount to nothing, really—after all.”

“Tell me,” Saxe said, simply. He was beamingly happy, and the fact showed plainly enough in his eyes and smile. The girl flushed a little under his glance.

“There's an island up there,” she said presently; and her voice was strangely soft for a statement so prosaic. “It lies in the entrance to the cove, before you come to the other islands. They are smaller, too. You noticed it, perhaps?” She glanced up at Saxe inquiringly, then her eyes drooped again, as he nodded assent.

“That,” she continued briskly, “was one of the places to which my cousin took me. What I learned that day may be just the thing you need to know now: There's a cave on that island.”

Saxe regarded the girl in dismay. This information was not what he had anticipated. He did not know just what he had expected, but certainly it had been nothing like this.

“A cave!” he exclaimed, weakly. “But the gold's at the bottom of the lake, you know.”

Margaret moved her head in assent.

“Yes, I know,” she agreed. She was not in the least disconcerted by the obvious disappointment on the part of her listener. On the contrary, a mischievous dimple pitted the rose of her cheek. “Just the same, the cave might have something to do with your affair.”

“I don't understand,” Saxe objected.

“The cave runs downward,” she said; and she waited for the meaning of her words to penetrate his consciousness. They did so, presently.

“Oh, the cave runs downward,” he repeated, thoughtfully. “I begin to understand.”

Margaret met his gaze frankly, and nodded assent to the idea that had arisen in his mind.

“Yes,” she went on, “the cave is really larger than you might fancy from the size of the island, and the passage slopes downward, though not very steeply. We didn't go far. I don't know the length of it. Cousin Horace didn't know—then. In

the cave, there are plenty of places where the gold could have been hidden. So, I thought I'd tell you."

"Bless your dear heart!" Saxe cried. "I believe you've saved the day for us. The chances are, we'd never have got to searching the island even, without your help."

"You might have missed the cave, if you had gone over the island," Margaret said. "It isn't at all easy to find, I can tell you. I don't know how my cousin happened on it. He told me that, as far as he knew, there was no one else aware of its existence."

A great volume of sound shattered the air. The two turned toward the boat-house, and saw Billy Walker, who made an imperative gesture, and shouted again:

"All ready! Hurry along!"

But, as Saxe turned to the girl, to say good-bye, she stayed him.

"Wait!" she commanded. "I don't wish the others to know—yet. You see, it might come to nothing, after all. How would it do, if I were to go with you in the canoe? Then we could land on the island, and investigate, and afterward, if you found things promising, you could tell the others. What do you think?"

Saxe was in a whirl of delight. Thus far, he had never enjoyed the like opportunity to be with the girl whom he loved. His heart leaped at the thought of it, and his eyes were tender and happy as they met hers.

"What do I think of it?" he repeated. His voice was so charged with adoration that the rich color flooded Margaret's cheeks. "Why, I think it will be splendid! Shall we start right away?"

The girl laughed, in some confusion, and her glance wandered from him.

"Not this very second," she protested, "for I must change into something different for paddling. Go down and send the others along, and I'll be with you in ten minutes—no, fifteen."

Saxe, waiting on the dock with the canoe already launched, smiled a trifle grimly, and admitted that the dearest woman in the world was essentially feminine, for his watch indicated the half-hour since their parting. It was just as he slipped the timepiece back into his pocket that he heard the laughing voice behind him:

"I'm just on time to the second, am I not?"

Saxe turned, to see Margaret, in workman-like gray sweater and short skirt. His gaze, though fond, was mildly reproachful.

“It’s been just half an hour,” he declared.

“Then, I’m on time, to the second as I said.” The girl beamed on him, quite unabashed.

At this astonishing statement, Saxe opened his eyes in wonder.

“But you said—” he began.

“I said fifteen minutes,” Margaret interrupted. “Of course, you know that you must always double a woman’s time.”

“I didn’t know,” the young man confessed, smiling.

“Yes,” Margaret continued, as she knelt in the bow of the canoe. “The time estimated must always be doubled. The trouble is that some women make the time triple, or worse, with no certainty about it. They bring the sex into disrepute, and we others, who are exact, get included in the general condemnation.”

Saxe, in the stern, watched the graceful swing of the girl’s arms as they plied the paddle, the liveness of the slender body as it swayed slightly to and fro, watched the sheen of the sunlight that touched to new glories the gold of her hair, watched the wonderful curve of white, softly radiant from the pulsing blood beneath, which ran from the low neck of the sweater to lose itself within the wind-tendriled, shimmering splendor of her locks. And she, this girl so magically beautiful, so wholesomely sweet, so divinely complex, so heavenly simple, this adorable creature had come to aid him at her own loss—she, his natural enemy!

They came at last to the island, where the canoe was beached on a sandy slope. The launch was out of sight, somewhere beyond the islands, within the cove. Margaret led the way without hesitation up the steep ascent that lined the shore, and then over a boulder-strewn level toward the center of the island. Presently, the ground became uneven, with sharp rises, and gullies running between these. Within the ravines, there were small cliffs, rugged, disposed topsy-turvily. Saxe began to see the possibility of caverns within the confusion of stone.

Finally, the girl halted, and looked about her dubiously.

“I’m not quite sure,” she confessed. “There have been landmarks all the way, until just here. But I think this is the ravine—if not, it’s close by.”

She went on slowly, with roving eyes. Then, of a sudden, her expression lightened.

“Ah, I know now,” she exclaimed joyously. “Yes, it’s here—see!” While speaking, she had hastened forward, and now, as she finished, she pointed to where a clump of bushes grew against the north cliff of the ravine. Above the tops of the branches showed a rift in the stone. It was less than a foot in width, a splotch of blackness hardly more noticeable than a deeper shadow. Saxe, beholding, was filled with gratitude to his guide.

“We’d never have found it in a thousand years,” he declared. “Besides, why should we ever hunt for the bed of a lake on the top of an island?”

“Mr. Walker would have evolved a reason for it in the course of time,” Margaret said, in a voice charged with profound respect for the sage.

“Yes, I believe Billy would have worked it out—in time,” Saxe agreed. “But,” he added, with a smile, “perhaps not in time—according to the terms of the will.”

“There’s another entrance, on one of the ridges near the shore,” Margaret explained. “Cousin Horace stumbled on that first. He showed it to me. But he found this way out, and it is better. He said the other was very hard climbing.”

The two had gone forward, and now they were close to the cliff, beside the bushes. Here, Margaret thrust aside the branches, and, advancing a step behind them, showed the entrance to the cave, which was a slit less than a yard in width at the base, narrowing to the apex a rod above. It yawned blackly. Saxe was reminded that he had taken no thought as to the need of candles or lantern. He began the confession of his carelessness, but the girl stopped him.

“I brought a pocket-torch,” she said. “See!” As she spoke, she drew the tube from a pocket of her sweater, pressed the spring, and lighted up the entrance to the cave.

“What a girl you are!” Saxe cried. There was that in his voice which set Margaret a-tremble.

“Come!” she commanded hastily. With the word, she walked forward into the cavern. Behind her in the narrow passage, Saxe followed obediently.



CHAPTER XIX IN THE CAVERN

THE passage continued of limited width for a number of rods. The floor lay almost level, smooth enough to make going easy. The light from the torch showed only walls of bare rock on either side, and once, when Margaret turned the rays upward, the narrowing slant to an apex far above their heads. The two explorers went in silence. Saxe thought the footing safe enough so that he could content himself with watching the girl, whose every motion was a delight to him, seen dimly in the glow that penetrated from without. He was not minded to waste many glances on barren cliffs, while so much of living beauty went in buoyant grace there before him. Margaret, however, gave no apparent attention to aught save the immediate business of the moment, which was holding her gaze to the path lighted by the torch. And so they came presently into a spacious chamber within the earth.

As the two entered here, Margaret halted, and Saxe eagerly stepped to her side. The girl flashed the torch here and there, to reveal the nature of the place. Saxe guessed that the room had a diameter of about fifty feet. The walls of ragged rock formed an uneven circle. They bent inward in the ascent, with a dome-like effect, to a height of hardly two score feet.

Margaret wasted no time. After one examination of the walls by the torch, she fixed the light on a portion of the side opposite them, a little to the left. Saxe, peering intently in this direction, thought that he detected two patches of shadow, a little denser than the surrounding dark, which might be the openings into other tunnels. The girl's words proved his surmise right.

"There are two passages over there, close together," she announced. "As I remember, the one we followed was that on the right. Of course, the money might be hidden anywhere. But we might go a little way in that passage first, so that you'll understand how it runs downward."

"Yes," Saxe agreed. "The place in which to search is narrowed by the statement in the cipher about the bottom of the lake. Does the other passage, too, run downward?"

The girl shook her head instinctively, although the action was not visible, since

the outdoor light did not penetrate thus far, and the beam cast by the torch was directed from her.

“I know nothing of the second passage,” she explained. “We didn’t enter it. Come.”

They set out across the chamber, walking side by side, and so came to the passage-way of which Margaret had had experience. This proved to be somewhat broader than that through which they had come. They had advanced but a very short way, when the floor began to slope sharply downward. Saxe realized that this rate of descent need not be continued long to bring them to the level of the lake’s bottom. He knew that the highest point of the island could have hardly more than a hundred feet of elevation above the surface of the lake. Indeed, he was sure that the entrance to the cavern was only a little distance above the level of the water. They had climbed the bluff that lined the shore, and had afterward ascended a few slight rises, but the total vertical height could not have been more than fifty feet. The inclination of the passage downward was enough to overcome this speedily, if it should continue. And it did continue, for such a long way that at last Saxe was sure the waters of the lake lay above them.

The two wayfarers within this secret place of the earth spoke little, and that for the most part of the things immediately about them. The floor of this passage-way here was not free from rubble, as the other had been. It was littered everywhere with fallen fragments, so that there was need to watch each step with care. Saxe experienced a new happiness when the difficulties of the path became so serious as to justify him in taking the hand of Margaret to help her in surmounting a fallen boulder. As the pulse of her blood touched his, it throbbed a rapture in his heart. In this dark vault of the earth, he forgot the first object of the subterranean wandering—forgot in worship of the woman at his side; Margaret herself sharply recalled him to the prosaic.

“Do you notice the difference in the light?” she asked. “I’m sure it’s dying out. It must need recharging. We must hurry back.”

A note of apprehension in the speaker’s voice aroused Saxe to instant concern. He gave a quick glance toward the circle of light cast by the torch, and perceived that its radiance had in fact grown less.

“Yes,” he answered, “it’s failing. We must turn. Anyhow, I’ve seen enough to understand that this is the likeliest place in which to hunt for the gold.”

As he spoke, they turned about together, and began the ascent with hastening steps, for the thought that the torch might die out while they were still within the

cavern was far from pleasant to either of them. The girl's anxiety was revealed in the next question:

“Have you matches?”

With a start of dismay, Saxe recalled that he had left his match-safe in the pocket of his coat, which remained in the canoe. Nevertheless, he made a perfunctory search.

“No,” he admitted reluctantly; “I left them in the canoe.” He heard the girl sigh; but she said nothing more, only hastened her steps. The dimming of the torch was very apparent now.

The two scrambled over the unevennesses of the passage with what haste they might. Saxe congratulated himself on the fact that there had been no other passages branching from that in which they had made the descent, for the turns, while never sharp, had been frequent enough to breed perilous confusion were there need of choice. In the next instant, however, he remembered the abstraction of his thoughts during the traversing of the route, and he was filled with self-reproach at the realization that, after all, there might have been such branches. And, just then, the two halted abruptly, arrested by a sudden consciousness of the truth. They were descending!

For a moment, neither spoke. In that little interval, the feeble glow of the torch died out altogether.

There came a gasp of dismay from Margaret. Saxe's clasp on her hand tightened in the instinct of protection. Then he essayed a cheerful laugh, albeit there was small merriment in it.

“Now,” he declared briskly, “we must stop right where we are until we've planned a campaign. This is a real adventure.” Even as he spoke, miserably aware of the serious predicament into which the going out of the torch had plunged them, he was conscious of the delicate fragrance of her hair, so near his lips, and the vague, yet penetrant, perfume that exhaled from her to the ravishing of his senses. He fought manfully against the temptation to draw her to his breast, as every fibre of him besought. Under the stress of desire denied, his voice came with a ring of imperiousness. “I had a lot of experiences in caves, when I was a boy. This thing will be easy.”

“But we're going downward,” Margaret faltered. The mystery of the event had sapped courage.

“Exactly!” Saxe conceded. “Somewhere, we turned off into a branch passage.

Did you know of any branch?"

"No," came the answer. The inflection of distress gave new strength to the temptation that beset him.

"I should have noticed it on the way down," Saxe confessed, in great bitterness of spirit; "but my mind was wool-gathering."

The girl ventured no question. Perhaps she guessed the nature of that distraction.

"Anyhow, we've managed to leave the passage in which we came down. We couldn't have turned around in it, without knowing the fact. It seems to me that we've only to face about, and make our way upward again—merely watching out that we don't get switched off another time. The ascent will surely take us back by one or the other of the two corridors into the big room above."

"But—if it should not!" Margaret stammered. The woe in her voice was pitiful. "Why, we might—here in the dark—no light—no food—oh!"

Saxe spoke with a manner of authority:

"Stop! Don't imagine things. Worry wastes strength. Save yours for this exciting climb through the dark. There's no danger—that I know." The calm confidence with which he contrived to charge his voice soothed the girl, and restored to her some measure of courage. From his position on the left side of her, he put out his free hand, and touched the wall. "Put out your right hand," he bade her, "until it reaches the wall. Now, we'll turn round, and begin the journey in the right direction. Keep in touch with the wall, please. Move slowly, using your feet in place of eyes, to avoid stumbling."

In this fashion, they set forth through the blackness of the cavern. It was slow and tedious going. It had been tiresome enough when the torch made plain the obstacles strewn over the floor. Now, the difficulties were multiplied an hundredfold by the absence of light. They could only shuffle a foot about cautiously until it secured a firm place, then by like clumsy feeling choose the next step. Often, one or the other stumbled, was near to falling, but, since these mishaps occurred rarely at the same instant, the one still in balance gave sufficient support. Yet, slow as was their progress, Saxe found heart to be content with it. Always it was upward, until he dared believe that they were actually in either the passage by which they had descended, or in that which opened near it in the big room. He told his faith to Margaret, and she strove her best to throw off the gloom bred of this hateful environment, but could not; nevertheless, despite her fears, they won through at last to the great chamber.

“Hurrah!” cried Saxe. His guiding left hand swept suddenly into emptiness—another step, and still there had been no contact to his roving fingers. It was then that he halted, and gave a shout of triumph. “There’s no wall on your side?” he demanded.

The girl put out her hand, but there was nothing within reach. With a pang of compunction, she realized that she had been remiss in the duty appointed her, for she had not felt the wall even once in a long while. She made admission of her guilt, with charming contrition.

“It’s no matter,” Saxe declared. Profound relief sounded in his words. “We’ve come safe to the big room, and nothing else counts.” In sheer exuberance over their escape, he pressed the fingers that lay so lightly within his.

The girl thrilled in answer to the clasp. The announcement of their return to the chamber came to her overwrought mind as a reprieve from fearful doom. With the joy now possessing her, there came relaxation of the tension that had sustained her. In the warm pressure of his hand over hers was a comfort that loosed the self-control in which she had held herself hitherto. Without any warning, she drooped as she stood; her form grew limp. She would have fallen, had not Saxe, in terror for her as he felt the yielding of her muscles, drawn her to his breast. He held her close there. It seemed strange to him, as she lay motionless within his embrace, the while his lips touched softly a strand of the wonderful hair, that the glory of those tresses should not make all things visibly radiant in the blackness of the cavern, even as the nearness of her made a golden sunlight in his heart. He did not utter a word or venture aught beyond the kiss on that lock which kindest fate had laid across his lips—only rested motionless, holding her firmly, reverently, what time she wept softly on his bosom. Surely, there needed no clumsy vehicle of words between those two embraced in the solitary dark. Twain pulses throbbed as one. In their rhythm ran a song of heavenly things.

CHAPTER XX

THE EVENTS OF A NIGHT

SINCE the large chamber was in utter darkness, Saxe decided on recourse to a device which had served him well in similar situations of his boyhood among the mountains. As soon as Margaret moved and drew a little away from him, he spoke.

“We must step back to the passage-way,” he said. “From it, I can take our bearings, so that we can cross the place without floundering about haphazard in the dark.”

“Yes,” the girl answered. Her voice came very low, quavering a little.

Two paces brought them again to the entrance of the corridor. There, with a hand touching either side, Saxe made sure of the exact direction in which he faced, and from this he judged his course, for he remembered the relative positions of the passage by which they had come into the big room and of the shadows he had seen on the opposite wall. He had in mind as well his estimate of the diameter of the chamber, and so, when he had made sure of his direction he set off boldly, after again taking Margaret by the hand. He lengthened his stride a trifle, to make it the measure of a pace. When he had counted fifteen steps, he reduced his speed, and moved with caution, groping before him. A moment later, his hands encountered the wall. He was confident that he had held his course fairly straight in crossing the chamber, and was certain, in consequence, that the opening into the passage must lie a little to his left. He therefore drew Margaret in this direction. An instant later, to his joy, his left hand found emptiness. Without a word, the two hurried forward, and presently they saw before them a dim glow that was the first hint of outer light. Saxe fell behind the girl as the passage narrowed. Margaret quickened her steps to a run, and he held fast at her heels. In the same second with her, he issued from the cavern, and sent forth a huge shout, which was a little for escape from the cave, but chiefly for a primitive, masterful delight in the woman beside him. Margaret smiled sympathy with his mood—and her smile, it may be, was divided in its sources, even as was the lover’s cry of triumph.

The girl’s face was mantled with blushes. But she spoke bravely, with a dainty air of inconsequence.

“Why, how late it is!” She pointed toward the west. “See, the sun has set already, we were in there for ages.”

“Yes,” Saxe agreed. “And it’s like rebirth to come back—rebirth into a new, glorious life.” With an effort, he checked himself, for he would not embarrass her now, though passion bubbled to his lips. “We must paddle over to where the rest are, and let them know about the cave at once.”

The news brought by the two created a lively excitement among the others, along with a considerable feeling of relief, for the continued absence of Margaret and Saxe had been inexplicable, until Billy Walker quoted, with ostentatious carelessness:

*Love’s a virtue for heroes—as white as the snow on high hills,
And immortal as every great soul is that struggles, endures and fulfills.*

At this utterance from the seer, who was by no means prone to sentimental rhapsodizing, Roy appeared at first puzzled, then enlightened, and he smiled—nor speculated more as to the whereabouts of his missing friend, while David grinned appreciatively, and accepted the innuendo as a sufficient explanation of Saxe’s absence even in this crisis of affairs.

For the rest, the three, with some assistance from Jake, had passed a busy afternoon, without accomplishing anything beyond a disheartening certainty that the gold had been very effectually concealed. Much of the cove was shallow, and Billy Walker had suited his convenience by pursuing his investigations of these portions from the launch which Jake guided to and fro as required. The clearness of the water made it possible to see the bottom distinctly except at the greatest depths, and in this comfortable fashion Billy conducted his search, smoking the inevitable black cigar. In the deeper parts, Roy, clad in a bathing-suit, made such examination of the bottom as he might by diving. David either assisted Billy in the scrutiny from the launch, or hunted over the islands near the shore. At no time did it occur to them to extend their researches so far as the island on which Saxe and Margaret had landed. They had just come to the conclusion that they must give over work for the day, and were again beginning to feel concern in regard to the continued absence of the heir himself, when they were startled by a hail in the voice of the missing man. They stared out over the lake, and perceived the canoe darting toward them, with Margaret plying a skilled paddle from the bow. Jake, who had just bent to the fly-wheel of the engine to crank up, dropped again to the bench; the others stood up and shouted. They had no least suspicion that the truants could be bringing news of the treasure. When finally

the light craft ranged alongside the launch, and the story of the cavern was told, there were wonder and satisfaction. Roy was the first to make a suggestion as to the course to be pursued.

“The rest of you go on to the cottage,” he directed. “I’ll stay here on guard, in case our friend, the engineer, should have a mind to drop in on a visit. After dinner, let Jake bring me a snack to eat, and I’ll keep watch through the night. You—” he turned toward Margaret and Saxe—“can take me to the island, and show me the entrance to the cave, and then leave me.”

There were protestations from the others, offers to share the watch with him; but Roy resisted all importunities.

“I’d like to meet Masters again,” he declared, in his gentlest voice. “I don’t want any help.” They recognized the emphasis of finality, and forebore further argument.

But, when after dinner at the cottage Jake was about setting forth in the launch with supplies for Roy, which in addition to food included a pair of blankets and a lantern, David appeared at the boat-house, and accosted the old man just as the propeller began to revolve:

“Hold your hosses, Jake!” he called; and the boatman obediently threw out the clutch, and steered in a slowing circle to the dock. As he came alongside, David produced—with a deftness of movement that showed some degree of familiarity with gun-play—a very businesslike appearing automatic, which lay snugly in his palm. With his other hand, he brought forth a box of cartridges. These and the weapon, he extended toward Jake.

“For Roy,” he explained. Jake nodded, and stowed the armament in a locker.

The recipient of this equipment displayed small gratitude for his friend’s thoughtfulness. On the contrary, he sniffed when Jake, after beaching the launch on the strip of sand where Roy awaited his coming, presented the automatic and cartridges as first fruits.

“I sha’n’t need a gun,” Roy declared superciliously; and his pugnacious jaw was thrust forward yet once again. And, afterward, when Jake had accompanied him to the cavern with the blankets and the lighted lantern, the boatman’s well-meant offer to remain for the night was rejected almost with indignation. “You don’t understand, Jake,” Roy said, venomously. “I personally have an account to settle with that infernal engineer.”

The old man grinned a cheerful appreciation of the situation.

“Of course,” he remarked, in a matter-of-fact tone, “you got quite some hefty grudge agin ’im for the way he ducked your sweetheart.”

At this candid statement, Roy gaped in amazement.

“Why, how did you know she—” he began. Then, he halted in confusion. For the first time in many years, he felt himself incapable of speech.

Jake chuckled in high good nature, and deemed that explanation enough.

“Well, lick ’im good, if ye ketch ’im,” he exhorted; and straightway set out on his return to the cottage, where he and David were to serve as guards throughout the night.

Thus left to his own devices, Roy proceeded to make himself as comfortable as the circumstances of his situation would permit. He was sure that the enemy would not appear on the scene for some time yet, if at all, and in the interval before that possible coming he proposed to make himself at ease. To this end, he placed the lantern in the center of the chamber on the floor, and folded the blankets into a comfortable rug, on which he seated himself cross-legged, according to the fashion he had learned to like in the Far East. He was at pains to have the luncheon-basket conveniently placed before him, and now began an investigation of its contents with a curiosity sharpened by keen appetite. He smiled contentedly as he brought out a cold sliced fowl, fresh salad, a vacuum-bottle of hot coffee—the dozen other things that would have made a formidable array, had it not been for the strength of hunger with which he happily confronted them. As he renewed energy with this repast, Roy smiled at the contrast of its luxuriousness, as compared with many another that had been his lot in the wild places. He was alone in the wilderness, as often of old, but there the similarity ceased, for in those other places, there had been no dainties, such as the ones before him, no napkins of damask, or utensils of silver. And yet——

Roy broke off his musings, as he finished his third cigarette, and set himself to make arrangements for the night. He removed his blankets to a point against the wall of the cavern on the side opposite the entrance, where a tiny recess offered partial concealment. In this nook, he spread out the blankets, extinguished the lantern, stretched himself in a comfortable posture, and thus entered on the long vigil. He did not hesitate to doze, as he was sure that he retained his old habit of becoming alert at the faintest sound.

It was hours afterward when he became broad-awake in an instant. For a time, he lay motionless, all his senses quickened. The blackness of the chamber seemed impenetrable, yet his eyes stared steadfastly into the dark, expectant for aught

that might befall. It was on hearing, however, that he depended chiefly to gather information, and his ears were set keenly. Yet, though he listened so intently, minute after minute passed, and there was no least interruption of the perfect silence.

Roy found himself in a quandary. He gave Masters credit for a shrewdness equal to the known unscrupulousness of the fellow. Undoubtedly, the engineer had lurked on some vantage spot of the shore throughout the day, and by this espionage had made himself acquainted with the progress of events on the lake. If he had perceived the landing of Margaret and Saxe on the island, as probably, almost certainly, he had, he would have known also of their long tarrying there, and of Roy's remaining on the island. Perhaps from some elevation Masters had followed all their activities through a glass, and had been able by this method to inform himself precisely concerning the location of the cavern in which Roy was lying. Or, even, he might have come to the island, venturing in by the north-east side, so that his approach would not have been observed by the others. He could very easily have kept himself hidden afterward, as the unevennesses of the island and the profuse growth of trees and bushes offered ample concealment. But, whether the advent to the island had been earlier or later, Roy was sure that it was now accomplished, and that the engineer was there present in the chamber with him. His sixth sense spoke the assurance.

After all, it was sight, and not hearing, that at last served to guide the warden of the cavern. His eyes, which had been roving vainly in an effort to pierce the black space, suddenly caught a faintest glow. It was so indistinct, so subtly suggested rather than seen, that for a little Roy believed his vision deluded by some phosphorescence within his brain, which had set the nerves of sight to vibrating. He closed the eyelids for a moment, then looked again. The vague hint of radiance far remote still lingered. On the instant, doubt vanished; in its stead came certainty.

There could be no question that the light shone from a distance. Even the faintest spark anywhere near would have presented an appearance radically different from this. The diffusion of it was proof that its origin was in a light set a long way off. Finally, Roy guessed that the source of it was shut out from his direct vision by some obstacle intervening between him and it, while the nimbus extended beyond the barrier, and thus became perceptible. If this were, indeed, the case, it would be reasonable to suppose that the person responsible for the light was equally far away. The conclusion was by no means inevitable, but it was a fair assumption. Roy deemed himself justified in acting upon it.

Forthwith, he got to his feet, using every caution to avoid the least noise. When erect, he stood for a time listening, but could detect no sound. He had removed his shoes before lying down, and now he went forward in stockinged feet, very slowly, taking the direction whence the light seemed to issue, although its feebleness made the location far from sure. He used all the skill of which he was capable in this advance, and did indeed contrive to avoid making any noise. When he had gone for two rods, or more, he halted, and again listened. Nothing, however, rewarded his attention, and presently he renewed the tedious progress. Soon, it was borne in on him that the origin of the light was within one of the passages leading downward, of which Saxe had told him, and of which entrances had been observed by him while he was eating his meal, though he had not troubled to examine them. His sense of direction, strong naturally, had been developed by experience, and he was convinced that the radiance streamed from the passage that was on the left, as he faced the two.

From Saxe's narrative, he knew that these tunnels were winding. The fact would readily explain the manner of the light, visible where he was in the big room like the afterglow from a sunset, with the cause of it hidden beyond the turnings of the corridor in which it burned, as the sun lies unseen below the horizon. With this understanding of the situation, Roy felt an accession of confidence, and at once moved forward more briskly in the direction from which the illumination shone. He held his hands outstretched, for the light was still too feeble to show objects round about him, even vaguely. Presently, his right hand touched stone. After another step, his left hand also came in contact with the wall, and he knew that he was within the passage, though whether that on the right or on the left he could only guess, nor did he regard the matter as of importance.

From this point onward, Roy's advance, while made with unfailing caution, was much more expeditious. His stockinged feet seemed to possess a consciousness of their own, by which they searched for, and found, the fragments of rubble that were smooth enough not to cut, while solid enough not to yield a sound under the pressure of his weight. And, as he went forward, the light increased, little by little, until at last he could distinguish the sides of the tunnel through which he was passing. Yet, even when the illumination became sufficient to show what sort the footing, Roy chose still to trust his sense of touch, and held his eyes alert for anything that might appear in the distance beyond. He was aware that the passage descended for a time, then mounted slowly, only to slope downward again, and to continue thus. He noted, too, that sometimes it widened, until he could touch only one wall. He mistook the opening into the other passage for one of these broader places.

Roy aroused to the fact that the source of the light he sought was itself advancing, even as he advanced. There was no other possible explanation of the way in which it remained at about the same brilliancy, though he went forward with good speed. By this time, too, Roy was certain that the distance between him and the light was such as to leave little danger in the slight noise of his progress. So, he mended his pace, and soon perceived, with satisfaction, that the radiance noticeably increased. He maintained the quickened speed for a minute or two longer, then prudently moderated it again. Indeed, so bright was the light now that he made sure of being very close to the cause of it, and renewed the exercise of all his caution as he crept forward. That this was none too much—nor, indeed, enough—was shown by what presently followed.

Roy paused again, to examine the situation in detail. The brilliance of the light now assured him that its source was shut from him only by a single bend of the tunnel, which was hardly a rod in front. It was plain, then, that the time had come for determining the manner of his attack, since the moment could not be long delayed. He had no intention of resorting to the weapon with which David had equipped him. He planned that he would approach the turning of the passage noiselessly, and seek to reconnoitre from that point without being observed. Thereafter, as opportunity should serve, he would steal upon his enemy unaware, overpower the fellow, handling him with roughness enough to afford some adequate satisfaction for the outrage against May Thurston, and finally, when the villain had been reduced to passivity, hold him prisoner—to which purpose, at last, the automatic might prove convenient. The arrangement was admirably simple; there remained but to test its efficacy.

The length of tunnel thus traversed by Roy in his pursuit had been considerable. Throughout the latter portion, the slope had been downward, with frequent variations from a sharp incline to stretches almost level. In the place to which he had now attained, the slant was scarcely perceptible. At this distance from the big chamber, he had long passed beneath the waters of the lake. The location of the treasure might well be anywhere hereabouts, according to the saying of the miser's cipher. Roy was moved to devouring curiosity to learn whether or no the man ahead of him had in truth come upon the gold. If so, the accomplishment should avail the scoundrel little, he vowed, and his jaw was thrust forward, as once again he advanced.

Roy looked to the placing of his feet for every step, neglecting no precaution to avoid aught that might give warning of his approach. In this stealthy fashion, he came to the turning of the tunnel, and then, after another delay to make sure that

his presence remained unsuspected, he ventured to peer into the passage beyond the bend. His heart exulted! Surely, fate had delivered his enemy into his hand.

A hundred feet beyond the corner from which Roy looked, a lantern was set on the floor of the passage. This was the source of the light that he had trailed so painstakingly. It burned clearly; the radiance from it showed all about with distinctness. The conspicuous thing on which the beams shone was the form of Masters, who was kneeling and gazing fixedly down into an opening in the floor of the cavern. The man was on the farther side of this, and so had his face toward the watcher, but absorption in whatever was displayed beneath him prevented his noticing the presence of the newcomer. Roy was, therefore, able to continue his spying at ease. Curiosity, as well as discretion, bade him delay attack. He was eager to learn the nature of the engineer's interest in the opening, and, too, the fellow's position, facing up the tunnel, rendered impossible at the moment a rush that should take him by surprise. Undoubtedly, the engineer would make some movement presently, which would place him more conveniently for Roy's purpose. In the meantime, it would be enough to observe, and to await the right instant for assault.

It may be that Masters, too, possessed a sixth sense. Roy could never be convinced that there was not something uncanny in the events that now immediately followed. Masters jumped down into the opening, where he stood with only head and shoulders exposed. Then, in an instant, the light of the lantern vanished—with that, the crash of a forty-five, thunderous there within the cavern. A second report came in the same instant. A searing pain touched Roy's brow, and he lay unconscious.



CHAPTER XXI

THE FIRST PIT

AT THE cottage that same night, Margaret made an excuse of fatigue, and withdrew to her chamber immediately when dinner was done, to the discomfiture of Saxe. May Thurston, too, vanished—perhaps because Roy was absent, and she preferred solitude in order that she might think of him without interruption. Presently Mrs. West said good night, and the three friends were left alone in the music-room. It was then that Saxe proposed to give to Billy Walker some information he had received from Margaret during their return trip in the canoe.

“I’ve found out who was in this room when you fell through the ceiling,” Saxe said to the sage.

“Oh, that!” Billy retorted contemptuously. “It was of no importance. I didn’t bother to tell you.”

“Do you mean,” Saxe demanded, in astonishment, “that you know already?”

“Certainly,” was the crisp answer. “It was Chris.”

“But how——”

“Elimination. There was no problem of interest.”

“But——”

“Only a kindergarten form of ratiocination required,” the sage went on, with an air of extreme boredom. “Cause—family devotion. Aged and faithful servitor didn’t mean to let you deprive daughter of his mistress of her share of the money—meant to beat you to it, like Masters, but from a different motive, merely to keep it away from you until the time limit should expire. Then, he observed symptoms between you and the said daughter that convinced him of error in his plans—made him realize that keeping the money away from you would end in depriving her of half the gold while giving her a half. Being emotional and devoted, he confessed to the girl. The girl felt it her duty to confess to you. It is probable that Chris was the one to discover the secret vault in the wall there, whom Roy, without due reasoning, took to be Masters. Was it Chris?”

“Yes,” Saxe admitted. He was greatly disconcerted by his failure to add anything to the seer’s knowledge.

“Bully for Chris!” David exclaimed. “Crafty old critter, too, to dig into that safe. Huh! I’ve heard about that sort of devotion on the part of old family servants, but it’s the first instance I’ve struck in my own experience. Don’t have ’em in Wyoming.”

“Awful nuisance,” Billy Walker grumbled, “aged family retainers—doddering remnants, always butting in!” He gaped shamelessly, with a great noise.

Saxe, outraged by the sage’s flippant reference to sacred things of his heart, felt himself indisposed for the further companionship of his friends just then. It was this mood, rather than any anxiety concerning the treasure, that led him to devise an excuse for separation.

“Let’s get to bed,” he said, “and then make an early start for the island in the morning.”

Billy Walker, whose lids were weighted by the day’s activities, grinned contentedly at the first phrase, and scowled portentously at the second.

“That’s the idea,” David agreed. “We’ll be off as soon as it gets to be light. I’ll tell Jake to call us, and Mrs. Dustin to have our breakfast ready.” He bustled out of the room, eager for the mission.

Billy Walker groaned.

“Dave is too precipitate,” he growled; “too precipitate by far.” He rose and started for his room. “If we’re to arise at some ghastly hour,” he explained to Saxe, “I musn’t lose an instant in getting to bed. Brain-workers require ten hours of sleep. It’s different with you others.” His feelings somewhat soothed by this gibe, he departed.

In consequence of David’s alertness, they were routed out of bed the following morning while yet there was only the most pallid hint of gray in the east to foretell the dawn. When Billy Walker found that he required a lamp to direct the process of his toilet, he was in a state of revolt. He was thoroughly disgusted when he discovered artificial light a necessity at the breakfast-table. He made it plain to all and sundry that nocturnal ramblings were not to his mind. But he sank into wordless grief when the party set forth in the launch, for darkness still prevailed, and he heard Jake announce that there would be a full hour before the rising of the sun.

David, for his part, was all eagerness to be at work. Saxe, too, now that he was in the open, gave over for a time his dreams of the one woman, and was filled with zeal toward this final struggle for the attainment of fortune. He believed that the day would determine success or failure in the quest for Abernethy's gold. He had seen to it that the equipment contained whatever might be necessary for thorough exploration of the cavern. In the launch were lanterns, ropes, pickaxes, shovels, and a miscellany of things, selected by himself, David and Jake in council. There was, too, a big hamper of food, so that they would not need to return to the cottage for luncheon.

On the arrival of the party at the island, they made their way at once to the cavern, carrying only the lanterns. The other things were left in the launch, to be got as occasion should require after the preliminary search. None of them suspected that aught might have befallen Roy in the cave. Although they had come to know something of the desperate nature of Masters, they were confident that Roy's presence on watch would have sufficed to keep the engineer at a distance. So they were all in the best of spirits, even to Billy Walker who was at last fully awake, when, after lighting each a lantern, they pushed aside the bushes that hid the break in the cliff, and made their way through the rift into the great chamber. As they stepped within it, they lifted their voices in joyous greeting to their comrade. To their surprise, no answer came to the hail—only innumerable echoes flung back from the recesses.

"He's off, exploring on his own," David remarked.

Billy Walker, who had been lurching clumsily here and there with inquisitive eyes, examining the unfamiliar surroundings by the light of his lantern, after the fashion of a modern Diogenes, now turned to Jake with a question.

"How many lanterns did Mr. Morton have?" he demanded.

"Why," drawled Jake, astonished at the interrogation, "he had jest one, o' course. What about it, Mr. Walker?"

"Simply, the fact is sufficient evidence to the effect that Roy is not absent on an exploring expedition by himself, which was David's suggestion. Here is his lantern." He stooped, with a groan in response to the physical strain involved, picked up the lantern, which he had observed at his feet where it stood beside the blankets, and held it out for the others to see. "It's quite cold," he added. "It hasn't been lighted for some time."

The others stared in silence for a little. Even yet, they were far from suspecting any evil. It was Jake who spoke at last:

“I opine, he must have gone outside some’rs, to kind o’ stretch ’imself-like. Got too sleepy, maybe.”

But now, David shook his head decisively.

“No,” he declared. “Roy’s ears are mighty sharp, and we talked loudly enough in the launch to be heard a mile—specially Billy. If Roy had been anywhere on the island, top of the ground, he’d have heard us then, and have come a-running.” David’s expression changed to one of perplexity, in which alarm mingled. There was a new note of anxiety in his voice as he concluded: “And, if he was anywhere about this place, he’d have heard us, too, and have come a-running. And the lantern here—” David’s big eyes, shining weirdly through the lenses, went from one to another of the three men before him, as if seeking help against the trouble growing within him.

“There’s some mystery here,” Saxe exclaimed. Anxiety sounded in his voice. “We must search the cavern at once—for him. We already know he’s not in this room. We’ll look through the two passages that run down under the lake. Come on, Jake. You and I’ll take the one on the right.” He called over his shoulder to his friends, as he hurried forward: “You two take the passage on the left. If you find him, try to make us hear.”

It was David who found Roy, for impatience sent him far in advance of plodding Billy Walker. By the light of the lantern, David made out the huddled form lying on the floor of the passage, just at the turning. He ran forward with a cry of grief, and knelt beside the body. It had come to him in a flash that the event was more serious than anything he had apprehended. Masters had at last gained a victim. With the lantern set on the floor close at hand, David raised the body, which had been lying face downward. As he did so, he perceived the creased brow, with its matting of blood, now dried to a ruddy black. For an instant, David was stricken with a great fear lest his friend be dead. But, as he rested the head against him, a soft moan breathed from the lips, and at the sound hope sprang alive. He sent forth a shout, and Billy Walker, who was near, came running—for the first time in many years. No sooner had he learned of the injury to Roy than he set himself to summoning the others, and the vast voice rang thunderous through the subterranean ways. The mighty volume went rolling in sonorous waves throughout this secret place of the earth, penetrating every cranny and devious winding nook. Saxe and Jake felt the smiting of it on their ear-drums, and came racing through the break and into the passage whence the roaring issued. Even the unconscious man was not impervious to the gigantic din, he groaned, and his eyelids unclosed. David raised a hand for silence, and Billy Walker halted

abruptly in his vociferation, his mouth wide. But, for a long time, the echoes clanged helter-skelter.

When Saxe and Jake came, they with David lifted the sufferer, and bore him along the passage, while Billy went before, bearing the four lanterns. In this manner, they were able to make rapid progress, and soon Roy was placed comfortably on the turf of the ravine, just outside the cavern entrance, with a coat to pillow his head. David brought water in one of the vessels from the hamper in the launch. Billy Walker, however, bethought himself of a flask which he had, and a little sup of the spirits was got into the wounded man's mouth. The effect of the stimulant was apparent almost at once. More was administered, with such excellent results that soon Roy's eyes opened, and his lips moved in a vain attempt to speak. A moment later, he made a feeble movement, as if to sit up. Saxe assisted him to a reclining posture. When the flask was proffered a third time, the sufferer was able to swallow a considerable portion of the liquor. David now appeared with the water, of which Roy drank thirstily. He remained quiet while David bathed his forehead, and, after it had been thoroughly cleansed, soaked a handkerchief in the whiskey, and bound it over the wound. Then finally, Roy spoke intelligibly.

"The damned skunk got me!"

"Masters!" Saxe repeated the name mechanically. There was no need to question—all knew.

Roy nodded assent; and his jaw moved forward, a bit tremulously, but none the less a proclamation of his mood.

David shook his head, in frank astonishment over the outcome of the encounter between the two men.

"Didn't suppose he was quick enough on the draw to get you," he said, dispiritedly. "Huh!"

Roy resented the implication. His voice came with new strength, almost snarling.

"Give the devil his due! He's quick, all right. I didn't mean to use a gun. I chased him in the dark down there, and came up to him. I was watching for a chance to jump him, when, somehow, he knew that I was there. I don't know what could have given him a hint. I didn't even guess that he had any suspicion. He fired two shots in a flash. I didn't see him so much as pull the gun. With the first shot, he put out the lantern, which was a little way off from him. The second got me."

"But—in the dark!" David's exclamation was incredulous.

“In the dark!” Roy repeated, weakly.

“Some class to that shooting,” David admitted, with manifest reluctance.

Billy Walker sniffed loudly.

“Nonsense!” he exclaimed; and the bourdon tone went reverberating afar. “You should exercise your reasoning powers, my dear David—if you have them—the enemy had the devil’s own luck, that’s all.”

“In the dark!” David repeated, disputatiously.

“Exactly—in the dark,” Billy conceded. “Why was the place in darkness? Because Masters shot out the light. Why did he shoot out the light? In order to be invisible to Roy, and so to avoid being killed himself. He didn’t wish to serve as a mark to the other man. That means, he wasn’t at all sure of hitting the other man. He chanced it, and he had the luck—better luck than he expected.”

Roy’s expression lightened greatly, as Billy presented this view of the matter. It took something from the hurt to his pride sustained in the encounter.

“I’d like to stand up to him,” he said, savagely; “luck, or no luck.”

Roy’s injury was no worse than a scalp-wound, and he was soon sufficiently recovered to be hungry. Afterward, he solaced himself with a cigarette, and declared that he would speedily be himself again. He insisted that, in the meantime, the others should busy themselves with the work in hand. He would remain where he was in the pleasant sunshine, and the luxurious idleness of it would hasten the restoration of his strength. Since there was no valid objection that could be urged to this plan, it was followed. Pickaxes were secured from the launch, and then Saxe led the way into the cavern. It was the common mind that they should first investigate the passage in which Roy had suffered defeat at the hands of the engineer.

The four hurried into the tunnel, and by the light of their lanterns made good progress along the rough and winding way. In about ten minutes, they reached the corner where Roy had stationed himself in his pursuit of Masters. They knew that the enemy had been engaged over something only a little distance beyond this point, and, as they advanced, they kept careful watch for the opening in the floor of the cavern. Presently, Saxe, who was still in the lead, uttered a shout.

“Here it is!”

As the others came up to him, he pointed to where, a few feet in front, a break yawned in the flooring of the tunnel. Immediately, all were grouped about the

edge of the opening, staring down into it with intense excitement. By this time, they had come to respect the resourcefulness of the engineer and his ability. The fact that the spot had held him absorbed appeared to them of high significance. Since the man had searched here before their coming, was it not probable that he had found the gold in this very place?

The opening was perhaps eight feet in length, by half as many in width. The depth was irregular. On the south end, it was hardly more than a foot below the level of the floor, running thus for a yard; then, it sloped sharply and unevenly until it was a full two yards in depth at the wall of the tunnel, on the side nearer the other passage. The light of the lanterns shone on a litter of earth and fragments of stone. There was no sign of either chest or bags that might contain treasure. The four stared down in silence for a long minute.

“We must dig here,” David said, eagerly. “The money must be buried here.”

Jake leaped down into the pit, and inspected the confused mass of fragments, while the others looked on curiously. Presently, he raised his head, and spoke:

“I calc’late we’re a mite behindhand, as it were. This hole’s been dug all over mighty careful—and mighty lately, too!”



CHAPTER XXII

THE OTHER PASSAGE

DAVID voiced the general consternation: "By the Lord, Masters has got the gold, after all!"

The following silence admitted the truth of his lament. Saxe's face set grimly. His tones came harsh, when at last he spoke:

"We'll keep on hunting," he said; "only, now we'll hunt Masters."

Jake stood disconsolate, scratching his head, and staring wistfully from one to another. It was evident that he accepted the catastrophe as irremediable. Not so Billy Walker! On the contrary, Saxe had hardly done speaking when the voice of the wise man came booming the decrees of ratiocination, with the usual pedantic note of authority:

"The trouble with the disorderly mind is," he began, with didacticism almost insulting, "that it jumps to a conclusion without due consideration of all the facts. Suddenly confronted with one fact, which is admitted, the illogical person reaches a judgment without any scrutiny whatsoever of other vital facts concerned. Thus, in the instance before us!" He paused, and his little dull eyes, twinkling now from excitement, went from one to another of the three men before him, who listened too anxiously to be in the least offended, for his opening gave them hope. They knew by experience that Billy's reasoning, notwithstanding all his boasts, was, indeed, usually exact, proven just by circumstance. The respectful attention on their faces was grateful to the seer. As he continued, his manner was more genial, though no less breathing the *ipse dixit*.

"Jake has discovered that someone has been before us here, digging in this hole. That is one single, solitary fact. Instantly, all of you impulsively take it for granted that Masters has found the gold here, and has already removed it. As a matter of reason, the chances are greatly against this unwarrantable assumption. It is only necessary to consider all the facts in our possession to understand this.

"In the first place, the fact that this hole has been dug up recently does not prove that there was gold hidden in it. As far as our knowledge goes, the treasure may have been there, or it may not. There is not a particle of evidence one way or the

other. Masters was after the gold. He hunted here. That's all we know. We do not know whether or not he found the money here. Even you chaps must admit that much." He regarded the trio with accusing glances, before which they nodded a meek assent.

"Go on, Billy," Saxe urged.

The undisguised interest of his audience served to set the orator in the best of humors, so that he grinned cheerfully on them as he resumed:

"There are some facts that tend to show the impossibility of Masters having already removed the money from this place. It was late when Roy got his hurt from the hands of the engineer. It is reasonable to suppose that the fellow had had no chance to find, much less take away, the gold before the time when he encountered Roy. Now, the time that elapsed, after Roy received his wound until our coming to the cavern, was not very long. You doubtless remember that we were routed out at an unchristian hour, little better than the middle of the night. In fact, the dawn was still on the other side of the hills when we made the island. We were here not more than three hours after Roy got shot, and it is more likely that the interval was less. I am inclined to think it was perhaps not more than two hours. David, here, knows something about gold and its weight. I submit as reasonable the statement that, had Masters found the gold in this hole, he could not in the time at his disposal have removed that weight of metal to any distance without aid.

"We are justified in believing that he works unaided, for the sake of greed and for the sake of prudence. If you bear in mind the length of this passage, and the impossibility of traversing it except slowly and cautiously, even unburdened, you will appreciate my reasons for suspecting that Masters has not carried off the gold." Billy stared inquiringly at the listeners, and appeared elated as they severally nodded agreement.

"No," David declared, "I believe it would have been next to impossible for him to have got away with it, even if he hid it close by on the island. From the way the blood on Roy's face was caked, and the color of it, I don't believe it had been an hour after the shooting when we got here."

"If you're right about that," Billy averred, "it makes the probability of my reasoning a certainty."

"I'm pretty sure," David answered. "I've seen bullet-holes enough to be pretty sure."

“Why, then,” Saxe exclaimed, briskly, and there was new confidence in his voice, “it seems to me that we’re just where we were—with the gold still to find. In the first place, we must make sure that it isn’t still here in this pit, and, if it isn’t, we must go ahead with the search of the cavern, until we find out where it is.”

Billy emitted a rumbling chuckle, as Saxe leaped down into the pit, and raised a pickaxe.

“My dear boy,” the sage cried, in bantering compliment, “for once you have reasoned simply and precisely. Bravo!”

Not much time was required to make evident the fact that there could be nothing of value concealed in the pit. The litter was readily penetrated, and revealed beneath it solid rock, undisturbed since first set there by the processes of primeval ages. The discovery was a source of relief, rather than of disappointment, and Saxe, doubtless encouraged by the tribute accorded to his reasoning powers by Billy Walker, called attention to the fact that the amount of loose matter in the pit was far from being sufficient to have concealed any great bulk of gold. It was, therefore, reasonable to suppose that the treasure had never been buried in this place.

The seer gave a grunt of approbation.

“You advance by leaps and bounds,” he declared.

Exploration of the continuance of the passage was speedily effected, as it narrowed immediately beyond the pit, and came to a definite end within ten yards. Thereupon, the four retraced their steps, inspecting with care every inch of the way, until they reached the break that formed a communication between the two tunnels. It was decided now that the party should divide, Billy and David keeping on in this passage, while Saxe and the boatman crossed into the other, there to follow its length under the lake.

Saxe knew that he and the girl had gone a little way beyond the junction of the passages, and he was intensely eager to learn what might lie farther on. Hope mounted high as he set forth down the slope, with Jake hard at his heels. He realized that, for ill or weal, he was close to the issue of his adventure, and he dared expect success.

The way at first led downward steeply, but afterward, at a point which, as Saxe judged, was still well within the island, the tunnel ascended for a time, then ran level. This level broadened presently into a chamber, larger even than that back

at the entrance to the cavern. Their lanterns showed a room fully a hundred feet in diameter, irregular, its walls broken by many ledges, with here and there deep shadows that might shroud the entrances to other passages.

“It’s not the place, though,” Saxe declared; “for we are too high. This isn’t under the lake—and the cipher says, ‘The Bed of the Lake.’ Come on, Jake.”

He led the way toward a tunnel that yawned blackly on the south side of the chamber. This sloped sharply downward, without a bend. Saxe, who possessed an instinct for location that was rarely at fault, had kept careful watch of every change in direction throughout the exploration.

“Jake,” he said abruptly, after the straight course had been followed for a few rods, “if we keep on like this, we ought to hit the passage where the pit is.”

“I guess not,” the boatman objected. “We’ve been all over that-thar tunnel, and there ain’t no place where this-here tunnel comes into it. Now, what do ye say to that, Mr. Temple, eh?”

“Not a blessed thing,” Saxe replied. “You’re right, of course, and yet—anyhow, I’d be willing to wager we’ll run within a rod of the other passage, at farthest.”

“Ain’t no way of settlin’ that-thar idee o’ your’n,” Jake commented, with a cackle. “Guess as how I don’t pine to bet none.”

The two went on in silence after this, moving at a fair rate of speed, for the tunnel was only slightly encumbered with débris, but they did not permit haste to breed neglect of their purpose. Ever, as they went, they kept a careful lookout for aught that might by any possibility be a hiding-place for the miser’s gold. On either side, they looked, above, below—always in vain. Nowhere in the descent was there anything to suggest a receptacle for stores of precious metal. Suddenly, Saxe, who from his place in advance had been peering before him anxiously, spoke in a voice of discouragement:

“Jake, I believe we’re coming to the end of it.”

The boatman quickened his steps, and reached the speaker’s side. The two halted. By the light of their lanterns, they saw a wall of stone, which barred further passage. Here was, indeed, the end of the tunnel. Jake nodded his head.

“Yes,” he agreed, “it’s the end, sure enough.”

“The floor is broken!” Saxe cried, of a sudden. In an instant, he was surcharged with excitement. Jake, too, was thrilled. Together, they stared fixedly at the space that stretched level from their feet to the end of the tunnel. Wildest hope

was welling in Saxe's breast now. In the interstices of broken rock before him, imagination caught the yellow gleam of coins.

For, at this point, the floor of the cavern showed some evidence of containing a natural opening similar to that in the other passage, at the place where Roy had seen Masters. But, where the other opening had been plainly visible, and, in fact, only partially filled by the pieces of stone within it, this was full to the top with rock fragments, neatly compacted—so neatly compacted, in truth, that it were easy to suspect the cunning of man in their precise adjustment, rather than the haphazard of nature. Gazing down on that orderly arrangement, the two men became certain that here, at last, was the spot chosen by the dead miser for the concealment of his store. Yet, for a little, each hesitated to begin the examination that would prove conclusive. They were half-fearful of putting conviction to the test of proof. Perhaps, too, the delight of anticipation held them in thrall. Saxe walked slowly along one side of the broken place, until he came to the end of the tunnel. There, something in the rocky wall caught his attention, and he regarded the terminal formation more critically. Presently, he turned to Jake, and spoke with an air of triumph:

“I'm sure I was right about this passage running to the one where we found Roy. This is a continuation of the other. The opening in the floor here is the other half of the one into which Masters burrowed.”

“Well, maybe so, maybe so,” Jake replied, in a voice that was plainly skeptical. “But jest how do ye make out all that-thar information?”

“By my bump of location, chiefly,” Saxe admitted. “But there's corroborative evidence in the fact that the wall here is only a big boulder, along with a lot of smaller stones which block the passage.”

“Well, so be,” the boatman commented placidly, “I don't calc'late as how it makes a mighty sight o' difference, one way or t'other. The p'int is, what in tarnation's under here?”

“Of course,” Saxe conceded. “Merely, it pleases my vanity to have been right.” He came to the old man's side, and spoke with a quick sharpness in his tone: “And now, Jake, let's find out if there's anything here.”

A few blows from the pickaxes loosened the closely packed pieces of stone. The two then began to cast out these to one side. They found the work simple enough, though fatiguing, for many of the rocks were of formidable weight; but all were lying loosely, once the top layer had been removed.

Saxe paused for a brief rest, after having with difficulty heaved a huge stone from the pit.

“Mr. Abernethy never could have handled these,” he exclaimed. “The idea is absurd.”

The boatman shook his head in emphatic denial.

“Don’t you go worrying yourself none over that,” he counseled. “That-thar old man was a wonder in some ways. He was mighty powerful in his arms and chist. I seen him oncet lift a barrel o’ vinegar up by the chines into a wagon. I reckon he acquired consid’ble muscle from the pianner; he used to wallop it some tremendous, I tell you! Yep, he could h’ist out a heftier rock nor you or me.”

This information quickened Saxe’s hope, and he toiled on with increased energy. The boatman showed an equal zeal. The pit grew deeper momentarily. Suddenly, Jake gave forth a great shout:

“Jumpin’ Jehosaphat! We’ve struck it!” He straightened up, his face creased with innumerable wrinkles of happiness as he looked across the pit at Saxe.

The heir of Abernethy was beside the speaker within the second. As he bent forward, following the boatman’s gesture, he saw, in the open place left by the removal of the stone, a surface of oak. He understood that this must be the cover of a chest. An exclamation of triumph broke from his lips. He made no effort to conceal his agitation.

“Quick! Quick!” he cried. “Let’s get the other stones off.” He hurled from the pit with ease one which, a minute before, he could hardly have stirred. The splendid madness of success tripled strength. The old man beside him shared in the frenzy of toil. Within an incredibly short time, the oak covering was laid bare, and one corner of the chest stood exposed for its whole height. It was a great box of polished wood, brass-bound at the corners. The cover was made fast by hasp and padlock—the whole simple, yet very strong and handsome.

“Hurrah!” Jake cried, as he paused from the work to wipe his dripping forehead.

“Hurrah!” Saxe answered, as he, too, rested. Then, he remained staring at the mighty box, wherein lay a fortune. He was too dazed by the final victory to think with coherence: he could but feel, with every atom of the energy in him.

There was no further interchange between the two for some time. In silence, they again attacked the litter of rock that surrounded the chest. It was freed at last from the rampart that had shielded it. Jake put his shoulder against the side, and

essayed an experimental push. With a groan from the strain, he abandoned the futile effort. There was vast contentment in his smile when he spoke:

“I calc’late that-thar box will heft pretty consid’ble. It’s gold, all right.”

“Yes, it’s the gold,” Saxe agreed, dreamily. He was thinking of Margaret now, and he smiled as he reflected on the fact that the miser’s legacy would fall to her and him together. A great longing to be alone assailed him. He turned impulsively to the boatman.

“Hurry, and find the others, Jake!” he directed.

“You bet ye!” the boatman responded, with alacrity. He was eager to bear the tidings. In a trice, he had scrambled out of the pit, seized his lantern, and set off briskly up the slope of the tunnel.

Left alone, Saxe lighted a cigarette, smiling a little as he noted the manner in which his hands were trembling. Then, he seated himself comfortably at the edge of the pit, and gazed raptly down on the treasure-chest.



CHAPTER XXIII

THE BLAST

ROY, after an hour of basking on the turf in the mellow warmth of the sunshine, felt himself his own man again, in spite of the dull pain in his head. Curiosity spurred him to action. He stretched himself luxuriously, then stood up, bent his right arm until the biceps was iron hard, to prove that the strength was still in him. Thereafter, he made his way into the cavern. When he had come into the big room, he found his lantern by the aid of matches, lighted it, and then paused, listening, uncertain as to which of the two passages he should follow. He could hear nothing, and presently decided on the left one, in which he had met his discomfiture. He traversed this until he reached the rift that gave communication with the adjacent tunnel. Here, again, he halted, to give ear intently, and once again he could detect no sound. He decided that his friends must be somewhere in the passage on the right, and crossed into it, continuing the descent. He had not gone far when he heard the familiar roaring of Billy Walker's voice, and knew that those whom he sought were ahead of him in the tunnel. He quickened his steps, and, much to his astonishment, found that the way now led upward, rather steeply. He reached a level, and heard the huge voice of the sage, followed by the mellow peal of David's laughter. An instant later, he stood within the second chamber of the cavern, and called out to his friends, who were moving slowly along the side opposite him.

Just as the two turned in surprise on recognizing the wounded man's voice thus unexpectedly, another noise caught their ears, and caused them to check the greetings on their lips. From the third passage came the clatter of feet running swiftly over the stone floor. As they gazed, the squat figure of Jake darted into the room, to halt, panting, as his eyes fell on the three men.

"Hurrah!" the boatman gasped weakly, for the hasty pace from the pit below had winded him. He swung his lantern in a flourish of triumph.

The glee of the man permitted only one possible explanation. The three witnesses of that exultant entrance knew that the treasure had been found. Forthwith, they shared the messenger's excitement. Jake told his story in few words. Within a half-minute of his coming, the four were hurrying down the third passage, toward the spot where Saxe was waiting beside his chest of gold.

He heard the noise of their approach, and, with a little start, aroused himself from the blissful dreaming into which he had fallen, wherein the gold of a woman's hair had counted as of more worth than that locked in the brass-bound box at his feet.

There ensued a period of general joy, though the specific causes of delight varied somewhat. Jake took keen pleasure in the fact that the one exciting incident of a humdrum life was ending in success. David was glad that the adventure on which he had embarked was achieved with victory to his friend's hopes. Roy was savagely pleased over this discovery, which thus summarily put an end to Masters' ambitions. Billy beheld with pride a final vindication of his exactitude in ratiocination. Saxe was happy in the thought that here was wealth to offer the one whom he loved. The subtly sweet flavor of that happiness was in the knowledge that the way to it had been pointed by her whom his friends had called his logical enemy. His enemy—she, Margaret! His lips curved to a tender smile.

Roy promptly assumed control of the operations involved in the disposal of the treasure. He had been a practical miner, was skilled in ingenious devices for the moving of heavy weights. He appointed David, who had had similar experiences, his chief helper. Billy Walker seated himself as comfortably as he might on one of the fragments cast up from the pit, and prepared to offer such comments on future events as should suggest themselves to an orderly and logical mind. Jake proposed breaking open the lock, and then loading themselves with as much gold as they could carry, for transportation to the launch. Roy refused acceptance of this simple method.

"It must weight about a thousand pounds," he said. "It's too heavy for us to carry all the way to the shore alone. Bring that heaviest cable from the launch, Jake, and the pulley-tackle that's in the locker. Do that first. Perhaps Dave and I may be able to rig the pulley, and haul the chest up into the room above. Then, after you've brought the rope, go in the launch, and get half-a-dozen men from the Landing, to help. Bring along, too, four heavy poles. We'll lash those on, to serve as handles in carrying the chest to the launch. Arrange for a lumber wagon at the Landing. Miss Thurston told me there's a bank at the nearest town—Hadley—about three miles from the Landing. Eh?" Jake nodded assent. "The day's young yet," Roy concluded. "We'll land Abernethey's gold in the bank before night."

"Bank shets up at three o'clock," the boatman objected.

“It’ll open again fast enough for what’s in this box,” Roy retorted. “You hurry up that cable, Jake.”

“I’ll go with him,” David said. “It may need more than the cable length for the business, it’s quite a stretch up that slope.” Roy nodded assent, and the two hastened off.

During their absence, Roy, with the assistance of Saxe, busied himself in arranging a smooth plane of stones in that end of the pit nearer the ascent, in such fashion as to afford an easy slide for the chest. Soon, the cable was brought, and, while the others devoted themselves to the adjustment of this, Jake departed on his mission to the Landing.

The workers in the tunnel found themselves confronted with serious difficulty when it came to passing the rope underneath the chest. It required the joint efforts of the four, though Billy Walker’s aid was not contributed without expostulation against the uselessness of this part of the labor. In the end, however, what by great exertion on the part of each and by the employment of the pickaxes as levers and bits of rock as supports, the task was achieved, and the rope was got in position under the chest. The remainder of the business was simple enough. In a short time, the box was firmly set within the hempen bands, knotted with seamanlike smartness by Roy, and the main length of the cable was free for adjustment to block and tackle. The extent of it, to Roy’s relief, proved ample for the purpose, and forthwith he and David carried the free end of it up the slope to the level of the chamber, in quest of some projection of rock to which the hook of the block might be made fast. Saxe and Billy remained below, beside the treasure-chest.

Saxe lighted another cigarette, Billy had recourse to one of his customary black cigars, and the two smoked contentedly in silence. Saxe could hear indistinctly from time to time the movements of Roy and David, busy on the level above. And then, presently, his ears detected another sound. He listened—idly at first, soon with growing interest, finally with intent curiosity, which swiftly became excitement. The noise was faint, intermittent, yet persistent. In his earlier attention to it, Saxe found difficulty in locating the direction whence the sound issued, but, later on, he became sure that it had its origin somewhere in the other passage, beyond the barrier that divided the pit into two parts. The fact filled him with amazement. He knew the whereabouts of all in his own party. He could still hear Roy and David, active on the level above; Billy Walker was there present with him by the pit; Jake, ere this, was on his way to the Landing in the launch. It was impossible that the boatman should have disobeyed instructions, to return

into the other passage for some mysterious purpose of his own. But, since all the members of his party were thus accounted for, the explanation of that persistent sound there beyond the barrier became more difficult. It was certain that someone was occupied at the end of the other passage. Who, then, could that person be? It could not be Margaret, the only other who knew the entrance to the cavern. No, not the only other who knew—there was Masters! On the instant, as the thought came, Saxe knew that the enemy was again at work.

The reason baffled the listener. What could the man of treacherous schemes be doing thus on the wrong side of the barrier? Saxe felt the puzzle too hard for his solving, and turned to Billy Walker, seeking the light of pure reason to clear away the mists of darkness with which the event was shrouded. The sage was nodding in somnolent relaxation, though still puffing his cigar.

“Wake up, Billy!” Saxe called, softly.

The dozing man straightened, and the small eyes opened on the disturber in an indignant stare.

“I’m not asleep,” he remarked crossly, following the universal habit of denial in such case.

“Well, then, listen,” Saxe requested. “Don’t you hear that noise—like somebody pounding?”

The sage gave ear obediently. It was evident that, after a moment of attention, he perceived the noise, for his expression brightened to one of interest. His inference as to the significance of the occurrence was not left long in doubt. He turned presently to Saxe, with a wide grin on his heavy lips.

“Our nimble and indefatigable friend is at his old tricks again,” he declared, in a whisper, without the least hesitation. “There remains for our deduction the precise variety of this latest devilry.” Having thus delivered himself, the oracle closed his eyes, and, while continuing to listen, scowled portentously in token of absorbed ratiocination, which Saxe was at pains not to interrupt. It was perhaps two minutes before Billy Walker spoke again. When he did so, there was unaccustomed liveliness in the method of his delivery; he displayed an agitation that first startled Saxe, then alarmed him.

“You said that Miss West mentioned another entrance to this cavern; Masters has probably availed himself of that. He has spied on us, and so has learned of our discovery of the treasure here. He has not dared to attack the lot of us openly. Very likely, he believes it will take us a considerable time to get out the chest. He

may have come near enough to hear Roy and Dave up there, and from the silence between you and me he has supposed no one left here. He intends to get a hole through the barrier there, then to have the chest open, and to help himself to what he can while nobody's looking. He may expect to have the whole night to work in. Of course, there's a possibility he may mean just to get a loophole, and then pick us off one by one. That's not likely, but he's capable of anything."

"He'll have something of a job to break through there," Saxe objected.

"Oh, dynamite is a quick worker," the sage vouchsafed.

"Dynamite!" Saxe repeated, aghast.

"Yes, dynamite," Billy stated again, with emphasis. "We know that he understands how to employ the explosive on occasion." He stood up, seized his lantern, and started at a half-trot up the ascent. "Probably, he wouldn't mind much if some of us got hurt." He turned his head to shout raucously over his shoulder at Saxe, who below him stood staring in horrified amazement: "But he'll be at a safe distance, and—so'll I." He ran on, wheezing grievously. Yet once again, he turned to roar toward his friend, in a voice of menace: "Run, you blithering idiot—for your life!"

At that, the paralysis of astonishment fell from Saxe. He, in turn, caught up his lantern, and set off racing up the slope. He had gone scarcely a dozen steps when a report sounded behind him. It was not loud—indeed, it was so faint and muffled that, for a moment, Saxe doubted if, in truth, this could be the explosion prophesied by Billy Walker. He halted and looked back. From his position, he could see with sufficient clearness to the barrier. In the dim light, he could distinguish no apparent change in the aspect. Then, of a sudden, his eyes fell on a rush of waters near the floor at the end of the passage. Now that the echoes of the detonation had passed, he heard the hissing of their flow. Even as he stared, astounded, vaguely terrified, though without understanding of the catastrophe, the flood mounted visibly. In a flash of horror, Saxe realized the peril darting upon him. He whirled with a great cry and fled from the death that menaced. A swift glance over his shoulder as he reached the level, showed the boiling element hard on his heels. He shouted a second time, in futile warning to his friends. In the next moment, the light of his lantern revealed Billy Walker, running at a good pace just before him.

"Masters has let in the lake!" Saxe cried frantically in his friend's ear, as he came abreast.

There was no need of the telling. Even as he spoke, the first waves lashed their

feet. No time was given them to mend their speed. Before they could do more than realize the coming of the flood, it had reached to their waists, to their armpits. They had dropped the drenched lanterns—they were swimming blindly on the rushing torrent. But Billy, whose bulk kept him afloat easily, had put out a hand, so that he held fast to Saxe's collar. Thus, they were borne onward together through the fearful blackness, tossed and torn by the coil of waters. That contact of each with the other was their single comfort.

Of a sudden, they felt themselves twisted violently to one side. Then, for once, the majestic volume of Billy Walker's voice served his necessity. The words bellowed in Saxe's ear came softly, as from an infinite distance, yet clearly.

"There's no turn like that—we're in the chamber. Make to the left—to the ledges, for your life! It's our only chance."

By mercy of fate, the eddy helped them on their course. But for that, they could never have won through against the mighty urge of the current. The eddy sent them far to the left, and they fought on with all their strength, when the pull of it would have swung them back toward the vortex. Then as he felt that he could strive no more, Saxe felt his fingers touch on stone. While his hand rasped on the rock for hold, his feet found footing. In the next moment, he realized as never before the great strength of his companion. A violent thrust upward fairly shot him clear of the water. Before he had time to help himself, Billy was again at his side, was dragging him still higher on the tumble of rocks.

"To the top!" boomed the sage. "It may be high enough, and it may not. Anyhow, it's the only chance." And, presently, the two were on the summit of the pile of stone. Below them, the writhing waters clamored in rage. But the flood did not reach to them. Each second, Saxe expected to feel the swirl of it about his feet, leaping to engulf him; he was shuddering from dread of it. The quick horror of the event bred cowardice. Then, yet once again, he heard the huge voice of his friend.

"We're safe—safe!"

But Saxe could not believe him.

"How do you know?" he shouted.

The sage had not heard the feebler tones through the din, but he guessed the question.

"The water just reaches my foot. It has mounted no higher through a full minute."

“But it may yet.”

This time, Billy heard.

“Use your reason, the water at my foot marks the level of the lake. It can rise no higher. Cheer up, my boy.”



CHAPTER XXIV

ENTOMBED

FOR a little, after he had realized the fact that the water could mount no higher, Saxe experienced such joy as must come to any normal person on escaping out of the peril of death. Ultimately, however, the first emotion wore itself out by its own intensity, and he was left free to think coherently again. The result was disastrous. There leaped in his consciousness the hideous truth that death was not avoided, only postponed. This refuge on the heap of rocks offered safety from drowning, from being crushed by the waves against the walls. It gave no more. On this tiny island, the two were marooned, with naught to expect save a slow, a frightful death. They had been borne hither on the first in-rush of the waters, and only the height of the cavern had saved them at that time. Now, there was no means by which they might make their way out from this prison. Beyond the chamber in which they were, the passage that led to the outdoors first dipped sharply. For a great way it must be filled with the flood. Margaret West had spoken of another entrance somewhere, but she had told him nothing in detail. It was evident that this could not be in the chamber, or if there, it must be covered by the lake's flow, incapable of affording egress. Had it place near the roof, the light of it must have shown clearly against the Stygian blackness. And there was no faintest gleam of light anywhere. Saxe's eyes roved in fierce longing, but nowhere was there aught except the total darkness. For once, the sage had reasoned ill. There had been grisly mockery in his cry that they were safe—in this place where there could be no safety. This was in truth the safety of the tomb—a narrow perch whereon to attend death, to wait, supine, impotent, for a laggard dissolution by starvation. And Billy realized now the dread certainty of their plight; otherwise, he had not sat there in grim silence. Surely, Roy and David had the better part, since their engulfment had been swift. They were spared the lingering tortures of these survivors, destined to a few dreadful hours. Then Saxe remembered the miser's gold, and the hate of it welled high in his heart. Truly, there had been a curse on it! And the wretched man thought of Margaret most of all. But that which he thought of her should not be written. It was the supreme agony.

Saxe had the courage of the strong man, but nature permits no man to lay down his life uselessly without revolt. Neither Saxe nor Billy was a coward, yet each

was craven there in that eyrie above the flood, which imprisoned them in eternal night. The crime of Masters had brought wanton destruction upon them. There was no solace of justice in this doom. They were abandoned of hope. Their hearts were sick within them.

Billy Walker spoke at last, and his voice was humbler than its wont, less sonorous, too. The first angry uproar of the waters was ended now, although they were rippling and swirling daintily still, as if in tender caresses of the rocks, which so recently they had smitten in fury. Above the gentle noise of the eddies, the sage's voice, mild as it was comparatively, sounded clearly. Instantly, a cry came from the far side of the chamber.

“Billy! Billy! You're alive!”

It was Roy's voice, and another voice broke in on the words, shouting shrilly:

“Billy! Thank God!” It was David's voice.

Billy roared so joyously that all other tones were lost for a time, but, at last, Roy and David caught Saxe's higher pitch, and they were glad anew. Across the room, questions and answers were volleyed. It was made known that Roy and David, at the first rush of the lake upon them, had held to the projections of the rock where they had just made fast the tackle, and had climbed higher until they were safe above the flood. Now, they rested aloft on a tiny shelf of stone, only a little way beneath the roof, and they, even as Saxe and Billy, realized to the full the impossibility of escape from this sepulchre within the earth. And Roy lamented in characteristic fashion, after Saxe and Billy had explained the cause of the lake's in-flow, which had been a mystery to the other two.

“I'm sorry I couldn't have had a chance at Masters before he went.”

David's voice, usually so kindly, was harsh as he spoke:

“The skunk got us, after all,” he mourned. He added, with frank ferocity: “Damn him!” He knew, as did the others, that such speech concerning the dead was unseemly. Yet none rebuked him. For a moment, the warmth of wrath was comfort against the chill desolation of their case.

Nevertheless, Billy Walker's ruling passion was so strong that not even death might daunt it. The action of Masters required some explanation, to make all clear before the less-orderly minds of his friends. So, after a period of reflection, he expounded his understanding of the engineer's part in the final act of their drama. The volume of his voice was such that he did not need to go beyond his usual conversational thundering to be heard distinctly by those on the opposite

side of the chamber.

“Masters, naturally, didn’t mean to do this thing,” he declared. “He wasn’t the type to commit suicide. He kept track of us all the time. How he did it doesn’t matter especially. Probably, he used another entrance to the cavern, which we don’t know. Anyhow, he learned what it was we had found down this way. I guess he spied on us, and heard you, Roy, and Dave, working on the tackle, and took it for granted we were all here together. He thought he could burrow through, and get at the gold himself while we were off after help. He meant to blow an opening just big enough to get through, I fancy. He failed to take into consideration the frailness of the roof that stood between the passage and the lake. He blew a hole in the bottom of the lake—and that was the beginning of our troubles, and the ending of his. He couldn’t find a refuge like ours in that other passage. *Exit* Masters—I regret our fate, but not his.” With this succinct statement, the sage relapsed into silence, which continued until Roy relieved his overwrought feelings by a denunciation against fate.

“I’ve been on the edge of dying many a time,” he declared, bitterly; “but I was never up against this sort of thing before, and I’m free to say that I don’t like it. There’s some satisfaction in being done to death in a good fight, or in battling your best against any kind of odds. Of course, a man doesn’t exactly want to die, any time. But what puts me in the dumps is this particular variety of dying that we’re up against here. We’ve got to sit roosting on a shelf in the dark, like a heathen idol in a temple after it’s been buried in an earthquake—and we’ve just got to sit till we starve to death. I do hope I run across Masters in the next world.”

“Let us hope for your own sake that both you and Dave do not have your wishes granted concerning Masters in the next world,” Billy exclaimed. The grim jest was not amusing in their situation. The three hearers shivered a little, and were silent.

Afterward, the four gave themselves to serious meditation, as is fitting to men in the presence of death. On one occasion, Billy, in answer to a question from David, discoursed freely on the reasonableness of belief in a future life, and pleaded in defense of such faith with a lucid sincerity and completeness that first surprised, then comforted his audience. Each, after his own fashion, believed in the continuance of life through death; none the less, each was loath to put off the garment of mortality. Billy Walker would fain have remained on earth for a larger accumulation of its wisdom, with which, as it seemed to him, he had only just begun. Saxe’s heart was near to breaking over the knowledge that he must

go from Margaret into the unknown places, where she would not be. Roy felt the like desolation because of May. David, since he had no particular thing to regret with superlative sadness, let his longing touch on many things, and grief was heavy upon him, because he must lose all—all!

A single incident afforded the unhappy men diversion from their plight. After some discussion, it was agreed that it would make the situation a trifle less dreary if the four of them were gathered in one place, instead of being divided by the width of the chamber. The shelf on which Roy and David had ensconced themselves was not of a size sufficient to accommodate the other two. For that matter, its dimensions were unduly restricted even for those already there. On the other hand, the top of the heap of rocks up which Saxe and Billy had climbed afforded ample room for all, besides giving better opportunity for the securing of water to drink, since the massed stones were easy of ascent and descent. Unfortunately, there was a difficulty in the way of consummating the assembly of the four in the one place, due to the fact that David could not swim. It was arranged finally, however, that Billy Walker should swim across the chamber, being guided by the voices of Roy and David, and that then he and Roy should support the other across to the heap of stones, being guided in turn by the voice of Saxe, who would remain behind for that purpose. At once, when this arrangement had been made, Billy clambered down the rocks with many a sigh, until the water supported him. Then, he swam easily to the point from which Roy was calling. David let himself down into the water through the blackness without demur as his friends bade him, and very quickly he was carried across to the place indicated by the voice of Saxe. A minute later, the four friends were reunited on their microscopic island, and the fact yielded them a pleasure melancholy and fleeting, yet a pleasure, an alleviation, where no alleviation had seemed possible.

Even in this fatal plight, the sage preserved his serenity, and from time to time startled his companions by his utterances, thus breaking in by ever so little on the torment of their spirits. They had just finished drinking as best they might from cupped hands dipped into the water at their feet, and David had spoken of being already hungry, when Billy laughed in his usual noisy outburst.

“Exactly!” he exclaimed. “Always, when a man is confronted with absolute lack of provisions, he at once develops a ravenous appetite. He may have eaten five meals on the day of the wreck, and have gorged to repletion five minutes before the ship foundered. When he has become acquainted with the fact that he is adrift on the ocean in an open boat with only a few drops of water in the beaker,

and ten wormy biscuits for six persons, he immediately begins to feel the gnawing pangs of ravenous hunger and deadly thirst. Naturally it will be so with us. David has already spoken. For my part, I confess that I, too, hear the generalissimo of the belly clamoring for reinforcements, although I enjoyed a capital and capacious breakfast, and it's not yet anywhere near the scheduled hour for luncheon on the earth above."

At that, there came a chorus of protests from the others, who had listened patiently enough hitherto:

"Not time for luncheon!" Roy exclaimed, indignantly. "Man, you're crazy."

"It's well along in the night," Saxe affirmed.

"Or, maybe, toward the morning of next day." David spoke with the emphasis of entire conviction. "We've been here close to twenty-four hours, already."

"Or even more," Roy added, defiantly.

Billy Walker chuckled—a great volume of sound, which sent multiplying echoes afar over the placid water that shut them off from life.

"The exercise of reason convinces me that all of you are quite wrong," the sage remarked, very genially. "There are certain well-known facts that compel me to believe you are wrong in your estimate of the time already elapsed since your incarceration by the flood. You are, perhaps, aware that in situations such as ours, the human mind errs outrageously in its calculations of time. Persons buried alive for a few hours invariably deem the time many days. One lives through great suffering; he believes that the time of his agony has been correspondingly great, though it may have been a matter of seconds, rather than of hours. This involuntary exaggeration seems a universal rule. We can't reasonably believe that we are constituted differently from other men. With the judgment clarified by reason, based on knowledge of allied facts, I am compelled to believe—in direct contradiction to my own feelings, as well as yours—that the time elapsed since the lake broke in on us hasn't been more than —" Billy paused to reflect, running over the sequence of events, as the basis of computation.

"Well, how long is it—measured by logic, and not by emotion?" Saxe demanded, somewhat sulkily.

"And, after all," Billy remarked musingly, "time is only one of the categories of human thought, as Kant pointed out. To me, it seems eons since I was in the great out-of-doors—free, free to live. I judge by reasoning that we have been

shut up here for nearly an hour—not quite.”

Before Roy could voice the protest on his lips, a cry came from Saxe:

“Hark! Hark!”

The others held silent, marveling what this might mean. To their ears came the gentle lapping of the waves against the walls of the prison-house, the faint sighs of their own breathing—nothing else. After a long time, Saxe spoke again; and his voice was lifeless, where before it had been vibrant with feeling.

“I must be going mad,” he said, simply. “I thought that I heard—someone—calling my name.”



CHAPTER XXV TO THE CHIMNEY

AS THEY were lingering over the breakfast table, that same morning, Margaret turned to May with a smile.

“And to think of them, off adventuring now, this very minute!” she exclaimed, pouting a little. “It was rather horrid of them to go at such an unearthly hour, when of course we weren’t up.”

May nodded cheerfully.

“Yes, I’d have enjoyed being in at the finish—if only I’d been invited.”

“And I, too,” Margaret declared. “Anyhow, it’s my affair in a way, so I think I’m entitled to a spectator’s privilege, at least.”

“It must be horribly exciting for you, with so much money involved,” May ventured, somewhat timidly.

Margaret received the suggestion without sign of offense, and answered seriously:

“I don’t wish Mr. Temple to fail. I don’t really need the money. Besides—” she broke off in confusion.

“And, besides, everything may come out right, after all, for everybody concerned,” May said slyly.

Margaret blushed to warmest rose, but she showed no displeasure at the innuendo.

“Except the poor musicians,” she remarked; and then the two girls laughed joyously. As a matter of fact, each of them understood perfectly the progress of the other’s love-affair, but their intimacy was too new for the most sacred confidences. Then, Margaret received an inspiration:

“Why, we’ll go,” she exclaimed. Her expression showed surprised triumph over the idea.

“Where?” May questioned, at a loss.

“To the island, of course,” came the brisk answer. “I’ll run and tell mother, and

then we'll paddle up there, and see everything that's to be seen."

"Splendid!" May cried with enthusiasm. She was interested in the outcome of the treasure-hunt, but at this moment her sole thought was a thrilling one to the effect that by the plan she would see Roy the sooner.

So, it came about that in mid-afternoon the two girls beached the canoe on the strip of sand at the island, and started toward the cavern. They were a little puzzled by the absence of the launch, and wondered if the fact were significant of good or ill fortune for the searchers. As they came to the top of the low bluff that rose from the shore, Margaret paused, and turned to look out over the lake.

"No, the launch isn't in sight anywhere," she said.

As she would have faced about to go on, a faint muffled sound came to her ears; the ground trembled very slightly; a movement of the lake's surface caught her glance. A moment before, the tiny waves, glistening prisms under the sunlight, had made a scene of quiet beauty. Now, in the twinkling of an eye, there had come a change—a change curious, inexplicable, sinister. Out there in the lake, only a little way from the shore, the water, which had been so placid when they skimmed over it hardly a minute before, was now writhing in a horrible convulsion. Yet, no unwarned tempest racked the lake. The warm air was floating as languidly as hitherto. Nothing had been hurled into the water. There had been no crash of fallen meteor. Naught showed as the cause of this amazing contrast. Nevertheless, under her eyes, the erstwhile tranquil bosom of the lake heaved in rage. Fifty yards from the shore, the water raced, lashing itself in wrath about the sunken center of its vortex. Margaret, thrilled, astounded, terrified, caught May by the arm, pulled her about.

"See! See!" she cried, wildly. "What is it? What can it mean?"

May, too, was stupefied by the spectacle. She stared at it in wordless confusion. She could make no guess as to the cause of this extraordinary event, nor tried to. She merely watched the mad carouse of the flood, and stood aghast. A great fear of this uncanny thing fell on the two girls, so that they clung together for protection, shuddering, their faces pallid.

It seemed to the watchers as if that mysterious turmoil in the waters of the lake continued for hours, though, as Billy Walker might have explained to them, it was doubtless no more than a matter of minutes. The commotion spread over a broad area, but the girls had eyes only for the central place of the movement, the maelstrom near the shore, where the waters whirled in funnel shape, with the swaying hollow pointing the downward rush. An engineer would have known at

first glance the reason for this churning of the lake, would have understood that some sudden vent below had set the tide racing to new liberty. But the girls had no such learning in physics. They could only look on in fascinated wonder, in awe. Haphazard, fantastic ideas darted in their brains, vague guesses concerning sea-serpents, earthquakes, tidal waves, waterspouts, which their own native sense rejected. Throughout the experience, neither was able to contrive any explanation of the extraordinary event. They were as confounded at the end as at the beginning.

Little by little, the waters of the lake ran slowly, and more slowly, in the path set them by the whorl. At last, there was scarcely a ripple to mark the spot where the cauldron had seethed hottest. Once again, there was nothing to see save the light tossing of the waves, dancing to the rhythm of the breeze toward the kisses of the sun. Margaret and May set their faces once more toward the cavern.

They were garrulous over the mystery—hardly concerned with the treasure-quest, for the moment. But the new interest had not lessened the desire of their hearts, and they quickened their steps, each at thought of the man she loved, now so near at hand. So they came soon to the cliff in the ravine, where was the entrance to the cave. Margaret had brought her torch, which Jake had recharged for her the night before from his own supplies. She pressed the button, pushed aside the concealing branches, and made her way within the opening, followed closely by May, who experienced a pleasurable excitement as she thus penetrated into the earth. The two came duly to the chamber, which they crossed to where the black openings into the tunnels showed. Now, May's heart beat faster, as she found herself deep in this grim abode of darkness, where the limited radiance of the torch served but to make more grotesquely menacing the shadowy unknown on every side. Yet, she would not confess the fear that clutched at her—only, held fast to Margaret's arm, and chatted with unusual volubility, while a little quaver crept in her voice. They entered the passage on the right, which Margaret had traversed with Saxe, and went forward with what speed they might over the rocks that cumbered the floor. They had descended for some distance, but had not yet reached the rift that led across into the other tunnel, when Margaret halted abruptly, with a gasp of amazement.

"It's—it's water!" she cried, dumfounded. She stood staring with dilated eyes, her lips parted, stupefied with astonishment, pointing with her free hand to the space before her, where the glow of the torch shone on a softly rippling level of water, which filled the tunnel like the contents of a well seen down the slope.

May, who had held her eyes fixed on the floor to save herself from stumbling,

looked forward at the exclamation, and perceived the water. But the sight was not especially impressive to her. She supposed that here was merely a well in the path. She did not understand her friend's dismay.

"What is it?" she asked, with no great interest. She wondered in which direction they would turn to pass by the pool.

Margaret, however, was thinking with desperate energy. Her mind was naturally keen, and it had enjoyed advantages of careful training. She began, at last, to suspect something as to the true significance of the catastrophe in the lake, which hitherto had baffled comprehension. The presence of water in the cavern, where before had been no water, stunned her at first; then, as she apprehended vaguely the meaning of it, it appalled. There where the tunnel was steep, the water filled it completely. She went forward until the water was at her very feet, and stared down at it, her face colorless, her pulse bounding wildly, in the grip of cold horror. Finally, she began stammering affrightedly:

"The lake—the water out there—it's broken into the cavern—they're drowned—drowned—Saxe!" Her voice rose to a wail on the last word.

Margaret's terror, rather than her words, had filled the other girl with dismay at the first. But "drowned" gave form to fear. May, in turn, was stricken with horror.

"Drowned?" she repeated, in a whisper. "Roy?" Her memory went back to the scene she had just witnessed on the lake. The utterance of Margaret, broken, uncomprehended, became hideously plain. It meant that the lake had somehow entered this cavern, which ran beneath the waters. In that case, the men down within the earth there must have been overwhelmed by the in-pouring flood. But, even as conviction came, her spirit refused credence to the truth. She cried aloud in revolt:

"No, no! No, I tell you! They are safe—safe!"

Margaret gave no heed to the folly of the words—the confidence in them spurred her to endeavor.

"Come!" she exclaimed. She whirled, and ran swiftly over the rubble, back the way they had come. Her thoughts were chaotic, but through them ran refusal to believe the worst. He—they—Saxe must have received warning—must be safe, somewhere, somehow—must be—must be! May, hard on Margaret's heels, was sore pressed to keep the pace over the jumble of fragments.

When they had come to the great chamber, Margaret, without pause, turned into

the passage on the left. With the same speed, she hurried along this, panting now. May ran just behind. Then, finally, the horror, against which Margaret had hoped, burst full on her. She halted, reeling, a shriek of despair wavering on her palsied lips. A few feet away, down the tunnel's slope, lay the level black of water, shining gently under the beams of the torch, serene, implacable. May, too, saw and understood, and rested frozen in dumb anguish over this ending of all things.

There are certain calamities so unexpected, so monstrous, that the mind refuses to accept them as fact at first announcement, no matter what the proof. It was so here. The two girls—freshly stirring to the most subtle and the most potent of human emotions, love, come forth in the morning with gladness of heart to meet the men of their choice, gaily eager to learn of an adventure—were now, in a flash, confronted with an inconceivable disaster. They would not accept the fact—they could not. There was, there must be, some hideous mistake, soon to be cleared away. Despite all evidence, those they loved had not been done to death, down there within the abysses of the earth. Somewhere, somehow, they had escaped. They would come forth presently, and then there would be only laughter, where now was terror.

It was this refusal to believe that gave Margaret inspiration to action at last. Of a sudden, she bethought herself of that other entrance to the cavern, concerning which she had spoken to Saxe. On the instant, she again turned, and fled back through the tunnel without a word. May, not understanding, yet still defiant of fate, followed. The time was marvelously short until they were again in the ravine outside the cavern. But Margaret did not pause here—she did not even trouble to cut off the current of her torch, of which the glow showed wanly against the sunlight, as she went running swiftly through the ravine, and out on the little plateau that lay at its mouth. There, she hesitated, but only for a second, her eyes sweeping the undulations of the island while memory struggled for assurance. Certainty flashed on her, and again she leaped forward, May always close beside in the flight. Across the plateau Margaret sped, into a gully that ran toward the shore, up a stiff slope to the crest of a ridge, which was part of the bluff overlooking the lake. The summit was boulder-strewn, a medley of masses lying topsy-turvy. She threaded a way among the rocks, perforce more slowly, yet still with feverish haste. At last, she halted, with a great cry of joy.

“It is here!” she said softly. There was a note of reverent thankfulness in her voice.

May looked, wondering, and saw a small hole amid the rocks at her feet. It was

less than a yard in length, and in breadth much narrower. She perceived that it was not quite vertical, though almost. A short way below the surface, its course was hidden in blackness.

Margaret wasted not a moment.

“They’re in there, I know,” she explained, succinctly, to May. “I’m going to show them the way out.”

As a matter of fact, the girl knew nothing as to the fact she stated so authoritatively. She had no least idea as to that part of the cavern on which the chimney gave. Her cousin had pointed it out, and had told her that by it he first made his way within. Beyond that, she knew nothing whatever. Hope dictated her claim to knowledge. She still denied any credence to the final catastrophe. Here, now, lay the sole avenue of escape. So she announced it with positiveness that admitted no question. Thus only might courage be held. May, for her part, eager to believe, received the declaration without doubt. Moreover, Roy had discoursed to her at length concerning the curious operations of the sixth sense. With that receptivity characteristic of the fond woman, she had accepted his pronouncements without hesitation, glad to believe whatsoever he believed. Besides, she had great faith in feminine intuition—and what was intuition, if not that self-same psychic thing over which her lover rhapsodized? Now, instinct cried that the man she loved was safe, and she believed.

“Shall I go, too?” she asked.

Margaret shook her head. She turned to scan the lake.

“No,” she said; “you couldn’t help—and it may be bad climbing. But I’m used to that. You keep watch for Jake and the launch. He may be needed later on.” With that as the last word, she let herself down into the chimney of the rocks. May from above gazed with wide eyes until the form of her friend disappeared into the blackness below. Then, she turned to look out over the lake, in anxious search for the coming of the launch. Standing alone there, with the dreadful mystery hidden within the earth under her feet, she felt a quick reaction of doubt, which welled swiftly to the torture of despair. The strength flowed from her. She sank to her knees, and stared down into the dark of the chasm with dull, unseeing eyes—rested motionless in the apathy of supreme misery.



CHAPTER XXVI IN THE DARK

MARGARET, as she let herself down into the chimney, held the torch so as to show her surroundings. She still clung to the rock above with her right hand, while the left was occupied by the torch. As yet, she had found no footing. The light revealed that this opening through the ridge was the result of the lodging of one huge block of stone, which had left the angle between it and the other rock empty. A clutter of fragments formed the third side of a triangle, which extended downward steeply as far as she could see. A feeling of sick apprehension swept over her when she perceived the manner in which some of the stones hung, seemingly poised to a fall. Then, in the next instant, she recalled the reason of her presence there, and conquered dread in the need of action.

She saw a jutting bit of rock a few inches below her feet. She let herself down to the extreme limit of reach, and found herself just able to touch the support with a toe. She released her hand-hold, and thus remained, half-standing, half-lying in the hole. She searched out other points to which her fingers might cling, at the height of her breast. Clenching these, she bent her knees, and finally came to a crouching posture on the tiny ledge that had been under her feet. In the like tedious, slow fashion, she continued the descent, for a distance of perhaps twenty feet, without mishap, though in constant danger of a fall. But, at this point, new difficulties threatened. Though she took long to search, she could find nothing to afford a foothold, even the tiniest. To make the matter worse, just here the smoothness of the walls was such that her hands could secure only a doubtful grip. She studied the situation painstakingly by means of the torch, making sure that nowhere a projection of the stone escaped her observation. She was distraught by this ill fortune, which threatened the ruin of her hopes. Finally, however, she perceived by the light of the torch that, two yards or more below the point to which her feet reached, the chimney bent a little, toward the horizontal. At the sight, Margaret's courage sprang to new life. Without a second of delay in which fear might grow, she loosed her hold, and let herself slip downward.

The steepness of the chimney was so great that her movement was rather a fall than a slide. In the very second of the start, she felt the violent impact of her feet against the stone as they struck the bend. Nor was the change of direction

sufficient to overcome the impetus of the drop, as she had hoped. Her body shot onward down the rough slope. She caught at the walls with her fingers, but, though the ragged surface tore the skin from her flesh, she could get no clutch strong enough to stay the flight. The torch had slipped from her grasp without her even being aware of its loss at the time. In the darkness, she went hurtling on. Her spirit broke in those seconds of dreadfulness. She felt that death waited at the end of the fall. Saxe's name was on her lips when she crashed into pause.

For a long time she lay without any movement, her sole consciousness a dazed suffering from bruised flesh and aching bones. Her senses all but failed, yet did not quite. A vague, incoherent necessity beat upon her brain, though she could by no means understand what that need might be. Her one clear realization was of pain—pain pervasive, deadly. But, little by little, the torment of racked nerves lessened. It seemed to her ages after that hideous drop through the black when, at last, her mind grew active again. On the instant, she was a creature transformed. She contrived with infinite pains to sit erect, alert to know the truth as to her own condition—for she still had work to do. To her relief, she found that, despite the complaining of her beaten body, she had been spared broken bones or other hurt that might disable. There was misery in each movement, but she could move, and with that she was content, grateful to providence that her plight was no worse. She looked back, and saw, a long way off, a feeble, pallid light, which came, she made certain, from the foot of the shaft at the bend. Now, from its remoteness, she was able to make some estimate of the distance through which she had sped beyond it, and she was fain to wonder that she should be indeed alive.

It was easy to determine that she was lying on a shelf of rock, which was almost level. She felt about this, and even ventured to crawl a short way. Then, her groping hand struck on emptiness, and, shuddering, she drew back from the invisible void. Nevertheless, weakness gave ground to desire. She must press onward, somehow, to the rescue. At once, she began creeping forward, bearing to the right, on which side she felt the sheer wall of a cliff. She judged that, by proceeding thus, she would be safe from the gulf as far as the ledge might run. She had gone perhaps twenty yards in this tortoise manner, when a sudden thought halted her in anger against the folly of having neglected the simplest expedient. Saxe—the others—might be about anywhere, and she had not called to them! Forthwith, she gathered her strength—such as was left to her—and sent out a cry, a pitiful, passionate cry.

“Saxe! Saxe!”

She listened in breathless suspense ... there came no answer.

Then, after a time, she called again; and again there came no answer, yet she refused to lose hold on faith. She sought comfort in the thought that she was still too far from him for her voice to carry. So, she set forward anew on hands and knees, her fingers groping over the rock on which she crawled, to make sure that the way was safe for her passing. Physical suffering rent her, but an indomitable spirit spurred the jaded body. By sheer strength of will, she persisted in that pitiful progress through minute after minute, until at last she deemed the distance traversed enough to warrant a second calling into the dark:

“Saxe! Saxe!” sounded the repetition of her summons. Followed an instant of profoundest silence, as the last echoes of the shrill cry died.

Then, of a sudden, the air was shattered with clamors. A din of shouts roared in her ears, multiplied by the reverberations of the cavern, chaotic, deafening. Out of all the cacophony, her strained sense caught a tone that thrilled the heart to rapture. Her voice rose in a scream—hysterical, triumphant—in answer.

“Saxe! Saxe!” And then a weary murmur: “Oh, thank God!”

A little silence fell. It was broken by her own name, spoken in his voice.

“Margaret!”

“Yes, Saxe,” she answered, simply. It was evident that the distance between them was not very great. She wondered that her calling should have remained unheard in the earlier effort. It occurred to her that perhaps in the first attempt she had not really cried out with all her might—as was, indeed, the case.

“You—you, Margaret—you came for us!”

“Yes.” There was no need to explain that she had come for him, for him alone. Oh, she would be very glad that the others should win to life—but she had come for him, for him only. “You are safe?” she added.

“Yes.” The others were silent, giving the dialogue to the girl and Saxe, for they understood how it was between the two. “You came by the other entrance, of which you told me?”

“Yes—through the chimney, on the ridge by the shore. May is there, watching and waiting for Jake to come. We shall need help to get out. It is hard to climb. I slipped coming down.”

“You are hurt!” The lover’s voice was harsh with fear.

But Margaret laughed blithely. What matter a few bruises now?

“It shook me up a bit,” she confessed. “But I’m all right. The worst of it was that I lost my torch. Can you come to me here? I know how to find the way back in the dark.”

Billy Walker deemed it time that he should assume direction of the affair.

“Do you know how high above the water you are there, Miss West?” he demanded. The gruff voice was very gentle, for gratitude to this girl burned hot in him, as in the others. She had brought the gift of life to dead men.

“No,” Margaret answered.

“You are on a ledge, of course,” the sage continued. “Please get to the edge of it, and reach down with your hand, and find if you can touch the water.”

There was a little delay before the reply came.

“Yes.”

“Be careful!” The sharp admonition was from Saxe.

“It’s almost level with the shelf I’m on,” the girl continued.

“Good!” Billy’s tone was full of satisfaction. “That makes it very simple. We shall swim across to you, and then you will guide us from these Plutonian shades back to the upper world.” He turned toward the companions whom he could not see, and addressed them with crisp authority. “You will go first, Saxe. Her voice will guide you—she’s directly across the chamber from us. Be ready afterward to help us with David when we get there. We shall allow you ample time to—er—climb out before we start to tote Dave. Go ahead.”

“I’m off,” Saxe answered, promptly. Then, he called to Margaret, “Talk a bit, please, while I’m in the water, so that I’ll know the direction. I’m just starting.”

There was a slight splash as Saxe lowered his body into the water, and the soft swish from his strokes as he swam away.

“Here, Saxe! Here I am! This way!” The girl continued the calls with joy in her tones. Then, a minute later, she heard him speak her name softly, at her feet. In another instant, he was beside her on the ledge—she was in his arms, their lips met. He had no thought of his dripping garments, nor had she. They had no knowledge of anything save heaven.

Billy Walker’s voice went thundering across the cavern:

“Are you there, Saxe?”

There was no reply. The sage chuckled aloud.

“The exercise of reason teaches me,” he explained in a voluminous whisper, “that our dear young friend is not drowned—oh, no! As a matter of fact, at this moment, he has already got clear of the water, and doesn’t know where he is, but is happier than he ever was before in his life. When he awakes from the trance, he will address us.”

So, in truth, it came to pass. Presently, the call came from Saxe, and the progress of the three across the cavern was safely accomplished. Arrived, they pressed about the girl, who was standing, supported by her lover’s arm, and mightily embarrassed by the fervor of their gratitude for the boon of life bestowed on them by her intrepidity and resource. Finally, the five set forth along the ledge, following it as Margaret had come, by groping on the sheer wall from which it jutted. And, now, the girl no longer went with painful slowness on hands and knees, but walked bravely, upheld by the lover at her side. So, at last, they came to the spot where Margaret’s fall had ended. To their left, seemingly a great way off, and high above them, showed the pallid gleam from the bend of the chimney—blessed harbinger of God’s light above.

Billy Walker surveyed the dim vista of ascent with extreme disfavor.

“Jake must bring ladders,” he declared. “Luckily, he’s to fetch along help—a whole crew for the rescue work. Oh, yes, I’ll wait—I don’t mind waiting. The water was warm, and the cavern’s warm, and, anyhow, wet clothes don’t bother—if one doesn’t think of them. But I wish I had a dry cigar and a match.”

Roy thrust himself forward resolutely.

“Nonsense!” he exclaimed. “I’ll climb up in a jiffy.” He had pulled off his shoes before starting for the first swim with David across the chamber, and now stood up in his stockinged feet. “I’m fond of cliff-climbing. The only trouble with this is, it’ll prove too easy.” Without more ado, he scrambled upward through the darkness. The others waited anxiously, and breathed a sigh of relief when they saw his form at last silhouetted against the pale light at the bend. His voice came to them muffled.

“The rest will be quicker, I can see, now.” Forthwith, he vanished.

It was May on the solid earth above who heard him, and the happiness of it made her almost fainting. But she held herself sternly, and even managed a quavering call of his name—for which, when he heard, Roy climbed the faster, and soon

these two were in each other's arms, glad beyond measure of gladness. The girl was in terror over the blood-stained bandage about her lover's head, and cried when she learned of the treacherous shot that had wounded him. She cried again, with content, that it had been no worse. Most of all, she cried for the exquisite bliss of his being alive and holding her in his arms—ruining the daintiest of summer frocks with his sodden, rock-stained clothes.

The strangeness of the spectacle thus presented by the ardent pair arrested the attention of Jake and his crew, who chanced just then to arrive in the launch. So great became the boatman's curiosity that he resolved to investigate before marching his company into the cavern. To this fact, and not to any alertness on the part of the lovers in looking out for the coming of the launch, was due the quickness with which measures of relief were undertaken for those left in the depths. Ropes were hurried to the scene; a lantern was lowered. It was then discovered that the descent was not so very difficult. With the way lighted, and a rope by which to cling, the various members of the party contrived to climb safely to the mouth of the chimney. Margaret went first, with Saxe behind to aid as best he might. David Thwing was next, and last of all, by his own choice, Billy Walker.

"If I go last," he explained to David, "I'm saved the discomfort of feeling that I ought to be hurrying to get out of somebody's way."

After the rescue had been effected, a watch made up from men trusted by the boatman was set over the chimney, at Roy's suggestion. Then, the four young men, with the two girls, entered the launch to be taken to the cottage, for a change of clothing and luncheon. Billy chuckled contentedly, while the other men appeared sheepish, when it was learned that noon remained still an hour distant.

"But the chances are poor of ever getting that gold, after all," Saxe said ruefully, when they were under weigh.

Roy uttered an indignant exclamation.

"Nothing of the sort!" he declared. "David and I had the tackle fastened, all right, with a knot on the rope to save it from slipping through the block. And we had it hauled tight, too." He laughed amusedly. "Why, do you know? That treasure-chest has started up the slope already! I'll bet what you like the shrinking of the rope has brought it out of the pit. A good gang of men can get that chest out in less than a half-day." He spoke with the sureness of one having knowledge drawn from experience. That he was right the issue proved, for the

gold was taken out very easily, and stored safely in the bank before nightfall.



That evening in the music-room, Saxe sat playing the miser's song of gold. Still drumming the harsh phrases, he turned, and spoke to his friends with a whimsical smile.

"You know, I rather apologized to you for asking your help in this affair, because it didn't offer anything much in the way of real adventure, but it did turn out a bit lively after all!"

Came a chorus of laughing assents.

"We owe Masters gratitude for some thrills," David said cheerfully. "And anyhow, he's got his deserts."

Roy was on the point of saying something candid anent the dead engineer. But his eyes met those of May Thurston, and he forgot hate, and remembered only love.

Saxe spoke again presently, with a meditative air, though Margaret thought that she could detect a twinkle deep in the gray eyes.

"Roy was right in his idea about the solution of the mystery coming by psychic impression. It did. The curious part is that the one to receive the subtle suggestion from the world beyond was the last person to be suspected of anything of the kind—a kind so contrary to pure reason."

"What's that?" Billy Walker demanded.

"Why, about the cipher," Saxe explained, placidly. "Billy, tell us the truth. Search your memory well. Didn't you first have the idea that the music had something to do with the hiding-place of the gold, and then didn't you dig out the reasons to justify that idea—after you had it?"

"Of all the preposterous—" the sage began stormily.

But Saxe interrupted ruthlessly:

"Carefully! Search your memory, Billy. Didn't the idea come first, the reasons afterward? Aren't you psychically sensitive, Billy Walker? Confess!"

"Psychic—I!" the seer boomed, outraged. Then, his brow became furrowed with thought. His expression changed to one of dismay. Little by little, this wore

away, a dawning satisfaction grew in its stead. Finally, he spoke aloud to himself, unconsciously. “Psychic—I? Well, well!” And Billy Walker smiled.

Saxe smiled in answer to the smile that was in Margaret’s eyes as her glance met his. Then he turned once again to the piano. The rhythm of the miser’s song of gold rang out. But now, the player touched the harsh measures with a certain grateful gentleness. In and over and about the grim chords, he wove daintier harmonies, lingered often for cadences of passion, wrought a counterpoint of basic love, set above all an exquisite melody, the unison of two hearts. The improvisation welled to a chorale of magnificent praise for that lonely and unhappy man to whose morbid intrigue the player owed not merely a fortune, but something infinitely more—the meeting and the winning of the woman he loved.

“It’s the only tune I ever cared for,” quoth Billy Walker, complacently.



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