

Flowing Gold

Rex Beach

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Flowing Gold, by Rex Beach

Copyright laws are changing all over the world. Be sure to check the copyright laws for your country before downloading or redistributing this or any other Project Gutenberg eBook.

This header should be the first thing seen when viewing this Project Gutenberg file. Please do not remove it. Do not change or edit the header without written permission.

Please read the "legal small print," and other information about the eBook and Project Gutenberg at the bottom of this file. Included is important information about your specific rights and restrictions in how the file may be used. You can also find out about how to make a donation to Project Gutenberg, and how to get involved.

****Welcome To The World of Free Plain Vanilla Electronic Texts****

****eBooks Readable By Both Humans and By Computers, Since 1971****

*******These eBooks Were Prepared By Thousands of Volunteers!*******

Title: Flowing Gold

Author: Rex Beach

Release Date: September, 2004 [EBook #6425]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on December 10, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK, FLOWING GOLD *****

Produced by Joshua Hutchinson, Charles Aldarondo and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

[Illustration: See p. 34 "I'M AWFULLY SORRY, TOO, DAD"]

Livros Grátis

<http://www.livrosgratis.com.br>

Milhares de livros grátis para download.

FLOWING GOLD

By Rex Beach

TO THE ONE WHOSE FAITH, ENTHUSIASM, AND DEVOTION CONSTITUTE A NEVER-FAILING SOURCE OF INSPIRATION, MY WIFE, SWEETHEART, AND PARTNER.

FLOWING GOLD

CHAPTER I

Room service at the Ajax is of a quality befitting the newest, the largest, and the most expensive hotel in Dallas. While the standard of excellence is uniformly high, nevertheless some extra care usually attaches to a breakfast ordered from the Governor's suite--most elegant and most expensive of all the suites--hence the waiter checked over his card and made a final, fluttering examination to be sure that the chilled fruit was chilled and that the hot plates were hot before he rapped on the door. A voice, loud and cheery, bade him enter.

Would the gentleman wish his breakfast served in the parlor or --No, the gentleman would have it right in his bedroom; but first, where were his cigarettes? He hoped above all things that the waiter had not forgotten his cigarettes. Some people began their days with cold showers--nothing less than a cruel shock to a languid nervous system. An atrocious practice, the speaker called it--a relic of barbarism--a fetish of ignorance. Much preferable was a hygienic, stimulating cigarette which served the same purpose and left no deleterious aftereffects.

The pajama-clad guest struck a light, inhaled with abundant satisfaction, and then cast a hungry eye over the contents of the rubber-tired breakfast table. He, too, tested the temperature of the melon and felt the cover of the toast plate.

"Splendid!" he cried. "Nice rooms, prompt service, a pleasant-faced waiter. Why, I couldn't fare better in my best club. Thanks to you, my first impression of Dallas is wholly delightful." He seated himself in a padded boudoir chair, unfolded a snowy serviette and attacked his breakfast with the enthusiasm of a perfectly healthy animal.

"Is this your first visit here, sir?"

"Absolutely. Dallas is as foreign to me as Lhasa. It is the Baghdad of my dreams and its streets are strange. Perhaps they are full of adventure for me. I hope so. Anything exciting can happen in a town where one has neither friends nor acquaintances, eh? You are a well-read man, I take it."

"I? Why--"

"At any rate, you have heard it said that this is a small world."

"Yes, sir."

"Good! I merely wish to deny authorship of the saying, for it is false. This is a large world. What is more, it is a world full of cities like Dallas where men like you and me, Heaven be praised, have neither friends, acquaintances, nor relatives. In that respect, it is a fine world and we should devoutly give thanks for its Dallases and its--Dalsatians. Jove! This ham is delicious!"

The waiter was accustomed to "morning talkers," but this gentleman was different. He had an air of consequence, and his voice, so deep, so well modulated, so pleasant, invested him with unusual distinction. Probably he was an actor! But no! Not in the Governor's suite. More likely he was one of the big men of the Standard, or the Gulf, or the Texas. To make sure, the waiter inquired:

"May I ask if you are in oil, sir?"

"In oil? Bless me, what a nauseating question--at this hour of the day!"

"Most everybody here is in oil. We turn dozens away every day, we're that full. It's the boom. I'm in oil myself--in a small way, of course. It's like this: sometimes gentlemen like--well, like you, sir--give me tips. They drop a hint, like, about their stocks, and I've done well--in a small way, of course. It doesn't cost them anything and--some of them are very kind. You'd really be surprised."

"Oh, not at all." The occupant of the Governor's suite leaned back in his chair and smiled widely. "As a matter of fact, I am flattered, for it is evident that you are endowed with the money-making instinct and that you unerringly recognize it in others. Very well, I shall see what I can do for you. But while we are on the subject of tips, would you mind helping yourself to a dollar out of my trousers pocket?"

The waiter proceeded to do as directed, but a moment later announced, apologetically: "Here's all I find, sir. It's mostly pennies." He exposed a handful of small coins.

"Look in my coat, if you will."

But the second search resulted as had the first. "Strange!" murmured the guest, without rising. "I must have been robbed. I remember now, a fellow crowded me as I left my train. Um--m! Robbed--at the very gates of Baghdad! Dallas is a City of Adventure. Please add your tip to the check, and--make it two dollars. I'd like to have you serve me every morning, for I cannot abide an acid face at breakfast. It sours my whole day."

Calvin Gray finished his breakfast, smoked a second cigarette as he scanned the morning paper, then he dressed himself with meticulous care. He possessed a tall, erect, athletic form, his perfectly fitting clothes had that touch of individuality affected by a certain few of New York's exclusive tailors, and when he finally surveyed himself in the glass, there was no denying the

fact that he presented an appearance of unusual distinction. As he turned away, his eyes fell upon the scanty handful of small coins which the waiter had removed from his pocket and for a moment he stared at them reflectively, then he scooped them into his palm and, with a smile, announced to his image:

"It would seem that it is time for us to introduce ourselves to the management."

He was humming a tune as he strode out of his richly furnished quarters.

The Governor's suite at the Ajax is on the mezzanine floor, at the head of the grand staircase. As Gray descended the spacious marble steps, he saw that the hotel was indeed doing a big business, for already the lobby was thickly peopled and at the desk a group of new arrivals were plaintively arguing with a bored and supercilious room clerk.

Some men possess an effortless knack of commanding attention and inspiring courtesy. Calvin Gray was one of these. Before many moments, he was in the manager's office, explaining, suavely, "Now that I have introduced myself, I wish to thank you for taking care of me upon such short notice."

"It was the only space we had. If you wish, I'll have your rooms changed as soon as--"

"Have you something better?"

Haviland, the manager, laughed and shook his head. "Scarcely! That suite is our pet and our pride. There's nothing to beat it in the whole Southwest."

"It is very nice. May I inquire the rate?"

"Twenty-five dollars a day."

"Quite reasonable." Mr. Gray beamed his satisfaction.

"It is the only suite we have left. We've put beds in the parlors of the others, and frequently we have to double up our guests. This oil excitement is a blessing to us poor innkeepers. I presume it's oil that brings you here?"

Gray met the speaker's interrogatory gaze with a negative shake of the head and a smile peculiarly noncommittal. "No," he declared. "I'm not in the oil business and I have no money to invest in it. I don't even represent a syndicate of Eastern capitalists. On the contrary, I am a penniless adventurer whom chance alone has cast upon your hospitable grand staircase." These words were spoken with a suggestion of mock modesty that had precisely the effect of a deliberate wink, and Mr. Haviland smiled and nodded his complete comprehension.

"I get you," said he. "And you're right. The lease hounds would devil you to death if you gave them a chance. Now then, if there's any way in which I can be of service--"

"There is." Gray's tone was at once businesslike. "Please give me the names of your leading bankers. I mean the strongest and the most--well, discreet."

During the next few minutes Gray received and swiftly tabulated in his mind a deal of inside information usually denied to the average stranger; the impression his swift, searching questions made upon the hotel manager was evident when the latter told him as he rose to go:

"Don't feel that you have to identify yourself at the banks to-day. If we can accommodate you--cash a check or the like--"

"Thank you." The caller shook his head and smiled his appreciation of the offer. "Your manner of conducting a hotel impresses me deeply, and I shall speak of it to some of my Eastern friends. Live executives are hard to find."

It is impossible to analyze or to describe that quality of magnetic charm which we commonly term personality, nevertheless it is the most potent influence in our social and our business lives. It is a gift of the gods, and most conspicuous successes, in whatever line, are due to it. Now and then comes an individual who is cold, even repellent, and yet who rises to full accomplishment by reason of pure intellectual force or strength of character; but nine times out of ten the man who gets ahead, be he merchant, banker, promoter, or crook, does so by reason of this abstract asset, this intangible birthright.

Gray possessed that happy quality. It had made itself felt by the waiter who brought his breakfast and by the manager of the hotel; its effect was equally noticeable upon the girl behind the cigar counter, where he next went. An intimate word or two and she was in a flutter. She sidetracked her chewing gum, completely ignored her other customers, and helped him select a handful of her choicest sixty-cent Havanas. When he finally decided to have her send the rest of the box of fifty up to his room and signed for them, she considered the transaction a tribute to her beauty rather than to her ability as a saleswoman. Her admiring eyes followed him clear across the lobby.

Even the blase bell-captain, by virtue of his calling a person of few enthusiasms and no illusions, edged up to the desk and inquired the name of the distinguished stranger "from the No'th."

Gray appeared to know exactly what he wanted to do, for he stopped at the telephone booths, inquired the number of the leading afternoon newspaper, and put in a call for it. When it came through he asked for the city editor. He closed the sound-proof door before voicing his message, then he began, rapidly:

"City editor? Well, I'm from the Ajax Hotel, and I have a tip for you. I'm one of the room clerks. Listen! Calvin Gray is registered here--got in last night, on gum shoes.... Gray! _Calvin Gray_! Better shoot a reporter around and get a story.... You _don't_? Well, other people know him. He's a character--globe trotter, soldier of fortune, financier. He's been everywhere and done everything, and you can get a great story if you've got a man clever enough to make him talk. But he won't loosen easily....

Oil, I suppose, but--... Sure! Under cover. Mystery stuff! Another big syndicate probably.... Oh, that's all right. I'm an old newspaper man myself. Don't mention it."

All American cities, these days, are much the same. Character, atmosphere, distinctiveness, have been squeezed out in the general mold. For all Calvin Gray could see, as he made his first acquaintance with Dallas, he might have been treading the streets of Los Angeles, of Indianapolis, of Portland, Maine, or of Portland, Oregon. A California brightness and a Florida warmth to the air, a New England alertness to the pedestrians, a Manhattan majesty to some of the newer office buildings, these were the most outstanding of his first impressions.

Into the largest and the newest of these buildings Gray went, a white tile and stone skyscraper, the entire lower floor of which was devoted to an impressive banking room. He sent his card in to the president, and spent perhaps ten minutes with that gentleman. He had called merely to get acquainted, so he explained; he wished to meet only the heads of the strongest financial institutions; he had no favors to ask--as yet, and he might have no business whatever with them. On the other hand--well, he was a slow and careful investigator, but when he moved, it was with promptitude and vigor, and in such an event he wished them to know who he was. Meanwhile, he desired no publicity, and he hoped his presence in Dallas would not become generally known--it might seriously interfere with his plans.

Before he left the bank Gray had met the other officers, and from their manner he saw that he had created a decided impression upon them. The bank president himself walked with him to the marble railing, then said:

"I'd like to have you wait and meet my son, Lieutenant Roswell. He's just back from overseas, and--the boy served with some distinction. A father's pride, you understand?"

"Was Lieutenant Roswell in France?" Gray inquired, quickly.

"Oh yes. He'll be in at any minute."

A shadow of regret crossed the caller's face. "I'm sorry, but I've arranged to call on the mayor, and I've no time to lose. What unit was your son with?"

"The Ninety-eighth Field Artillery."

The shadow fled. Mr. Gray was vexed at the necessity for haste, but he would look forward to meeting the young hero later.

"And meanwhile," Roswell, senior, said, warmly, "if we can be of service to you, please feel free to call upon us. I dare say we'd be safe in honoring a small check." He laughed pleasantly and clapped his caller on the back.

A fine man, Gray decided as he paused outside the bank. And here was another offer to cash a check--the second this morning. Good address and an expensive tailor certainly did count: with them as capital, a man could take a profit at any time. Gray's fingers

strayed to the small change in his trousers pocket and he turned longing eyes back toward the bank interior. Without doubt it was a temptation, especially inasmuch as at that moment his well-manicured right hand held in its grasp every cent that he possessed.

This was not the first time he had been broke. On the contrary, during his younger days he had more than once found himself in that condition and had looked upon it as an exciting experience, as a not unpleasant form of adventure. To be strapped in a mining camp, for instance, was no more than a mild embarrassment. But to find oneself thirty-eight years old, friendless and without funds in a city the size of Dallas--well, that was more than an adventure, and it afforded a sort of excitement that he believed he could very well do without. Dallas was no open-handed frontier town; it was a small New York, where life is settled, where men are suspicious, and where fortunes are slow in the making. He wondered now if hard, fast living had robbed him of the punch to make a new beginning; he wondered, too, if the vague plans at the back of his mind had anything to them or if they were entirely impracticable. Here was opportunity, definite, concrete, and spelled with a capital O, here was a deliberate invitation to avail himself of a short cut out of his embarrassment. A mere scratch of a pen and he would have money enough to move on to some other Dallas, and there gain the start he needed--enough, at least, so that he could tip his waiter and pay cash for his Coronas. Business men are too gullible, any how; it would be a good lesson to Roswell and Haviland. Why not--?

Calvin Gray started, he recoiled slightly, the abstracted stare was wiped from his face, for an officer in uniform had brushed past him and entered the bank. That damned khaki again! Those service stripes! They were forever obtruding themselves, it seemed. Was there no place where one could escape the hateful sight of them? His chain of thought had been snapped, and he realized that there could be no short cut for him. He had climbed through the ropes, taken his corner, and the gong had rung; it was now a fight to a finish, with no quarter given. He squared his shoulders and set out for the hotel, where he felt sure he would find a reporter awaiting him.

CHAPTER II

The representative of the Dallas Post had anticipated some difficulty in interviewing the elusive Calvin Gray--whoever he might be--but luck appeared to be with him, for shortly after his arrival at the hotel the object of his quest appeared. Mr. Gray was annoyed at being discovered; he was, in fact, loath to acknowledge his identity. Having just returned from an important conference with some of the leading financiers of the city, his mind was burdened with affairs of weight, and then, too, the mayor was expecting him--luncheon probably--hence he was in no mood to be interviewed. Usually Mr. Gray's secretary saw interviewers. However, now that his identity was known, he had not the heart to be discourteous to a fellow journalist. Yes! He had once owned a newspaper--in Alaska. Incidentally, it was the farthest-north

publication in the world.

Alaska! The reporter pricked up his ears. He managed to elicit the fact that Mr. Gray had operated mines and built railroads there; that he had been forced into the newspaper game merely to protect his interests from the depredations of a gang of political grafters, and that it had been a sensational fight while it lasted. This item was duly jotted down in the reportorial memory.

Alaska was a hard country, quite so, but nothing like Mexico during the revolution. Mexican sugar and mahogany, it transpired, had occupied Mr. Gray's attention for a time, as had Argentine cattle, Yucatan hennequin, and an engineering enterprise in Bolivia, not to mention other investments closer to home.

Once the speaker had become reconciled to the distasteful necessity of talking about himself, he suggested an adjournment to his rooms, where he would perhaps suffer less embarrassment by reason of his unavoidable use of the personal pronoun.

Gray noted the effect upon his visitor of the Governor's suite and soon had the young man at ease, with a Corona between his teeth. Then followed a full three-quarters of an hour, during which the visitor discoursed in his very best style and his caller sat spellbound, making occasional hieroglyphic hen tracks upon his note paper and congratulating himself upon his good luck in striking a man like this in one of his rare, talkative moods. Gray had set himself deliberately to the task of selling himself to this gentleman of the press, and, having succeeded, he was enough of a salesman to avoid the fatal error of overselling.

Alone at last, a sardonic grin crept over his features. So far, so good. Now for the rest of those bankers and the mayor. Gray was working rapidly, but he knew no other way of working, and speed was essential. It seemed to him not unlikely that delay of the slightest might force him to turn in desperation to a length of lead pipe and a mask, for--a man must live. As yet he had no very definite plans, he had merely undertaken to establish himself in a position to profit by the first opportunity, whatever it might be. And opportunity of some sort would surely come. It always did. What is more, it had an agreeable way of turning up just when he was most in need of it.

Gray called at several other banks that morning. He strode in swiftly, introduced himself with quick incisiveness, and tarried only long enough to fix himself indelibly in the minds of those he had come to see, then he left. There are right and wrong ways of closing a deal or of ending an interview, and Gray flattered himself that he possessed "terminal facilities." He was very busy, always a bit pressed for time, always a moment late; his theory of constant forward motion never permitted an awkward pause in conversation. On the street, his long legs covered the ground at something less than a run, his eyes were keenly alert, his face set in purposeful lines. Pedestrians turned to look after him.

At the mayor's office he was denied admission to the chief executive, but insisted so peremptorily as to gain his end. Once inside, he conveyed his compliments with such a graceful flourish that his intrusion assumed the importance of a ceremony and the

People's Choice was flattered. He inferred that this Calvin Gray made a practice of presenting his formal respects to the dignitaries of all the large cities he visited and deemed it a favor to them. No doubt it was, if he so considered it, for he appeared to be fully aware of his own importance. After all, it was an agreeable practice. Since no man in public life can risk offending people of importance, His Honor unbent. Gray turned a current jest upon Texas politics into a neat compliment to the city's executive; they laughed; formality vanished; personal magnetism made itself felt. The call ended by the two men lunching together at the City Club, as Gray had assumed it would, and he took pains that the bankers upon whom he had called earlier in the morning should see him in company with the mayor.

He returned to his hotel that afternoon pretty well satisfied with his efforts and hopeful that some of the seed he had sown broadcast would be ripe for the reaping ere-long. But he received an electric shock as he approached the desk, for the bell captain addressed him, saying:

"Mr. Haviland wishes to see you at once, in his office."

"Indeed? Anything important?"

"Very important, sir. I've been waiting for you to come in." There was something ominous about this unexpected summons, or perhaps about the manner of its delivery. At any rate, suspicion leaped into Gray's mind.

So! Haviland was wise! Quick work that. Evidently he had investigated, through those mysterious sources of information available to great hotels. Or perhaps some one had seen and recognized him. Well, that was the way his luck had run, lately --every break against him.

Now--Gray's shoulders lifted in a shrug of resignation--there was nothing to do except wave aside the blindfold and face the firing squad like an officer and a gentleman. But it was a pity that the crash had come so soon; fortune might have given him at least a short interval of grace. Haviland was probably in a cold rage at the discovery of the fraud, and Gray could only hope that he wouldn't get noisy over it, for scenes were always annoying and sometimes they ran to unfortunate lengths.

There was a curious brightness to the imposter's eyes, a reckless, mocking smile upon his lips, when he stepped into the manager's office and stood beside the desk. He declined Haviland's invitation to be seated--it seemed more fitting that a man should take sentence on his feet.

"Have you seen the Post?" the manager inquired.

"No."

Haviland handed him a copy of the leading afternoon paper, and Gray's eyes flashed to the headline of an article reading:

CALVIN GRAY, HERO OF SENSATIONAL EXPLOITS, IN DALLAS ADVENTURES
READ LIKE PAGE OF ROMANCE FAMOUS FINANCIER ADMITS LARGE OIL

INTERESTS BEHIND HIM

From the opening paragraph Gray judged that he had impressed the reporter even more deeply than he had supposed, but he took no satisfaction there from, for Haviland was saying:

"I've read the whole story, but I want you to tell me something more about yourself."

"What do you wish to know?"

"Were you in France?"

Over the visitor's face there came a subtle change. Whereas, upon entering, he had worn an expression of careless defiance, now he appeared to harden in every fiber and to go on guard.

"I have been many times in France."

"I mean during the war. Did you serve?"

There was a pause. "I did." Gray's eyes remained fixed upon his interrogator, but they had begun to smolder.

"Then you're Colonel Gray. Colonel Calvin Gray."

"Quite so." The speaker's voice was harsh, and it came with an effort. "But you didn't read that in the Post. Come! What's the idea? Out with it."

The interview had taken an unexpectedly disagreeable turn. Gray had anticipated an unpleasant moment or two, but this--well, it was indeed the crash. Calamity had overtaken him from the very quarter he had least expected and most dreaded, and his mind raced off at a tangent; a dozen unwelcome queries presented themselves.

"Strange what circles we move in," Haviland was saying. "Do you know who owns the controlling interest in this hotel? Surely you must know or can guess. Think a moment. It's somebody you met over there and have reason to remember."

A sound escaped, from the throat of Colonel Gray--not a cry, but rather a gasp of amazement, or of rage.

"Aha!" Haviland grinned in triumph. "I thought--"

His guest leaned forward over the desk, with face twitching. Passion had driven the blood from it, and his whole expression was one of such hatred, such fury, the metamorphosis was so startling, that the hotel man stiffened in his chair and stared upward in sudden amazement.

"Nelson!" Gray ejaculated. "Nelson! By God! So! He's here!"

During the moment that Haviland sat petrified, Gray turned his head slowly, his blazing eyes searched the office as if expecting to discover a presence concealed somewhere; they returned to the hotel man's face, and he inquired:

"Well, where is he?"

Haviland stirred. "I don't know what you're talking about. Who's Nelson?" After a second he exclaimed: "Good Lord! I thought I had a pleasant surprise for you, and I was gracefully leading up to it, but--I must have jazzed it all up. I was going to tell you that the hotel and everything in it is yours."

"Eh?"

"Why, the Ajax is one of the Dietz chain! Herman Dietz of Cincinnati owns it. He left for the North not an hour ago. At the last minute he heard you were here--read this story in the paper --and had bellboys scouring the place for you. You must know why he wanted to see you, and what he said when he found that he'd have to leave before you came in."

Colonel Gray uttered another exclamation, this time an expletive of deep relief. He fought with himself a moment, then murmured an apology. "Sorry. You gave me a start--decidedly. Herman Dietz, eh? Well, well! You made me think for a moment that I was a guest in the house of some other--friend."

"_Friend?_"

"Exactly!" Gray was himself again now. He ran a loosening finger between his collar and throat. "Quite a start, I'll admit, but --some of my friends are great practical jokers. They have a way of jumping out at me and crying 'Boo!' when I least expect it."

"Um-m! I see. Mr. Dietz told me that he was under lifelong obligation to a certain Colonel Calvin Gray. Something to do with passports--"

"I once rendered him a slight favor."

"He doesn't regard the favor as 'slight.' He was about to be imprisoned for the duration of the war and you managed to get him back home."

"Merely a matter of official routine. I felt sure he was a loyal American citizen."

"Exactly. But he makes more of the incident than you do, and he gave me my instructions. So--what can I do for you on his behalf? You have only to ask."

Gray pondered the unexpected offer. He was still a bit shaken, for a moment ago he had been more deeply stirred even than Haviland suspected, and the emotional reaction had left him weak. After all the hollow pretense of this day a genuine proffer of aid was welcome, and the temptation to accept was strong. Herman Dietz was indeed indebted to him, and he believed the old German-American would do anything, lend him any amount of money, for instance, that he might ask for. Gray wondered why he had not thought of Dietz before he came to Texas; it would have made things much easier. But the offer had come too late, it seemed to him; at this moment he could see no means of profiting by it without wrecking the flimsy house of cards he had that very day

erected and exposing himself to ridicule, to obloquy as a rank four-flusher. The scarcely dry headlines of that afternoon paper ran before his eyes--"Famous Financier Admits Large Oil Interests Behind Him." Probably there were other things in the body of the article that would not harmonize with an appeal to Haviland for funds, nor sound well to Mr. Dietz, once he learned the truth. The more Gray pondered the matter, the more regretfully he realized that he had overplayed his hand, as it were.

Here was a situation indeed! To be occupying the most expensive suite in the hotel of a man who wished to lend him money, to be unable to pay one day's rent therefore, and yet to be stopped from accepting aid. There was a grim irony about it, for a fact. Then, too, the seed he had sown in banking circles, and his luncheon with the mayor! Haviland had a sense of humor; it would make a story too good to keep--the new oil operator, the magnificent and mysterious New York financier, a "deadhead" at the Ajax. Oh, murder!

"Well, name your poison! Isn't there something, anything we can do for you?" Haviland repeated.

"There is, decidedly." Gray smiled his warm appreciation of the tender. "If it is not too great a drain upon the Dietz millions, you may keep a supply of cut flowers in my room. I'm passionately fond of roses, and I should like to have my vases filled every morning."

"You shall dwell in a perfumed bridal bower."

Gray paused at the door to light one of those sixty-cent cigars and between puffs observed: "Please assure Mr. Dietz that--his obligation is squared and that I am--deeply touched. I shall revel in the scent of those flowers."

That evening, when Calvin Gray, formally and faultlessly attired, strolled into the Ajax dining room he was conscious of attracting no little attention. For one thing, few of the other guests were in evening dress, and also that article in the Post, which he had read with a curiously detached amusement, had been of a nature to excite general notice. The interview had jarred upon him in only one respect--viz., in describing him as a "typical soldier of fortune." No doubt the reporter had intended that phrase in the kindest spirit; nevertheless, it implied a certain recklessness and instability of character that did not completely harmonize with Gray's inchoate, undeveloped banking projects. Bankers are wary of anything that sounds adventurous--or they pretend to be. As a matter of fact, Gray had learned enough that very day about Texas bankers to convince him that most of them were good, game gamblers, and that a large part of the dividends paid by most of the local institutions of finance were derived from oil profits. However, the newspaper story, as a whole, was such as to give him the publicity he desired, and he was well content with it.

Its first results were prompt in coming. Even while the head waiter was seating him, another diner arose and approached him with a smile. Gray recognized the fellow instantly--one of that vast army of casuals that march through every active man's life and disappear down the avenues of forgetfulness.

After customary greetings had been exchanged, the newcomer, Coverly by name, explained that he had read the Post article not five minutes before, and was delighted to learn how well the world had used Gray. He was dining alone; with alacrity he accepted an invitation to join his old friend, and straightway he launched himself upon the current of reminiscence. In answer to Gray's inquiry, he confessed modestly enough:

"Oh, I'm not in your class, old man. I'm no 'modern Gil Blas,' as the paper calls you. No Wall Street money barons are eating out of my hand, and I have no international interests 'reaching from the Yukon to the Plate,' but--I stand all right in little old Dallas. I'm the V. P. of our biggest jewelry house, and business is great." After their order had been given, he recited in greater detail the nature of his success.

Gray was interested. "Texas is booming," he said, at the conclusion of the story. "I'm told the new oil towns are something like our old mining camps."

"Except that they are more so. The same excitement, the same quick fortunes, only quicker and larger. Believe me, it's fine for the jewelry business. Look here." Coverly drew from his pocket a letter written in a painfully cramped hand upon cheap note paper, and this he spread out for his companion to read. "There's an example in point."

The letter, which bore the Ranger postmark, ran as follows:

DERE SIR--Your store has bin rekomend to me for dimons and I want some for my wife and dauter. Send me prises on rings of large sises.

Yours truley GUS BRISKOW.

"Um-m! Who is Mr. Briskow?"

Coverly shrugged. "Probably some nester who never saw a hundred dollars all in one place until recently. When they strike oil, they buy diamonds, nice large yellow ones, as a rule; then as the money continues to flow in, they pay off the mortgage and buy a bank--or an interest in one."

"In Heaven's name, introduce me to the opulent Gus Briskow."

"I wish I might. But I don't expect to make his acquaintance. The head of our firm is away and I haven't a man I'd dare trust to send out into the field. Usually I handle these inquiries myself when the victim can't tear himself away from contemplating the miraculous flow of liquid gold long enough to come here. I take an assortment of gems with me and beard the nouveau riche right on his derrick floor. Why, I've carried as much as a hundred thousand dollars' worth of merchandise on some of my trips." Coverly sighed regretfully. "Tough luck! Too bad you're not a good jewelry salesman?"

"I am," Gray declared. "I can sell anything. As for diamonds--I've bought enough in my time to know their value."

Coverly laughed in ready agreement with this statement. "Gad! I'm sore at missing this sale."

"You needn't miss it. I'll go."

"Don't kid an unfortunate--"

"I'm not joking. If it's worth while, pack up your saffron solitaires--all that you dare trust me with--and I'll be your gentlemanly representative."

"Worth while? Good Lord! I'd probably get a ten-thousand-dollar order!"

"Very well. It's settled." Gray's decision had been quickly made. Opportunity had knocked--he was not one to deny her admission, no matter how queer her garb. A hundred thousand dollars' worth of gems! The very figures intrigued him and--diamonds are readily negotiable. There would be a natural risk attached to the handling of so large an amount. A thousand things might happen to a treasure chest of that size. Gray began to believe that his luck had changed.

"Where does Mr. Briskow live?" he inquired.

"Out beyond Ranger, somewhere. But--"

"I'm going to visit that field, anyhow. This will give me an excuse."

"Nonsense!" The jeweler did not like to have fun poked at him. For some time he refused to take the offer seriously, and even when his host insisted that he would enjoy the lark, he expostulated: "Why, the idea is ridiculous! You--Calvin Gray, the financier, peddling jewelry? Ha! Outside of the fact that you wouldn't, couldn't do it, it's not the safest thing in the world to carry a small fortune in stones through the oil fields."

"Of course you insure it against theft?"

"That's the point. We can't. Have you ever heard of 'high-jackers'? That's the Texas term for hold-up men, robbers. Well, the country is full of them."

"Excellent! There no longer is any question about my going," Gray announced, firmly. "I am bored; I am stale; a thrill, of whatever sort, would stir my blood. Animated by purely selfish motives, I now insist upon a serious consideration of my offer. First, you say I 'wouldn't, couldn't'; I assure you that I would, could--and _shall_, provided I can qualify as a salesman."

Coverly admitted without much argument that anybody could probably effect a sale in this instance, if the diamonds were plainly marked with their prices; it would be a mere question of displaying the goods. That was not the point. Gray was a rich, a busy man--the idea was fantastic.

"Why, you're offering to do this as an accommodation to an old friend, and your time is probably worth more than our whole profit

on the sale would amount to."

"My time is worth nothing. If you hesitate to intrust this king's ransom to me, I'll go personally responsible for its value. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Don't be silly. How could I pay you if you did go?"

"Um-m!" This idea, it seemed, had not occurred to Mr. Gray. It was plain that money meant nothing to him.

"You see? We couldn't permit--"

"I have it. We'll divorce friendship and sentiment entirely from the discussion and reduce it to a strictly business basis. You shall ease your conscience by paying my traveling expenses. The emotional suspense that I undergo shall be my reward. I'll take my commission in thrills."

This offer evoked a light laugh from Gray's guest. "You'd get enough of 'em," he asserted. "I'll advance a mild one, on account, at this moment. Notice the couple dining at the third table to your left." Gray lifted his eyes. "What do you see?"

"A rather well-dressed, hard-faced man and a decidedly attractive woman--brunette. There's a suggestion of repressed widowhood about her. It's the gown, probably. I am not yet in my dotage, and I had seen her before I saw you."

"She's living here. I don't know much about her, but the man goes by the name of Mallow."

"No thrill yet."

"He's been hanging about our store for the past month, making a few purchases and getting acquainted with some of the clerks. Wherever I go, lately, there he is. I'll wager if I took to-night's train for Ranger, he'd be on it."

"And still my pulses do not leap."

"Wait! I got a sort of report on him and it's bad. I believe, and so does the chief of police, that Mr. Mallow has something to do with the gang of crooks that infests this country. One thing is certain, they're not the native product, and our hold-ups aren't staged by rope-chokers out of work."

Calvin Gray turned now and openly stared at the object of Coverly's suspicions. There was an alert interest in his eyes. "You've cinched the matter with me," he declared, after a moment. "Get out your diamonds to-morrow; I'm going to take the night train to Ranger."

Later that evening, after his guest had gone, Gray took occasion deliberately to put himself in Mallow's way and to get into conversation with him. This was not a difficult maneuver, for it was nearly midnight and the lobby was well-nigh deserted; moreover, it almost appeared as if the restless Mr. Mallow was seeking an acquaintance.

For the better part of an hour the two men smoked and talked, and had Coverly overheard their conversation his blood would have chilled and he would have prematurely aged, for his distinguished host, Calvin Gray, the worldly-wise, suave man of affairs, actually permitted himself to be pumped like a farmer's son. It would have been a ghastly surprise to the jeweler to learn how careless and how confiding his friend could be in an off moment; he would have swooned when Gray told about his coming trip to Ranger and actually produced the misspelled Briskow letter for the edification of his chance acquaintance. Any lingering doubt as to his friend's honesty of purpose would have vanished utterly had he heard Mallow announce that he, too, was going to Ranger, the very next night--a curious coincidence, truly--and Gray's expression of pleasure at the prospect of such a congenial traveling companion. The agitated Coverly no doubt would have phoned a frantic call for the police, then and there.

Once Gray was in his rooms, however, his manner changed, and into his eyes there came a triumphant glitter. Hastily he rummaged through one of his bags, and from a collection of trinkets, souvenirs, and the like he selected an object which he examined carefully, then took into the bathroom for further experiment. His step was springy, his lips were puckered, he was whistling blithely when he emerged, for at last those vaguely outlined plans that had been at the back of his mind had assumed form and pattern. His luck had turned, he had made a new start. Mallow was indeed a crook, and Gray blessed the prompt good fortune that had thrown both him and Coverly in his way.

It had been a busy day; he was well content with its fruitage.

CHAPTER III

Old Tom Parker was a "type." He was one of a small class of men at one time common to the West, but now rapidly disappearing. A turbulent lifetime spent in administering the law in a lawless region had stamped him with the characteristics of a frontier officer--_viz_., vigilance, caution, self-restraint, sang-froid. For more than thirty years he had worn a badge of some sort and, in the serving of warrants and other processes of law, he had covered, first in the saddle or on buckboard, later in Pullman car or automobile, most of that vast region lying between the Arkansas and the Pecos, the Cimarron, and the Sabine--virtually all of what is now Texas and Oklahoma. He still spoke of the latter state, by the way, as "the Territory," and there were few corners of it that he had not explored long before it ceased to be a haven of hunted men.

That is what Tom Parker had been--a hunter of men--and time was when his name had been famous. But he had played his part. The times had caught up with and passed him, and no longer in the administration of justice was there need of abilities like his, hence the shield of his calling had been taken away.

Now Tom did not reckon himself obsolete. He was badger-gray, to be

sure, and stiff in one knee--a rheumatic legacy of office inherited by reason of wet nights in the open and a too-diligent devotion to duty--but in no other respect did he believe his age to be apparent. His smoke-blue eyes were as bright as ever, his hand was quick; realization that he had been shunted upon a side track filled him with surprise and bewilderment. It was characteristic of the man that he still considered himself a bulwark of law and order, a de facto guardian of the peace, and that from force of habit he still sat facing the door and never passed between a lighted lamp and a window.

Among the late comers to Wichita Falls, where he lived, Tom was known as a quiet-spoken, emotionless old fellow with an honorable past, but with a gift for tiresome reminiscence quite out of place in the new and impatient order of things, and none but old-timers and his particular cronies were aware of the fact that he had another side to his character. It was not generally known, for instance, that he was a kind and indulgent father and had a daughter whom he worshiped with blind adulation. This ignorance was not strange, for Miss Barbara Parker had been away at college for four years now, and during that time she had not once returned home.

There was a perfectly good reason for this protracted separation of father and daughter; since Old Tom was no longer on pay, it took all he could rake and scrape to meet her bills, and railroad fares are high. That Hudson River institution was indeed a finishing school; not only had it polished off Barbara, but also it had about administered the coup de grace to her father. There had been a ranch over near Electra with some "shallow production," from which Tom had derived a small royalty--this was when Barbara Parker went East and before the Burk-burnett wells hit deep sand --but income from that source had been used up faster than it had come in, and "Bob," as Tom insisted upon calling her, would have had to come home had it not been for an interesting discovery on her father's part--viz., the discovery of a quaint device of the law entitled a "mortgage." Mortgages had to do with a department of the law unfamiliar to Tom, his wit, his intelligence, and his dexterity of hand having been exercised solely in upholding the dignity of the criminal branch, but once he had realized that a mortgage, so called, was no more than a meaningless banking term used to cloak the impulsive generosity of moneyed men, he availed himself of this discovery and was duly grateful.

Tom carried on a nominal fire-insurance business, but as a matter of fact the tiny two-roomed frame structure that bore his painted sign was nothing more or less than a loafing place for him and his rheumatic friends, and a place in which the owner could spend the heat of the day in a position of comfort to his stiff leg--that is to say, asleep in a high-backed office chair, his feet propped upon his desk. It was here that Tom could usually be found, and when one of those hateful statements arrived from the East he merely roused himself, put on his wide gray hat, limped around to the bank, and pledged more of his oil royalties or signed another mortgage. What insurance policies he wrote were brought to him by his old pals; the money derived there from he sent on to "Bob" with love and an admonition to be a good girl and study hard and hurry home, because he was dying to see her. This office, by the way, no longer suited Tom; it was becoming too

noisy and he would have sold it and sought another farther out had it not been mortgaged for more than it was worth. So, too, was the house where he lived amid the dirt and disorder of all bachelor establishments.

Now Old Tom would have resented an accusation of indolence; the bare implication of such a charge would have aroused his instant indignation, and Tom Parker indignant was a man to shun. As a matter of fact, he believed himself sadly overworked, and was forever complaining about it.

The time came, however, when he was forced to shed his habit of slothfulness as completely as a snake sheds its skin, and that was during the week before "Bob's" arrival. Then, indeed, he swept and he dusted, he mopped and he polished, he rubbed and he scrubbed, trying his best to put the house in order. Never in all his life had he labored as he did then, for four years of "batching" will make a bear's nest out of the most orderly house, but he was jealous of his task and he refused to share it with other hands. Pots and pans, rusty from disuse or bearing the accumulated evidence of many hastily prepared meals, he took out in the back yard and scrubbed with sand, leaving his bony knuckles skinned and bleeding from the process; he put down a new carpet in "Bob's" room, no easy task for a man with an ossified knee joint--incidentally, the "damn thing" kept him awake for two nights thereafter; he nailed up fresh curtains, or they looked fresh to him, at her windows, and smashed a perfectly good thumb-nail in doing so. This and many other abominable duties he performed. But love means suffering, and every pang gave Old Tom a thrill of fierce delight for--"Bob" was coming. The lonely, hungry, aching wait was over.

Constant familiarity with the house had mercifully dulled the occupant's appreciation of its natural deterioration and the effects of his neglect, so when he finally straightened his aching back and regarded the results of his heroic efforts, it seemed to him that everything shone like new and that the place was as neat and as clean as on the day "Bob" went away. Probably Hercules thought the Augean stables were spotless and fragrant when he had finished with them. And perhaps they were, but Tom Parker was no demigod. He was just a clumsy old man, unaccustomed to indoor "doings," and his eyes at times during the last few days had been unaccountably dim--as, for instance, while he was at work in Barbara's chamber.

He did not sleep much on the night before the girl's arrival. He sat until late with the framed photograph of Barbara's mother on his knee, and tried to tell the dead and gone original that he had done his best for the girl so far, and if he had failed, it was because he knew nothing about raising girls and--nature hadn't cut him out to be a father, anyhow. He had been considerably older than Barbara's mother when he married her, and he had never ceased to wonder what there had been in him to win the love of a woman like her, or to regret that fate had not taken him instead of her. Heaven knows his calling had been risky enough. But--that was how things went sometimes--the wheat was taken and the chaff remained.

And in the morning! Tom was up before daylight and had his dishes washed and his things in order long ere the town was awake. Then he went down to the office and waited--with the jumps. Repeatedly

he consulted his heavy gold watch, engraved: "With the admiration and gratitude of the citizens of Burlingame. November fifth, 1892." It was still two hours of train time when he locked up and limped off toward the station, but--it was well to be there early.

Of course he met Judge Halloran on the street--he always did--and of course the judge asked when "Bob" was coming home. The judge always did that, too. Old Tom had lied diligently to the judge every day for a month now, for he had no intention of sharing this day of days with a tiresome old pest, and now he again made an evasive answer.

"Mendacity is at once the lowest and the commonest form of deceit," the judge indignantly announced. "You know perfectly well when she's coming, damn you!"

"Honest, I don't--not exactly."

But the judge was unconvinced. "You've been as mysterious as a bootlegger for the last week, but I could always read you like a book, Tom Parker. You know, all right. Mrs. Halloran wants to come over and fix things up for her. She said so this--"

"Oh, I got everything fixed," Tom hastily declared. "Ha! What did I tell you?" The judge glared; Tom could have bitten his tongue for that slip. "Your pitiful attempts to mislead Barbara's admirers expose you to ridicule, and offend those of us who tolerate you out of regard for her." (The judge had a nice Texas drawl, and he pronounced it "reegy'ad.") "You're on your way to the train at this moment and--I propose to accompany you."

"What would I be going to the train for, now?" Tom inquired, in a deceitfully mild tone. Inwardly he was raging, and he cursed the judge for a meddling old fool.

"Hm-m! Thought you'd sneak down there, unobserved, probably." There was a pause; then the speaker went on in an altered tone: "D'you suppose she has forgotten all her native accomplishments, Tom? I wonder if she can still ride and rope and shoot, or if those thin-blooded Eastern schoolma'ams have taught her that such things are unladylike and coarse."

"Pshaw! You never forget how to do those things."

"She could handle a horse or a rope or a gun as well as you at your best."

"_Better!_" Tom declared, with swelling pride.

Halloran wagged his white head in agreement, an unusual procedure, inasmuch as he never agreed with Tom on any subject which offered possible ground for disagreement. "A wonderful girl! And I'll wager they haven't spoiled her. Even _you_ couldn't spoil 'Bob.'" He raised his red, belligerent eyes and fixed them upon his old friend, but there was now a kindly light in them. "You made a real son of her, didn't you, Tom?"

"Almost. I was mighty disappointed because she was a girl, but--I don't know as a boy could of turned out much better. Well, Judge,

I got to be moving."

"You are neither grammatical nor precise," snapped Judge Halloran. "You mean we must be moving." He linked arms with Tom and fell into step with him; he clung to that rigid arm, moreover, despite Tom's surly displeasure. Not until a friend stopped them for a word or two was the distracted parent enabled to escape from that spidery embrace; then, indeed, he slipped it as a filibustering schooner slips its moorings, and made off as rapidly and as unobtrusively as possible.

Judge Halloran stared after the retreating figure, then he showed his decayed teeth in a smile. "'Bob' is coming home to-day and the old Mountain Lion is on edge," he explained. "I must warn the boys to stay away from the station and give him his hour. Poor Tom! He has held his breath for four years."

Tom Parker had heard of children spoiled by schooling, of daughters educated away from their commonplace parents and rendered disdainful of them, but never for one instant did he fear that his girl was that sort. He just knew better. He could no more have doubted "Bob's" love for him than his for her, or-God's love for both of them. Such love is perfect, absolute. He took no thought, therefore, of the changes time and poverty had wrought in his appearance: "Bob" wouldn't notice. He bet she wouldn't care if he was plumb ragged. They were one and indivisible; she was his, just like his right arm; she was his boy and his girl; his son-daughter. The old gunman choked and his tonsils ached abominably. He hoped he wasn't in for another attack of quinsy sore throat. But--why lie to himself? The truth was, he wanted to cry and he wanted to laugh at the same time, and the impulses were crossed in his windpipe. He shook his watch like a child's rattle, to be sure it was still running.

Barbara did not disappoint her father. On the contrary, she was perhaps more deeply moved than he at their meeting. At sight of him she uttered a strangled little cry, then she ran into his arms and clung there, tightly, her cheek pressed against his breast. It was only upon occasions like this that "Bob" kissed her father, for she had been reared as a boy and taught to shun emotional display. Boys kiss their mothers. She snuggled close, and Tom could feel her whole body shaking; but she kept her head averted to conceal a distressingly unmasculine weakness. It was a useless precaution, however, for Tom was blind, his eyes were as wet as hers, and tears were trickling down the seams in his wrinkled face.

"Oh, daddy, it has been a long time!" Those were the first words either of them had spoken.

Tom opened his lips, then he closed them. He patted Barbara clumsily, and finally cleared his aching throat with a loud "Harrumph!" He dashed the tears from his eyes with the heel of one harsh palm, then leveled a defiant glare over her head, directed at anyone who might be looking on at his weakness. It was a blurry glare, however, and not nearly so ferocious as he intended it to be. After several efforts he managed to regain control of his vocal powers.

"Well, son!" he cried, huskily; then, "Harrumph!"

Barbara's clutch tightened appreciatively. "Such a long, long time!" Still with her cheek pressed close against him, she ran a small gloved hand into the pocket of his coat and brought forth a bandana handkerchief which she thrust into his palm, saying: "It's a good thing I'm home, for you've caught another cold, haven't you? Now blow your nose."

Barbara was anything but boyish to look at; quite the opposite, in fact. She was delightfully feminine from the crown of her smart little traveling hat to her dainty French heels, and although her suit was not expensive, it was worn with an air and was perhaps as fetching as any that had ever come to Wichita Falls. It gave the impression of perfectly setting off a figure and a personality that required no setting off. She had the Parker eyes of quenchless blue.

"Well, son, there's a boom on and the town has grown some; but I guess things here are about the same as when you left 'em." Tom spoke with pride and satisfaction as he paid the driver, took Barbara's suitcase, and opened the gate for her.

The girl turned from her first long, appraising gaze at the modest home. No change, indeed! The paint on the house was peeling, gutters had rusted out, some of the porch flooring had rotted through, the yard was an unkempt tangle of matted grass and weeds and neglected shrubbery. The sight of it was like a stab to her, for she remembered the place as it had been, and the shock was akin to that of seeing a loved one in the garb of a tramp. But she smiled up at the gray face above her--Tom, too, was as seedy as the premises--and she nodded.

"It hasn't changed a mite," she said, bravely.

A moment later she paused upon the threshold, tense, thrilled, apparently speechless. Tom was reminded of a trim little wren poised upon the edge of its nest. This time it was more difficult to counterfeit an exclamation of joy, but the catch in "Bob's" voice, the moisture in her eyes, was attributed by her father to gladness at the sight of old familiar things. This was pay for the thought and the love and the labor expended, truly.

"Why, everything is right where it belongs! How wonderfully you've kept house! You must have a perfect jewel of a girl, dad!"

"I let Aunt Lizzie go 'bout three years back," Tom explained. "She got--shiftless and I been sort of batching it since. Clean, though, ain't it?"

Barbara turned; blindly she walked to the center table and buried her face in a bouquet of wild flowers garnered from the yard. She held it there for a moment before she spoke. "You--didn't even forget that I love bluebonnets, did you, dad?"

"Pshaw! I 'ain't had much to do but remember what you like, son."

"What's the matter? Business bad?" "Bob's" face was still hidden.

"Oh no! I'm busy as usual. But, now you're home, I'll probably

feel like doing more. I got a lot of work left in me yet, now I got somebody to work for."

"So you fixed everything with your own hands."

"Sure! I knew how you like the place to look, and--well, a man gets used to doing without help. The kitchen's clean, too."

Side by side the two moved from room to room, and, once the girl had regained control of herself, she maintained an admirable self-restraint. She petted and she cooed over objects dear to her; she loved every inch of everything; she laughed and she exclaimed, and with her laughter sunshine suddenly broke into the musty, threadbare interior for the first time in four years.

"Bob's" room was saved for the last, and Old Tom stood back, glowing at her delight. He could not refrain from showing her his blackened thumb-nail--the price of his carpentry--for he hoped she'd kiss it. And she did. Not until she had "shooed" him out and sent him downstairs, smiling and chuckling at her radiant happiness, did she give way to those emotions she had been fighting this long time; then her face grew white and tragic. "Oh, daddy, daddy!" she whispered. "What _have_ I done to you?"

Tom Parker had raised his girl like a son, and like a son she took hold of things, but with a daughter's tact. Her intuition told her much, but she did not arrive at a full appreciation of the family affairs until she had the house running and went down to put his office in order. Then, indeed, she learned at what cost had come those four expensive years in the East, and the truth left her limp. She went through Tom's dusty, disordered papers, ostensibly rearranging and filing them, and they told her much; what they did not tell her she learned from Judge Halloran and other old cronies who came in to pay their garrulous compliments.

Tom was mortgaged to the hilt, his royalties were pledged; a crow could not pick a living out of his insurance business.

Such a condition was enough to dismay any girl who had never seriously considered money matters and who had returned home to take up a life of comparative ease and superlative enjoyment where she had left it off, but "Bob" said nothing to her father. She knew every one of his shortcomings, and they endeared him to her, quite as a son's faults and failures deepen a mother's love, but she knew, too, that he was cantankerous and required careful handling. Tom's toes were tender, and he forever exposed them where they were easily trodden upon, therefore the girl stepped cautiously and never even referred to his sacrifices, which would have cruelly embarrassed both of them.

But something had to be done, and quickly; a new hand needed to mend the family fortunes. Barbara determined to lend that hand.

A great change had come over the town and the whole country round about, a change which the girl believed afforded her an opportunity to prove that she was not a mere daughter, not an ornament and a drag, but a real son-daughter such as Tom considered her. Wichita Falls was overcrowded with oil man, drawn thither by the town-site strike at Burkburnett, a few miles

northwest, and excitement was mounting as new wells continued to come in. Central north Texas was nearing an epoch-making petroleum boom, for Ranger, away to the south, had set the oil world by the ears, and now this new sand at "Burk" lent color to the wild assertion that these north counties were completely underlaid with the precious fluid. At any rate, the price of thirsty ranch lands was somersaulting and prosperity was apparent in the homes of all Barbara's girl friends. Her admirers of the opposite sex could talk of little except leases and bonuses and "production"; they were almost too busy making money to call upon her.

Barbara knew something about oil, for she had watched the drilling of every one of those shallow wells that had kept her in college, and what is more, she knew most of the property owners in this part of the state. In that advantage she believed lay her chance of accomplishment.

After a fortnight of careful consideration she decided to enter the oil business and deal in leases.

"Good idea," Tom declared, when she had made known her plan. "The town's so full of scamps it looks like Rodeo Day, and most of 'em are doing well. If they can make good, it seems like an honest firm could do better."

"We'll be partners, dad. You run the insurance and I'll be the lease hound."

"Say--" Tom's eyes brightened. "I'll put a desk right alongside of mine--a little feller, just your size--and a nice lounge in the back room, where you can lay down when you're tired. You been away so long it seems like I can't have you close enough." Another thought presented itself, and he manifested sudden excitement. "I tell you! I'll get a new sign painted, too! 'Tom and Bob Parker. Real Estate and Insurance. Oil Prop'ties and Leases.' _Gosh!_ It's a _great_ idea, son!" His smile lingered, but a moment later there came into his eyes a half-regretful light.

Barbara read his thought almost before he was aware of it, and, rising, she laid her hand upon his shoulder. Wistfully she said, "I'm awfully sorry, too, dad--"

"Eh?"

"--that I disappointed you so by not being a boy. But--it wasn't my fault, and maybe I'll show you that a daughter can help as much as a son."

CHAPTER IV

A year before this story opens the town of Ranger, Texas, consisted of a weatherbeaten, run-down railroad station, a blacksmith shop, and a hitching rail, town enough, incidentally, for the limited number of people and the scanty amount of merchandise that passed through it. Ranger lay in the dry belt --considered an almost entirely useless part of the state--where

killing droughts were not uncommon, and where for months on end the low, flinty hills radiate heat like the rolls of a steel mill. In such times even the steep, tortuous canyons dried out and there was neither shade nor moisture in them. The few farms and ranches round about were scattered widely, and life thereon was a grim struggle against heartbreak, by reason of the gaunt, gray, ever-present specter of the drought. Of late this particular region had proven itself to be one of violent extremes, of extreme dryness during which flowers failed to bloom, the grass shriveled and died, and even the trees refused to put forth leaves; or, more rarely, of extreme wetness, when the country was drowned beneath torrential rains. Sometimes, during unusual winters, the heavens opened and spilled themselves, choking the narrow watercourses, washing out roads and destroying fields, changing the arid arroyos into raging river beds. At such times life for the country people was scarcely less burdensome than during the droughts, for the heavy bottom lands became quagmires, and the clay of the higher levels turned into putty or a devilish agglutinous substance that rendered travel for man or beast or vehicle almost impossible.

There appeared to be no law of average here. In dry times it was a desert, lacking wholly, however, in the beauty, the mystery, and the spell of a desert; in wet times it was a gehenna of mud and slush and stickiness, and entirely minus that beauty and freshness that attends the rainy seasons in a tropic clime. It was a land peopled by a hard-bitten race of nesters--come from God knows where and for God knows why--starved in mind and body, slaves of a hideous environment from which they lacked means of escape.

Geologists had claimed for some time that there must be coal in these north Texas counties, a contention perhaps based upon a comfortable belief in the law of compensation, upon a theory that a region so poor aboveground must of necessity contain values of some sort beneath the surface. But as for other natural resources, they scouted the belief in such. Other parts of the state yielded oil, for instance, but here the formation was all wrong. Who ever heard of oil in hard lime?

Nevertheless, petroleum was discovered, and among the fraternity that dealt in it Ranger became a word of contradiction and of deep meaning. Aladdin rubbed his lamp, and, lo! a magic transformation occurred; one of those thrilling dramas of a dramatic industry was played. A gypsy camp sprang up beside the blacksmith shop, and as the weeks fled by it changed into a village of wooden houses, then into a town, and soon into a city of brick and iron and concrete. The railroad became clogged with freight, a tidal wave of men broke over the town. Wagons, giant motor trucks, caterpillar tractors towing long strings of trailers, lurched and groaned and creaked over the hills, following roads unfit for a horse and buggy. Straddling derricks reared themselves everywhere; their feet were set in garden patches, in plowed fields, in lonely mesquite pastures, and even high up on the crests of stony ridges. One day their timbers were raw and clean, the next day they were black and greasy, advertising the fact that once again the heavy rock pressure far below had sent another fountain of fortune spraying over the top. Then pipe lines were laid and unsightly tank farms were built.

Ranger became a mobilization point, a vast concentration camp

for supplies, and amid its feverish activity there was no rest, no Sundays or holidays; the work went on at top tension night and day amid a clangor of metal, a ceaseless roar of motors, a bedlam of hammers and saws and riveters. Men lived in greasy clothes, breathing dust and the odors of burnt gas mainly, eating poor food and drinking warm, fetid water when they were lucky enough to get any at all.

This was about the state of affairs that Calvin Gray found on the morning of his arrival. He and Mallow had managed to secure a Pullman section on the night train from Dallas; the fact that they were forced to carry their own luggage from the station uptown to the restaurant where they hoped to get breakfast was characteristic of the place. En route thither they had to elbow their way through a crowd that filled the sidewalks as if on a fair day.

Mallow was well acquainted with the town, it appeared, and during breakfast he maintained a running fire of comment, some of which was worth listening to.

"Ever hear how the first discovery was made? Well, the T. P. Company had the whole country plastered with coal leases and finally decided to put down a fifteen-hundred-foot wildcat. The guy that ran the rig had a hunch there was oil here if he went deep enough, but he knew the company wouldn't stick, so he faked the log of the well as long as he could, then he kept on drilling, against orders--refused to open his mail, for fear he'd find he was fired and the job called off. He was a thousand feet deeper than he'd been ordered to go when--blooie! Over the top she went with fourteen hundred barrels.... Desdemona's the name of a camp below here, but they call it Hog Town. More elegant! Down there the derricks actually straddle one another, and they have to board them over to keep from drowning one another out when they blow in. Fellow in Dallas brought in the first well, and it was so big that his stock went from a hundred dollars a share to twelve thousand. All in a few weeks. Of course, he started a bank. Funniest people I ever saw, that way. Usually when a rube makes a winning he gambles or gets him a woman, but these hicks take their coin and buy banks.... Ranger's a real town; everything wide open and the law in on the play. That makes good times. Show me a camp where the gamblers play solitaire and the women take in washing and I'll show you a dead village. The joints here have big signs on the wall, '_Gambling Positively Prohibited_', and underneath the games are running high, wide, and fancy. Refined humor, I call it.... There were nine killings one day, but that's above the average. The last time I was in town a couple of tool dressers got into a row with a laundryman--claimed they'd been overcharged six cents. It came to a shooting, and we buried all three of them. Two cents apiece! That was their closing price. The cost of living is high enough, but it isn't expensive to die here."

In this vein ran Mallow's talk. From the first he had laid himself out to be entertaining and helpful, and Gray obligingly permitted him to have his way. When they had finished breakfast, he even allowed his companion to hire an automobile and driver for him. They shook hands finally, the best of friends. Mallow wished him good luck and gravely voiced the hope that he would have fewer diamonds when he returned. Gray warmly thanked his companion for his many courtesies and declared they would soon meet again.

Thus far the trip had worked out much as Gray had expected. Now, as his service car left the town and joined the dusty procession of vehicles moving country-ward, he covertly studied its driver and was gratified to note that the fellow bore all the ear-marks of a thorough scoundrel. What conversation the man indulged in strengthened that impression.

The Briskow farm, it appeared, lay about twenty miles out, but twenty miles over oil-field roads proved to be quite a journey. During the muddy season the driver declared, it might well take a whole day to make that distance; now that the roads were dry, they could probably cover it in two or three hours, if the car held together. Traffic near Ranger was terrific, and how it managed to move, even at a snail's pace, was a mystery, for to sit a car was like riding a bucking horse. If there had been the slightest attempts at road building they were now invisible, and the vehicular streams followed meandering wagon trails laid down by the original inhabitants of pre-petroleum days, which had not been bettered by the ceaseless pounding of the past twelve months. Up and down, over armored ridges and into sandy arroyos, along leaning hillsides and across 'dobe flats, baked brick hard by the sun, the current of travel roared and pounded with reckless disregard of tire and bolt and axle. In the main, it was a motor-driven procession. There were, to be sure, occasional teams of fine imported draft horses, but for every head of live stock there were a dozen huge trucks, and for every truck a score of passenger cars. These last were battered and gray with mud, and their dusty occupants were of a color to match, for they drove blindly through an asphyxiating cloud. Even the thirsty vegetation beside the roads was coated gray, and was so tinder dry that it seemed as if a lighted match would explode it.

The sun glared cruelly, and the pyramidal piles of iron pipe chained to the groaning trucks and plunging trailers were hot enough to fry eggs upon, but neither they nor the steaming radiators gave off more heat than the soil and the rocks.

Detours were common--testimony to man's inherent optimism--but each was worse than the other, the roadbeds everywhere were rutted, torn, broken up as if from long-continued heavy shell fire.

From every ridge skeleton derricks were in sight as far as the eye could reach, the scattered ones, whose clean timbers gleamed in the sunlight, testifying to dry holes; the blackened ones, usually in clumps, indicating "production"--magic word.

There were a few crossroads settlements--"hitch-rail towns"--unpainted and ramshackle, but nowhere was there an attempt at farming, for this part of Texas had gone hog wild over oil. Abandoned straw stacks had settled and molded, cornfields had grown up to weeds, what few head of cattle still remained lolled near the artificial surface tanks, all but dried into mud holes.

It was a farm of this character that Gray's driver finally pointed out as the Briskow ranch. The house, an unsightly story-and-a-half affair, stood at the back of what had once been a cultivated field, and the place was distinctive only in the fact that it gave

evidence of a good water well, or a capacious reservoir, in the form of a vivid green garden patch and a few flourishing peach trees immediately behind the residence--welcome relief to the eye.

Nobody answered Gray's knock at the front door, so he walked around the house. Over the garden fence, grown thick with brambles, he beheld two feminine figures, or rather two faded sunbonnets topping two pairs of shoulders, and as he drew nearer he saw that one woman was bent and slow moving, while the other was a huge creature, wide of hip and deep of bosom, whose bare arms, burnt to a rich golden brown, were like those of a blacksmith, and who wielded her heavy hoe as if it were a toy. She was singing in a thin, nasal, uncultivated voice.

Evidently they were the Briskow "help," therefore Gray made his presence known and inquired for the master or mistress of the place.

The elder woman turned, exposing a shrewd, benevolent face, and after a moment of appraisal said, "I'm Miz' Briskow."

"Indeed!" The visitor smiled his best and announced the nature of his errand.

"Lawsy me!" Mrs. Briskow planted her hoe in the soil and turned her back upon Gray. "Allie! Yore pa has gone an' done it again. Here's another of his fool notions."

The women regarded each other silently, their facial expressions hidden beneath their bonnets; then the mother exposed her countenance a second time, and said, "Mister, this is Allegheny, our girl."

Miss Allegheny Briskow lifted her head, nodded shortly, and stared over the hoe handle at Gray. Her gaze was one of frank curiosity, and he returned it in kind, for he had never beheld a creature like her. Gray was a tall man, but this girl's eyes met his on a level, and her figure, if anything, was heavier than his. Nor was its appearance improved by her shapeless garment of faded wash material. Her feet were incased in a pair of men's cheap "brogans" that Gray could have worn; drops of perspiration gleamed upon her face, and her hair, what little was visible beneath the sunbonnet, was wet and untidy. Altogether she presented a picture such as some painter of peasant types might have sketched. Garbed appropriately, in shawl and sabots, she would have passed for some European plowwoman of Amazonian proportions. Allegheny! It was a suitable name, indeed, for such a mountainous person. Her size was truly heroic; she would have been grotesque, ridiculous, except for a certain youthful plasticity and a suggestion of tremendous vigor and strength that gave her dignity. Her ample, ill-fitting dress failed to hide the fact that her robust body was well, even splendidly molded.

Gray's attention, however, was particularly challenged by the girl's face and eyes. It was a handsome countenance, cut in large, bold features, but of a stony immobility; the eyes were watchful, brooding, sullen. They regarded him with mingled defiance and shyness for an instant, then they avoided his; she averted her gaze; she appeared to be meditating ignominious flight.

The mother abandoned her labor, wiped her hands upon her skirt, and said, with genuine hospitality: "Come right into the house and rest yourself. Pa and Buddy'll be home at dinner time." By now a fuller significance of this stranger's presence had struck home and she laughed softly as she led the way toward the dwelling. "Di'mon's for Allie and me, eh? Land sakes! Pa's up to something new every day, lately. I wonder what next."

As Gray stepped aside for the younger woman to precede him, his curiosity must have been patent, for Allegheny became even more self-conscious than before, and her face flamed a fiery red. As yet she had not spoken.

There were three rooms to the Briskow residence, bedrooms all, with a semi-detached, ramshackle, whitewashed kitchen at the rear and separated from the main house by a narrow "gallery." Into the front chamber, which evidently did service also as a parlor, Mrs. Briskow led the way. By now she was in quite a flutter of excitement. For the guest she drew forth the one rocking chair, a patent contraption, the rockers of which were held upon a sort of track by stout spiral springs. Its seat and back were of cheap carpet material stretched over a lacquered frame, and these she hastily dusted with her apron; then she seated herself upon the edge of the bed and beamed expectantly.

Allegheny had carelessly brushed back her sunbonnet, exposing a mane of damp, straight, brown hair of a quantity and length to match her tremendous vigor of limb; but she remained standing at the foot of the bed, too ill at ease to take a chair or perhaps too agitated to see one. She was staring straight ahead, her eyes fixed a foot or two over the caller's head.

Gray ignored her manifest embarrassment, made a gingerly acquaintance with the chair of honor, and then devoted his attention to the elder woman. At every move the coiled springs under him strained and snapped alarmingly.

"We don't often see jewelry peddlers," the mother announced; "but, sakes alive! things is changin' so fast we get a new surprise most every day. I s'pose you got those rings in that valise?" She indicated Gray's stout leather sample case.

"Precisely," said he. "If you have time I'd like to show them to you."

Mrs. Briskow's bent figure stirred, she uttered a throaty chuckle, and her weary face, lined with the marks of toil and hardship, flushed faintly. Her misshapen hands tightly clasped themselves and her faded eyes began to sparkle. Gray felt a warm thrill of compassion at the agitation of this kindly, worn old soul, and he rose quickly. As he gained his feet that amazing chair behaved in a manner wholly unusual and startling; relieved of strain, the springs snapped and whined, there was a violent oscillation of the back, a shudder convulsed the thing, and it sprang after him, much as a tame rabbit thumps its feet upon the ground in an effort to bluff a kitten.

The volunteer salesman spread out his dazzling wares upon the

patchwork counterpane, then stepped back to observe the effect. Ma Briskow's hands fluttered toward the gems, then reclasped themselves in her lap; she bent closer and regarded them fixedly. The Juno-like daughter also stared down at the display with fascination.

After a moment Allegheny spoke, and her speaking voice was in pleasing contrast to the nasal notes of that interrupted song.

"Are them _real_ di'mon's?" she queried, darkly.

"Oh yes! And most of them are of very fine quality."

"Pa never told us a word," breathed the mother. "He's _allus_ up to some trick."

"Please examine them. I want you to look them all over," Gray urged.

Mrs. Briskow acted upon this invitation only after she had dried her hands, and then with trepidation. Gingerly, reverently she removed a ring from its resting place and held it up to the light.

"My! Ain't it sparkly?" she gasped, after an ecstatic pause.

Again the girl spoke, her eyes fixed defiantly upon Gray. "You could fool us easy, 'cause we never saw _real_ di'mon's. We've allus been too pore."

The man nodded. "I hope you're not disappointed in them and I hope you are going to see and to own a great many finer ones.

"We've never seen noth--anything, nor been anywhere, yet." It was Mrs. Briskow speaking. "But we're goin'. We're goin' lots of places and we're goin' to see everything wuth seein', so Pa says. Anyhow, the children is. First off, Pa's goin' to take us to the mountains." The mother faced the visitor at this announcement and for a moment she appeared to be gazing at a vision, for her wrinkled countenance was glorified. "You've seen 'em, haven't you, mister?"

"Mountains? A great many."

Allegheny broke in: "I dunno's these di'mon's is just what _I_ expected 'em to be. They are and--they ain't. I'm kind of disapp'inted."

Gray smiled. "That is true of most things that we anticipate or aspire to. It's the tragedy of accomplishment--to find that our rewards are never quite up to our expectations."

"Do they cost much?"

"Oh, decidedly! The prices are all plainly marked. Please look them over."

Ma Briskow did as urged, but the shock was paralyzing; delight, admiration, expectancy, gave place to horrified amazement at the figures upon the tags. She shook her head slowly and made repeated sounds of disapproval.

"Tse! Tse! Tse! Why, your pa's crazy! Plumb crazy!"

Although the mother's principal emotion for the moment was aroused by the price marks on the price tags, Allegheny paid little attention to them and began vainly fitting ring after ring to her fingers. All were too small, however; most of them refused to pass even the first joint, and Gray realized now what Gus Briskow had meant when he wrote for rings "of large sises." Eventually the girl found one that slipped into place, and this she regarded with complacent admiration.

"This one'll do for me," she declared. "And it's a whopper!"

Gray took her hand in his; as yet it had not been greatly distorted by manual labor, but the nails were dull and cracked and ragged and they were inlaid in deep mourning. "I don't believe you'll like that mounting," he said, gently. "It's what we call a man's ring. This is the kind women usually wear." He held up a thin platinum band of delicate workmanship which Allegheny examined with frank disdain.

[Image: "THIS ONE'LL DO FOR ME," SHE DECLARED. "AND IT'S A WHOPPER!"]

"Pshaw! I'd bust that the first time I hoed a row of 'taters," she declared. "I got to have things stout, for me."

"But," Gray protested, in even a milder voice, "you probably wouldn't want to wear expensive jewelry in the garden."

Miss Briskow held her hand high, admiring the play of light upon the facets of the splendid jewel, then she voiced a complacent thought that has been variously expressed by other women better circumstanced than she--"If we can afford to buy 'em, I reckon we can afford to wear 'em."

Not until Gray had suggested that her days of work in the fields were probably about ended did the girl's expression change. Then indeed her interest was arrested. She regarded him with a sudden quickening of imagination; she revolved the novel idea in her mind.

"From what my driver has told me about the Briskow farm," he ran on, "you won't have to work at anything, unless you care to."

Allie continued to weigh this new thought in her mind; that it intrigued her was plain, but she made no audible comment.

CHAPTER V

For perhaps half an hour the women tried on one piece of jewelry after another, exclaiming, admiring, arguing, then the mother realized with a start that meal time was near and that the menfolks would soon be home. Leaving Allie to entertain their guest, she hurried out, and the sound of splitting kindling, the clatter of stove lids, the rattle of utensils came from the kitchen.

Gray retired to the patent rocker, Miss Briskow settled herself upon a straight-backed chair and folded her capable hands in her lap; an oppressive silence fell upon the room. Evidently the duties of hostess lay with crushing weight upon the girl, for her face became stony, her cheeks paled, her eyes glazed; the power of speech completely failed her and she answered Gray with nods or shakes of her head. The most that he could elicit from her were brief "yeps" and "nopes." It was not unlike a "spirit reading," or a ouija-board seance. He told himself, in terms of the oil fields, that here was a dry well--that the girl was a "duster." Having exhausted the usual commonplace topics in the course of a monologue that induced no reaction whatever, he voiced a perfectly natural remark about the wonder of sudden riches. He was, in a way, thinking aloud of the changes wrought in drab lives like the Briskows' by the discovery of oil. He was surprised when Allegheny responded:

"Ma and me stand it all right, but it's an awful strain on Pa," said she.

"Indeed?"

The girl nodded. "He's got more nutty notions."

Gray endeavored to learn the nature of Pa's recently acquired eccentricities, but Allie was flushing and paling as a result of her sudden excursion into the audible. Eventually she trembled upon the verge of speech once more, then she took another desperate plunge.

"He says folks are going to laugh at us or with us, and--and rich people have got to act rich. They got to be elegant." She laughed loudly, abruptly, and the explosive nature of the sound startled her as greatly as it did her hearer. "He's going to get somebody to teach Buddy and me how to behave."

"I think he's right," Gray said, quietly.

"Why, he's sent to Fort Worth for a piano, already, and for a lady to come out for a coupla days and show me how to play it!" There was another black hiatus in the conversation. "We haven't got a spare room, but--I'm quick at learnin' tunes. She could bunk in with me for a night or two."

Gray eyed the speaker suspiciously, but it was evident that she was in sober earnest, and the tragedy of such profound ignorance smote the man sharply. Here was a girl of at least average intelligence and of sensitive makeup; a girl with looks, too, in spite of her size, and no doubt a full share of common sense --perhaps even talents of some sort--yet with the knowledge of a child. For the first time he realized what playthings of Fate are men and women, how completely circumstance can make or mar them, and what utter paralysis results from the strangling grip of poverty.

History hints that during the Middle Ages there flourished an association known as Comprachicos--"child-buyers"--which traded in children. The Comprachicos bought little human beings and disfigured their features, distorted their bodies, fashioned them into ludicrous, grotesque, or hideous monstrosities for king and

populace to laugh at, and then resold them. Soft, immature faces were made into animal likenesses; tender, unformed bodies were put into wicker forms or porcelain vases and allowed to grow; then when they had become things of compressed flesh and twisted bone, the wicker was cut, the vase was broken, leaving a man in the shape of a bottle or a mug.

That is precisely what environment does.

In the case of Allegheny Briskow, poverty, the drought, the grinding hardships of these hard-scrabble Texas counties, had dwarfed the intellect, the very soul of a splendid young animal. Or so, at least, Gray told himself. It was a thought that evoked profound consideration.

Now that the girl was beginning to lose her painful embarrassment, she showed to somewhat better advantage and no longer impressed him, as bovine, stolid, almost stupid; he could not but note again her full young figure, her well-shaped, well-poised head, and her regular features, and the pity of it seemed all the greater by reason thereof. He tried to visualize her perfectly groomed, clad in a smart gown molded over a well-fitting corset, with her feet properly shod and her hair dressed--but the task was beyond him. Probably she had never worn a corset, never seen a pair of silk stockings. He thought, too, of what was in store for her and wondered how she would fit into the new world she was about to enter. Not very well, he feared. Might not this prove to be the happiest period of all her new life, he asked himself. As yet the wonder and the glory of the new estate left room in her imagination for little else; the mold was broken, but the child was not conscious of its bottle shape. Nevertheless the shape was there. When that child learned the truth, when it heard the laughter and felt the ridicule, what then? He could not bring himself to envy Allegheny Briskow.

"First off, Ma and me are goin' over to Dallas to do some tradin'," the girl was saying. "After that we're goin' to the mountains."

"Your mother mentioned mountains."

"Yep. Her and Pa have allus been crazy about mountains, but they never seen 'em. That's the first thing Ma said when Number One blowed in. When we saw that oil go over the crown block, and when they told us that black stuff was really oil, Ma busted out cryin' and said she'd see the mountains, after all--then she wouldn't mind if she died. Pa he cried, too, we'd allus been so pore--You see, Ma's kind of marked about mountains--been that way since she was a girl. She cuts out stories and pictures of 'em. And that's how me and Buddy came to be named Allegheny and Ozark. But we never expected to _see_ 'em. The drought burned us out too often."

Allegheny and Ozark. Quaint names. "Times must have been hard." The remark was intended only as a spur.

"_Hard!_" There was a pause; slowly the girl's eyes began to smolder, and as she went on in her deliberate way, memory set a tragic shadow over her face. "I'll say they was hard! Nobody but us nesters knows what hard times is. Out west of here they went

three years without rain, and all around here people was starvin'. Grown folks was thin and tired, and children was sickly--they was too peaked to play. Why, we took in a hull family--wagon-folks. Their hosses died and they couldn't go on, so we kep' 'em--'til we burned out. I don't know how we managed to get by except that Pa and Buddy are rustlers and I can do more 'n a hired man. We never had enough to eat. Stuff just wouldn't grow. The stock got bonier and bonier and finally died, 'count of no grass and the tanks dryin' out. And all the time the sun was a-blazin' and the dust was a-blowin and the clouds would roll up and then drift away and the sun would come out hotter 'n ever. Day after day, month after month, we waited--eighteen, I think it was. People got so they wouldn't pray no more, and the preachers moved away. I guess we was as bad off as them pore folks in Beljum. Why, even the rattlesnakes pulled out of the country! Somehow the papers got hold of it and bime-by some grub was shipped in and give around, but--us Briskows didn't get none. Pa'd die before he'd beg."

The girl was herself now; she was talking naturally, feelingly, and her voice was both deep and pleasing.

"The thinner Ma got, the more she talked about the mountains, where there was water--cool, clear water in the criks. And timber on the hills--timber with green leaves on it. And grass that you could lay down in and smell. I guess Ma was kind of feverish. We was drier 'n a lime-burner's boot when the rain did come. I'll never forget--we all stood out in it and soaked it up. It was wonderful, to get all wet and soaky, and not with sweat."

"Then on top of that the oil came, too. It must have been wonderful."

"Yep. Now we're rich. And buyin' di'mon's and pianos and goin' to Dallas for pretty fixin's. Seems kinda dreamy." Allegheny Briskow closed her eyes, her massive crown of damp, disordered hair drooped backward and for a moment Gray was able, unobserved, to study her.

She had revealed herself to him, suddenly, in the space of a few moments, and the revelation added such poignancy to his previous thoughts that he regarded her with a wholly new sympathy. There was nothing dull about this girl. On the contrary, she had intelligence and feeling. There had been a rich vibrance in her voice as she told of that frightful ordeal; a dimness had come into her eyes as she spoke of her mother gabbling feverishly of the green hills and babbling brooks; she had yearned maternally at mention of those wretched little children. No, there was a sincere emotional quality concealed in this young giantess, and a sensitiveness quite unexpected.

Gray remained silent until she opened her eyes; then he said: "When you and your mother come to Dallas to do your shopping, won't you let me take you around to the right shops and see that you get the right things?" Then, prompted by the girl's quick resentment, he added, hastily, "--at the right prices?"

Allie's face cleared. "Why, that's right nice of you!" she declared. "I--I reckon we'd be glad to."

Gus Briskow was a sandy, angular man; a ring of air holes cut in the crown of his faded felt hat showed a head of hair faded to match the color of his headgear; his greasy overalls were tucked into boots, and a ragged Joseph's coat covered his flannel shirt. Both the man and his makeup were thoroughly typical of this part of the country, except in one particular--Pa Briskow possessed the brightest, the shrewdest pair of blue eyes that Calvin Gray had ever seen, and they were surrounded by a network of prepossessing wrinkles.

He came directly in to greet his visitor, then said: "I never expected you'd come 'way out here an' bring your plunder with you. Ma says you got a hull gripful o' di'mon's."

"I have, indeed." Gray pointed to the glittering display still spread out upon the varicolored counterpane.

Briskow approached the bed and gazed curiously, silently down at the treasure, then his face broke into a sunshiny smile. He wiped his hands upon his trousers legs and picked up a ring. But instead of examining the jewel, he looked at the price mark, after which his smile broadened.

Ozark had entered behind his father, and his sister introduced him now. He was a year or two younger than Allegheny, but cast in the same heroic mold. They formed a massive pair of children indeed, and, as in her case, a sullen distrust of strangers was inherent in him. He stared coldly, resentfully, at Gray, mumbled an unintelligible greeting, then rudely turned his back upon the visitor and joined his father.

The elder Briskow spoke first, and it was evident that he feared to betray lack of conservatism, for he said, with admirable restraint:

"Likely-lookin' lot of trinkets, eh, Bud?"

Bud grunted. After a moment he inquired of Gray, "How much is that hull lot wuth, Mister?"

"Close to a hundred thousand dollars."

Brother and sister exchanged glances; the father considered briefly, smilingly, then he said, "With oil at three an' a quarter, it wouldn't take long for a twelve-hundred bar'ler to get the hull caboodle, would it?" "Is your well producing twelve hundred barrels a day?"

"Huh!" Briskow, junior, grinned at his sister, exposing a mouth full of teeth as white and as sound as railroad crockery, but his next words were directed at Gray: "We got _four_ wells and the p'orest one is makin' twelve hundred bar'l."

The guests' mental calculations as to the Briskow royalties were interrupted by an announcement that dinner was ready, whereupon the father announced:

"Mister, it looks like you'd have to stay overnight with us, 'cause I got important business after dinner an' I wouldn't trust Ma to pick out no jewelry by herself--them prices would skeer her

to death. We're ignorant people and we ain't used to spendin' money, so it'll take time for us to make up our minds. Kin you wait?"

"I'll stay as long as you'll keep me," Gray declared, heartily.

A moment later, having learned that a place at the table had been set for his driver as well as himself, Gray stepped out to summon the man and to effect the necessary change in his arrangements. He was not surprised to find the chauffeur with nose flattened against a pane of the front-room window, his hands cupped over his eyes. Ignoring the fellow's confusion at being discovered, Gray told him of his change of plan and instructed him to drive back to Ranger and to return late the following afternoon. Then he led the way toward the kitchen.

That stay at the Briskows' turned out to be less irksome than the visitor had anticipated, for the afternoon was spent with Buddy examining the Briskow wells and others near by. It was an interesting experience, and Gray obtained a deal of first-hand information that he believed would come in handy. Buddy's first mistrust was not long in passing, and, once Gray had penetrated his guard, the boy was won completely, the pendulum swung to the opposite extreme, and ere long suspicion changed to liking, then to approval, and at last to open, extravagant admiration.

And Gray liked the youthful giant, too, once the latter had dropped his hostility and had become his natural self, for Ozark was a lad with temper and with temperament. They got along together swimmingly; in fact, they grew thicker than thieves in the course of time. The elder man soon became conscious of the fact that he was being studied, analyzed, even copied--the sincerest form of flattery--and it pleased his vanity. Buddy's mind was thirsty, his curiosity was boundless, questions popped out of him at every step, and every answer, every bit of information or of philosophy that fell from the visitor's lips he pounced upon, avidly examined, then carefully put away for future use. He was like a magpie filling its nest. Gray's personal habits, mannerisms, tricks--all were grist for Buddy's mill. The stranger's suit, for instance, was a curiosity to the boy, who could not understand wherein it was so different from any other he had ever seen; young Briskow attributed that difference to the fact that it had probably come from a bigger store than any he had known. It amazed him to learn, in answer to a pointed question, that it had been cut and fitted to the wearer by expert workmen. It disappointed him bitterly to be informed that there was not another one exactly like it which he could buy.

And the visitor's silk shirt, with double cuffs and a monogram on the sleeve! Fancy "fixin's" like this, Buddy confessed, he had always associated with womenfolks, but if Gray wore them there could be nothing disgraceful, nothing effeminate about the practice. There was a decided thrill in the prospect of possessing such finery, all initialed with huge, silken O. B's. Life was presenting wholly novel and exciting possibilities to the youth.

When Gray offered him a cigarette, Buddy rudely took the gold case out of his hand and examined it, then he laughed in raucous delight.

"Gosh! I never knew men had _purty_ things. I--I'm goin' to get me one like that."

"Do you like it?" "Gee! It's _swell_!"

"Good! I'll make you a present of it."

Buddy stared at the speaker in speechless surprise. "What--what for?" he finally stammered.

"Because you admire it."

"Why--it's solid gold, ain't it?"

"To be sure."

"How much d'it cost?"

"My dear fellow," Gray protested, "you shouldn't ask questions like that. You embarrass me."

Buddy examined the object anew, then he inquired, "Say, why'd you offer to gimme this?"

"I've just told you." Gray was becoming impatient. "It is a custom in some countries to present an object to one who is polite enough to admire it."

"Nobody never give _me_ a present," Buddy said. "Not one that I wanted. I never had _nothing_ that I didn't have to have and couldn't get along without. This cigareet case is worth more 'n all the stuff I ever owned, an' I'm sure obliged to you." He replaced the article in Gray's hand.

"Eh? Won't you accept it? Why not?"

"I--Oh, I dunno."

Gray pondered this refusal for a moment before saying, "Perhaps you think I'm--trying to make a good impression on you, so you'll buy some diamonds?"

"Mebbe." Buddy averted his eyes. He was in real distress.

"Um-m! I ought to punch your head." Gray slipped the case into young Briskow's pocket. "I don't have to bribe people. Some day you'll realize that I like you."

"_Honest?_"

"Cross my heart."

The boy laughed in frank delight, his brown cheeks colored, his eyes sparkled. "Gosh!" said he. "I--like _you!_" For some time thereafter he remained red and silent, but he kept one big hand in the pocket where lay the gold cigarette case. There was a wordless song in Buddy Briskow's heart, for--he had made a friend. And such a friend!

The Briskow children possessed each other's fullest confidence, hence Ozark took the first occasion to show his gift to Allegheny, and to tell her in breathless excitement all about that wonderful afternoon.

"He said he'd a mind to lick me, an' I bet he could 'a' done it, too," the boy concluded.

"Lick you? Hunh!"

"Oh, he's hard-boiled! That's why I like him. He's been 'round the world and speaks furrin language like a natif. That suit of clo's was made for him, an' he's got thirty others, all better 'n this one. Shoes, too! Made special, in New York. Forty dollars a pair!"

"What's he doin' here if he's so rich?" It was the doubting female of the species speaking. "Drummers is terrible liars."

Buddy flew to the defense of his hero. "He's doin' this to he'p a friend. Told me all about it. I'm goin' to have thirty suits--"

"Shoes don't cost forty dollars. Clo's don't cost that much." Allie regarded her brother keenly, understandingly, then she said, somberly, "It ain't no use, Buddy."

"What ain't?"

"It ain't no use to wish. Mebbe you can have thirty suits--if the wells hold out, but they won't look like his. And me, too. We're too big, Buddy, an' the more money we got, the more clo's we put on, the more folks is goin' to laugh at us. It shames me to go places with anybody but you."

"He wouldn't laugh. He's been all over the world," the boy asserted. Then, after some deliberation, "I bet he's seen bigger people than us."

As a matter of fact, Allegheny's sensitiveness about her size had been quickly apparent to Gray, and during that day he did his utmost to overcome it, but with what success he could not know. Buddy was his, body and soul, that much was certain; he made the conquest doubly secure by engaging the young Behemoth in a scuffle and playfully putting him on his back. Defeat, at other hands than Gray's, would have enraged Ozark to the point of frenzy, it would have been considered by him an indignity and a disgrace. Now, however, he looked upon it as a natural and wholly satisfactory demonstration of his idol's supreme prowess, and he roared with delight at being bested. Gray promptly taught him the wrestling trick by which he had accomplished the feat, and flattered the boy immensely by refusing to again try his skill. The older man, when he really played, could enter into sport with tremendous zest and he did so now; he taught Buddy trick after trick; they matched each other in feats of strength and agility. They wound up finally on opposite sides of the Briskow kitchen table, elbows planted, fingers interlocked, straining furiously in that muscle-racking, joint-cracking pastime of the lumber camps known as "twisting arms." Here again Gray was victorious, until he showed Buddy how to gain greater leverage by changing the position of his wrist and

by slightly altering his grip, whereupon the boy's superior strength told. They were red in the face, out of breath, and soaked with perspiration, when Pa Briskow drove up in his expensive new touring car.

By this time Buddy's admiration had turned to adulation; he had passed under the yoke and he gloried shamelessly in his captive state. At supper time he appeared with his hair wetly combed in imitation of Gray's. He wore a necktie, too, and into it he had fastened a cheap brass stickpin, much as Gray wore his. During the meal he watched how the guest used his knife and fork and made awkward attempts to do likewise, but a table fork was an instrument which, heretofore, Buddy had looked upon as a weapon of pure offense, like a whaler's harpoon, and conveniently designed either for spearing edibles beyond his reach or for retrieving fragments of meat lurking between his back teeth. He even did some hasty manicuring under the edge of the table with his jack-knife.

Pa Briskow was scarcely less observant than his son. He watched Gray's every move; he sounded him out adroitly; he pondered his lightest word. After the supper things had been cleared away and the dishes washed, the entire family adjourned to the front room and again examined the jewelry. It was an absorbing task, they did not hurry it. Not until the following afternoon, in fact, did they finally make their selections, and then they were guided almost wholly by the good taste of their guest. Gray did not exploit them. On the contrary, his effort was to limit their extravagance; but in this he had little success, for Pa Briskow had decided to indulge his generous impulses to the full and insisted upon so doing. The check he finally wrote was one of five figures.

By this time the visitor had become aware of arousing a queer reaction in Allegheny Briskow. He had overcome her diffidence early enough; he had unsealed her lips; he had obtained an insight into her character; but once that was done, the girl retired within herself again and he could get nothing more out of her. He would have believed that she actually disliked him, had it not been for the fact that whatever he said, she took as gospel, that wherever he chanced to be there she was, her ears open, her somber, meditative eyes fixed upon him. Evidently she did not actually dislike him; he decided finally that she was studying him, striving to analyze and to weigh him to her own complete satisfaction before trusting him further than she had.

When it drew near the time for him to leave, and he announced that the driver of his hired car had been instructed to return for him, there was protest, loud and earnest, from the Briskows, father and son. Buddy actually sulked at being denied the pleasure of driving his hero to town in the new car, and told about a smooth place on a certain detour where he could "get her up to sixty mile an hour." "If it was longer, she'd do a hundred," he declared.

Pa Briskow was worried for the security of the diamonds, and assured Gray that it was unsafe to trust those service-car drivers.

But the latter, seeing a threat to his carefully matured plans, refused to listen. "There's one thing you can do for me," he told them. "You can give me a pint of cream."

"Cream? What for?" The family regarded him with amazement.

"I'm fond of it. If you have no cream, milk will do."

"Pshaw! I'll put up a hull basket of lunch for you," Mrs. Briskow declared. "Buddy, go kill a rooster, an' you, Allie, get them eggs out of the nest in the garden, an' a jar of them peach preserves, while I make up a pan of biscuits."

Protest was unavailing.

When the others had hurried away, Pa Briskow said: "I been studyin' you, Mister Gray, and I got you down as a first-class man. When Ma and Allie come over to Dallas to get rigged out, I'd like you to help 'em. They 'ain't never been fu'ther from home than Cisco--that's thirty mile. I'll pay you for your time."

Gray's hearty acceptance of the first and his prompt refusal of the second proposal pleased the speaker.

"Bein' rich is mighty fine, but--" Gus Briskow shook his head doubtfully. "It takes a lot of thinkin', and I ain't used to thinkin'. Some day, mebbe, I'll get you to give me a hand in figgerin' out some worries."

"Business worries?"

"No. I got enough of them, an' more comin', but it ain't that. We're goin' to have a heap of money, and"--he looked up with straightforward eyes--"we ain't goin' to lose it, if I have my way. We've rubbed along, half starved, all our lives, an' done without things till we're--Well, look at us! I reckon we've made you laugh. Oh, I bet we have! Ma an' me can stand it, but, mister, I don't want folks to laugh at my children, and there's other things I don't want to happen to 'em. Buddy's a wild hoss and he's got a streak of the Old Nick in him. And Allie ain't broke no better 'n him. I got a feelin' there may be trouble ahead, an' --sometimes I 'most wish we'd never had no oil in Texas."

CHAPTER VI

"Well, did you land them hicks?" It was Gray's driver speaking. Through the gloom of early evening he was guiding his car back toward Ranger. The road was the same they had come, but darkness had invested it with unfamiliar perils, or so it seemed, for the headlights threw every rock and ridge into bold relief and left the holes filled with mysterious shadows; the vehicle strained, its motor raced, its gears clashed noisily as it rocked along like a dory in a boisterous tide rip. Only now and then did a few rods of smooth going permit the chauffeur to take his attention from the streak of illumination ahead long enough to light another cigarette, a swift maneuver, the dexterity of which bespoke long practice.

"Yes. And I made a good sale," the passenger declared. With pride he announced the size of the Briskow check.

"J'ever see a dame the size of that gal?" A short laugh issued from the driver. "She'd clean up in vaudeville, wouldn't she? Why, she could lift a ton, in harness. And hoein' the garden, with their coin! It's like a woman I heard of: they got a big well on their farm and she came to town to do some shoppin'; somebody told her she'd ought to buy a present for her old man, so she got him a new handle for the ax. _Gawd!_"

A few miles farther on the fellow confessed: "I wasn't crazy about comin' for you to-night. Not after I got a flash at what's in that valise."

"No?"

"You're takin' a chance, stranger."

"Nothing new about that." Gray remained unperturbed. His left arm was behind the driver; with it he clung rigidly to the back of the seat as the car plunged and rolled. "Frequently we are in danger when we least suspect it. Now you, for instance."

"Me?" The man at the wheel shot a quick glance at his fare.

"You probably take more chances than you dream of."

"How so?"

"Um-m! These roads are a menace to life and limb; the country is infested with robbers--"

"Oh, sure! That's what I had in mind. Joy-ridin' at night with a hatful of diamonds is my idea of a sucker's amusement. Of course, we won't 'get it'--"

"Of course! One never does."

"Sure! But if we should, there's just one thing to do."

"Indeed?" Gray was pleasantly inquisitive, but it was plain that he suffered no apprehensions. "And that is--?"

"Sit tight and take your medicine."

"I never take medicine."

The chauffeur shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I do, when it's put down my throat. I _been_ stuck up."

"Really!"

"Twice. Tame as a house cat, me--both times. I s'pose I'll get nicked again sometime."

"And you won't offer any resistance?"

"Not a one, cull."

"I'm relieved to be assured of that."

For a second time the driver flashed a glance at his companion. It was a peculiar remark and voiced in a queer tone. "Yes? Why?"

"Because--" Gray slightly shifted his position, there was a movement of his right hand--the one farthest away from the man at the wheel--and simultaneously his left arm slipped from the back of the seat and tightly encircled the latter's waist. He finished in a wholly unfamiliar voice, "Because, my good man, you are now held up for the third time, and it would distress me to have to kill you."

The driver uttered a loud grunt, for something sharp and hard had been thrust deeply into that soft, sensitive region overlying his liver, and now it was held there. It was unnecessary for Gray to order the car stopped; its brakes squealed, it ceased its progress as abruptly as if its front wheels had fetched up against a stone wall.

"Hey! What the--?"

"Don't try to 'heel' me with your elbow," Gray warned, sharply. "Now, up with 'em--you know. That's nice."

The faces of the men were close together. Gray's was blazing, the driver's was stiff with amazement and stamped with an incredulous grimace. Paralyzed for the moment with astonishment, he made no resistance, not even when he felt that long muscular left arm relax and the hand at the end of it go searching over his pockets.

Gray was grim, mocking; some vibrant, evil quality to his voice suggested extreme malignity at full cock, like that unseen weapon the muzzle of which was buried beneath the driver's short ribs. "Ah! You go armed, I see. A shoulder holster, as I suspected. I knew you had nothing on this side." Seizing his victim's upstretched right hand with his own left, he gave it a sudden fierce wrench that all but snapped the wrist, and at the same instant he reached across and snatched the concealed weapon from its resting place. He flung the chauffeur's body away from him; there was a sharp click as he swiftly jammed the barrel of the automatic back and let it fly into place.

The entire maneuver had been deftly executed, even yet the object of the assault was speechless.

"Now then"--the passenger faced about in his seat and showed his teeth in a smile--"it is customary to permit the condemned to enjoy the last word. What have you to say for yourself?"

"I--got this to say. It's a hell of a joke--" the man exploded.

"Do I act as if I were joking?"

"If you think it's funny to jab a gun in a man's belly when he ain't lookin'--" "A gun? My simple friend, you have--or had--the only gun in this party, and you may thank whatever gods you worship that you didn't try to use it, for--I would have been rough with you. Oh, very rough! I might even have made you eat it. Now, inasmuch as you may be tempted to embellish this story with

some highly imaginary details, I prefer that you know the truth. This is the 'gun' I used to stick you up." With a rigidly outthrust thumb Gray prodded the driver in the side. "Simple, isn't it? And no chance for accidents." The speaker's shoulders were shaking.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"Not a doubt of it!" chuckled the other. "Especially if you follow in the course you have chosen. And a similar fate will overtake your pal, Mallow. By the way, is that his right name?... Never mind, I know him as Mallow. A shallow, trusting man, and, I hope, a better judge of diamonds than of character. As for me, I look deeper than the surface and am seldom deceived in people--witness your case, for example. I knew you at once for a crook. It might save you several miles of bad walking to tell me where Mallow is waiting to high-jack me.... No?"

"I dunno what you're ravin' about," growled the unhappy owner of the automobile. "But, believe me, I'll have you pinched for this."

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth is ingratitude! And what bad taste to prattle of prosecution. I sha'n't steal your car, it needs too much overhauling. And I abominate cheap machines. It is true that I'm one pistol to the good, but in view of the law against carrying lethal weapons, surely you won't prefer charges against me for removing it from your person. Oh, not that! It seems to me that I'm treating you handsomely, for I shall even pay you the agreed price for this trip, provided only you tell me where you expect to meet Mr. Mallow."

"Go to hell!" "Very well. Oblige me now by getting out.... And make it snappy!"

The driver did as directed. Gray pocketed the automatic, slipped in behind the steering wheel, and drove away into the night, followed by loud and earnest objurgations.

He was still smiling cheerfully when, a mile farther on, he brought the car to a stop and clambered out. Passing forward into the illumination of the headlights, he busied himself there for several moments before resuming his journey.

For the first time in a long while Calvin Gray was thoroughly enjoying himself. Here was an enterprise with all the possibilities of a first-class adventure, and of the sort, moreover, that he was peculiarly qualified to cope with. It possessed enough hazard to lend it the requisite zest, it was sufficiently unusual to awaken his keenest interest; he experienced an agreeable exaltation of spirit, but no misgivings whatever as to the outcome, for he held the commanding cards. Little remained, it seemed to him, except to play them carefully and to take the tricks as they fell. He had not the slightest notion of permitting Mallow to lay hands upon that case of jewels.

There was no mistaking the road, but Gray did not bother to stick to the main-traveled course when detours or short cuts promised better going, for he knew full well that Mallow would be waiting, if at all, in some place he was bound to pass. It was an ideal

country for a holdup; lonely and lawless. Derrick lights twinkled over the mesquite tops, and occasionally the flaming red mouth of some boiler gaped at him, or the foliage was illuminated by the glare of gas flambeaux--vertical iron pipes at the ends of which the surplus from neighboring wells was consumed in what seemed a reckless wastage. Occasionally, too, a belated truck thundered past, but the traffic was pretty thin.

At last, however, he beheld some distance ahead the white glare of two stationary lights. The road was narrow and sandy here, and shut in by banks of underbrush; as he drew nearer a figure stepped out and stood in silhouette until his own lights picked it up. The figure waved its arms, and called attention to the car behind--evidently broken down. Here, then, the drama was to be played.

Gray brought his machine on at such a pace and so close to the man in the road that the latter was forced to step aside, then he swung it far to the right, brought it back with a quick twist of the steering wheel, and killed his motor. He was now in the ditch and outside the blinding glare of the opposing headlights; the stalled machine was in the full illumination of his own lamps.

Contrary to Gray's expectations, the car in the road was empty and the man who had hailed him was a stranger. As the latter approached, he inquired:

"What's wrong?"

"Out of gas, I guess. Anyhow--I--" The speaker noted that there was but one new arrival, where he had expected two, and the discovery appeared to nonplus him momentarily. He stammered, involuntarily he turned his head.

Gray looked in the same direction, but without changing his position, and out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a new figure emerging from the shadows behind him. Very clever! But, at least, his unexpected maneuver with his own car had made it necessary for both men to approach him from the same side.

While the first stranger continued to mumble, Gray sat motionless, keenly conscious, meanwhile, of that other presence closing in upon him from the rear. He simulated a violent start when a second voice cried:

"Don't move. I've got you covered."

"My God!" Gray twisted about in his seat and exposed a startled countenance. A masked man was standing close to the left running board, and he held a revolver near Gray's head; the apparition appeared to paralyze the unhappy traveler, for he still tightly clutched the steering wheel with both hands.

"Just sit still." The cloth of the mask blew outward as the words issued; through the slits two malevolent eyes gleamed. "Act pretty, and you won't get hurt."

"Why! It's--it's Mr. _Mallow_!" Gray hitched himself farther around in his seat and leaned forward in justifiable amazement. "As I live it's you, Mallow!" Both highwaymen were in front of

him, now, and shoulder to shoulder; he made sure there were no others behind them.

"Shut up!" Mallow snapped. "Frisk him, Tony, and--"

The command was cut short by a startled, throaty cry--a hoarse sound of astonishment and rage--and simultaneously a strange, a phenomenal thing occurred. An unseen hand appeared to strike down both Mallow and his accomplice where they stood, and it smote them, moreover, with appalling force and terrifying effect. One moment they were in complete mastery of the situation, the next they were groveling in the road, coughing, sneezing, barking, retching, blaspheming poisonously. Baffled fury followed their first surprise. Mallow tore the mask from his face and groped blindly for the weapon he had dropped, but before he could recover it, pain mastered him and he fell back, clawing at himself, rubbing at his eyes that had been stricken sightless. He yelled. Tony yelled. Then upon the startled night there burst a duet of squeals and curses, a hideous medley of mingled pain and fright, at once terrifying and unnatural. Both bandits appeared to be in paroxysms of agony; from Tony issued sounds that might have issued from the throat of a woman in deadly fear and excruciating torment; Mallow's face had been partially protected, hence he was the lesser sufferer; nevertheless, his eyes were boiling in their sockets, his lungs were ablaze, ungovernable convulsions ran over him.

The men understood vaguely what had afflicted them, for they had seen Gray lift one hand from the wheel, and out of that hand they had seen a stream of liquid, or a jet of aqueous vapor, leap. It was too close to dodge. It had sprung directly into their faces, vaporizing as it came, and at its touch, at the first scent of its fumes, their legs had collapsed, their eyes had tightly closed, and every cell in their outraged bodies had rebelled. It was as if acid had been dashed upon them, destroying in one blinding instant all power for evil. With every breath, now, a new misery smote them. But worse than this torture was the monstrous nature of their afflictions. It was mysterious, horrible; they believed themselves to be dying and screamed in abysmal terror of the unknown.

Gray squeezed again the rubber bulb that he had carried in his hand these last several miles, ejecting from it the last few drops of its contents, then he opened the car door, stepped out of it and stood over his strangling victims. He kicked Mallow's revolver off the road, and, holding his breath, relieved the other high-jacker of his weapon. This he flung after the first, then he withdrew himself a few paces and lighted a cigarette, for a raw, pungent odor offended his nostrils. Both of the bawling bandits reeked of it, but their plight left him indifferent. They reminded him of a pair of horses he had seen disemboweled by a bursting shell, but he felt much less pity for them.

His lack of concern made itself felt finally. Mallow, who was the first to show signs of recovery, struggled to his feet and clawed blindly toward the automobile. He clung to it, sick and shaking; profanely he appealed for aid.

"So! It is Mr. Mallow," Gray said. "Fancy meeting you here!"

A stream of incoherencies issued from the wretched object of this mockery. Tony, the other man, stifled his groans, rose to his knees, and, with his hands clasped over his eyes, shuffled slowly away, as if to escape the sound of Gray's voice.

"Better quiet down and let me do something at once, if you wish to save your sight," the latter suggested. "Otherwise I won't answer for the result. And you needn't tell me how it hurts. I know." This proffer of aid appeared to throw the sufferers into new depths of dismay. They called to him in the name of God. They were harmless, now, and anyhow they had intended to do him no bodily harm. They implored him to lend succor or to put them out of their distress.

Gray fell to work promptly. The bottle of cream he had begged from Ma Briskow he now put to use. With this soothing liquid he first washed out their eyes, the membranes of which were raw and spongy, and excruciatingly sensitive to light, then he bandaged them as best he could with compresses, wet in it.

"You'll breathe easier as time goes on," he announced. "You'll cough a good deal for a few days, but where you are going that won't disturb anybody. Your eyes will get well, too, if you take care of them as I direct. But, meanwhile, let me warn you against lifting those bandages. Advise me as they dry out and I'll wet them again."

A blessed relief stole over the unfortunate pair; they were still sick and weak, but in a short time the acuteness of their suffering had diminished sufficiently for Gray to help them into the back seat of his car and resume his journey.

Sarcastically he referred to the sample case on the tonneau floor. "If those diamonds are in your way, I'll take them in front with me. If not, I'll ask you to keep an eye on them--or, let us say, keep a foot on them. If you should be foolish enough to heave them overboard or try to renew your assault upon me, I would be tempted to break this milk bottle. In that event, my dear Mallow, you'd go through life with a tin cup in your hand and a dog on a string."

Tony groaned in abject misery of body and soul. Mallow cursed feebly.

"What--is that devilish stuff?" the latter queried. It was plain from his voice that he meditated no treachery. "Oh! I was going to tell you. It is a product of German ingenuity, designed, I believe, for the purpose of quelling riotous and insurrectionary prisoners. It was efficacious, also, in taking pill boxes and clearing out dug-outs and the like. With some care one is safe in using it in an ordinary ammonia gun--the sort policemen use on mad dogs. Forgive me, if I say that you have demonstrated its utility in peace as well as in war. If there were more high-jackers in the world the device might be commercialized at some profit; but, alas, my good Mallow, your profession is not a common one."

"Cut out the kidding," Mallow growled, then he fell into a new convulsion of coughing. The car proceeded for some time to the tune of smothered complaints from the miserable figures bouncing upon the rear seat before Gray said: "I fear you are a selfish

pair of rascals. Have you no concern regarding the fate of the third member of your treasure-hunting trio?" Evidently they had none. "Too bad! It's a good story."

Whatever their indifference to the welfare of the chauffeur, they still had some curiosity as to their own, for Mallow asked:

"What are you going to do with us?"

"What would you do, if you were in my place?"

"I'd--listen to reason."

"Meaning--?"

"Hell! You know what he means," Tony cried, feebly.

"So! You do me the honor to offer a bribe." Gray laughed. "Pardon my amusement. It sounds callous, I know, but, frankly, your unhappy condition fails to distress me. Well, how much do you offer?"

"All we got. A coupla thousand."

"A temptation, truly."

Mallow addressed his companion irritably. "Have a little sense. He don't need money."

Calvin Gray had never been more pleased with himself than now, for matters had worked out almost exactly according to plan, a compliment indeed to his foresight and to his executive ability. He loved excitement, he lived upon it, and much of his life had been devoted to the stage-management of sensational exploits like this one. As a boy plays with a toy, so did Gray amuse himself with adventure, and now he was determined to exact from this one the last particle of enjoyment and whatever profit it afforded.

Within a few minutes of his arrival at Ranger, the town was noisy with the story, for he drove down the brightly lighted main street and stopped in front of the most populous cafe. There he called loudly for a policeman, and when the latter elbowed his way through the crowd, Gray told him, in plain hearing of all, enough of his experience to electrify everybody. He told the story well; he even made known the value of his diamond stock; mercilessly he pilloried the two blindfolded bandits. When he drove to the jail the running boards of his car were jammed with inquisitive citizens, and those who could not find footing thereon followed at a run, laughing, shouting, acclaiming him and jeering at his prisoners.

Having surrendered custody of the latter, he dressed their eyes once more and explained the sort of care they required, then he made an appeal from the front steps of the jail, a

Livros Grátis

(<http://www.livrosgratis.com.br>)

Milhares de Livros para Download:

[Baixar livros de Administração](#)

[Baixar livros de Agronomia](#)

[Baixar livros de Arquitetura](#)

[Baixar livros de Artes](#)

[Baixar livros de Astronomia](#)

[Baixar livros de Biologia Geral](#)

[Baixar livros de Ciência da Computação](#)

[Baixar livros de Ciência da Informação](#)

[Baixar livros de Ciência Política](#)

[Baixar livros de Ciências da Saúde](#)

[Baixar livros de Comunicação](#)

[Baixar livros do Conselho Nacional de Educação - CNE](#)

[Baixar livros de Defesa civil](#)

[Baixar livros de Direito](#)

[Baixar livros de Direitos humanos](#)

[Baixar livros de Economia](#)

[Baixar livros de Economia Doméstica](#)

[Baixar livros de Educação](#)

[Baixar livros de Educação - Trânsito](#)

[Baixar livros de Educação Física](#)

[Baixar livros de Engenharia Aeroespacial](#)

[Baixar livros de Farmácia](#)

[Baixar livros de Filosofia](#)

[Baixar livros de Física](#)

[Baixar livros de Geociências](#)

[Baixar livros de Geografia](#)

[Baixar livros de História](#)

[Baixar livros de Línguas](#)

[Baixar livros de Literatura](#)
[Baixar livros de Literatura de Cordel](#)
[Baixar livros de Literatura Infantil](#)
[Baixar livros de Matemática](#)
[Baixar livros de Medicina](#)
[Baixar livros de Medicina Veterinária](#)
[Baixar livros de Meio Ambiente](#)
[Baixar livros de Meteorologia](#)
[Baixar Monografias e TCC](#)
[Baixar livros Multidisciplinar](#)
[Baixar livros de Música](#)
[Baixar livros de Psicologia](#)
[Baixar livros de Química](#)
[Baixar livros de Saúde Coletiva](#)
[Baixar livros de Serviço Social](#)
[Baixar livros de Sociologia](#)
[Baixar livros de Teologia](#)
[Baixar livros de Trabalho](#)
[Baixar livros de Turismo](#)