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SOLDIERS OF CHANCE

A SERIAL IN IV PARTS — PART I

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

Author of "When the Sea Ran Dry," "Ice-Bound Hearts," etc.

CHAPTER I.

Billy Mountain, the Revolutionist.

DOWN in his squat cabin on the edge of a mahogany-wood swamp, Bulldog Loring, the Englishman — Vandyked, wax-mustached, and monocle-eyed — read for the second time the final lines of Billy Mountain's letter, while a deputation of one general, two colonels, and three captains of insurrectos waited for him on a mahogany log outside.

Loring had ornamented his eye with the monocle in honor of the visit from the patriots, now seated on his prize timber. That eye-glass had been one of his heavy assets. It compelled respect. It was hypnotic. Through it he could look at generals, colonels, captains and presidential candidates with compelling dignity, or with much the air of one making a casual examination of biological specimens under a microscope.

So it was with great care that he plucked it forth to give himself better

vision for a third perusal of those last lines of Billy's letter, while the waiting insurrectos smoked a little longer at their black cigars.

"Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief!" that's the key, Larry (Billy Mountain had written). Now that scream is in and we are ready to sail, I can confess something that I didn't dare mention in your presence, because I know you would have insisted on digging out your war-togs and coming with me. And it's a job I want to do myself — alone. You'll understand why when I return and tell you all about it. I'm going to take me on to New York, and well lose a week or ten days. But the game is worth it. I've been waiting and planning and scheming for eight years, and the balloon is just about ready to go up. I'm going to break a millionaire and a thief, and I'm going to change the swamp-hut domicils of a poor man and a beggar man into marble castles. I'm not only going to break him financially, but I'm going to break his body and heart and soul — if he possesses the last two. I'm going to break him until he will weep for the poor man and the beggar man to take his millions, and plead upon his knees for that poor man and the beggar man to go and live in his hundred-thousand-dollar mansion on Fifth Avenue, and call it their own. That poor man and beggar man are "Us and Company," Lorry.

L. C.

So mind your monocle while I'm gone, and feed our patriots double rations of nigger-cooked bread and Bulldog Loring taffy. I'll be back within a month, if we don't sink on the way.

Loring readjusted his eye-glass, carefully folded his partner's letter and placed it in his pocket, gave his mustache a stiffening twist and stalked forth to inform Señor Ricardo and his hopeful compatriots that Billy Mountain was well on his way to the munitions of war awaiting them at Key West.

As a matter of fact, Billy was already several hundred miles beyond that port and steaming straight for New York. Facetiously he had named his craft The Prune. She was painted a ghastly maroon, and the name stuck out in bold white letters on her starboard brow—or bow.

She had two funnels, antiquated deck-houses, and at the present moment was laden with oranges and grapefruit instead of powder and ball and gunis. Billy had taken these on at Key West as a sort of card of introduction to the port officials at New York. One thing the outward appearance of The Prune cleverly disguised. That was her speed. She could show a remarkable pair of heels when occasion demanded.

And "occasion had demanded" ever since Billy had left Key West. From that hour The Prune's engines had done their best, night and day. Nevertheless, Billy had remained quite cool, and his blood had flowed evenly.

Even under unusual circumstances he was not an excitable man. Loring, who was somewhat of an artist, had once sketched a picture of him and had called it "The Fighter." There was that quality in the cold blue of his eyes which made men respect him at first glance.

He was not large—a trifle over five feet eight—but he gave the impression of being an engine of dynamic strength that it would be dangerous to play with. His shoulders were broad and splendidly clean-cut, and their effect

was accentuated by a lithic slenderness of waist and hips that added to his height. Like Loring, he wore a beard, blond, with a premature touch of gray in it. There were barely perceptible lines of gray in the hair above his temples.

At a glance one knew that this was not caused by age or dissipation. Something about his eyes and his mouth revealed more of the truth, to those who observed him closely; than he would have confessed to his closest friends, with the exception of Loring. And most people with whom he came in contact did observe him with more than ordinary interest.

He was one of that extraordinarily small class of men who compel attention, without desiring it, chiefly because to look at him was to like him. It is hard to define this kind of physical attraction. With Billy Mountain it lay largely in his eyes. His face, bronzed by wind and sun, was almost boyish, in spite of the beard he wore. But in his eyes there slumbered the shadows of experience—of things that gave to him the look of one who had beheld more than one abyss too deep for the earth, and more than one mountain too tall for the heavens.

Men looked at him and knew that he had seen life in its most rugged aspects. They guessed that he might have tunneled for thin lines of steel through the hearts of mountains; that he might have bridged rivers in fever-ridden jungles; that in some way, or in many ways, he was a leader in the fight of civilization and progress through savage and inaccessible places.

Whatever his experience had been, it had molded a man they liked. The look in his eyes was clean and direct. The grip of his hand was hard and real. He was the sort that would fight for a friend, and who would not strike an enemy from behind.

Was he striking from behind now? He had asked himself that question a dozen times since leaving Key West. It was a question that troubled him.

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And yet in a coolly argumentative way he had, a hundred times, assured himself that he was not.

He would have preferred to achieve what he was about to attempt in a more open way. But fate had passed him the opportunity for which he had waited so long.

It was not a matter of personal selection. And, after all, the chances were even. If anything, they were in Lawler's favor. He was risking everything. A slip—and he would pay the forfeit. Lawler could not lose more.

He wondered if there was one chance in a thousand of Lawler recognizing him, after all the time that had gone. Eight years—and they had seemed like a lifetime to him! Eight years waiting, and watching, and scheming for the main chance.

That chance had come at last. Lawler would not recognize him. He was sure of that. He was no longer the boyish and unsophisticated Billy Mountain of those days. Even she—the woman—would not recognize him. He smiled a little grimly as he thought of his young wife and the terrible thing that had separated them. Was she still in New York? he wondered. Was she as beautiful as ever? Or had the vicissitudes of a gilded life changed her in ways that the glaring sun of the jungles and the humid vapors of the swamps had not changed him?

Eight years was a long time. She was now thirty, and he knew that for at least four of those eight years she had lived that life which is quick consumption to beauty and youth. During those four years the gray had stolen in over his temples—as a warning.

Then he had begun the other fight, and he knew now that he had won. He thought of her coolly and dispassionately. Perhaps she had remarried. If so, he was glad, for even his old bitterness was gone. She had hurt him as a hundred thousand women had hurt men. For a time it had hurt

him more deeply than it would have hurt most others. But she had been his wife, and he hoped that she was happy. He believed that she was of a nature to be so.

But Lawler! After eight years his blood still ran hot when he thought of him. Lawler would be waiting for him now—for "Captain Josslyn," of the Honduras mahogany concessions. On the last day he went over all his papers again. There was nothing in them that suggested Billy Mountain. His cards bore the name Alfred Josslyn.

A dozen letters from Lawler were addressed to him in that name, and as many documents, manufactured for the purpose, confirmed his fictitious identity. Lawler would know him only as Josslyn, the Englishman. He would not penetrate the veneer to Billy Mountain, the American.

Billy assured himself of that a hundred times, and yet on this last day he was growing nervous. He told himself that it was not nervousness, but a yearning for the action that was near at hand.

There was a tightening at his heart when he realized at last that he was very near to home—for he still called it home. He had dreamed this hour more than all others, and he remained in his cabin, smoking cigar after cigar. He had expected that his return would give him pain.

He knew that there could be nothing left to him of what had been—of what should have been. There would be none of the old friends to greet him, no hand to reach out and give him welcome. The city was home, and yet it was a home filled only with the memories of things that were dead and gone. He had felt this same tightening at his heart, a thickening of the muscles in his throat when, years and years ago, he had returned one summer day to the little vine-covered cottage in the village of his boyhood to grieve, in that same terrible loneliness, where his mother had been.

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things very much. There was the same vine in its purple bloom; the masses of old roses; the narrow footpath, bordered with whitewashed cobblestones, which they had placed there in that glorious comradeship of mother and boy; the same lilacs over the porch, the gnarled old apple-tree that shaded his window—a thousand things that were unchanged, and yet no more than haunting specters of what had been. He thought of those old days now as he sat alone in his cabin, and then of the girl who had come into his life to fill the place of those who had gone.

All that he had given to the mother he had given to her. Then—the city. That, too, had emptied itself of all things living for him, as the old cottage had emptied itself; death in one, and in the other—

His hands clenched as the visions of those two faces came up before him—his mother, the wife—one guiding him still through the dark nights and long years of his loneliness, the other laughing at him from out of a chaos of wrecked dreams.

Perhaps she was still in the city. But she would never know that he had returned.

No one would know—but Lawler. For it was Lawler who was to pay, and not the woman. And Lawler would pay heavily. Then—and not until then—could he go out into the great world again, and look up into the blue skies, and laugh. Again he told himself that he was not striking from behind, but that what he was about to do was right.

He was striking as any man would strike at a serpent. For it was Lawler who had ruined him. It was Lawler who had emptied the city of all things for him, as death had robbed the cottage. His was not to be an act of retaliation. It was justice. He grew more eager as he thought of the hour of action that was near.

What would his revolutionary friends say, he wondered, if they knew that in place of smuggling munitions

of war off a lonely Florida key, he would be on Broadway to-night?

He laughed softly, and went on deck.

CHAPTER II.

The Girl and Broadway.

IN his gaudily upholstered and highly polished office on the third floor of the new Dominion Building, Peter Lawler sat in fat and contented state, puffing lazily at a big cigar, his puffed-out, pale-gray eyes glowing with satisfaction and triumph, for Peter Lawler had much to glow over. Yet most men considered him unfortunate, and most women despised him.

He was not only fat. He was flesh-ridden. His face was puffy, his eyes were puffy, his hands and his fingers and his whole body were puffy. He accentuated his unpleasant appearance by wearing two enormous diamonds on his fingers and a still larger one in his cravat.

His eyes were remarkable. In moments of excitement they glittered until they seemed about to shed tears, but no one had ever seen tears in them. All of Lawler's physical energies and fighting forces were centered in those eyes. They had been the big guns in his rise to power.

In that rise Lawler had slaughtered and had slain. He had forgotten three out of four of his victims, because with him forgetfulness was a necessity. But to-night he was in a glowingly reminiscent mood, and his mind traveled back in retrospective channels which had long ago filled up behind him.

He had eaten a particularly good dinner which he had topped off with a bottle of particularly good wine. Today he was worth a couple of millions. To-morrow he would be worth three—

if Josslyn, the Englishman, kept his appointment.

He chuckled audibly as he compared the beginning of things to this—to his present fortune, his power, his tremen-

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dous future. He took a gloating pleasure in the fact that he had begun with nothing, and paragonized himself because he had climbed "up" through the medium of what he was pleased to call his wits, which, translated by common decency, meant dishonesty in its most vicious form.

He recalled now with no pangs of conscience the days when he had been almost a criminal. Even to himself, in his lowest depths, he would never concede that he had actually been a criminal. Those were the days when he had called himself the "love wrecker," and had concealed his real name. He had found blackmail remunerative. He had proved that it was easy to ruin reputations, if money was not forthcoming to preserve those reputations. He had photographed a hundred men in embarrassing positions. He had collected volumes of "evidence" against women, respectable as well as otherwise.

Respectable people had always paid him best, for they were the greatest cowards in his particular business. He prided himself that respectability was his cloak. For that reason he had ceased to be a love-wrecker and had turned his "wits" along higher levels. Eventually he had graduated into the business of financing and promoting, which in his case might more properly have been called the incorporating of wind and the capitalizing of water.

It paid no one but himself, and it paid him well. Also it gave him a reputation for shrewdness and generalship among a set of men who pedigreed him by the fact that he had "made" two millions, and whose knowledge of him did not go back to past history.

Lawler went over all this, punctuating his wool-gathering by occasional references to a gold watch which possessed to a remarkable measure the puffy obtrusiveness of its owner. By telephone Captain Josslyn had appointed their meeting for eight o'clock. It was now a quarter to the hour, and Lawler lighted another fat cigar, and

rubbed his fat hands in pleasant anticipation. Within his orbit all things came a little late, from directors' to easy money, and he was considerably surprised when his secretary opened the door to his inner sanctum and announced Billy Mountain, fifteen minutes ahead of time—only the card which he brought in bore the inscription, "Mr. Alfred Josslyn, Truxillo, Honduras."

Billy had not waited for a formal invitation to enter. He was at the door when Lawler rose from his chair. For a moment he was startled. Was the man who advanced to greet him really Lawler? Could eight years have produced such a change in a human being? He had always loathed Lawler's face and eyes, but never had he seen him like this.

He looked like an overfatted pig. Billy lowered his eyes as he gripped the other's hand. In spite of his coolness, there was something in them which he did not wish Lawler to see.

"I'm mighty glad to meet you, Captain Josslyn," gushed Lawler in his oiliest and most affable voice. "Our correspondence has been so intimate, you know, that it seems almost like meeting an old friend. Only I—well, to be truthful, I was looking for an older man. Have a seat, captain—and a cigar."

He pushed a box of cigars across the table, seated himself, and purred audibly. His whole body quivered and trembled joyously. In the glow of the electric lights the tearlike glitter in his eyes was almost metallic.

"Good of you to say so—upon my word it is," replied Billy, who had practised a little of Loring's vocabulary. "The feeling's mutual, you know," he added, lighting one of the cigars. "I like to meet the chap I'm doing business with, especially when I'm going to place half a million or more."

Lawler's chest gave a perceptible heave.

"Half a million—or more," he re-

peated, giving an emphasis to the last word. "I congratulate you on the 'more,' captain. Not that I'm going to profit by it, you understand. I've got every dollar's worth of stock I can carry. But I like to see men like you among the winners."

"The additional capital doesn't belong to me," explained Billy. "I've interested a friend who is willing to lay another half-million alongside mine. Curious sort of chap, he is. He wouldn't listen to the thing for a minute unless I agreed to come up and look you over. I've got his certified checks."

Lawler lighted a match and held it to the end of his cigar to cover his emotion. His pudgy hand trembled.

"I've got his certified checks," repeated Billy slowly, "and I guess I'll cash them. I'm wondering, though, if I oughtn't to get something off the deal."

He looked Lawler squarely in the eyes. It was the final test. Lawler did not recognize him. For a few moments he returned the gaze steadily, but in his look there was only the shrewd speculation of one who was measuring the truthfulness of something he had heard, and upon which he did not care to commit himself until he was sure of good faith. Billy saw the other's cautious hesitation.

"I may be putting it rather bluntly," he apologized. "When you're in Central American jungles for ten months of the year you get a bit rough around the edges, you know. But you don't lose sight of yourself altogether, and I've got an idea that when a chap's handling something pretty close up to the million mark he ought to have some sort of a rake-off to pay for the rack on his nerves."

"I put in a couple of years down in Peru for an American who was trying to start something with the old inca mines. His capital all came from London, and I got the idea there. I don't suppose you'd call it stealing—but he didn't do his work for nothing."

You can't afford to take the risks of handling a million for fun."

Lawler nodded. "You're right," he said. "Your own money is bound to take care of itself. It's going to win big. This additional capital—which doesn't belong to you—is sure to win just as big."

"Your friend would probably be offended if you asked a commission of him. That's the way with friends. It's got to be done through a little diplomacy, as you might say. Now—I think it could be arranged."

He interrupted himself to reach for pencil and paper.

At the end of half an hour Billy's face was flushed and his voice quivered. Lawler wrongly interpreted his emotion. The glow in Billy's eyes delighted instead of appalled; the tremor in his voice was one of excitement and enthusiasm, Lawler believed.

Billy's suggestion that he ought to get something out of the deal had given Lawler his cue, and he had sunk his line deeper and deeper until he felt that he had struck bottom. A scatter of papers covered with figures lay on the table between them. Billy possessed himself of one of these, and ran his eyes over the various items for the third or fourth time.

"See if I've got it straight," he said. "You've got a hundred and ten thousand shares of the Amalgamated Zinc and Chromium stock for sale at ten dollars a share, and you've given me pretty good evidence that it'll go to twenty within a year."

"That looks good to me, and I'm ready to run my half million in the deal. Your proposition is this: You'll actually sell me my fifty thousand for ten dollars a share, but will give me a receipt which will show, if questions are asked, that I paid twelve for it. Am I right?"

Lawler nodded with a wheezy chuckle.

"Then you sell me the other fifty thousand at the same price, though I ostensibly pay twelve for it. In other

words, I take the risks of sand dollars for fun."

"For Lawler said. "Your to take care of thousand win big. This which doesn't belong to him—win just as big—probably be offered a commission of one thousand with friends."

"Make a deal," said Lawler.

Lawler extended himself to reach for

"Done quibble an hour Billy's

Billy's voice quivered. He looked at Lawler's pudgy hand.

"By Jove, I didn't expect to see you here."

"I didn't expect to see you here," he said. "I've got a million for sale at ten dollars a share, and you've given me pretty good evidence that it'll go to twenty within a year."

Lawler brought a loose leaf of paper to his face. In Billy's idea of business, the idea of bringing his "find" into personal contact with his professional friends at the club, and the invitation offered him a loophole.

"Why—I'd really made up my mind that you were going to be my guest," he expostulated mildly. "Outside of that fact I'd be delighted—"

"It's settled then," interrupted Billy with finality. "You'll dine with me on board The Prune." He wrote rapidly on a slip of paper, which he gave to Lawler. "You'll find us there," he said. "I'll be looking for you at eleven sharp."

Lawler followed him to the door, through the outer offices and to the elevator, pressing three of his fat cigars and an unwelcome handshake upon him

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words, I give you four hundred thousand dollars of my friend's money, and keep the other hundred thousand."

"For your commission," added Lawler. "But it isn't quite a hundred thousand, you'll observe. To account to him for his half million you will have to give him certificates for forty-one thousand six hundred and sixty-six shares of stock at twelve dollars a share."

"Make it eighty-five and call it a deal," said Billy.

Lawler lurched across the table with extended hand.

"Done!" he cried. "We won't quibble over a couple of thousand!"

Billy shoved himself back and looked at his watch to evade seeing the pudgy and quivering hand.

"By Jove, I'm late!" he exclaimed. "I didn't think it would take over fifteen minutes to settle this deal after we once got together, and we've used up three times that. I'm going to sell a million feet of mahogany to a buyer from London to-night. Will you join me in an early dinner to-morrow on board my boat? Then we'll come up and turn over the cash."

Lawler hesitated, and labored to bring a look of disappointment into his face. Inwardly he was pleased at Billy's invitation. He did not like the idea of bringing his "find" into personal contact with his professional friends at the club, and the invitation offered him a loophole.

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at the last moment. Not until he was again in the street did Billy fill his lungs with a real breath.

From the New Dominion Building he walked over to Thirty-Third Street, and at the corner of Thirty-Third and Broadway stood for a moment gazing at the blazing floods of electricity that seemed to engulf the theater section in one great conflagration. Everything was freshly and vividly wonderful to him again.

The streams of fire racing over the frameworks of giant signs, the fountains and waterfalls and galloping wonders of electrical flame, the throbs of life that trembled under his feet and surged in billows of sound and movement about his ears, were as new as that other night, years ago, when he had first looked upon these things.

So long had he seen only the stars over the jungles, and the moon rising up from behind the mountains, that he held himself out of the current of passing life, wondering if he had once upon a time been actually a part of it. He had believed that he was immune to the thrill of the city—that it could hold no lure for him again.

But even as he stood there, caught in its mad rush and garish glare, the old fever returned into him, setting his pulse to beating more swiftly, as though he had taken a glass of sharp wine. His cigar had gone out, and he turned to relight it. The reflection he caught of himself in a window brought him out of the momentary spell into which he had fallen.

He had made an appointment to meet Captain Thorpe, of The Prune, at nine o'clock, and it was now nearly that. If Lawler had by any chance recognized him, there was to have been other work to do that night, and Thorpe would be waiting. He had written on a slip of paper certain directions, showing the easiest way to reach the point where The Prune's captain was to wait for him, and he reached into his pocket for the leather wallet, in which he carried those confi-

dential letters and papers identifying him as Josslyn, the Englishman. The wallet was gone. He remembered that he had left it on Lawler's table.

He hurried back to Thirty-Third Street and turned in the direction of the New Dominion Building. He was quite sure that Lawler would still be in his office, especially if he had happened to see the wallet, which was probable. He was the sort of a man to investigate the wallet on his own account, and Billy thanked his stars that there was nothing in it to betray him. He did not wait for the night elevator, but ran quickly up the stairs.

Lawler's office was the last at the end of a long and dimly lighted corridor, and the first of the doors entering into his suite opened into a small alcove which Billy had observed was dark when he had passed through it a few minutes before. Lawler had said something about a burned-out electric lamp.

As he walked down the corridor a flicker of light irradiated for an instant the thinly frosted window, and went out as suddenly as it had appeared. It looked as though Lawler, in leaving his inner office, had paused to light a cigar in the alcove. If so, his hand was unsteady or the match defective, for a second glimmer of light appeared, to be followed almost in the same moment by darkness. Billy approached more slowly. A third match was lighted in the little room. But Lawler did not appear.

Billy's feet made no sound as he drew near the end of the corridor. He observed that the alcove door was slightly ajar. Not until he had approached within three or four feet of it did he stop. He heard no sound, and, believing that Lawler had reentered his office, he was about to pass in when, to his surprise, a fourth match was lighted. With a quick movement he thrust the door inward. Another moment and his astonishment had almost betrayed his presence.

Illuminated for an instant in the flare

of the match, he saw the profile of a face. It was a woman's face, as white as death in the phosphorus glow. She was kneeling before the inner door, and as he stared down upon her she was preparing to fit a key into the lock. Under the plumes of her wide hat he caught the rich gleam of thick coils of brown hair as she bowed her head. In that one swift glance he saw that she wore an opera cloak, and that the white plumes that swept her shoulder were not whiter than her cheek.

Suddenly the match went out and the little room was plunged in darkness. He drew back his head, partly closing the door, and listened. A key clicked in the lock, and it was followed by a strange sound—a low throat-note from out of the darkness—something that came to him almost like a stifled sob. Then he heard Lawler's door open.

CHAPTER III.

Mystery of the Closed Cab.

BILLY felt the throb of an excitement greater than that he had experienced when he had faced Lawler an hour before. Something in that tableau of an instant, while the match was burning—the tense attitude of the kneeling girl, the poise of her graceful head, the glow of the light in her hair, and after that the sobbing breath that had come to him like a whisper from out of the darkness—filled him with an emotion that held him silent and expectant.

He did not stop to ask himself why she had knelt before the door, or why there was a deathly pallor on her face. Out of darkness it had flashed with the suddenness of a picture thrown on a screen, and as quickly it had vanished.

But it had left behind, gripping him strangely, the conviction that he had looked upon a scene from a tragedy. Not until the soft rustle of her dress told him that the girl had passed into Lawler's room did he move from his

listening swiftly behind him.

The inner door Lawler's heard a chair, the room expected would re shrank in

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of an excite- that he had ex- ed Cab.

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He had whisper from d him with an silent and ex-

himself why door, or why on her face. shed with the thrown on a ad vanished.

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After all she was a thief! She had gripping him that he had n a tragedy. of her dress. l passed into ve from his

After all she was a thief! She had gripping him that he had n a tragedy. of her dress. l passed into ve from his

listening attitude. Then he passed swiftly into the alcove, closing the door behind him.

The inner door was partly open, and Lawler's office was in darkness. He heard a cautious step, the moving of a chair, the rustling of a dress, and then the room flashed into sudden light. He expected that the mysterious intruder would return to close the door, and he shrank into a dark-corner of the alcove.

In this his conjecture was wrong. The door remained ajar, so that the light within could be seen from any part of the long corridor. He waited for a full minute, and then determined to step into the room. Yet he hesitated to make the move. If the intruder had been a man he would have acted quickly. But he had cornered not a man—not even a hardened and criminal woman—but a girl whose youth and beauty had appealed to him strangely in that flash-light picture he had seen of her. The thought occurred to him that she might be one of Lawler's employees returning to the office on some errand.

But, if this were so, why had there been that whiteness of fear in her face as she had crouched before the door? She was not an employee, and neither was she a thief. A thief would have shut the door and turned down the lights. He faltered, with his hand on the knob. Then he entered.

He had expected that she would confront him instantly, but what he saw now amazed him more than what he had seen when he looked through the alcove door. The girl was upon her knees before Lawler's safe. Oblivious to his presence she was scanning a slip of paper held in her hand. Presently she began slowly to turn the knob of the combination lock.

After all she was a thief! She had gripping him that he had n a tragedy. of her dress. l passed into ve from his

was no mistake. It was a sob—quivering, breathless, filled with that same shuddering grief and terror that he had heard before. Billy stepped across the room.

"Good evening!" he said.

For one terrible moment the girl did not move. Her fingers clutched at the knob. The paper slipped from her hand. No sound escaped her lips. It was as if those two quietly spoken words had struck her lifeless. And then, slowly, she turned her head, and Billy looked down into a pair of the most wonderful blue eyes he had ever seen.

At first he saw nothing but those eyes, blazing like violet stars—eyes that seemed to him filled with a child-like terror as they met his own. She made no effort to speak, but shrank back against the steel door of the safe, staring at him. There was more than fear in her face—more than the mere fright caused by his unexpected interruption.

Without reasoning why, Billy knew that this was so. He was about to speak to her again when he heard the distant crash of the elevator door. Was it Lawler returning? The girl sprang to her feet. Billy ran to the alcove door. It was not Lawler.

He came back, closing the door behind him. He was astonished by the change in the girl. She was standing near Lawler's table. Her big, plumed hat had fallen from her head. Until now he had not seen how beautiful she was. Her cheeks were flushed. Her lips were parted. Her hair shone lustrous and dark in the glow of a ceiling light.

It was drawn back smoothly from her forehead, without a part, and its simplicity gave to her face a sweetness and purity that drove back the words he had intended to say. Only once or twice had he seen a face like hers, and he had remembered it as a vision of all that was sweet and true in womanhood. And now he had found that face again—here—in Lawler's office.

and it was, the face of one he had caught in an act of crime. He stood paralyzed.

It was the girl who was cool now. The fear had gone from her eyes. She looked at Billy steadily across the table.

"Now that you have caught me," she asked, "what are you going to do?"

"I'll be hanged if I know," replied Billy, returning her gaze as steadily. "I suppose I ought to hold you here and telephone for the police." The girl's lips quivered, and in the same breath he added: "No, I don't mean that, deuce take me if I do! I'm always saying the rough things—because I've been hanging on to the rough edges of the world for a few years, I guess. I'm not used to your city ways. I suppose I ought to apologize to you, go away, and leave you to finish your work."

"You—you don't live in the city?"

"No. My home is a log hut down in Honduras."

The girl's eyes were glowing. She, too, saw in Billy Mountain what other people had seen. She sat down in Lawler's chair, and Billy leaned with his hands on the edge of the table. For a space she bowed her head in her hands, and as Billy looked down upon her there filled him for a moment a desire to reach over and touch the glossy hair that was drawn back so smoothly to the thick coils behind.

"See here, little girl," he asked bluntly, "what in thunder are you doing here? What do you want in that safe?"

His tone was a command. She looked up. Her face was pale, but this time he knew that it was not with fear.

"You are not going to call the police?"

"No."

"Then will you help me open the safe?"

He stared at her speechlessly. Was it possible that he heard aright? Could

it be that this girl, with a face so childishly sweet and pure, was actually inviting him to join in a crime which he had interrupted? Incredulity shone in his face. Not by the droop of an eyelash did her gaze waver under the steely scrutiny of his eyes.

"Will you?" she persisted. He leaned over the table toward her. Her words had broken the spell which he was under.

"No," he said. "And I won't call the police. I am going to let you go. After that I shall telephone Lawler and tell him just enough of what I have seen and found to make him change the combination of the safe. The paper you dropped probably holds the present combination."

He stepped across to the safe and picked up the crumpled slip. When he faced her again the girl had risen from her chair.

"Read it!" she said. He smoothed out the paper. On it were written a number of words, numerals, and letters of almost microscopic fineness.

R. V. D.

Three turns each way
12-17-24

"And now—*open the safe!*"

He saw that he was fairly caught. The girl stood within three paces of him, and the blue of her eyes shot a threatening fire from behind a revolver leveled straight at his breast.

"Open the safe!" she commanded. In spite of the menacing weapon Billy felt a thrill of admiration. She had thrown back her opera cloak and her slender form stood tense and poised as if to spring upon him. He noted the quick rising and falling of her breast, the throb of her bare throat, the cluster of violets that had begun to fill the room with their faint perfume, even the filmy lace that half concealed her shimmering arms.

"By Jove, but you're a little brick!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I'd almost like to do it. But I can't."

"You're or—"

"Or—what?"

"I—I'll kill you!"

"Shoot away if you want to," invited Billy to do it.

"I'll persist."

"I'll persist."

"I'll persist."

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"Or—what?"

"I—I'll kill you!"

"Shoot away if you want to," invited Billy. "But I'd advise you not to do it. In the first place I'm not so sure that you'd hit me, and in the second, if you did hit me, the shot would bring some one here and you wouldn't get your safe open after all. Listen to me! I may be a fool. Every man is a fool at certain times in his life, and this is one of mine. But I want you to get away from here—unharméd. Do you understand? There is no time to lose. If any one should come—"

Again there came the distant crash of the elevator door. Unmindful of the fact that the revolver, slightly wavering, was still pointing at him, Billy ran for a second time into the alcove room. He was back in an instant.

"It's Lawler!" he cried. "He's coming up the corridor! Quick—if you want to escape—"

He picked up the plumed hat, and in that same swift movement darted to the electric switch. Another moment and they were plunged in darkness.

"This way," he urged in a whisper. He felt the girl near him. A hand touched his arm; and he seized it in his own. It was cold and shivering.

He held it tight and drew her through the door, closing it softly after them. They could hear Lawler's footsteps in the corridor, and Billy pushed his companion back into the farthest corner of the alcove.

For an instant she clung to him, and in that moment her body pressed against his own, and with a thrill that sent the hot blood swiftly through him, he felt the silken touch of her hair against his lips. Lawler's hand was on the outer door, and the girl shrank closer to him. The perfume of her hair and breath filled his nostrils, and her hands clung to his arms in an agony of terror. In that moment his arm stole about her, and he felt again

the warm thrill of her hair against his lips.

"Be quiet!" he whispered. "He won't hear you! He won't see you!"

For an instant his arm tightened. Then the door swung inward and he stepped out to confront Lawler. The capitalist uttered an exclamation of surprise as Billy faced him in the open door.

"By Jove, but you gave me a start!" said Billy. "I left my wallet on your table and came back to see if I'd find you here. For two pesos I'd have broken in. I must have those papers before I go on with the mahogany deal to-night, and I'm an hour behind schedule now. You've turned up just in the nick of time."

Lawler recovered from the start. Billy's sudden appearance had given him, and laughed in his oily voice as he fingered a bunch of keys.

"Confound that idiot of a janitor!" he complained. "He promised to put a light in here to-day. I can't find the key. Got a match, captain?"

Billy crowded close to him and struck a match, holding the flame in the hollow of his hands. Lawler found the key and inserted it in the lock. The door swung open, and the lights were turned on. Billy's eyes swept the room. Their flight had left nothing suspicious behind, and he began to breathe more freely. He stood with his shoulders close to the crack of the door while Lawler went to his desk. He heard a movement behind him, and he knew that the girl was leaving. He listened. Out of the alcove there came a whisper, so low that he scarcely heard it, yet so filled with sweetness that his heart leaped.

"Good-by!" it said. "Good-by!"—and then there was silence.

Lawler had pulled out a drawer and was offering him the wallet.

"I put it in there for safe-keeping," he was saying. "Can't you remain long enough to smoke a cigar, captain?"

"Impossible!" said Billy, almost

snatching the wallet from the other's hands. "Can't lose another minute; 'pon my soul I can't—"

In his haste he dropped the wallet and a scatter of papers fell out on the floor. With a muttered curse at his execrable luck he stooped to recover them. A dozen seconds had changed him. He felt the fire of a new excitement tingling to his finger-tips.

Those whispered words—not much more than the plaintive sobbing of a breath—still lingered in his ears. Not so much the words, but that trembling soul of a voice that had borne them to him—its prayer of thankfulness, its note of sadness—had sunk into his heart until in this moment he was no longer the cool and invincible Billy Mountain who had traveled from the jungles of Central America to wreak his vengeance upon the man who was watching him from the other side of the table.

He had made up his mind almost before the whispered words had died away in the darkness of the alcove. He would follow. He would overtake the girl who, in a space so short that he could not yet comprehend its significance, had aroused this revolution in him. She might be an adventuress, a thief, a woman whose beauty and purity of face had fooled as well as lured him.

But he would follow. He would know who she was. In those few hours in which he had dared to dream of love after the black ruin of his earlier days, it was a face such as hers that he had visioned. Here he had found the reality.

He rose to his feet and held out a hand to Lawler.

"You'll pardon me for all this haste, won't you, old man?" he asked, as they shook hands. "I'll see you to-morrow—sharp at eleven!"

He could have kicked Lawler for following him into the corridor. It kept him from running, and he knew that the girl had already secured a good start. Once at the stairs, he de-

scended them three steps at a bound. The night elevator-man was lighting a cigarette when he rushed into the lobby.

"Did you see a young lady pass out half a minute ago?" he cried.

"Just brought 'one down," replied the man with maddening slowness.

"Put on her 'at in the car."

"Which way did she go?"

He nodded toward Broadway, and Billy left him like a shot. A block away he saw a woman hurrying in advance of him, and he hastened to overtake her. It was not the girl. Not until he was within half a block of Broadway was he sure that he saw her. She had hesitated for an instant at the corner, and then turned up-town.

He was sure that he could not lose her now, for the theater crowds were off the streets. He half ran to the corner and there slackened his pace to avoid attracting attention by his haste. He was within fifty yards of her when she turned in at the Knickerbocker. He quickened his steps only to be doomed to disappointment.

The foyer door was swinging behind her as he entered in front of the box-office. Two precious minutes were lost while he roused the man in the box and purchased a ticket. He felt like thrusting a hand through the cage and gripping the sawn-faced young fellow behind it by the throat. Never had a human being moved with more aggravating slowness. The girl had disappeared again when he reached the foyer. To the man who received his ticket he said casually:

"A young lady just came in ahead of me. Which way did she go?"

"Box ticket—to the right," replied the doorman tersely.

He crowded in among the men at the railing and stared at the boxes. Almost instantly his questing eyes saw the parting of a curtain, and for a moment he caught a glimpse of her face. In that same breath he clenched his hands in vexation.

A man he was joining had achieved his purpose. He cursed him for having lost those few precious moments in Lawler's office. If he would have seen her before she reached Broadway.

Even if he would have asked her for an answer to his curious feeling, the man in the swift reaction.

He had expected her partners in the office on foot. The man left to his beautiful not time to turn into the puzzle.

The girl ran down the upper box-seats at the Knickerbocker. He saw the girl, his skin in immaculate.

His skin wore a wax which, like the girl's, was what he was within three feet of her. Never had a human being moved with more aggravating slowness. The girl had disappeared again when he reached the foyer. To the man who received his ticket he said casually:

"It will say. 'A cab outside—'

Billy did few words were sufficient to spur him once more into the zest of the adventure: that he had made up his mind was about ended for him. He had noted that there was nothing of the criminal in the for-eigner's face. It was a countenance that bore the marks of refinement and good blood.

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A man had risen from his seat and was joining her. After all, his pursuit had achieved him nothing, and again he cursed his luck for having lost those few precious moments in Lawler's office. If it had not been for that he would have caught up with her before she reached Broadway.

Even if he had overtaken her, what would have happened? For the first time he asked himself the question, and its answer left him filled with a curious feeling of depression. Sight of the man in the box had produced a swift reaction in him.

He had been waiting for her—expecting her. They were undoubtedly partners in whatever scheme had been on foot. But if this were so why had the man left the most dangerous part to his beautiful accomplice? Billy had not time to question himself deeper into the puzzling situation.

The girl and her escort were coming down the stairway leading from the upper box-seats. His first glance was at the flushed and excited face of the girl, his second at the man. He was in immaculate evening dress.

His skin was of olive darkness. He wore a waxed and pointed mustache, which, like his hair, was jet black. The girl was so deeply absorbed in what he was saying that she passed within three steps of Billy without seeing him. If that moment Billy heard the man's voice distinctly. He was speaking in the tongue which was almost as familiar to him as his own—Spanish.

"It will not do, Josephine," he was saying. "We must wait. We will take a cab outside, and—"

Billy did not hear the rest, but the few words that he had understood were sufficient to spur him once more into the zest of the adventure: that he had made up his mind was about ended for him. He had noted that there was nothing of the criminal in the for-eigner's face. It was a countenance that bore the marks of refinement and good blood. The man's whole appear-

ance—his face, his low voice, his pleasing carriage, the manner in which he opened the door for the girl to pass out of the foyer, all confirmed him in his first judgment of the girl herself. He had not surprised a mere thief in Lawler's office. She was there for some other and deeper motive than robbery alone.

Scarcely had the door ceased to swing upon the girl and her companion than he had made up his mind to follow them. He would discover where they were going—perhaps where the girl lived. Not for an instant did he think of them as man and wife. There was something repugnant and entirely unconvincing in that thought. He watched the couple enter a taxicab. No sooner had the machine started than he sprang toward another cab.

"I want to follow that taxi!" he cried. "Keep a block behind, but don't lose it. If you make good I'll tip you a five. Are you on?"

The chauffeur's reply was to start his engine. For fifteen minutes Billy looked eagerly for developments. Every minute after that he became more puzzled. The chauffeur in the car ahead seemed to be driving aimlessly—down Broadway to Twenty-Seventh, east to Fifth Avenue, then back to Fifty-Third Street, and after that following an intricacy of avenues and streets that soon had Billy completely bewildered.

At the end of half an hour his driver suddenly doubled the speed of his car, and when he slowed down they were on Bleecker Street. If a bomb had exploded under his feet Billy could not have been more astonished than when he saw the car he was pursuing stop just below where Sixth Avenue fuses itself into Carmine Street; and its occupants got out. A hundred times he had traveled over this ugliest of New York streets, and for a moment he was so amazed at the action of the two ahead of him that he did not move. Then, as he saw them actually joining the crowd, he

thrust a bank-note into the taxi-driver's hand and jumped to the street.

"Wait for me here," he said. "If I'm not back within an hour keep the change!"

Every step that he took added to his bewilderment. Within the next few blocks he approached at times within a few yards of the girl and her companion. He knew the sort of people he was among. They rubbed against his elbows. They touched the girl's dress who was hurrying on ahead, her hand in the arm of her escort.

Through this night-current of Bleeker Street the two continued, straight past the old office of the Banca Italiana, and then stopped and turned so suddenly that Billy had only time to turn his back to them and drop into a doorway before they passed him. Across the street was an old building with a sign which read, "Agenzia di Pasaggi da e per l'Europa," and toward this they went. Billy thought they were about to enter, when they turned again and disappeared up Thompson Street. He followed, but had scarcely rounded the corner when he stopped as suddenly as though some one had confronted him with a gun. At the curb stood a closed carriage. The girl was entering it. The man got in after her. The door slammed and the carriage rattled swiftly up Thompson Street—the ragpickers' paradise!

For fully a minute Billy stood without moving. The carriage disappeared. The rattle of the wheels died away. Still staring, he thrust his hands deep into his trouser-pockets.

"Now what the devil do you think of that?" he demanded of himself, and turned slowly back in the direction of the taxicab.

CHAPTER IV.

The Day After.

NOT until the faint odor of bilgewater again tickled his nostrils, and he found himself once more among

the innumerable little nautical-supply shops in the vicinity of The Prune's anchorage, was Billy sure that he had come, fully into possession of his senses.

He came out on South Street, with the keen salt air sweeping into his face, and stood looking out over the great open sweep of the quays. Bordering the water-front was a dark wall of old warehouses, and the lofts of the sail-makers and boat-builders, with nautical-supply stores and saloons elbowing one another for breathing space.

Passing beyond these he searched the massive piers, stretching like long arms out into the river, along which were moored the deep-sea merchantmen. He wondered if Captain Thorpe had returned to The Prune. Time had passed more swiftly than he had thought. He looked at his watch and found that it was eleven o'clock. He was not surprised when, on reaching The Prune, he heard Thorpe's heavy voice and saw the glow of his pipe.

Thorpe looked like a pirate—huge shouldered, shaggy haired, grisly faced, and as fierce looking as any cut-throat that ever sailed the seven seas. But he loved Billy Mountain with a Sancholike fidelity, and there was a tremble of relief in his rumbling voice when he saw him approaching through the darkness.

"Another half-hour and I'd have been up there with Pedro and Miguel," he greeted Billy, gripping him by the hand. "I was beginning to think mebby you'd shot the old cuss and the police had nabbed you. If they had—"

"What then?" laughed Billy.

"There'd 've been a revolution in New York before daylight to-morrow morning," assured Thorpe seriously.

They went on deck, and Billy retired to his cabin. Now that he was alone, he went over the incidents of the evening, one by one. He had played his part well. The trap was set. To-morrow Lawler would walk into it. He did not regret that he had allowed the mysterious visitant's

escape, nor had he

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escape, nor reproach himself because he had followed her.

But he tried to convince himself that in allowing a pretty face to affect him as hers had done, he had been guilty of an inexcusable weakness. The effort was in vain. He had seen a thousand beautiful faces since the cataclysm of eight years ago, but none had impressed itself upon him so deeply as hers. He knew now that those few unforgettable moments in the dark alcove, when he felt the sweet pressure of her body, and the touch of her hair against his lips, had changed him, perhaps forever, and that a new motive had swept irresistibly into his life.

At last he went to bed. He slept but little during the night, and was glad when day broke. The morning he passed in superintending the unloading of what remained of The Prune's small cargo of fruit.

Lawler was on hand promptly at eleven. Billy greeted him with forced effusiveness, and Lawler's fleshy face fairly diffused a radiance. His vest-pockets bulged with cigars, which he unloaded on the table when they entered the cabin.

Billy picked one up, lighted a match, and hesitated. Then he put it down.

"Make yourself at home, Lawler," he said. "I've got to go over a few matters of immediate business with the captain. It won't take more than ten or fifteen minutes. Will you excuse me that long?" He forestalled any possible intention his guest might have had of going on deck by handing him a number of papers. "Do you mind looking those over?" he asked. "They describe our mahogany concessions, and I'd like your professional opinion on them."

"I'll look 'em over with pleasure," said Lawler. "Mahogany concessions, eh? That's something new to me. On the face of it—for a stock company, you know—sounds mighty good, that word mahogany. Gold, silver, lead, oil—all worked out, you know. But mahogany—that's new.

Has a pleasing sound—very. Looks good in print. Mighty pleasing to the eye. Ever think of it in that way?"

"I suppose there would be more money in selling stock than in digging out the stuff yourself," mused Billy.

"Sure as sunset!" exclaimed Lawler. "Millions more!"

Once outside, Billy made for the captain's cabin. Thorpe was waiting for him—hot water, towels, and a razor at hand. Billy stripped off his collar and dropped into a chair.

"Make good time, won't you, Thorpe?" he urged. "I don't want to keep him waiting long."

Twenty minutes later he looked at himself in a glass. His beard and mustache were gone. Smooth-shaven, darker by several shades, a little firmer about the jaw, he was again the blue-eyed Billy Mountain of eight years ago. One thing was missing, and that was the old quality of his smile; its careless good humor. The smile was there, but it was different. Lines had deepened and changed, and back of the smile that he saw now in the glass there was something terrific and impending. He went back to the cabin, where Lawler was still poring over the papers.

Lawler glanced up, and resumed his reading.

"This is interesting, Josslyn," he said. "You've got hold of a mighty big concession. It wouldn't be hard to make a winner out of this."

"It's worth a couple of million of any man's money, isn't it?" asked Billy. "I mean, of course, that there wouldn't be anything crooked about selling it."

Lawler gave an oily laugh. "It could be floated for five. Two million would be cheap."

Slowly Billy turned. His face was in the light, and as Lawler stared at him his eyes seemed to pop from his head, and his face deadened to the color of wax. His fleshy lips moved soundlessly, and from his pudgy fingers the papers dropped to the floor.

"My God!" he gasped. "You!"
 "Yes, it's I, Lawler," replied Billy quietly. "Don't you remember what I promised you on that last night—that some day I'd come back? Well, I've come!"

Lawler rose to his feet and stood like one stunned. Billy pointed to the chair.

"Sit down!" he commanded. "I want to chat with you, Lawler. The door is locked. If you make a disturbance I shall use this." He drew an automatic pistol and held it with the muzzle pointing carelessly toward his prisoner, as he seated himself across the table from him. "Sit down!" he said again.

Lawler dropped back into his chair. Under their feet there came a rumbling throb of engines, and something in Billy's cold smile filled Lawler's heart with a clammy chill.

"We're getting under way," explained Billy. "Want to look out of the window, and see the last of home, Lawler?"

Lawler wet his lips.

"You'll pay for this," he gasped. "It means the penitentiary. If it isn't a joke—"

"It isn't," assured Billy. "It's the deadliest game you ever played in your life, Lawler! Do you suppose I've waited and planned and schemed for eight years just to play a joke?"

"Was yours a joke? Do you remember the day when a young fellow named Billy Mountain walked into your office for the first time, ten years ago? He was a green-looking chap, wasn't he? He was honest, and he trusted people.

"He trusted you, above all others, because you were supposed to be his father's friend, and his father had just died. Remember, Lawler? That youngster had about twenty thousand dollars' worth of timber. And besides that he brought down with him a wife so pretty that she turned your wicked soul green with envy the moment you saw her.

"Was the thing that happened after that a joke? What a friend you were, for a time—weren't you, Lawler? You took that young fellow into your office. You paid him a larger and larger salary. You promised him a partnership—and he was green enough to believe you.

"Also, he was honest and trustful enough to think nothing wrong when you sent his wife flowers and candy and theater-tickets and took her out to high-toned dinners, while he grubbed at work in the office. Thought it was only friendship, you know. But it was a joke, wasn't it, Lawler?—a joke on me. For you robbed me of every dollar I had. And you showed her the glitter, the song, and the wine of life until she got drunk with it all, and you ruined her. Both blows came at about the same time, as I remember them.

"You took my wife first, with your money, your drink, your big promises, and your fast friends—but I didn't know it at the time. I didn't discover it all until you had stolen the timber, and then— But what's the use of going on, Lawler? It was all a joke, wasn't it?"

Not a quiver of excitement or irritation betrayed itself in Billy's voice. But it shook a little now as he leaned across and asked:

"What became of her, Lawler? Where did she go?"

Lawler tried to speak, but his voice failed him. Billy could hear the dry rattle in his throat.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm not going to kill you now, Lawler. That would be too swift and too easy for you. But I'll kill you if you lie. What became of her?"

"She—she left me for Hemmingway, the broker," throated Lawler in a hoarse, stifled voice. "He had more money. She broke up his home."

"You mean that you broke up his home," corrected Billy. "It was you who started her, Lawler. Go on. Don't be afraid of hurting me. What happened to her after that?"

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"My God, Billy—"
 "Go on!"

Lawler was sweating. There were livid lines across his face, and Billy saw that the palms of his hands were wet.

"Go on!"
 "She went from bad to worse," he finished huskily, "and she seemed to like it. Plenty of money and jewels and a carriage of her own! She wasn't fit for you, Billy. I haven't seen her in two years."

Billy rose from his chair and walked back and forth across the cabin, the pistol in his hand, and a smile which Lawler could not understand on his lips.

"No, she wasn't fit," he said with a queer softness in his voice. "I know she wasn't fit. But"—he turned, and his teeth gleamed in a cold, passionless smile—"that isn't going to save you! You're going to pay, Lawler. You're going to pay big. You're going to make restitution in capital letters. And if you want to live another half hour you're going to copy this in your own handwriting, and sign it!"

Lawler read the paper tossed on the table, and his thick lips twitched. It was a letter addressed to his private secretary. It advised him that he, Peter Lawler, was slipping quietly out of the city for a month on important business, and that during that time he wanted no one to know of his whereabouts. It also went into minute details as to his private papers and stock certificates, which he ordered to be sent to him immediately at Key West, in care of Captain Alfred Josslyn, of The Prune.

"Do you think I'm fool enough to write and sign that?" he grunted.

Billy shoved pen, ink, and paper in front of him. He took out his watch.

"I'll give you one minute in which to decide," he said. "If you don't begin in that time, Lawler, I swear to God that I will kill you where you sit!"

For twenty seconds Lawler hesitated.

There was a glitter in Billy's eyes—a deadly determination that Lawler had never faced before. His threat lay more in those eyes than in his words, and something told Lawler that he was ready to do what he had promised. Slowly he moved a pudgy hand toward the pen.

"You want all my private papers—sent to Key West—where you can rob me of them?" he asked, in a voice that was thick with fear and passion.

Billy looked at his watch. He leveled his pistol.

"You've got twenty seconds in which to make up your mind, Lawler. Twenty seconds—eighteen—fifteen—"
 Lawler began to write. When he came to the words "my personal and negotiable papers and certificates of stock" he stopped for a moment and his thick lips trembled. Then he went on.

At the end, after he had followed Billy's copy and had written "The combination to the safe is—" there was a blank. Again he hesitated, and after a moment set down a row of figures. Billy had come behind him and was looking over his shoulder. Suddenly the chilling muzzle of the automatic touched the side of Lawler's head.

"I've a mind to blow your brains out," said Billy in a quiet, cold voice. "Lawler, you're a liar! That's not the combination. I know what it is. Put it down—and if you make a mistake this time you'll not live to draw another breath!"

Lawler's hand trembled as if stricken with palsy. Billy reached over and gripped his arm.

"Wait!" he said. "We don't want any one to think you had the ague while writing this, Lawler." Then, after a moment, he added: "Now!"

Without a word Lawler wrote down the key, that Billy had seen in the girl's hand the night before—"R. V. D.—three turns each way—12—17—24," and signed his name.

"Correct," smiled Billy, taking the

paper. "We'll have this sent by special delivery, Lawler. I have an envelope here, already stamped." Now, if you will address it—"

When Lawler had finished he dropped the pen and settled weakly back in his chair, his yellow face and watery eyes turned to the man whose hopes, fortunes, and happiness he had done his best to destroy, and who stood before him now with a look in his face which sank like a clammy hand to the very life in the other's heart.

"What does this—mean?" he demanded huskily.

Billy leaned over the table.

"It means that your end has come, Lawler," he said. "No one will ever know what became of you. From this hour you've dropped out of the world. You have disappeared. My time has come, and you're mine, Lawler—mine! You're on my ship, and you're in the company of men who would die for me. There's no hope for you. Your sun has set. Restitution! Did you ever hear that word, Lawler? You're going to make it—down to the last drop of yellow blood in your knavish body! Take a last look at home if you want to. We'll soon be in the open sea."

He moved toward the door.

"I'll have your dinner sent in, Lawler."

A ghastly terror filled the other's face, and he sprang to his feet with a cry.

"Wait—stop the ship—send me back!" he cried. "I'll pay, Billy—I'll pay you back the twenty thousand—"

"And the woman?"

Lawler came nearer, rubbing his fleshy hands.

"I've—I've always been sorry for that, Billy," he went on hoarsely. "If I could have found you—if I'd known where you were—I'd have made it right long ago. I'll pay you another twenty thousand for her. And after all, Billy, she was only a—"

Billy saw the word on Lawler's lips before it was uttered. It never came.

His fist shot out and Lawler fell back over the table with a crash.

Billy went out, locking the door behind him.

CHAPTER V.

Billy Explains the Situation.

IT was night when Billy visited Lawler's cabin again. This time there followed him through the door The Prune's captain and two half-blood Spanish and Indian stokers, who could fight as well as shovel coal. Lawler was sitting in a chair under the swinging lamp. He had pushed back his untasted supper.

One side of his face was swollen, and his little eyes glittered when he saw Billy enter. He was one of those moral and physical cowards who sometimes fight desperately through sheer fear. He was ready to fight now—to leap at his enemy's throat with all the flabby strength that he possessed. But what he saw behind Billy deprived him of the power of movement and speech.

Out of the deep shadow appeared Thorpe's head—huge, red-bearded, shaggy-haired, short-necked—topping a hulk of shoulders with the breadth and strength of an ox. And behind him there came the two dark and beady-eyed faces of the half-bloods, their black hair falling to their naked shoulders. No combination of piratical cutthroats could have made a more terrible picture than these three men, silently awaiting Billy's orders, and Lawler's face faded to a ghastly yellow in the lamp-glow. For him it could mean but one thing—and that was death. Billy advanced to the table and looked down into the other's lumpy face.

"Take your medicine like a man, Lawler," he whispered almost gently. "I'm not going to kill you to-night. We've only come to begin the preparations. Don't you know—in the old days—they always prepared the sacrifice? It would be a joke on justice to

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kill you now; too quick, too easy for you. You're too fat to meet the end I've got in store for you. We're going to trim you down. Strip off your clothes, Lawler—and put on these!"

Thorpe stepped forward and flung a pair of greasy overalls at the millionaire's feet.

"Them's all you'll need," he growled, and his voice rolled out of his deep chest like low thunder. "Miguel—Pedro—git a move on!"

The half-breeds darted forward with the quickness of cats and laid their hands on Lawler. Piece by piece he was stripped of his rich and gaudy raiment until his tie, collar, waistcoat, trousers, and underwear lay in a pile on the floor. Thorpe pointed to the overalls at his feet.

"Git in!" he rumbled.

Two minutes later Lawler was led out on deck. His overfed body was naked to the waist, and his feet were bare. He uttered not a word. His head and puffy neck seemed to have shrunk into the hollow obesity of his shoulders.

Billy spoke a few low words to Thorpe and disappeared in the gloom. Lawler shivered, and the chill was not that of the wind striking his naked and bloodless flesh. Even Billy was less to be feared, he thought, than these three fierce-looking buccaneers who were dragging him along the deck. After a little a huge hand fell on his naked shoulder, and Thorpe's rumbling voice warned him to be careful in going down the ladder.

Light spread out before him dimly as he descended. He could hear a faint subterranean roar and the distant and muffled thunder of pounding engines. Then they passed through a door, and a volcano of light and heat burst into his face. In the glare two half-naked men, as murderous-looking as Miguel and Pedro, were shoveling coal into the gaping mouth of a furnace. Into this place, filled with a crackling roar, stifling hot and choked with coal and coal-dust, Lawler was

thrust. He heard Thorpe's voice in a shout of command behind him.

"Make this fat devil work!" he yelled. "Make 'im work until he can't stand, and if he objects stick a knife between his ribs! Understand?"

A shrill medley of Spanish and Indian was the response to Thorpe's command, and Lawler found himself alone with the naked horde.

Thorpe went on deck, and for an hour he and Billy smoked Lawler's fat cigars while they laid their plans for Key West. Billy was certain that Lawler's private papers and certificates of stock would follow them the next day. Thorpe, who would have gone through fire and water for him, looked serious; but Billy laughed at the risk he was taking.

He had planned and waited too long, and had contrived his trap too carefully, to fear the outcome. The papers would be addressed to Lawler, in care of Captain Josslyn; and he, as Captain Josslyn, with Lawler's own letters and a score of papers to identify him, would get them. It was quite a simple matter, less complex even than the loading of the guns and ammunition. He was explaining this to Thorpe for the third time, when a knock at the door interrupted them.

Pedro stood there, grinning and gesticulating. The two men followed him on deck. Miguel was holding a lantern over an inanimate form stretched out upon its back. It was Lawler, no longer recognizable through his covering of coal-dust and sweat. With every breath he groaned. His ponderous stomach heaved like a bellows, and his mouth was gaping. Under his arms was fastened a stout rope Thorpe laughed.

"Guess they worked him all right—eh, Billy? Worked him until he fell flat, and they had to haul him up with a rope." He turned to Pedro. "Drown the fat devil with a dozen pails of water and chuck him in a bunk. Watch him close, an' give him a work-out every third shift!"

Billy drew Thorpe aside.

"There could not be a better time than to-night," he said. "Bring him to my cabin as soon as he is in shape."

He returned to his room and pulled a small cedar chest from under his berth. Unlocking it with a key he carried in his pocket, he took from it a number of maps and papers and spread them on the table under the light of the lamp.

He bent over one of the maps, and on it began tracing a new line in ink. He was proud of this map. It had taken him four years to make it as complete as it was, and the presence of it under his fingers always stirred his blood to swifter action.

It was a map of Honduras, and Billy told himself that it was one of the completest war-maps ever made. He had walled in a dozen cities and towns, he had obliterated others, he had covered it with red lines and black lines, dots, bars, and figures, and every mark held a meaning for him. He wondered what President Cristobal Barilla, preparing for the annual fêtes in his sleeping capital of Tegucigalpa, would be willing to pay for that map and the information it contained.

How deep, he asked himself, would Guatemala go into her coffers to possess it? And Segovia, of Nicaragua, watching and waiting like an eager dog at the end of a chain—what would he have given? He recalled how Loring's jaws had set when he had suggested once that they might sell it and make themselves rich. The map in itself was complete. It invited them to strike—and little furrows grew in Billy's forehead as he thought for the thousandth time during these last three months of the one thing that was holding them back.

To-night—an hour from now—perhaps within a few minutes, he would begin the fight to overcome that last obstacle. He lighted a cigar and began pacing swiftly back and forth across the cabin floor, disturbed by the feeling that he was not quite as calm

as he should be. He and Loring had played more than one desperate game during those four years of plotting.

They had faced death and imprisonment. Twenty times during the last year they would have been shot had they been discovered in any one of their operations. But this game that he was playing with Lawler was different. He would not be shot if he failed to win. But there would be another punishment—a punishment that made him shiver when he thought of it—a possibility that had pictured itself now and then in his mind more terribly than one of those scenes he had witnessed in Tegucigalpa when revolutionists less dangerous than himself had dug their graves before they stood up to be shot.

One of those scenes rose before him now. The victim had been a mere boy, and when he had finished the trench in which his own body was to be thrown he had held his hands out to him, palms up, and had laughed coolly in Spanish. "See, *señor*, it is not many who can say they have worn blisters on their hands by digging their own grave." Five minutes later he had looked upon his limp and beautiful young body crumpled up in the trench. Billy believed that he could meet that same end with the same calm and fearless smile that had been on the Spanish boy's lips. If the time ever came when he stood with his back to the bullet-riddled old Spanish church where the executions took place, he knew that he would recall the last smile and the final words of that brave youth who had stood there before him so unflinchingly, and that they would give him a strength to die as he had died.

But in this affair with Lawler—if Lawler should win—it meant the penitentiary for him, years more to be dreaded than a quick death. He felt that the thing he was about to do was justice, and yet he knew that the law would not concede it as such. But he would win. He set his jaws till they crushed the cigar between his teeth.

When quickly rolled up the maps and papers and stood waiting.

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When he heard steps outside he quickly rolled up the maps and papers and stood waiting. Thorpe came in, followed by Lawler. With an understanding nod the captain retired immediately, closing the door after him.

There was a change in Lawler which Billy had not expected to see. He had measured the man not only as a moral coward, but as a physical one as well. But there were no signs of these weaknesses in the man who confronted him now.

His hair was wet. He was still covered with the stain of coal dust. He was only half-clad, but there was no longer the look of terror in his face. Before him Billy saw a man in whom hatred, and hatred alone, had roused the fighting energies that lay dormant in him. There was that hatred in Lawler's eyes now as he gazed unflinchingly and challengingly at Billy.

"Will you sit down, Lawler?" invited Billy, pointing to the chair opposite him.

Lawler seated himself without a word. Billy sat facing him, with his arms on the table.

"I'm glad to see you more yourself, Lawler," he began, though inwardly he regretted this change in his prisoner. "I'm glad, because I want to come down to business with you, and I don't fancy talking to a man who's shivering because he's afraid."

"It gets on my nerves. I like to see a man take his medicine like a man. Did you ever stop to think that death isn't such a fearful thing, after all—when you know that it's waiting for you, and that it's coming at a certain moment? It's not much worse than going to an operating table."

"You have been pretty close to death all these years, Lawler. I have been planning it for you. All along I have been sure that in the end I would kill you. I only waited my chance. And the chance has come. If your body is thrown into the sea to-night, weighted with a hundred pounds of lead, no one will ever find it, will they? I would

be perfectly safe, and you would be fairly punished. And yet, Lawler, I'm going to give you a chance—one chance."

Billy stopped, and for the first time the old look came back into Lawler's eyes—the look that was half hope, half entreaty, and he leaned across the table.

"I've wronged you, Billy," he said, in a husky voice. "And I don't excuse myself because a million other men have done the same thing. I'd undo it if I could. What can I do?"

"I'm going to give you a chance," repeated Billy, and suddenly he rose to his feet, the fire that he had held back flaming into his face. "I ought to kill you. I ought to shoot you or throw you into the sea. But I'm going to try you out first, Lawler. I'm going to find out if you ever really regretted the ruin you brought to me. If you have—if you regret it now—there is hope for you. Do you understand? It's up to you, Lawler. I've been thinking lately of that old, old story my mother used to tell me of the ninety and nine who never wandered away into the mountains, and who never ran up against temptation—and of that one who did and who repented. So I won't kill you—now. I'll give you the chance!"

Lawler went to speak, but Billy stopped him.

"Wait," he said. "Wait until you hear me. You've worked out a good many schemes in your time, and most of those schemes have sent men and women to hell. I know a good deal about you. I've been following you. I've trailed you back, too—back to the days you're so anxious to keep buried from the present. You've left behind you a trail choked with the ruin of others, of broken hopes, despair, men and women with the life taken out of them—with death even."

"You've never done a clean thing in your life—and now I'm giving you a chance, an opportunity to wipe off the slate a little of what you've done, to

square yourself as much as you can. I'm coming to the point now, Lawler. I've got a scheme of my own, and I need you. I don't want to coerce you into it, for that would not be proving you out. Whatever you do must be voluntary. You've got to show your good-will—your regret for the past. That's square, isn't it?"

Lawler wet his lips to speak, but only nodded. In Billy's face he saw that which held back any promises he might otherwise have dared to make. Too many years he had run the course of his own destructive and scheming life not to know to what extremes a man would go to attain his ends—were they of vengeance or of profit.

At Billy's words there had for a moment risen in him a hope that the man whom he had once done his most to destroy would let him off easy—was about, in fact, to accept the money consideration which he had offered.

This hope was dashed by what he saw in Billy's face as he continued. If the fear of personal violence and of death had been upon him a few hours before, it was another fear that possessed him now; and so he nodded, but did not speak.

Billy had taken a map from the roll, and was spreading it out under Lawler's eyes.

"That's Honduras, Lawler," he said. "That's the oldest, the richest, the most beautiful, the most despised, and the most backward single state in the two Americas. It's a garden of Eden, filled with mud huts, and houses that are painted green and yellow and pink. It's a country where there ought to be ten millions of the happiest and most prosperous people in the world, instead of half a million of the laziest and most unambitious beings that travel the face of the earth. There should be a hundred thousand Americans down there, and there aren't five hundred."

"It's bigger than the State of Pennsylvania, and outside of Sambos, Caribs, and real niggers, it hasn't a

live population the size of Kalamazoo. Maybe you don't see the drift of all this, but you will in a minute. Before I come to the main point I want you to know what this yellow blotch on the map stands for.

"It's worth more than a dozen Alaskas, because it's got climate as well as gold. Nowhere on earth are there more fertile valleys, more genial suns, softer breezes or fairer skies, and yet it's the tramp among nations—if you can call it a nation.

"It's patched at the knees, and frayed at the neck, and out behind; it goes barefooted and dirty, and it's as hard to reach its capital from New York as it is to reach the capital of Persia.

"That capital, Lawler, was a powerful city when nothing but a wigwam stood where Chicago is to-day. It's Tegucigalpa—there—where you see that red spot. Once it had thirty thousand people. Now it's got less than twenty. Wherever you see those red marks—and there are over fifty of them on that map—it means that for a hundred years the population has been going down instead of up.

"There was a time when there were a million and a half of people down there. Your latest atlas will tell you that there are three-quarters of a million now. But it's below that. It's not a human head-above five hundred thousand. And it's the richest country on earth! Do you get that, Lawler? Do you begin to see the possibilities?"

Billy paused. His face was flushed. He leaned over the table toward Lawler.

"I'm coming to the point now, Lawler," he went on. "When you drove me away I went down into Central America, and ended up in Honduras; and since then I've devoted my life to two things—plotting for Honduras, and plotting to punish you. Fate has made them work hand in hand. For that reason you've got to understand a little more of what that yellow blotch means."

"For the drift of all minute. Before I want you to know what this yellow blotch on the

map stands for. It's worth more than a dozen Alaskas, because it's got climate as well as gold. Nowhere on earth are there more fertile valleys, more genial suns, softer breezes or fairer skies, and yet it's the tramp among nations—if you can call it a nation.

"It's patched at the knees, and frayed at the neck, and out behind; it goes barefooted and dirty, and it's as hard to reach its capital from New York as it is to reach the capital of Persia.

"That capital, Lawler, was a powerful city when nothing but a wigwam stood where Chicago is to-day. It's Tegucigalpa—there—where you see that red spot. Once it had thirty thousand people. Now it's got less than twenty. Wherever you see those red marks—and there are over fifty of them on that map—it means that for a hundred years the population has been going down instead of up.

"There was a time when there were a million and a half of people down there. Your latest atlas will tell you that there are three-quarters of a million now. But it's below that. It's not a human head-above five hundred thousand. And it's the richest country on earth! Do you get that, Lawler? Do you begin to see the possibilities?"

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"For thirty years there was a revolution a year down there, Lawler. Last year the United States had to land marines three times at Amalpa, Ceiba, and Puerto Cortés. They don't have elections. They have revolutions. To be the government means to be in possession of the customs offices. That has been the condition for more than fifty years. And meanwhile the people of the United States have sat up here, as blind as bats, enjoying themselves hugely over what they have called the 'opera-bouffe affairs' of a country which they picture as a jumble of swamps, jungles, miasma, and snakes, with a few greasers thrown in to scrap like a lot of kids and make fun for the rest of the world.

"These same people have missed the opportunity of a century, Lawler. Twenty-five thousand good Americans and a few million dollars would mighty soon make that country turn out a hundred million dollars in exports, in place of four million. You'd soon see cities down there with populations of thousands instead of hundreds. There'd be steamship lines, schools, factories, commerce—and a million settlers within ten years.

"This may sound like a dream, but we're going to prove it. Within the next two months the biggest and the last revolution in Honduras will be pulled off. Every wire is laid. We're almost ready to strike. It means the end of the old régime.

"There'll be no revolutions after that, because Honduras will be thrown wide open to the world. Our government is going to ask the United States to step in and collect our customs, as she is doing down in San Domingo, keeping out a percentage for the payment of the millions of dollars of debts that have piled up under the old governments.

"That will give us at least ten years of peace, and by that time there'll be so many Americans in Honduras that the man who utters the word 'revolution' will be lynched by his neigh-

bors. There's just one thing we lack to insure our absolute success, Lawler, and you can furnish that. Therein lies the chance of redemption I'm giving you. You're rich. You can get hold of two million dollars in cash within a few weeks. And we need those millions, not to start the revolution, but to hold our heads above water after we've won it.

"I've told you all this so that you would fully understand the tremendous boon to humanity it is within your power to give. Think of it! Your name will go down in history as one who sacrificed his all to assist in giving birth to a nation. We want you, Lawler. We want your sympathy, your help—your two million!"

Lawler sat like one stunned. For a few moments after Billy had stopped he seemed powerless to speak. He was so amazed that his hands fell limp, and his jaws hung loose. Slowly the look of stupefaction passed from his countenance and he laughed. He rose from his chair, still without speaking. Behind that laugh there was his old malice—all his hatred for Billy Mountain.

"You're going to try and force me to sign over my stocks and negotiable papers, are you?" he asked, defiantly. "Well, you'll have a job of it. You can go to hell and be damned!"

Billy coolly lighted a cigar. "Did I hint at that, Lawler?" he replied in mild surprise. "I tried to make myself understood. No, I'm not going to force you to sign anything. I had the papers sent on to Key West in order that you might have them right at hand, if you made up your mind to join our cause."

"I admit it doesn't look very promising from a financial point of view, for there would be nothing in it for you—no concessions, no guarantees, no melons to cut. It simply offers you the opportunity to do some good in the world, and so I have given you the chance. I'm not going to attempt to argue you into it, much less try to force you against your own inclina-

tions. Anyway, think it over, Lawler."

"You can kill me!" cried Lawler, with sudden ferocity. "You can shoot me, you can throw me into the sea, but I'll not sign one of those papers that you expect to get at Key West. I've offered you forty thousand dollars for my freedom, and you'll not get a cent more!"

Billy walked to the door. He opened it. Thorpe and Pedro were waiting.

"You can have Lawler now," he said, and stood back while his prisoner passed out. Lawler did not look at him, and Billy noticed that his naked neck was curiously red as he went through the door.

"He's got nerve," he muttered to himself, after they had gone. "He's not such a coward after all!"

Fifteen minutes later Captain Thorpe tapped at the door, and thrust in his shaggy head.

"How did it come out, Billy?" he inquired.

"Fine!" exclaimed Billy. "It couldn't have been better, Thorpe—not if he'd pulled two millions in bills out of his pocket and handed them to me!"

CHAPTER VI.

Josephine.

ALONE in his room, Billy had to face the fact that in Lawler he had found a different man than he had previously judged him to be. He had scarcely expected that his old enemy would contribute his assistance to the revolutionary movement without some effort to escape the sacrifice of his fortune. He did not underestimate the other's shrewdness and the foxlike cunning that had made him powerful and rich. He knew that he was dealing with a man whose trickery was an art, but he had thought that he was a coward.

The manner of his defiance was something unexpected and a little disconcerting, notwithstanding the fact

that up to the present moment everything had worked out even better than Billy had hoped for. He believed that he was acting charitably toward Lawler. In their first meeting in the cabin his hands had "itched" to grip at the other's throat. The desire to leap upon him and to have at last the satisfaction which the law could not give him, had been almost overwhelming.

But he had held himself back, until the last moment, when he had struck him. He had regretted that act an instant later. And now he was surprised to find that the hatred and desire for retaliation that he had smothered in his breast for years were growing less. Always with thought of Lawler there had come to him a vision of her whom Lawler had robbed him of, and whom he had ruined.

He had long ago grown to despise the woman who appeared to him in these visions, but the visions brought memories that stirred him like a fever. He could not account for the change in himself now. And there was a change. Was it because another face was associated with Lawler now?

If it had not been for him, if he had not come to New York, he would not have met the beautiful girl who was filling his thoughts more every hour, even though he knew he would never see her again. He wondered if that was why he felt less bitter toward Lawler.

Many times he asked himself what the girl could have wanted in Lawler's safe. A few minutes later, if Lawler had not returned, he might have found out. The weapon that covered his breast was trembling even as the crash of the elevator door came to their ears.

Another minute and he was sure that the girl would have broken down, and the revolver would have fallen to the floor. What would have happened then? Would she have revealed her secret to him? Would she have uncovered some other dark page in Lawler's ugly life? Or was she after the money and papers in the safe, urged

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on to the perpetration of robbery by the man whom she had later met in the theater?

This Billy could not believe. He was certain now that a deeper motive than robbery had brought her to the office, and slowly there began growing in him the conviction that Lawler had it in his power to clear up the mystery of that night, if he could be made to speak. Lawler did not know of the girl's visit—of her effort to open his safe—but that he could give a motive for the visit Billy had not a doubt. He was urged now by the thought that he had one more reason for playing a winning hand in his game with this man.

He made up his mind to change none of his plans, and so instructed Captain Thorpe before he went to bed. Every six hours after that Lawler went through the torment of the stoke-hole.

Once, the second day out, Billy visited him there. Unperceived he stood and watched the ponderous and shapeless bulk as it toiled in sweat and grime and heat. At last he spoke. Lawler was backing from the red mouth of the furnace. He turned. In an instant his blackened face was distorted with rage. His teeth gleamed in a snarl between his thick lips, and with a cry that was all but drowned in the roar of the furnaces, he raised his shovel and sprang toward Billy.

With the quickness of cats Miguel and Pedro were upon him. Under their weight he crashed down upon a pile of cinders, and together they throttled and beat him until his head and shoulders were almost buried in the mass. Billy shouted a command and the half-bloods drew off like well-trained dogs. He did not wait for Lawler to rise, but went on deck. Three times after that he came up and viewed him as he lay panting in the open air after his hour in the furnace room.

Just before The Prune reached Key West, Thorpe came into Billy's cabin, and his face was serious. "It ain't working worth a damn,"

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Billy," he said, fingering his shaggy beard. "He's got over his fright, and the harder we work 'im the closer we have to watch 'im. If he thought he could escape by doing murder, he'd do it."

"He'll change," replied Billy confidently. "He'll toe the line pretty soon. If he doesn't—" He smiled in a way that made Thorpe shrug his huge shoulders.

Early in the afternoon The Prune ran through the outer line of reefs and crossed the channel. It was Thorpe's design to attract as little attention to his vessel as possible, so he ran in among the lower wharfs, where a score of nondescript craft, whose trade was plying between the Bahamas, Cuba, Bonaca, Caymans, and other out-of-the-way places, were tied up. He found a berth behind a weather-beaten two-master from the Marquesas, whose crew was unloading a cargo of green turtles, and alongside a wharf where a score of negroes and Cubans were spreading out a shipload of sponges to dry in the sun and salt air.

A short distance away, midway between the upper and the lower shipping, was anchored a beautiful yacht. The vessel was pure white, and looked like a miniature cruiser. On her bow in gilt letters, was the name Sans Souci.

Captain Thorpe had not much more than nosed The Prune into her berth when Billy observed that a small boat was heading toward them from the yacht. There were three men in the boat. One, seated in the stern, was dressed in a white yachting suit. When within a hundred yards of them the small boat swung parallel with The Prune, and both Thorpe and Billy observed that the man in the stern was scanning them closely through a pair of glasses.

Thorpe's face betrayed a curious and uneasy interest. "That fellow hung a little too close when I was here on my last trip," he said under his breath. "He even had

the nerve to follow me out of port. I got away from him in a fog. I found out who the owner was over at Big Blanco. He's a Spaniard, with half a dozen plantations in Cuba. His name is Juan Costillo—damned suspicious. If he's hunting for trouble—"The big captain laughed in his beard. "Gad, wouldn't it be exciting!"

"You suspect he may be watching this port in the interests of Barilla?"

"That's my guess—if he has any business here at all. He'll bear watching. If I were you I wouldn't lose any time in Key West. We'll slip away before dark, and see if he follows."

Fifteen minutes later Billy was on his way to the express office. He saw nothing of the men who had gone ashore in the small boat until he reached the office, when he was surprised to find that one of them had preceded him. It struck him that the coincidence was not a natural one, and he felt convinced that Thorpe's suspicions were far from groundless.

And yet, on second thought, the unreasonable suspicion that had flashed into his head became apparent. The man had not followed him. He had preceded him. And he could not have known that he was going to visit the express office. Only Lawler and Thorpe knew that. He made no attempt to conceal his satisfaction when the agent told him that he had a package addressed in care of Captain Josslyn, and he had no difficulty in proving that he was the person to whom it was to be delivered.

Thorpe was pacing The Prune's deck when Billy returned. The captain drew him behind one of the cabins and thrust a pair of binoculars into his hand.

"Take a look at that dago and see what you see!" he exclaimed.

Billy fixed the glasses to his eyes, with Thorpe's voice enjoining him to show no more than his head from behind the cabin. At first he thought the yacht's deck was completely deserted. Then he discovered a man. He was

sitting in one of the deck-house doors, with only his head and shoulders visible above the yacht's snowy rail. He was scrutinizing The Prune through a glass. Thorpe's hand fell on Billy's shoulder.

"Do you see 'im?" he asked. "He's been watching us like that ever since you went ashore. Now, what the devil is he looking for? Don't suppose he's fool enough to think we'd load our stuff here, do you? I wonder—" He looked suddenly into Billy's face and laughed. "By Crimble, I wonder if he's trying to locate Billy Mountain, and can't do it because you've cut your whiskers off!"

"It may be," said Billy, returning the glass to Thorpe. "But I have my doubts. If the Sans Souci is carrying Barilla's colors on the quiet, this fellow has no reason for wanting to locate Billy Mountain. You're here, Thorpe, whiskers and all, and they're blind idiots if they don't know by this time that wherever they find Captain David Thorpe there's something doing in the way of filibustering. If they're on to their game they're wise to the fact that they're not going to load with turtles or sponges. Do you think she can fight?"

"I've been trying to make up my mind," replied Thorpe. "Did you notice the dark lines around her ports? It's possible they're doors that can be thrown open for guns, but I doubt it. She has good decks, but you can't see through her bulwarks. But if it comes to fighting—" He rumbled gleefully, and his huge hand gripped Billy's arm. "If it comes to that, Billy, with a good open sea around us and no Stars and Stripes in sight, she's going to get into a bad mess if she tackles The Prune!"

"Wouldn't she make a corking little cruiser to start off the new government's fleet with?" mused Billy half to himself. "By Jove—"

Thorpe was reaching out a big hand to him when he turned.

"Shake, Billy!" he entreated. "If

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she puts just one shot after us—just one—" He did not finish, but he saw understanding in Billy's eyes.

Both Thorpe and Billy were eager to get under way, but not until an hour before sunset did Thorpe bring his vessel out into the channel. The Prune's captain was filled with an almost feverish desire to see what the yacht would do, while, on the other hand, Billy was anxious to get out of sight and sound of shipping so that he could have an interview with Lawler.

Thorpe's savage prayer for the good Lord to furnish him at once with a real sea-fight was still in Billy's ears when he told Pedro and Miguel to bring Lawler to his cabin. If he had hoped to see a weakening in his old enemy he was disappointed. Peter Lawler coolly opened the package that Billy gave him, selected from it three or four envelopes, and tossed the remainder of the papers on the table under Billy's nose.

"There they are," he said. "Those are the stock certificates and other negotiable papers. They're worth over a million dollars—when my name's on 'em. These that I have kept out are papers without a value that don't belong to me. This"—and he held one of the envelopes so that Billy could read the name upon it—"belongs to a friend of mine." On the envelope Billy read:

MR. PAUL WINTON

"And these," added Lawler, holding up the papers he had selected from the package, "also belong to others, and have no value to a thief. I suppose you'll let me keep them in my possession."

"Certainly," replied Billy. "I'd tell you to take them all if you had a place for them, Lawler. I'll take good care of them for you, however. I am sorry now that I took the trouble to have them sent to Key West. I was sure you would accept the chance I offered you. Inasmuch as you are determined not to accept that chance, I

will have them returned to your secretary, so that nothing will be lost to your heirs."

Lawler's eyes popped. His air of bravado shrank away from him, and he crushed the papers in his hand. Billy saw the change without seeming to notice it. He had hoped that in this meeting Lawler would reveal some sign of yielding. But he did not wish to force the situation, and so he called to Pedro and Miguel. Scarcely had they entered when Thorpe burst in with a muffled yell.

"Glory be!" he shouted. "The dago's after us, Billy! He's up anchor—and entering the channel, straight as a die in our wake for the Keys!"

The interruption checked whatever words had been on Lawler's lips, and he fell in between the two half-bloods, who escorted him back to his quarters.

Billy went on deck with Thorpe. Amidships half a dozen men were tugging at ropes about one of the open hatches, and as Billy took his eyes from the yacht, slowly making her way from the harbor into the channel, the black muzzle of a six-pounder rose above the deck. Before The Prune had passed the outer rim of the Keys the six-pounder, two four-pounders, and a machine-gun were being assembled on their carriages.

"If she only throws a shot off way!" groaned Thorpe prayerfully. "If she only does!"

Both The Prune and the Sans Souci were soon in the open sea, and as darkness hid all but the lights of the two vessels, Captain Thorpe struck a bold course for Lone Man's Key, where the munitions of war were waiting. While it soon became apparent that the Spaniard was giving chase, it was equally evident that he did not wish to approach near enough to arouse suspicions, and Thorpe was jubilant.

"If they're going to tackle us they won't begin the fun until we've got the stuff aboard," he decided. "That's their game, and we'll load in a hurry."

It was ten o'clock when The Prune ran in under the lee of a small and thickly wooded key, and three low blasts from her whistle, repeated twice, brought an almost immediate reply from shore—a revolver-shot.

Thorpe responded to this by firing his own revolver twice, and a few minutes later a small boat ran alongside. The lights of the yacht had disappeared, and during the two hours that followed those aboard The Prune did not catch another glimpse of them. At the end of that time six hundred rifles, three Gatling guns, and five hundred thousand rounds of ammunition were stored in the hold. Of the four cargoes of a similar nature that Thorpe had taken during the past eight months, this was the largest, and in spite of the captain's eagerness for a fight with the Spaniard, it was with some misgiving that Billy foresaw the possibility of a mix-up with the cruiserlike yacht. In the enthusiasm of the moment he had given Thorpe to understand that he would welcome an opportunity to make a capture of the Sans Souci. He knew, however, that if the Spaniard was actually in the service of the Honduran government, though under private ownership, he would be equipped with both guns and men sufficient to make of him a formidable adversary, and the thought that a possible sea-fight might send to smash all of his plans of years compelled him to express his doubts to The Prune's captain.

Under protest, Thorpe doused the ship's lights, and Billy retired to his berth toward dawn, convinced that they had given the strange yacht the slip.

It was seven o'clock when a heavy pounding at his door roused him from his slumber. At his invitation Thorpe came in. Billy could see that he had not been to bed, and that something unusual had happened.

"Lawler is not feeling well this morning," he said, "and I have given him the freedom of the deck. Thought

mebby you'd like to have him see what's going to happen, too. The Spaniard's about four miles astern, and coming up fast. I can make out the Nicaraguan colors at his peak. I've pulled down to half speed, and we're looking for a shell any minute."

He spoke quietly, but there was that in his voice which brought Billy out of his bunk with a bound. In three minutes he was on deck with Thorpe. In spite of his hope that the Spaniard would not overtake them again, his blood leaped at what he saw. A dozen of Thorpe's men, most of whom had shipped as stokers, were gathered about the guns, and were ready for action.

One of the hatches was raised, with a ladder dropping into the hold on each side. Piles of tarpaulin covered the four and six pounders, but the breeches were open and gleamed in the morning sun. Like a great white gull the Spaniard was coming up behind.

Lawler stood between the open hatch, and the half-naked men crouched under the bulwark near the stern guns. His face was white and tense with fear, and yet as Billy came up he could not keep a gleam of triumph from betraying itself in his eyes.

"Looks as though you're in for it," he spoke sneeringly. "United States cruiser, eh? And they're going to get you, too!"

"If they do it won't help you, Lawler," said Billy quietly. "They won't do much to us for filibustering. They might send me to the penitentiary for running off with you in the way I have. But they'll never know. If we see they've got us my men have instructions to shoot you and drop you into the sea. It's hard on you, Lawler. But I can't help it."

"Good God!" gasped Lawler. "You mean—"

"That's just what I mean," nodded Billy. "If it was a United States cruiser you'd be as good as dead. You may thank Heaven that it isn't. It's a Spaniard, and if he tackles us

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The yacht came up swiftly. At the end of twenty minutes Thorpe gave a low command, and shells were shipped into the breeches of the guns. Thorpe himself loaded the machine gun, with Miguel and Pedro grinning at his back. From the yacht's deck not more than half a dozen men could be seen aboard The Prune. Through their glasses both Billy and Thorpe watched the Sans Souci. There was no sign of activity or of guns aboard her. Half a mile astern she altered her course a little. A third of a mile—a quarter—and Thorpe cursed under his breath. The faces of the men were growing dark with disappointment. Five minutes later Thorpe turned to Billy and rumbled forth a single word: "Damn!"

Like a great bird the yacht swept alongside, her golden name gleaming in the sun. Three or four white-clad figures were lounging about her deck, and suddenly Lawler ran to the rail with a strange cry. Billy was close at his side. He saw Lawler's hands grip upon the wood. He saw the sudden

swelling of the muscles in his neck, and as the yacht swept past he scanned her decks with his glass. Several people were seated aft. One of these was a woman, and as she came within the focus of his glass Billy felt that for an instant every drop of blood in his body had surged to his heart. She was looking in his direction. She wore no hat—and he knew that he was not mistaken.

"It's Josephine!" he gasped. In his astonishment he spoke the words aloud. A hand caught him by the arm, but he paid no attention to it. Close beside the girl stood the young Spaniard he had seen in the theater. The yacht swept on, and Lawler's voice sounded in his ear.

"Will you—will you let me take your glass?" he asked, as if choking.

For the first time Billy observed the strange excitement in Lawler's face, and he gave him the glass. Lawler glued it to his eyes. When he turned to Billy again his lips and whole body were quivering.

"Thanks," he said, and he went to move away, but as he did so Billy caught him by the shoulder.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

FOR YOUR THREE BEST FRIENDS

HERE IS AN IDEA

Send me the names and addresses of three of your friends who you think will be interested in the stories in THE CAVALIER, and I will send them sample copies direct from this office. You might, if you wish, to prepare them for the coming of the magazine, write to them as well, and say that sample copies of THE CAVALIER are being sent them at your request.

This is just a suggestion. If it is too much trouble, don't do it, but I will appreciate it if you do, and you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have let your friends in on a good thing.

EDITOR, THE CAVALIER, Flatiron Building, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York.