

SKID PUFFER





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"BUT BOSSY WAS STRANGLIN' TO DEATH AN' SHE JUS' HED TO COME
UP TO BLOW."

SKID PUFFER

A TALE OF THE KANKAKEE SWAMP

ILLUSTRATED BY
F. T. RICHARDS AND VICTOR PERARD
and from Photographs of Scenery



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PREFACE

THE manuscript of the first part of this book has lain in my office desk for many years. In its original form it contained only the tales of old Pufferland on the south central border of the great Kankakee swamp. There I passed many happy hunting vacations which will ever remain among my dearest pleasures of memory.

I am a retired business man unskilful in writing and often I am hard put to it to make my unfacile pen travel blithely enough along my halting lines. When I first recorded these tales by Skid Puffer I had no thought of telling the rest of the story of his life, to which these are but the anticipatory chapters and the book itself but the foreword of a life worth while. I have no literary dreams and did not think I could be persuaded to lead them out into the hard glare of the world.

I can not help feeling a little abashed even yet, when in the stiller hours I see that I am so unduly at the front of the narration, and know too that I have uncovered so brazenly the raw bones of identity of old Pufferland. Yet I can see no other way. That was a long time ago when with endless amusement but ever wary ear I transcribed these first chapters soon after they came from Skid Puffer's lips.

You may find a few words and phrases in the swamp vernacular which at first sight in print may appear odd or worse, but if you will bend the sympathetic ear you will discover that even the most uncouth are of ancient and most patrician ancestry.

Modern commercialism, with its ditches, canals and bridges, its dredgers, railroads, highways and farm machinery, has transformed and transfigured old Pufferland. Abe Puffer has gone to his "Gret Silens"; the Indiana Greysons are far more than an empty name; and the hero himself has long been regarded as a great and favorite son. The world-old Sand-ridge, once clung to by all Pufferdom, which struck like a defiant spear into the heart of the great swamp, is withered and wasted away to its very bones. Now the region is clothed with vast, shining cornfields, long hayfields and lawnlike meadows, blooming orchards and noble farms. But even yet there obtrudes the squat outline of the Ridge, which seems like a tumbled epitaph of some secret miseries too deep to tell, of some glories that will forever endure.

I acknowledge gratefully the gift of some fine cuts illustrating the Sonoyta paradise in the Sonoran desert. These are from that silent worker for posterity, Dr. Trembly MacDougal of the Carnegie Desert Laboratory at Tucson. Some of the most pregnant botanical work of modern times is being accomplished there. I am greatly indebted to the noted California librarian, Charles Samuel Greene, for translations and reference helps, and to his able assistant, Miss

J. M. Fenton, I tender my sincere thanks for securing for me invaluable governmental data as to maps and other topographical details that for a time seemed an almost insurmountable difficulty.

One word more, the deepest in meaning: I inscribe this first volume of Skid Puffer's life to Henry J. Bamford of Wisconsin, but for whose kindly counsel, brotherly sympathy, fine taste and unswerving confidence and help this work would have been impossible.

Francis F. French

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BOOK I

PUFFERLAND

CHAPTER I

THE SANDHILL ROAD OF PUFFERDOM

PUFFERLAND for many generations had been a barely habitable region on the north end of a sand-ridge that at the farthest reach dipped into the Kankakee swamp. Throughout almost its entire way it was branded by the Sandhill road.

The road started somewhere in southern White county among the crisscross of roadways, among meadows, orchards, cornfields and forests, dotted with homes. It fielded its way with uncertainty across vast hayfields, over lower rangelands interspersed with reedy lakes and open-faced, shining sloughs; then the crossways failing, it progressed onward and upward through tussocky seas of unfenced grazing lands. When at last the grass-stump levels changed gradually to oozy fens alongside the road embankment, the Ridge itself rose like a monster out of its sodden sleep and stood up, verdure-covered and stony-ribbed for the next thirty miles. And this famous Sandhill road, commencing in the far-off farms to the south, ended at Abe Puffer's big farm-yard gate,—Squire Puffer, the noblest Roman of them all.

For a few leagues after the Ridge was reached

the ancient wagon trail struggled obliquely upward on the western side from the worthless willows and gaunt water elms, past small grubbed-out farms, through bosomy fields and meadows and hilly orchards, all becoming less significant and less happy with each traveled mile.

Yet still scaling the Ridge, the wagon road went through dense shrubberies of chaste-skinned buckeyes, dogwood and birch that hooded the way. Then gradually came in the stately, dark-boled tupeloes, burly, moss-bearded bur-oaks, haggish shellbark hickories, robust walnut groves, dark reaches of sugar maple with forlorn deserted sugar camps until the very high places were attained. There in their cameo barks of whitish gray the tremendous white oaks lorded over the forest grandeur for twenty miles. A few miles further on is where in all decency the Sandhill road should have stopped.

But the Sandhill road did not stop there; it wound on and on through slowly decrescent growths. The trees became smaller, shorter, scrubbier; thickety uprisings of worthless shrubberies came on, and there were open places where the sunlight shone in brazenly. Now and then a gaunt ledge raced along the roadway, sneaking out into sunny places in the impoverished soil, diving in again among the pinched grass, beggar-lice, mole runs and mounds. The stone-finned top of the Ridge was covered with stubborn, enfamined growths and down its long slopes there were hideous black stumps and contorted boles, death marks of earlier swamp fires.

As the jolty road progressed, more sterile and more infecund became the scene. The prosperous little farms at the beginning of the rise on the edge of the Ridge changed to less inviting and sadder ones. The airily graceful windmills were succeeded by pumps, then by well-sweeps, then by reedy water holes. The sleek stock in farmerlike inclosures after a time gave way to big-headed, pot-bellied colts, bony, harness-marked horses, woolly, flat-bodied steers and bony-cornered cows. Contented pasture cattle were displaced by burry sheep, ugly goats and sharp-backed, unherded swine. And as the road extended, more numerous and more worthless became the curs.

After the prosperous looking cottages, the smaller houses, cabins, shanties, huts came in, parasitic nests scratched out in half-hidden spots on the clay polls of the Ridge. Down on the flattish places between the upper places of the Ridge and the inclusive tentacles of the swamp, bedeviled timber still had way. Who lived in the cabins and shanties and huts, their ways and means and social status, the middle names of the babies down to the names of the animal pets, no one knew in all of its intricacy so well as the widow of Jelly Puffer, who kept the Pufferland store.

In a stray knoll of scrub oaks surrounding the saloon, the post-office and the watering trough was the general store, the loafing place and the beginning of Pufferland. From the high places not far from the white oaks a vein of water ran under the penury of the land and emerging at the store poured unceasingly throughout the year.

A hundred cow-trails and footpaths converged at this glory spot of Pufferdom—"the store." A few miles further on the road sank down to the lower stretches to avoid the unburied backbone of the Ridge. There were yet thickets and shrubs, more stunted and of meaner worth, fields of ragweed, open patches of Spanish-needles and beggar-lice; up by the unfenced road with its jolting ruts were blotches of thistles, sparse clutches of velvet mulleins and ragged camps of naked rocks. Then the Puffer schoolhouse at the "Crossins" came into view. Far down on the west side was an estray forest of butternuts, walnuts and hickories and on the opposite side of the Ridge stood the only scrub oak and crooked maple timber for a dozen miles.

The bisecting, rooty road at the Crossins led down westward to the rangelands on the flats of the swamp and extended eastward in commingling ways to the firewood clearings and to a degenerate sugar camp stingily holding on.

The old Puffer schoolhouse held sway in a level of scrawny black oaks twisted by earlier swamp fires. A stick and stone chimney crowned with a rusted, leaning stovepipe, seemed to tie the worn out building to its dominion of inhospitable Pufferland.

This cross road by the schoolhouse was the south boundary of Abe Puffer's three-thousand-acre farm. Here the sterile soil was washed to its farming dregs. The swamp pillage was complete. On either side were beggary stretches of sandburs, infertile clumps of wire grass, patches of worn out brambles not

knee-high, thickets of debased hazel bushes, bald acres of white clay, skinny ribs of ledges, and intervening acreages of wasted, naked soil.

Above the home the Ridge extended nakedly two miles further on, and slipped into the engulfing wastes of the Kankakee swamp. But Squire Puffer's three thousand acres had two striking merits, perhaps three: the two-hundred-acre swamp strip, the famous Puffer five-inch spring and—Skid Puffer.

The strip of swamp was not more than eighty rods wide at its greatest breadth. It was a bed of tropical richness,—the soil looted from the higher places and a conquest of the edge of the swamp. A crowded wall of huge willows forming a levee five feet high, held the strip on its western side from the maw of the swamp. A seven-strand, barb wire fence protected its eastern side from the ravages of the ever hungry denizens of Pufferland. This inhospitable fence was not only the most reputable one on Abe Puffer's farm, but was the only horse-high, bull-strong, pig-tight fence in all Pufferland.

Abe Puffer was proud of the fence, but he was still prouder of the strip. Many a night after the hunters came, when the embers in the five-foot fireplace were low, a little prodding at his genial soul let in stories. Once—before my coming—he told about his wonderful "Strip."

"I tell you Genral, I hev saw some o' the bigges' punkins, leas' onct, es ever lay like a clump o' gol' din the sun on a frosty mornin'. Onct I hed a yearlin' shoat es was lost an' wher d'you 'spect I found 'im,

hugh? 'E'd et a hole in the furside of a punkin, one o' the bigges' punkins o' course, nen et inside big 'nough so's 'e could turn 'roun' 'thout mussin' 'is tail. It was jus' ta whopper." All of us agreed with him. "Anether time I missed a four year ol' heifer an' hunted two whole days fer 'er, thinkin' mebbly she was fast in the quicksan' som'ers. An' wher do you s'pect I found *her*? Just inside of a cabbitch perfec'ly hid. She hed et a stall in 'bout four foot an' it was too shy fer 'er to turn 'roun'. An' ther she was wher mos' nobody could find 'er. Lord-a-mighty sech cabbitches 's nough to scare a feller."

The "General" had eagle eyes, a most irruptive temper and exceedingly bluff ways on such occasions and had a fierce way of subduing with an authoritative glance any snickering hunter who dared to assume any other mien than the gravest dissimulation.

"Tell about those turnips squire; you remember you and I dug out the first year I came. Hugh? Don't remember? Yes you do," and the General by his reproachful astonishment forced a tale of turnips on the squire.

"Oh yes; so I do. I'd forgot thet. Them was turnips es was turnips an' no mistake. The Genral an' me boys, spadn' 'bout a nour dug out jus' three. Nen we put two 'ith ther tails up and one 'ith its tail down in a soap kittle and efter pourin' in 'bout half a pint o' water wich most of it run over, they jus' zactly filled the whole geedanged kittle. An' wat's

more it was n't sech a swell seasing fer turnips either, ner was it sech a gosh blimmity small kittle."

"And the corn squire; for heaven's sake are you forgetting the corn year? Heavens! Is your memory going *back* on you?" A new hunter was stabbed with a hot glance.

"Oh evrybody fer forty mile knows 'bout thet gret corn year. Ther was never less 'an two er three years on evry stalk an' da nubbin' so goshblimmity big es 'd break down the stalk 'ith its heft. Thet was the time I foun' da year thet hed an odd row o' grains on it, th' ony one ever seen roun' the whole earth. I tell you gentlemen, y' ony hed to tickle the belly o' thet strip most any year and it'd fairly ro-o-ar 'ith abundans."

Squire Puffer was no fool to be laughed at when he seriously told what that swamp strip had done for him. Before I came he was telling what the crop of pumpkins had yielded one famous year and a new huntsman snickered out into Abe Puffer's face. And Abe Puffer, who had told the same tale long enough to believe in it, felt insulted with the snicker and had slapped the hunter over.

And that famous Puffer five-inch spring! I could vouch for *it*. Out of a five-inch iron pipe from a half hidden, vine covered ledge the water tumbled in musical vigor into a huge walled pool under a willow with a sixty-foot spread. The drouths of summer, the cold of winter, the torrents of spring could not diminish its volume, silence its singing, or stain its delicious flood. It boiled up in the pool in dark

whirls of shadowy coolness, then raced in tumult through the stone milkhouse to the slough. The stream ran for two miles under a hooded way of willows till at last it mingled with the ooze of the swamp.

The home sat squat in a reach of black oaks, accompanied by a stringing litter of sheds, bins, a tool-house, a blacksmith shop, a greasy smokehouse, a dirt cellar and two summerhouses. One was mostly of screens and netting, the other (of dear memory) was of morning glory vines. Before the hunters came, there were several sorry looking patches and gardens long gone to neglect, wasted fence inclosures, brushy orchards, and a huge dooryard raggedly covered with plantains and knot grass, pasturage at times for poultry, geese and swine to the very doors.

The oak-log barn, partially denuded of its shakes, sat stumpishly on guard at the big gate, its south side filled with ten thousand tiny woodpecker holes that once had held each a cherry seed or a grain of corn. Behind it was the swine yard, one-third of its extent a forest of rank-smelling "Jimson weeds." Only in the fattening season when hunger was appeased were the hog lot fences able to stand unbreached. Chasing the hogs back out of the yards and half protected patches was a frequent clamor of shouts, barking dogs and squeals of pain. At least this was true till the educational influence of the General prevailed.

CHAPTER II

THE RISE OF THE PUFFERS

THIS is Skid Puffer's description of the origin of the Pufferland clan. I have thought best in his longer narrations to omit quotation marks except where he quotes himself or others. After I got his confidence Skid Puffer told me at different times perhaps a thousand tales. This is the first that I remember:

Onct there was a half kilt ol' she bear 'ith 'er litteres was chased an' chased from the cornfiel's es she was aruinin' way down on the north side o' Tippecanoe county. She was chased an' chased from the cornfiel's an' taller timber out into White county into the smaller timber, nen through the lower saplin's into the littler thickets, allus goin' north 'long the Ridge.

She was a rootin' 'ith 'er nine little she-bears w'en she was discovered by ol' Ager Puffer. He shot 'er through the vitals an' the arrer went through 'er an' went clean up to the hilt into a slippery ellum on th' ether side. Pop says the arrer was still a-stickin' in the tree down on the Battle o' Tippecanoe campin' groun's tell a few years ago. An' ef Pop, that's the Squire, he's dead now an' gone to the Great Si-

lens,—Pop allus said “Gret Silens”—es I was tellin’, ef Pop didn’t know about thet arrer nobody knowed.

So nachurly feelin’ painful on ’er insides she an’ the whole kit took north. An’ efter aw’ile goin’ through the taller thickets o’ pawpaw bushes an’ elderberries, trailin’ over the ridges an’ sandy stretches an’ ’roun’ hills an’ crashin’ through hazel bresh follered by them nine little bears, their tails a hangin’ on the groun’ an’ their tongues a lollin’ an’ a lollin’ fer three days and three nights, ’ithout a blessed thing to eat an’ not a drop to drink,—yes; they *did* hev three killdeer’s aigs an’ half a quail nes’,—wy they come at las’ plunk up agin this here Puffer five inch spring.

An’ ol’ Ager Puffer ’ith ’is nose clost to the groun’ was allus follerin’ an’ never quite ketchin’ up. So wen they all come to the spring es was ro-olin’ an’ atumblin’ like fightin’ cats, they jus’ stopped an’ ev’ry last eternal one of ’em drank ’emsevs to death.

I hev heard Pop tell thet story a hundred times, allus diff’rint, an’ de allus insisted the nine little bears was she bears an’ thet ther tails was a hangin’ on the groun’.

I says to Pop onct, “Pop bears don’t hev tails es hang way down on the groun’.” Nen Pop ketched ’imsef up fer a minute an’ scratched ’is hed for the point to get in clear, an’ said, “Skid them bears was diff’reenter. They was the reglar long-tailed Puffer bear. ’Sides ther’s the ol’ San’hill road es was blazed by them bear tails. Thet’s evidence es *won’t*

rub out. Fax is fax Skid. Hist'ry is a mighty uncertain thing anyways, but the bears es discovered this spring hed tails mebbby three foot long an' mebbby longer; ther's no *tellin'* about the Puffer bear."

So allus efter thet I lef' the tails on 'em. Wen my grety, grety-gret gran'father's gran'father came a snortin' an' a sneezin' efter them long tailed, escapin' bears, Puffer bears, ther they was all swelled up es big es smokehouses an' their laigs a stickin' up into the sky. An' ev'ry las' eternal one of 'em was perfec'ly dead.

It was so pitiful thet ol' Ager jus' set down an' bust into livin' tears, so Pop says. 'E jus' set down like all the ether Puffers an' never come away. An' here 'e built the firs' shed, an' lived the rest of 'is born days, jus' restin' an' eatin' acorns an' shakin' 'ith the jumpin' yellor ager. Here 'is descendens built the firs' log house, an' piled sothin' in the barnyard es was broke er waitin' to be used, es rails, an' stakes, an' parts an' pieces o' wagons an' harrers, an' plank an' machinery, tell at las' the pile was twenty foot high an' covered 'bout a nacre. Nen the turkeys an' chickens got to roostin' on it and about a million rats an' skunks an' weasels made ther sportin' prem'ses there. "Sportin' prem'ses" is wat Genral called the pile las' spring.

Evry Puffer from ol' Ager Puffer down to the squire hes built sothin' an' forgot sothin', an' broke sothin', an' all of 'em hes hed a few swamp grass stacks to rot. An' all of 'em hes been fightin' back the bresh an' little starved trees 'ith grubbin' pick

an' fire an' restin' mos' o' the time, tell at las' here y'air in this blessed parydise o' Squire Puffer an' 'is beloved son.

Pop said wen 'e come on the vale, Pop allus called it vale, thet the whole place was ripped up to the middle and run down at both en's an' sort o' noncom-bobbledefusticated in the middle. I've heard Pop use words es long as yer arm 'ithout strainin'. I ast Pop one time whut the first Puffers lived on, specially ol' Ager Puffer.

"Skid," says Pop, lookin' critical, "whut the devil do I know about whut them ol' ager shakers lived on? It's enough fer 'is descendens to keep the record from agoin' to tateractums 'ithout findin' feed fer 'em. I spose though," says Pop, shettin' 'is eyes es ef 'e was jus' boun' to keep hist'ry straight anyways, "I 'spect Ager Puffer lived mos'ly on mast. He didn't live long noways, fer es 'e was the firs' man 'long here, the swamp ager jus' leapt on 'im like a tiger on a buff'lo. The swamp hed been waitin' fer a case mebbly a million years an' the dose was partic'lar piznous. Ol' Ager Puffer was the Adam of Indiany ager."

"Didn't any of 'em ever leave this vale Pop?" I ast 'im onct.

"Yes; one fall the ager eternally prevailin' in ther vitals an' mebbly the acorns afailin', ev'ry las' one of 'em gatherin' up their dogs an' cattle an' childern an' mos' o' ther wives, they took to the ol' San'hill road, jus' like the crusaders back to ol' Jerusylum; took to th' ol' bear trail Skid, back to

civilization. Ther was about nine hundred of 'em, countin' the dogs. An' so they went on an' on Skid, fer forty days an' forty nights, tell at las' they come up to livin' human bein's es wasn't allus a shakin' an' ashiverin' an' aburnin' up 'ith ager.

"They was people I heard es hed come 'roun' the Horn an' hed discovered the quinine tree. Nen they et an' feasted fer nine days an' nine nights, a singin' an' gloryfyin' God, an' singin' hosannas to the quinine tree. Nen each one from ol' Zac Puffer, who was eight feet tall an' so big thet 'e never did hev ager all over him to onct, down to the little Puffers who never wore clothes 'cept in winter tell they was 'bout fifteen years ol', wy all of 'em slung a gunny-sackful o' quinine on ther backs an' took back trail fer home. An' here they came singin' an' shoutin', 'ith banners awavin', praisin' God from wich all bles-sin's flow. O' course Skid, it was perfec'ly nachural fer 'em to want to come back to th' ol' stompin' groun's an' go to rootin' agin under the chinquapins an' swiggin' quinine.

"After thet Skid, the ager didn't shake more'n half a dozen ev'ry year into the ol' buryin' groun'. Ol' Zac was the firs' to go, though. 'E caught seven er eight cases of ager to onct fer the firs' time in diffrent places of 'is system an' it was nentirely too much to buck. It was a sort o' retribution on ol' Zac fer a'temptin' to lead the Puffers out o' the vale, mos' ev'rybody says."

"Skid," I asked, for he seemed to have finished, "why will human beings live in this out of the way

spot? There's a stinking endless swamp on one side and starvation on the other. You told me once that the crows fly down to Reynolds, thirty miles, to get three grains of corn for breakfast,—why three I don't know. Didn't the Puffers want to get out of this living desert?"

Es Pop said at the literary onct, "De Gustavus Adolphus non dispustand on," wich means some people prefers one thing an' ethers prefers ether things. I ast Pop onct jus' wy people 'ith 'is intlec' lived 'roun' here.

"Skid," 'e said to me, "De Gustavus Adolphus non dispustand on ' an' 'Honey salt key mallypansy'—gosh all blimmity how does thet go? Anyways it means ther's no disputin' wether acorns er pansies is jus' the proper rashsheoshenashun. Some people prefer one thing, ether folks prefer ether things an' ethers b'lieve in tyin' a mole skin 'ith assafetiday on a string 'roun' ther neck to keep the devil away. Them kin' genrally sagashiate 'long this here Ridge."

CHAPTER III

THE LAST OF THE PUFFERS

I HAD been taking my hunting vacations at the Puffers' with three or four other hunters for a few seasons. I had gained the confidence of the son, who was now eighteen years old. The little summer-house covered with morning glory vines held for me many a happy memory of bedtime hours. The Puffer homestead had improved in material aspects; the prosperity derived in greater part from the liberal purses of the hunters caused new palings on garden fences, new rails around patches, new shingles on many roofs, and the hogs and chickens which often had rooted and scratched up the paths and dooryard to the doors had been trained in better manners and were now secluded in their appropriate confines.

I had never seen Abe Puffer, he having died a year or so before I came on the scene. Skid had told me that his father "was six feet four, weighed two fifty, an' could hold out arm's lenth seventy-five poun's. I hev seen 'im jump a fourteen han' horse 'ithout tetchin' an' Jake Spading, thet's Hi's dad, he's Dutch tongue tied, wy 'e tol' me he once heerd Pop acallin' the hogs. An' the way 'e said it was: 'Ich habbe gehord dine fader sombtimes ven the

sky ist frosty yit makin' de hogs callin' yit still,' er sothin' like thet. Jake lives four miles down the San'hill road Clonel. I've saw Pop go ten mile to doctor a sick horse et night 'ithout chargin' a cent an' "—Skid's eyes closed almost shut—"sometime the horse got well. Pop'd never let on wen the neighbors 'd come in an' steal Mom's dishrag wen ther cows 'd lost ther cuds.

Two things Pop was mighty good in, elocutin' at the literary an' flingin' out fereign words, some es he knowed by sight and ethers by soun'. 'E hed a book 'e called Hunderd Selexyuns 'e liked to read 'bout es well es Mom does the Bible. It took a mighty smart man to tell wen Pop allus 'was in earnes'. Sometimes 'e'd fool even Mom. I allus tol' by a wrinkle 'e hed on 'is left eye.

Pop allus went in 'is bare feet tell you fellows come; 'e was getting mos' particular 'bout nen. An' Mom's doin' the cookin' of 'er life. Sence then things 's picked up wonderful.

"Skid, what has become of that immortal barn-yard I have heard so much about?"

Once Genral Torrence bein' mad about sothin', kin' do wantin' to bite a nail head off fer exercise, wy 'e goin' out an' lookin' et the barn y'd says to Pop, "Squire whut'll you take fer yer dam barn y'd?"

"The wich?" says Pop, s'prised like.

"Wy this goldang Puffer curiosity shop o' weasels, skunks, henroosts an' genral farm deviltery. It's been settin' out ther fer nine billion years. Speak up."

Pop was took off'n his feet it was so sudden, specially fer any livin' human bein' jus' awantin' the geedanged ol' contraption. But Pop was a good dickerer; nobody 'cept Jelly Puffer ever beat Pop on dickerin'. And Pop hated Jelly worse'n pizon er rattlesnakes. So Pop took a deep breath tryin' not to let on an' watchin' the Genral from out'n the sides of 'is eyes.

"Well, aint you got any price on the lousy stuff?" The Genral kin' do roared thet. Pop jumped spite of 'isef cause 'e could n't do dickerin' right off'n the handle. Nen Pop begun to figger up an' add an' subtrac an' divide an' multiply an' extrac the cube root an' things. But 'e's wonderin' bout all the time whut in thunder the Genral wanted thet geedanged deviltery fer an' 'bout how much the Genral 'd stan' fer. An' 'e's doing the figgerin' under 'is breath wen the Genral bust out, "Oh blazes an' Tom Walker! Aint you got any price? D'you think yer sellin' the Looziana Purchass? D'you want to can up this here cussid boorooloogogaw? Fire an' tow, wat's yer price?" He fairly hooped thet time.

"Wy Genral, seein's it's you 'bout five dol"—nen Pop stopped 'e was so shamed. But seein' the Genral run 'is han' quick into 'is pocket Pop stopped. Nen 'e took a new start. "Five dollars an' thir—"

You see Pop was figgerin' clost on the cents. Nothin' ever got away from Pop on a dicker. Nen Pop rared up brazen as the Genral tore 'roun' so mad 'e could n't talk. "An' thirty—" an' Pop stopped once more. Save 'is life 'e did n't know

wether to tack on five cents more 'er leggo at five thirty. So stickin 'is pencil in 'is pocket 'e said shameful like, "Seein's it's you Genral, five dollars an' thirty—five." Pop kin' do busted out thet las' five.

"It's my rot Abe. Get Spading, Stickel an' teams an' haul the whole blankety, blankety blank stuff," 'e said blankety blankety blank the las' time—the Genral swears ony wen 'is new seven hunderd dollar bird dog goes yoopin' efter a rabbit wen it ought to be pintin' out quail—"take the whole capoodle out on the swamp an' burn it all to hell. Here's two five dollar pieces; th' extra four sixty five is fer buryin' the ashes. Hurry fer heaven's sake."

I slep in th' old' house then an' Pop set up half the night talkin' to Mom in wispers about thet ten dollars. 'E said just es like es not 'e might hev got another ten cents ef 'e'd ony hung on. 'E felt mighty blue 'bout dickerin' so blamed fas'.

"What did your father do with all that money, Skid?"

Pop give one of the fives to Mom sayin', "Angie half I got's yourn; wen I turn in fer the 'Gret Silens' I want you to go havers 'ith Skid fer evrything on the whole farm."

Pufferland was a huntsman's paradise for waterfowl of almost every description and the solid land borders were generous with snipe, squirrels and quail. But the chief delights for me were Skid's stories and the cooking of Angelina Puffer. She had been New England bred and in the course of events and strange

vicissitudes she had married Abe Puffer and had long bloomed unappreciated in Pufferland. Her acorn ham, her pork tenderloin sausage, her young fried chicken or roasted squirrel set before a hunter on an early June morning are very tender gustatory memories. Of course rich milk, eggs and butter, cooled by the waters of the famous spring under the willow's deep shade we could expect at any time; but the ravishments of roasting canvasback or the savory odors of toasting October snipe some storm-filled evening after a day's hard gunning on the rangelands made hunters think considerably about the immortality of cooks.

On a frosty evening after supper was over and the five-foot fireplace threw its glow on the white oak floor, we, at peace with all the world (domestic and foreign) because of Angelina Puffer's table, would fill our pipes and settle once for all the questions of government and law and mix amiably in celestial matters.

Then about bedtime Skid and I would withdraw to our little summerhouse of the morning glory vines close by the slumbrous music of the famous spring. Here till long after bedtime hours he told me stories of the peculiar doings of Pufferland.

He was nearly eighteen years of age when I first knew him, tall, a little bent, just breaking into the form of muscular manhood with its awkwardness, lithe as a weasel and strong as an ox. His shoes, when he wore any, were ugly plow shoes and covered calloused red feet that in summertime were almost

as impervious to hurt as the hoof of a horse. His ill-fitting clothes, few enough at any time, were scant in summer and always two sizes too large. He never, "jus' could ketch up 'ith my geedinged close" he told me one time. From his shoulders down he rivaled a tramp in attire.

But Skid Puffer from his shoulders up was a different thing. His silky, curling hair, unkempt and shining like a crow's wing, hung down almost to his disreputable shoulders. His face—ah, Skid Puffer's face! It was as much out of place in that sorry region as the cardinal flower or the glorious Nelumbo down in those stinking fens. His features were cameo-like in beauty and clarity of outline, whether they were smudged with Kankakee dirt or not.

His great dark eyes—I never could determine their color—would play all manner of magnetic attractions as they glowed or flashed with the ardor of his stories or wrinkled almost shut in the cold satire or sly irony of a person of maturer years. His mind was as impressionable as a photographic plate and his mobile face registered all the moods and emotions of a strangely noble and sensitive soul.

He was a puzzle from the first moment I met him, and all the other people of Pufferland called him a silent lad. "He had no words for anybody," they told me, and the other hunters wondered what I found to attract me in the wordless, shy boy. I had often wondered how he would look in decent attire, with his locks becomingly barbered. His features at their best in color, animation, expression,

purity and nobility of line were the most perfect I had ever seen.

One November night Skid gave the genealogy of the most prominent saints and sinners of Pufferland. Being in a discursive mood he finished his personal round-up with the current records of Hink Stickel and Hi Spading, throwing in for dessert the architectural puzzle of the old Puffer home. He said:

The big Puffers, not countin' Pop, was ol' Ager Puffer, the bear chaser who lived in a hole in the groun'. Nex' was Gran'father Zac, not Big Zac thet caught eight cases o' fever an' ager to onct. Gran'father Zac, Pop says, come out o' the Ark an' hed six fingers on each han' an' six toes on each foot. Pop said one time, he wasn't so gol dang sure but Zac run on all fours mos' o' the time. Nen followed Black Puffer, Red Puffer, Ol' One Eye Puffer, Ol' Deafandum Puffer who hed nineteen children which ate raw frogs. Nen ol' Hoopin' Puffer. They say he could imitate a thunder pumper so slick 'at all 'e hed to do was to sneak along the bank o' the san' ridge an' go to yoopin' an' ahoopin' an' evry blessed thunder pumper in four mile 'd come right up to 'im like a bluebird into a black snake's mouth.

Nen come ol' gran'mother Ann Puffer, the singin' Puffer who had visions. She could cure warts by layin' on o' hands; she invented Knock-em-stiff linamen' out o' lobelia root, wich is a sure cure for fits, mad-dog bites, worms, horse bots, ringworms an'

specially concocted fer Wabash scratches. She used to go about talkin' to 'ersef an' wen the moon was jus' comin' in full she's throw conniption fits an' talk in ferin tongues.

Nen followed sixteen generations o' black Puffers who run mos'ly wil' and Pop says the assessor never yit caught one to home. The only way the sheriff could surroun' a Black Puffer was by gittin' about a hunderd deputies an' beat up the bush. An' 'cordin' to history a good many of 'em needed sur-roundin'.

Pop said, 'bout the time Washington discovered America, gret droves o' Puffers ev'ry fall 'd go ravagin' the southern part o' Indiany an' carry off food, es acorns, pokeberries, walnuts, wil' crab-apples, black haws, red haws, an' ether eatin' stuff. Onct they brought back 'ith 'em the firs' Indiany pennyroil cow, an' from thet day civilization c'menst. Nen come the long-laiged dogs. 'Cause they hed to hev dogs to ketch the cows at milkin' time.

I'll tell you 'bout the pennyroil cow sometime.

Nen the blood got mixed 'ith ether inhabitants an' at las' Pop bloomed. *He* is the last o' the Puffers. I don't know how Jake Spading come on this vale. Jake hes elephant ears, rat eyes an' smokes nearly all the time. He's set the bed afire twict. Worse'n Sim Puffer. I forgot about Sim. Dreckly I'll tell you 'bout *him*. Hi Stickel is noted fer producin' Jake Stickel who run off 'ith a circus, an' Hink Stickel, the bumblebee fighter.

Jake Spading's boy is Hi Spading, the hornet

chaser, mos'ly freckles an' who can say the catachism by heart. Hi hes been tellin' me fer three years what a catachism is an' I don't know yit.

Nen ther's Ole Oleson who has 'leven children an' seven dogs; Mister Reddic who lives in a fodder shock in winter an' who owns a mule es come out o' the flood an' can almos' climb a tree an' a coffee-pot swiped from the army surroundin' ol' Acre. Down beyon' the Crossin's, thet's three mile, kind o' hid in the bresh like turkey nests, is ethers, nen comes more Puffers, nen the post-office 'leven miles further on. A Puffer widow run *it*.

But mos' ev'rybody hugs clost to the San'hill road, jus' like buttons of all colors, sizes an' kin's on a string, but ev'ry last one of 'em hes the swamp earmark on 'em. But ther's a few dozen er so es lives back in the bresh es it takes a detective good at trailin' es can fin' em. O' course, 'cept in a few places 'long the San'hill road, the shanties an' huts an' livin' places is hid by trees er thickets er bresh. Goin' through the woods to find 'em is 'bout like flushin' prairie chickens 'ith a hot dog in July.

The Squire's house is a livin' example, es I hev heard Pop say, "of architectooral monstrosity an' carpenter's mayhem." Them words was liked 'bout es well es any 'e ever rolled out. An' wen it come to rollin' words, w'en Pop was feelin' gay 'e could beat Shakespeare all hollow. That's whut the preacher es taught me readin' an' spellin' said.

Firs' one Puffer cut through the side o' the ol' double log house an' built a naddition. Nen a nether

Puffer come in an' cut through th' ether side an' built a naddition. Nen some Puffers es wasn't so well off built lean-tos to the 'additions. Next the Squire cut through additions,—nen through the back en' an' concocted three rooms more. Nen three year ago Pop put a front addition on. I fergot to say some o' the ol' Puffers built a porch aroun' in spots an' ethers tore sothin' out an' tacked ether things on, tell now you hev to go roun' back of the house to git into the front door, an' even then a stranger is liable to git lost.

Now as to Sim Puffer, he makes a nexplanation by 'imsef.

CHAPTER IV

OL' SIM PUFFER

ONE time Clonel, Pop an' me was out 'ith a cross-cut saw agettin' some ellum stovewood down in the firewood clearin's. Purty hot thet day an' Pop set down. Pop allus did set down easy 'ith a crosscut, an' nothin' but talkin' seemed to rest 'im. 'E was fannin' 'imsef wen 'e says, "Skid this here ol' ellum log makes me think of ol' Sim Puffer. Nobody knowed how tall 'e was fer nobody ever saw him clean straight up. He was es eternally thin es a fishworm an' allus smokin'. W'er 'e got 'is tobacker jus' nobody knowed, but I allus hed my s'picious. It was home growed an' dis smoke smelled jus tee-totally like Jake Spadings. And water. Water Skid? Lordygod! Wy 'e jus' drunk 'ise'f an' smoked 'ise'f to death. Fer a fac. Ef ther ever was a throwback ol' Sim Puffer was the genewine article."

Nen I ast Pop whut a throwback was.

"Whut's thet Skid? Don't know whut a throwback is, hugh? Wy a throwback is a Darwinick son. Wen you grow up Skid an' git cornered in a nargumen' allus lay back an' loll on Darwinicks an' 'lectricity. Fling in a few hoopin' words an' stan'

back an' freeze 'em 'ith yer dignity. There is nothin' thet can squelch a nargufyer like Darwinicks and 'lectricity. And I ought to know ef anybody does."

"Who was this Darwinicks Pop?" I ast.

"Skid I aint partic'lar posted on jus' wher 'e lived, er—percisely wat 'is name was, er,—er jus whut 'e said. But I seen 'is picture onct, an' 'e looked like a big bunch o' wiskers an' wrinkles. But 'e peddled reglar tinware all right. Heredity was 'is main holt. Thet's the bunch Skid,—heredity. I'd bet forty-nine dollars ther aint anether man in forty mile, 'cept thet grinnin' bunch o' yeller monkey, Jelly Puffer, es knows beans about heredity.

"Frinstance a throwback is tracin' a throwfor'd back'ard tell you get on the particlar spot of its pristine origin."

"Who's thet Pop?" I ast 'im; I *was* s'prised.

"Skid them words come easy to a man o' my intlec'." I saw thet lef' wrinkle in 'is eye an' I knowed to onct we was out fer anything but crosscut sawin' o' stovewood.

"Frinstance agin, supposin' ol' Ager Puffer et buckeyes 'stead o' sweet tastin' chinquapins. Nen suppose now efter mebbby five hunderd years some one 'd come acrost a fool kid Puffer es was nibblin' buckeyes. Thet would show heredity er a throwback to ol' Ager. It aint particlar hard fer some cranks to read up on throwbacks, but it's fire an' tow an' mos' thunderation hard to read throwfor'ards. This Darwinick was good, they say, in tracin' the throw-

backs to the original thrower of the—the—heredity boomyrang.

"Frinstance, Jelly Puffer goes back to grinnin' monkeys smashin' cocoanuts out'n the tops o' the trees. The genewine Puffers don't go back no further 'n ol' Ager Puffer; 'e sprung spontanous. Now w'en you see Jake Spading's Dutch dog stiltin' 'roun' efter a rabbit it hes jus' chased up an' lost, it means it's descended from the boorooloogoogaw o' the grass age. I aint jus' swearin' about the scientific name of the animal Skid.

"In thet early age of the worl' Skid, the grass was from fifteen to forty foot high an' so the dog's ancestors hed nachurly to rare up on 'is hin' laigs wen 'e started up a rabbuck. So efter a few hunderd million years an' mebbby longer the grass gittin' wore shorter all the time, o' course the boorooloogoogaw got shorter an' shorter in 'is laigs all the time tell 'e got to runnin' on all fours."

"W'at about the kangaroo Pop?" I ast fer the preacher tol' me about it.

"The w'ich? Oh kangaroo; perfec' 'lustration son, perfec'. The kangaroo is n't a throwback s'much es a half throwback. Besides I am creditabelly informed thet the grass in Norway is purty goldang high yit."

"Wy Pop! The preacher said the Kangaroo is a ninhabitan' of Austeraily."

"Austerthunder an' Tom Walker Skid. I'm speakin' 'bout the reglar Norway Kangaroo." An' Pop bristled up more 'n I 'd saw 'im fer a year.

"But comin' back, whut's bred in the bone can't be teetotally worked out by time. Ther's boun' to be streaks, an' stains, an' motion 'n' sleepin' mem'ries tucked away som'ers in the anatmy, fysollogy an' hygeen. Thet is things es b'longed to the booroo-loogoogaw mos'ly er entirely wore out er ain't work-abel any more. So w'en Jake's dog rares up on 'is hin' laigs 'e fergits 'is breedin' fer a million years an' mebbby longer an' wakes up the 'rignal boorooloogoo-gaw perspectiv an' some o' the rasheoshenashun details."

"Gosh! Pop thet's a slambanger, but wher does the throwback come out in ol' Sim?"

"Well Sim was allus smokin', wa'n't 'e? An' allus a drinkin' swamp water, wa'n't 'e? An' bein' slim es a fishworm o' course 'e never did know wether 'e hed the stomachache er the backache er jus' plain bots er wether 'e hed a native longin' fer 'is nachurel element. An' thet was water an' smoke. So-o."

"Well Pop," says I sly, "w'at is the rest o' the perspectiv?"

"Whut's thet? The res'? W'y it's es plain es the nose on your looker, Sim is the rignal pipe fish o' the Kankakee swamp. Hugh?"

An' I tol' Pop es how I guessed it was an' mebbby plainer.

CHAPTER V

ABE PUFFER'S ASH-HOPPER

ONE evening I came in dead tired from an almost unsuccessful snipe hunt. Skid fed my dogs, cleaned my guns and looked the question he did not dare to ask. He had quickly learned some of the amenities and peculiarities of huntsmen's etiquette. I had hidden my game sack and I knew no hunter would ask more than, "What luck, Colonel?" But Skid wanted to know why there was no game sack and pawed around my hunter's outfit obtrusively. I was unsociably silent.

"Snipe out here aint a bit like some ether snipe. Not a bit." There was no reply. After waiting he began again. "Evrybody says so." I grunted enigmatically. He sat down, crossed his knees, bent an elbow on them, with his chin in his hand and with a judicial air uttered, "A teetotally differenter kin'."

"Our kin' do snipe wriggle an' twis' fearful wen they break up. Wen up they jus' whiz down like night hawks flyin' in the sunset an' doin' the chimbley act. Ever see 'em twist an' roar down mebbly thirty foot? Them's the Monon kin'." He relapsed into silence.

"Oh, I got one, Skid, but don't get on the top of

the Ridge and shout it out to the rest of the hunters."

"Thet's 'bout right. The Iryquois is diff'rent. A fellow can get two to three of them. Monon's diffrent. I've seen fellows 'ith seven hunderd dollar guns o'ny git one of them."

We went in to supper. All of us were taciturn that day; snipe were shy and elusive. I asked Skid after a little thawing induced by Angelina's spread, "Skid, did you ever get a Monon snipe with that old musket of yours?"

"'Casionally; I won't let 'em bit me." All of us laughed at his unexpected answer.

"How many in one whole day Mister?" Skid squirmed in his chair. Some of the other hunters persisted.

"How many snipe ever tried to bite you in one day, Skid?" asked the General, winking at me.

"Reglar snipe huntin'?"

"Yes; the regular snipe hunting, the Monon kind," I broke in.

"Wen they was kin' do peart an' sassy an' the weather kin' do snappy?"

"Of course. The real night hawk kind, that do the chimney act, the peart and sassy Monon breed, and when the weather just snaps like whip crackers, eh?"

"O' course I s'pect 'ith m' ol' musket too." He looked miserable, moved restlessly in his chair and even tried to change the subject. At a given signal by the General, each of us four stopped masticating, brought knife and fork down with a bang on the

board and glared our question at Skid. We could do such unholy things.

"Well seein's I'm up agin it good an' hard—wy onct I kilt twelve."

"In heaven's name Skid, snipe or pewees?" roared the General.

"Jus' snipe Genral." He reddened guiltily as if ashamed of his massacre, yet every man of us knew he was telling the truth. His stolen glance at me pleaded for my compassion. I turned decent at once.

"Skiddie, it doesn't look well to be bragging about your hunting. General, do have a hot biscuit." I became eloquent over the bread. Though Skid breathed a relieving sigh he still seemed to be troubled that in an unguarded moment he had told that he had made twelve snipe bite the dust. Perhaps he could not forget how each hunter had groaned when he named the score of his massacre.

After supper when we had returned to our summerhouse Skid seemed to be himself again. He asked a dozen sly and eager questions about the great world he knew of but could not know. Somehow the subject of building an ash-hopper arose. I asked him how the dark, acrid, ill-smelling stuff was made.

Es Pop said to me onct, "Skid the makin' o' sof' soap is one o' the lost arts, 'cept in dark corners o' Kentucky, Indiany an' in the bresh districks of Ohio."

Pop gits four post an' sets 'em 'bout three an'

da half by three. Nen he nails liners on top o' the posts fer the slantin' boards 'e puts in wich p'int into the sugar trough at the bottom. Nex' throw in some straw so's the ashes won't git mixed 'ith the lye, nen th' ashes an' nen water an' there y'air. Looks easy to buil' da lye hopper bu' taint. Wen it's done it looks like a big cut o' boughten cheese 'ith the pint down restin' in the trough wich runs the lye into the bucket. I've saw 'em leak worse sixty all over.

I remember how Pop built the last one. Y'ought to've saw Pop thet day. Spring, bluebirds singin' on the gate pos', blue mist over the swamp; ash-hopper time. So Pop heven swiped a sugar maple trough down beyond the Crossins one night, got 'is new post, lined 'em an' nailed 'is square top. Nen 'e rested considerable an' talked.

Seems like Pop hed to buil' da hopper 'bout evry two year. 'E was allus mad adoin' two things, scourin' 'is plow an' erectin' a nash-hopper.

"Son," sez 'e to me, "sometime in yer mortal histry wen you hev been enough ijut to be married an' hev to buil' a nash-hopper, you will steal a sugar trough, cause ef you don't the lye won't run free. Get some nails o' Hi Stickel, some boards o' Jake Spading an' dabout this time o' year wen y' ought to be scourin' up the plow down the San'hill road, bustin' it up so nobody can git along it fer three months, an' wen y' ought to be shellin' seed corn an' fixin' up extry harness, w'y you'll hev to projec' one of these gosh blamed ol' lye manafactories.

"Now you take yer hammer an' nails in han' an' begin to nail like the ol' Nick was a comin' to borry the hammer. Trust in Providence an' nail away."

Pop got four stakes an' drove 'em in the groun'. "So," said Pop, lookin' at me. "Now nail; now poun'. Compron eevu?" Thet wasn't Pop's limit in ferin language, though. Pop nailed an' nailed. One nail flew up on the smokehouse. He stared at it.

"Reglar flyin' machine," 'e said, nailin' harder 'n ever.

Pop put the board en's in the thought, some long an' some short, makin' the thing look fearful 'at would scare mos' any livin' thing at night. Nen 'e slammed a lot of ashes in an' set down a long w'ile to res'. Pop was great on restin' an' talkin' ef any-one hed the intlec' to hear 'im.

"Skid wen you go into the fambly business y'allus got to hev a nash-hopper fer a weddin' gif'. Specially in Indiany. Bein' married you must 'ave soap; t'ave soap you mus'tave lye; t'ave lye you got t'ave a nash-hopper. Wen yer married 'bout forty year the men folks hev learnt to buil' da hopper an' the women folks hev learnt to make soap. But it takes a one eyed ol' woman 'ith a shawl 'round 'er head an' da niron clay pipe in 'er teeth to make perfec', tremblin' livery sof' soap."

Wen Pop was right in the center o' the perceedin's Mom looked out'n the kitching door an' says, "Abie you 'll have to hurry 'cause I want to go to bilin' by nex' Thursday."

Thet was n't much to say, was it? But it acted like pizon on Pop. Sence I think Pop *hed* been restin' considerable an' was talkin' 'bout thet time. He jumped up an' begun to hammer the life out'n thet hopper. 'E drove nails like fury most anywhers 'cause Mom was lookin'. Anether nail flew up on the smokehouse. Pop did n't look up. "Nails hev riz," 'e said. A tenpenny glanced out an' took a flyin' nip out'n my ear. Gosh-all-blimmity it made me rub. Pop laughed an' stopped 'long 'nough to say, "Skid you'll hev to look out, this is the sweet hour o' prayer. Dreadful hurry, lye convention meets nex' Thursday. Can't tell but would n't s'prise me a geedanged bit ef I'd kill half the neighborhood jus' preparin' the fixin's. Better back off wile I'm aworkin' the battery. Savvy Skid?" Nen wile nailin' he kep' sayin':

"Skid I sugges' you take a Genral Sherman flank movemen 'roun' behin' the smokehouse. Mebby there'll be a whole string o' corpses 'roun' here before I git marched through Georgy. Ef you happin' to see any females 'roun' here shoo 'em off, it's dreadfully temerarius."

Thet word was a new one on me, an' Pop seein' thet felt better. Ef ther was one thing 'e liked better'n anything else it was elocutin' at the Crossins literary and flashin' out bustin' words.

Pop hed the thing about done an' was cypherin' around it, squintin' 'is eye long the top, nen the thought, an' sizen the basteel up like a hunter jedges the pints of a new bird dog. 'E backed off, cocked

'is head first on one side nen on th'ether like a robin. Nen he backed off 'bout thirty feet sayin' 'e wanted to git the rashsheoshenashun perspectiv. Nen 'e said, flourishin' 'is hammer 'round 'is head:

"On this 'spicious occasion my bosom swells within me at whut we hev accomplished in our short but glo-o-orous history. Time will reward the strong. The crumblin' mawsoleyum, the marble shaff,—the marble shaff that pierces the hevings blue, the mighty walls on which the cannons rest, all bear witness to the 'stinctive desire within us to be remembered by the coming generations. The 'morseless han' o' time grasps each granite fiber, an'—an'—the 'morseless han's o' time grasps each granite fiber; an'—an'—an'—say Skid, how in thunder does thet go?—They fall into the, into the—Skid scoot to the house an' git that Hunderd Selexshuns. If Mrs. Puffer,"—w'en Pop said "Mrs. Puffer" I knowed thet there was no argument, so I got up an' made fer the house. "Skid," 'e called after me, "ef yer mother asts anything, w'y,—tell 'er,—tell 'er, we want it fer a corner stone, or nest aig, or sothin'."

I said to Mom, "Pop's got to the Hunderd Selexshuns part o' the ash-hopper program." Mom set down tired, but she understood to onct. Lookin' serious she came out to the ash-hopper 'ith me. "Abe," said Mom, frownin', "'pears to me you got some fool idy about this hopper. What you wanting this book for?" Mom allus talked more proper 'n Pop.

"Missis Puffer," said Pop, tryin' to brazen it out,

"can you expect a man o' my intlec' to—to perjec a lye basteel like this, 'ithout some recreation or in ether words 'ithout the rashsheoshenatin' details?"

"Oh! rats an' snails an' puppy dog tails," said Mom. Nen Pop looked foolisher 'an ever. "Sakes alive man, you ain't getting this thing right." She walked 'round it frownin', an' Pop follerin' 'er 'ith 'is eyes, lookin' solemn.

"The trough isn't slanted right. The lye will back up an' spill. It won't run." Pop was mad in 'is stomick an' efter a little 'e busted out mimickin' Mom's voice:

"Won't run, eh? Do you want it to canter, er lope, er trot, er pace? Mebby you want it to leap up like a panther er perform a war dance er sothin'." Mom, seein' Pop's dander was up, kept walkin' 'round it, nen stooped down an' squinted along the edge. Nen Mom took holt of a corner stake an' kin' do shook it. Fer a wonder it snapped square off.

"Oh! oh!" Mom squeaked, sort o' scared in spite of 'ersef.

"O-o-o-oh!" said Pop, mad as a hornet an' mimickin' 'er. "Angelina, I hev allus ma'ntained thet the proper place fer a livin' woman was the house, the fireside wher she could comfort the dyin', the dead," nen Pop caught 'imsef up. "I'll be golly switched, dod slammed—wy—er—nobody ast you to come out here an' commit salt an' battery an' mayhem an'—an'—ev'rything on my handiwork. I suggest you gather up your remains while you air

still intact an' betook yourself to Abe Puffer's lovin' kitching."

Pop was mad all right, ef 'e was talkin' thet way. Mom was experienced, an' lookin' kind o' scared went in. Nen Pop sailed in. He jus' flew at it like a settin' hen at a hawk. He kep' a snortin' out as 'e worked, "Goshblimmity, I'll make a *three*-laiged ash-hopper out o' this, by the Lord Harry. *Three* laigs so help me thunderation an' Tom Walker." An' Pop fairly tore loose at the thing.

Pop nailed and knocked and pounded a mile a minute, but the hopper would n't stan' up at all an' hung over on one side like a drunk man in a saddle. But Pop nailed an' hammered an' pounded an' a nail flew up an' tried to get into 'is mouth. It was a reg'lar three bagger. Pop flung the hammer down mad an' begun to dance. I took to the house. It was no time to be a spectater to any ash-hopper doin's. W'en I glanced back, flyin' on, Pop was doin' a war dance 'roun' the hopper holdin' 'is mouth. Wen I peeked out the winder nex' time, I saw Pop 'ith a stick o' cord wood mashin' that ash-hopper to flinders. I could scarcely make 'im out as 'e charged on it agin and agin, the dust a rollin' up like a storm.

We didn't hev any soft soap thet year. 'As Pop says, buildin' a nash-hopper is a lost art.

We went to bed that night as usual. Skid slept on coiled-wire bed springs that sagged almost to the floor. I occupied the noble white spare bed with the big mattress of corn husks that rattled, every

time I turned, like a windstorm in a field of ripe corn. I listened to the distant hoot of owls, the love voices of the katydids outside of the window in the morning glory vines. Near, with uncertain note, the screech owl's tremulous cry startled the birds in the trees. Far down in the mysterious depths of the swamp the whooping heron awoke at long intervals the silences of the night. The dark-leaved jack-oaks rustled over the roof, the Puffer spring ran with a drowsy murmur, and a deep feeling of contentment and rest pervaded my soul. The moonless night seemed doubly still. I fell asleep and woke with a start, for I had been dreaming that the paternal Puffer with a huge sawlog was beating our little summerhouse to pieces.

Across the room I heard a sly but restless movement.

"Skid, are you awake?"

"Kin'do." The tone showed he had not been asleep at all.

"What's the matter, Skid?" My voice was soft with sympathy.

I heard a struggle with the bedclothes, a gulp and then in a feeble tone: "I'm kin'do sorry I shot them twelve Monon snipe in one day: I jus' can't lie like you hunters wen yer in a tight place."

Like an unfeeling brute I snickered under the quilts. I composed myself and quickly thought out the proper prevarication necessary to soothe his soul. Just as I began to speak I heard a gentle snore. He had gone to sleep, having settled with his manners.

CHAPTER VI

THE PENNYROIL CALF

ONE spring night Skid and I were on top of the Ridge above the Puffer homestead trying to get a shot at a flock of wild geese that were circling and quarreling in the fog, but perhaps within gunshot.

Wen geese is hevin' conventions at night in the sky in the spring Pop said they was quarrelin' about fambly matters, es marryin' an' sech things. One ol' gander can cut up more didos 'n a prairie chicken an' they air about the limit. I hev sneaked out 'fore it was light an' waited fer the prairie rooster dance many a time. Ain't many prairie chickens lef' tover here any more. Of all the jumpin', struttin', boo-hoo'n', an' holy rollin' gang they's certainly "tha-pecks o' the culmination" es Pop says.

It'd take a nour to tell the bluffs an' wrigglin's, the bustin' out o' ther neck feathers like bladders an' jumpin' 'bout three foot high an' the talkin' down in ther bellies like a ventril,—say Clonel, wat's the rest o' thet word, I heerd the preacher say it all ri'—wy you can't tell wether they's ten feet er a mile off.

"Showing off before the ladies, think?"

Nix. Ther's never a hen aroun'. Guess they kin'do think ther husban's is holy rollers es I read about in our weekly. Guess they feel 'shamed an' let thet protracted meetin' gang o' crazy roosters go through ther shines wile they finish ther naps. Listen! I hear them geese agin. Let's be hurryin'. These foggy nights is jus' right 'n we c'n slip right under 'm.

As we cautiously moved onward in the fog, Skid, under his breath and in a tone little above a whisper, told me this:

Onct, wen a gang o' brants was heving a holy roller convention thet hed lasted three nights 'ithout gittin' things settled, I slipped under 'em with m' ol' musket. I hed it loaded 'ith a handful o' buckshot, BB's, and some broke shingle nails. I let fly right in the mos' excitin' spot. Fer heavins sake!" Skid had stopped, I thought perhaps momentarily overpowered with the vast extent of the slaughter. After waiting a decent time, I asked:

"How did you get them all home?"

Not a single brant. Fellow wants a cannon to kill brants. Ther was feathers all over the Kankakee swamp fer a week. I told Pop. Efter thinkin' over it a long time he ast, "How many shingle nails Skid?" I told 'im 'bout two baby handfuls. Nen 'e ast agin, "'Bout how many bucks?" An' I said 'bout two hunderd. "Huh-u-u!" 'e laughed kin'do grunty like. "I see whut's whut, them brants took the nails to shingle on the shot. Course they did n't need the feathers." Fellow

seein' the feathers 'd think it'd be terrible crowdin' to hev all three on. Sh! We air gittin' clost.

We sat down by a big niggerhead and waited, but the geese had circled out of gunshot.

Pop said onct 'e slipt under a gang of a narguin' crowd o' geese an' blazed away in the clouds not seein' a thing and 'e brought down four ol' ganders fer walkin' exercise. 'E said each one was big es a yearlin' calf. The firs' one 'e come to grabbed 'is coat tail an' hung on like a bulldog. 'E walked to the nex' an' it fastened on to the tail o' the firs'. Drec'ly 'e hed all four connected. Nen 'e marched to the house, goin' straight, all pullin' in a row to the woodshed. Pop said 'e was mos' tired to death jus' pullin' thet geedinged row o' ganders, specially sence they was so big. 'E tol' me a fellow c'd see 'is tracks pilin' back the san' fer three weeks efter thet. Pop said all 'e done was to slip of'n 'is coat an' hang 'em all up nex' the rafters. All 'e hed to do fer six weeks was to cut off wat goose was wanted from the gander lowes' down. A gander's like a doodle bug, they hang fer life.

A fightin' gander does hate to leggo, but Pop hes imagination bad. A goose is like a calf. In sense a goose is a goslin' till it's dead. An' da calf ony gits sense es it gits past the calf age. An' tame geese never hes any sense a'tall. Hi Spading says they's like fleas, they's a mistake in the beginnin'.

We went home. For some unknown reason the sky flock had disappeared far down the lands. We reached our room and pulled our rubber boots off

and I was filling my pipe for the last smoke before bed. Skid had said as we returned, "Them geese makes me think about our pennyroil; I'll tell you wen we git back." I charged him now for the tale.

Pop said ther was forty 'leven ways to feed a calf mos'ly wich was wrong. 'E said wen a calf was brought up on a bucket it depended on the feeder, an' calf sense was n't required 'cept 'ith the feeder. 'E said thet did take sense an' no mistake. 'E said 'e spected Napolion 'imsef could n't 'ave fed a Nindiana pennyroil calf. Pop's rule was "Ef a pennyroil can't drink et the secon' try, veal is the reglar thing in the course o' human events."

These pennyroil Indiana calves (Skid pronounced calves as if spelled caffs) aint like ether calves. They hev too much deer and tiger in 'em. All our calves aint pennyroil but some air. Pop tol' Hans a hired han' onct how to feed a pennyroil and Pop never cracked 'is face either.

"Hans the way to feed these pennyroils is mos'ly guesswork. On the third day you steal it away from the cow an' slam it in the rail pen by the grassrick. Mebbby the cow 'll hook you to death, but don't mind a thing like thet. Nen retire fer a seasing o' meditation fer things air goin' to happin. Git a bucket o' hot milk half full an' sashay out to yer Thermopoly. Bid yer frien's goodbye ef the cow is 'roun'. Ef sh' aint keep on. Climb over the rails wile the calf is practisin' dancin'. Study its anatomy, fysology an' hygeen. Nen sail efter it.

You 'll hev to run it down. Ef you happen to catch it, straddle its neck like a panther an' Bullrun it to'ards the waitin' bucket. Nen hol' yer breath. Yer jus' up to the firin' line. Ef the calf is five days ol' before it was took away there'll be lots of tearin' up 'roun' them calf hereditimen's. Don't ever try a seven day ol' pennyroil; you might jus' es well try to run down a wil' turkey. Supposin' fer argumen you air a straddle of its neck: lock yer lovin' han's on one ear, spread yer taper fingers in its mouth, nen holdin' yer breath an' repeatin' some hymn jab 'ith all yer might its lovin' nose down in the hot milk and—there y'air—mebby."

"What did Hans say, Skid?" I asked, filling my pipe again.

'What did Hans say?' Jus' "Wa!" an' kep' on lightin' 'is pipe es was already lit. Pop tol' me 'at w'en a calf begins to butt, wriggle, snort, spit, nen blow like a whale, jus' repeat some verse in Job an' keep on. But I learned Pop 'bout feedin' calves. Drec'ly I'll tell you 'bout thet. 'Fore I learned how, w'y, w'en a calf come up to blow, or w'en it was plum crazy 'ith its nose in the milk, tryin' to drink an' not knowin' how, it'd bob up an' knock a corner off my stomick. Sometimes 'fore I knowed jus' how, it'd give me a knock es I'd hev to set down wonderin' fer sometime ef calves wasn't a mistake anyways.

"Nobody ought to jine church," Pop said, "durin' calf feedin' season." Es our cows was dreadful uncertain 'ith calves Pop was kep' out o' church, besides

the neares' church was down at Wolcott wher ev'rybody takes turns reg'lar lickin' the teacher durin' winter.

Efter Pop 'd fed a young calf about three times 'e allus turned it over to me. One o' the las' calves 'e fed wanted to starve to death. It jus' *wouldn't* drink. I thought it anether case o' mighty thin veal, w'en an idy struck me. I got a new corncob an' punched the peth out. Nen es Pop was standin' there, speckled 'ith slobbers, 'is face red, an' kind o' undecided on veal, I slipped the cob in the calf's mouth. An' there 'twas! It was the firs' time in the histry o' mankin' es a thing like thet happened.

Wen Pop seen thet calf squat down, tremblin' 'ith joy, swoopin' in thet milk, 'e stared, moved aroun' kind of excited, an' nen the calf being ready for pie, spit the cob out like a cud o' tobacco. Pop picked the cob up, squinted through the hole and seein' the milk was clean gone in the bucket, 'e looked at me an' sniggered.

"Skid 'ith the proper financial connections an' the rasheoshenashun details you'd be anether Rocky-feller."

Onct we hed a black bull pennyroil calf w'ich we foun' late, down in the swamp. It was nine days ol' w'en we begun to raise it by han'. It was strong an' scary an' worse 'n a zebra.

I know 'bout zebras; Jelly Puffer hed a pair. 'E traded off a forty fer two zebras from a circus man an' drove 'em aroun' wen 'e was runnin' fer sheriff

on the greenback ticket or sothin'. Jelly was Pop's step-cousin er sothin', don't zactly know. Jelly said a zebra was 'bout es dangerous at one en' es th' ether, an' to break it well, you hev to half kill it, nen break it over agin 'bout ev'ry ether day.

His "stripers," as 'e called 'em, broke up all 'is wagon tongues, shaffs, wheels, specially the front parts o' wagons. Evrybody said Jelly 'd get elected sure, but the day 'fore election wile 'e was makin' a regular "haranguer" speech at Seafeld, thet's a frog country, an' was standin' in the las' wagon 'e hed, Jim Crary, who was runnin' agin 'im, hed some boys to tickle the zebras' stomicks an' they run away an' killed Jelly. They say they scattered Jelly fer more'n four mile through thet frog country.

Jelly's wife, she aint a real Puffer, she works and saves 'er money, wy she took the law on Jim Crary an' sued 'im fer damages to life an' wagon, an' Pop said fer the pursuit o' happiness an' dinsanity. 'Taint settled yit, either. The jedge 'lowed 'er fifty dollars fer Jelly an' twenty-fifty fer the wagon. Ef I remember, the jedge forced Jim to take care o' the zebras the rest of 'is natural life.

Yes, 'bout the black bull calf, almos' forgot 'bout it. It was pennyroil, zebra an' some Bengaul tiger. Wen it was put in the rail pen there was considerable doin' in the calf business. It was wet, muddy an' slippy an' Pop took efter it by zigzag. Ever see two dogs fight 'ith muzzles on? Pop'd catch, slip, fall, the calf'd leap, squirm, beller an' turn han' springs. 'E got it down in the corner at las'

an' set on it. I never saw Pop so mad in 'is born days; it was lookin' to me it'd be Puffer er veal.

D'rec'ly 'e yelled, "Milk, Skid," an' I jumped over an' give 'im the bucket. Nen what do you think 'e done?

Wile pantin' and sweatin' 'e poured thet milk over its head kind o' solemn es it squirmed under 'im, sayin', "Drink, purty creature, drink. The stars air beginnin' to blink!" Nen 'e give it a little crack over its bull black head, got up an' climbed over the fence. "Skid go over an' tell Jake Spading if 'e wants some tiger meat, bring over 'is houn's, run it down, kill it an' I'll go halvers."

I never could understan' w'en 'e was so mad, w'ich was seldom, how 'e could quote them lines wile 'e was pourin' thet milk in its ears. It didn't do me any good, the calf didn't understan', an' accordin' to Mom, 'e never quoted right in his whole born days. Mom said it done 'im good, jus' as ef 'e said 'is prayers 'er got religion, or sothin'.

Pop died about a year and a half ago an' 'e allus said I was to hev the whole shootin' match aroun' here 'ith Mom, wen 'e was gathered to the Gret Silens.

Mom sent me out to feed Bossy, a new calf, one night. I jus' tried the reglar way,—stan' astraddle of its neck 'ith my fingers in its mouth, shettin' my eyes and waitin'. 'Fore I knowed it ther was slobbers, straw an' dirt all over me, 'sides the milk was upset. Wen I 'peared 'fore Mom she

looked vexed. She says "vexed" now, sence she j'ined at protracted meetin' at Reynolds las' winter.

Nen kind o' collectin' 'ersef, 'cause she was new bein' religious an' hadn't been goin' in thet kind o' harness, she said, soft, "Never min', Skiddie," she allus calls me Skiddie now, "I will feed Bossy my own self. Love an' kin'ness rules the worl'. They conquer the heathen, drives away sorrow an'—an'—" nen she went into the milkhouse fer milk. I was thinkin' an' wonderin'. Mom hed never fed a calf. Nen she put one arm 'roun' my shoulder an' we went out to tackle Bossy on a teetotally new kind of feedin' plan. It was ferin missions workin' on pennyroil calves.

Wen we come to the pen ther was Bossy 'ith slobbers on 'er wiskers eatin' the rails up an' lookin' es innocent es a kitten. I did n't say a word about the cob way o' feedin', kin'do fergot es I was a graduate 'ith fingers. 'Sides I 'spected mebbly Mom hed a few religion p'int. I was watchin' fer p'int. anyway. Bossy stopped eatin' rails an' stared at Mom, lifted 'er tail gaylike an' backed into a corner. I guess it thought Mom was a nachural enemy er sothin'.

Mom went up clost to the fence an' said, "Co, co, Bossy dearie," an' Bossy's eyes bulged like a rabbit's an' I guess she stopped breathin'. She scr'uged back into the strawstack.

"Strawstack, Skid?"

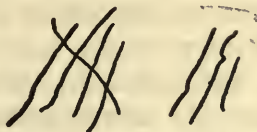
Course. Evry calf pen is made 'ith three pannels

o' rails 'ith a strawstack er grassrick at the back. I tol' Mom to back off, nen I stuck my han' through the cracks. Nen Bossy bein' acquainted 'ith me an' me smellin' like milk, she come out brave like a boy es aint agoin' to fight.

"Dearie we won't hurt you," says Mom, 'er voice thick 'ith 'er protracted meetin' lovin'-kin'ness. Nen Mom climbed over. Y'ought to 've saw Bossy. She danced an' jiggered. She was fraidy es a weasel. Mom went closter an' set the bucket in the middle of the pen. Nen Mom talked a lot o' love to Bossy es would melt a doorknob. The way it looked to me, Bossy was in no frame o' min' to go up to the mourners' bench. Mom went closter yet and spread out 'er apurn to keep it from runnin' by 'er. Thet shakin' apurn nigh scared Bossy to death. Mom got Bossy cornered 'bout the same way as wen you got a hog es is ready to bust past you. Nen she looked kin'do back'ard an' 'roun' fer the milk. 'Bout then Bossy shot past 'er an' tore like a spit devil 'roun' thet pen, s'pect 'bout a mile a minit. An' y'ought to've saw Mom fall in behin' Bossy on the trail. Wen she foun' she could n't run it down she begun to cut corners on Bossy an' drec'ly springin' she caught Bossy fair 'roun' the neck.

I guess Bossy hed some pennyroil in her the way them two woozled. It was nip an' tuck atween 'em. Mom was slow makin' fer the bucket an' hed Bossy most there wen Bossy pulled out from under 'er arm jus' like a pup sometimes pulls out'n 'is collar. Nen Bossy flew. So did Mom. They cut aroun' thet

circus ring jus' eight times. Like this: and Skid drew his knife and made



Did I count? I certinly did. Mom was jus' in tetch wen she stepped on 'er dress an' down she went flat. Bossy run over twict 'fore she knowed the race was off. Es Mom flirted up Bossy made a glancin' run an' tore half o' Mom's apurn off an' Bossy run aroun' 'ith the piece over 'er eyes mighty gay lookin'. Thet tore gingham apurn took all the protracted feelin's out'n Mom. Thet was fatal in Bossy, sh'ought to've knowed better.

"You mean, hateful, pesky little sow," said Mom. I noticed Mom was gettin' 'er grammar mixed but I aint the one to butt in wher life an' death 's at stake. Mom's hair was hangin' down 'er back 'cept one little piece 'at stuck out like a hen's tail w'ich is broke an' sort o' soshin' back an' forth in the win'.

Mom eyed Bossy—it was a fearful stare—wile she was pinnin' up 'er dress around 'er, nen makin' a panther leap, both went down in the corner. Wen Mom come up she hed Bossy by the ears an' begun to tug 'er to'ards the bucket. It *was* a tug, both nigh makin' a straight line, 'cept Mom was lookin' considerable like a clevis. She jammed Bossy's red

nose down in the milk. Nen Mom stepped on the further side o' the bucket, while holdin' on so the milk bucket wouldn't be knocked over.

I hed no time to tell Mom thet was fatal. Bossy went crazy wen she smelt the milk she didn't know how to drink. She come up to blow like a whale. All calves blow. She snorted milk over the lower half of Mom. "Whe-e-e!" yelled Mom as she spit slobbers es come high up, but agin she done the jammin' act. She helt on like a doodle bug on a nant. Now was the time to get beside Bossy an' fer Mom to slip 'er fingers in Bossy's mouth. But Mom wasn't a nexpert on calf feedin' an' I was brought up knowin' jus' w'en it's safe to interfere in the Puffer fambly.

W'en the calf come up nex' time, Mom gritted 'er teeth like death holdin' it down. But she slipped on the straw an' set down astraddle roun' the bucket, the calf steppin' on 'er dress. She couldn't git up, an' Bossy couldn't git away. I noticed now Mom hed considerable milk in 'er face an' about a han'ful o' straw around 'er, in 'er hair an' on 'er close.

But Bossy was stranglin' to death an' she jus' hed to come up to blow. It was 'bout half and half, but Bossy blowed like a nengine an' Mom was almos' lost in milk slobbers. Mom yelled twice, spit like a cat seven or eight times an' helt on. Mom looked like a meltin' snow man.

"Drink! Drink! you miserable scuttle fish," screamed Mom, holdin' on. I couldn't see es ef Bossy understood English yit. Pop tol' me con-

fidential onct thet between a Nindiany and a Conecticut woman doin' things w'en ther min's made up, it was nutmegs to acorns thet w'en the glo-o-rious sun was settin' in the golden wes' the Conecticut woman 'd still be on the burnin' deck. Mom was Casibianky correct enough thet time.

I saw my time hed come. I jumped over, slipped my fingers in Bossy's mouth an' Bossy set to drinkin' sweet es groun' cherry pie. Mom straightened up, stared at Bossy an' said:

"Skid you certainly beat the devil!" An' them's the worst words I ever heard Mom say in all 'er life. An' I never saw Mom mad before.

"Mom," I said, "I see preacher Tomsing comin' 'roun' the ben'. Better streak fer the house." Y'ought to've saw Mom leap them rails an' sail fer the house behin' the ether buildin's. Looked jus' like a close line 'ith white duds in a storm. I jus' could n't keep from snigglin' right out in Bossy's face.

O' course wen Bossy come to the bottom of the bucket she es usual allus efter tried to butt the bottom out. An' es calves is allus hungry she begun on my wamus. She was no more afraid o' me an' es ef I was a cow. Allus efter thet Bossy acted like a perfec' lady.

Pop said to me many a time thet feedin' calves an' settin' hens took the kin' do brains es made checker players. You hed to study yer adversary an' study moves. An' no two games was jus' talike. Another thing 'e said I never could quite ketch on. 'E said

every human bein' hed a girl in 'is system called Bet Noire. Wen I ast 'bout it I saw thet wrinkle 'round 'is left eye. "It's hard t'explain Skid. It's a sort o' French girl nachurly in 'is heredity," an' thet was 'bout all I ever found out.

"Where did your father go to school, Skid? Where did he learn his foreign words?"

Pop, Mom tol' me one time, come from the South. 'E never went to school 'cause 'e said he hed to be school director most all the time. I've heerd Pop say many a time 'e had a knowledge of evry livin' language 'cept the harder places in United Stateser. Pop hes been school director, paff-master and county supervisor fer a lifetime. 'E's ben Justice o' the Peace fer forty years. Thet's the reason they call 'im "Squire."

CHAPTER VII

THE RORYBILIUS

“EVER have any enjoyments down here, Skid?” I asked one night just before going to bed.

Things like parties? Once nawhile. Specially down roun’ the store; dances down there o’ young folks. I never forget ’bout the Squire’s cold New Year’s party though. Pop never tells it the same twict an’ es Mom says ’e got a fearful lot o’ nem-bellishments before ’e turned into ’is Gret Silens. He practised considerable on me the time ’e was on the Gran’ Jury down et Monticello. I ’spect ’e wanted to bresh up so’s ’e could make it interestin’ to th’ ethers ’ith ’im.

Onct I ast ’im, “Pop, ’bout how col’ was it thet time w’en you hed thet big New Years blow out?”

“Whut’s thet Skid? How col’? Lordy me Skid, ther is no way atellin’. Thet was the time w’en it was cold enough to bust any thermometer on earth, pervidin’ they hed any. Thet was before thermom’ters was invented. Col’? That aint any name fer it, by bing! Col’? Ther aint any language ferin er United Stateser es can do the describin’. W’y Skid, gol ding it! it busted lots o’ trees

wide open. They jes' kep' a poppin' all night 'ith frost, like the battle o' Chattanooga.

"F'instans; ef you throwed up a tincup o' water it'd rattle down in a million icicles an'—an' snow. Pervided Skid, remember I'm sayin' *pervided*, ef you was mighty quick about it. Ef you wasn't it'd freeze solid an' bust the tincup right in yer han'. It was leas' forty degrees b'low Cairo,—er—say? thet don't seem the right word neither."

"It froze ev'ry cat in nine mile solid. Sech a night fer cats thet was! Mighty me-e-e! Ev'ry can o' fruit in the cellar was busted skyhigh and evry winder hed fros' mebbly a foot thick next mornin'.

"The day before New Years was foggy, nen it turned to drizzle, nen rain, nen we piled to bed. I woke up 'bout midnight. Golly whee-ee! W'y Skid, th' ice was a foot thick roun' my mouth on my wiskers. I was froze fast. I jumped up to buil' da fire to keep from freezin' to death. And by bing! I drug two covers off'n the bed froze tight to my beard. I guess I looked jes' like Nagra Falls froze up.

"I c'menct to buil' fires. In the fireplace, in the heatin' stove, in the kitching stove jes' a draggin' them bedclothes roun' on my wiskers. Mom jumped out to git warm et the fireplace an' the minnit she tetched the floor the chilbrames lit into 'er. She hed 'em fer years clean to 'er knees. Talk about col'!

"'Bout then we heerd guns, yessir guns. An' whut d'y think it was? You couldn't guess in a

thousin' years. The frost hed jus' reached the cellar an' them fruit cans was jes' shootin' off. Cans to the righ' tov us, cans to the lef' tov us; cans to the—the cans comin' *up* at us by thunder an' lightnin'. Never in my born days did I hear before sech a battin' an' bangin', 'ith cannons now and nen, thet was the crout barl and the sugar water beer barl explodin'.

“Skid I don' min' tellin' private thet not knowin' whut it was et firs I was kin'do,—thet is kin'do—er—flabbergasted. Anyways I took a candle and opened the door an' looked out. Skid I'll be teetotally goldinged ef it wasn't so col' thet it froze the flame square off right down to the taller. Yer mother said it mus' be the win'. Nix I tell you-u. An' the snow an' sleet 'ith the fireplace shinin' on 'em! It looked jes' like parydise. Fer a fac' Skid, jes' like parydise.

“An' while I stood ther, mebbly in a tranct, mebbly freezin' to death, yer mother jumped et me an' drug me safte. She was jes' in time Skid, jes' in time. One secon' more and I would abeen a corpse. W'en she slammed the door to, mebbly a ninch o' frost an' fine snow dropped out the air o' the rooms.

“But in Hevings name son whut do you think came a walkin' through thet door w'en I was in thet tranct? Marchin', waddlin' like sojers single file right up to the fireplace?”

“Owls, Pop.” I hed heard 'bout them owls more'n onct.

“Yessir, by thunder! them 'levin screech owls.

They marched right up to the fireplace an' turned ther backs, 'levin of 'em an' mebbby twelve fer I aint very good accountin'. I tol' yer mother, says I, 'Angelina whut do you s'pose wy them screetch owls come in?'

"An' she said, 'Abe I jes' fergit now 'bout them owls. I thought thet was whut Sim Puffer tol' et the party.' Skid them was Puffer owls, Squire Puffer owls. Dad bust Sim Puffer; 'e never hed a fireplace in 'is hull life. Screetch owls awarmin' 'emsevs et Sim's! 'Dad burn Sim Puffer!' says I, to Mom,—th' ol' crawfish eater!

"You can jes' bet yer sweet gizzards thet was a col' time, fer the air was thet tight froze es them ghost owls c'dn't fly.

"Mom an' me drug the bed up near the fireplace and turned in. Long w'ile though 'fore we got to sleep cause them fruit cans was 'casionally bustin' an' nothin' got ca'm tell the neatfoot ile jug went off jes' like a Fourth o' July anvil down at Monticello. Nen we dropped off.

"Es I hed piled on three feather ticks an' nine blankets we slep' purty soun'. But w'en I woke up in the mornin' ther was them poor little screetch owls corpses on the harth. Jes' nothin' on this yer earth could stan' forever a col' snap like o' thet. No siree-ee.

"I piled 'bout a cord o' shellbark on the fireplace an' things c'menst to limber up some. Efter puttin' hot coals an' ashes in my boots fer 'bout a nour I got so es I could dror 'em on. Nen I moseyed out

t' see how much was lef' talive. Jes' four hens, three horses, one old barrow es hed no ears, an' wich nothin' could kill 'cept a tiger, an' les' see, I guess 'cept a cow or two, yes, thet was all es was lef' talive, t' tell the tale.

"W'en I come back Mom was tryin' to chop up the sàssige 'ith a nax, an' teetotally give up. Ther was no water, an' th' aigs an' milk in the spring house was covered 'bout ten foot 'ith ice.

"I'll tell you 'bout thet. You see the spring hed run 'bout forty million barls durin' the night. It hed froze et the milk house door an' comin' back to the reservoir, freezin' es it come, tell it reached the five-inch iron mouth. The water in th' earth 'course didn't freeze tell it come out. Nen it run over the ice an' c'menct to pile up. Yessir it was leas' ten foot right over the top o' thet spring house. Ther was the aigs an' butter safte, but who on earth could chop into them? I am sayin' emphatic son, it was impossible. Ther was the aigs an' butter an' milk an' ther was thet iceberg ontop mebby forty foot thick. Spread over mebby a nacre too. Tell you Skid, things looked mighty blue roun' ther fer vittals fer awile.

"Nen Angie an' me got a candle an' dug into the cellar. You 'member wen I was in Kentucky peddlin' thet Safety Fire Kindler es exploded an' burnt my hair an' wiskers off es I tol' you 'bout? You 'member I saw the Mamoth cave? Them stallyactites hangin' and all thet? Well sir, the cellar hed' em jes' the same made out 'n razberries,

gooseberries, jam, sealin' wax, crout, jams an' jellies, all jes' hangin' from the kitching floor perfec'ly mixed an' mixed. Sech a goldinged mixer es the worl' never seen before er sence. The crout barl 'sploded nex' to las' an' made them vittals fuzzy 'ith crout, and the neatfoot ile was the las' tetch o' flavor.

"I chopped one off one icicle fer Angie and an-ether fer me an' suckin' 'em an' spittin' out the ceilin' wax an' things es was too rank, we made out. But ther was part of a nol' mouse trap w'ich 'ith the neat-foot ile kin' do spiled the 'joymen' of it. I guess thet is whut they call frozen frickisee down to Indianapolis.

"I forgot to tell you 'bout them aigs in the nice house. Wen th' ice melted off 'bout the Fourth, we busted in the door. An' Skid, whut do you s'pect? You couldn't guess in a thousan' years."

"Chickens, Pop?" I ast 'im Clonel French, feelin' es ef I ought to throw in a nidea er two fer them gran'jurors down at Monty. He scratched 'is head es ef thet was kin' do new on him. 'E kindo was thoughtful, nen bust out, "Skid who in thunder tol' *you*? S'pect I did though."

"Yessir, ee-ee bobstail,—two hull tubsful o' cheepin' chicks, jes' ready fer ther firs' snack o' corn meal. The spring house bein' covered 'ith ice got so warm thet they hatched. I tell *you* Skid, thet was lucky. 'Taint of'n a feller can raise poultry in a niceberg. Not very goldurn of'n Skid. I tipped over them tubs an' gittin' Angie to count, 'cause I can't swing sech numbers fer certain, an' ther was

over, less see, over, er—yes, over nine 'underd an' fifty nine chicks besides, ef I 'member jes' right, there was a 'underd and 'leven thet was pippin' but we saved even *them* all ri'."

Clonel I tol' Mom bout thet chicking hatchin' onct. She was churnin', but she stopped an' ast me 'bout it agin. I 'splained it careful. She shook 'er head an' looked tired.

"Es thet all ri' Mom?" I ast.

"Them's jus' embellishmens Skid."

"Whut's embellishmens Skid?" she ast. "You might ast Squire 'bout 'em." But goin' back to Pop. Nen I ast Pop 'bout the party New Years night.

"Skid thet's it. I was dreadfully worried 'bout thet. We sent our forty invites an' cooked fer sixty. We counted on 'bout two dozen es 'd nachurly drop in 'cause this Ridge kin'do drops in w'en ther's eatin' goin' on. Everybody es hed a ninvite was tol' private to keep it mighty clost to ther stomacks, but spite of all, extra dropped in kin'do natchural an' lookin' devilish hungry. Ther was Sim an' Reddic o' Piqua an' Ol' Ann, an' Black Puffer 'ith is one eye an' double stomack like a bear, Lige Tramphorn who never hed enough fried mush in 'is life; less see, Doc Poppinal who lives down by Reynol's an' hes cramps wen 'e aint drunk, an' spen's leas' half the time in the calaboose.

"Ther was four half-breed Puffers from roun' down 'bout the Store es come 'bout 'leven o'clock an' was goin' to make a rough house 'cause they didn't

git a ninvite. I licked two. Jelly Puffer chased one into the bresh fer a mile. But you want to 'member Skid, Jelly is the bigges' liar 'ith cross eyes an' tow hair es ever looked two ways to onct. 'Sides the cuss 'e ramped after, hed jes' got over the small-pox an' was weak es a sick hen.

"Yer mother an' me piled on hickory cordwood all forenoon tryin' to thaw the pies an' cakes an' things she hed cooked the day before. W'y they was thet froze you couldn't abore in 'em 'ith a gimlet. W'y onct jes' to show Angie how hard they was froze, I struck the ax right down in the stomach of a cake and I'll be hongswoggled Skid, if the sparks didn't fly out an'—an' set the dishrag afire. Fer a fac' Skid.

"'Bout noon I hed melted the periperies o' nine cakes and sixteen elderberry pies."

"The wich?" I ast Pop.

"Periperies son. Them words come easy to me. W'y sir, them cakes in ther periperies looked like scrambled aigs 'ith a high fever in ther vitals. We hed one thing thet saved the day,—thet sugarwater beer es was a chunk of ice. I chopped it up an' melted a hull barl. Nen w'en Angie was mournin' over them scrambled pies an' cakes, feelin' kin' do gay I mixed 'bout ten gallon o' hard cider in. Skid thet hard cider was strong 'nough to hold up a niron wedge.

"Nen 'bout dusk, 'cept some women es come over to help yer mother, the Ridge people c'menct to show up. Skid whut do you think is the population

of this here Ridge? Well sir, it looked mighty like es of evrybody fer thirty mile was jes' droppin' in, droppin' in, droppin' in.

"But most evrybody fetched something. Jake Spading's woman fetched thawed pickles an' crout; Hi Stickle's woman about a peck o' walnut taffy candy made out'n maple sugar. Ther aint much better tastin' stuff on this earth son. Ef I hed to die eatin', jus' give me walnut taffy made out'n maple sugar, an' I would let all my frien's do the weepin' and I would jes' go on dyin' an' eatin' walnut maple molasses taffy. I don't jes' know how much I could eat, if I hed it, but I wouldn't think o' stoppin' short a half a rain barl full.

"Jelly Puffer's wife, she's a reglar ol' mammy cook from the Rappyhannock valley, fetched a layer cake 'bout two foot acrost an' spread over 'ith frost sugar an' ornymented 'ith conversation candy hearts. She fetched besides a nacorn ham, sugar cured, an' hed it boiled in cider, an' nex' to dyin' eatin' maple taffy, jes' turn me loose Skid, on one o' her cider biled hams an' I wouldn't care ef I hed to die twict.

"Less see, Ann, the ol' girl es hes visions evry new moon an' come out'n the ark, I guess, fetched over 'er fortune tellin' cards an' three quarts o' roasted chinquapins. It was them little black acorns Skid, es firs' induced ramagrants into this here section o' country. Ole Oleson brought over two quart bottles o' Logansport hilarity wich we mixed in the tub of sugar water beer. Nen old Black Puffer. His woman fetched two pints o' Monticello rye. Oh

you can bet the Olesons never miss the high steppin' stuff tell the well runs dry, neither."

"I didn't know es they hed a well Pop," I said to 'im.

"No, they haint. But in the beautiful future they're agoin' to dig one all ri'. Whut they brought 'ith 'em Skid, is a private matter, but ef a feller was dyin' in a desert fer water an' ther was nothin' in forty mile 'cept whut they hed, wy efter takin' it more'n likely a feller wouldn't know whether 'e was dyin' 'ith thirst, er whether 'e'd chawed off a chunk o' hell.

"Somebody fetched a peck o' hazel nuts, ethers walnuts and big hickory nuts an' ol' deaf an' dumb Puffer done sothin' to excuse 'is cussidness ef enything would. He brought over a two gallon jug o' honey mead jes' seven weeks old. Honey mead jes' seven weeks ol' 'ith anise seed in it and mint flavored is a thing of beauty an' da joy f'rever.

"Es it hed turned kin' do warm in the efternoon an' da few hed dirt cellars es didn't freeze we hed the mos' didrappines' layout es ever festered 'long the San'hill road. An' whut made the hull thing a mos' auspicious occasion, ther was more'n a plenty jes' es long es anybody hed the ability to keep on layin' things away.

"'Bout midnight ther wasn't more'n two er three of us, includin' a sprinklin' o' women, es could tetch the pints o' ther two fingers together the firs' time they tried. They was jes' thet joyful.

"The sorrowful part of it was thet the sugarwater

beer seemed to fly right up to the top of a feller's hair. Mos' evrybody was singin' diff'rent songs an' hymns et the same time. You could slice the smoke 'ith a case knife it was so blamed thick. Nen old Sim got out 'is fiddle an' played 'Money Musk,' 'Soldier's Joy,' 'Arkansaw Traveler,' and w'en 'e 'ith 'is eyes a rollin' an' 'is foot a stampin' keepin' time es shook the teakettle so it rattled, w'y evrybody, 'cept Angie, squared off fer a dance.

"Skid y' ought to've seen thet. A few of 'em, not bein' in the set, hed private hoedowns in the corner. Nen the dust rose up. Ther was two sets in the kitching and one in the settin' room agoin' et the same time. And I want to say private Skid, thet it was pretty hard on the furnichur. You see some of 'em didn't track any too well.

"'Bout a nour afterwards the supper was ready. Nen I made a little speech. You know son, I'm purty good et thet ef I do say't myse'f.

"Mom tol' me nex' day she s'pected it was ten minutes before she could tell jes' whut I was drivin' et. But I know it was 'bout liberty, union an' the pursuit o' happiness one an' dinseprable f'rever.

"An' w'en I come to the peoration Reddic hed kin' do swiped a plate o' crulls 'ith 'is eyes rolled up to'ards the ceilin' es ef 'e was in a tranct. Thet's whut made me break off so sudden Skid. He was the ony gol dang geezer es hed the gall to swipe crulls w'en I was the mos' eloquent. Angie said nex' day w'en she spoke slow and in a clear voice so's I could understan' thet I was eloquent, nen-

tirely too gosh blamed eloquent fer—fer any use atall.

“Nen efter 'bout a nour w'en we was tellin' our 'sperience 'bout the col' the night before, mebbby though we was eatin' 'bout a nour an' da half, w'y Sim told es how 'e'd run through 'is fireplace seven times w'en 'e got up and 'e didn't even feel the heat, but 'e did make the floor sloppy by meltin'. Ef Sim'd said 'e allus paid fer his smokin' it couldn't a surprised us more.” I ast Pop how Sim lived. “Skid thet beast hes not hed enough to eat fer forty years 'cept thet time.”

“W'y Pop,” says I, “'e hes to live an' to live 'e's jus' got t' eat.” Thet made Pop snort, for 'e don't like Sim any more'n 'e does Jelly.

“'E don't live, 'e's jes' a livin' corpse. Jes' swigs swamp water an' smokes home made tobaccer. An' Skid, I don't want to cas' spicions on my neighbors, but Sim does all 'is tobaccer farmin' et night. Oh, o' course Skid, 'e sometimes hev a snack o' woodpeckers, mebbby a groun' mole, p'raps a crawfish er two, but fer a reglar diet give Sim fishworms and 'e's happy. An' ther's ony one liar in forty mile es can hol' a candle to ol' one-eyed Sim 'ith 'is double stomach, an' thet animal is thet grinnin' cross-eyed monkey, 'ith 'is eyes tryin' to crawl into 'is nose, thet yellow haired shoat Jelly Puffer. He's bigger. Jelly lies wen 'e does 'is level best jes' *tryin'* to tell the truth.

“Nen bout 2 o'clock, we was settin' ther jes' tired out. Everything was nigh still. Some was a dozin'

off in ther chairs an' benches. Reddic o' Piqua was nibblin' roun' yit tryin' to see ef ther was any room inside o' 'im fer temptin' further. Even the women wasn't talkin' an' w'en you git a gang o' swamp women es can't talk w'y the worl' is 'bout comin' to a conclusion.

"Right then w'en evrything was 'bout still es a corpse, a nowl es big es a churn, flyin' a mile a minnit, came boomity boom bust right through the winder. It scattered glass forty ways fer Sunday, an' bein' half killed, it tumbled roun' over the vittals, and wrestled 'ith death right ther in the middle o' the table. Sech a scatterin', breakin', flounderin', screetchin' an' mixen' the lord God of Hosts never saw before er sence.

"Nen w'en it hed about four pound of butter an' molasses and ether grub on it, it bounced right off'n the table into the sugarwater beer tub an' died 'ith its wings stickin' out 'bout four foot. Ther wasn't ony a reg'lar wreck but mebbly four bushel o' feathers floatin' an' settlin' on things.

"Skid I never had 'em in my whole born days, but some o' the rest hed. Wen the mixed bran' we hed 'd make a feller see owls it's 'bout time to call in the doctors. Snakes is a mos' mil' dinsect beside a nowl under sech circumstances. Nothin' like thet can disturb my—my susquanimity ner infract my rashsheoshenashun. I rose up dignified and says: 'Ladies, gen'lemen, frien's and neighbors, an' dethers es may be here, this, this animal is a nowl.' Wasn't them corkin' words Skid?

“Well did them assurin’ words calm thet goldang gang? Lord-omighty no-o. Right about then Sally Stickle screamed like a dyin’ panther.

“‘Run! Run! the worl’s onfire!’ And sure ’nough it was. We tumbled out’n the house like sheep goin’ crost a bridge chased by a dog. I never s’pect to see anether sight like thet.

“In the north the hull hevings was burnin’ up. Mebby the tub o’ sugarwater beer kin’ do spiled the steadiness of our eyes fer a minit, but sure ther was flames a million miles high ravin’, gleamin’, shootin’ roun’ red, pink, blue, yeller, tremblin’, mixin’, wrestlin’ like fightin’ tomcats. Nen evrything ’d get still an’ jes’ tremble an’ flicker an’ wait. Nen up she would twist an’ turn inside out in a thousan’ gleamin’ colors like the las’ piece o’ magic lantern.

“An’ sech yellin’ an’ screamin’—wy bout half the women hed ther apurns over ther heads moanin’ an’ Reddic o’ Piqua was out kneelin’ in the snow aprayin’. Jelly hed snatched a piece o’ rag carpet an’ flingin’ it over ’is head was hidin’ under the lilac bush. Black Puffer was runnin’ roun’ from one to a nether sayin’ ef the Lord ’d excuse ’im jes’ this las’ time, ’e never, never so help him God ’e’d never tech a nether drop. Ol’ Ann was throwin’ ’er arms wide tryin’ to grab thet fire in the sky an’ yellin’ ‘Whee-ee-ee!’ You could aheerd ’er four mile. Crazy? jes’ springin’ up like a cat ’ith a fit.

“I never did see sech a scared crowd, an’ never in my whole born days did I see a scarrier thing up ther in the sky. And Skid, all I did wile they

was runnin' roun' es scared es if you hed stuck a stick in a nanthill, was jes' to fol' m'arms like Bonyparte acrossin' th' Alps er starin' brazen right into the face o' them pyramids. Jes' proud an' col' like, an' waitin' fer 'em to recover ther rasheoshenashun details an' perspective."

"I guess the Squire always had his nerve with him, Skid? Eh?"

Well Clonel, I ast partic'lar of Mom jes' whut Pop did do durin' thex 'citemen' an' she said, "Et first Pop went a hoopin' to the barn an' c'menct to harness up Jinn an' Bett. 'E'd fergot 'is hat an' wen she come a runnin' up 'e was a talkin' to 'imsef sayin', 'Ef I ever see Dick Winters agin in this worl' I'll give 'im evry las' cent ef I never hev anether bite to eat in my whole born days.'"

"Who is Dick Winters, Skid?" I asked.

W'y 'e's th' assessor. He nearly allus can fin' Pop the secon' er third trip. But the rest o' the Puffers hes mos'ly to be tracked down 'ith houn's ef Dick gits to 'em. 'Cept Jelly Puffer. Pop said wen 'e was supervisor, the best tax year outside 'im an' Jelly brought in \$1.37. Nen seventeen of 'em come before the Equalizin' Board fer excess taxes.

Mom said she found 'im sweatin' an' talkin' to 'imsef an' jus' hed Jinn's collar down ready to put it on the mare. Nen Mom 'splained thet it was the Northe'n lights es was perfec'ly harmless. She said Pop kep' pettin' an' smoothin' the horse collar an' tryin' to understan' her words.

"Es it perfec'ly safte Angie, don't we need the doctor?"

It couldn't hurt a flea, she told 'im. Nen Pop, shakin' 'is hed an' talkin' to 'isef, follored Mom back to the house efter she hed 'splained some more.

"Whut did you say thet scientific name was Angie?" Pop called efter 'er.

"Aurora borealis," answered Mom, hurryin' back kin'do to settle the women es was scared 'bout nigh to death. Ol' Ann hed run into the house an' cas' ta fit under the bed an' Mom was tendin' 'er. Efter awhile she said she went out adoors to quiet things. An' ther was Pop talkin' gran' to the res' 'bout the Rorybilus 'ith Jinn's collar 'round 'is neck an' not knowin' much whut 'e said.

"Skid I'd like fer you to keep private about thet horse collar," Mom tol' me. "Ef I want to cut Abe's feathers right down to the pint all I hev to say is, 'Abe jest about how is the harness business this spring?'"

"How did it all en' Pop?" I ast 'im onct.

"Well science is mighty pacificatin'. I jes' stood ther 'ith my arms acrost my breas' splainin' the sciens of it. First thing I see was Reddic sneakin' into the house an' comenct to sniff 'roun' the table. Nen Jelly come out slow from the lilac bush 'is eyes rollin' an' lookin' cautious. We all went in efter awile an' ther was Reddic eatin' a full meal agin. 'E was makin' 'imsef square 'ith ol' Rory by prayin' an' was makin' sure 'e couldn't hol' anether bite before 'e quit.

"I tell you Skid, thet was a mighty quiet crowd wen we went into the house agin. Nobody was sayin' a thing. All the noise we heerd was the smackin' an' rattle of Reddic an' the breathin' of ol' Sim.

"Efter aw'ile Sim rose up sayin', 'Folkses ef thet wasn't the worl' burnin' up et the north en', et leas' 'twas hell shinin' out o' the winders on the clouds. I caint fiddle, er eat, er drink no more. I'm agoin' back hom̃ ef some one 'll come 'long 'ith me.' "

"Blacky ol' cuss let's skin out, ugh?" asked Sim. And evrybody talkin' in wispers, Pop said, slunk out fer home castin' scarry looks over ther shoulders up ther to them north clouds es was slowin' down blue and col'.

CHAPTER VIII

A MEMBER OF THE PUFFER FAMILY

"GOIN' to take anether pull Clonel?" asked Skid one night about eleven o'clock as I was thinking of going to bed. From his appearance I deemed another smoke might prove good for my soul.

"Guess I will try that new tobacco. Got any news about Pufferdom for company, Skid?"

I was thinkin' about Pop's experience 'ith settin' hens an' specially 'ith 'is incubator. One spring wen Mom was down 'ith erysipels fer nigh three weeks an' evrything was loose at both en's an' run down, wy Pop hed to do lots o' new kin's o' work. 'E bought a nincubator from a nad in our weekly from a Burlington man. Pop said efterwards Burlington made a specialty o' subscription books, handwritin' an' dincubators. Thet town, 'e tol' me, educated nembitious farmers es blieved in advertisemens.

Pop bought it by mail an' went clean down to Monon to git it. W'ile puttin' it up it fell down twict, besides Pop hed to stick rags in it to keep the sun out an' the hot air in. 'E set it thet night 'ith seven dozen real aigs. Pop efter readin' the directions an' some circlers 'es come 'long 'ith it said 'e

hed a goldang notion to set it 'ith glass aigs it seemed so infernal productiv'.

The firs' seven dozen roasted. The secon' seven dozen froze. The third seven dozen was gittin' 'long to'ards summer an' got to the pippin' stage. 'E was so excited thet 'e begin talkin' to 'imsef mos' o' the time. Goin' to bed I heard 'im say to Mom:

"Angie by the eternal lord Harry, tommory mornin' in this year of Any Dominy we'll hev seven dozen chicks mos'ly pullets, layin' two aigs a day, ev'ry last eternal one of 'em hatched by int'lect an' machinery. Whoo-oo-p-ee!"

"Don't go to yappin' Abe, till after countin' your hatch," said Mom. She allus talked better 'n any of us.

Nex' mornin' 'bout daylight I heerd Pop knockin' aroun' gittin' dressed. Nen es 'e went out 'e said:

"*Komong voo potter voo*, y'ol' chicking cadavery. *Wee befindin su seek*, you geedanged Burlington cackle fact'ry." 'Bout then I heard 'im spring out the house, nen yellin', nen cracklin' soun's. The whole shed an' dincubator was burnin' up. I tell you Clonel, there was excitemen' rarin' up on its hin' laigs 'roun' ther fer 'bout half a nour.

It was a long w'ile efter thet 'fore Pop got over it. Onct wen 'e seemed to be thinkin' solemn 'e ast me suddenly, "Skid whut you think made thet geedanged, misera-ā-ble incubator burn itself to death?"

"I wouldn't wonder Bet Nore got to snoopin' 'roun' here jus' to tant you, an' set it afire. You

know Genral Torrance says the whole o' Rome was snooped up jus' by one ol' bull emp'ror 'ith 'is fiddle." He sniggered a long time efter thet. I never heerd 'im laugh sence 'bout th' incubator though, an' de took particlar pains never to mention it to the hunters. I ast 'im onct to tell about it to the Gen'ral 'cause I saw the night before things was leadin' thet way. Pop was sort o' feelin' 'roun' an' not darin' to tell.

"Skid ther air some things you don't ever want to tell: like about love letters, fambly matters an' the times you hev been licked. I was buckin' nature 'raisin' chickings by machinery. The Lord never made machinery to butt in an' take the bread out o' the mouth o',—o', well, say hens. I hev borried a basket of aigs from Spadings an' sence the female part o' this 'stablishmen' is down 'ith erysipels we hev got to set Cluck. Come on, ' 'Tis the voice o' nature speaks.' "

We went into the house, an' pale as a ghost an' so weak she could hardly set up, Mom tol' Pop how to perceed. Fellow'd think it was easy to set hens, but it aint. Some hens want to set on darnicks and cobs; some won't set on nothin' an' some is inter-mitten'. Hens is like calves, they aint got no sense any time. Some air so scarry ef you point yer finger at 'em they will yell at you like a guinea. Them very same hens, though, w'en settin' 'll let you handle 'em es ef you was a lovin' frien' o' the fambly. An' the scarries' hen on earth 'll fight a bufflo wen she's struttin' 'round 'ith two er three chicks.

Mom allus said men wasn't cackilated to set hens

any more'n they could do fancy tettino'. An' Pop tol' der a hen didn't hev any sense noway cause ther heads was so small there was no room fer anything but the cackle. So Pop an' me got the basket o' hen aigs out'n the spring house an' went in to get the specifications an' rashsheoshenatin' details. Mom an' Cluck was perticular frien's. They could gabble frien'ly es two deaf an' dumb sisters who hedn't seen each ether fer a year,—reg'lar hen talk. 'Ith Cluck Mom was perfec'ly at home; but 'ith the Squire Cluck was a nentire stranger.

Efter Mom hed tol' 'bout forty times how to set Cluck Pop flared up. "Angelina d'you s'pose I'm a saber toothed Bengaul tiger er jus' a snortin' boorooloogoogaw es never set a measly ol' bunch o' yeller feathers? Come on Skid, let's look et this member o' the fambly 'ith such a delicate setter on 'er. C'mong 'long." An' Pop went out w'istlin'. Wen Pop wistles 'e aint all fired mad, jus' enough mad es makes conversation mos'ly dangerous.

I tagged 'long, o' course, heerin' Pop talkin' to issef: "Reg'lar pizon case, includin' salt an' battery an' danger signals flyin' at the mast on the court house. Gol' blame this ol' hen convention anyways."

Wen Pop got out to wher Cluck was hatchin' out the darnicks an' cobs an' mos' wore out, 'e said encouragin', "Cluckie, I hev come out 'ith my beloved son adoin' ferin missionary work to save yer immortal gibblets. *Comprong eevoo? Spreckin su Di-iitch? Parlor voo Fransay? Wee gates, huh, yet,*

still?" "An' all Cluck done was to stare an' blink at us nentire strangers. She didn't know any more ferin language 'n Pop did, mebbby not so much. Cluck was kind o' pale complexioned an' blinked an' blinked, w'ile Pop seemed to be studyin' 'er charack-ter.

"By the gret Horn spondulix Missis Cluckie, I hev come out as yer frien'. D'you give me the right hand o' fellowship, huh?

"Son, this is a serious occasion demandin' the mos' onstreperous concatenation o' Darwinicks," an' 'ith the wrinkle roun' 'is lef' eye I saw 'e was in a proper frame o' min' to do Cluck all the ferin mission work 'e hed on tap. Nen 'e got one 'is spells an' said, "Sink er swim, sarvive er perish, I give my aigs to this—here lady in buff." He got down an' begun to claw out the nails an' cobs. Cluck looked astonished. He chucked 'bout two dozen aigs under 'er. There was a row roun' the edge outside o' Cluck. Pop was treatin' 'er soft, but right in the perceedin's Cluck took a fine pick out the back o' Pop's han'. Pop drew back es ef a frien' hed suddenly hit 'im right in the stomick. Wen 'e saw 'is han' ableedin' a little, 'e snorted, "You yellor heifer, who d' you s'pose is boss 'roun' here?" an' 'e kept rubbin' 'is han' an' shakin' 'is head. "Anether mayhem like thet an' somebody 'ill be carryin' sothin' out dead, lookin' like a scattered punkin."

Cluck got up nervous an' turned 'roun' a few times, 'ith 'er feathers stuck out makin' 'er look 'bout as big as a bushel basket.

"Suit you Cluckie dear?" said Pop sarcastic. "Mebby the size aint right; does the color suit yer complexion? Mebby you want 'em fried er turned over, er b'iled? Praps you want nails an' darnicks? Speak up Cluckie," said Pop, still rubbin' an' lookin' sour at 'is han', "speak right up, the key to the city is yourn."

"Pop," I tol' dim, "ther's too many aigs under 'er. She's smaller w'en settin' 'an she looks now."

"Hollyhocks! So sh' is, so sh' is." So 'e lifted 'er off an' shoved 'er to one side. Nen Cluck went plumb crazy. She flew up on 'is back, knocked 'is hat off, mussed up 'is hair an' lit down in the nes' breakin' two or three aigs, evry feather tremblin' 'ith fight. Pop give 'er a cuff under the bustle, bouncin' 'er away a yard er so, nen she come swingin' back. 'E scrouged over the nes' like a numbereller, clawin' the aigs out w'ile Cluck was chargin' at 'im from behin'. I couldn't hear very well mongst the clashin' 'cept, "Omlettes 'ith hay, an' music in the gallery."

I forget all the things thet happened, they was comin' so quick, but in one o' the roun's Cluck took a nunder cut an' twisted a piece blue on the back o' Pop's han' 'bout as big as a copper. Nen Cluck seein' 'er day was off fer settin', streaked fer the hog hole under the barn. Pop was the mos' surprised an' maddes' man in the whole state of Indiany.

"Holy cracky!" yelled Pop an' suspectin' Cluck's intentions 'e cut loose efter 'er. Cluck o' course was stiff in the laigs but pushed 'ith 'er wings. Pop, holdin' 'is breath, sailed. Ef Pop'd yelled ev'ry jump

I wouldn't a been s'prised. Thet's the way dogs do efter a rabbit, 'less 'e's runnin' 'is best. Gosh! thet was a hot dash.

Cluck got away firs', o' course, an' was 'bout half way wen Pop soared. 'E throwed back dirt like a race horse.

I throwed up my hat an' yelled, "Two muskrat skins on Cluck Pop!" Pop was holdin' 'is breath an' runnin' so hard 'e couldn't answer, but by the extra jump 'e give I knowed 'e took me up. Both got to the hole together, but Cluck nachurly hed a chanct to slow down under the barn an' Pop hedn't. Jus' then Pop give 'er a glancin' kick an' knocked 'er to the ether side way back in the dark. Bein's it was a log barn an' built well, Pop stopped agin it. 'An' all the dents was on Pop.

Besides bein' generally strained 'e was mos'ly squshed an' tore loose. 'E didn't seem to appreciate nothin' but jus' rubbin'.

I can't just tell you how 'e looked wen 'e come back, but 'is hair was hangin' over 'is eyes like rat tails an' 'ith sweatin', rubbin' an' screwin' 'is face 'ith hurtin', 'e looked mighty frien'less. "Them skins is yourn Pop fer speed," I said, wantin' to be safte. Nen we both saw Mom settin' in the doorway 'ith her face an' arms in 'er nightgown cryin'.

Gosh blimmity! I felt mean; so did Pop. We went up slow to 'er, fer it looked es ef the en' do' the worl' was comin' fer I never saw Mom bawl before.

"Cluck was like a baby to me an' now you have



E. T. RICHARDS.

"NEN CLUCK WENT PLUMB CRAZY."

gone an' kilt her," and 'thout lookin' up Mom went on cryin' in 'er arms, an' both of us jus' stood there wantin' to die an' couldn't. Pop wasn't sayin' anything, but how 'e *did* get worse an' worse ev'ry minute. He rubbed es ef 'e hed been in a runaway an' drug a mile.

"Skid you better run 'ith all yer might over to Jake Spading's fer all o' the arnica, turpentine an' witch hazel 'e hes on the place. I feel all skewjeed an' tore loose," an' Pop was screwin' up 'is w'iskers like a show camel. Mom jus' kep' on snifflin'. "Skid while yer at it, mebbly you better go over an' git Hi Stickel to set up 'ith me tonight. Ther's no tellin' what'll come out o' this." Nen Mom rose up an' teetered into the house to bed. I made a move es ef I was goin' to streak out fer the whole neighborhood.

"Well, mebbly I jus' can pull through the night Skid." An' Pop quit mos' of 'is rubbin', an' lookin' tired to'ards the house 'e went into the woodshed to hunt fer the turpentine.

"The Squire must have felt like one of his 'crumblin' shaffs o' granite, Skid. Was that the way it ended? One dead hen, one 'kilt' man and your mother abed?"

No; d'rec'ly 'e come out an' said, "Skid crawl under the barn an' get Cluck an' bury 'er. The smell 'll be awful ef you don't."

"Sure she's dead Pop?" I ast.

"Dead? Can a yellow ol' zebra like thet stand a man weighin' two hunderd and fifty poun's, who

broke in the side o' the barn, cracked three er four ribs, tore seven or eight muscles loose, an' still preserve 'er identity? Dead Skid? For the Lord's sake! W'y, no livin' hen on the whole earth could stan' a swipe like thet an' still be in the lan' do the livin'. She is dead son, perfec'ly dead, an' hes no doubt c'menst to putere-e-fy already. Bury 'er deep an' throw the shovel in efter 'er." Nen 'e went into the woodshed lookin' fer more turpentine.

I started out 'ith the shovel an' met Cluck acomin' back to do hatchin' at th' ol' stan'. She looked purty feeble, kind o' three cornered an' was cluckin' a language es said she was perfec'ly able to hatch aigs an' omelettes together ef let alone. Thet's bout all Clonel.

Skid made a move towards the candle.

"How did your mother take it? Did Cluck make good, Skid?"

No, but Pop did. 'E got thet eighty cent ingrain on the parlow, the new Garlan' an' ever efter Mom got all the chicking money. An' whut d'you s'pect I got out'n the perceedin's Clonel? Well, Pop would n't take the muskrat skins an' 'sides 'e give me a whole half dollar jus' to preserve the fambly honor, which I'm sp'ilin' right now. Good ni' Clonel, happy dreams." Puff! went the candle blaze.

CHAPTER IX

THE GENTLE MISS MORGAN

ONE October night, dark and cheerless, the swamp fog coming in at the close of day had changed to a sleepy drizzle on our tiny vine-clad house under the oaks. It was the second trip I had made to the swamps, and in a sort of voyage of discovery I had asked Skid if there were any panthers to be found in the wooded districts below the Crossings. I had been planning all day to tell a particularly vivid panther story. The main theme was a brave miner cornering a particularly bloodthirsty panther in the tunnel of an abandoned mine. I had thought out the details, and trusted my constructive imagination when the hour of trial should come. Assuming as much guile as I could I had led out my question as a feeler. And this is the way the budding genius took the tale out of my soul:

No, not now, but we hed a Morgan colt onct.

"Skid, for the life of me I don't see how a panther and a Morgan colt have anything in common. What's a Morgan panther colt anyway?"

The Morgan stock come from nowhers," he said. "They wedge back, Pop said, to the royal equine purple in the obscurity of lyin' stockmen from Ohio. I hev heard the Squire get off "equine purple" more

'n onct. Some ether words was favorites 'ith 'im. "Corrosivesublimite" was one. He saw thet on a bottle o' bedbug pizon down at Hi Stickel's. Pop was th' only one 'long the San'hill road es could handle it.

The Morgans we hed was quick es a panther on their feet; never got tired an' was allus prancin' an' sweatin'. They was good roadsters, an' could run funder an' longer an' do less damage arunnin' off 'an any ether kin' o' stock es ever took to the San'hill road. Specially w'en they wasn't broke right. Pop was a nexpert. He gentled 'em. Firs' to tie, nen to lead, nen to stan' harnessed, nen to follow behin' the wagon 'ith the gears on.

Our firs' Morgan was nearly blue blood. She knowed more 'an mos' Dutch hired han's es aint been dug out o' ferin countries very long. She looked like a fat little shoat but was jus' es quick es a panther, Pop allus said, 'ith 'er feet. 'Er eyes stuck out like a rabbit's, an' she liked me 'bout like Cluck does Mom.

She took to edication fine. She was tame es a kitten, 'ith big eyes and 'd follow me aroun' es ef I was a chum of 'ers.

So one May mornin' out come Pop 'ith Morgie hitched in shavs and a naxle stuck into cornplow wheels.

Clonel you'd nachurly think aseain' 'er thet was 'er nachural way a doin' business, jus' growed up in shavs on a' naxle ith cornplow wheels. Pop drove 'er up to the yard gate an' called Mom out to see

'is handiwork. He was sweatin', 'is big black hat was stuck on the back of 'is head an' 'e was feelin' glo-o-rious.

Mom walked round 'im an' Morgie kin'do squint-in' 'er eyes an' lookin' critical. Pop never did like to see 'er look thet way. Nen 'e followin' er 'ith 'is eyes sideways kin'do mad but sayin' nothin' et firs'. Mom I guess walked roun' twict, nen Pop snorted out, "Does this here chariot suit yer critical spondulix Missis Puffer?"

"Abe thet colt does n't look jest right to m' eyes. Sh' is n't broke enough. Yer takin' chances; better look out fer yourse'f." No, Mom said "yerself." She allus did talk proper enough.

"Angelina," said Pop, tryin' to be polite 'cept 'e was mad down in 'is stomach, "ther air sevrал things you be inducted into sech es housekeepin', cookin', grammar, religion an' chicking fixin's. But breakin' colts is beyon' yer concatenation. Me an' Morgie is agoin' out ridin' this beautiful May mornin'." Pop sprung into the seat. "Better git back to yer waitin' kiching work. Giddap girlie," an' Pop slapped Morgie 'ith the lines. An' nen 'e rode off.

Mom shook 'er head solemn, "Thet man does beat all Skid."

I could see right away thet Morgie was enjoyin' 'erself. 'Bout forty rod up the San'hill road ther's a turn, an' you can't see funder. 'E was a goin' a purty good gait wen we seen 'im las'. "You better trail after him Skid," says Mom, "he 'll loose his hat anyway."

Wen I got 'bout halfway to the corner I seen Morgie comin' back on a sheep trot 'ith the lines ahangin' an' the cart nowhers. I tried to ketch 'er an' could n't an' follerd 'er in. Efter a little here come Pop in the shavs a pullin' the cart. 'E was n't sayin' a word an' 'is hat was lost. Mom was waitin' 'im.

"I see you are back Abe." And Mom looked relieved wen she saw the look on Pop's face. Ther was no blood er tearin' anywhers. Pop snorted but did n't say anything. Nen Mom turned to go in the house sayin':

"I suggest Abe, that you keep your colors together. If you are going into the thills you had better let Morgie ride."

Es Pop hed hauled the cart back, steppin' long lively in the shavs, I was ready to bust. Nen Mom went into the house. I don't know yit wether Mom was guyin' Pop er not. Anyway I dodged into the henhouse to hunt th' aigs. I peeped out through a crack and seen Pop starin' at Mom's apurn strings es if Mom was a new kin'do Angelina.

Pop went up to Morgie es was nibblin' et the hitchin' pos' tan begun to harness 'er up agin. She took it all es ef she was ol' Bet. Nen Pop got in agin an' she trotted off like a nol' horse. I come out in time jus' to look up the road to see 'er gallopin' roun' the turn. An' Pop was a sawin' on the lines.

I followed along tell I come to the corner an' looked down the San'hill road. It's purty near two miles clear there. Pop was nowher. He had

vanished like a weasel into a hole. 'An' the very firs' thing 'at come into my head was, "Oh! Wher Is My Wanderin' Boy t-night?" Thet's one o' Pop's favorites. I hev heard 'im singin' it 'bout four mile away.

Drec'ly 'bout a mile way down to the right near the swamp edge I saw the woodpeckers an' black-birds aflyin' es ef 'bout scared to death. Nex' I saw flashin' an' dartin', lightnin' things cuttin' through the thickets jus' like a cow in flytime runnin' through the bresh from greenheads es is eatin' 'em up alive. Sothin' was shootin' aroun' like a mink ketchin' fish under the ice.

Nen all was still. Sothin' hed stopped an' I felt sure it was Morgie an' mebbly Pop, s'posin' 'e'd got thet fur.

I cut through the bresh an' foun' Pop settin' in the cart an' Morgie flounderin' in a quicksan' hole right on the edge of the slough. The wheels was on the solid groun' an' the front en's of the shavs was in some humps o' wiregrass on th' ether side. She was sunk halfway down, she could n't go ahead er back out. She was stuck, but she was flounderin' fit to kill but helt up by the shavs. 'Er fore feet went jus' like a dog diggin' fer rats. An' you could n't guess in a thousan' years whut Pop was adoin'. Well 'e was settin' 'ith 'is laigs crossed recitin' poetry. An' smokin' too. I guess 'e knowed I was acomin' an' was doin' thet to relieve the contention. Them's big words 'e gits off now an' then. Whut was 'e recitin'? W'y less see; oh yes; "Br-r-eathes ther a

man 'ith so-o-ul so dead thet he hes not to himsef hev said, this is me own, me nata-av lan'."

Nen 'e took 'is pipe out an' swung it round 'is head an' repeated in a big bullfrog voice, "Me own, me own, me na-a-tav lan'." It was fine all ri' and even Morgie stuck back one ear alistenin'.

"Pop fer heavens sake what are you doin'?" I ast thet in spite o' mysef.

"Doin' Skid? wy jus' tenjoyin' the scenery. Ain't it mos' goshblammed hoopin' fine?" Like a chump I ast agin, "Why did n't you keep to the San'hill road?"

"Keep to the San'hill road Skid? Well seein's it you I'll tell you in strict confidence I brought Morgie down here fer 'er ba-a-th. Thet's all." And 'e went to smokin' agin. 'E got a big mouthful o' smoke an' blew it at a swarm o' fightin' gnats. "You see this is Chuesday Skid."

"Chuesday Pop?"

"Course. I jus' brought Miss Morgan 'down fer 'er ba-a-th."

"Won't Morgie sink Pop?" I was purty anxious. I allus noticed thet wen everybody else was excited, specially me, wy nen Pop allus got quiet an' mos'ly foolish.

Morgie slashed and dug an' whopped 'roun',—sounded like water runnin' over a dam. She couldn't get a ninch further the shavs holdin' 'er out from drowndin'. She was sort o' stuck loose. I noticed evry time Morgie 'd heva fit o' sheep swimmin' there in the mud, Pop watched 'er mighty clost but never

lettin' on. I knowed he was waitin' fer sothin' an' I set down tell the cloud'd roll by. So to be sayin' sothin' I says, "She seemed awful gen'le wen you started off Pop."

"Yes Skid, a goshblamed gen'ler 'an wen she come back 'ith the lines adraggin'. Wy she was gen'le es the very devil wen I started off the firs' time but fer the Lord Harry! was 'nt she gay wen she come back?" Nen Pop kin'do dropped is head es if thinkin'.

"Besides Skid, I aint a very good roadster."

"Roadster Pop?"

"Laws-a-mighty son, did n't you see me come under the wire in them shafts the firs' time? I hed no intention atall o' disconnectin' thet firs' time, none atall. The firs' thing I knowed Miss Morgan turned 'er head aroun' an' said, 'Hello! Squire, I teetotally forgot my tooth bresh. Excu-u-se me-e-e.' Nen she turned so quick aroun' thet a stump jumped four foot under the wheel, the shafts twisted over 'er back, the tugs come loose, an' 'thout sayin' goodbye, er payin' 'er taxes 'er takin' a receipt, Miss Morgan skinned 'ersef out'n 'er clothes an' sailed back home liftin' 'er tail es proud es Lucifer, 'er maybe a dang-site prouder. Ther was no harsh words. I did n't feel very durn peert noways stuffed ther under the cart 'ith the seat an' the blankets smotherin' me mos' to death an' thet allfired stump punchin' me like Sullivant right in my hygeen." Thet's Pop's word fer stomach mos' tov the time. He never did know zactly whut it was but I heerd 'im more an' onct

say "Anatmy, fysollogy an Hygeen" was the nobles' study o' mankin'. I never did know whut 'e meant tell I ast Mom about it. "Thet's the name of a high school book Skid; it tells you 'bout yer innards and they say it's a mos' disgraceful study."

The more I giggled the worse Pop allus got.

"Skid yer mother was right about keepin' the colors together, perfec'ly right. Thet's whut I am endeavorin' to do now. It has been an allfired swift mornin' fer keepin' them colors in jewtaxtowposition but ther nailed on the same identicle mast so fur."

I kind o' went out gingerly to Morgie's head an' pulled some grass an' she et it.

"Seems to take 'er vittals all right yit Skid." Nen seein' the en's o' them shavs tight punched into thet wire grass jus' es tough es haywire I knowed we would hev to chop 'em out more 'n likely. So I went back on solid groun' and ast, "Pop think I better git the ax?"

"Seein's it's you Skid, wy not git the shotgun?" Thet kin'do discouraged me an' I set down an' Pop smoked like a bresh afire 'at's wet. Morgie wich was purty quiet now slammed 'roun' onct more but she was helt fast. Drec'ly she made a terrible dig an' sort o' give up an' got quiet.

"Miss Morgan is whut the French 'd say 'horse dew comback' Skid. Wich she can't 'thout assistans. Ef she ever gits out o' here she'll hev a changed heart." An' Pop kep' on smokin'.

'Bout a nour efter thet I saw Morgie's ears drop

an' drec'ly she turned 'er head back pitiful like. Pop stuck 'is pipe quick in 'is hatban' an' flew down to the groun'. "Miss Morgan hes finished 'er ba-ath Skid. Grab a wheel."

We grabbed the wheels an' tried to yank 'em back, Pop pullin' on the lines. And out come Morgie flounderin' an' weak an' teetotally whipped. She stood there tremblin' on solid groun'.

She certingly was the sloppies', muddies' mos' drowned lookin' horse es ever stood on four laigs. Just es she got hard on the bank she gave 'er tail a fling an' Pop got the load a ninch deep mos'ly streaky an' ther was n't a place on Pop, from 'is waist up, thet was n't clean covered up 'ith swamp mud. He looked es ef 'e'd been drug a nour through the swamp. An' Pop did n't say a word, not a word. I never could make out w'ether he was so stopped up 'ith mad from the inside er 'ith mud from the outside, but ther's one thing I was certain of, he was n't enjoyin' the scenery any more. But I was, some of it. In all my born days I never hed sech a bustin' time on the furside of Morgie. Drec'ly I flew home not darin' to look back.

I hid by the chicking house tell I seen 'em come roun' the turn. Nen I yelled, "Mom, oh Mom fer hevings sake hurry! Here come the colors of the Puffers both ahangin' together. Hooray! Hooray! Hoo-oo ra-a-y!"

Here come Morgie lookin' nearly like a drowned rat in swamp mud, 'ith 'er head ahangin' down 'an steppin' slow like a funeral. An' Pop was slouched

down on the seat, the lines ahangin' 'tween 'is laigs his eyes th' on'y clean place on 'im. Evry thing about 'em was daubed and streaked an' splashed mebbly jus' like they'd been playin' mud slingin' 'ith the devil 'imse'f.

Mom, efter she hed heard me, came runnin' out es ef the barn was afire an' stood there at the yard gate. And es Morgie an' Pop come up they was perfectly still neither one makin' a soun'; they sort o' stole in like death er pestilens. Morgie stopped right 'fore Mom 'ithout Pop atechin' the lines an' Mom looked either like she was agoin' to fly er sink in the earth. Dreck'ly she screamed "Whee-ee!" one o' them swamp screams wen a woman is ready to die fer joy er scare. It was fear all right this time. She run half way to the house but Pop set there like a mud ghost never sayin' a word. Nen Mom come back.

"Missis Angelina Puffer," an' Pop's voice was way down in his stomick like a bullfrog's, "we hev come back, Miss Morgan an' me, 'ith our colors together. And—yer eyes will notice thet I am doin' the ridin' an' I aint in the shafts."

Mom was tremblin' like a blue stem in the win' but she tipped out cautious an' looked et Pop from all p'int's o' the compass. And all she said 'fore she got the corn cutter to begin scrapin' the mud off was, "You certingly do beat the devil, Abe Puffer."

CHAPTER X

A PUFFERLAND JAGGO LANTERN

THE great swamp storm had swirled the seething sheets of rain for two days and nights, and with lessening vigor still raged at noon of the third day. The time was late October with November's crying winds, its glooms and racing storms. The famous spring roared rebelliously; the jack-oaks, twisted and distorted by swamp fires and broken by the ice storms of many winters, black with age and stunted by the lean earth, writhed in the winds and scattered their tough leaves along the wasted, sodden lands. These oaks had lived through a thousand greater adversities at their outpost camp of the Ridge and seemed like sentinels of the Puffer swamp strip and habitation guarding against the world-old ravages of those long tentacles of the treacherous swamp. The huge willow over the spring, denuded of its last leaf, lashed its lithe whips at the raging winds and the ancient log house itself seemed to glare down defiantly at the hateful fens. Some of the shakes and a few of the clapboards of the old barn were wind flung on the reeds of the near-by slough and the more decrepit shingles of the lesser buildings lay everywhere along the inclosures like spent missiles of

battle. And hour after hour in the gloom of the days, in the roaring blackness of the nights, the rains pounded the roof of our summerhouse and beat contentiously at the window panes. Many fences were leaning or flat on the earth, ancient apple trees were snapped off and hundreds of new-cut gullies tumbled their loads of leaves and muddy filth to the insatiable maw of the swamp.

The Puffer cows, miserable and benumbed, crowded the lee of the swamp grassricks, bedraggled fowl essayed the open places in vain, the swine with their discordant screams at night under the leaking sheds waked us to their miseries and the old chimney of the log house moaned like a wounded monster through all the hours.

When I disconsolately gazed at times out of the doorway of the main house I saw the wood ducks go whistling past like cannon balls, or down in the lashing blue stems of the swamp saw spectral cranes, still as stone guards breasting the eddying winds. The swamp storm with its mold, its gloom, its cold, its agonies held all Pufferland in its clutch.

Each hunter had talked himself silent, had smoked himself churlish and had turned moodily irrisory and reviled the damnable luck that had brought him there. We had read every piece and kind of book the place had except the Bible, and by noon of the third day even the adroit ministrations of Angelina Puffer failed to soothe our brutalities.

About the third hour of the afternoon of the third day, after the General had tried to quarrel with

every person on the place, when I had proposed to kill every howling dog tied in the barn, each one thinking things unutterable not only about the weather but about each other, I left the main building and sought my miserable, fireless room. I was going to ask Skid sharply why he did not take better care of my guns and wipe the mold off cleaner and oftener, even secretly was enjoying myself in anticipating his looks when I should ask him "Why in thunder did n't you tell us hunters you had such infernal weather out here?" Such weather too in such a short vacation as we had determined upon.

When I entered my dreary room, I started. Skid had got together a few pieces of sheet iron, a few joints of rusted broken stovepipe, and a roaring fire (with some smoke) had transformed the room. Three candles were lit on the table. My spirits rose. Skid lay bent like an inverted bow on his swayback couch, reading his "Stories of the Crusades." The book had been torn in two and the first half was missing. He did not even look up, but he knew I was staring at him.

"Skid, I'll be honswoggled and also noncome-bobblydefusticated and other things. How *did* you do it?"

"Int'lect Clonel," he said, throwing his half book under the lounge. "Got to keep watch on it. It might fall apart an' burn us out. Don't forget th' incubator."

The numerous bolts seemed secure.

"Goin' to clear up," he said laconically. "I see

the cranes air movin'. Sure sign. Sun'll set clear." As it was very dark at that hour in the middle of the afternoon I saw no possible fulfilment of such prediction. But the opinion of anybody who could make a stove out of rusted iron and turn purgatory into paradise in an hour was worthy of respect. I threw myself on my noisy corn husk mattress without a word and soon was lost in sleep.

It was supper time when I was wakened. As I entered the big, clean, sweet smelling kitchen with its fragrant odors, happy and refreshed, every hunter to a man eyed me suspiciously. The General asked crossly, "What have you got up your sleeve, Chicago?" Under ordinary conditions he had invariably called me "Col. French."

"Gentlemen, the sun will set clear; it's an hour to sunset and the sun will show up sure. To-morrow we will get ducks by the wagon load." I looked as mysterious as I could and stealing a glance at Skid saw him bend all the closer over his plate, though he did move somewhat restlessly. There were several unamiable grins around the table and the General obtrusively changed the subject.

The wind died down soon after; the rains stopped; the fog began to settle over everything. It seemed to slowly descend and stood in a mighty blanket over the immense levels about a man's height above the reeds and pasturage flats. I noticed that Skid seemed apprehensive and more than once gazed uneasily, not towards the sun but down towards the neighborhood of the cranes. Just at the proper hour when a proper

sun should retire gracefully behind the swamp rim, I saw between the blanket of gray fog and the bright green rangelands, a blue purse-slit of sky, and a glorious sun blazed through the long avenue between the waiting mists and water lands. Then the sun dipped down as if affrighted, and the fog closed gloomily down.

When I saw Skid a moment after he looked up with a relieved sigh,

"Clonel thet was a purty clost shave. I fergot to tell you the cranes was movin' ter-r-ible slow."

"Skid, the next time in an important affair of life and death like this be sure to tell a fellow whether the cranes are stepping lively or just poking along."

"I'm rememberin' Clonel," and he softly pulled the lobe of his ear.

"Skid," I asked an hour afterward, "can't you tell me some story to cheer me up? Here it's been three days and nights, and I think it has been the bluest three days and nights ever. Tell me something about murders, wild cats, or shooting scrapes, something cheerful like that, heh?"

Instead of seeing Skid smile, I was astonished to see him turn white and rise up and gaze apprehensively out of the door towards the swamp. He said in hushed tones of fear, "It'll come tonight, sure. It allus does. It aint funny at all an' none o' us hereabouts hev ever tol' you fellows."

He sat down and rubbed his knees thoughtfully, again rose up after a minute or so, and gazed with an awestruck mien toward the fog enveloped swamp.

"What do you expect to see down there, Skid?" I asked unsympathetically, "bears or Indians?"

To my surprise Skid smiled uneasily, and I saw suppressed excitement in every glance and tense movement.

I aint feelin' a bit funny tonight Clonel. One time it hed been rainin' jus' like this fer three days an' nights. It was a reglar swamp storm. Pop was out lookin' fer some cattle es was missin' thinkin' more'n likely they hed got mired down. It cleared up jus' like it did tonight, though. W'en dark come on it was awful dark. It was gettin' late an' Pop didn't show up. Supper was waitin' col'.

We was settin' uneasy 'roun' the kitching stove, Mom gettin' up an' allus lookin' out to'ards the swamp. Dark? Black was no name. D'rec'ly w'en ev'rything was still 'nough we could hear the cat abreathin', we heard,

"Angee-e!" It was Pop. Mom flung out'n 'er chair like a speared eel.

I started to follow 'er an' she said sharp, "Stay back Skid." She understood thet kin' da callin' lots better'n I did.

Nen I heerd 'em a tuggin' an' talkin' in low wispers an' Pop was carryin' sothin'. Drec'ly they come into the kitching carryin' a draggy, dead woman. She was all covered 'ith mud. Pop an' Mom talked in scary wispers an' washed 'er up clean an' put Mom's nightgown on 'er. Nen they laid 'er on the tick in the spare bed.

Never in my born days Clonel did I ever see a

woman like thet. She was the mos' beautiful woman I ever seen, 'ith big dark pitiful eyes. I saw 'em, wiles they was washin' 'er, take off a watch 'ith blue w'ite fire in it from round 'er neck. Pop kin' do sneaked it off an' handed it to Mom. She shook 'er head. Pop kept on givin' it to 'er, nen Mom took it an' turned roun' to see where I was. I never let on.

Nen Pop said low "Fer expenses Angie." I hev never saw it sence. The dead woman's eyes was open an' so-o pitiful an' also kin' do scared. Pop put some plow washers on 'em to keep 'em shet. Nen kin' do fer the firs' time they looked 'er over.

"Not a mark," says Pop.

"'Cept blue marks here on 'er neck," says Mom.

"Fine lookin' girl," says Pop. Nen Pop suddenly sort o' jumped back surprised and got the lamp an' helt it clost. Nen 'e took off the washers.

"Lordy God! Abe she looks like Skid," says Mom. She was pale es death. Nen she looked roun' scared to where I was. I never let on.

"You mean 'er complexion is somat like Skid's," says Pop in a loud voice. Nen drec'ly 'e looked at 'er agin an' sneaked a look at me. Nen 'e set the lamp down suddenly an' went out 'doors.

Nen I went up an' took a look myself Clonel. An' them looks aint got away from me yit.

Pop sent out runners, an' evrybody fer ten miles come thet night and all decided to bury 'er. Jake Spading an' Hi Stickel dug the grave an' shoveled in the dirt. Wen Pop was sayin' some words over

'er, es 'e was squire you know, wy suddenly a woman screamed, es we all stood there at the grave. I was 'bout ten years old then.

Nen they all run away like rabbits into the bresh. Ony Pop an' me was left. Even Mom went somwhers. 'Cause why? Right up the willow way from the swamp, nen to the spring house, nen over the house was a Jaggo lantern ro-o-o-lin' an' ro-o-lin', red es blood an' big es a bushel basket. Es we looked it wabbled a little, nen started fer us. D'rec'ly it kin' do lost the scent an' stopped. Nex' it begun to move, ro-o-o-lin' bloody an' fierce. It lifted a little an' come straight fer me an' Pop.

I looked to Pop fer comfort an' de was pale es a snowdrif'.

"Skid won't you stay 'ith me?" ast Pop. Though Pop wasn't afraid o' seven horned devils, ef 'e *was* pale, an' I felt like a nax was comin' down on my neck, I staid it out fer Pop.

The bloody, twistin' thing got clost to tetchin' us an' nen I jus' couldn't run. I was scared nearly to death. I shet my eyes. Wen I opened 'em agin there it was nosin' over the grave. Nex' it snapped out an' I could see by Pop's lantern two little smoky wings fly up in the air.

Skid's face had a strange exaltant light in it that I could not understand. His great, beautiful eyes burned with commingling emotions of inquiry, mystery and fear that made the eerie tale very impressive.

"Has it ever come back, Skid?"

No; but I hev seen little ones ahuntin' around over the swamp twict sence. Pop calls 'em Jaggo Lanterns. They air lost souls 'e said huntin' fer sothin' es b'longs to 'm down in the worst places o' the swamp.

Here I thought was a fine opportunity to throttle superstition and fear on virgin soil. I explained the meaning and occurrence of that phosphorescent ball of light. While I had risen in my ardor I happened to look toward the swamp and beheld down by the milk house a huge Will o' the Wisp, the most formidable I had ever seen.

"Here, Skid, follow me." I grasped an oar beside the house and he followed me down to the spring. His face was white as death. We came to the fiery ball and I swung my oar through it and of course it vanished.

"Smell the paddle, Skid." He stuck his nose close to the blade.

"Jee! w'at a nasty smell, mos'ly like a corpse."

We returned—he a wiser and more cheerful lad, but even yet not wholly convinced.

After we were settled and almost ready for the final plunge to the swayback couch and to the storm noises in the corn husk mattress I asked him what other information had been found about the dead woman.

Mom found in her stocking a partly writ letter. I don't exactly know *whut* was in it, but sothin' like this was meant; she was writin' to 'er father, who seemed to be a jedge, thankin' 'im fer some money

an' sayin' she was onto some fellows 'at hed stole 'er baby. She said 'fore a week the law'd hev 'em in jail. She said on a certain day it'd be either eight er nine years sence they stole it. Seems they was allus promisin' to sen' dit, nen gettin' the money 'd make some excuse er ether. Thet's 'bout all I can remember.

"What became of the watch? Seems funny she was wearing it around her neck. And what became of the letter, the clothes and so on?"

I ast Mom last year about thet watch with thet blue flashin' fire in it. I hevn't seen Mom so all broke up before in my life an' she aint one the easy kind to break either. But all she said, was, "We were awfully poor then Skiddie, and your father took it down to Monticello to sell it to pay expenses. And he lost it. That is he lost part of it." Nen Mom, who allus talked better 'n me an' Pop, I can talk some things jus' like her, why she got awfully excited an' talked kin' do wil'. I never mentioned things sence.

Mom es hones' tes the day's long too. But ther's sothin' wrong som'ers. I'll fin' dout some day. Thet year was the great swamp fires an' Pop did n't hev money enough to pay the taxes. An' we did n't hev much t'eat er wear.

"She was beautiful, was she?"

I hev heerd 'bout angels an' sech, but I bet they'd hev a hard ol' time comparin' 'ith 'er. I can see 'er perfec'ly yit.

I was in silent thought for awhile, thinking over

the strange tragedy. I looked up and was astonished to see Skid's face aflame with passion. The fact seemed incredible.

"Clonel I don't want to say too much just now, but w'en I grow up I'm agoin' to hunt them men thet strangled 'er an' kill 'em." The intensity of his tones was entirely convincing.

"Sh! Skid. Don't harbor such thoughts." I arose and threw my arm around his shoulders. Instantly my compassion melted his black intentions. He was deeply moved, and as we undressed, all he said was: "You don't know all about it yit Clonel; sometime I'll tell you more."

CHAPTER XI

A KITTIECLYSM

IN a warm dusk, after a hazy October day, Skid and I, with our shotguns slung across our knees, sat on the second blue grass near the ditch source of the little Monon. We were after whippoorwills and were waiting for the rising of the full moon. We were silent and I was wondering what was in the young man's thoughts. In the dusk I could see his face, and his great eyes gazing thoughtfully across the waste. To the right, not far away, the edge of the reeds curved sharply into the land making a precipitous, vine-covered bluff. Further on the squat black jack-oaks walked in thin troops to the top of the Ridge. The shallow ditch water at our feet murmured; farther down the wimpling water-way two muskrats played in a dim pool. There was not a sound but the flow of the water and the soft splash of the muskrats; the dusk, sweet, dreamful, pulsed with silence.

The moon, now began to edge out of the water rim, dull red in the still impending haze. Belated waterfowl swirled just overhead on storming wings; the distant thunder pumper started his boom; lone killdeers began to circle in the lighting skies; the un-

easy whippoorwills in the slowly illumined oaks hesitantly commenced their bodeful calls; the screech owls in the rising dark of the bluff uttered their stridulous notes; the barn owls far down the Ridge, as the light slowly sifted in the dusky fastnesses, cautiously called to one another in sepulchral hoots, across the awakening leagues; with faint chinkings the alarmed bats darted over us in angling flights; the crickets struck the first notes of the insect choir in the grass; then slowly, first one, then another, nearer, farther away in echoing breadth, awoke the mighty frog diapason of the fens; the moon stood out radiant, glorious, full-orbed. It was night on a hundred square leagues of the Kankakee swamp.

I looked at Skid, whom for a minute I had forgotten in the beauty and loneliness of the scene. His face was wistful and sad. What was he thinking about, this wasting genius of the swamp? Untutored, neglected, virgin in mind, unread in all that makes existence worth while, an abnormal sport of the Kankakee swamp,—what glimmerings could illumine his secret soul? What was the meaning of it all to him?

“A penny for your thoughts, Skid,” I broke in.

“Allus on nights like this on the swamp makes me feel things ’at I can’t talk out er tell. Same way es w’en I look up at the stars on a snappin’ frosty night, er w’en I hear the win’s acryin’ nex’ the roof in a swamp storm. I jus’ wonder an’ I feel my heart sinkin’ down.”

“What would you like to do, my boy?”

"I want to get away. I want to hear different music, see diff'rent things; I want to git the swamp ear-bran' off'n me, I guess I want to fly more'n anything else."

"I have wanted to fly all my life, Skid. Now where'd you fly first?"

"Firs'? I guess I'd fly from one en' do the swamp to th' ether. I want to see how big a thing it is. Nen, I'd circle round an' 'roun', higher an' higher jus' like a squirrel hawk, right above the swamp, tell,—" and he stopped. For the first time in my experience with him he failed for words.

"Then when you got as high as you wanted, what would you do then, poor squirrel hawk?" He smiled a little foolishly.

"Wy, nen Clonel, I think I'd give this here swamp the worst geedanged cussin' es ever a livin' bein' got." He laughed with me, a thing he seldom did.

"Then what, Skid?"

"Nen, finishin', it 'd take 'bout a day an' da half, I'd go a little higher an' sail away to the en'do' the worl'. Nen I guess bein' hungry by thet time I'd light down in Egypt an' hev a snatch o' manna. Nex' I'd circle up agin tell I mos' wore my wings out an' I'd come back an' givin' this gosh blamed, allfired ol' swamp a nastier cussin' es I hed thought up, I'd sail off agin ahuntin' the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem."

Ah! his Crusaders' book was meting out its glories.

"Well, now, my lad, having sufficiently damned

the Kankakee swamp what would you finally do?" I asked with an earnestness that showed that Skid's ambitions were most modest. "What's the matter with this country, Skid? It is a part of life; a part of the good God's big world."

"To men 'taint. It's on'y the manure pile of Indiany. Ef I hed my sayso about it I'd set it on en' an' kick holes in it. I hate it. I'll tell you sometime wat I got against it. Whut about them whipperwills we was efter?"

I had forgotten; we *were* after whippoorwills. A few days before, a hot contention had arisen among the hunters as to the identity of these elusive birds. There have been not a few misunderstandings in hunters' camps about the snipe, the pipers, the woodcocks and the rails.

"Yes; let's get a move on."

As we rose and moved silently along the bluff I thought: Who has not had his hunter's blood aroused by ignorance blocking intelligence? I recalled that once in my life I contended and proved that a ground mole never ate a grain of corn. Now we would show those hunters at the Puffer home that a whippoorwill and a night hawk were entirely different. I intended to talk learnedly about the goatsucker, the poorwill, the night hawk, the churr-bird, the chuck-will's-widow, the whippoorwill, especially learnedly about this whippoorwill. I had known previously how a discussion about this subject had crossed friendships, spoiled many a hunting vacation and also had set the ornithologists by the ears. Al-

most as much so too as the names of the cardinal bird in its different stages of development. Yet after all this shrew bird of the thickets, of crepuscular deeds, this mottled gray-back hag of the bodeful woods and dark ravines, this Jekyll-Hyde of the bird world still reviles, eludes and charms.

As we were picking our vagrant way along through the gloomy coverts a screechowl with the peculiar feathery sound of its wings darted close to us; a fox barked near in a briar maze and there were eerie sounds of scurrying small feet of water rats. Skid stopped me and whispered, "Right up there on that sycamore elbow, Hink an' Hi an' me onct burnt out a hornets' nes'." I could not see a thing in the gloom, but heard him touch a limb with his gun barrel.

"Hunting hornets any fun, Skid?"

He immediately sat down. I knew what that meant.

Thet depen's. Ef you air easy on yer laigs, got a neagle eye an' air experienced it aint much more dangerous 'n playin' 'ith gunpowder. Hi is mos'ly freckles an' laigs; Hink is waddly, fat, humped up an' unreasonable brave. I'm purty good on yellow jackets; they allus make ther nests in the groun' an' generally 'ten' to ther own business. An' bumble-bees aint nachurly lookin' fer trouble, but a hornet is jus' allus achin' fer a fight. Hi can run like a killdeer an' yell like a wil' cat caught in a steel trap. 'E's special on hornets. Hink's main holt is bumble bees. He'll squat over a nes' like Casibianky on the burnin' deck and 'ith a paddle 'e'll lay out a whole

nes'. Hi an' me stand off a little ways ready to scream an' sail, specially wen 'e misses one 'ith its laigs ahangin'. W'en a bumble bee sails out slow 'ith its laigs ahangin' we don't dror pictures er make speeches; we sail. But Hink jukin' 'is head down 'tween 'is humps 'ill keep spattin' an' spattin' like a reglar Richard cur de line.

Ever stung by a hefty three year ol' bumblebee Clonel? Remember how it hurts? 'Bout like a red hot darnin' needle. Hi said 'e was stung twict by hornets in 'is life. The firs' time it hurt so he turned freckly; the secon' time 'is head turned fiery red. Hink allus said Hi learnt to 'ave long laigs fightin' hornets. Well, a hornet *can* fly 'bout as fas' es a real limber boy can run.

Hi says Hink got 'is humps by missin'. A bumble bee allus aims fer a boy's left eye. Ef 'e misses thet 'e is reasonable satisfied with a jab o' hot pizen in 'is ear.

Wen Hink missed 'e'd juke 'is head down in 'is shoulders like a mud turtle. Pop said onct thet a form o' livin' death was hevin' 'bout three nifty bumble bees up yer pants' laigs kind o' scattered fore an' daft. I ast 'im 'bout three er four hornets doin' business thet way. 'E shook 'is head, sayin' solemn, "Skid, nobody knows, es no one ever was left alive to tell the tale."

The way we fight 'em is to wrap a gunny sack wet 'ith coal oil tied on a long pole. Longer the better. Mile long is 'bout right. Nen steal up 'ith it blazin'. I took my turn on this nes'. Hink

an' Hi was guards, keepin' watch fer incomin' vis'tors.

He stopped.

"Who were the guards did you say, Skid?"

Thet's the business o' Hink an' Hi. Hi from long experience has an eye like a hen hawk. Hi can spot a bal' faced hornet, mebby a hundred yards; s'pect less. I was burnin' up the nes' 'ithout a crimp in the perceedin' wen all to onct Hi yelled like a Nindian, "Ther's a nes' behin' you, Skid, look out, skoot!" I didn't ast any questions fer es I looked 'round I saw a bal' faced hornet 'bout as big es a peewee follered by a reserve stringin' behin' long es a rake handle makin' fer me. They seemed jus' achin' fer Puffer vittals.

"Take fer the slough Skid," screamed Hink. 'Thout thinkin' I did. I leapt like a tiger on a bufflo an' lit in a mud hole at the edge o' the slough. Both my head an' feet lit to onct an' mos' all o' me went under. But not quite all. There was a landin' place fer at leas' 'leven hornets 'fore I could tuck mysef clean under, prayin' fer death.

"Did they sting you, Skid?" I asked as sympathetically as I could.

Some people might call it stingin' Clonel; ethers might call it stump blastin', er sword fish fightin'; mebby more like throw'n' a red hot harrow at a man. Efter holdin' my breath mebby a minute, mebby a nour, I come out to die on dry lan'. Ef I hev to be killed I want allus to die on dry lan'.

“What did Hi and Hink say when you came out to die? They were sorry of course.”

Sorry; yes, but they wasn't sheddin' tears 'bout it though. You see I wasn't a fine lookin' article o' livin' beauty w'en I come out 'ith a big part o' the Kankakee swamp clingin' to me lovin'ly. Hi was rollin' over an' expirin' tryin' to get more win' in 'is system. Yes, Hi was jus' rollin' in livin' sorrow.

“And Hink?”

Well, es I was sailin' for the slough Hink was so excited 'e didn't know 'e was in the line o' battle. Some o' the hornets seein' there was no hope of arrivin' at the killin' branched off fer Hink. O' course Hink being experienced, didn't wait to argue er ast questions but sailed. I listened an' felt purty sure I could hear the bresh acrackin' down on the ether side o' the san'ridge. They run 'im clean home an' drove 'im still flyin' under the smokehouse. Hi tol' me afterwards 'e didn't come out till efter dark. He said Hink outrun 'em all right fer thet three mile fer 'bout on'y four rod.

Pop ast about it. Efter laughin' 'bout a nour 'e said it was mighty lucky I wasn't stung in some vital part o' my hygeen. I hev thought ef a fellow could been at the siege of Acre in them crusadin' times 'ith Indiany hornets! Wen the Christians was killin' the heathens fer the glory of God an' all thet, an' havin' ther batterin' rams burnt dozens o' times 'ith Greek fire from the walls,—ef a feller could 've hed just seven hornets' nests an' flung 'em over the walls,—whee-ee! Talk about runnin'!

We rose and, still talking, slowly took our way home. As we went Skid stopped on the top of the Ridge an' said, "Right here is the place where a kittieclysm happened."

"A kittieclysm, what on earth is that? A new-fangled bug?"

I'll tell you. Onct Hi, Hink an' me was out huntin' hornets an' not findin' any we come acrost this spot an' saw lots o' doodle bug funnels. Anether name is ant lion. So we begun to call out doodle bugs. Ther's reglar poetry goin' 'ith the callin'. Ther's nineteen verses an' all is sothin' like this; you set down by the san' funnel, flick a little san' in the funnel, makin' the doodle think a nant hes fell in, nen recitin',

"Oh doodly, doodle oh! doodly doo;
Here's a dinner, a dinner fer you-oo-oo."

Nen the doodle sleepin' at the bottom o' the funnel wakes up quick, flirts the san' off a little an' sticks 'is two long sucker claws out an' listens. He's feelin' fer 'is dinner. It's fun a foolin' 'em. We put in a nant. Less th' ant is awful big the fracas is over 'n no time. Hi put in a hard shelled pinchin' bug. O' course it tried to run up the slippin' sides o' san', fell back, tried agin, fell back an' the doodle throwed up earthquakes o' san' an' 'is suckers aroun' like a devil fish tryin' to get hol'. 'E was no good so we took 'im out.

Hi hed a yellow jacket 'ith its wings tore off, in a

bottle, 'e wanted to put in fer a fracas, but Hink hunted an' foun' a big hunter ant es mebby hed killed thousan's an' thousan's o' little ants. So we put the hunter ant in a fresh funnel. The ant the first thing was 'bout scared to death. A san' funnel is a nant's nachural enemy, like a hog is of a rattlesnake.

It was a big ant an' a little doodle, 'bout half size. Nen the tumult begun. I learnt "tumult" from the preacher. Umbrellar earthquakes o' san'; heavins o' san'; whirlin' storms o' san'. The ant raved up the slippery sides and o' course tumbled back. An' them swishin' blood suckers, blin' an' swingin', feelin', tryin' to grab,—w'y, it was a battle fer anybody's w'iskers es Pop'd say.

. D'rec'ly the little san' louse caught a hol' but the ant was so strong 'e jerked the doodle out plain. The doodle was scared mos' to death 'cause 'e on'y fights 'ith 'is body hid, 'ith the suckin' claws out. 'E le' go an' backed quick in the san'. But the little codger by mistake backed in up on the side o' the tunnel wich was half full by this time. Nen 'e began to flick up san' agen an' filled up 'is hole, so the ant climbed out.

Nen findin' the bigges' hole of all Hi put in the yellow jacket. It was the firs' time in the hist'ry o' the worl' thet a yellow jacket was in a doodle san' crater. The yellow jacket tried to crawl up the sides and o' course tumbled back. Nen earthquakes. The big doodle stopped onct or twict cause the yellow jacket could hum some. Sech a hummin'

thing in a san' louse's hole hed never happened before to the oldes' inhabitant o' the doodle bug worl'.

Doodle bugs, like humin bein's, air mos' tafraid o' things they don't know about an' can't understan'. My horse-thief preacher said onct, the Unknown is whut evrybody is most afraid of an' mos' worships. So the doodle bug, though s'prised, got to workin' a little harder an' harder, nen raved 'cause 'e fer a million years was born hungry an' was educated fer a million years 'at anything 'at come to 'is funnel trap was a special providence in vittals. It was Darwinicks fer sure.

O' course 'is funnel is the whole worl' to 'im and 'e hes on'y glimmerin's of anything outside. Jus' like some o' the swamp people, 'cept their funnel is bigger an' ther glimmerin's wider. I never saw a fight fer life like thet. I jus' imagined I was thet poor little yellow jacket 'ith broken arms bein' drowned 'ith whirlwin's o' san'. An' all the time big blin' sickles hot es fire swingin' 'roun' reckless efter me. An' all the time the earth slippin', slippin' out'n under my feet.

D'rec'ly, starvin' hungry, but scared mos' to death at the hummin' an' mebbby the awful big body o' the yellow jacket, 'e accidentally caught a double holt right aroun' the yellow jacket's neck. I jus' could hear the little sick boy 'ith broken arms scream w'en them burnin' sickles begun to sink in. But the jacket jus' curled down an' under an' shot 'is pizen slinger in the doodle's nasty stomick. Nen ef I had been

fine enough in hearin' mebbly I could have heard the doodle yell.

Hi jumped up an' yelled: Hink shouted out like a Fourth o' July speaker,

"Hey! doodly doodly doodle do;

Ther ain't any dinner, any dinner fer you-oo-oo,
goshding ye!"

an' I was so glad I felt jus' like bawlin'.

The doodle bug jus' keeled over dead, but a doodle in the histry o' mankin' never le' go w'en it gits a good holt. An' 'e helt on till the yellow jacket died. Nen we piled the san' over 'em an' buried 'em f'rever.

I could not laugh at the sad little tale. When we got to our room I asked Skid where the kittieclysm came in.

'Mos' fergot thet. Mr. Reverent Lemuel Mason, he's the horse-thief preacher 'at taught me to read an' spell a little, said wen I told 'im about it, "Skid sometimes the ocean waters way down below on the bottom finds a crack and the water sinks down tell it comes to the innard fire. Nen it's two irresistibel bodies a fightin'. W'en they comes together nature hits 'erself in the win'. Nen the devil's to pay. Mebbly the mountains air 'tendin' to ther own business an' not sayin' a word. But the whirlin' devils o' water an' fire tumble, an' twist, an' roar, an' hiss like fightin' lions. Nen they come jumpin' out o' the mountain tops like ten million meltin' cats.

Mebby thousan's is kilt." Nen 'e said thet was a cataclysm. I told 'im I did n't see wher the cataclysm come in 'ith a little doodle bug an' a sp'ilt yellow jacket. "Oh in thet case you might call it a kittieclysm." An' d'e looked solemn off at a cloud jus' like 'e was thinkin' sad 'bout sothin'.

CHAPTER XII

THE EYES OF A FRIEND

As we were about ready for bed Skid went to a secret spot under a shelf and handed me a flat package, dirty and soiled.

This hes been on my min' fer a long w'ile Clonel; mebby you can help me out 'ith it. I found it efter the horse-thief preacher lef'. Guess 'e dropped it an' I can't read writin' very well an' 'sides I never opened it. It's 'dressed to Robert Greyson. S'pose we ought to read it?

"Who else knows anything about this, Skid?"

Nobody. I jus' kept it all to myself. I kin' do s'pect it's got bad news in it. Don't know zactly w'y, but mebby. Greyson thet's jus' the same name es the teacher down et the Crossins. I ought to tell you 'bout thet. Las' winter I went onct to a spellin' school. Mos' evrybody was sayin' "Excuse me please" an' I kin' do got mad an' picks up my head an' strung 'long 'ith the rest wen I was chosen. I wanted to see ef I was any good efter thet teachin' I hed been doing 'ith the preacher. The schoolmam is a stunner an' bein' sor'to bashful I kep' my shoul-der 'er way. Efter aw'ile I set down the bigges' speller right before me.

Ef I remember right I hed 'em all downed 'cept one, nen she give me out thet condemn word, cataclysm. I somehow couldn't get thet word. Never spelt such a dinged bunch o' letters. I was kind o' keepin' my shoulders 'er way, but fergettin' myself I flared roun' sayin', "How did you say thet all-fired bunch o' letters, mam?" Well first she stared at me. Nen her eyes got big, she turned white es snow an' nex' thing she jus' sunk slow down in a chair daft like. She was sick. It broke up the spellin', an' mos' everybody said they was sorry she took sick so sudden.

Twict efter thet she came to our house, but I allus cleared out. She ast so many particular questions o' Mom thet she got huffy. I guess they hed some words.

"Who got huffy, Skid?"

W'y, Mom. One night I heard Mom say to Pop, "Thet hussy is pokin' 'er nose entirely too free in other people's sour dough again."

"Oh! puddin'!" says Pop, rollin' over to sleep.

"She ast entirely too much about that horse-thief preacher, Abe. She even got to pokin' in who you were and who I was and all that. What put me the worst against her was her sayin', 'Excuse me, Mrs. Puffer, if I seem interested, but your son has the eyes of a friend that I know. She was a dear friend of our family. It seems so strange that they, your son and this friend, could look so much alike and not be connected in any way.' Abe, air you asleep, Abe?"

"Whut's thet Angie?" Pop ast, tryin' to wake up a little.

"I say that teacher down at the Crossins smells a mouse Abe."

"Whut's thet you're gettin' off?" and Pop snorted 'imse'f awake.

"I say that teacher down at the Crossins smells a rat Abe."

"Oh, gol dang yer rat Angelina," and Pop whirled over.

"Yes she doo Abe," said Mom, holdin' on like a bulldog.

"Oh puddin'! puddin'! puddin'!" an' Pop whirled aroun' in the bed like a squirmen' eel. Wen Pop says "puddin'" like thet it 's mighty close to the shettin' up point fer all concerned in our fambly. Mom, feelin' as ef she hed warned the fort o' moc-casin tracks bein' seen, es Pop says, dozed off into sleep.

The letter had been posted on a train mail car, the date could not be deciphered, and of course the envelope had only the postmark of the railroad. The sheets were undated and had no address nor signature. The handwriting was virile. The letter apparently unfinished, or perhaps a sheet was missing.

We spread out the old letter and easily made it out. It ran:

"I send this to your advertised address but I ought to hand your hiding place over to the

police. I will give you one more chance. I will never send you another cent. If you ask even and I can place you I will do my best to get you into the hands of the law. I doubt if Robert Greyson gets this; you have too many emissaries and dark friends. To me it looks like a trick. Claire told me that she heard you were in prison but that the preacher was out yet. He will keep you company before he dies.

I have got you out of your last scrape. Neither do I fear you or what you say about protecting my good name. There's a limit to endurance. This is final. I believe you and Charles Mason stole her baby; used her fear and love to extort money from her and through her from me. You have bled me for the last dollar now.

Where is Claire now? You say you know nothing about her or her baby. You lie; you know you lie; you know that I know you lie. Why should her husband steal her baby? The very last time Claire was home she whispered to me just as she left at the gate, "I believe Bob stole my baby." She thought it was Bob, consumed with jealousy and a libertine's hate, with his half cousin did it. To think an unknown, a stranger to me should presume to marry my beloved step-daughter. It makes my blood boil to think of it.

I think she married Mason clandestinely be-

cause she so feared you. That was her first and only wrong since I adopted her.

I do not believe my stepson Lem Greyson had anything to do with the abduction of her baby. He's a thief, but he has a soul. You have not. I loved Claire as if she were my own flesh and blood. And to think you, you, you hateful demon would do the things I think you have done. I will tell you something more and you do not want to forget it. If I can lay hold of——"

That was all. One sheet, perhaps more, had been lost. I looked at Skid. His eyes were luminous, staring, his hands twitched and waves of white and pink shot alternately through his face. He was terribly aroused.

"What shall we do Clonel?" he asked in almost breathless excitement.

"It's a pretty hard case to make out clearly, Skid, but this is my guess: The writer is a forceful middle-aged man holding a high position and I think his name is Greyson. He married twice and had two stepsons, one was Robert Greyson and probably the other was Lem. I think this Robert Greyson was a jailbird and must have been in many sorry scrapes. He wants money from the writer, who refuses to give it and threatens him with punishment if he ever gets in touch with him again.

"Claire was an adopted daughter whom the writer loved as his own flesh and blood. He furnished her

with much money for years, trying to help her with detectives to find her baby who was abducted. The writer thinks Claire's husband and Robert Greyson are responsible for its disappearance. The preacher dropped this about a year and a half since. May be he was the half cousin, looks that way. He was trying to extort money from the writer, who suspicions that the letter will go wrong. The preacher got it anyway, and he is the wrong man. One can't tell for certain though unless Robert Greyson could preach too. Lemuel Mason must be Robert Greyson's half cousin, or half brother.

"Why, it's a perfect foundation for a melodrama, Skid?"

"Wat's a mellerdramo Clonel?" I was still astonished at the intensity Skid manifested.

"It's something very unreal that's played on a stage so realistically that one forgets it's wholly impossible." I went over the letter again and was much puzzled. Suddenly I looked up and asked, "What do you think about the whole thing, Skid?"

"I'm mixed. I'm kin' do 'fraid to look fuder. Sh! listen to thet." He was almost panting. I heard only a killdeer's cry, a lone bird calling wailingly from the night skies. I had known that curious way of this bird for years. Round and round its sharp cry of grief came eerily down as it circled in its companionless flight. I was amazed at the fanatic light of hate I saw in Skid's face. I could scarcely believe my eyes. He held his breath, tensely erect

as the cry came clearer. As it passed onward he breathed gustily.

"Why, Skid, that's only a killdeer. Are you superstitious?"

"Same ol' cry; same ol' wailin'; same ol' callin' es I allus heerd in my dreamin'. It would n't ascreamed like thet ef it did n't know we was readin' this letter Clonel."

The unmeaning talk made me doubt his sanity. I asked bluntly, "Are you a little off in the upper story to-night, Skid?" He smiled sheepishly. "I'm rememberin' them Jaggo Lanterns Clonel. Quotin' Pop, 'To beer er not to beer thet is the question.' In the mornin' I'm agoin' to see the teacher down at the Crossins Clonel, ef you hain't no objection."

"I don't catch on, Skid."

"I'm agoin' to take this letter an' ast 'er some questions. An' wy? 'Cause she says m' eyes air jus' like th' eyes of a frien'. She neen to think I aint a s'pectin' things neither." I stared at him.

He continued excitedly, "Thet time at the spellin' school wen she got sick I came home wonderin'. My blamed eyes seem to be makin' a sight o' fuss roun' here. I'm goin' to ast 'er about thet frien', show 'er the letter an' see whut she knows. Me an' thet killdeer 'll git in touch yit."

"Oh, geedang your killdeer, Skid, but what—er—what does she look like?"

"Es Hi Spading said, 'Teacher is peaches, cream an' sunshine 'ith piles o' sugar.' She don't belong to the swamp any more'n a neagle does. A fellow

jus' nachurly sneaks a look at 'er w'en she aint alook-in'. She's one o' them kind Pop used to say the pawpaw bushes 'd bow to 'er es she come on an' twist the bark off wen she hed passed tryin' to get anether squint at 'er. But Pop never said thet about *her*, though."

"What is her name, Skid?"

"'Miss Alice Greyson, Indianapolis.' Thet is what I saw in one o' her books."

"How many terms did you attend, my boy?"

"I didn't go to her. Efter thet spellin' school shake up Pop an' Mom both kicked an' I couldn't make out why."

"Where did you see any of her books, Skid?"

"One Sunday w'en Hi an' Hink an' me was out huntin' pawpaws we sneaked in the schoolhouse; anybody can get in the windows."

"Notice anything peculiar?"

"Should say! She's got pictures out o' books an' papers, an' flowers agrowin' in pots an' it aint the same ol' place, any more. She nearly got the swamp earmarks off'n the place. W'en she foun' Hi an' Hink was chums o' mine she ast them lots o' questions. They went to 'er, but es Pop said they hev hide-boun' int'lec's, they never learnt nothin'."

"Why is she so interested in you, Skid? She has never seen you but once, has she?"

"Jus' onct."

"What's the matter with her, anyway?"

"Crecked mebbly."

He had acted so unusual for the last ten minutes

that, as I have said, I had more than once momentary misgivings as to his sanity. Yet he now seemed so natural that I almost believed that I was mistaken in how he had acted. He was the old Skid once more. We undressed slowly in silence and went to bed. I determined on the morrow I would drive the killdeer ideas out of his mind. After the candle flame was extinguished and I had plunged into my noisily startled bed and settled, I heard a whisper in the darkness of the room, and I am sure there was uttered something like a man talking to himself when he forgets his surroundings—"Geedang thet killdeer anyways."

CHAPTER XIII

ANGELINA PUFFER

IT was eight o'clock next morning when I awoke at a farmer's disreputable hour of eight o'clock. I had overslept at least two and a half hours. Skid was gone. I rose feeling sheepish, and going into Mrs. Puffer's kitchen found that blessed cook had kept my breakfast hot. I do not mean a stale breakfast kept warm, any cook can do that.

"I guess you and Skiddie sat up pretty late last night," and I noticed something faintly acerb in her manner. While I ate she sat by the window paring some yellow fall pippins with that skill no man can ever hope to attain. I looked at her covertly a great deal closer than I had ever done before. How could this woman be the mother of Skid Puffer? She was tall, well rounded for a woman of sixty, with keen but broken gray eyes, thin lips, a rigidly severe face with a smile at times of promotive amiability that had not a single curve of humor in it. She had the grim glance and stiff mien of a hard-working and disappointed New England woman. Perhaps she had too that ever present consciousness of unfailing righteousness, bent but never broken, over a marital wheel of sacrifice. It seemed to me

she was a woman of fine capacities who had brooded unavailingly in secret, because like ten thousand other housewives she was misfitted in marriage and had no hope of any new horizons. Had I not heard Skid tell that he had seen her weep one time over a sitting hen, I would never have thought that acid face was ever stained with as cheap a thing to her as a domestic tear. And this woman was Skid's mother.

I had seen her reading the Bible many times and had whistled with amazement when the General told me she knew all the poetry there was in the old English Reader. He said that the Squire told him one time that Angelina had taught him all his elocution and that she alone recited to her husband the "Nightingale and the Glowworm" and "Alexander Selkirk" from memory.

I had never seen Skid read anything but his book of the Crusaders, but there was an old file of an agricultural weekly on top of the cupboard. He went to the Puffer post-office once a week, and invariably took a letter and brought at least one back from New England friends. And I was told those letters had been going on for at least forty years.

"You have lived here a great many years, Mrs. Puffer; aren't there a great many changes going on?"

"I have lived out here forty years," she answered, "and I can't see a particle of difference in anybody here yet, except that each is older." As she sat there silently peeling those apples I was suddenly possessed with perhaps a mean curiosity to know

the secret meanings of her life. No one, I thought, anywhere on earth could have doubted her integrity, her chastity, her cleanliness of soul, her sanity, her regularity of conduct, her coldness of heart.

"Mrs. Puffer," I broke in on those apples abruptly, "you ought to move out of this. You and Skid are as much out of place here as a hummingbird in a goose nest." Perhaps this was not a very brilliant opening.

"I guess—" she said. I could not tell whether those two short words were the leaders of a drove of words or whether they were more like a snowy door shut in my face.

"I'd like to see you settled down with Skid somewhere, say in Connecticut. There you'd be in society that would appreciate and understand you. Then Skid could be educated. Why not?"

"I never had anything I wanted except Skid." I noticed that the paring knife whirled a little more determinedly around the flesh of the pippins, the mouth wrinkled more tightly and a faint flush grew in her withered cheeks.

I have done some very dare-devil things in my life, most of which I repented of afterward. I would stir this woman up. She must have some secret. How had she, a New England woman, met Abe Puffer? Why had she married him? So I stumbled out with:

"Mrs. Puffer, why is Skid afraid of a killdeer?" The paring knife stopped with a jerk, then clattered to the floor; a look of fear and misery filled her

wrinkled face. Her jaw dropped. But as she stared, I saw her face lighten and soften; a happy relief swept in; then recovering, she said evenly, stonily, "You'll have to ask Skid, I don't know."

My chance shot brought down only feathers and the gun's recoil had hurt the marksman.

"Skid showed me that letter this morning, said he told you everything. I thought I understood that boy. But I don't. He's kept it secret for years." She went to the stove, poked the fire viciously, slammed the damper down, then up again, and returned to her pan of apples. Diplomatically as I knew how, I suggested a plan for Skid's education. She could rent or sell her farm and could go somewhere so that she could be with him. I flattered her as softly and slyly as I knew how. She was now rolling out some dough pie, silently listening. I told her she deserved a better fate than to dry up on the edge of the Kankakee swamp. She ought to think of Skid. She had made many unappreciated sacrifices all her life. Was it right to let her son grow up in the barbarities of Pufferdom?

"Skid is my son by raisin' and by right of law. If I am satisfied why should you interfere?" She had whirled round and was eying me fiercely. "That hussy down there at the Crossins is trying to steal him away. I have suffered enough the last forty-five years; there's entirely too many people amixing in my affairs. If Skid is satisfied who should interfere?"

"But Skid is not satisfied; you know that. He

will run off." That was a most brazen shot, but it brought blood.

"Did he tell you that?" She was transformed in an instant. She reminded me of Ann Hutchinson defying the Puritan elders. She rose, dominant, fierce, glowering; her breath came gustily, her eyes glinted blue flames.

"Not a word, Mrs. Puffer, but you know it as well as I do."

She sat down limply. The sudden fire had died out. She stared away before her with her hands dejectedly between her knees. "I have been wondering that for years. I guess it's nothing but ashes after all."

I felt a profound pity for her and wondered what I could say that would make her happier. I suddenly boldened:

"Let me take Skid away, dress him differently, teach him, show him the world." She had started up tensely defiant, but not noticing I kept on. "I will put up your farm for sale, then you can sell and buy a little place somewhere where you can be appreciated and board Skid, er—I mean you can give him a home while he is going to school. You can keep together. See?" I stopped, awaiting her assent. She bent forward, her eyes introspective, her thoughts far away.

"This morning Skiddie came in saying he was going down to see the teacher and have it out with her. Then he showed me that letter. I could do nothing with him; you seem to have more influence

over him than I have. Such things breaks a mother's heart. I don't care what. Do as you please. It's all ashes after all. Just ashes with scorching coals in them. Just as you say; just as Skid says; just so you keep him for me till I die."

CHAPTER XIV

TAKING THE BULL BY THE FOOT

I HEARD a noise out in the summerhouse and saw that Skid had returned. I expected to find him at least excitedly serious, but he was very like a person in a singing state of mind. I sat down with him. His cheeks' weather tint could not conceal his glowing color and his magic eyes flashed with half suppressed joyfulness. He opened out with noisy joy, slamming his dirty old wool hat on the floor with a hearty fling and cocked his red feet on my bed as he sat in his decrepit rocker.

S'mornin' I was up 'ith the catbirds, done my chores, hed a snatch o' breakfas', hed a little set-to 'ith Mom an' nen made fer the Crossins. I felt purty anxious at firs' an' hed to whistle to skeer the rats away. I guess mebbly I spit on my han's fer courage. Say, it aint whut it's cracked up to be to kin' do charge like a groun'hog on a fine bird dog. Nix; excuse me-e mister. You see I hed n't jus' thought out the rashsheonashunin' details.

He shot a side glance at me from under his fine brows without adding, "as Pop ust to say."

I found 'er 'bout two mile this side the Crossins botanizin'. Thet's th'immortal vocoboloarry she

used Clonel—botanizin'. We jus' kin' do bumped into each ether 'fore we knowed. She was settin' on a log bendin' over some blue flowers. Shucks! I knowed they was Spiderwort 'fore she said a word. Soon's she saw me she jumped up an' the blood left 'er face. She looked wite and dry fer a fac'. Heavins but she's a looker!

Drec'ly she says 'ith a bluebirdy voice, "Good mornin' Mister Puffer." And Skid laughed musically, very musically for a swamp boy as he mimicked "Mi-s-t-er." Wy I never was tagged 'ith thet golly whangin' handle before. "Mi-i-is-t-e-r"—again Skid imitated rudely the strange appellation. I said polite though, mebbys es polite es Richard cur de line, "Good mornin' Miss Greyson," an' I tetched my ol' hat jus' like you did onct to Jake Spading's woman. She *did* look s'prised. I guess she was es s'prised most es much es I was. Gee whang I was some!

Nen I let on es ef I was perceedin' down to the furside o' White county to buy a drove o' cattle er mebbys agoin' to Monticello to pay up my taxes. But I guess I was wantin' fat cattle the wors'. Nex' she riz up—rose up—I mean. Mom says "riz" is off color. Nen she ast soft, "D'you ever botanize Mi-i-s-ter Puffer?"

Say Clonel, how'd you size me up fer a deed-n-double-pon-yer-soul-en-honor botanizer? He was much amused.

I tol'der I knowed most o' the scientific names of the weeds. I thought she'd mos' faint wen I said

thet. You see the preacher told me a whole raft of names o' weeds an' 'e said they was scientific. Woop! but I was a pert scientifikier. Nen I stood back an' froze 'er 'ith my Darwinicks an' dignity. Fer the life o' me I could n't think of a geedanged thing about 'lectricity though.

She looked at 'er watch an' said it was mos' time fer her to be goin' 'long to school. Nen I begun to crab a little thinkin' about them fat cattle an' my taxes, cause thet was n't business. Nen she says "I guess I'll g'long 'ith you." Wat you so s'prised at Clonel?" asked Skid, bringing himself up with a jerk.

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering if she said, 'I'll g'long 'ith you.' That was all."

Well—I—should—snickernix," said Skid with long-drawn emphasis on each one of his words; the last syllable very emphatic. "I'm jus' translatin' in Kankakee, thet's all.

We walked 'long and along sociable like jus' gabblin' an' gabblin', sayin' this, thet an' th' ether, she sneakin' underhan' looks at me all the time. We was jus' es happy es little pigs w'en firs' let out from the pen in spring. In the course o' human evens we nachurly got funder 'long the San'hill road. Spite all I c'd do I was n't feelin' so gosh blamed peart es I hed been.

I could n't help feelin' she hed a lot o' double geared lightnin' in 'er system, es Pop says. But she was ony showin' up sheet lightnin' down roun' the edges yit. I hed a notion she was a high stepper

nachurly and I was jus' a waddler. I can't zactly 'splain it though. 'Er steppin' was n't swamp steppin' and 'er face hed n't the swamp hang in it.

Wen we got to the schoolhouse she looked at 'er watch an' says:

"Wy it aint nigh schooltime yit. Let's set out here w're it's cool under the trees. How is yer mother Mis-s-ter Puffer?" No, she said how is "yoar mother." And Skid put a deadly emphasis on "yoar." "I want to talk to you a little."

Cracky! Wasn't she takin' the bull by the foot though? "Is 'yoar' mother well Mi-i-ster Puffer?"

Nen ther was a sort o' lull. She looked me square in the face es we was settin' there an' said plain out, "*Your* eyes is jus' like the eyes of a dear frien' o' mine." There 'twas! "Wy," says she, "I'd give the worl' to know wher she is."

"Is 'er name Claire?" I ast cool. She straightened up an' der breath stopped. Her ches' rose in a big wave, helt a little bit nen sunk down. She was w'ite es death. She was mighty quiet 'bout a minnit, nen she said cold like, "Now you must tell me all about it."

She did n't say Skid er Mister ner look like ther was any excuses comin'. I jus' knowed thet very minit I hed to pump er drown. And I pumped.

Thet letter was burnin' a hole in my shirt; I took it out an' handed it to 'er 'thout sayin' a word. She

locked 'er face up an' read it through; caught up her breath, nen read it through the second time.

Nen she handed it back an' looked me right in the eye. She did n't look very frien'ly either. I hed been so peart an' her heart was sore er sothin'. There was to be no foolin' now; and somehow I felt ashamed.

"Tell me the res'," she said, an' I said, "Ther aint any rest. I'd like to know who wrote thet letter, Miss Greyson?" I said Miss Greyson 'stead o' teacher, though mos' ev'rybody says "teacher" 'roun' here.

"My father Judge Greyson wrote thet letter and—it's sacred."

Nen I tol' der all about findin' it an' about the preacher who taught me to spell and write thet summer an' ev'ry thing I knowed 'cept about the dead woman. I don't feel right about hidin' thet. I couldn't bear to open thet. Lots o' reasons w'y, too. Nen I got to workin' the battery m'sef. She tol' thet Robert Greyson was 'er step er half brother er sothin' but wasn't of *her* blood in *any* way, ner her *father's* flesh er blood in anyway. Gosh, thet mixed me up. But Lem, whoever 'e was, hed been a member o' the family but he wasn't any blood relation either.

She said her father married twict an' the two boys, stepsons I guess, was bad an' no good an' thet he hed tried to bring 'm up right but they was allus makin' trouble an' disgrace. I heard 'er say, 'at she 's just a little kid an' this Claire was 'er father's

adopted chil' nen run off an' got married w'en 'bout eighteen. And she said she was on'y a little tot but she loved Claire es much es she did 'er mother. "This Mason," she says, "was Claire's husban'. None of us ever saw him." Nen she tol' 'bout how they 'd been huntin' Claire fer years an' they didn't know what'd become of Lem er Robert Greyson er Mason an' lots more. She got up sayin' "it's 'bout schooltime," an' we walked to'ards the school-house.

I spoke up, "Teacher I'm all mixed up. Looks like my eyes was someway responsible fer sothin'." An' I guess mebbly I looked kin' do mad.

Nen Clonel, she stuck out her han' smilin' sof' an' I guess like a nangel, 'er face meltin' into the fines' lookin' human bein' es ever I s'pect to see in this worl', an' says, "Skid yer eyes air jus' like Claire's eyes, yer face in a dozen ways reminds me o' Claire, the sweetes', lovlies', mos' beautiful being out of heaven."

An' Clonel, wat do you think I done? I snorted out, "I guess yer Claire wouldn't a took the blue ribbon fer beauty at the county fair," an' I laughed kin' do 'shamed an' started to put out. An' she was sort o' 'shamed an' mad, too, es she hed said more'n she wanted to. Some pink leapt in 'er face, an' 'er eyes shot gleamin's like a cat es looks efter a bird es he's jus' flew away wen the cat was ready to grab it. Ever seen a hen-hawk Clonel?" he asked in deep seriousness, "es flutters over a tuft o' grass wher a quail is hidin'? Ever seen it come down

'ith its feet a stickin' out nen drop quick an' see the blood squirt an' the feather fly? Well thet's 'bout the way she looked an' mebbby felt.

She said slow, 'er voice remindin' of a bulldog es lets out a long level growl 'fore 'e goes to fight, "You seem to be a very tender souled young man. Ef you hed any heart I'd think Claire was yer mother."

Nen fer a fact Clonel, I was ready to bawl, even ef I am nineteen years ol' next July. An' jus' es quick es she said it an' looked at me, tears squirted sudden out of 'er eyes an' she stuck out 'er han' an' said, "Fergive me Skid, I didn't mean that," an' smilin' through 'er tears she kin' do gulped 'n went in the schoolhouse.

Skid had stopped. He was gravely staring at his red feet as if the story was ended.

"Well, what did you do when she left you standin' there, Skid?" I asked softly.

He looked up quickly, rose, walked agitatedly around, then, suddenly calm, he sat down again with the old humorous twinkle in his eyes. "Well wonderin' wat 'd struck me I come to, nen kin' do angled off back'ards like a crawfish an' gittin' clean of everything, I turned an' broke down the San'hill road 'bout like Morgie runnin' off. I guess I didn't take more'n two breaths fer two miles. I guess ef I hadn't been p'inted down the San'hill road mebbby I would've cut mos' anywhere acrost the country an' mebbby run in the swamp an' hev been teetotally drowned."

He seemed to be himself again. I was eager to know more, but all that I got out of him was, "Gosh blimmity! Her eyes is thet fine and 'er face so lovin' an' her han' is thet sof' es,—es,—I'll bee teetotally dingbusted ef I know w'at."

CHAPTER XV

ROSES, MILK AND GOLD

THE next day after Skid's visit to the schoolhouse, I was out hunting, and about four o'clock in the afternoon, my gun getting out of order, I came in, tied my dogs in the barn and fed them. Then I went to the toolhouse, repaired my firearm and retired to my little room for a quiet smoke. The whole place was very quiet at that hour. Skid was supposed to be out on the range with the cattle.

As I sat there I heard the familiar squeak of the big barnyard gate and looking out saw Skid coming through on one of the old horses. Further down the road I saw a woman walking swiftly towards him. He waited; she came up, and their hands met. I saw the sorry figure, in his umbrella-like greasy hat, in bare feet muddy and red, point towards the house. Then he turned and stabled his horse under a shed, while the woman came slowly to the toolhouse and sat down on a bench beside the door.

I could see her plainly as I sat there almost wholly obscured by the red mosquito netting and morning glory vines. She was not more than a dozen yards away. She was a very handsome lass with a whole-

some appearance, her eyes luminous, her glowing colors tender and her mien gentle and sweet. Seldom in my life have I seen a woman more graceful, of better figure, fresher, more attractive and lovable at first glance.

Skid, unkempt, slouchy from head to his dirty toes, yet lithe and sinuous, came up and flung down his hat. His face was aglow and nearly clean. From his shoulders up he was not only handsome but positively beautiful. He brushed aside his long, square-edged, home-scissored hair and cordially and unabashed sat down beside her. From his shoulders down he was disreputable.

She was looking at him with repressed curiosity as he pushed his silken locks aside, exposing a white brow that Apollo could have envied.

Every word they uttered I easily heard; every action, color, glance, intonation were as distinct as if they had been in the room with me. I did not feel like an eavesdropper. They were in a public place and I was in my own room, attending to my own affairs. I did not find it convenient to change my position, so I sat and smoked and incidentally—watched and listened.

“There was something I forgot to ask you about yesterday, Mr. Puffer, and—”

“Wa! I aint ‘Mister.’ I’m jus’ plain Skid.”

“Well then, plain Skid”—a quick smile ran through his features,—“I forgot to ask you, or at least to remember the name of that fugitive that was here a few seasons since. What did you say

his name was?" There was an amiable smile playing around her mouth. I could see that Skid receded somewhat into his shell.

"The preacher-horse-thief? W'y Mr. Lemuel Reverent Mason, principally from nowhers an' travelin' to'ards the same place, but flyin' still," replied Skid irreverently. She rippled out into a musical trill.

"Well, from things I know that was a borrowed name, Mis—er—Skid."

"Well, it wasn't so much to borry es it was to carry," and the lad looked serenely across the stretches without a semblance of a smile.

"Mason was the name of sister Claire's husband, the man who stole her baby and blackmailed father and her so long." It was plain to me that Skid was becoming sullen; the subject seemed a sore spot in his feelings. Only yesterday she had said that Claire must be his mother. What was that to her? He was getting away from her and was closing up like a clam. He did not see her nimble arts of fascination, arts womanly enough to melt a much harder heart than I thought Skid possessed.

She led out fruitlessly once or twice, recalled herself, glanced secretly at him, flushed and seemed almost angry. A moment later she peered around into his almost averted face, laid her white hand confidingly on his sleeve and caught up her breath hesitatingly.

Suddenly he asked, "Who is this Claire y' air allus speakin' of, teacher?"

"As I told you yesterday, Claire was my sister by adoption."

"An' is thet all?" His voice was not cordial.

"She was an orphan named Ballard from the East, adopted by my father soon after his first marriage. She married a rascal named Mason, who helped steal her baby. We have run every clue out for many years, but nothing has resulted but sorrow and defeat. I came down here to teach and accidentally came on baffling circumstances,—a strange face like hers, and a strange man, a refugee from justice, who had her name but was my father's stepson, Robert Greyson. I find a stray letter uncovering the most sacred places of our family, among strangers. It is too much." There was a ring of pain and pride in her voice just then that must have gone to Skid's heart.

Who was the Mason that he knew? he was asking himself. Was he Claire's husband? Was he her father's stepson or half-cousin Robert Greyson?

While these thoughts were sweeping through his puzzled brain, she sat there, angry and unhappy. She had never met a being like this Skid before, so uncouth in attire, so contrary in manners, so unmoved by her honest desire to be agreeable. She had come as a friend and he had repelled her. He had seemed glad to see her at the gate and now he had relapsed into unmannerly silence. I felt as if I would like to go out and shake him for being so boorish.

Perhaps it was two or three minutes before either said a word. Then I saw her breast heave in a

quick resolution and she said very coldly and evenly, "Skid, we may as well understand each other like sensible people. I came in good faith to unravel some very sorrowful and sacred things that have hovered over several lives for many years. All you have to do is to be simply honest and frank. There is nothing to conceal, nothing to be ashamed of—unless——" she hesitated.

He stole a quick glance into her face.

"Well whut teacher?" I could see he was a little more cordial.

"Well, you taunted me when I said Claire was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. And you said, you said,—you know what you said."

"How could I hep it, you makin' me purty thet way, wen I wasn't?" and he looked much grieved. "I jus' couldn't keep from bustin' out, I felt so shamed. I hed never done nothin' to you?"

"Oh! you did not understand me then nor now. I meant that I was sorry that I said Claire must be your mother. I meant all the time that you looked like her as a man and you were like her in gestures."

"Jesters, what's them?" He stiffened a little as he saw the fleeting merriment slip across her mouth.

"They mean such things as motions, actions and so forth," she replied with a straight face.

"Well, thet aint sayin' much fer 'er either teacher. I aint purty, an' I never had no chanct fer manners ner schoolin'. But I don't like to be poked fun at."

"Nobody is poking fun at you. There's some sore spot in your heart that I do not know about nor wish to touch. Our own hearts have been sore for years, and all I wish is to do my part to find her and help her if she is in this world. Your face is so like hers in many ways, I know it can not be accidental. Yet I can see no possible connection between you. Any one having an honest heart knowing our grief, and the long silence, would help if he could." The bolt went straight. Skid looked like a half-whipped dog trying to get in the good graces of his master.

"Gosh all blimmity anyway! Gosh blame thet killdeer anyway," he said, jumping up, turning around once, then sitting down hard with a very troubled air. He understood her at last. He felt, he told me afterwards, as if he was a "mean lived dog es would lay on a whole strawstack an' not let another dog 'ithin five mile to come nigh ef 'e could hep it."

A kind look filled her sincere, beautiful face. She turned and looked smilingly at him, and his fine eyes glowed as they met hers. Indeed she looked entrancing, and so did Skid.

Before she knew it Skid had locked his arms around her neck and was hugging her, and it was a vigorous hug too, with his forehead pushed into her cheek. There was a great change immediately in the atmosphere. She struggled up and tugging for twenty violent seconds she pushed herself loose. Her hair was awry, hanging disconsolately over one ear, and a little end of a strand had almost cut loose

from the base of supplies and was shaking aggressively and angrily.

"Haven't you any sense, Skid Puffer?" she cried out in tense anger, her face red with confusion and shame. And Skid sat there speechless, looking as crestfallen as any mortal could look. She arranged her hair, staring with hot indignation into his averted face.

"What do you mean, sir?" she cried with a genuine wrathful ring in her high voice. And Skid looked foolish and miserable. I could not help laughing almost aloud. She straightened up still more erect, her clenched hands on her parasol handle holding the point stiffly into the ground. I almost expected she would lift it and strike him.

"Can't you speak? What did you do that for, sir?" There could be no mistake that she intended to have an answer then and there.

"You can search me," he said, his face covered with conflicting emotions. But he could not look her in the face and his miserable mien softened the intensity of her tones.

"I am a lady and decent; I thought you at least part a gentleman and halfway decent. What made you do such an ungentlemanly thing?" Her voice was very severe, her face harsh. Skid twisted uneasily, rooting up the sand in the yard with his big red toe.

She was ready to go. I saw that if she waited long enough there would be an outburst of some kind. Providence prevailed. As she took a step away she

said in a voice freighted with outraged girlhood but very low and hard, "If you are any part of a gentleman, apologize."

Then Skid broke out: "Did y' ever see a beautiful sunset w'en it's all roses an' milk an' gol'? W'en the sun is makin' a swimmin' yellow roadway right off the edge o' the skies, mebbly leadin' into heaven er sothin'? Did y' ever see a baby w'ite an' pink an' jus' like it was flew in from nowhere, 'ith chubby little han's kin' do diggin' up et you? An' haint you kind o' grabbed it up 'thout askin' whose it was an' wher it come from an' wether it wanted to er not an' kissed it hard? Jus' like diggin' right down fer it an' huggin' it? W'y somehow before I thought, thet was the way you looked 'ith yer chin a tremblin', an' yer face a pleadin' an' you lookin' like them kind o' sunsets as you want 'ith all yer heart an' can't have." His voice was trembling with a longing and a tenderness that I never heard in it before.

And naturally the rage entirely left Miss Greyson's face. She understood.

"But you want to remember, Skid, I'm not a baby nor a sunset. You must never do such an awful thing again. We are almost strangers, no relation by blood or marriage, and—" her voice was very low and gentle, "we are not lovers."

"Jus' like you said awile ago. I'm mixed. Some books I hev in there," and I could have sworn Skid pointed right to my face, "say es how the women and men kiss each other, 'sides I didn't kiss you er try to—I—jus'—goshblimmit all anyways!"

"You want to remember it was very improper and—shameful. You want to grow up and learn what is right." She was ready to go.

"I'm learnin' fas' teacher, but this is a mighty strange kin' o' worl'. I s'pect I jus' can't learn ev'rything to onct." Skid looked up in surprise as he heard a quiet trickle of laughter. She looked very charming.

"No, Skid, it will take you several days." She held out her hand as if to go. He hesitated and drew back. "What!" she asked, arching her fine eyebrows in surprise, "won't say good-by?"

Skid took a step forward, shook his head dubiously, and his hand refused to come higher than his pocket. She raised her hand obtrusively, there was no mistaking its urgency, but Skid was now warming his right hand in his pocket.

"I guess I better not shake han's; s'pect I better not."

"And why not?" She was really surprised.

"Jus' because I'll be dreamin' o' them baby fists an' sunsets an' things. Your han's is dreadful soft, anyways." Again that musical ripple, louder, firmer and freer than before. "Well," and she let her hand fall by her, "never kiss a woman against her will. Do you promise me that, if I forgive you?"

"I'm promisin'," said Skid very humbly, moving restlessly as he gazed in her roguish face. She turned from him and was walking away. Her steps were light, her head erect. After she had gone a few steps she turned a bewitching look back over her

shoulder at the puzzled and ashamed lad that seemed to me must have been as entrancing, as compelling as the music of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

That night we had been sitting together in silent thought for a long time. Skid, assuming a confident air, tried to ask carelessly, "Clonel out in the worl' wher you live how long does it take fer a fellow to hev goin' girl sense? Thet is how long so's 'e can get along 'ith 'em 'thout hevin' a fracas bout evry minute?"

"Well, Skid, seein's it's you," he instantly detected my essay in the swamp vernacular, but I went on with deep seriousness, "I don't mind telling you that some people live and die short of girl sense. It oughtn't to take you very long—just a few years. The world here is unlike my world; it does not eat, drink, smoke, play and die the same; it does not talk, damn, dress and lie the same. Here almost each one of you is after the other fellow's reputation; where I live each is after the other fellow's scalp. Here all of you are behind; where I dwell most all are running trying to catch up with those who have got far ahead."

"I s'pect Clonel, it's the diffrence 'tween pursuit an' possession we ust to debate et the literary."

The subject seemed exhausted, but I saw from faint traces of emotional movements by Skid that something was coming to the surface of his expression. I waited as I nonchalantly smoked.

"Whut about kissin' girls nen?"

I did want to turn around and see just how he

looked when he asked that, but I calmly, lazily smoked on.

“Well, as to that, Skid, I’m an oyster. But from what I have read I should say that kissing right with the right girl, at the right time and so forth, is like a sunset of roses, milk and gold.” I turned with a stony face to him; he did not look ashamed as I had expected. At the least I expected a fine flood in his beautiful features. His eyes closed in his old sly way, a smile faintly pulled at the muscles of his mouth, and then like a man talking to himself in grave judgment on his own conduct he said, looking at the stove unseeingly, “W’en I saw them gosh-blimmin’ dogs tied in the shed w’en she went home I jus’ knowed thet the devil was to pay som’ers. I knowed I’d hev to take my medicine ’fore goin’ to bed.” His tones was deeply introspective and impersonal—as if a meditative man in the solitude of his reveries had his thoughts rise to the surface in a monotonous speech.

I laughed rather indecently under the circumstances. I was trying to think out the best way to tell him of the proposed change in his life and soon became serious. He watched me hawkishly, for I was in a mood he did not understand.

“Skid, I have been talking to your mother about a certain change that is going to take place in this part of the world. I am going to put up the farm for sale, then sell it, and your mother is—” I was surprised almost into silence by the happy astonishment in his face. “I am going to take you, dress

you, educate you, make a man of you. How'd you like to do that?"

Before I knew he had thrown his arms around my neck and was crying like a child. He soon recovered and there was no look of shame on his face.

He left the room a little while after and as I stole a glance out of the window I saw, astonished, that he was or seemed to be looking up in the skies. Once or twice he appeared to be listening. Then he came in.

"Well, what do you say to it, Skid?"

"I'd ruther go 'ith you 'an anything else in the worl'—'cept jus' one thing."

"What's that, Skid?" I asked joyfully. His white brows clouded. How strangely he had been acting; I could not make him out. He shook his head solemnly but dubiously.

"I guess it's all right. I aint heerd the killdeer t'night."

"Oh, curse your old killdeer; drive out your silly superstitions if you are going to be a man. Brighten up. Be a man."

"S'pect I ought to tell you; but mebbly not. Ef I thought it was right and I was not breakin' my promise,—wy—well!" he exclaimed with sudden lightness, "wy, say Clonel, wen will we git out?"

"To-morrow morning, the Lord willing. Go over to Hi's, engage a team to take us to Reynolds. We start at sun-up. Hurry. Let's pack."

BOOK II
AT THE GREYSONS'

CHAPTER I

WHEN THE CORTÈGE MOVED

THE June sun had just peered over the sand-ridge when Hi Spading drove up to the little summerhouse door at the Puffers'. The early dawn was breathless. The long levels of the green swamp were still swathed in the blue remnants of the risen fog. Far as the eye could sweep to the north I saw the faint glimmerings of the thick waters of the Kankakee. The spent thunderheads, lying like a sleeping camp, rested low down in the west. The tops were brazenly high, rimmed with silver; fleecy yellows lower down turned to outrolling brassiness; and the unoutlined depths were blue and huge as an eternal ledge of slate. Faintly I heard the low, ventriloquistic boom of the prairie cocks answering the cowbells of lonely Pufferland. The commingled tinkle sounded afar like the dim and drowsy music of a dream. A little blue smoke blithely curled out of the stovepipe joint above the slant-roofed kitchen of the gray and scattered habitation of the Puffers. Except the faint stirrings near at hand, the only sound of health and buoyancy was the hearty gurgle and pour of the spring that raced down into

the willow shaded pool. Like a sleepy beggar Pufferland had just sat up and yawned.

Hi Spading's horses were as forlorn as his ancient wagon. They were reinless in ragged harness with rope lines, chain tugs, half-burst canvas-covered straw collars, flapping blinders, all in various stages of mending. Patches of the long, still unshed hair of winter covered their thin, bony bodies. They hung their heads sleepily and gave little sign of life except the despondent switch of their rattish tails.

The wagon was a Studebaker, heirloom of earlier Pufferland. It had been a faithful chariot in many a sudden dash when the gay people of Pufferdom were returning from the far-off White County Fair. It had never thrown a wheel or cast a tire, but a spoke or two in the dished hind-wheel complained as it tried to follow the wabbling wheel in front. It was old, very old, and spoke in many screaming tongues. A spring seat, broken in both springs and surgeoned with tourniquets of hay wire, sat uppishly on the front end of the scarred and splintered wagon-box. It was cushioned handsomely with a stable blanket, healthful enough if the wind was right.

Hi Spading, freckled like a goatsucker, alert as a wren, was gay and happy in his best Sunday clothes. Was he not to get three silver dollars for driving us those thirty miles or more? His indigo blue overalls, still tagged with the maker's name, bright in spots with riveted buttons, smelled strongly of the commingled odors of the factory and the Pufferland store. He was coatless, suspenderless, with a home-

made, neck-choking, hickory shirt, and wore a funnel-shaped hat banded with a broad equator of sweated grease and Kankakee grime. Skid was attired like Hi except that he had on dollar plowshoes and his late father's duster, which hung to his knees.

My hunting impedimenta, the dogs, our luggage, with Skid on a backless chair, were crowded in behind, while Hi, looking like a henhawk in freckles and alertness, was perched by me and my gun in the high odorous seat of honor. We were ready to move off.

Mrs. Puffer, calm and dry-eyed, came to the wagon side, climbed up and kissed Skid and her thin voice quavered a little as she said, "Colonel, take good care o' Skid; and write evry week Skid, so's I can tell. Good-bye, t' all o' you."

"Yessim," answered Skid. Then we endeavored to move.

"Giddap, you ol' slowpokes," cried Hi, and he bobbed up and down as he energetically whipped the rope lines. "Some horses es slower 'n tar on a col' day." After which I could see that we were going along.

We approached the Crossins schoolhouse and saw afar the teacher on the steps. Hi stopped and jumped out to get a gad.

"Cut two, Hi," called Skid, "one fer goin' an' one fer comin' back."

"Nix coom arous Skid; won't need any comin' back. They allus fly acomin' home."

The swamp bird-of-paradise awaited with normal

expectancy our dignified approach. Hi stopped the procession without effort. She handed me a letter with an apologetic smile, and such a smile!—it made Skid twist uneasily on his chair. She asked me to post the letter as it was an urgent one to her father. She said that if it were convenient while in the "city" (that meant Indianapolis to everybody in Pufferland when Monticello and Logansport were excluded) her father would be happy to thank us in person. I looked at the address as I tucked the letter in my breast pocket. "Justice Greyson, Indianapolis." As we began to gather to start, there was something more said, which I forget. Hi glared at the monotonously switching tails; Skid stared entranced at his plowshoes; I saw that he knew her smiling was a subtle raillery intended for him.

Her swift glances, her laughing roguery, brief as the time was, were for his especial benefit, though she said not a word to him till we tried to move once more. I gave a secret elbow punch to Hi's ribs, though I was loth to go. Hi, who had some wit, began to make strong efforts on the team for further flight. I lifted my cap. Skid still surveyed his shoes with an intensity and steadiness of effort that proved plowshoes were the main interest of his life.

"Good-bye, gentlemen! good-bye, Skid! If you meet my father tell him I am happy out here, for we have the most beautiful sunsets of roses and milk and gold." I could not help laughing as she uttered those words bewitchingly. Skid ought to

have done something beside catching his breath, wavering in his stare and ejaculating "Damn" in a voice she did not hear.

A few yards further on I turned and saw the handsome, roguish woman standing in the school-house door with a plaintive light in her face. Hi, feeling reasonably safe, looked back.

"Bet she'd like to go 'long 'ith us back home," he said thoughtfully. "Teachin' out here aint whut it's cracked up to be." Then Skid came out of his trance. Hi had gone two terms to school and there were doubts of his qualification to pronounce judgments on educational topics.

I turned an ear back to Skid, as I watched a chipmunk racing along with us in the tortuous course of a worm fence, and said rather aimlessly, "Which can spell down in a wrestling match, Skid, you or Hi?"

"Well, I should say it's 'bout a dogfall atween us. I learnt to spell cataclysm but Hi never got further 'an the firs' syllable."

Hi laughed with us and said with a droll grin, his face exchanging freckles as his features moved, "I'm sayin' that Skid is a terror w'en it comes to knockin' down an' draggin' out big words. Got it from 'is father, 'e hed cords of 'm. They say w'en ol' Squire Puffer was feelin' chipper 'e could limber out a bunch o' words 's long's this here gad. W'y don't you take a crack at that guinea Colonel?" He was sharply watching the chipmunk,

"That what?" I asked in surprise.

"Guinea? Groun' squir'l, thet beechnut-eater racin' us es if 'e was fas' es Hi Stickel's houn's," translated Hi.

"There's room for all of us, Hi," I answered, not wishing to waste a load on such an innocent and happy creature.

"Well, I know a good many es is gettin' mighty slim pickin' 'roun' here, guess there's too much room fer the pickin'," said Hi, rubbing his freckled nose in a subdued, thoughtful manner.

Late in the afternoon of the following day we arrived at Reynolds, a little railroad station with level streets of sand and tired looking dwellings, few and old, all surrounded by swampy land. I hunted up the general store and furnished Hi from crown to toes. I had him barbered, and regretted no place could be found where he could have a scrub-down, which, like his new clothes, would have been the first in his seventeen years.

To make him look as dashing as possible, I bought him a pair of patent leather shoes, the only pair in the village, a sample forgotten by a shoe salesman long before. Arrayed in a linen shirt, with collar and cuffs, a seersucker suit, a flaming red tie, a sailor straw hat and a pocketful of handkerchiefs, which he had no use for, he was turned homeward, the gayest young Lochinvar that ever disturbed the serenity of the southern Kankakee swamp.

He was delighted almost beyond words. "Skid whut you think o' this here—this here—cataclysm?"

He stood up before the spring seat ready to disrupt the traditions of Pufferland.

Skid took off his hat, and walking around Hi, viewed him from every point of the compass and from every altitude, and, critically as a hunter estimates the value points of a new dog, said judiciously with a fine squint of technical exactness, "Well, I should say you might be toler'bly safte at the county fair, but the firs' money you git buy a pistol. You jus' can't tell what you air up against wen you git back to yer natav, yer natav lan'." I knew from his pronunciation of "native" Skid was quoting a part of his father's famous speech.

"It'll be dark w'en I git in," replied Hi with a deep sigh of resignation. Then he drove away toward the green jungles of yellow sand and starved thickets of Pufferland.

CHAPTER II

THE SWAMP ANGEL

WHEN we arrived at Indianapolis we deposited our baggage and housed our dogs. I looked at the address on Miss Greyson's envelope, and taking a valise, we proceeded up to the center of the town. Skid was watching the vociferous hackmen, and seemed dazed at the strange sights and unfamiliar noises, the surging crowds and glittering lights. He clung to my arm as if he were a shy girl.

"Whut was ailin' them men Clonel?" he asked over his shoulder, still gazing at the shouting bus men around the station platform.

"Oh! those men are licensed robbers that throttle one another when trade is bad and rob you when trade is good."

There was a twinkle in his dark eyes as he answered, "They look it 'ith some to spare."

We went up the long street. After a time I saw by the numbers that I was in the block where Judge Greyson should have his office. I wished to locate the place, and had no thought that he would be there at that hour.

Presently I saw the door number on a stylish marble stairway, and at the same instant a large

man with short gray whiskers leisurely pulling on his light summer gloves. I knew that Judge Greyson was before me. How I knew I cannot say, but he had a grave, judicial air and appeared like a man of importance. I fumbled for the letter.

"Is this Judge Greyson?" I asked, holding out the letter. Surprised, he glanced sharply at me, took the letter, instantly recognized the handwriting, appeared astonished and expressed his thanks.

He saw my hunter's dress, glanced at the gun and understood. He put the letter into his pocket and with a bland look was about to go when his eyes fell on Skid.

"My God!" he cried and leaned against the marble.

"My name is French, of the Governor's staff of Illinois," I said.

"Pardon, Mr. French, but who is this young man?"

"Judge Greyson, Mr. Skid Puffer." Skid nodded.

The Judge forgot to shake hands. He hesitated an instant, then said evenly, "Can you not come up to my chambers a moment, gentlemen, just a moment; I wish to speak to you." We dutifully followed. In the office we seated ourselves, Skid dodging up and down uncertainly on the spring seat of an office chair.

Skid watched the Judge hawkishly, but shyly. Not once did he seem to avoid or to meet Skid's eyes. After a few inquiries he easily grasped the situation, and becoming cordial asked to glance for a brief

instant at the letter from his daughter. He read rapidly, returned it to his pocket and looked in a fatherly way at Skid.

"My daughter explains it all. She seems to be enjoying herself out there somehow and hears that this young man is about to visit the city, and says that it would be a favor to her if—if"—the Judge had run up against something not provided for in his current diplomacy,—“well, to make a long story short, she says that as Mr. Puffer is a friend and pupil of hers, if I could render him any service she would appreciate it.” The Judge smiled a trifle miserably I thought. Skid seemed wholly unmoved.

I heard him a moment later inviting us out to his house. I stared.

"I have some very important business in guardianship matters in that district and it would be an unusual favor if you would come out, Mr. French, well, say to-morrow evening. I very much need some local information. Would it be possible for you?"

At first I thought of refusing; my plans were different; but I saw a volume of meaning in his face. I replied that if he could accept us in our hunting clothes, I would change my arrangements. I was about to suggest his office as a more appropriate place, but a second glance told me that he wanted us for some other business than guardianship affairs.

He gave me his home address, and we descended to the street and parted.

"Well, Skid, what do you think of the teacher's father?"

"I was jus' wonderin' whut 'e hed up 'is sleeve," said Skid, shaking his head in doubt.

I did several things in the next hour. Skid was barbered, shampooed and had his first bath. We went to a man's furnishing house and found him clothes that fitted him well. I have never seen such a striking change for the better. With a little straightening of his spine and a shortening of his pace, Skid would have looked like a gentleman of leisure and fashion, an angel of the Kankakee swamp.

I wished that Miss Greyson could have seen his incipient burst from the swamp chrysalis. So far, I had kept Skid from seeing himself in any mirror. We went to the hotel, and I piloted him away from any chance reflection till I had him alone before the full-length mirror in the hotel parlor.

"Well, what do you think of yourself, Skid?" I asked him as I suddenly pushed him squarely before the mirror.

"Gosh-amighty an' thunderation! Gee! is thet me?" He had seen himself for a brief moment in the barber-shop, but the sum-total of the new apparition burst on him like a meteor. He took off his trim straw hat and looked at his shortened locks; he twisted around like a snake and tried to see his back, slid his red hands over the soft clothes and turned to me with a satisfied look.

"Clonel somehow I guess I look 'bout like thet

teacher at the Crossins feels nachurly. Ony," he added with a thoughtful air, "she jus' tetches the highest places wen she walks."

"Throw out your chest, Skid, walk straight and follow my example as to customs and conventions. I'm nothing to brag about, but so far these manners of mine have kept me out of jail."

"Ef Mom'd see me now I jus' wonder ef she'd think I was a perfec' example fer feedin' calves Clonel?"

The hotel arrangements and conveniences were a constant source of trouble to Skid. The electric bulb in his room, of which I forgot to enlighten him, was gracefully obscured the entire night, I found next morning, by a new straw hat. At the breakfast table he ordered "same fer me" from the waiter. When he saw three varieties of forks, as many kinds of knives and a pair of spoons by his plate, he asked in a whisper, "Clonel do you begin on the outside 'ith these, er start on the inside?" and he gingerly laid his hand on the shining silver.

He was marvelously adaptive and versatile and one lesson was always enough, except in language.

The day passed in sightseeing, and I was delighted with his unrestrained amazement and bubbling happiness.

Judge Greyson's residence was out in the more scattered part of the city and denoted wealth and refined ease. The vast ornamental grounds were beautiful with masses of color, vines, arcades, marbles

and levels of soft green sward. White peacocks were at large, fountains played and Skid gaped just a little more than I.

The Judge himself received us at the door. When he looked at Skid in his new feathers, I felt sure he was more astonished at his appearance than he was the evening before.

"Well! well! Mr. Puffer, indeed I scarcely knew you in your—your—" He did not finish, but cordially seated us in the splendid drawing room. A moment later Mrs. Greyson entered. She was a stately woman with a sweet, wholesome face. Skid's glowing eyes softened even before he was introduced. At her first glance, her gentle face paled. Notwithstanding her repressed manner, I saw she was shocked.

I felt sure the Judge had told his family of his find, and knew they must expect something different. His face said plainly, "Is it possible that this is the swamp lad of yesterday?"

The conversation ran on without point, and I was waiting to be enlightened about the Judge's business, when a young girl dashed into the rather restrained atmosphere. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks aglow from racing. She stopped short, almost abashed. Then she went up to the Judge, leaned against his chair and stared. And Skid returned stare for stare. Both seemed satisfied. This was Tootsie Greyson, the Judge's younger daughter, sixteen years old.

Her mother recovered first and introduced us.

Skid, taking the hint from me, rose and made his first bow. I noticed that he had difficulty in getting down to the encompassing luxury again. The girl's face plainly said that she would be relieved if some one would explain how it came that two strangers she had never heard of, were having a most sociable talk on the weather with her parents.

She seemed to think that Skid was a young man worth further acquaintance, and listened as if trying to discover some key to the problem. Judge Greyson was not a little halting in leading the conversation, and at last beckoned me to follow him into the library.

I left Skid to his fate. I heard faint echoes of talk that drifted over the library transom, and knew from the infrequent strains of Skid's musical voice that he still survived. But Tootsie's revival was complete. She had got part of the kernel out of the nut.

I told the Judge about Pufferland, the Puffers and my intentions as to Skid's future. Then I showed him the letter left by the fugitive preacher, addressed to Robert Greyson. He immediately recognized the letter as his own. I told a part of the incidents of Skid's meeting with his daughter at the schoolhouse.

He burst out: "There's a ragged blotch of memory about the Puffers. I have heard of Abe Puffer—'Squire' they called him. He was one of my delegates at a political convention, but this young man with you,—why, he's enough like in appearance

to be my adopted daughter's son. Oh, I'm not mistaken. It isn't a chance likeness, no, no." He shook his great head in forceful negation, rose and walked restlessly.

"Colonel French, this protégé of yours, yesterday looking like a country yahoo, took me completely off my feet by his resemblance to my lost daughter. To-day he surprises me still more as he comes in like a dude. I have spent thousands of dollars running down futile clues; I have employed the best detectives for years to find what has become of her, done everything—no use, no trace. This boy Skid Puffer looks like her. The expression of his eyes is identical. We have a painting of Claire in the bedroom parlor." I wondered why he did not ask me to look at it. He rose, sat, rose again, paced, then continued:

"I noticed yesterday that you saw through my clumsy ruse to get him down here for the corroborative identification of my wife. I saw how shocked she was. My daughter Alice, teaching out there, loved Claire as a sister—mother almost. Her letter explains a great deal too, but she's entirely at sea. How providential that you brought me the letter instead of posting it. I am going to clear this mystery. I'm certain there's something in it that's going to hit mighty close." There was a look of excited determination in his powerful face.

"Judge, I have a troubled light, too, in this affair." Then I told him of the dead woman in

the Puffer graveyard, and of the Puffers' discovery of Skid's likeness to her. The Judge sat tensely listening.

"That's half a dozen links of testimony," he shouted. I cautioned him as to his over-loud tones. He asked in an intense whisper, "Were there any mementoes, anything to identify her?"

"Skid said she drew a blank in life and that he saw a watch his mother had with a blue fire in it." The Judge shot erect.

"Colonel French, don't lose sight of that. I want to examine him. Why not put him to school here? If a private teacher, if——" he stopped abruptly, eyed me penetratingly, then calmed himself.

I saw a purposeful look of wary persuasiveness. He said, watching me narrowly, "I have a fine likeness of Claire. I have a plan, not ripe yet. We must keep our swamp angel out of the parlor. Somehow I feel almost as a father would toward him already, Colonel. Strange, isn't it? If he could get his preliminary start in schooling here——" he paused, "say at—at—my house."

He went on with wary ease. "At our home, he will get the more vital rudiments so necessary at first, the influences of home. Those little conventions, the hidebound customs, the small misfits in morals, the swamp earmarks of neglect in language, and so on,—he must be worked out into something of finer finish. If I could persuade you and his mother, Colonel French,—my heart is so set on this—to allow him to remain. Let us think up some

plausible reason, something—not abrupt or unnatural, er—what do you think of it?”

I at once was enthusiastic.

“Now if we could persuade Tootsie to help—let us find my wife,” he said, jumping up. He looked into the drawing room. “Why, they are gone! No; there’s my wife on the veranda.”

“Tootsie and the young gentleman,” said Mrs. Greyson, “are looking in the birdhouse. James?” she said in a lower voice.

“Well, mother?”

“Just the image of Claire in eyes and face,” she answered with a quaver in her voice.

Then the Judge outlined our proposal. She grew animated as he proceeded, and acquiesced with a little catch at a sob.

CHAPTER III

A SWAMP CARDINAL FLOWER

JUDGE GREYSON and I silently approached the young people, who were discussing quail. Then Tootsie tackled the habits, habitat, and peculiarities of the prairie chickens in a pen further on. The Judge and I kept within earshot. Skid began a graphic account, as simple as it was sincere, of the sun-dance of prairie cocks. That was not in books. The Judge was amused and Tootsie seemed entranced. She and Skid sat down on a bench and there came more of doodle bugs, of hornets' nests, of the great hunters of the swamp, Hi Spading and Hink Stickel. Skid was doing nearly all the talking in swamp vernacular.

The Judge whispered, "That is the first human being, from her teachers down, who could talk my little bird expert to a standstill. Sh! listen!" We stepped in a little denser shrubbery and heard Skid telling the "San'hill road race." It was as new to me as it was to the Judge. We had hard efforts to restrain ourselves. Placidly concealing the extent of our eavesdropping, we went toward them.

"Oh, father," said Tootsie, whirling around and skipping to him. "Father, Skid—I mean Mr.

Puffer—knows things about birds and animal life that ought to go in books and aren't there."

"I'm jus' plain Skid miss," and Skid appeared worried.

"Tootsie," began the Judge, "Colonel French, mother and myself are somewhat interested in a plan. This young man—Skid—is to be put at school. Meanwhile till we find a suitable teacher, why—er—we thought maybe he might stay."

Tootsie Greyson gasped; it was a little sudden even for her. But in a few seconds her luminous eyes, glancing at each of us in turn, grasped the situation.

"Good!" she cried. Then she looked at Skid. Perhaps he could not think of himself except as the old, ill-dressed, disreputable looking Skid; he remained calm.

"Colonel,"—the wily Judge seemed struck with a momentous thought partly inspired, partly luck,— "how would it do for these young people, whose tastes are so much alike, to teach each other?"

"Brilliant idea, Judge Greyson! Certainly we might—might be able to fix up a room somewhere. He has to brush up before he enters the spring term."

"Above the carriage house, father, where our gymnasium is to be, and if Mr. Puf—Skid, I mean, shall I call you Skid? That is just as good and proper a front name as Puffer is a back name. Now if he—" and Tootsie Greyson paused.

The Judge agreed instantly. "Right, daughter; as you say, we could fit up those three rooms with

very little cost to Colonel French. We will secure the services of an athletic teacher, as you say, er—as you must have said sometime or other, and with blackboards and—and—”

I had a sudden outburst: “Exchange ideas, she teach him rudiments and get him ready for January, and Skid would—say, Skid, what would you do for the good of the cause?”

“I might—might”—he looked soberly at his patent leather shoes—“set on a chair and try to look solemn, while the ethers is givin’ ther testimony.” Of course three of us laughed. “O’ course things hev been comin’ so fas’ lately, thet I’m jus’ settin’ back an’ tryin’ to see through the dus’. Whut the Clonel says is jus’ whut I want.” He turned a wistful look up at the Judge,—“I s’pect I’ll be terrible wearin’ on your nerves till I git to fittin’ in the fambly es well es I do my new clo’ses. I will lie awake nights Clonel, jus’ tryin’ to make good es fas’ es I can.” His looks and words sobered us.

We went to the veranda. There were more explanations and suggestions. Skid was to return the next day for final arrangements. We bade them good-bye, and as we went away I reflected that it was the swiftest evening in my existence.

On our way back to the hotel I asked Skid how he felt.

“’Bout like spiled rain-crow aigs in a hummin’ bird’s nes’. Things new an’ strange is comin’ fas’. Thet girl is ’leven quarters thoroughbred, es Pop ust to say. She’s square an’—an’ knows a lot. I

hev to guess while she knows. Ef she don't know, she don't lie about it like them hunters. Maybe she can make a feller feel at home in thet big place. Gosh blimmity Clonel, it looks like a patch on the outside o' heaven."

"Did you say 'maybe' or 'mebby,' Skid?" I asked.

"I learned seven new ways this afternoon o' sayin' the same words es I hev been allus saying. Ther is es many more es there is frogs out in the swamp. I wisht I could be a lobelia 'stead of a burdock."

"What's a lobelia, Skid?"

"W'y it's called the swamp cardinal flower. It grows in wet places an' all the ol' doctors, specially the witch doctors, give it for fits, mad dog bites, an' they make a knock-'m-stiff linament. Thet's what we call the stuff out there. It was invented, es I tol' you, by Grandmother Ann. A teaspoonful is cackilated to lay a man out full lenth. The roots biled is specially good fer them kin' o' diseases es we don't know whut they are. Fer ef the sick person dies 'ith takin' the medicine nobody knows whuther it was the medicine er the ailin' es killed 'im. W'en the moon is on the encrease, nobody 'll touch knock-'em-stiff linament.

"I hev been huntin' er herdin' all day out ther on the range lan's in early fall an' seein' nothin' but rotten places, quicksan' holes, an' waste spots an' las' year's dead blue stems,—jus' swamp, swamp and swamp dried up 'fore the fall rains. Mebby,

maybe I mean, ef the sky is kind o' gray, seein' nothin' but that eternal fightin' o' the high lan's an' the swamp; maybe thinkin' 'bout things es hed no answer, w'en suddenlike, right afore you think, you'd run plunk up ag'inst one o' them cardinal flowers.

"There it 'd be standin', flashin', proud an' red, holdin' its head up es ef it was darin' the whole gol blamed, all-fired swamp. It 'd be gleamin', shakin', defyin', its sassy head high, jus' es ef it was sayin', 'Go to hell you nasty swamp. I am master here. I'm the whole thing!' I guess it looks sothin' like the teacher at the Crossins feels w'en she's huffy." He ceased and turned his great eyes to me.

"Skid, just buckle down to work for a few months; take your medicine whatever way it comes, but stick. Listen, fit in by learning how to act, talk, do." I threw one arm around his shoulder. "You have the stuff, but it must be shaved down to the sounder grain for better growth. You'll win out. And what is more, my boy, some of those questions you have asked yourself out in the swamp will be answered; or their mystery, even if never lifted, will not rob you of your peace of mind. Buckle down; get into the new gear, and remember I believe in you though you make a thousand and one mistakes. Now good-night, Skid. Happy snores."

"Same to you Clonel, no Colonel. That's one o' the seven I've learnt."

A little later I slipped past his door and bent my ear; he was breathing softly and regularly as a child.

CHAPTER IV

THINGS 'ITH ME IS KIND O' MIXED

EARLY next morning Judge Greyson telephoned me that he and Mrs. Greyson would be down with the carriage at nine-thirty to take us out driving. I have neglected to say that the Judge had told me the previous evening that Claire had had a little property which was now worth seven or eight thousand dollars, and he wished to make certain legal arrangements about the matter with me.

"How does Tootsie strike you now, Skid?" I asked while waiting for the Greyson carriage.

"Well, she's a little the quickes' in brain travel es I ever run with. She is runnin' over 'ith books an' civilization, thet's Pop's ol' word; I'm bilin' over 'ith wil' things and swamp stuff. She seemed to know me an' me her in ten minutes es well es we ever will. She said to me, 'Skid, you don't know books, but you know what's to go in 'em.' Yes; them's 'er very words. She said, 'Skid, you don't talk es I do, but you air jus' a thousan' times more interestin'.' Nen she got off while we was lookin' at them white peacocks what she called her philosophy. Gosh! aint thet a crackin' word though. Jus'

keeps me hoppin' to remember 'em. She says, 'Langwidge wasn't so much to conceal our thought es to expose our ignorance.'"

"Think she's beautiful?"

"She makes me think o' snake peters flashin' in the sun on a May mornin'. Er like parts o' rainbows in thunder clouds wen the sunshower in April is over an' the birds asingin'; er water bugs playin'—er—gosh blimmity I jus' don't know wat. But anyways we took t' each ether like kittens, es efter touchin' whiskers fer the firs' time, air perfectly contented to go skippin' roun' the room like es they was 'quainted all ther lives."

Our idle talk led up somewhere to our meeting nearly two years before when I first came to hunt on the Pufferland range.

"Skid, honest now, what did you think of me as a hunter? Tell me square,—since I have graduated."

"Seein' it's you Clonel, no Colonel, an' it's two years ago, I *was* kind o' fearful fer yer dogs at firs'."

So looking as serious as I could, with a squint in my eye which he understood, I said, "Well, one day one of my dogs did yelp considerable."

"Guess you didn't know I rubbed salt grease on thet shot hole thet night w'en you was asleep. Good thing you had number eight loads. Fellow'd nachurly think eights was purty fine too, fer snipe." And the solemn way he said it made me laugh outright.

"Sure, Skid, of one thing. I never told a livin', breathin' soul," said I in swamp-land vernacular.

"An' o' course the dogs didn't," he said, serenely smoothing the glittering shine of his patent leather shoes.

Our conversation turned to hotel menus and he asked seriously, "Wher does the cook get them frogs' laigs we hed?"

"From the Kankakee sloughs," I answered. He rubbed his nose with mature thoughtfulness. "Guess it'd be a good thing to tell Mom to ast five dollars a nacre more fer the slough forty w'en she sells. I'll bet ther air four hundred billion million bullfrogs efter the cranes an' thunder-pumpers air through ev'ry fall." That "forty" later furnished frog legs to a hundred hotels.

Later I left Skid staring at the wonders of a hardware shop window and returned; the Greyson carriage was about due.

The shining stateliness of the Greyson carriage, with its driver and footman, was a little oppressive, but as we sped down the less noisy thoroughfares any restraint was soon dispelled by the genuine cordiality of the Judge and his gentle wife. I sat with her facing the Judge. I repeated once more what I knew of the Puffers, of Pufferland and its ways and its inhabitants, Skid's character, his longings, his unique ways and peculiar language. Once more I told of my experience with Mrs. Puffer.

But there were two things I did not mention, that

comical scene between Skid and Alice on the bench by the toolhouse, and the Judge's letter to Robert Greyson.

The lines hardened round Mrs. Greyson's tender mouth when I had told her about the foster mother, but her only comment was, "She's hiding something yet, I am sure." It was a woman's intuition that months later proved to be right. The remark grew in my consciousness and would not out.

It was arranged that a schoolroom and gymnasium were to be made over in the upper rooms of the carriage house and that Skid should have a certain chamber of the main house looking out on the rear. Money matters were settled. Later I was to be appointed guardian if Mrs. Puffer could be induced to assign her legal rights. Skid was to avoid most of the diversions of city boys, and his language should be of Tootsie's particular manufacture.

"He learns almost by intuition and needs to be told just once. Perhaps the swamp brand of speech will come hard to your lovable daughter," I said with increasing enthusiasm, "but he is sensitive, proud, and you will scarcely believe me when I tell you he is shy. I can think of no possible better luck than what you offer him. I feel too, Mrs. Greyson, he will be an obedient boy, and when you know him as I do you will love him."

She replied: "I feel an affection for him now that I cannot understand on any other principle than he somehow belongs to us." There was a motherly light in her sweet old face.

An hour afterward they set me down at the hotel door.

Later I saw Skid coming back. 'As he reached the nearest corner the policeman with him pointed him on and walked away. Skid told me afterward that he "kind o' accidentally worked 'roun' off the main road onto a crossin' gapin' at winders an' 'fore I knowed I's los' worse'n a spring chicking two days ol'." As we sat in the shade of a long awning over the water-cooled pavement he seemed to be approaching some serious subject. I helped him.

"Any 'breaks' while I was away, Skid?"

"Colonel I wish you'd give the password es to them talkin' incubators in there."

"I hope you did not make the same mistake as I did the first time, Skid." I confessed no further. I felt sure he had been investigating the mysteries of the telephone.

"S'pect the same. I talked into the wrong hole. That 'hop' giggled till I thought 'is face 'd pop. Nen I ast him how *his* kind o' masheen worked. I hed a notion to tell 'im our kin' down home was diff'rent.

"'This is a new kind, sir.' He was thet polite wen 'e tried to behave 'isself,—nen 'e showed me how. It was Toots, astin' how 'er pupil was. She tol' me 'bout them rooms over the stable an' the jim—jim, some sort o' sothin' er ether. She said we was to hev a special teacher,—nen the ding masheen didn't speak up good,—an' maybe four er five 'd be in at the killin'.

"Right wiles we was jabbin' talk into thet hole, some big animal cut right in an' says, 'Is this the libery stable?' I can hear 'im yet. 'Is this the libery stable?' " Skid drew his chin down hard and rolled out a deep, bull-frog voice. "I heard Tootsie Greyson tellin' 'im sothin' 'bout gittin' off the line, 'bout interferin', nen I busted in feelin' purty mad.

" 'Yes,' I says, 'this aint the libery stable still, huh? I am jus' out, sol' the las' pair 'bout a nour ago. I can fix you out 'ith a bar'l o' blue bull-frogs tho. How are you fix' on the reg'lar blue cowfrogs s'morning?' I could hear her laughin' an' the big animal thet broke through kind o' turned roun', I guess, an' said sothin' loud enough fer me to hear, to some one 'side o' 'im:

" 'Something's got loose on Park 937. Guess it's the jag department of the jail!' Nen loud an' fierce he whirled into 'is hole an' says:

" 'Say, cully, how long you been out?'

"I guess thet's 'bout all es disturbed the air 'roun' here," concluded Skid.

A moment after, I was called to the telephone and accepted an invitation to dinner at the Greyson home. I told Skid; he seemed much pleased, but said, "Seems a purty fas' clip we're cuttin' Colonel. Well, I hev learnt it aint the proper caper to snore w'en you drink out o' the coffee saucer, an' it's ag'inst the rules to carry away the silver." He was laughing as merrily as I was.

We arrived at the Greysons', an hour or so before dinner and I noted that Skid seemed to know that

his best speech and manner were required. He talked little when the others were present, but when he was with Tootsie he completely forgot himself in her honest appreciation. I cannot make clear to my satisfaction just how Skid got on, but I had a feeling that he was almost uncomfortably swift in finding a level in the new associations. His former rough charms of wit and mature integrity of feeling seemed to be gilded over with something better than he had had. I am sure his table conduct was at least as good as mine. His provincialisms were lost most of the time in the laughter that always followed his remarks. He was learning to speak another jargon more extensive than his own, perhaps with no better philological pedigree. Mine at its best and his at its worst ran back to dim ages, perhaps to the grunt or vowel deviltries of slangwhanging barbarians. He would learn new intonations, softer shades of meaning; new ideas from his active brain would find new words; but no one would ever hear more musical resonance than his voice possessed. When the Judge had heard that voice in the library the first night, he had said, "Where in the name of heaven he got that voice I cannot understand, unless heredity steps in and unties the knot."

After dinner Skid and Tootsie went to see the changes already commenced in the rooms above the carriage house. They traveled over the natural history of many of the captives in the aviary. She explained to him the intricacies of lawn tennis; suddenly she showed him the white peacocks again.

He saw for the first time in his life, and as if for his special favor, the peacocks strut out in a glory of lambent ivory. He was wordless for a time, then he found his tongue and said in a hushed voice, "An' ken a bird bloom out like thet 'ithout a fellow fallin' down like the soldiers at the Holy Sepulcher, Tootsie?"

Tootsie Greyson stared at the lad, but it took only a second or two for her to find her tongue. "What on earth, Skid Puffer, do you know about the Holy Sepulcher?" She found that Skid knew all about Richard Cœur de Lion down to the details of that villain hero's half-legendary history. He might have told her, too, that that was about all the history that he did know.

When we were ready to part for bed at the hotel, I asked Skid how he felt.

"The raincrow feelin' hes gone Colonel, an' in its place I begin to feel like a meader lark. You know how they flick their wings an' sail asingin' just like they was bilin' 'ith joy? I hev been thinkin' all day as how I'd rether be a meader lark bilin' over 'ith music an' I would to be havin' my fists up like a swamp cardinal."

CHAPTER V

ENGLISH AS IT MAY BE WRITTEN

WHEN I said farewell at the railroad station the next morning, I feared for a time Skid would break down. I did not dare to look back at him as he stood there watching the dusty train glide away. That morning was the fifth day of June.

The fifth day of the following month I got Skid Puffer's first letter. The Judge had written twice, so I had heard news of him. I also received one from Tootsie and a brief scrawl from Mrs. Puffer, who said she was willing to be guided by me in the matter of guardianship.

Skid's letter may be offered as a perfect example of a ragoût of mental mince without the peppering of commas. I found after some study it would read if it were punctuated. As there has never been seen in literature a letter like it, I give it in all the glories of its sausage-like style.

"DEAR COLONEL

Its now a month sence you went away. Tootsie G. that is what I call her sits right over there and is telling me how to spell the hard words in this letter. I am now nineteen years old. I have been all night at it. I am copying it. She has taught

me to spell two hundred words and most of them are just about three letters long. I am writing this on a new sheet from the one I did last night. I'm ringing in some new words as I have learnt. She dont ask say Colonel that's an awful way to spell ast nor want to see this letter. She says be sure and slaughter the ins. She means when I travel along a word that has a tail at the end ith no with she says thats right to as sounds like in why jus no that's wrong to. I have to keep spelling thers one of them ings on that word why say ing ing ing three times and cross my heart. But she says there is such a word as in.

This first letter is a curiosity as to commas quotation marks and punctuation points. Theres three words a thousand times harder than the ing family. But I can fling 'em here I have stopp'd to fix that em. I have crossed my heart three time on em. Its them. Thats why she says this letter is a curiosity. But as its a letter to a member of the family she never lets up on that of why she says it cuts no ice. She did not say it cuts no ice she means that.

I have learned to put in capitals and periods. When in doubt Skid jab in a period take a fresh start and struggle on. Thats her instructions.

Say Colonel its going there I slaughtered thet no that one proper. Ill start over. Its going to be gosh blim no I have to cut the vitals out of it too. Some of the death dealing is with I just cant get over with it seems to me ith ought to go. Its as for

es has for hes then I have to put a head on about a hundred others. Ether for other and them dees in such gabble as blind cant you hear me grunt that d on blind find old and a lot more? She says put in the crooked thing there.

I have learned there are three ways to spell 2. Several ways for write about three are right thats right she says and the rest rong. I can spell rong easy. That aint no am not in my hundred words. Besides the hard easy ones of three letters I can spell three regular busters here they are phthisics syzygy and chamois nobody on earth knows what they mean. No gets me. I can spell it several ways most which is rong.

Tootsie G says shes going theres another ing come into its own to throw the grammar at me soon. She says its safe I always said safte before to never say is with me. Just try are for a change. The reason I am righting this with a pencil she just told me how to work pencil on the paper lets see wher was I yes the reason is I have to rub out about half the time.

If ever I felt tongue tide its righting letters. I asked her how she spelled tide. Its tied and tide is right because it kind of rolls over me and douses me. Yes I am certain tide is right.

We dont agree on one word and thats ither for either. She says the proper way to say it is i-ither. The reason I don't agree is I have heard you say eether. With the accent hammer on the E. She says always right the pronouns big and maybe E is

one of them skewjeed letters. She says there am not I pretty near said aint any such word as skewjeed. Thats where I am ahead of her.

I practice in the gym an our each day. I can chin myself twelve times and not stop. And Tootsie G three times. I can spell them two hundred words backwards and use them right about half of the time. I wrote to mother and this is what she wrote back some of it I mean.

Dear son You seem to be doing well. Your photograph that is the way she spelt it is quite like Hi when he came back in his canary feathers. He wears his freckles yet more than his shoes. The judge wrote me and he says he and you come out in August or September. I would dearly love to see you. Its very lonely out here since you are gone. I have sold off considerable. Toots no Tootsie G. says mom is famous for her spelling and not one word is toggged up rong.

Alice is coming home about September. Mother says other things but I am bout wore out sharpening pencils and rubbing things out I will now take a bath and try to sleep for a few hours.

SKID.

N B I have learned about N B. When you forget something you tack it on at the end this way. I have forgot nothing."

The letter amused me very much and I forgave its sorry appearance, knowing the labors of its construction. One or two places showed that he had erased

beyond the quick of the sheet and little holes showed.

Tootsie's letter had all the marks of a school miss. The envelope was pinkish, with the stamp on the left hand upper corner, and was sealed with three little dabs of green wax on the back with an old English G in each. The writing commenced on the first page, the second and third pages were written in long lines across both sheets and she of course took pains not to write on the last page. I forget what the perfume was.

“COLONEL FRENCH,
Chicago.

My dear new and beloved uncle: I want to inclose this with Skiddie P's as a sort of amendment to his constitutional labors. He is progressing famously and he right now talks a great deal better than he writes. I believe this is his first attempt at letters, a representative illustration of what he is not. I have a spelling class of one scholar and so far two hundred words have been encompassed, words that trouble his soul with the shades of sound rather than in meaning. I am adding a few new ones. We are on the “states” now.

The Gulf stream and the tides and currents will be the next to flood his epistolary remains. Indiana geography does not afford enough natural phenomena to satisfy his cravings.

Some of my pleasantest hours are up there in the carriage house teaching him,—one of the most fragrant souls ever cut in for the vivisection of educa-

tion. He is remarkable in many ways and perhaps it will surprise you when I tell you that his gym exercises show him a wonder. I hold out my arm on a level with my eyes, and he springs over it like a cat. I suppose you knew of his ease at turning handsprings before I had him in tow, but your trainer has taught him to throw a back summersault with the ease of a professional. Only once I believe did he make too short a turn and we all shook (like the building) for the safety of our lives.

He has performed another feat worthy of immortality. He can draw himself up with one arm to the trapeze bar. He is putting on flesh, too. He stands five-eleven, and weighs one hundred and seventy-five pounds—mostly Troy.

I want to ask you if I may teach him to waltz. If I undergo the dangers of being trampled to death,—just see how disloyal I am! and am willing to take chances (before he gets any heavier) to untangle his swamp feet in graceful exercises,—why I want your blessing on my missionary work. May I teach him to shoot—the lancers?

Now uncle, I may call you uncle, mayn't I? I think you have done a great deed to rescue such a great personality, and to prevent his going to waste out there in those fens.

You may be solicitous as to his personal environment. We have team work, and a variety of ordinary athletics, mostly indoors. There are three girls beside myself, and Skid pairs off when necessary with the Professor.

The girls are my particular friends and loyal. Tippy Shurk is the Chief Justice's daughter, and my confidante. Then Molly Sewell who can "do more" facial criss-crosses than any one on this mundane sphere. She can stare with one eye and frown with the other at the same time. And there is another glory all her own,—she can move her ears. Skid said in a moment of forgetful manners that "mules an' horses hes the same." But she is a well bred girl. Then there is our own beloved Nell. She is as strong as a leopard. We are not heroines or goddesses, but just fun loving girls, have our pains, our woes and our hunger for candy as other girls. Tippy told me recently that if she could find a gentleman sufficiently handsome to appear in the society columns, and if next spring opened well, she would elope,—perhaps she would ask Skid to go along.

Nell's distinguishing trick is to make all of us girls behave when she is cutting up. We are not practising for muscular abnormalities. We are playing for ease, grace, muscular flow, how not to step on one's own feet in making a speech.

I am sure Skid will surprise you when you see him again. The swamp ear-marks are fast coming off. He never did look or act as uncouth as his language looks in a letter, or feels in the ear. He is always kind and thoughtful and sincere in everything. Mother, I think, could not get along without him, he is so lovable, so son like and brotherly. There

is much more I would write you, but Skid's letter is enough.

Your loving niece,

TOOTSIE C. G."

When I left the Greysons' in June, Tootsie weighed a "lady's-weight," wore gowns to somewhere below her knees, and also at times changed to one which, if she were still (and that was seldom), was sisterly with her shoe tops. I am sure she had no instincts yet of sex. In mental equipment she was unusually advanced, her expression bright as lightning, but she was in that most troublous, still undelimited age of character, the transition period between face-scratching and neck-clinging, but very affectionate and pure.

I answered Skid's letter in a way that made him comfortable, perhaps happy. As I was going up in the Wisconsin lake districts "to lazy," I wrote him that I did not expect him to write again before the middle of September. I asked the Judge to do the writing.

About the middle of September I got my second letter from Skid,—typewritten,—its grammar still lame.

Indpls. Ind.,

Sept. 15, 18—

COLONEL FRANCIS FRENCH,

Weaver Lake, Wisconsin.

My dearest friend:

I have been feeling like a meadow-lark for several days. Tootsie G. says she sees glimmerings in me.

"There's hopes." Her sister Alice took sick with swamp fever in July about the time she was to have come home, and for several weeks she lay pretty close to the line. Her mother went out with a nurse and from there she went to somewhere in Michigan for a relapse. No; that isn't the word Colonel.

Her mother is home now, but Alice won't return till late in the fall. I have not seen her since you have.

The Judge and me went out to fix up the sale papers in September, and have just got home. We took a box of stuff for Hi and Jake, most for Jake and went to Reynolds where we got livery and drove out to the home place in swell style with a couple of half broke bronchos that most of the time were running off. As they pointed the way we wanted to go we made fast time.

Mother had most of the stock sold off, most of the things packed up, and will move into the city about holidays. When we flourished up at the barnyard gate, I jumped out forgetting I was a new kind of bird to her in those clothes. She come out, took one stare at me and flung her arms around my neck and squealed,

"Wh-ee-ee!" And she hugged me so tight it almost hurt.

Mother, you know I used to call her "Mom," managed to put a meal of cold boiled pork, crackling egg corn bread, a bowl of milk half cream and set out a dish of Rambo apples. Oh yes; she had dew-

berry pie to finish off with. As Judge G. and me were hungry as a new pointer muzzled all day when you are teaching him to nose out quail, I tell you Colonel I agreed with the Judge that was the sweetest tasting fodder that I have held my nose over since we left last June.

Mother was pretty cute holding out for us preparations as to beds and canned goods even if she did know we was coming out some time. The Judge made music all night on those corn husks you used to sleep on and I dreamed new dreams on my old sway back lounge.

Next morning Judge and I drove over to Spadings and found Hi and Hink waiting for us. Hink looked as if he was going to take to the timber as we got near, but Hi who had been touched with civilization in those patent leathers, stood his ground.

The new wore off of me pretty quick with them but I had to drag the box of presents out to the woodshed and lock the door and yank off my coat, and vest before Hink got confidence enough to come out of his humps. If I could make everybody as happy as them for such a small amount of money, I'd like to have a chance to try it.

There was an overcoat for each, a complete outfit for Hink two shotguns with everything that goes with them except the dogs and game. When I handed the gun to Hink he took it as if it was a hornets nest and then seeing the clothes and shirts and underclothes he just handed that gun over to Hi and busted right out bawling. But he was

hugging me at the same time. He come to pretty quick for joy, and begun to strip and get on those fine clothes, dirt, humps and all. Then he swooped for the black socks and swept his hand around for those shining shoes.

But I was so sorry! His feet has been spreading and spreading ever since we came away. His feet was tens then, but he has the regular swamp spread now and levins or twelves is needed for his foot territory. I told him he looked swell anyway and slick as slippery elm.

It was a pretty hot morning, but both wearing their overcoats sneaked around to the pantry window. I went into the house and told Mrs. Spading to come out and survey them, like Solomon in all his glory. All she could do was to set down on the crock bench with her mouth open and fan with her apron kind of mumbling, "Is der world zo das ent a coomin yet"; or something like that. She's dutch as crout. I haven't got my pocket dictionary here and I'm ringing in some old words I never harnessed up before.

Then the Judge and I drove back to mothers. Hi told me next day, for we staid the second night, that after we left Hink sweat over those shoes once more and gave it up. Then, wearing his overcoat and carrying his old clothes in a bundle on a stick and his patent leathers in his hands he broke for home. He ran all the way.

His mother saw something flying and thought it might be a swamp fire, Hi said. Those new things,

specially the overcoat and white shirt, standing collar, stiff cuffs and stiff hat, though sort of human, made her catch hold of the door nob for safety. She was going to slam the door in his face if he looked too sassy. She saw his feet. She knew them, that end was her Hink anyhow.

This is what Hink said to his mother, Hi says: '*Wachtet unt bake it das dir nikt in fer soothin syrup fall in, die gyste ist villig auber die flysh ish squaw.*' That was taught to Hink out of Hi's catekism book and so far as I ever learned its the only thing Hink ever did learn. And Hi said he was poor at that. Hi said so far as he knew she just set down and cried as if her heart would break. That part sounds just like Hi though.

The place looked mighty onry out there this time of year. Everything is dried up and the old smell of rotten fish and dried up swamp, miles from the center, was the same old smell, with the same burning sand, the same dead thickets and the same hungry look that comes this time of year. The long haired fuzzy cattle lie hid in the brush and come out at night only because the freckled wood flies and the ten million greenheads eat them up alive in the hot daylight. Now and then the scraggy looking cranes with heavy wings would lumber up and beat slow to the next dead slough hole; and besides the thunder pumper about all the sounds you'd hear would be the steady click of the treefrog, or the quirk! quirk of the redheads on the barn. It was so lonely I felt like bawling. I can see yet the hot sand boiling

up over the buggy fellos and raining down over the hubs. The heat steamed up in some places and rolled and rolled. I couldn't help thinking, may be the swamp cardinal itself out there in the blue skim over the swamp was a hanging its fighting head since I was gone. And there wasn't a killdeer anywhere.

We stopped as we went past Hink's, got those shoes and told him we would send him another pair. Then Hink had me get out to show me something behind the woodshed. What would you guess it was? He had a nest of flying squirrels all boxed up and slatted. He gave them to me and I brought them home to Tootsie G. She was tickled most to death and now they are in a big wire mesh cage as big as a house.

We overtook Hi about five mile down the road with his new shot gun; he was sitting on a log waiting for us. He stopped us and gave me a pawpaw whistle almost as big as my leg, with fife holes in it. When he blowed it I believe you could hear it a mile.

I want to see you Colonel bad. Everybody is good to me but there is something hanging over me all the time because I haven't told you. Only telling you can make me feel right. So good bye and write soon.

SKID.

Those last lines set me to thinking. What could he mean? I immediately wrote him; encouraged him; told him I would visit him before the year was out and even went so far as to invite him to Chicago to spend a week or so.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN THE MEADOW LARK BOILED

I RECEIVED another letter from Skid Puffer some time in early October, which I regret is lost. It was firm in touch, typewritten, with a reasonable plenty of commas pertly traveling along the lines.

Judge Greyson wrote regularly once each week. He had several papers for me to sign; a bond was to be given; and I was to act as Skid Puffer's guardian. Mrs. Puffer had assigned her rights. He seemed to take a vast delight in Skid's physical and mental grooming. He went into the details of some of the athletic feats and was enthusiastic over two of their peculiarities,—their cat-like litheness and strength.

I got a letter from Mrs. Puffer saying she had assigned her mother rights to Skid, and she was cordial as a stiff, cramped little letter would permit. I wrote to Skid suggesting a little vacation and asked him to meet me in Chicago.

A short time after I got a telegram from him, the longest in text I had ever received from any one:

"Please bring dogs, guns for hunt at Puffer's. Since fall rains all green. Land of Jaggos ready.

My system needs ducks. Pawpaws soft. Yellow pumpkins falling, geese flying low, quail ripe. The spring by summerhouse calls, calls, calls. S. P."

This was so terse, so unlike his first letter that I laughed aloud.

It was late in October when I arrived at the station and found the entire Greyson family awaiting me. The Judge's handshake was warm, and he was in a cordial temper. Mrs. Greyson was glad to see me, and Tootsie, after clinging to my hand with both of hers for a hesitating moment, cast a quick glance at her mother and jumped up and kissed me. I felt greatly flattered, the Judge chuckled, and Mrs. Greyson gave a tiny grimace of affected horror.

And Skid! I somehow saw him last, although the meeting with the others was only seconds long. His hand clung to mine, and there was a look in his dark eyes that made me glad. But his appearance shocked me. It is easy to be mawkish when one is enthusiastic; Skid was "elegant," as trim, as polished in appearance as the Judge's gold-headed mahogany cane. I looked with almost unfriendly sharpness for some touch of the swamp, some vagrant zephyr of the Kankakee air.

When we stepped rapidly down the platform to the carriage he was erect, easy-mannered as Mrs. Greyson and his eyes were dancing with joy.

We whipped up with gallant splendor, and snapped brightly through the streets to the great home. There we had talked over cordial nothings

of the vacant weeks of separation, dined handsomely and were a merry crowd till ten o'clock that night. We had recitations by Tootsie and a funny tale by Skid, and the Judge himself peeled off the last veil of public dignity for a rather wabby foot-race with his daughter in the more secluded part of the lawn.

Just before I was ready to go to the hotel with Skid, Mrs. Greyson, whose presence always tempered the ardor of the company and subdued the hilarity of her husband, sat down at the piano and played an old-fashioned waltz. And the very next thing I saw was Tootsie and Skid circling around to the music.

I can not describe the ease, the grace, the poetry of the movements of the beautiful pair. When I came to, with a mental jolt, I saw the Judge rubbing his gleeful fists and looking at me.

Now I was shaking hands with them ready to go. The Judge beckoned me and we went into the library.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, his face lighted up.

"There's only one way to say it,—in the language of the immortal Abe Puffer, 'I am unnoncombobble-defustigated with the rasheoshenashun details.'" And the Judge laughed the happiest and longest laugh I had ever heard from him.

"Skid," I asked at the hotel as we sat for a few minutes before retiring, "how is the meadow lark?"

"Jus' tabilin'," he said with glowing face and a delightful fragrance from Pufferland.

After Skid had left me and I thought over the events of the day it seemed to me that, as Skid once had said, "things was comin' purty fas'." Though in his speech he still had his falls from rectitude, yet when he was at his best I had an uneasy feeling that he was fitting almost too well. Perhaps he was imitative rather than original after all. His development from a swamp chrysalis was a little too sudden and a little too bright. But I was glad he had won the affection and confidence of the Greysons. I am sure there had been no envious pang in my heart when I had seen the great judge place his arm around Skid's shoulder as they were stooping to look into the bird pens; there had been no mean feeling when I had seen Skid's hand fold over his new mother's as he stood by her chair. I was sincere with myself; I had no illusions. I could not help feeling that Skid was growing not only away from himself but away from all of us.

The next morning Skid knocked at my door to waken me.

"The train will be four hours late, Colonel—accident,—gets here at two P.M." So we were fated to stay over another day.

That afternoon we tried to kill time amiably. We practised pistol shooting; took a ride on horseback with the Judge and his daughter; reviewed the hunting dogs; telegraphed our liveryman to be ready at two the next day; and passed the afternoon at the Greysons'.

That night at the Judge's office I signed several

papers, signed a bond relating to guardianship requirements, and finished all legal matters about ten o'clock. Skid's division of the Puffer estate was a respectable amount, and I was now his guardian.

I had asked the Judge whether he had made any discoveries at the Puffer homestead, what his opinions were as to Mrs. Puffer, and what evidence he had collected.

"It was nearly an empty-handed hunt, Colonel. She disliked even to talk of the dead woman, told me less than she did you, but seemed willing enough to turn over her rights to you. Her farm is sold, the graveyard is reserved, most of the values have changed hands and she is to take a house down on Jefferson street, after the holidays. She seems to believe she is going to be happy with Skid. I know Skid will not be, but I could not tell her that. It comes into my mind continually that she is holding something back. You recall what my wife said about that?

"When you go out, I want you to spring something on her; startle her; make her give up. If you can guess accurately enough what she has in her mind, you may flush her. I've been thinking. If the dead woman out there was my poor daughter, she must have had some trinkets on. What has become of them? It seems to my way of thinking we ought to secure two bits of vital evidence. Something that will identify that dead woman, and show how she looked. My daughter had a little open-faced watch with a snapping blue diamond on the

back lid. She had a ring too, but I don't recollect how it looked. Of course none of her clothes are left. I would not recognize them anyway. The second thing is to spring my daughter's picture, we have in the back bedroom parlor, the women's parlor, and see if Skid recalls the dead woman through this likeness."

I rose. He took my hand and said earnestly, "Get some evidence, try for the watch, anything. If you get what you go after, when you return telephone me any time of night. I'll come."

I returned to my hotel filled with determination and many schemes none of which seemed to fit my desires. I expected that Skid would be at the Greysons', but I found him waiting for me and reading.

"What are you reading, Skid, and what part of the paper do you under—that is, er—what do you like best in a newspaper?"

"Colonel, you never have to make any changes in your flow for my feelings. I always want you to say just what you think. Will you?"

"Well, Skid, I have too blunt a way of speaking my mind. I have got into the habit of going back and covering up. But, Skid,"—I went over and gave him a pull around the waist and was astonished at some iron muscles that met my arm—"I have everything fixed now. I'm your legal guardian, philosopher, treasurer and friend. From now on, as at all time in the past, let's be square, candid and friendly to each other. I'm your boss. Say, Skid, can you stand me for a boss till you are twenty-one,

eh?" He caught my weak jollity, and his hand sought mine.

"I'm glad, Colonel, if it hadn't been for you—" Then I stopped him with my hand over his mouth.

"You can look the whole world in the face now, Skid. You are worth considerable in cold cash. To cut all guessing, my boy," and I locked my arm in his, and walked as I talked, "the Judge and I are about to unravel several mysteries soon. Wait. Don't guess. You have to answer to society by being a good and useful man. The starting post and the wire is where you come in at. Run square, beat out, take the purse. Have everybody who sees the race say, 'Well done, sir.' Skid, Mrs. Puffer has something up her sleeve she has not told us yet. I am going to find out what, in the next two weeks. And what's more, I want your help." Then we bade each other good-night.

CHAPTER VII

TIME AND TIDE WAIT FOR NO MAN

THE next morning at nine-thirty we were at the station, and saw the train pull out just as we got there. It had changed time just four minutes, and we were left to curse our luck. So far in my life as a business man I have not worked out any philosophy as to the real meaning of missing a train. I have never found any one to blame for the misconnection. I have never found adequate language to represent the excited emotions on display when "one misses the train." Trains missed are always the ones that are most vitally important for your existence at the time.

Neither have I seen one of these escaping, demonish trains that did not always scream or puff with a malignity never found in other trains. I might say in confidence that I have taken after these malignant trains and tried to run them down. I have reached them, thrown my valise (one time) on the back platform and then tried to jerk the breath out of the monster. But as yet I have always had to telegraph to the next station to intercept a valise, and I do not remember now that I ever disturbed the

equanimity or screaming savageness of any trains I missed and almost caught.

There are some sorrows and some passions that one learns to endure; which after a certain time, one may almost smile at. But time and age have no charms or soothing touch for a missed train that can palliate the deep damnation of its taking off.

Though only one single elemental passion possessed me when the smoke twiddled its fingers in my face, though I glared and wanted a tongue that could utter the thoughts that arose in me, I looked at Skid. Here was virgin soil, and he had never missed a train.

I managed to choke out, "Skid, what do you think?"

He smiled. "I'd like to crack it just behind the ears." A great peace fell on me. I knew what cracking a rabbit just behind the ears meant.

We returned to the hotel. We had wisely sent our baggage ahead, and it was all on the missed train gayly cavorting down to the wilds. It was a very pleasant situation. The hotel baggageman saw us enter the hotel and stared at us.

"Sorry you walked, gentlemen, here's your tickets. I checked everything through for you. I meant to tell you time had been changed on the Tip-up last Sunday. Clerk ought to have told you, he's new though." It is such afterclaps from baggagemen that induce much of the darkest criminality. In

our little parlor we got level with ordinary conventions before noon.

An hour later, throwing off my depression, I said cheerily, "Oh, what's the use anyway, Skid?"

"That's just what mother said to me one time. I was churning with our old standup churn. The butter would come to pinheads, but the cream was so cold, or so hot, or so contrary, that it bucked and refused to gather.

" 'Keep on stompin' Skid, it'll come sooner or later,' Mom said.

"But I had stomped and stomped and stomped.

" 'Mom,' I said, 'put in some cold water er hot water er sothin', it's buckin' worse'n a broncho.'

"Well, I sat down wearily on the doorsteps. Mom went to the tea kettle for some hot water, monkeyed around the stove a little, and when she was about to dash some scalding water in the churn our old cat jumped out calcimined with pinhead butter. She had just fallen in, when our backs were turned. Mom set the tea kettle back and stared at the cat, which was joyfully licking that pinhead butter from her coat.

" 'Mom,' said I, 'shall I jus' keep on stompin'?' "

" 'Oh lord-amighty Skid, whut's the use, the butter's mos'ly on the cat.' "

Later we got to talking about Tootsie. I asked my protégé if she was selfish. He grew enthusiastic and told of her good deeds. She had given up her drawing, her music lessons in part, just to teach him. She had sat up one whole night when her

mother was ill giving her medicine while the nurse slept. She was the best girl, the squarest girl, the most beautiful girl! He certainly was the most handsome being imaginable when wrought up with the virtues and excellencies of Tootsie Greyson.

"Yes, yes, Skid, I know all that. But what are her failings? She's human. What are her faults? Candid now, you remember we are to be square."

I expected him to charge full-head, but he had gone his length. A quizzical smile, a drawing close of the eyelids, a soft pulling of the left lobe of his ear, a habit Tootsie had not yet killed, because she had never seen it, and he said in a quiet judicial way, "Oh! of course she swears sometimes for relief, of course just a little thing like that."

I was more surprised than amused.

For fear that he would not proceed I said with a mean, significant sniff, "I thought as much."

But Skid was wise beyond his years, and not easily dispossessed by artifices so easy to read as mine.

"She was going to a picnic at Delphi one day and found at the last quarter of an hour that the train had changed time. She had about half enough time to primp. I heard her shooting around her room getting ready. She did not call Mary to help her, because Mary was born tired and thinks slower than she works. So Tootsie flew into her dresses and ribbons and things. She was just ripping into them. Suddenly I heard a sharp snap. Something had broken.

“ ‘Gosh-all-blimmity, thunderation, Tom Walker and—Texas! Sk-i-d?’ she called.

“ I rushed in. I found her sitting on the rug with her knees cocked up, half dressed, putting on her shoes. She held up the broken string in one hand and the shoe in the other. She looked more vexed than I ever saw her before. Suddenly she bounced up, and looking as much like our Irish footman as possible and drawing down her upper lip long, she flung her hand to her forehead, struck an attitude and said, ‘Yer honor, thuh korridge waits at thuh door, sor.’

“ I knew where I came in. I darted to her shoe box in her closet, yanked a shoestring out, grabbed the shoe, snipped in a new string and bounced out the door and waited.

“ A minute later I heard her snap her parasol from her dressing case and shout, ‘Thuh worr-rr-ld is me-ine.’

“ Then she stampeded out of the room, flew at me, kissed me, give my cheek a spat and raced to the door. She leaped into the carriage and as she settled said, ‘A shoe, a shoo! ado, adieu.’

“ Then the coachman loped his horses and she got to Delphi on time.

“ Then she has funny tantrums once in a while. One night about ten o’clock when everything was still, Mrs. Greyson doing embroidery, the Judge reading, and I,—I forget *what* I was doing. We had missed Toot for half an hour. Suddenly when everything was as still as death, the hall door that

leads to the back opened, and in came Toot, painted white as chalk in her mother's nightie, and a wisp of hay around her head looking like a ghost or marble statue. She looked like death. Then she opened her mouth and broke out this way:

“ ‘The crumblin’ tewmstone, the gojus musaleum, the marble shaffs o’ granit all bear the stinkin’ desire ’ithin us,—er—the marble shaffs o’ granit, marble shaffs o’—say Skid, how in thunder does it go? Skoot to the house fer them Hunderd Selexuns an’ ef yer mother comes snoopin’ roun’ tell ’er we want it fer a nest aig.’

“Then she sailed away. Mrs. Greyson laughed till she cried and the Judge just roared. She had remembered my telling about building the ash-hopper.”

At one o’clock, while Skid and I were seated with the commercial travelers under the long veranda wing of the hotel wondering what we should do, the Greyson carriage dashed up to us with Tootsie Greyson alone in it. She ran down to us in a flutter of excitement and before we knew had Skid half-way to the carriage, talking volubly, as careless of conventions and external circumstances as a child.

“Come; hurry. We have just received a telegram from Alice and she will be here on the flyer. Her message was delayed. Come, uncle. We shall just have time if we run the horses like a doctor.”

And before we had time to resist or protest she had us in the vehicle, and the horses were on a gallop to the railroad station.

The train had just come in as we reached the station. Tootsie, who had run ahead, jumped out and spied Alice in the hurrying throng, and was locked around her neck as we came up. Alice received me cordially. Then Tootsie, who for months had carefully withheld the evolution of Skid from her letters to Alice, pulled her around to him.

I had never seen the lad more charmingly delighted. Alice turned to him, stared, gasped and then burst out laughing in his face. I was indignant. Tootsie was pale with anger. Skid was the first to recover. A haughty look shot through his face, his spine straightened, and then he offered her his arm. As she lightly touched his sleeve a deep look of mortification reddened her face. She tried to say something, but the well-poised girl could not find her tongue. Tootsie pulled Skid away, and they, not saying a word, walked rapidly to the carriage.

As I piloted Alice she grew composed. We seated ourselves, and the carriage moved off.

She said, almost with serenity, "I am not feeling well to-day."

"Neither am I," I answered.

Alice looked up quickly, but I was sure I looked too honest for her. I asked her about her illness, the incidents of her journey, made other conversation, and seemed reasonably polite. What had been in her mind, anyway? I asked myself. I set out to discover the reason of her rudeness.

She said with about as much animation as a woman

paying her carfare, "Of course, Colonel French, you'll understand."

I looked as intelligent as I could.

"Of course I saw—Skid—that is what you call him,—I met him a few times out there, the oddest, most imperturbable misfit I ever saw. Some of his old aspects,—such as sitting with muddy red feet on that fuzzy old horse in his barnyard, with his yellow funnel hat,—and sitting in the wagon looking at his beautiful shoes the morning he left, sullenly biting his tongue,—I saw those the instant I looked at him. I burst out laughing with most unintentionally bad manners. I was too sincere for my training. I started to apologize as I saw Tootsie look so hurt. It checked my apology to see the well-bred fling of contempt in his face as he offered me his arm. Then I could not apologize without making it worse. You came to my rescue, and here we are talking like old friends."

Our tremendous length of friendship could be measured by minutes.

There was an ominous silence on the back seat.

"Oh, it will be easily explained to Skid," I said. "He sees the humor in almost anything. The moment you tell him you were looking at the old Skid instead of the new, he will be laughing with you. It is a very small thing, Miss Alice, at its worst. I suppose Tootsie has not explained so very much about him?"

"I fear she got more than she deserved for that," said Alice.

An hour later at the Greysons' Skid rose with me to go. I had been concocting an excuse that would pass any suspicion. Mrs. Greyson saw the restraint on Tootsie, who would not rise to the occasion. Alice and I were doing our best to disperse the lowering fogs that threatened the general discourse. Tootsie would not hear of both of us going. She revived suddenly. Skid succumbed to her persuasions. Promising to pass an hour with them after dinner I left, wondering about his fate among the warring elements.

Skid came to my room a short time after.

"Colonel, I've made the tallest break in my life. 'I'm kilt,' as Abe Puffer used to say." He looked more miserable than his words. From his version of what happened after I left I filled in the details, and the complete picture shocked me with its harsh lines.

"Mr. Puffer," Alice had said. This was too much for Tootsie Greyson, and she had laughed a long disconcerting peal.

Alice straightened up, sat primly aggressive and went on. "I might explain to you if you noticed it,—this afternoon at the station—for a moment—" Then Alice was thrown, horse and rider, by the unsympathetic countenance of scorn, the superior sniff of Tootsie and the cold reticence of the young man himself.

She signaled in a woman's way that she would like Tootsie Greyson to leave the room, and not doubting that Tootsie would go, she proceeded again, "You see, Mr.—er—Skid, I believe they call you,

—we have known each other for a long time. You seem a pupil of mine and if you—” Alice stopped surprised. Tootsie had risen as if to leave the room, but Skid was her pupil, and it seemed preposterous that Alice should claim him and have anything to say to him of such delicate nature that it was necessary for Tootsie to take to flight. She glanced at Skid, who seemed to sniff trouble and looked as if he needed sympathy.

Tootsie impulsively turned, perched herself on one of his knees and began to talk nonsense to him to relieve the tension. Skid had held the same maidenly burden a thousand times; that was nothing unusual. But Alice rose and glared. Tootsie saw nothing but Skid’s abashed face. He twisted uneasily, then as Tootsie Greyson saw his perplexed look, she caught his cheek in one of her hands and turned his face around to her. Then he began to push the sitter from his knee. He had seen that same look on Alice’s face before.

“Toot Greyson, haven’t you any sense?” Skid tried to rise, but, as he said, he was frozen. Tootsie whirled round on her sister, amazed past all comprehension.

“Tootsie,” said Alice, “I wished to apologize for my unintentional rudeness while at the railroad station, but after seeing your actions I suggest you go out to mother. I am not at all sure after what I have just seen that an apology with you would be understood, and I am not at all sure now that any other is—needed.”

"I understood that, Colonel," Skid said to me; "it cut just as clean as a butchering knife at hog-killing time. I felt sure there was a mistake all around, but I had not corraled it yet. But I felt something hot rise up in me, and the ice melted. I made for the hall and said kind of quiet:

" 'I suggest that both of you go out to mother and that Miss Alice go first.' Then I tramped out."

Tootsie Greyson at a later day gave me the rest of the scene after Skid had left.

"It's almost funny now, uncle, but it was dreadfully serious then. When Skid slammed the door, Alice hesitated, looked frustrated and forgot her own transgressions thinking of mine.

"But I was ashamed and hurt, and was thinking more of Skid than I was of her insult. 'Alice,' I cried out, 'that is twice you forgot your manners this afternoon.' Well, she was pretty angry. Alice has been the only one of the family that had ever submerged me, but I had been flying myself for several months then.

" 'Oh, that is what you call manners,' she said— 'sitting on a young man's knees. I was rude at the station, but I am not shameless.'

"That was the hottest fire that has ever been poured over my head. I said, 'Alice, you must need paregoric bad.'

" 'You shameless Toot Greyson!' she flamed. We heard a rustle, and there stood mother in the door. I have never seen mother look that way before or since.

“‘Are these—these—my daughters?’ There was heartbreak in mother’s look. I wanted to scream and fly into her arms. Alice turned paler than I ever saw her before. And mad as we had been, we both stood there sick at heart.

“‘Tootsie, you may explain.’

“Choked as I was, I had enough words to begin. ‘This afternoon we were all so happy to meet her at the depot, everything was all right till she came to Skid. He put out his hand, she stared at him, and laughed out loud right in his face. She took the Colonel’s arm and sat up proud and superior on the front seat. Here in the parlor a moment since she said she wished to have a private conference with Skid. I started to go out because Alice always has made me her servant. I saw how miserable Skid looked, so offended, so hurt, and I went over and began to plague him and somehow ease him up. His face all at once looked as if he was going to—faint. I followed his eyes and there was Alice! standing there like a gorgon moving her jaw. Then I heard, “Toot Greyson, haven’t you got any sense?”’

“Alice had started to break in once or twice, but a look from mother silenced her.

“‘She’s insulted Skid; she’s insulted me; and she has not apologized.’ And then, being through, I sat down and commenced to cry.

“‘Alice!’ mother demanded.

“And then Alice, who had recovered her wits and some anger, commenced to explain her side of

the case. 'I asked her,' Alice said, 'in a lady-like way to leave me a minute with this Mr.—Skid. I had unintentionally laughed as we were about to shake hands at the station. You remember, mother, I told you how he looked and talked, and that vision on the old hairy horse, with black swamp mud on his feet. The very instant that I ought to have felt proud of him at the depot, I saw him looking so disreputable and ignorant and everything out there in the swamp that I burst out laughing. I could have mended it and turned it off in a second, but Tootsie looked as if the world had come to an end.'

"And then I found out what the trouble was, uncle, for Alice went on, 'Then she jumped on this young man's knees, pulled his face around, began to talk baby talk, and they looked like two brazen fools spooning in public. And would your own flesh and blood, mother, stand that?' Mother and I saw the trouble at a flash.

"'Is that all, Alice?' for she had stopped.

"'All! all! all!' Alice almost screamed, looking at mother as if mother had suddenly gone daft. Mother's face was not so hard now, but she was still dangerous.

"'Alice, have you never done worse?'

"I think that question was a chance shot of mother's. Alice colored forty ways for Sundays. Alice did not know whether mother meant more or even what she said. She did not know whether mother had heard about the tool-bench affair. But

Alice said evenly after a thought or two, 'Mother, I could not do a thing like that.'

"Mother looked a little relieved. Then the look of heartbreak and shame came back to her face.

" 'The rest, Alice,' I called.

"As if she had forgotten, Alice caught herself up and went on. 'I said, "I suggest you go out to mother, Tootsie."' Skid got up like one who is perfect master of himself, and said smilingly, as if we were both children, "I suggest both of you go out to mother, and Alice might go first." He put on his hat and left.'

"Then mother spoke. 'Skid Puffer, a poor neglected boy of the marshes, a member of our family, Tootsie's pupil and brother, has shown himself immeasurably superior to either of you. He acted like a gentleman; you two like street brats. Now go to your rooms and apologize, or you are no daughters of mine.'

"Goodness! uncle, that was a sharp stroke of lightning just that moment. Like criminals, Alice and I climbed the stairs."

Returning to Skid: I saw that he was restless with apprehension, regret and suspense. I thought my best means to lift his burden was to speak lightly.

"You did perfectly right, Skid. I'm charmed with you. Those lovely Greyson girls will hear from their mother before the sun sets. When two well-bred girls get to quarreling about a young gentleman, and he present in the fray, it's high time for the taller timber. Yes, my boy, you did just right. If

you had shown a red temper everything would have been different. Come; we will patch up the fences."

We secured the most ravishing bouquet we could buy, then both labored over an apology, and this is what we wrought:

"My dear new sisters: Once in a while children forget themselves in the ardor of their amusements, and a little black cloud shuts out the sunshine for a little while. I forgot myself to-day; I apologize; won't all of you forgive me?

"SKID."

We hired a messenger and sent it. After a time the telephone rang. Skid Puffer was wanted. When he came back he said to me,

"Tootsie."

"And what?"

"Said she was crying. Every word."

"A complete and full apology, Skid. Stand by her."

"Suppose Alice will call me up, Colonel?"

"Never," I said in full conviction.

In due time I was called to the telephone, and Mrs. Greyson's voice asked calmly if I would permit Skid to come down. Skid looked a little unnerved when I reported to him.

"Was that all she said?" he said anxiously.

"Yes, I feel sure you have won out nobly, my dear boy. Don't delay." And Skid started out.

In an hour he returned happy, his face aglow. I felt sure his description of the affair was a trifle exaggerated by his humorous instincts.

"Mrs. Greyson herself opened the door," he told me. "Guess she was looking for me at the window. She took me in the parlor, and I felt better when I saw how her face was. The next thing I said was, 'I'm so sorry, mother.'

" 'For what, my son?' She did look surprised.

" 'Why, for being so, so unmannerly this afternoon.' And before I knew where I was at, she had me tight in her arms.

"Then she said next, 'Sit down, son!' Of course I sat and wondered what would be next move.

" 'Alice!' she called. I heard Alice come tripping down the stairway; she came in just as composed as those white peacocks. Mother just stood there and waited.

"Then Alice, just as easy as if she were going to market, said, 'This afternoon, Skid, at the station when I took your hand I looked over your head after the first glance and saw you on that old bony mare in the barnyard out at your home. The vision was so different from what I saw before me, I could not help smiling right out loud without a single thought of offense. You easily understand it now? When I came home and saw Tootsie sitting in your lap, I thought of you as a stranger. It looked so brazen and defiant that I just lost my temper as other people do sometimes and spoke my mind. Now if you will overlook the little misunder-

standing we will play together as nice little children should.'

"I was about to take her hand she was holding out, when mother interfered and said, 'Wait.'

"Then she was about to call Tootsie when who should appear with her face around the door jamb but Toots herself, saying, 'I am so glad the birds are singing after the storm.'

" 'Tootsie, apologize to Skid,' and mother's lips shut pretty severe.

" 'Why, I have already, mother dear,' said Tootsie, looking to me for further testimony.

" 'She has, mother,' said I, looking as comfortable as I could.

"Well, that took the wind out of mother's sails and she sat down with a little grunt. She must have wondered how we managed it, especially if she sat by the window watching for me. But there was a soft light in her face as she came over and kissed me just as she always does. I felt better. Then Tootsie, looking a little ashamed about something, came up and kissed me like a sister, whispering, 'Skid, I'm so sorry,—the villain is discover-r-ed.'

" 'Now, Alice,' said mother. Gosh-all-blimmity, Colonel, that took grit. Talk about missing trains, burning limekilns, roasting at the stake and—and hornets. Shucks! They are nothing. Grit? Alice knew she was up against it good and hard, Colonel, but think of me-e. I had to do it and she's different from Tootsie. Besides, I remembered the last time. She just stood there rosy and turning white and look-

ing cryey, and kind of caught her breath as I stepped out brazen as a swamp bumble-bee, on its first fly out of the nest, but I did not dare to say a word. Alice kind of shuffled out a henstep or so and seemed to have lost all her nerve.

"Colonel, honest, she looked just that way when—oh, you know when—when I flew up and,—the roses, milk and gold business?"—I remembered.—"Mother did not hurry us a bit. Things were coming at an Ole Oleson gait for Alice, anyway. I thought of old Squire Puffer's words: 'Sh' is a bran' to be snatched from the burnin',' and—yes, just while she was looking down her cheeks I got after the brand.

"She looked me square in the eyes, Colonel, when our lips touched and her eyes swam. Shucks! Kissing with her sticks."

I believe I was as happy as he that the strong gale which filled the Greyson sails had died down to a redolent zephyr.

Late in the afternoon Judge Greyson stopped at the hotel and handed me an envelope containing six theater tickets. Skid and I promised to be ready at a quarter of eight to walk with the family to the opera house.

"What will we do about clothes, Colonel?" asked Skid earnestly. I was surprised.

"Clothes, Skid?" He looked a trifle embarrassed.

"Why, yes. The last time we went we traveled in state, both the Judge and I wore evening dress,—beavers, canes and bouquets."

"Oh, Rome! Has it come to this?"

"You see, Colonel, when the Greyson carriage flourishes up to the opera house entrance the people from the stage manager down to the program boys know it. Then the papers next day tell how the ladies were dressed, and that the learned Justice Greyson was accompanied by so-and-so. In this case it will be, let's see,—by the illustrious Colonel French of the American legation, er the multi-millionaire sassidge maker from Shaycoggo. I've got to go out to the house for my finery, Colonel."

"It's a warm evening, Skid; why not go in our shirt sleeves?"

"That's so; or in our bare feet. Everybody would have their opera glasses on us."

"That might do, Skid. Then we might get our pictures in the society columns and be mentioned as the distinguishable swamp angels from the kingdom of Puffer, eh?"

After Skid had gone I went to my trunk and began to array myself in my fine linen. Suddenly I stopped staring the mirror out of countenance. I thought: "Skid will tell them of my shortcomings as to the conventional attire. Then they will modify their own." I was embarrassed with the situation. I couldn't well 'phone the family on such a matter. I imagined myself spick and span in evening attire, the Judge in his business clothes. Ah, blessed solution! I would call Skid. But why had he gone to array himself like Solomon if he knew I was to mix in like a restaurant waiter?

When scouring my brain I got to wondering how Skid would look in a dress suit with the dainty Tootsie Greyson by his side. I compressed myself and got into those uneasy clothes. In about an hour, being completely disguised, I sat down for a final survey when Skid walked in. His magical eyes glowed with complimentary lights. He said in the most matter-of-fact tone, "Yer the perfec' image of a Chicago sassidge maker. Yer safte." I chuckled at his breath of swamp air.

"Colonel, you will find the Greyson foray coming along in all their glories pretty soon. Be good and happy; if you just can't be good naturally, try to increase your happiness by walking with Tootsie."

I was surprised. He was alert and a little too ardent.

"How are you going to manage to pair off with Alice, Skid?"

"My fondest hopes are that the pairing will look just as natural as—as death." I saw a handsome gentleman before me in a silk hat, twiddling a shining, flexible cane which he seemed to manage naturally. I learned long afterwards that Alice with perfect naturalness had asked Skid to accompany her, as she had something important to tell him. I asked on a later day if he cared to tell me what the important matter was. He looked half startled for a moment, then said:

"I think she must have forgotten what it was, or I have."

CHAPTER VIII

THE MORTAL ILLNESS OF ALICE GREYSON

WITH proper punctuality, especially for a theater party of six, we were on our way to the opera house, under the full refulgence of a steadily gazing moon. The night was fit for treason, stratagems and ladies' wiles. Judge Greyson and myself walked behind, cordially talking about nothing; Mrs. Greyson and her youngest daughter, rather preoccupied or listening, were ahead of us, and Alice and Skid conversing lazily were in advance of them. Only the intuition of suspicion could make one think that Tootsie was unhappy. When well on our way she suddenly recovered her wonted gaiety, but ranged very closely along the precipices of jollity.

When Tootsie Greyson threw aside her fashionable outer glories as she sat down in her seat at the theater, she appeared like a fulvous being of tinted gleams of white, pink and flashing tawnniness.

Evening attire starts one wrong with a woman naturally. So I said, "Tootsie, my little niece by good fortune, you look sweet enough to be seated on a rainbow."

"I wonder what Skid is thinking about," she answered unsmilingly.

I gazed at the young man and saw his eyes fixed proudly and softly on Alice. And Alice! She sat there in a distinguished repose of ardent haughtiness, in the admiring eyes of half the audience, a Venus come to red life,—a slimmer Venus with a handsomer Apollo. I cannot tell what she wore, save that there were a few rows of pearls on her neck and that white silk and blue had much to do with the vision. Alice had more personal charms of a human but unusual kind than I had ever seen. Skid was apparently less of and on the earth than she. And Tootsie was wondering what Skid was thinking about! Suddenly she turned to me.

"Did you see Tippy Shurk at the door?" No. I saw a roguish look that seemed worth pursuing to the thought. I looked at her questioningly.

"Tippy asked me, 'Who's that distinguished looking Frenchman with you, Toot?' and if you will promise 'pon-your-soul-an'-honor-an'-hope-to-die-if-you-don't, that you'll look pleased, I will tell you.'" I solemnly crossed my shirt front.

"I told her you were a French Count from the Wabashington Embassy, lost in our village this afternonn: That you looked so sad and hungry that I took you in, fed you, fitted you up in papa's clothes, and jus' brung yoh 'cause you didn't know nobody ner nothin'." It was very amusing the way she said it.

"And Tippy said—"

"She sniffed and said she never would divide her gum with me again. There she is by that bald-headed man, that's her father, near the right box. He's the Chief Justice. Don't look till I tell you. She's looking at us with those yorricks now."

I looked. Simply another beauty. "Yes; beautiful, but—Yorricks?"

"Graveyard orbs," translated Toot.—"See that girl in the left second box below?"

I did.

"See her right jaw?" I did, it was swollen.

"Will she go out between the acts to chew her gum, Tootsie G.?"

"No; toothache. She 'phoned me this afternoon. Nearly dead then. Wouldn't think so now, would you?" The lady was continually arranging a stray lock left for display purposes, and her diamonds on hand and hair needed constant correction, the accumulating display accomplished with deft carelessness. The lights went low and then we thought of our programs.

The first act was over, the lights blazed again. There was a call of the cigarette and the cocktail. What! Skid was going out? Alice following him? Were we dreaming? As she passed us she said:

"I feel faint, mother, a breath of air." And Tootsie looked shocked.

"What do you think of that, uncle?" Perhaps she read my face; she added, "Simply the call

of the—swamp.” I was heartless enough to say:

“Maybe the call of the little schoolhouse at the Crossings, Tootsie.” But I noticed that Alice’s manner and look of unconcern was impregnable as she followed the usher up the aisle.

“Would you like a fresh breath? Maybe we can start a new fad, Tootsie?”

“I would love to, but I haven’t the nerves. Alice can do a thing like that. If I should attempt it the manager would come out on the stage front and shout:

“‘Is there a doacktoar in the house? Toot Greyson has a—has a fit of the mumps?’”

Mrs. Greyson laughed as heartily as I did. Then of course the husband had to be enlightened, and he laughed expansively.

We left after the third hiatus of the play. We were troubled, Mrs. Greyson and I and the Judge. Perhaps Alice was ill. I observed that Tootsie was quite willing to go, but seemed wholly untroubled. I could imagine Alice stretched on a lounge at home with bandages around her lovely brows moaning with pain.

We walked pretty swiftly homeward, and I still recall how beautifully sentimental the grand night was for those having the necessary proclivities. When we reached the gate to the great lawns, Mrs. Greyson was panting with her ardor and alarm. We discovered Alice and Skid walking arm in arm in the moonlit heaven of the shrubbery, lost to most of

the activities of life except those immediately at hand.

No! Tootsie Greyson was not at all alarmed. I did not notice the least trace of compassion as the little maiden sapiently observed,

“Alice seems to be entirely—discover-r-r-ed.”

CHAPTER IX

'A SNAPPING BLUE DIAMOND

THE next day when we reached the swamp railroad station our conveyance was waiting, and we arrived at Mrs. Puffer's at midnight. The next two weeks were the most refreshing hunting season of my life. We ate the golden pawpaws, we collected a bushel of hazel nuts with the aid of Hink and Hi. Then there were two bags of shellbark hickory nuts for us further down on the Ridge, little and big and the best in the world. Hi and Hink were stained beyond recognition hulling black walnuts, which they dried on the milk-shed roofs. We had fresh cider made from Rambo apples, and winesaps, apples for any of the lesser gods. Frost-covered pumpkins were transfigured by Mrs. Puffer into cream-made pies. Ducks innumerable fell; toasting quail and spring squirrels scented the air. Amid the somnolent haze of the lands, the dreams of the corn-fields, the call of the partridge, the slumbrous tinkle of the cowbells, the morning boom of the prairie cocks, the spirit of contentment dwelt in our relaxing souls.

One soft November noon, with the October colors still in the woods, Skid and I burglarized the little,

vacant schoolhouse. A well-worn window, after a feeble resistance, permitted our entrance to the educational throne of Pufferland. Pictures from magazines and newspapers illumined the yellow, crime-stained walls. The sunlight flooded the remains of desks; lonely flies buzzed on the smoky, blue-tinged window panes, and a few tall ragweeds stared brazenly in at a back window. There was the uplifting smell of schoolhouse emptiness, and withered flowers dried to wisps mutely told of a glory that was gone.

Skid rifled the teacher's desk and found that Inquisition of schoolboys, with its relics of tops, crystal taws, now escheated to the state, a warped ruler, and that vast accumulation of a country school's criminal collections, which only a boy expert could Bertillonize. A large bunch of gnawed Testaments, long unused by Pufferland, had found in a happier day a mission as a mouse's nest. Skid, posing perhaps like Abe Puffer, recited, as nearly as he could, a long-time favorite of the swamp educationists:

“The sea fowl hes gone to 'er nes',
The beas' hes laid down in 'is lair;
Even heyar there's a seasing o' res'
An' I to my cabing repair.”

A blackboard made of wood now warped and yellowish, as slick as crockery and as resistant to chalk, still held its position, defiant of weather, time and the unholy purposes for which country schoolhouse blackboards are used. The remaining plaster on the walls held whole and fragmentary examples

of native art. The old reddish, egg-shaped stove was the only safe and solid thing in the room.

"Here's Hink's desk, Colonel," shouted Skid. "How can I tell? Why, by the German S cut in the cover that Hi taught him how to make" (as no other German S has been made, since the beginning of mortal troubles).

Our two weeks passed happily, in some things perhaps with a touch of wildness in some of our dreams. For who would not dream at such a time so filled with delightful memories? The last night in Pufferland we were walking slowly homeward, the huge red sun dim on the western level of the waste. Near the middle of a log near the Sandhill road I saw something glitter in the earth, now hardened to a rocklike clump of mud. Its blue gleam was beautiful, and uttering a grunt of surprise I made a dive for that glittering thing and dug it out. It was a blue scintillating gem about as large as a sweet pea, a snapping blue diamond, as big as a sweet pea.

About nine o'clock that night, with the collusion of Skid, I was adroitly left with Mrs. Puffer. I talked alone with her for perhaps an hour while Skid was getting our baggage together. Our conversation turned on intimate things connected with Skid's present and future life. Mrs. Puffer was amiable, though not a trace of enthusiasm illumined her face. There was a lull in the conversation, an awkward and unnecessary silence which she twice tried in vain to break.

Finally I said, "There's something wrong about Skid's history, Mrs. Puffer."

She grew fidgety, but made no answer. Her quick wit immediately divined too much. I covertly watched her uneasy actions, her side glances at me. She knew something was wrong. Her conscience was on edge.

Perhaps five minutes passed without a word. "Mrs. Puffer, what became of the watch and the blue diamond that—"

Before I had gone that far I saw her turn as white as snow. She looked wildly at me, and had she been less fortified by the coldness of her temper I am sure she would have fainted. She misinterpreted the look of triumph on my face, for she trembled like a leaf as she answered, "I am not to blame. Abe lost it."

"I suppose so, Mrs. Puffer, but get me the watch now." She made an effort to rise, and sank back, her face pitiful with anxiety and fear. "Will they put me in jail for what Abe did?"

"I'll protect you if you'll give me straight goods, although this is a serious affair so far as you are concerned. Get me the letter that was found in her stocking, the watch and the other things."

She was reassured by my tone and manner. She tottered a moment, suddenly revived, then filled with energy she raced to a dark closet and brought out a little tin box. She unlocked it with a small key she had on a string around her neck, hidden beneath her gown, gave a final, fearful glance at me, opened

the box, and gingerly began to unwind a packet wrapped in a white cotton remnant. She placed a tiny open-faced watch in my hand, face up! Her hands trembled and slyly she hid them under her apron. I turned the watch over to look at the torn, rough fastenings on the other side. I could feel the sharp edges.

"The letter, Mrs. Puffer." She handed me the stained paper.

"Anything else, Mrs. Puffer?" I am confident my voice was kind.

"That's all. I wore out her clothes." I scrutinized the watch closely, not a mark or scratch of identification, only the clumsy breaks of the setting.

"Tell me about the jewel, Mrs. Puffer. Who lost it?" She gasped and began to shake. Again she suddenly regathered her composure.

"Colonel, since you are Skid's guardian, I will tell you now why I held back. Abe Puffer was—you know about him. He was a good man altogether. We found this watch on her. We were terribly poor that year. We could not pay our taxes. It cost to bury her. Abe said by law we had a right to keep this if there was no owner. So he took it. We had been at expense to bury her. No one would have taken the watch anyway. So we—just kept it. One day Abe asked for the key. The tax collector was coming next week. He pried the diamond out and took it down to Monticello to sell it. And before he got to the Crossings he lost it. When Abe come home 'bout an hour after-

ward, he bawled. The only time I ever saw him do that. He was sorry. He got to thinking about it day and night, and could not eat or sleep.

"I just had to wear her clothes. I was half-naked. I knew God would punish me. I got old fast after that. You didn't hear me object very much when I signed away my rights to Skid. That most broke my heart. He was all I had. I did not tell Skid. He was the best boy a mother ever had. Onct Abe being mad was going to whip him. I said, 'Abe, if you lay a hand or rod on that child I will fight you to death.' He knew I meant it. I did wrong. God has laid His hand on me. I would not have turned old with this gnawin' in my heart if God was not punishing me; then I joined church."

I turned to the watch; was that not a screw rim? I began to twist. It would not budge. "Get some kerosene, Mrs. Puffer." I poured oil on it and tried again. Not a movement showed that it was a lid that screwed on.

"Let me pour some boiling water on it, Colonel," she cried out excitedly. She poured the water on, and I tried again. It slid, turned half round and stopped. With all my force I tried once more; it hung fast.

"Twist it shet again, Colonel." She was ragingly excited. I turned it shut, then again tried the return movement and after a turn or two the thin lid rolled on the floor. I ran for it. There was not a letter, not a scratch, not a mark. Yes; I saw

a jeweler's repair number. That was a clue. Thank heaven for as much as that.

I slowly screwed the lid on again and was lost in the disappointment of defeat.

Suddenly I heard her thin sharp voice. "Colonel, open the side." I stopped abruptly as if I had run against a wall.

Perhaps that *might* tell something. I waited, then slowly, composedly, unscrewed the case and pried the inner lid open with my knife. As it flew back I cried out. There was a small daguerreotype of a beautiful woman, and her eyes were Skid's very own! And there at the bottom were two initials, C. G. That was all, but enough. She was as astonished as I was.

"God has lifted His hand." I saw an exultant light in the old withered face. Her curse was lifted. Her voice had an intensity that made me think of the old martyrs. I gave her my hand and said, "God bless you, Mrs. Puffer."

All at once I thought of that blue snapping diamond in my pocket. I drew it forth and before she knew, laid it in her withered palm.

She stared at it, drew back, bent forward again, touched it with her long hard finger. It turned over. The fascinating watery blue glintings seemed to soften. She raised her eyes upward, white light shot through her twitching face and she began and sang,

"Knocking, knocking, who is there?
Waiting, waiting, Oh! so fair!

'Tis a pilgrim strange and kingly,
Never such was seen before.
Ah! my soul, for such a wonder,
Wilt thou not undo the door?'"

I did not feel the faintest grotesqueness in the situation, or in the thin, tense voice. I rose; she took my hand. "It's all right, Mrs. Puffer, you have made good. Good-night." I went out, closing the door; paused on the steps, I heard a high tense voice praying.

I sought Skid in the little summerhouse by the spring. It murmured more gently than I had ever heard it before and seemed to be singing to Skid in his dreams.

CHAPTER X

A CRY IN THE NIGHT

IT was nearly midnight when Skid and I arrived in Indianapolis. He was soon in bed and asleep, for it had been a tiresome day. I had not told him a word, and Mrs. Puffer agreed to confide nothing to him till I might say the time was ripe. The hotel was nearly silent. Here and there some belated traveler was figuring over his daily orders or smoking the last cigar. The mists from the swamp were stealing in.

I went to the telephone and called Judge Greyson; a sleepy talker came to the other end. I heard the deep protesting voice of Judge Greyson.

"I told you at ten, Sam, that even if the jury did come in I would not come down to-night. Please don't call me again." "Click!" said the 'phone. The Judge had hung up. I called for Central again. She was ready to defend the eminent judge from night intrusions by over-zealous reporters. Just a word with her,—this was in Indianapolis remember,—and again the Judge was at the other end of the wire. His voice was not pleasant now; he certainly knew "Sam," the villain, whoever he was. "Let me tell you positively, Sam, that I will not stand for

this. What? Who—er,—you, Colonel? A thousand pardons! I'm coming. Whirl a hack down here. Tell him to run his horses. Thank God."—"Click! Click!" went the far telephone.

I ran out, found a hackman, thrust five dollars in his hand and told him to race for Judge Greyson and be back in half an hour. In fifteen minutes the Judge was wringing my hand, his heart in his eyes. We hurried to our rooms.

"Sit down, Judge." I handed him the stained letter.

"My poor girl; my poor girl," was all he said. He looked eagerly for something else. I handed him the blue diamond.

"There!" he said, jumping up and twisting it in the light. "See that certain blue and green light as I hold it so. That is almost evidence enough. Where did—"

"Wait, Judge." I handed out the watch and showed him the face within the lid. He gasped and bent his face in his hands and shook. Then in a few sentences I told him the rest. He raised his great leonine head, his face white, his body shaking with unspent sobs.

"Does Skid know yet?"

"Not a word." He bent down and I heard smothering sobs in his hands.

He rose silently, not trusting his voice, and took his hat from the table. I offered him the jewel, the letter and the watch; he hesitated, took them and put them in his overcoat pocket, wrung my hand as

he turned his head to the side and went from the room without a word.

A minute later I heard the dull roll of the hack flying down a darkish, mist-filled street.

The next morning I received a message from the Judge, and I was soon at his house. He and I retired to the library and completed our plans. I was diplomatically to open the subject with his wife and at the proper moment the picture of the lost Claire was to be brought in. Meanwhile the evidence was to be presented piece by piece. We went into the sitting room.

Alice was absent, why I did not know then. I talked of our hunting trip, made them laugh nervously once or twice and at last I began the main recital.

"You recall, Mrs. Greyson, that a month or so since you told me that it was possible Mrs. Puffer knew more about the dead woman found in the swamp. While out there I thought I would ask her if there were other things she knew about. Skid told me the dead woman was the most beautiful woman he ever saw; he was about nine or ten years old then. You remember her looks, Skid? Describe her, can't you?"

"She had black, curling hair, but draggly because she had been in the water and mud. Her eyes were dark, soft, pitiful, so I just couldn't look at her very long without finding my eyes filling up. I don't remember much else."

Though I had seen the Judge catch his breath and

Mrs. Greyson seemed on the point of a question, they tried to look simply interested. Skid, however, was watching me with the eyes of a falcon. I could not help feeling a little disconcerted, though I went on as heartily as I could.

“ ‘Mrs. Puffer,’ I asked, ‘where is that watch you found on the dead woman that—’ Well, Mrs. Greyson, I recalled your remark about Mrs. Puffer holding something back. She acted as if she was going to faint. After a little she recovered and went to a closet, brought out a box, unlocked it and produced a little watch.” The Judge felt in his pocket, but I signaled him to be quiet.

“Then I said, ‘Where is the jewel that was in this lid?’ Then she confessed. Abe Puffer, thinking he had a claim on the dead woman’s remaining valuables, and being hard up, to pay his taxes gouged the jewel out and took it down to Monticello to sell it. On the way he lost it. Skid and I, the last evening we were there, found it on our way home. Skid, you recall it?”

Skid said, “Yes; the Colonel kept it mighty close, though.”

“Let me see, have you the diamond I gave you, Judge?” Skid and the others examined it without a word. I handed it back to the Judge. Skid was surely being fooled as to our intentions.

“Then I looked over the watch case for some identifying mark and found none. Mrs. Puffer was very uneasy, but I told her that she had not gone very far wrong, that it was more her husband’s fault.

I saw that it was an open-faced, lady's gold watch, and that the outer back lid was screwed on. I unscrewed it, and there were no more identification marks on the inside than there were on the outside. I was very much disappointed, because any one would naturally want to discover who the woman was. Mrs. Puffer told me to pry the inner lid off and I did. Judge, where is that watch?"

The Judge did well, but Skid instantly noted the meaning in his face. Mrs. Greyson was white and Tootsie Greyson looked steadily in her lap.

"Ah! that's it," I cried out as I took it, trying to be calm. "Look at this, Skid."

As he glanced he started back in astonishment and burst out excitedly, "That's the very face of the dead woman. I would know it anywhere."

A sudden wave of happiness and relief rushed through the Judge's over-wrought face. He shook excitedly as he grasped Skid's hand.

"God bless you, my boy. I have waited a long time for this. Mother?" He turned to his wife. Mrs. Greyson moved swiftly out of the room and almost immediately returned with the servants, lugging a large picture in a frame—the face turned away from us. Then when in a good position the portrait of the lost daughter was whirled round suddenly and Mrs. Greyson stepped back.

"Oh!" cried Skid as if stabbed with a knife, "that is the very image."

Mrs. Greyson burst out weeping and left the room. Skid was acting in a most unaccountable man-

ner. He cast a scared, doubting look at me twice; his breast heaved and he seemed about to speak, but remained silent.

The Judge's voice was resonant as he asked, "Has Alice got back yet? Colonel, I have spent some of the best years of my life trying to solve my daughter's disappearance. I cannot tell you how grateful I am. I can sleep in peace now." Then, moved too deeply to trust himself further, he went into the library. Tootsie was watching Skid in a doubtful way; she could not understand his actions. He was staring out of the window as if beyond us in his thoughts.

"Here, Skid and Tootsie, is something that will clinch it all." They came close to me and I took my thumb off of the two initials, "C. G." Mrs. Greyson returned and said quietly, "Alice is here."

I turned to Skid. "The Judge bought her the watch, set with the diamond, and Mrs. Puffer gave me the unfinished letter you told me once that they had found. Mrs. Greyson, you know it is your husband's adopted daughter's handwriting?"

Skid was staring at the carpet now. I do not believe he heard any of us. He appeared lost in disturbed thoughts.

"From all I know and heard and have seen, it is our daughter Claire who is buried out there in that swamp graveyard. We will have her brought here and reburied."

In the excitement of the various emotions all pitched to the breaking point, I think none of us

except Tootsie and me had looked much at Skid. He was greatly wrought up in a manner that puzzled me. Why should he not be happy with the rest of us? Why did he not show that he was alive to what was going on around him now? He was moving restlessly and a look of misery had settled like a white cloud in his face.

Just then Alice hurried in behind a servant who was carrying a framed portrait. Alice had just come into the house with it, and she was elated and hurried. Skid stopped short, for he recognized that it was one of himself though it was not turned to us yet. The Judge had been waiting for its completion for a month, and Alice had brought it in a little late, with the paint in some places almost wet.

"Papa," called Alice. He came in with marks of tears in his face. Then Alice turned her picture and set it beside the dead vision of Claire. I could scarcely believe my eyes. I never thought the likeness of a man and a woman could so vividly counterfeit each other. I looked at Skid. He was staring entranced at one, then the other.

Now everybody in the room was gazing at Skid Puffer. His eyes turned finally on the picture of Claire. His face lighted. He did not appear to recognize that we were around him. His lips were moving, mumbling in the still room; faint but clear we heard the one word, "Mother."

He was so rapt, staring so tensely at the picture of the dead woman, which looked wistful, lifelike,

almost pleading, that we turned to one another questioningly, wondering if we heard aright.

Then he sank down in a chair and covered his face. He shook with a grief we could not understand, but not a moan, not a word escaped him. A moment after he felt out blindly as he bent there, grasped my arm unseeingly and rose; and together we turned and slowly went out the door. I guided him to a covered seat in the shrubberies and still without a word or sob, he slowly recovered. At last he sat up.

"Colonel, you don't understand. I will tell you now." He paused for perhaps a minute, then started on again with a gasp.

"I want you to go in and tell them I want to explain something." I rose to go.

"I will come in a minute or so."

I entered the house, every eye turned on me. I shook my head. I told them what he had asked. We saw him coming in, erect, his face drawn and white. We were all seated. The Judge seemed about to say something to relieve the tension, when Skid said measuredly:

"When the Colonel offered to take me away to educate me I started to tell him something I had promised Mrs. Puffer not to tell. I also promised Squire Puffer when he was dying that I would never tell. I felt sure I ought to tell. I tried to tell Colonel French about the kildeer, but he told me never to mention it again. The kildeer, the kildeer had been trying to tell me till I understood at last.

He said it was superstition, and to drive it out of my heart. When I showed him the Judge's letter to Robert Greyson I told him that night while it was crying down from the sky that the little killdeer and I were in touch. I felt sure then. When Abe Puffer laid your daughter Claire on the bed he turned to Mrs. Puffer and said, 'She looks like Skid.'

"When Mrs. Puffer looked at her, she seemed scared. They made me promise afterward never to tell. And I never did. I told the Colonel twice by words and once by letter I must tell him. What made me so slow was, I did not know it would do any good. Besides, the Colonel shut me up twice. I promised Squire Puffer when he was on his death-bed that I would never tell."

He stopped. None of us knew what he meant. He had not explained anything. What had he to tell? The Judge had become wise in certain expressions of the soul, for he had led out many a halting soul on the borderland of confession.

"Skid," he said, "we believe in you. You have not sized the matter up right. You are square, all of us know you are, and your promise to those old people who have done things they should not have done, was not for your benefit. It was to hide some of the wrongs that they did. If you promised what your morals and good heart show you now was wrong you are absolved from any promises. What did you want to tell Colonel French? What should you tell us now? Trust us."

"I am not a Puffer. They adopted me at ten. Claire Greyson is—is—my mother."

Then he sank down on the parlor lounge. In an instant Tootsie was crying with her arms around his neck, her cheek against his own. Mrs. Greyson was kneeling at his feet, soothing and trying to hold his face in her hands. I do not know what Alice or her father did, but I recall that I found myself a few moments later sitting by Skid on the opposite side from Tootsie Greyson with an arm around his waist. A minute later several of us were shaking hands and laughing through our tears. To this day, years after, I do not know what Alice Greyson said or did.

After the storm the rainbow. Our spirits rose in joy after having been submerged. Later there was a duet by Alice on the piano and Tootsie on the violin. Tootsie could play as well as she looked. It seems almost incredible, now that it recurs to me, that Tootsie and Skid waltzed. Even Justice Greyson was joyfully extravagant and sang, "I'm Joe Bowers from Pike." After some urging he sang "We Are Growing Old, Maggie," and Tootsie accompanied him on the violin.

Skid was quiet through it all, yet cordially interested and no sign of brooding was on his face. Alice told a funny story of the "Crossins schoolhouse" and we turned to Skid for a tale of the Kankakee world.

"I was thinking this afternoon of a voice I heard in the sky one night; would you like to hear it?"

We prepared to hear something humorous and we urged him to go on.

"One night after I had come from the Tippecanoe County Fair, and had seen things I had only heard or dreamed of before, I went out on the sandridge behind our house,—well,—to think. The black clouds of a storm were flying. It was nearly midnight in October. The leaves in the jack-oaks were talking that night. There was something in my heart that kept calling up to me; it seemed to say over and over again, 'Skid Puffer, you are lost; Skid Puffer, you are lost.'

"Oh! but it was a black night, with shadows looking queer in the sheet lightning. But it was the stillest night I ever was out in, except for the wind that swelled along. I looked towards the house and I could see the candle shining, but that was all I could see except the queer things in the sheet lightnings.

"Then way off, seemed a mile, I heard a cry in the skies. Then everything was still again. Soon after right close it broke out sharp and clear. It was that cry of a wounded goose, dying as it flies and lost in the blackness. It was going nowhere, right in the face of the storm, or to its home in the swamp. It must have been flying since sundown, because it had the cry of a goose that is shot, but not hurt enough to die right away, but starts out nowhere to get away from the pain. Closer and closer it came, its cry sharper and more piercing, till it got right over me. It said just as plain as I am

telling you, but not in words of course, 'Skid Puffer, you are lost; Skid Puffer, you are lost; Skid Puffer, you are lost.'

"It passed over me, its cry of fear and pain grew duller, thinner, till the call and cry was nearly out of my ears. Suddenly I heard that swirling cry that hunters sometimes hear when they shoot in the sky at a flock of geese and one comes whirling down. I knew it had dropped.

"I sneaked home hot and teary and slipped into bed, and all through the rest of the night in my dreams I heard that cry: 'Skid Puffer, you are lost.' Next morning I flung open my summerhouse screen door, and there at the end of the steps, with its wings stretched out, its little blue eyes looking right into mine, was that lost goose that flew into the face of the storm. The sunshine was playing mixed criss-cross in the glance holes of the jack-oak treetops and there wasn't a trace of a storm."

That was all, the tale was done. A moment later Tootsie and Skid were amiably walking on the lawn and seemed as contented as children.

"That boy can make me laugh or shiver as he pleases with his tales of that—that infernal swamp," said the Judge very soberly. Mrs. Greyson rose and peered through the window. "If Tootsie will interpret that story properly I think Skid will get great comfort out of it," she said. Tootsie, as I found on a later day, was a feminine Joseph that read the meaning of the voice of that cry in the sky in the dead of night.

CHAPTER XI

THE BLACK DEVIL

I RETURNED to my affairs in Chicago and an early winter came in. I received short letters frequently from Skid, longer ones from the Judge and daughter, all noting just the common run of things. Tootsie was bending down more enthusiastically than ever to her teaching. Skid had broken a finger, Alice had gone to New England for a winter visit, the Judge was laying the invisible wires for re-election, Mrs. Greyson had been ill, and Mrs. Puffer had moved to town. She had taken a house for boarders, her fame grew and her lodgers waxed reasonably fat. Even Hi Spading, who staid with her, was learning to talk and act, and had shed a gray nest of swamp peculiarities as well as his deeper freckles.

Nearly all of Skid Puffer's studies were by objective methods in elementary natural science. He could prepare a microscopic slide, analyze a fish or a frog, and had his bottles, jars and dissecting pans, his dumb-bells, his trapeze bars, his fencing swords, and his boxing gloves, his eternal spelling, spoken grammar and the everlasting grooming in the refinements of the Greyson home.

He wrote me that he could hold out fifty pounds

weight at level arm's length, could turn a forward summersault, and daily made his high jump of five feet ten with a fraction to spare. He was five feet eleven and three-quarter inches tall, weighed one hundred and ninety pounds, and though most of his sprinting was cut out, he had run one hundred yards in ten seconds plus.

He and Tootsie had attended lectures on literary subjects, visited Mrs. Puffer twice each week and passed several Sunday afternoons with her. Tootsie had written me that Skid as a pupil behaved beautifully, and had become a giant in size and strength, but that she could control him with her little finger if she looked fierce enough.

When the middle of April came, the Judge wrote me he had been successful, and that he was making arrangements for a banquet in June for his associates and political friends. He invited me as his star guest. The winter had been muddy, wet and miserable, and March of that year will be remembered for years as the muddiest and gloomiest in the history of Indiana. Alice came back in early April. Skid was nearly twenty years old.

I ran down to Indianapolis in late April, unannounced, audited and paid certain bills, and made certain reports to Court. The Judge and I, after our labors, on a fine balmy evening, arm and arm pursued the uneven tenor of our way to the Greyson home. No one except him knew I had arrived, and as we entered the broad driveway we felt as sly as two cunning old foxes. Skid and Hi, who had been

boxing in his gymnasium, had come out to a secluded seat in the yard to cool off. Their backs were to us, and they were quietly talking. Tacitly we crouched; I think the Judge toed in like Indians he had read about in an earlier but influential literature, and I felt that when it came to stealing up unawares on unsuspecting victims, I should be put near to the top of the percentage columns.

About the time we bent down in our Indian treacheries, we saw a white figure, Tootsie, with clutched skirts, stealing on them, and we waited to see the effect of amateur work. She reached her unsuspecting victims and screamed, and their startled jump seemed to satisfy her roguish propensities. But she only screamed; the Judge and I had real lungs.

They sat down amiably together. It was now our turn. We sneaked, we crouched, we shudderingly stole like red savages on the helpless whites. As we got closer I now recall that Tootsie, whose face I am sure was sidewise to us, startled a little and immediately said something to them. I would testify that nobody looked our way. I recall that immediately each one became very voluble, and seemed interested in something beyond them at which Skid was laboriously pointing.

We sneaked close, inhaled to the bursting point and shouted loud enough to bring out the fire department. Not a muscle moved in any of them except in Tootsie, who simply vibrated with the shock of sounds. After perhaps twenty seconds, Skid turned carelessly around and said crossly,

“What’s ailing you two old gentlemen?”

Then all of them, those conscienceless three, seemed deadly interested in a henhouse across the way. Even Hi, after all I had done for him, looked enraptured at that far-off henhouse. The Judge and I were simply negligible parts of the more common scenery. A henhouse was enchanting.

We got all the surprise and shock that I noticed in that immediate vicinity. We looked in each other’s faces and laughed weakly. They made glorious amends a few seconds after, but the Judge and I solemnly shook hands and promised never again to practise barbarian stealth, at least not on conscienceless whites.

The air was sweet, there were new spring scents, the slim moon danced along a crimson cloud in the sunset glow and night came in soft and lovely. The evening was passed delightfully, happily. Skid was to meet me at the hotel early the next day and all of us were on the veranda saying good-night. The Judge and Skid started to accompany me to the distant gate.

We were scarcely on the long gravel walk when we saw at the same time a man skulking in the shade of a vine-clad tree. Skid, without a word, dashed at him. The skulker ran down the carriage driveway to the closed iron gates. The pursuer and pursued flew. The Judge and I, panting like fat oxen on a hot July day, raced after them. Nobody was holding a watch, nobody knew the distance, but it was the fastest sprinting I had ever seen,—and

it was the first that the Judge and I had done for years. After Skid got in the gravel stretch he did not apparently gain a foot. The skulker reached the gate, swung over gracefully without touching the gate and ran on. We heard a mean, mocking laugh; it chilled us. Skid had made no preparations for stopping, and brought up hard against the gate.

He came back rubbing, and screwing his face up with grinning pain.

"Abe Puffer and Cluck all over again," said Skid, trying to look more comfortable than he felt. "Colonel, a whole drove of muskrat skins if you will bury that man." The Judge and I meanly laughed. It was Skid's fault, anyway. We discussed the case in all its phases as we recrossed to the gate. Then the Judge, having exhausted his ingenuity, asked for Skid's opinion.

"The man that made that run and cleared that wagon gate is a topnotcher in athletics. He's a ten-second man and a six-foot bar athlete. There are very few men his equal. The way he crouched when he ran; the manner of swinging his arms, and the swing sidewise of his feet when he swept over that six-foot gate, means that he's whipcord, steel and watch springs mixed."

The Judge became immediately grave. "Call at the office, Colonel, at eleven in the forenoon if you can. Good-night, Colonel." And the Judge, in agitated thought, hurried away. Skid followed alone behind him.

When Skid Puffer visited me the next morning I

asked, "Well, Skid, how are you on road racing to-day?"

He smiled queerly, enigmatically. After a moment's pause he answered with a question, "What's your guess?"

I was not talkative as long as Skid avoided my question. I was wondering if the Judge's strange actions at parting could be explained; whether Skid himself had noticed anything out of the ordinary.

"I measured the height of the gate this morning and it was an even six feet. I tried to learn something from Alice about Lem. She said she scarcely ever saw him and remembered him by his having a white cowlick right over the center of his forehead, and that he had a birthmark on the back of his neck just the shape of a Bartlett pear, greenish red in color. She said he was heavy, short, whiskered and strong as an ox.

"I then asked her about Robert Greyson, and she said she did not know him at all. They have no pictures of either in the family. I asked the Judge plain out if he thought Robert Greyson was the man that was skulking in the shrubbery. He looked startled, but he calmed down quickly and said, 'Oh, I guess not, my son. He is where he cannot bother anybody if he wanted to. It's such a disagreeable matter, my boy, I wish you would never mention him again to me. He is a damned rascal if there ever was one.' And then he went to turning over some papers just as if the subject was exhausted, and I came away."

"Skid, we have got to find out who this Robert Greyson is."

The severe light that leaped into Skid's fine eyes surprised me. I thought that I would gradually lead away from the subject, not knowing then I was playing around a crater of feelings that shocked me when the outburst came.

"Well, what shall we do about it, Skid?" I asked carelessly.

"I am going to learn to run faster than that man; and what's more I am going to jump that gate clear if I get killed trying to do it."

Later we called on Mrs. Puffer, and I learned from her that the fugitive preacher was slow-motioned, tall, sarcastic and too polite. I asked her why the swamp people called him a horse-thief.

"Well, you see, Colonel, the people out there are naturally suspicious of anything out of the common which they can not explain by their experience. That's the way with this preacher. He was cautious, never told anything about himself, and was entirely too good a preacher for us poor people. The sheriff came up there hunting a horse-thief when the preacher had gone. We described him and found the sheriff was after a different man. The sheriff said his man was short and stocky, had a pear-shaped birthmark on his neck, and a white lock of hair over his forehead. So somehow after that we got to calling the preacher the horse-thief. We ought not to have done that, but the name stuck. The minister said his name was Lemuel Mason from

New York and that he was out on a vacation. But I knew he was a bad man when he stole out one night taking Skid's boat and not paying for all of his board."

After we left Mrs. Puffer, Skid and I sought the public park, for the day was just right for doing nothing. The soft air was filled with fresh fragrances, there seemed to be a new light in the sunbeams, the birds had their sweeter tones of mating time. We sat down on a bench sociably silent.

After a long communional silence I lazily asked, "Skid, you seem to be taking more interest than ever in physical development; why is this thusly?"

"I feel sure, Colonel, that I am going to have another real mix-up with that sneak I ran out of the yard. You noticed, I suppose, that I did not put my hands on the top of those gates and swing over, didn't you? I was glad to stop right there good and hard rather than go over. If I had caught that man it is probable that I might have been carried back on a cellar door."

"Can you cipher out who he could be, Skid?"

"Just guessing, he's some fellow that's mixed up with the Greysons. Somehow, in a way I can't understand, he seems to want me. He shall take me sometime, when I meet him,—if he can." There was a sudden, deep growling roll in his voice that was new to me. There were passions in him ready at touch that I did not suspect. Without another word we slowly went back to the hotel. I sat in a chair dreaming—he stretched full length on a

lounge, staring at the ceiling with half-closed eyes. We remained so perhaps for half an hour. I looked over at him and was astonished to see his great eyes staring savagely at the ceiling.

"A penny for your thoughts, Skid," I cried out abruptly. He jumped up startled, smiled seriously and began to walk back and forth across the room. I had never seen him do that alone before.

"I was thinking about that beautiful dead woman Abe Puffer found strangled out there in the swamp. I have had her in my dreams day and night a good deal of the time for many years now. When I used to be out alone on the ranges herding the cattle, thinking of things that had no answer, dreaming things that I thought could never come true, wondering about that unfinished letter found on the dead woman's body, why, I said to myself, 'I will come across that man that strangled that woman some day.' I just could not get that clear in or out of my mind.

"I used to hear those swamp killdeers. There was one that I was acquainted with, and it knew me too. When I'd chase it up accidentally it would go circling 'round and 'round the skies, right 'round me too, crying out shrilly, 'Killdeer, killdeer, killdeer.' Once I dreamed about the dead woman, and I was waked up by a loud, nasty laugh just like the one I heard last night beyond the gate. I cannot explain that, but the laugh last night and that in the dream were just the same.

"I dreamed twice that she called on me to help.

Yes, she called to me just as plain as you are sitting there. When I rode out on the range next morning, feeling pretty glum because no one was thinking the way I was, or doing the way I wanted to do, or even thinking about what I wanted to do, up skurried that killdeer. It went screaming around me with fiercer cries than ever before. It circled around me twice and then lit not far in front. As it slid with shaking wings along the ground, as they all do sometimes, it said 'kill-kill-kill.' That cry was different and was meant for me."

"Well," said I, as he had stopped, "what did you think then?"

"I said that when I grew up I would hunt for that man that made her scream, and call for me. I'm going to hunt and get that man that had that laugh, and if I found him,"—he came close to me, his eyes blazing,—“I would kill him, kill him, kill him as a hawk tears at a skunk.”

I was startled with his vengeful intensity. His fingers were clutched like talons, his face was pale with malignity and his breath came in gusts.

"Skid," I said, shocked, "you have a very black guest in your soul, that I knew nothing of." We walked the room together, he trying to repress his feelings and as if waiting for something else from me. He was carrying a black burden that he could not hold, and was afraid to let it go. He seemed to wait for me to ask him more. I tried to calm him and divert his mind.

"Lie down on your lounge again, Skid. I want

to talk to you." Obediently, but sighing, he stretched out again.

I sat and coolly said: "Skid, I see you are superstitious. That means you have the passions of ignorance unawakened or guarded by everyday common sense. You have a dark rusty spot in your soul. There's only one way to get it off. Read, study, have the Judge tell you what is right and wrong in law. Then try to think out what is right and wrong yourself."

"Should I not kill the devil who killed her?"

Again I was shocked, he was so tempestuously vengeful. I maintained my serenity as well as I could.

"No, Skid, of course not. You are not the government, not the executioner of the law. There are several others who are. We chose them. It's perfectly proper for you and me to hunt out the evidence, give it to a jury, and hire the killing done. The sheriff does that. Just remember that. I am with you in this thing. We will find the man if we can. But two things: Don't disgrace me: Don't disgrace your mother."

I rose. "Skid, you stay around here for half an hour. I am going to see the Judge. Maybe I will have something to tell you when I come back. Telephone the house I will not be down for luncheon; if I can get the Judge to accept, he and I will dine here. You make an excuse to go home when I come back." I went to the door. There was a longing, wistful look in his face. I understood. As he came

near I threw my arm around his shoulder and said in a low voice in his ear: "Keep that black devil out of your soul, or he will strangle your manhood. I think you are the finest lad on earth and believe in you. Get the Judge to post you for a few months on what is right and wrong, about this thing called vengeance." Then I went out.

I had been in the Judge's office nearly half an hour when at the end of an earnest moment I asked, "Judge, who is Robert Greyson?"

"I knew that was coming sometime, and I must tell you before my nerve deserts me. I looked over the certified copies in a New York case, and find that Robert Greyson must have been released last March. He has been the black spot in my peace and life till seven years ago, when he was sent up to Dannemora for ten years. He was the second son, illegitimate, of my first wife, who was a widow with a son, Lem Greyson. Neither Lem nor this Robert Greyson is of my blood or flesh. I had loved my first wife dearly, but Bob was too much. I kept the scandal quiet and tried to raise him right. She died when he was young. When she was dead a year or so, I adopted Claire Ballard, a sweet orphan who grew up a good and beautiful daughter.

"Robert, Bob I always called him, was congenitally crooked as a corkscrew. One scrape after another had to be settled for. As he got older he got more brazen and more calloused. When Bob was seventeen, Lem about nineteen, and Claire fifteen, I married my present wife. I was a rising lawyer,

and had my eye set pretty high. I moved out of the East and settled in this city. Lem had been caught stealing horses down in Logansport while with a half-cousin of Bob's who is a smooth article and preaches after a particularly criminal deed. Bob himself I sent to a sporting academy, and he became the finest athlete in the school. He went to Europe, traded on my name, got in prison and when he came back fell desperately in love with Claire.

"Instead of its making a man out of him he went half crazy with jealousy. Then Claire ran away with a poor beggar named A. C. Mason, and you know the rest of her history as well as I do. There is no doubt in my mind that Bob and Claire's husband know all about what became of her. I believe the man that Skid chased is Bob. I have already put the detective department in motion. There is another felony indictment hanging over him. It is revived. If I catch him he will tell me what I want to know." There was a dangerous look in the Judge's eye.

I told the Judge what had occurred between Skid and myself at the hotel. He looked very grave.

"That is a very difficult thing to manage, Colonel. There must be something in his mind that you and I know nothing about. We ought to know. From your description I think he was on the borderland of saying more yet. I have had a good many men confess to me after conviction. I feel sure there is more than superstition to move him so deeply. It is not humanly natural. First we must raise him

out of his false perspectives. A laugh in a dream and a real laugh thousands of miles away being similar are out of the reach of reason; can not be true in any way I look at it. A killdeer screaming 'kill' driving a determination to kill a man is too unreal for sense. But there is something below all this on which these hallucinations are based. We will know some day. No man can be a wit, a humorous soul, without seeing the incongruities of substance and shadow. It's his humor that keeps him sane. It's more than superstition that shakes him.

"But I agree with you; we must edge in and split out these emotional knots, and get a growth of straighter grain. I'll teach him as you told him, in this."

I returned to Skid and told him pretty fully what the Judge had related about his family history. I said that he should make excuse to the family, as the Judge and I were to finish some business and dine uptown.

As he was about to leave me he came up and said, "And father too?" I shall never forget the torment in those tones.

A moment later he went home.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN A MAN DOES HIS DUTY

MY dining with Judge Greyson was rather cheerless. We had too many misapprehensions, too many misgivings, and even our plan as to what we should do filled us with unrest. After we had parted for the afternoon, I was meditating on all that the day had brought forth. What was the best thing to do at once, I asked myself over and over again. I thought of Tootsie, perhaps she could help. But if I, to whom Skid seemed so grateful, so affectionate, could not drive a murderous intention out of his heart, could she?

I concluded at last to have another simple talk with Skid that afternoon, and to make the opportunity I went with a very high purpose to the Greyson home. I dislike those who do things that look well in print, and ascribe it to duty. Every uncovered religious fraud calls up "duty." Politicians have it ever ready at their tongue's end. More than once I have damned this ancient, striped word so full of punk and holiness. For once in my life I knew I was going to do *my* duty if the heavens careened. And I would do my duty that very afternoon and keep it to myself.

Doing one's duty incites grave looks, especially if the duty comes along the moral heights. I had always found it quite easy to give advice; it came so natural. A successful business man is nearly always brimming with it, markedly so, for those who have no bank accounts. And my particular brand of advice seemed (to me) so peculiarly sound. I determined I would tell my protégé a few hard, cold facts that would make him see the way to go.

I was grave of course, but not sour. I am no bigot. I sallied forth to the Greyson home at two o'clock. I knew just what I was going to say, even to the expression, the emphasis—studied out the place where I should smile, the place where I should look paternal, the place where my countenance would carry volumes. That kind of advice has weight, significance and perhaps other things.

When I got to the Greyson gate I paused. I could not resist the sensation that I was a little perturbed. Really "duty" has several definitions. I have met people who have mixed things in giving advice and drew blood instead of honey. Perturbed! No; I should look gay. I tapped lightly on the gate, hesitated, there was no need of hurrying about the matter. I put my hand on the latch, partly opened the gate. Then I closed it from the outside. What a long street that was I had come along! No; I had forgotten nothing; there was no use to go back to the hotel and get my rough advice notes. I reviewed and again determined the expression, the emphasis and perhaps the accents. Skid was

such a foolish mortal about that infernal kill-deer.

I shut my teeth, unlatched the gate and went in. I stopped and fanned myself—it was very warm for June.

“Good-afternoon, Colonel French; you seem troubled.” In heaven’s name! Troubled? It was Alice’s soft voice, as musical as the first bluebird’s gurgle in spring. Ah! Alice my savior! She was the one to help me, blessed inspiration and happy chance! We seated ourselves under an ivy vine.

“What seems to stop the pleasant current of your thoughts, Colonel?”

I thought to lash out “duty” at once, but I *said*, “I’m thinking of Skid. What, er—that is what do you think of him for, er! as a lover?”

Those are my exact words to her. I had no intention of saying anything like the last part of that at all. Considering the relations between her and Skid,—the toolbench episode, the theater malady, such a question was nothing short of conversational idiocy. She knew that Skid and I were intimate. How much had he told me? She might have thought I was drawing serious conclusions about them. Perhaps she had seen how perturbed I had been a minute before. She might have deemed something very important and grave was in the air. Perhaps Skid himself had told *me* grave secrets about his regard for her. Perhaps,—oh! perhaps anything.

But I had now recovered a part of my wonted

sanity. I would gracefully retire to more solid footing. One sometimes does say things exactly opposite in meaning from the intention, especially when one, being agitated, gets a strangle hold on his "duty."

Several emotions had flashed through her face, as I was turning my misfit interrogation over in my mind, estimating its damages. She was surprised, puzzled, somewhat indignant; then a rapid sweep of womanly dignity hardened her features a little. Just as rapidly all gave way to an amused tiny laugh. She had donned her maidenly armor and assumed the safe side of things.

"Really, Colonel French, I could not conceive of Skid Puffer as a lover. I do not believe he ever felt the passion or would know it if he saw it." Then she waited for me. She now looked me very honestly in the face. I felt like a conversational impostor, or something like that. So I began to retreat to secure footing and incidentally nail down unobserved the raw edges of my lingual break.

"Would it surprise you, Miss Alice, if I told you he was in love?" Of course I wanted to know a little thing like that while I was retreating, and when safe, come back with my "duty" resolves intact. She answered instantly: "Nothing could surprise me more. Is he in love with—some one?"

I was a little disconcerted by the quick response and question. I was also astonished, for I saw a flash of pain on her face. I was rambling now, not driveling, just rambling. There were too many ends

to my purpose; there were too many divagations from the line at issue, which of course was "duty," plain, cold, beloved "duty" first, last and some of the time.

"Have you no idea with whom he could fall in love, Miss Alice?" I accidentally emphasized "you." I should have accented "fall" instead. I realized at once now and fully that Xenophon had once made a better retreat out of difficulties. I had retreated of course somewhere, and found myself up against a stone wall. The extra issue at hand was a separate full-fledged affair of its own. So to give us time to think,—or perhaps she was the only person present who was thinking,—I became humorous and asked knowingly, "What about Tippy Shurk?"

Ah, at last the secret was out. Could she believe her senses? That was what had so disturbed my troubled soul. I felt that she was amazed, gaping at me, wondering perhaps if she were awake.

"Tippy Shurk!" She did not scream, though I might have expected it. I had never seen Tippy, never heard of her but twice, and I am sure Skid never mentioned her to me in his life.

Then when I was wondering how I should get out of my conversation corral, which was apparently very high, with the exits padlocked and the keys lost, I heard again, "Tippy Shurk?"

Yes, it was Tippy's great love, undyingly warm, that was disturbing the atmosphere of the Greyson

dooryard. Then I bravely, brazenly looked at Alice Greyson. It was my duty, I think, that enabled me to do that. I can not describe the look of astonishment, the stopping of the breath, the sharp accent of the eyebrows, the shocked little jerks backward of her shoulders, that entire oppugnancy she presented. Of course I indicated by an affirmative little bob that she had the name right at least.

"Tippy Shurk is not half good enough for Skid Puffer, Colonel French." What! Her words were bitter. "He is a genius, a man who will have a great name in the world some time. I'd rather see him dead than married to such a girl as she. Or any girl I ever saw, for that matter. Why, I am amazed. I never thought—how did you know? Did he tell you—and—oh, it is perfectly dreadful!" I saw that she had a secret locked up in the deepest chambers of her heart.

She rose nervously and turned her back as she pretended to look at an ivy bud, if there is such a thing. There's a divinity that shapes our means, rough hew them as we will not. I saw her trembling there with her back to me. I saw, thank heaven! Tootsie and Skid running toward us, their faces aglow with excitement.

"Oh, Uncle French! Think of it! Skid has made the six-foot bar twice out of seven times. Seven attempts. Shout! fire the guns, fling the starry banner out! Charge, Chester, charge! shout, six feet clear till—Skid, where's them Hundred Selexuns?"

And she jumped at Alice and kissed her. Then we started for the gymnasium.

I managed to say privately to Alice, "Wait till I see you alone. I want to explain more."

And the great love of Tippy Shurk for Skid Puffer is one of the "duty" spots in my life.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LIGHTS SHONE ON FAIR WOMEN AND BRAVE MEN

IF this book were a novel I should then have more constructive sway and could without a blush endow the people of these pages with all manner of graces and perfections. It would be easy to smooth out a real record's unmendable jarring with imagination's literary lubricity, but a chronicler, as I am for the most part, must not escape. It is a failing of modern pens to carve out our literary statuettes from the raw ideal into the romantic real to grace a publisher's holiday.

The most that I can do is to make my hero and heroines fictionally true. I can not, like an historical novelist, unmake mountains if they bar the course, or run my rivers dry if they should flood the facts. My compassion or imagination shall not chisel out a new topography, nor induce me to cover up the shortcomings of my characters. It is no fault of mine that I tell of an unhappy event in Indiana's unwritten history.

It was midnight at the Greyson mansion, and Indiana's beauty, chivalry and a stringed and a brass band were there. Stray inhabitants of contiguous

political territory and outer society colonizations were also there to increase the shine, the swell and the expense. It was Associate Justice Greyson's coming out at sixty years of age. The reporters with their hereditary Americanese were there. The snap-shot lens, the coyote of photography, was there also. And that pampered miscreant, the flashlight man, for awhile was the observed of all observers, and gracefully scented up an acre of inclosed grandeur.

I can not take space nor time, though I have abundance of both, to tell as the newspaper reporters told it, how the "music crashed," how "they skipped the light fantastic till the wee sma' hours," how the "appointments were superb," how "the lights shone on fair women and brave men," how the "spacious lawns were a fairy land of scenic beauty"; and I shall not give the list of "other notabilities present." Of course the Associate Justice was "deeply affected by the speeches and genuine outburst of good feeling and manifest affection of his guests" and "the attire of the ladies present was as follows"—for three columns.

This is not a Whitman catalogue.

In the two dozen columns of poor newspaper cuts and reportorial English of five newspapers, and the two-inch despatch of the Associated Press, there was not an allusion to one of the vital incidents of the "gorgeous affair," this "notable function," this "brilliant occasion." That event was a stiff fight between two of the guests.

About midnight the guests promenading and spoiling the lawns and disrupting the flower beds under a thousand ugly Chinese lanterns, or ensconced in pairs in romantic spots, all, from the stiff and swelling importance of Indiana's Colonel of Cavalry, Colonel Armstrong, with his braided orderlies, down to the obtrusively dressed timidity of maidens, shy as little rabbits nibbling clover all atremble along the hedges at sundown, were startled by a healthy, feminine scream, just as the town clock struck twelve. But the clock had nothing to do with it. Nearly all town clocks strike twelve during the night, whatever the time may be. This Indianapolis town clock was a part of the dramatic setting.

In thirty or forty seconds after, a half-acre flock of feminine loveliness, in varying stages of undressed dressiness, were surging, ejaculating, screaming, fainting and trying to faint around two lithe giants in evening dress who were fighting on an open gravel spot near the aviary. And among them was nobody except myself that dared to interfere.

But a firm voice came back at me, "Keep away, Colonel, I can manage this thief. Keep those women still."

Two men agile as tigers were trying to kill each other. There were flashing and ducking and heavy thuds of fists on waistcoats. There was no pulling, gouging, clawing, but there *was* springing back and twisting under; mis-strokes, hits, blows, of very angry gentlemen.

The intruder was crowding Skid back with genteel

fury. Thud, thud, thud, went white fists crashing hard on exposed breastworks. A shift; crack went a hard, white fist to the stranger's right cheek. The blood flew all over his white shirt. A second's wavering pause. Then he came on with a rush. There were blockings, shifts, and crash came a bunch of knuckles into Skid Puffer's immaculate shirt front. He stumbled backward several feet and sat down hard.

He jumped up and they came together like fighting rams. I did not see exactly what was done for a few seconds. Then I saw a bent whirl to the right of head and shoulder, a short, left-curve, hooking thrust shoot under the right arm of the stranger. It had the stroke power of a small engine. He began to buckle and slowly sink, and Skid stood there waiting perhaps five seconds to see him drop to the ground at his feet. Then with the quickness of a steel beartrap up came the sinking man, and out flashed a fist that struck Skid Puffer at the top of his chest. Skid Puffer went unheroically backward ten feet and was picked up quite dazed while the thief, gathering his gloves, hat and overcoat, walked calmly down the driveway.

Not a word of this affair got into the newspapers. And "the leaders of fashion there" so managed that the ball, the flirting, the heartburning, everything, went on as merrily as ever after awhile.

It was three o'clock in the morning and every guest had gone, when Skid Puffer told the Judge and me in the library how the thing happened. He and

Alice had been promenading on the lawns; and the music commencing again, they were starting to go in. Nearly all the guests were in the house. The outside places were vacant and still.

"I saw Alice start and point to that English ivy fan inclosure near the west window. I looked and saw a man. He did not act as a guest would. He was in evening dress though. I told Alice to wait a moment and I ran softly up and looked in. He was bareheaded, and I started to apologize as he turned calmly around. But I saw his silk hat, overcoat and gloves on the seat. Then I knew he had no right to be there.

"I was angry at once. 'Get out of here, you sneak,' I said, hot as a coal. He bowed low, grandly low, picked up his hat, coat and gloves, and I stood aside for him to pass me. Just after he passed me, I half turned as I heard the swish of skirts, and Alice came running up. Then quick as a cat stroke at a mouse, he slapped me. There must be iron spikes in his fingers. It was hard enough to knock a post over. It was not a fist blow, just a lightning slap.

"He was walking calmly away when I came to. I made one jump, I suppose about a dozen feet, and struck him in the back of the head. He fell forward on his hands. He whirled up, dropped everything and put on the wickedest face I ever saw. Then Alice raised her gentle voice in a Comanche death yell.

"Of course I had expected him to jump up and

fly. The gentleman wasn't flying just then except towards me. You know the rest.

"But, Skid, you had him going, I don't understand, er—" I hesitated.

"I understand perfectly, Colonel," answered Skid, looking foolish. "He took about five seconds to stall, throwing me off my guard. Then he came up good and strong with that knockout. That's what a fellow gets sometimes when the other fellow stalls."

There was much discussion, guessing and theorizing. "What do you think, my son?" asked the Judge when the subject was exhausted.

"I shall meet this gentleman again. I will do the stalling then," said Skid.

CHAPTER XIV

ALONG THE EDGES OF DANGER

"WHAT made you scream and bring the whole crowd on the run last night while I was doing the pug act, Alice?" This harsh question was addressed to Alice as Skid met her on the walk in the rear of the house the morning after the banquet. He looked almost serene enough, and there was a smile in his face, but an unpleasant gleam was in his eyes. She was on the defensive at once.

"I saw him strike you. When I saw him come back with that malicious twist in his face, of course I was alarmed, I screamed." She was eying him keenly, measuring his displeasure.

"Adding to the gaiety of the town?"

"Skid!" she said reproachfully.

"Oh, I suppose you thought I needed help. It did look that way." He turned and was walking to the study rooms; why not? He had started for that place before he had met her.

"Oh, naturally a sister does not want to see her brother beat up. Of course I screamed. I could not fight him, and I do just love to scream." He paused; he liked that.

"Do you know who he is, Alice? Ever see him before?"

"He's an entire stranger. I have wondered all night about him. What do you believe?"

"He's the fellow that I ran a foot-race with last April. The going was a little slow on my part then, but June opens with a fast track."

"Now, Skid, do not be pert. I am much concerned; I am really alarmed." She looked very charming in her sympathy. He came up, and locking his arm within hers (to her great surprise), they went still farther back and sat in a bower near the tennis grounds. She tried to look serene, but she was nervously twisting and untwisting the end of a belt ribbon around her quite ladylike thumb.

"With gymnasium and road work I think he will hand me his card."

"Card?"

"Yes; if I practise thumping, jumping and running a few months more, I can jump further, hit harder and run faster. Then maybe I will hit hard enough for him to recover, so that he can hand me his visiting card. Takes time, Alice." He was laughing silently.

"Oh, Skid, you may get killed. That was an awful rap."

"Alice," and he rolled his eyes drolly, "I am much concerned; I am really alarmed."

"You are horrid this morning, Skid. Suppose I'd weep now?" And she looked with just enough mock seriousness to hide her feelings.

"What do you think Toot said, Alice?" and he chuckled delightedly.

"How should I know?" Alice answered coldly.

"She said, 'Skid, in the next exhibition of evening dress fisticuffs, don't let the other fellow stall or he'll get you sure, if you don't watch out.'"

"Tootsie! Where did she get that sporting slang?" Alice looked quite severe. Skid looked happy and leaned back in the shade at peace with all the world.

"Where did *you* learn it, Alice?" asked Skid, looking at the gurgling martins in their toyhouse. She was about to deny that she knew any disreputable language, though she had passed condemnation on some. She parried with a tiny exasperate twirl of her lip.

"What did Tippy Shurk say?" She asked that evenly, but with defiant heart. He brightened animatedly, sat erect, his eyes shining.

"When I was alone in the upper library Miss Shurk held out her hand and said, 'Mr. Puffer, you fought like a gentleman; you are his master.' Oh, yes, I forgot, she said she did not scream once."

"Is Tippy interested in pugilism too?" Skid felt the unpleasant stroke against the grain. He remembered his gymnasium and stood up.

"How is Tippy anyway, Skid? She is so gushy and I had almost said 'sporty' since she's been in the classes, why, I really do not know what to think of her." Skid sat down in sheer astonishment. He had never conceived the modest Tippy Shurk as

gushy and "sporty," and he was trying to think that out. Alice looked discouragingly unsocial, but smiling and picked at her belt.

"Alice, what have you up your kimona this morning?" She evidently did not object to slang if the tone and glance were good English.

"Now, Skid, don't you think so?" She seemed cheerful now. A bantering smile flashed through her face. She looked very charming as Skid tried to find the bearings of her question.

"Why, Skid, brother dear, to tell the truth, she's just the woman I've picked out for you. She isn't *exactly* gushy, she is what is called new. She's poetic, has beautiful teeth which she shows so-o easily; and besides being rich, or will be, dearly loves a man who can knock a tree over." Her sudden changeful mood, her physical luxury and charms made him look softly into her exquisite face. He now believed he had never seen her look so inviting before. Perhaps he felt the first obscure touch of gender.

His eyes grew very tender; he thought of that barbarous time when he had thrust his forehead into her cheek (under the eaves of the toolhouse in the Puffer dooryard). Her heart rushed the red currents faster and suffused her with love's incomprehensible glow.

"Alice, you'd better behave or you shan't play in my playhouse any more." He said that so drolly, so childlike, that she said in that peculiar full-throated, babying voice one sometimes hears:

"Oh, forgive you ittie, wootsie thisther, she ith tho thorry for ittie Tippie, her brotherth thweet-heart." Yes; Alice Gareen Greyson, nearly twenty-one years old, after the ball was over, delivered that.

"Alice, if you have no objections I would dearly love to kiss you," said Skid. Her assumptions were snuffed at once. She had more than she could manage. She had never kissed him but once in her life, and that a penitential one. But now he looked so big and brave and handsome that she did not know how much she had been vanquished. She said with a roguish look, but quivering chin:

"'Ware your old tricks, my swamp angel!" He shut his admiring eyes and saw in retrospection an enchanting school teacher leaving him in his despair in Abe Puffer's dooryard.

"Sunsets of milk and roses and gold. You told me never to kiss a woman against her will. Are you willing?"

She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him passionately and was a little too long getting away. She was covered with the charming confusion of maidenly reaction,—besides, she was inexperienced in love affairs. And Skid, though a little surprised with her ardency, was as blind as an adder. He placarded this danger edge by saying:

"Somehow, Alice, you make me more bashful than when I kiss Tootsie." Then Skid Puffer went to his gymnasium whistling "We Are Growing Old, Maggie" in a vanishing pitch.

CHAPTER XV

THE LOCKSTEP

FOR three months after the Greyson banquet I was in the East in the detective business. I found that Robert Greyson had been released from Sing Sing in the preceding March. In the directories of the cities I visited there were about seven thousand Masons. I discovered that the Colonization Association's records were burnt up in a fire.

I got the measurements, a copied photograph and prison transcript of the commitment of Robert Greyson to Sing Sing. From this I found the trial date, the name of the judge and the testimony in the Court records and police department at New York. I also secured a copy of a likeness of Robert Greyson in the New York rogues' gallery.

And the prison photograph and the rogues' gallery photograph were very unlike! The Sing Sing picture showed a fine face with deep sad eyes, so unexpected in prison pictures that I was startled. The rogues' gallery likeness showed the criminal face, but I could not see any trace of dissipation in it. It was Voltairish, scornful and had a mocking twist. And that face was of the man that fought Skid Puffer!

Judge Greyson, who had certified transcripts of the documents, had said Robert Greyson was in the Dannemora prison for a term of ten years and was no doubt released some months before. But the New York record showed that he had been sent to Sing Sing. I retraced the record back and forth and found not a flaw. The trial judge was dead, and all the other court attendants and officers of course had been replaced by the shifts of politics.

Confounded and defeated, I arrived at Indianapolis, on the first of October. As I was about to step into the hotel conveyance I saw a man just ahead on the sidewalk. He carried a cheap valise and wore rough looking clothes. What instantly arrested my attention was his peculiar gait.

I jumped out and told the carriage caller I would walk. I followed the stranger covertly. His gait was slow and the swing of course was more ample, but there were the heel down, the towing out, the stiff, ungraceful erectness, the steady swing, the automatic mechanism of the prison lockstep. He had surely "served time."

I hoped to get a view of his face. His hair was black and short; his clothes cheap. I had no presentiment that he was anybody I was interested in.

Going slowly along unnoticingly, and in deep thought, he came to the Park and sat down wearily, despairingly on the bench before the Morton monument.

I came up briskly, stopped short, gazed over him at the effigy and asked without looking at him, "Beg

pardon, stranger, whose monument is that?" Then I cast my glance upon him. His was the Sing Sing prison face; the same wistful eyes, the same good face. I could not be mistaken.

"My God, man, Bob Greyson sure as I'm alive!" and I extended my hand. He gasped with surprise and limply held my hand an instant.

"You are on, Mr. Officer; they all are everywhere I go sooner or later. I can't get away, though my term's out and there's nothing hanging over me. I just can not get away."

There was a pitiful alarm and helplessness in his face that touched me.

"I am not a plain-clothes man, Greyson, and you don't look like a criminal."

"Then how did you catch on?"

"I'm a mind-reader," I said with gay heartlessness. "Why, I even know where you are going. You got out last March, and getting enough money together you have come to see Judge Greyson. Is that it?"

He gaped. I now had a pretty good opinion of my ability as a detective. I could fool and pick out an old criminal. I was too deeply in earnest to trifle much. I wanted him to tell me who he was, and to explain those photographs.

"Pardner, you are great. That's what I am going to do. But I'd like to know who you are."

"I'll trade even on information," I said honestly.

"It's a go," he answered, looking distrustful.

"My name is Colonel French. I went East to do some unprofessional work for Judge Greyson of the Supreme Court. I found out there are two Robert Greysons, both were convicted and served their terms out last March. One went to Dannemora, the other to Sing Sing. I'm mixed. That's all."

"My story is longer than yours. I'm nobody, just a human blank. I have no name, no reputation, and every hand against me. Every one that's come to me for nearly nineteen years has had a key, a gun or a pair of handcuffs. You're the first man I've run up against in nineteen years with your hand open.

"There's only one Robert Greyson, thank God. The world wouldn't stand for two. There isn't enough meanness in it for two. I married Bob Greyson's sweetheart. He stole our baby when it was a year old. We got into a scrap about it right in a crowded street in New York, and while struggling on the ground he pulled my pistol, tried to kill me, missed and accidentally shot a woman. He stuck the pistol in my pocket, run and escaped. I got fifteen years. When I got out in about eleven years, he had me nabbed again. He had his witnesses, and with charges of abduction and wife murder and with my prison record I had no show. I got ten years more.

"He had an evil influence over my wife. I don't know what became of her or the baby. I think he hypnotized her. When I went up the first time, I

came out in about eleven years, because of good conduct. I have never committed any sort of crime. I'm about rubbed out now. I had one glorious revenge. Bob got ten years before the same judge at the same time I did,—the last time. He was sent to Dannemora. If I see him and get the drop—that's all, unless my wife and boy are alive. That's what I'm going to see Jim Greyson for. I wrote him my whole case; he never answered. Damn such a man!"

"Whom did you marry? What's your name?"

"I married the Greyson girl Claire; my name is 'A. C. Mason. That's all.'" Skid Puffer's father! That was all!

I sat there stunned. I could not find my tongue to tell him what I knew. I turned back on his story after a time and we slowly pieced out the fabric of his lost years. It fitted in all its parts and was convincing. I got the minuter facts about Robert Greyson's love for Claire, his jealousy, his cunning dissimulations, his ways and means. It was a reasonable story of jealousy and revenge in a conscienceless man.

I explained to him in a few words that his wife was dead, and that his son was alive and a fine man. I refused him details. I explained those would come later. I told him more fully about the life and home and position of the Greysons. I explained to him that the Judge held him and Robert Greyson doubly guilty of the misery and fate of Claire.

Then I said, "Just a word about your son. He has a furious vengeance in his heart. We are trying to keep him from taking the law in his own hands against you and Robert Greyson. He may kill both of you."

I told him about the probated estate in New York, explained that I was the guardian of Skid, and that his property was worth nearly eight thousand dollars. As I had more of this world's goods than I could use, I told him I would place a sum to his credit in bank just as soon as his position and appearance were rehabilitated. I fitted him out, gave him the accounts and accepted a due bill.

After he had become a prosperous looking citizen we went to the Park again.

"Just a little walk, Mason, in order to get better acquainted. You are as much a man now as you ever were. The call of those accursed cells is to the whole family, to your son, to me, to all who love fair play. I will stand by you. I will help you fight out your wrongs. We will find Robert Greyson."

He was aroused with new hope. I told him to stand square with the world, and get away from the lockstep in his heart as well as the lockstep in his feet.

We went to the hotel and got rooms. Later we engaged a private parlor, and made an appointment with Judge Greyson for four o'clock.

The Judge's welcome was hearty. He glanced at the stranger with me, and I said in a commonplace

way, "This gentleman has helped me out. I want to tell you what he has done." The Judge bowed cordially.

I pitched into my story at once, and explained everything minutely up to my arrival.

"Then this gentleman, Judge, who helped me, had the final solution of all my work. He found two Robert Greysons, one Robert Greyson, the one in Sing Sing, was sent there nearly nineteen years ago first. Your stepson, Robert Greyson, went to Dannemora state prison about seven years ago. Now, Judge, what this gentleman found out, for which both of us should be grateful, is that the Greyson who went to Sing Sing was your son-in-law and he was put there by Bob Greyson and his half-cousin." Then I related the history of Mason, the Sing Sing Greyson, in detail. I showed the Judge the rogues' gallery picture and gave him a certified copy of the Dannemora Greyson case. He recognized his stepson instantly. "He is the man that fought Skid last June, Judge," I explained (the Judge had not seen the contest).

The jurist asked a dozen illuminating questions for facts I had not thought of relating, but which my investigations or certified copies satisfied.

"How comes it that Mason rested content under the name of Greyson at Sing Sing?" he asked.

"I got that too, Judge, through this gentleman here. Mason was practically insane when he was first put in prison, and he was in the hospital three months. He told the physician, but the prison doc-

tor is used to fairy stories. Mason even wrote to you. Did you get that letter?"

"Never; never in the world," answered the Judge emphatically.

"Mason, your son-in-law, is released and we have him here in the city. Would you like to see him?"

"See him? Great God! See him? Where is he? Let us get there, hurry." And the Judge grasped his hat, his cane and gloves.

"Let's plan a little, Judge. What shall we say, and what ought we to do?"

"My Maker! Have I treated any human being as I have this man Mason! It does not seem possible that I, a man whose whole life is devoted to justice, have been responsible for this injustice. I moved from the East here about that time. That may explain the letter not reaching me. But let's see Mason. Quick, hurry for God's sake, Colonel, let's get to him."

"Hold on, Judge Greyson, I am doing the honors to-day. Calm yourself."

He looked at me searchingly.

I took him by the arm. "Judge, I want to introduce you to your—to your son-in-law, Mr. A. C. Mason. Here is his Sing Sing likeness." The Judge gasped, stared at the picture, at Mason, and then took his hand.

Looking him through and through, he asked, "You have heard all that has been said here?"

"Yes, I have, Jim Greyson, and every word is true as gospel."

"What is your true name in full?"

"A. C. Mason. Arthur Charles Mason."

"What was Claire's full name?"

"Claire Gareen Greyson, born Ballard," said Mason unhesitatingly.

Then the Judge came out of his lawyer's shell, the big-hearted man.

"God bless you, Mason; forgive my unintentional injuries if you can. You are to be one of us now. I will introduce you to the family to-night." The Judge's voice was broken and he trembled with his emotions. "I have much to tell you about Skid, Colonel. I will be here before court to-morrow morning. Bring Mason—shall I call you Charlie now?—bring him down to-night. Good-afternoon, gentlemen."

BOOK III
THE DESERT



THE SONOYTA RIVER

A desert stream dry at both ends. On the desert edge to right the saguaro (sahuaro), the single stem, and organ-pipe cactus. Ocatilla, prickly fig and greasewood bushes seen.

CHAPTER I

CRYPTOGRAMS AND LETTERS

AFTER the Judge had left us Mason and I sought our separate apartments for our own private meditations. Not long after it came to my mind rather suddenly that the Judge and I had forgotten the complication attendant on Skid meeting his father. That was a serious difficulty and must be attended to at once. I rushed to the telephone and found him at that very moment calling me.

"What about that gentleman and his son, Judge? You understand?"

"Was just going to call you up to tell you that the son is out of town. There will be no mix there."

"So. Good! What's that, Judge? All right; we'll be down about eight."

The next morning the Judge, pale and serious, met us early and, without explanation except "From Skid," read a telegraphic message apparently several days old. This is what it told:

TUCSON, ARIZ., Sept. 20th.

Justice Greyson, Chambers Indpls.

G gone Mexico city ballard survey employee returns guaymas routed hermosillo sonora trail to altar

quitobaquita on international boundary line about onethirteen will intercept hermosillo if can with state and province warrants repeat to french letter follows skid.

I jumped with astonishment. Then the Judge calmly withdrew a letter from his pocket, rather crumpled and evidently several days old, spread it out ready to read, saying:

"I got a letter from my stepson, Lem, a few weeks ago, which was like a message from the dead. He said he had reformed, and was leading an honorable life. It was written from the Survey camp of the engineers, who are relocating the international boundary line. It was posted at Buenos Ayres, Arizona, where the headquarters are. He is chief scout of the provision branch and routes the water wagons, finds camping grounds of water and grass, and is scout for the army escort who attend the surveying parties. He is nearly always at the front. He has been living in that country for years and says he knows the country as well as he does the streets of this city.

"But the astonishing part of his letter, the part that concerns us, is that Robert Greyson arrived there a few weeks ago with high credentials and a specially warm letter from me. He so impressed Chief Ballard, one of the division chiefs, that Bob is not only in high standing, but is now employed on a mission to the City of Mexico. Something about previous survey records perhaps. I interpret the telegram

to mean that Bob will return from Mexico City by water to Guaymas on the eastern shore of the Gulf of California, thence northward by trail to Hermosillo on the Sonora River. Skid has warrants from Arizona and also from the Province of Sonora. It appears that the surveying camp is now about Quitobaquita proceeding westward on the boundary line, say meridian 113 to 114. This is in the Yuma desert of Arizona. As I did not know your address, Colonel, for the last two weeks, I was stumped as to repeating the telegram to you.

"Lem is seldom at Buenos Ayres, and he being at the front Bob probably does not yet know Lem is with the survey. The front now, I suppose, is at, or a little west of, meridian 113. Lem, I find, is company hunting down near Nogales about 100 miles easterly from the front survey, or reconnoissance parties."

Judge Greyson then began to read Skid's letter:

"I had my wire posted to Tucson. Chief Ballard is with me heart and soul. He is mother's uncle! How strange things come out in this world. I have studied routes with him for several hours and have government blue prints of this whole country. He was deeply chagrined when he found out whom he had sent to Mexico for those maps, etc. I have made arrangements to take the trail from here with Captain Jack Rodgers, employed by the government as Inspector of Immigration on the boundary from Nogales west. I can't quite make out his position,

for he seems to be deputy ranger for Arizona territory too. He is my guide. We have duplicate warrants for the territory. I'm a deputy under Jack, and Chief Ballard has arranged to serve a duplicate warrant at the headquarters at Buenos Ayres if he gets the chance. Besides this, Jack is to arrange for a Sonora province warrant for Greyson.

"Greyson returns by water via Guaymas; then Hermosillo, then Altar, to 113. He then comes in to headquarters. As Jack has a two weeks' vacation or furlough and gets a hundred dollars to read my warrant to Greyson, dead or alive, and makes three dollars a day for trial service, he goes with me gladly.

"We go down leisurely on the old Coronado trail east of and also on the railroad from Nogales south to Hermosillo and start in the morning. Jack says we may miss our party at Hermosillo, and for fear there may be some slip-up we shall have our outfit ready there to follow on the trail. I want to get the scenery and experience anyway. I have a Marlin, two Colts, maps, compass, thermometer, camp outfit and will learn to sleep in a sack and eat greasy bacon and red-hot Mexican food.

"Captain Jack is a fierce, black-faced fellow, speaks excellent language of several kinds. Ballard says he knows all the trails as well as a pack rat does its greasewood burrows lined with Bigelow choya thorns.

"I hope you now have Colonel's permanent address where a letter will reach him. I shall write

him. Explain the situation please. I will write to Tootsie either along the route or at Hermosillo. I hope you will not write or wire me for some time, for it might flush the game. Wait. I'll get my man. Love to all, "SKID."

"What is the date of that letter, Judge Greyson?" I asked excitedly.

"It's dated one day later than the telegram of the twentieth. It is now the first of October. Skid and the Captain must be at Hermosillo perhaps for two or three days or more. We may expect a letter at any hour now. Tootsie should hear from him at any time."

"Oh! I forgot to ask for my mail at the office, Judge," I said, springing up. I had telegraphed the hotel to hold my mail. I ran and found not only a letter, but a telegram.

The letter had the postmark of Hermosillo, but of course the telegraph envelope was blank. I tore the message out and read it, returned to the Judge and Mason and read it to them.

COL. F. FRENCH,

Indpls., Inda.

cr. Grand Hotel.

Read wire letter Judge Greyson comes north H. fourth or fifth ready have help all well shake skid.

That was the second telegraphic cryptogram. We got several more. Capitals and punctuation marks

were absent. At last we became expert in reading the code that prevails in telegraph offices, presided over by "any-boy-can-learn-telegraphing-at-home" incompetents. But we stopped puzzling over the telegram and sat down to Skid's bulky letter.

"Hermosillo, Mex.,

"Sept. 26th.

"DEAR COLONEL AND GUARDIAN:

"Supposing this will be forwarded to you sooner or later I try the hotel. I hope father, by this time, has seen the contents of my wire and letter to you also. Now you may be a little surprised that I am out here on the desert having the time of my life. I am only just getting to the danger edge now. Meanwhile throwing everything off my mind except the work in hand, trailing and learning things—I arrived here early this morning with Captain Jack Rodgers.

"You know why I came here, of course. It was the first chance I had to do anything. I drew through father a large sum, got to Buenos Ayres, made arrangements there (see letter to father) and came with Captain Jack down this old missionary trail to Hermosillo. R. G. is expected about the 4th or 5th. Only one thing has disturbed us so far. Jack says a trailer or guide, a rattish eyed Yaq, went all around the stopping places to-day seeing who was about to take the trail. He eyed me suspiciously. Jack says that if a Yaq eyes a man darkly for awhile,

that man wants to sleep with his gun in his hand for a few days.

"We re-outfit here. We won't be a bit surprised now if they try to slip past. Jack thinks R. G. is in Guaymas right now. That's about a hundred miles south, and it will take them at least four days though the nights are cool, and the road is fine from there. Jack himself was discovered. He and that very same Yaq once had a little set-to, he says, and when that Yaq reports such a man here as I am, R. G. may take alarm.

"We have made arrangements to take Papago Charlie and two pack burros on. You ought to smell my outfit over. It even surprises me at the stuff we have. Now we are a regular caravan with a Winchester (Jack's), a thermometer, a Marlin (mine) a steel shovel (that's extra), field glass of high power, extra water skins, handcuffs, ankle shackles, a hand compass (terrestrial, hair sights), Ballard's blue print maps, two kinds of warrants (Jack expects to have an officer serve the Mexican one here), about a peck of steel nosed cartridges, and provisions and supplies of various kinds.

"A curious thing happened ten days or more before my arrival at Buenos Ayres. A crazy mule, mad with thirst, rushed in from the desert on a hot evening and grabbed R. G. by the left sleeve. He held on like a bulldog (he had some flesh with the bite) and R. G., Ballard says, could not get loose. He paused, set, drew back his right slowly, then shot it out like a piston, throwing his weight with

it, and struck that mule square in the forehead. Crack! And that mule sank down with a little whine—dead. He had broken its skull. I call that going some.

“Would you believe it? Chief B. is a college chum of that pompous Col. Armstrong that swelled around with his orderlies at the Judge’s big blow out in June, and he had written Chief B. about that little fracas I had in the dooryard. He sent all the newspaper clippings about the affair (Col. A. made a ‘happy speech,’ the clippings said), but he enlarged on that scrape and said ‘Skid Puffer, the great Judge’s adopted son,’ etc. So I was known because I was discovered. And I was discovered because I was known. Wa!

“As Squire Puffer would say, I was persony gravy right from the start, and Chief B. being mother’s uncle! you can imagine things set my way. I am a deputy ranger! After two days residence! It’s legal too. I think though the strangest thing that I have run against is Captain Jack himself.

“His face is marked with powder stains and he has several knife marks on his arms and hands. He is as black as a Spaniard, agile as a cat, swift as an antelope, and as quick in a fight or an emergency as a chaparral cock. He is tall, thin, bristly, with lazy blue eyes. Think of that! Lazy blue eyes! I was told on the sly that he is an ex-outlaw (I can’t believe it), ex-boundary smuggler, gun expert (I could fill pages of his feats, all sufficiently attested to make them look right), deserter and mountain

trailer, and the best deputy International Boundary immigration inspector in this part of creation.

"When he gets on the trail of a Reservation escape, Navajo, Piman, Yaq or Pap (Papagoes are called the Bean Eaters) and if they find out it's Black Jack after them, they act just like Davy C.'s coons. His principal business now is shooing back the Chinks and Japs, who thirst to get across the Line by way of the Sonoran trail (or elsewhere).

"I think he unlimbered more to me confidentially when coming down here than he has to others.

"One time when he was down around Railroad Pass, Arizona, a crowd of those human hyenas, the Apaches, crowded him to a fortified little lava hole in the side of a mountain. He said he lived six days on a handful of honey mesquite beans, a quart of buggy water,—six scalps and twelve Indian ponies! Then the Apaches quit.

"He has to go back on the tenth of October. When on our way down here he taught me all the desert trailing and hunting craft my system would absorb. And the tales he told me! They're better than the Squire ever dreamed up. When I return I'll repeat them for a year. The strangest thing about him is,—*He's a graduate of Columbia!* He's traveled, I think, a hundred miles (counting the railroads in) to any old padre's one, not counting in Garces. He has taught me how to camp out under almost any kind of difficulties. Of course I can make a campfire out of the regular mesquite materials, but I have learned to make one out of dry

ocotillo and palo-verde stems, provided I have a little galleta grass and a match.

"I am getting wise on cactus. I know the whole gang around this part of the world. The other day we pretended as we went into camp at Ures on the Coronado trail that there was no water within forty-four miles. With my hatchet and hunting knife, I cut off the top of a biznaga cactus. (There are several kinds, but this kind is about as big and tall as a flour barrel, and is sometimes called the barrel cactus). Then I got a palo-verde tree stem (any punch piece of wood will do if it isn't bitter; one can take the end of the hatchet handle) and pounded the innards to a pulp, then I squeezed out the juice. I easily got a quart. There are two or three kinds of choyas. It's a short jointed terror, a savage bunch of cockle burrs about as big as a small nubbin of corn with back action claws on each, making one think of hornets and red hot fishhooks, when it's on the rampage. Captain Jack said he called it Bigelow's devil, because Bigelow is the man that invented it.

"Then there's the pitahaya; it's the Esau of the candelabra cactus. Sometimes it's called the saguaro, sometimes almost any kind of straight stem cactus. There has been so much confusion among cactal names that they have been tied down forever with scientific labels. And Jack, think of this too! knows the scientific tags and I have written them all down, for Tootsie. The *Cereus giganteus* is the Old Desert Sentinel, the saguara, the candelabra cactus, the

pitahaya (with reservations) and a few other names that everybody knows about. It's good for woodpecker nests, firewood when it's dead, and for travelers' lies. Its staves will make bows and arrows, but it has about as much general value as swamp blue stem. Every traveler has to work it into his letters as I do. After the *lluvia d'ora*, or the bush *palo verde* or flowering top of the *yucca* or the *Ajo* lily (that's Mexican for garlic) this whole geedanged half resurrected sea floor ought to be planted with things that don't look so fierce and starved. If I had my way about it, I told Jack, I would go up to the Colorado Canyon somewhere when the river is low and where it is about a mile down between narrow walls and I'd dam it clear to the top and let the water overflow this part of the Devil's world. That would make it a paradise. I can see the twist of his black bristly mustache yet when he said, 'If we have time, Puffer, we will take an afternoon off and chuck in the rocks, just to see how it works.'

"About the quickest thing on earth in little motions is a sand lizard. They will curl their tails over their backs and shoot over the sands or trail to a crevice with about the speed of electricity. There's just one thing that's quicker, though, a road-runner or chaparral cock. He's all bill, tail, steel springs and feathers. He can catch a lizard between the time the lizard is scared and the time the lizard starts to run away, and cover about ten feet in doing it. He clips it in two like a candy man down at

Monticello snips a kiss of taffy off. I have seen him cut a horned toad in two parts for practice.

"The best trick Jack has taught me is snapping a pair of handcuffs on him with my left while holding my Colt cocked in my right. Three seconds plus is my time. I have a Marlin and he a Winchester. He doesn't like a Marlin and says it 'catches' the shell in emergencies, once in a thousand times. And emergencies in his business mean life or death. I have shot away about a peck of ammunition in practice. I can plug a woodpecker hole in an organ pipe cactus, or a saguaro four inches over, at ninety yards, five times in seven. I have also shot off seventeen woodpecker heads as they made faces at me, sticking their heads out of their holes, at fifteen paces (with my revolver). He has taught me to swing down on the side of my mule (with my belt gun) and shoot under its neck at an imaginary redskin, say a Bean Eater. So far I have not been able to hit anything but a large expanse of atmosphere.

"Captain Jack says the main thing out here is quickness and endurance. Learning to go about thirty hours without water in August, three days without eating, and getting the drop are the three virtues of desert life in this part of mis-creation. He says there is only one thing slyer than a wildcat or an Apache, and that is a white throated desert pack rat. We have seen a thousand of their nests in the greasewood burrows, their holes lined with ocatillo thorns or choya spears, but I have not seen a rat yet. Jack said he has seen just two in life,

one was dead by a poisoned well and the other was in a picture book.

"One night we were camped at old Ures. We thought nobody was within ten miles, and the town was there all right some hundreds of years ago. I went down the banks to a little spring. It was just dusk. Before I knew what was up, I heard a rumbling thunder, coming closer and closer, till, when I was almost ready to run into a hole or hide my head under a greasewood bush, I saw dimly about thirty Rancheria Indians, on their little ponies, go roaring past in a cloud of dust after a bunch of wild burros. As they got opposite they swirled down the arroya and up like flashing snake-peters. Just as they got to the other rise they began to yell and swing their lariats. The whole time was not a minute. From the beginning of the rattling thunder, I never heard the like of before, till they dashed up and out like shouting devils and disappeared, I thought old Nick had given a holiday to the Infernal regions and that I was the victim of their picnic. Everything I heard or saw was unlike any other sound or thing in my experience. That was the second deathly scare I've had in my life.

"I feel pretty good, Colonel, the way Jack treats me. He said if he hadn't seen me commence with my Marlin and followed the time till yesterday, seeing me shoot, he would testify before high heaven that to his best knowledge and belief I was born with a Winchester in my—mouth. Yes, he said that. Yesterday, wishing to do something on the

ancient Coronado trail to distinguish myself, Jack measured off (by pacing) one hundred yards. Then I stripped to my shoes and drawers, he held the watch and I covered the ground in ten flat. He was so astonished for a while that he was silent, then he asked me how I could negotiate a mile. I told him when I was feeling pert and the weather was snappy, about 4:45 was needed. He said I ought to hire out to run down antelopes for the mining companies. He sort of threw in aimlessly that a swift man was never a remarkably strong man. I could not stand that. I told him to make himself stiff with his arms by his side. I caught him by his belt from behind, and with a quick flirt he was way up above my head on the end of one arm. I let him down softly, and asked him how the weather was up there.

“‘Puffer,’ he said, ‘you don’t need any gun to serve these warrants, coming, stopping, or going.’

“It would take several letters much longer than this to tell you the interesting things he related about the language, the people, the history and the meaning of this part of the world. I know something about tarantulas, centipedes, desert mice, rabbits and hares, the difference between a rancheria and a temporale, sidewinders, mountain sheep, water-holes, the Camino del Diablo, the International Boundary line, about the Gila and Salt River meridian and base line, the reservations, the habits of Indians of the different kinds, sandstorms, regular storms, desert ice,

yes *ice* (twice already at nights we have had two blankets over our sleeping bags, with 110 in the shade in the daytime) and how to—cook.

“The most deadly thing I have attacked yet is the cooking. A camp cook, part Yaq, part Mexican, and part devil, mixes things, makes them hot as fire can make them and hotter with peppers and other unknown things. Then you brace yourself, say good-bye and try. It is something like eating Abe Puffer’s cockle burs red hot, washed down with Angelina P.’s strongest lye. My cook from here will be Papago Charlie. I have already sampled his mixes. Pepper, rancid butter or lard, mule bacon, and unleavened tortilla flour are his desserts. He talks about a thousand times worse than pure Kankakee, but in the sign and grunt language he is grammatically A1. Jack says he is an expert on the trail, and will not do anything worse than steal or desert a tenderfoot. If we have to follow from here he will walk behind two burros which hold most of our earthly possessions, while Jack and I will either ride our mules or trade them off for ponies.

“This is a big dead and alive trading place; a rendezvous for cattlemen, prospectors, mine bosses, thieves, cutthroats, cowboys, lazy peons, lazier Indians, sleepy officials, squaws who are always trying to sell what nobody on earth ought to buy, and much other animated disreputability. (That’s a bigger pair than Abe Puffer ever grew. What he did miss by not having those two in emergencies! He could have thrown them at Jake Spading, stood back on

his dignity and Darwinicks and shaken the foundations of Pufferland).

"Jack gets a hundred dollars for serving either warrant to R. G., dead or alive. He says it looks as if this case was one of the hot muzzle arrests on trail. There is only one way our party can make meridian 113 on the Boundary. They must follow the old Hermosillo trail from here to Altar on the Altar river. From there (it's four days' travel to that spot) they must go over the ancient Sonora-Altar trail north. Above Altar (El Altar, Mexicano) it bears off Northwest-north-north (or something like that) to the Sonoyta Valley. There are no *temporales* or *rancherias* till one strikes the very old trail from the Sonoyta Valley to Nogales. Those places are about 120 miles apart. All the way north from Altar now the country is deserted, the wickiups vacant, the country empty. The Papagoes are over in the Sierra Madre foothills hunting; the squaws for pine nuts, acorns, roots, seeds and several kinds of nuts. The bucks are hunting mountain sheep, wild turkeys, mule deer, 'burros,' and other game in daytime, and stealing ranch cattle and ponies at night. They sometimes raid a mine for excitement.

"Jack told me all about the Sonoyta river, valley, mountains and its people. I'll save that for Tootsie's letter, for this letter is too long (though I have nothing else to do). My dear Colonel, at times I feel devilish lonely out here in this killing corner, where not only nature seems nearly starved, but the people too seem to be too lazy to grow right.

"When I lie awake some nights down here with my head sticking out of my bed sack, my head on my saddle (that's a very hard pillow, Colonel, too) looking up at the blazing stars I have thoughts that I know you will understand. I have tried to keep my mind off of the *time* and the *place* and the *thing*! Yet I feel sure I will be successful in my mission. Robert Greyson is coming home with me in handcuffs or in a coffin. You will know this is no bluff. He must answer.

"I have made arrangements with Captain Jack and with Chief Ballard, if things do not turn out right. Remember that. I shall have to quit right here before I say too much or feel the same way. With love to you for ten thousand friendly and fatherly acts, and blessing and loving all the others at home, I will close.

"SKID."

During the reading of this letter we had been delighted, amused, charmed into forgetfulness, surprised, proud, reassured for his safety. We had burst into uneasy fits of laughter, and at the last felt a clutch at our hearts. He "would make arrangements with Captain Jack or Chief Ballard if things do not turn out right."

The Judge was called to the hotel office and returned to us, saying that Tootsie had received her letter. "It's mostly historical, she says, but we must go down now to the house and read it."

CHAPTER II

SKID'S LETTER TO TOOTSIE

IT is not pertinent in this part of the record of Skid Puffer's life to recite the meeting of Mason with the Greyson family. I can not take the space either to give all of Skid's letter to Tootsie, but I will give disconnected paragraphs from it.

"Captain Jack and I have traveled, rather leisurely, part of the way on the old Coronado trail down here. I suppose this is the oldest road in America, and has most of historic interest. Why, Toots, people have been doing roadwork on it long before the Sandhill road was blazed by the tails of the Puffer bears. Shakespeare was not born when Father Marcos and his negro tacked along it, finding out how hard it is to make a new way in a Mexican wilderness.

"This was some time ago, in 1539. I suppose an expert like you knows all about Estevanico and Father Marcos. These names have as many ways for their spelling as Hink Stickel has for catechism.

"The first name that Captain Jack mentioned that caught my fancy was Vacapa or Bacapa. That's

where Father Mark stopped over on Easter Sunday, April 6th, 1539. And that's about the first word where the history mixers stop when they start on his trail, many of them telling what old Mark never said, and describing where he never went.

"Captain Jack says, 'A great deal depends where Mark took dinner on April 6th; his narrative of leagues and geographical monstrosities depends on where he dined. Books have been written about this famous spot. Some of the historical masseurs have slammed old Marcos over to Quitobaquita up on the north edge of Sonora, about meridian 113 on the International Boundary. That was not a Papago bean dinner, Puffer, it happened down on the Matape or Fuerte river, south central Sonora. St. Joseph's mission was down there in 1629. Mark's body-servant was a much traveled colored gent. He came overland from Florida with de Vaca, and getting the big head, he ran things on the old father's pioneer trail when they went hunting for the immortal Seven Cities of Cibola.'

"Jack knows about a bushel of Indian dialects, and has made original investigation here for years. He says he's been over the trail from one end to the other with a fellow named Bandelier years ago, and others have mixed things part of the way. He says books have been written about old Mark and Coronado, who came next year following the old father's footsteps, including Steve's. He talks very irreverently about the whole matter, and says 'Any man who would waste over six or seven minutes as

to the route Old Mark and his lying nigger went, ought to be jailed.'

"Captain Jack's age, judging from his looks, would fit almost anywhere between thirty-five and fifty. I asked him one time the meaning of this corner of the world.

" 'Puffer,' he answered, 'this Yuma and Colorado desert is the frying pan to purify the air for the rest of the United States.'

" 'But what is it *good* for, Cap?'

" 'Son, that is the last question an artist should ask. What's a sky picture from a devil's mirage to God's finest sunset good for? What's vastness, sublimity, landscape, color *good* for? The question ought to be, What is a man out here good for?' Then he turned whimsical; his bristles over his upper lip twisted into a smile. 'This part of creation is good for an editor on vacation, a paid correspondent, or some prose poet, to ride along the railway and make pen splurges to send home to their readers or for the paunches of books of travels. They are the fellows who from the car windows see the glowing floods of colors that were never on land or sea; hear the silence, hook on to the vastness, slop about the Cataract canyon, and talk about the fierceness, and never fail to ring in the greasewood and butcher up the saguaro and Casa Grande ruins. Their testimony is about as competent as the travelers on the incoming liners making their first trip to America. A few of them begin to tell how they love America when they smell the smoke of the reporters' tug.

If Nature pours out too much water we have ocean down to swamp; too much heat, hellfire in the earth all the way up to deserts. The wind sands modify, the travelers do the rest. The tantrums of the wind out here, loaded up with sand, have cut this country into curious landscape mosaics.'

"One night when we were stretched out on our blankets before going to bed up at old Arispe, just poking along in silent thought, Jack raised up on one elbow and looked at me with a curious glance in his dark face.

" 'Ever get to dreaming, Puffer? Fool dreams, just to pass the time away, like flying and having visions? '

" 'Thousands of times, Cap. I'm built that way. I have flown a million miles up in the skies, been worth nine hundred and forty-four millions of dollars and—oh! other little things like that.'

"He laughed and seemed to get some comfort out of the thought that there were others. He turned serious.

" 'I have studied this part of the map,' he said, 'till I know it about as well as my little ranch. I know the trackways from railroad down to a lizard's run; slept in it, hunted in it for animals, four legged and two legged; trailed in it, warred in it, starved in it, smothered in it and stood it for eighteen years. And the more I live in it, the more bedamned I am. About the only fun I get out of it is in having its historical visions. I somehow always start about a year before Coronado came jaggging along. To-

day and especially to-night, I have been seeing that fat, Moroccan nigger, Estevanico, Steve, old man de Vaca's servant. See him and old Mark stumbling along this trail in 1539?

“‘They went along here, Steve doing the introduction and telling lies so big and new that they were bowlegged; and so entrancing that old Mark set them down in an imperishable geographical mix-up. You ought to start on it some time, but make your will first. You may never live through it.

“‘I see Steve, crazy over women and gold, getting the swelled head, a few days in advance of his master, old Mark, whose name nobody knows, both fascinated or crazy by the stories of the seven cities of Cibola. The nigger went ahead spying out roads and ready to steal, the true pioneer instinct. You know about Cibola? No? Cibola was on the southern land edge of the Great Northern Mystery. It should have had silver walls, golden roofs and the people should have worn gem-decked clothes and then Steve would have been a black saint by this time.

“‘So as Steve raged on followed by old Mark, through this Sonora River valley; right along this very road and Mark dreaming of souls, that's the missionary instinct, he would receive crosses from Steve of a size in proportion to his lies. Mark could not head Steve off, and he poked along after him, his glory goose quill in one hand, the crucifix in the other, getting enough counterfeit glory crosses

from the front to make poor old nameless Mark forget his prayers.

" 'I see the old Friscan friar toiling along here through this bony Sonora valley after the panting nigger, thinking of the torquoise studded cotton clothes, the silver walls, the golden roofs of the far off seven cities of Cibola and taking possession of the country when he had picked these choya thorns out of his hands, four hundred and fifty years ago. Say, that's older than you are, Puffer.'

"I told him he had missed my age just a year. Then he went on:

" 'Let us be down at Ures now, old Ures by the gorge where friar Mark got his first cross. There the road comes up out of Mexico, and hesitates which way it will go. It is later in the year. I see old Mark coming back ragged, starved, gaunt, shaking with fear and startled at every lurking bush,—defeated. Whipped ever since. The nigger staid, staid there ever since.

" 'Here they come, Puffer, Coronado, the sword following the crucifix.'

"Jack jumped up and pointed down the south going trail. 'See that toy army, the thousand Indians, the sheep, the cattle, the thousand extra horses, the twenty praying priests, the two hundred and fifty of the Castilian chivalry in their pomp, their flashing trappings and glistening arms! Hear the rattling thunder of the horses' hoofs following old Mark's spoor. Their eyes see in fancy the golden roofs of the seven mighty cities, their hands itch, every

eye shining with the glory that was Coronado and the grandeur that was Steve's. They camp here, the twenty priests more or less bless them as they sink to sleep with dreams of Cibola. Dreams of yellow written out in red.'

"After this effort Captain Jack sat down again and in about a minute pointed to the north. 'Here they come back again, that toy army defeated like old Mark, also ragged and dirty, shivering, thinned, empty-handed, reviling old Mark, cursing all Cibola. Those few are all that are left, heavy hearted, hanging their heads, sneaking back home. Poor devils of Spanishmen, poor stricken people of Cibola, what a swan song chase was that, my countrymen! That's ever the Spanish way.

"'Look over the mountains, Puffer, to the west. See those friars? . Traveling here, there on trails no better marked than the mule deer's or the wild-cat's. Missions, churches, presidios from way south of Bacapa to the headwaters of the Gila across the deserts to San Francisco. I see old Father Garces toiling his way down the Gila to the Colorado, across the Mohave, to Buena Vista, down the Pacific coast with the roar of the ocean in his pious ears to San Diego, coming back across the Colorado desert, Yuma, the Gila pass at Tinajas, Agua Dulce, Caborca on the Altar, back to the Fuerte, then up the trail to Bac, on the desert above Nogales. Prayer shacks in a hundred lost corners on naked deserts, beads in ten thousand redskins' hands, churches with crosses looking reverently over a hundred leagues,

padres, padres, padres, everywhere winding along the trails; mumbling Latin prayers, sprinkling desert water on a dirty savage to save his black soul, the Spanish kind of God in the high tablelands, on the mesas, the rivers, the desert sands, in every mesquite bush.

“ ‘Then revolts, insurrections and slaughterings—there’s a wagonload of martyrs’ crowns at least in Sonora. Soon the old glory trails are silent, the Apache, like the coyote, jumps through the windows of the fallen mission houses,—ruin, silence, forgetfulness!’

“And, Toots, though I could not help admiring his humorous, cynical and earnest vision, I added: ‘And, Jack, the coyote chews up the stolen mail sack and howls his even-song in the places where the Bean Eaters once said their rigmaroles.’ Jack laughed at that, and seeing I was still in the right temper, went on orating:

“ ‘Then after three centuries another kind of bloody missionary is picking along the old missionary trails. He leads a pack mule or so, carries a gun, and every bundle has a pick and a pan. He digs holes in the riverbeds, in the hills, in the ledges, in the mountains and he pans, pans, pans. Now I see a human herd coming along the trails from the south, peons, Mexicans, Indians, dark faced men with bullet heads and hot eyes, crowding along the deserted missionary tracks, the Devil’s trail, the trackless deserts to the flood wash of the Colorado, to the golden gravels of California. A better Cibola, but

as bloody. They, like Steve, rage along, the sun beats them down and the rocky crosses on the sands mark the human sacrifice to the Yellow Thirst.

“‘I see a kingly man of high brows and eagle eyes with his immortal troop come out of the valleys on the west, cross the burning deserts and disappear to the east. Fremont! Here another troop coming from the east with their eyes in every nook, their hands using strange instruments shining in the hot sun, measuring and spying out the long, long tablelands of Arizona. There are springs, passes, flowers, roads, rivers, mountain ranges, named after them. They, like Steve the nigger, who is sleeping across their path for more than three hundred years, are seeking a trail to the golden roofed Portolas of California. They are sending back not crosses but government reports for the waiting millions beyond the sunrise rim. I hear the boy-voiced whistle of Ives' cackling toy steamer echoing in the caverns of the upper Colorado; see him jump on the banks and rage across the awful tablelands of Arizona, starved and perishing. Twenty years and there is a black roach of smoke from demons plunging through the endless wilds.

“‘Engines puff in lone places at the entrance to dark holes in the mountains; there is the eternal defiant thunder of the stamps breaking up the ribs of the mountains; swarms of men are edging over from the east; numberless droves of cattle are biting the earth of the starved plains; windmills mark the way; the east touches the west; the desert blooms.

“ ‘The Anglo-Saxon is crawling up out of the valleys, swinging over the tablelands, building cities on the sands. The red men are rubbed out in corrals, the antelope and the wildcat quiver in the night as they stop over the steel rails listening to their funeral march in the singing telegraph wires. Now they understand the meaning of the daylight salute of the requiem guns. The padres sleep, the missions crumble into the sands, the American sits down to sup after his long slaughters for peaceful homes. That's Sonora, Arizona, New Mexico after four hundred and fifty years. Whoope-ee!’ It was a wild Apache war whoop and I jumped a yard.

“ ‘That's pretty good, Jack, you'd take a blue ribbon at the Tippecanoe County Fair.’ He seemed tickled.

“ ‘That's my commencement address at Columbia a few years ago, Puffer. I see I have forgotten just how some of it roars. You stood it gee-danged well.’ (He said gee-danged, honest!) And then he slipped in his camp sack, and before ten minutes was snoring.”

There were several pages more of Tootsie's letter from Skid. As she read it, it made us almost forget our fears and sorrows. We read and reread those letters many times.

The next morning on his way down town the Judge stopped at the telegraph office; and he stopped every morning without result till the morning of the fifth of October.

CHAPTER III

THE PUFFER CUT-OFF

ON the fifth of October he received this telegram :

"G. slipped past last night fourth follow jack popgo write from altar three days more skid."

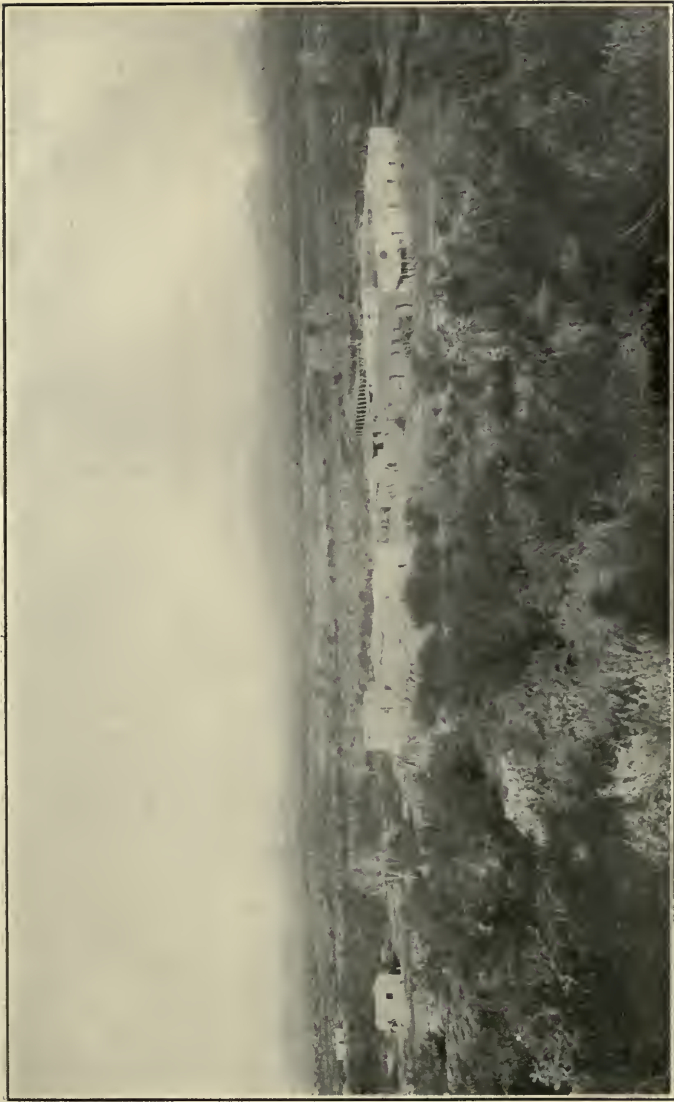
"Seems to be unsigned, Judge," explained the young operator who had just "picked it from the wire." The Judge had stood there with impressive dignity at the counter waiting to see it.

The Judge took it eagerly, frowned at it, stared at it, glared at it and said in that kind of tone that had made many a prisoner wince at its evenness when sentence was about to be pronounced, "It seems unsensed also."

"All I got," answered the operator—looking ruefully sympathetic.

"Oh!" said Judge Greyson, "one message is about as good as another with you gentlemen, I suppose." And the Judge was about to swell out. The general manager had caught the look on the Greyson features and hurrying up, looking grievously concerned, asked:

"What's the matter, your honor?" The man-



THE DEAD TOWN OF SANTO DOMINGO

On the oasal river the Sonoyta. River beyond, trial near side of the large square. Cotton-woods in center, choya and greasewood in front.

ager shot a forbidding glance at the narrow back of his operator at the instrument. The Judge with cold disdain handed back the yellow paper. The manager frowned at it with nervous intensity, poised, moved tensely toward the operator now slopping out other grammatical ciphers, bored again with his nose over the sheet and burst out:

"Shall we repeat, Judge?" The Judge reached for the message in darkling silence, tucked the paper in his overcoat pocket with great judicial calm.

"No; *I* have experts at the office. I am glad you throw in word spaces free but I would willingly pay for punctuation and capitals."

"Of course they charge for periods, Judge; you see—"

"I see," said the Judge, stiffly erect, and ready to stamp out with his gold-headed cane, "I see. Capitals would get bunched and tangled on the wires. They short circuit the sense. We can not expect too much from the telegraph company anyway. The knotting up of the words is enough. Good-morning, sir."

The manager shook his head meditatively as the Judge with supernal calm was driven off with slow dignity to his home.

When he reached his library he shook off his great coat, flung off his undercoat, snapped off his cuffs, spread out the cryptogram before him and, calling for me, he began to nose over it with great energy.

Our translation was in effect that Greyson had slipped out of or past Hermosillo the night of the

fourth of October; that Jack and Skid and the Papago followed, and that after three days more Skid would write from Altar.

During these days our apprehensions, our fears, our suspense supped and slept with us. But all things end sometime. At last the letter did come and it was very long. We read it many times. The rough map in it made things clearer and our public maps became more useful, but it showed how poor they were. The letter was commenced at Altar on the Asuncion river and was finished the next day at the Boni waterhole, perhaps fifty miles further along the trail. It appeared that after a "gun brush" the party ahead secured fresh mules, and scarcely stopping at Altar, continued with great haste to the next stopping place. Skid and Jack stopped during the sunlight hours at Altar. Here Captain Jack, whose time was up the next day, the morning of the tenth of October, made part of a rough map of the region further on. As they started off at sunset Captain Jack had tucked the paper in his pocket and said to Skid:

"Puffer, I have almost finished a map of the country above. If we overtake them at Boni, and we have a Winchester introduction that leaves my nose sticking in the sand for the rest of the day before the coyotes come, just roll me over and take this out of my pocket. You'll need it. I have made a cut-off in it that I want to explain a little. If they get out of Boni before we get there, we will go west about a mile to a butte I know of, and with our

compass and field glasses we will get the lay of the land."

Perhaps it was an hour before sunset when they hastened forward on the trail. Meanwhile Skid had written his letter.

When he and his party by almost incredible exertions arrived at the Boni waterhole in early morning of the next day they found the hole emptied and converted into a mass of filth. To an inexperienced and unversatile man this would have been a problem of life and death. Of course the water which they carried was exhausted; they could not go ahead or return to Altar with much hope of surviving.

It was then that Captain Jack said:

"Puffer, I have been following desert and mountain trails for eighteen years. I can play the whole game, but this fellow ahead—hell never vomited up one like him before for cunning and unmixed deviltry. It's things like these that make me believe in some of the doctrines of Calvin."

But out came that short-handled steel shovel from the pack. They carried out the rock, scooped out the filth and got the watering place clean before daylight, and then waited for the slow running arsenous water to fill the hole once more.

They spread their little tent shades, watered the sand under them, and, taking compass and field glass, they went to the westward and ascended a sharp, naked, solitary butte. They surveyed the whole northern half of the exposed position that met their view, and filled in the rough map. Though true in

directions and names, this map was without scale. I now quote from the letter:

“When Captain Jack and I got to the top of the black butte the sun was pretty warm, I can tell you. Usually down here the best time to travel is in November. October is fair but Jack says this is the infernalest, hottest October since Adam, and he says he ought to know. ‘See that peak way down there about 150 miles?’ he asked me. ‘That’s old Babo, about twenty-two hundred feet right up. It turns all colors sometimes at sunrise and sunset. It’s northwest of Nogales—Nogales is Spanish for walnut—and to the east of it, those two heads are old Baldy and Santa Rita. This side of old Babo are the Pilocartos mountains. I’ve killed gray squirrels and wild turkeys by the dozen there. Old Bab,—that’s short for Baboquivera, is one of the places where the Paps used to ascend and watch for their Moctezuma. Not Montezuma, that word is nothing but historical slang, Puffer.

“‘North of us, across half a dozen of those short rolls or ridges,—just baby mountains—see that old Dutchman with his top hat and broad shoulders? Eh? Well, that’s famous to anybody who ever put his fool foot down in this God-forsaken country. That’s the throne of Moctezuma—deserted. That’s the spot where the Paps’ Messiah reigned. Don’t you ever believe a word of that missionary rot of those ruins up at Casa Grande northwest of Tucson on the Gila being the throne of Moctezuma. The

scouts out here are mixed about whether it is the boss of the Ajo mountains or an unnamed gang not down on the maps. On this side and to the left of the Ajos (that means garlic mountains,—there's a big mine stamping day and night at the end of a long tunnel under them) are the Quitobaquito foothills. Isn't that a corking name? Don't you ever forget that name. Quitobaquita has two adobe huts mostly fallen in and the finest spring anywhere. The International Boundary Line travels over them one way, meridian 113 the other; ever hear of it?

“A trailer I met at Altar yesterday told me that the Governments have already got their little iron post, white as a ghost, and man high, set up there. Its number is 172. Don't forget that, either, because that means the surveyors must be several miles west of it now. The way they are setting them they must be nearer meridian 114 than 113. Your man, as you say, has to go to the front before he reports to headquarters at Buenos Ayres, a hundred miles east of the Q. Springs. Only one spring though.

“Now, Puffer, turn your glass eye to the west. Bunch of peaks over there. See those three, blue black, the highest one? Well, that's Pinacate. Yes, four syllables on that bug name. Means a bug that stands on its head when it is disturbed. Now see where I have jabbed down that tadpole, got a tail,—that's the Agua Dulce. Pretty name, isn't it? Means sweet water. Further to the south is a salt spring where the Paps used to get their salt. I

won't mark it. Now another thing you want to remember about this map, which will never get into the narrative and critical histories of the U. S. Agua Dulce is the center of your world!

“ ‘Prick up your ears now, Puffer; Pinacate and Moctezuma are in an exact line from northeast to southwest, running through your metropolis—Agua Dulce. Now, your compass; sight exactly northwest and that hole in the ground two days away, about at the south end of a river dry at both ends, is your dear little Agua Dulce. You don't pronounce it right. Try again,—that's right. The river? The Sonoyta. It's the center of a lost Papago paradise. There never was a river like it since the world was born. People exist on it yet, though no one can tell where it commences and no one can tell where it stops. I could talk all day about the Sonoyta river. It's chuck full of history and meteorological, climatical and geological, and—and '—and as Captain Jack seemed stuck, I helped him by saying: 'rashshe-oshenashun details and perspective.' And hot as it was I told him about Abe Puffer, and how he used those slambang words. He snickered a long time.

“ ‘Now this trail, Puffer, is like the handle of a crooked gourd, as I told you. It angles off north and bends sharp to the west when it strikes the trail that reaches Nogales, before it crosses the Line. It strikes the Nogales trail pretty close to Narizo (lot of Pap rancherias there); there this trail turns west. You come to the valley of the Sonoyta and to its trading port, Sonoyta. Look sharp or you'll not

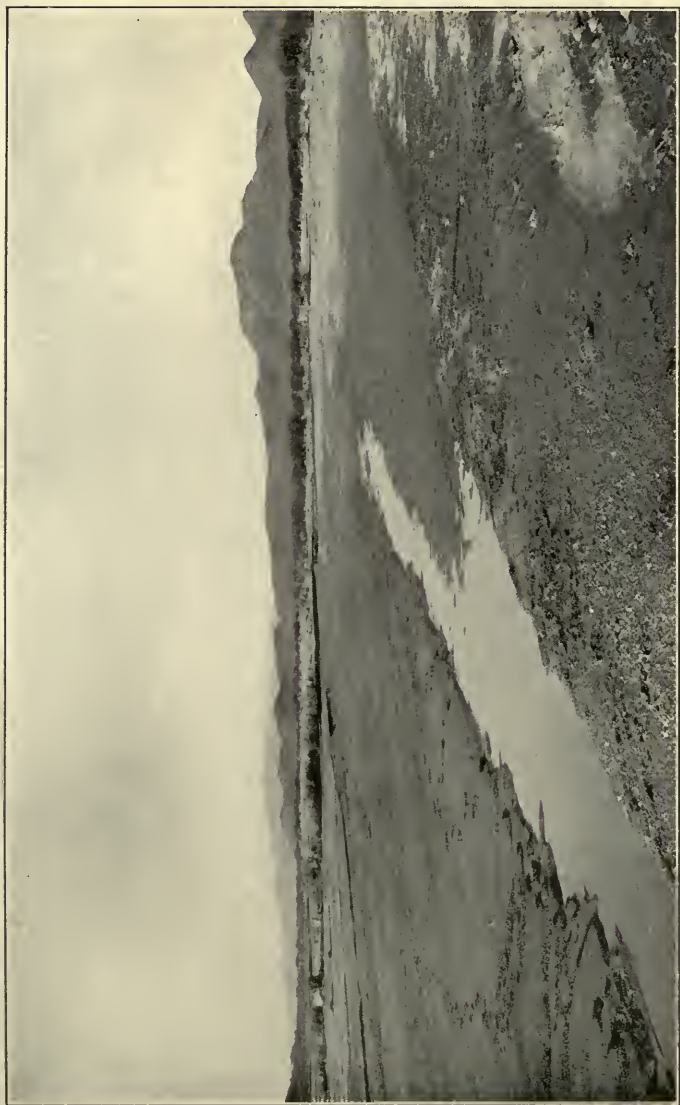
see it. It was founded in 1699 by old father Kino, and by the Indians about the time the morning first stars swam in singing. You know about that. About six miles further on there is another dead town. Not a white man there, though some big looking buildings. A mine made it; a mine killed, and nobody buried it. Still follow the Sonoyta, ankle deep and a jump wide part of the time and occasionally after cloud bursts 200 feet wide and able to wash a half ton boulder down on the way to Agua Dulce if there were any boulders.

“‘Next you reach the Hesperides, the Quitobaquita Springs. It was formed during the Tertiary, I suppose, and does business on its own hook. It is just as stable as the Quitobaquita foothills, while the Sonoyta river is as unstable as a desert sandstorm. Old Garces, who followed in the footsteps of Father Kino, has traveled more miles right over this whole territory, from the forks of the Gila over to San Francisco and down to San Diego and home again at Bac, than there are sands on the desert. Quitabaquito is Indian, Mexicano and Missionary word rot. It can only be explained by imagination and intellectual hiatus. Old Garces tried his quill on it and missed it a mile.

“‘Once in that Sonoyta valley thousands and thousands of the Bean Eaters had their dog, their *bisnaga* and *saguara* sap, their *pitahaya* drink and preserves, their bean patches and *temporales*. When the July rains came they trained the Sonoyta's waters into their little ditches to their *temporales*, usually

marked off by occatillo poles and mesquite roots, and raised melons, corn, garlic, squashes, beans, and beans and beans and lots of other things. The sun would glow about 115 to 120 in the shade and scalding hot in the sun, and those melons and things would grow faster than Jack's bean stalk. I have an idea the Sonoyta paradise was the birthplace of the Sedentary Indians. We have a few up our way, the Moqui, the cliff-dwellers.

“ ‘ Every summer during the centuries they would have a cloud burst and the devil would be to pay. Or the Apaches, those bloody hyenas, way down there in the southeast of Arizona, would slip in and kill off a few hundred and drive off what stock they could steal. And it went on so till the Spaniards came. Father Kino established a mission here, I forget when, but it was flourishing in 1751. Then there were many missions and visitas scattered all around over Sonora. Garces—he's one of the four martyrs the Yumas beat to death with clubs up there at the mouth of the Gila in 1782, I think it was, in execrable Spanish, tells all about them. About that time a swell headed, black souled Pima Indian convert named Sarac, got a lot of Indians who had never been sprinkled and they rose up in the night and murdered the converts by wholesale, and clubbed some of the padres to death. After that the cloud bursts had worn the river so low in many places that the Bean Eaters could not lead in the water to their temporales and rancherias, and the gardens went back to the sands again. But there's old fig trees there



WHERE THE SONOYTA RIVER SINKS NEAR AGUA DULCE.

Dim outlined mountains to left center are the Pinacates.

yet and cottonwoods and deserted ditches that maybe the Spaniards made. Anyway the Sonoyta valley paradise dried up in the air, and some few Paps, too lazy to walk, hung on. Why, Puffer, the Paps and the Pimans had wheatfields down here one time.

“ ‘Sonoyta valley is an oasal spot still clung to by a few slow reds. It’s all on the Mexican side. The river comes out of the Santa Rosa Mountains way east, sometimes one place out of the sands, sometimes another, and ends sometimes below Agua Dulce in the alkali plain, and some seasons between Sonoyta and Santo Domingo. The Paps had a Messiah; they have theirs and the Spanish one mixed now. But they used to scale old Moctezuma and old Babo during the night and wait up on the heights for the rising of the sun. There they would watch and wait for the coming of their risen lord in the splendors and glories of the desert morning. That’s history, Puffer. That’s the reason their adobe huts and their wickiups have only one entrance and that looks to the east. They hope, some of them yet, to see their Messiah come with the sunrise and lead them to their longed for paradise where they can eat fried dog, roasted bighorn mountain rams and have honey an inch deep on their tortilla paste.

“ ‘But here, let’s finish this map. That’s a three days’ journey for the people ahead to make Agua Dulce, and they will have to go further than that yet after they get there. Agua Dulce is about nine or ten miles southwest towards the Pinacates from

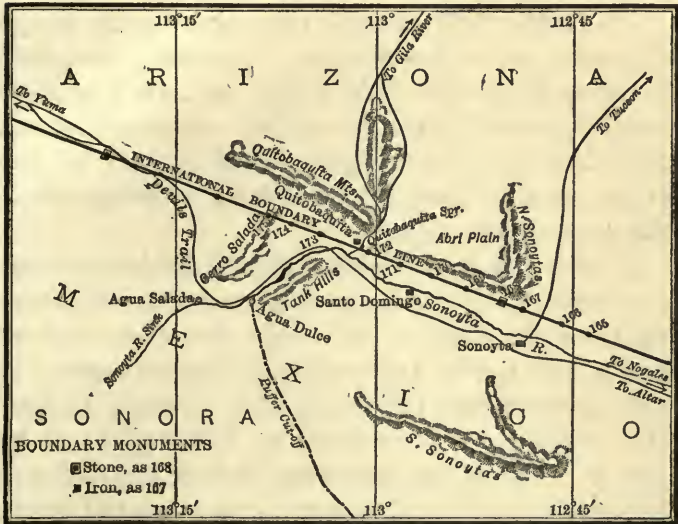
the Q. springs. At Agua the road turns sharply northwest towards the Tule desert and extends on towards Las Tinajas Altas. Your blueprint shows the rest of the road trail to Yuma. Now, what you have to do is to get to Agua Dulce first. It's a two days' journey in a straight line from here. They are one day ahead. They take the Sonoyta valley trail and come out Agua Dulce way and then there's fun for Winchesters; if you get there, hide and wait.

" 'Now, as you know, I have to leave you to-morrow morning for Buenos Ayres via the Mexican collector's at Sasabe. To-morrow's the tenth. Before daylight I leave and you take this.' Here all at once Captain Jack made a heavy dotted line northwest across the map ending at Agua Dulce. Then he wrote right under it:

"THE PUFFER CUT-OFF"

" 'Start across this cut-off, never made by mortal man by trail, and follow the trembling nose of your compass for one night and half a day and you will easily beat them out to Agua Dulce. Have Charlie go ahead between the burros two hundred yards and signal you how the land lies. He'll see how things are almost by instinct before he gets there. They won't pot him if they are waiting for you. If they do, you are safe. Keep this side of the Cips, your way will be only bush rough and rocky, half the way. There's just enough to eat and drink along

the way to supply a small grasshopper for a short breakfast. I have gone over the route for sneaking Chinks twice. You can make it. You will have to bring out your extra *bota* though.



THE GREAT PUFFER CUT-OFF

“ ‘ Now one thing more, Puffer, and I’m through: Remember you go by needle northwest, deflection now about 16 degrees. About a day and a half travel. The Agua is seepage from the Sonoyta, about the last pool between the Salada Hills on the west side and the Tank Hills on the east hemming the last course of the river. You double load with water, and send Charlie ahead to reconnoiter. If they have passed,—you can expect anything from those flying

devils ahead,—follow. But there is not another drop of good water for seventy miles or more. And you will have to follow the Devil's Trail, with the devil ahead of you.' ”

The letter told several other interesting things that need not be written here. It seemed incredible to us at times that Skid Puffer on such a mission should go into details as he did. Perhaps to keep his mind from the dangers ahead of him he was trying to shut them out by writing of things along the edge of his progress.

It appeared from his letter that he finished it about two hours before sunset at Boni, and then all moved on along the regular trail. He also wrote that he sent a message by Jack to Chief Ballard explaining the situation and suggesting that Captain Ballard send word by wire or letter to Indianapolis as he saw fit. He would keep after Robert Greyson and if possible beat him into camp at the front and secure assistance for the capture. He asked Captain Ballard to send him assistance somewhere along the Sonoyta valley with trail help.

Captain Jack was to leave him in early morning and Skid was to bear off in the desert alone with the Papago. His letter ended thus:

“Don't worry the least little bit about me. I will get my man. Captain Ballard will take care of this end if I do not win out. I never prayed yet and do not believe a man can interfere much with

the plans of God Almighty; I'm a barbarian, as Tootsie says, in such things. But suppose you pray for me and trust me a little while longer yet. Anyway, God bless you all.

“From SKID.”

CHAPTER IV

EL CAMINO DEL DIABLO

THAT long letter was six days old, for it was now the sixteenth of October. How we pored over that rough desert map, ill-drawn, but illuminating. A tenderfoot taking an unknown course on a trackless desert in the night! And if he passed the perils of the unmarked waste, what greater dangers he undertook when he should reach his destination at Agua Dulce!

I asked the Judge what he could have been thinking of in permitting Skid to make such a foolhardy pursuit. Allowing a lad twenty years old, inexperienced, ignorant of the region, to try to catch a devil in ingenuity, cruelty and strength! And the Judge humbly answered that he could no more restrain Skid Puffer after he had read Lem's letter than one could restrain the winds. Skid had become restless as a caged wolf. Nothing could persuade him to forego the hunt. He simply would go and there was no other way about it.

We tried to think out where Skid would be most likely to mail another letter. There was not a bit of sensible evidence to help our guessing. All we could do was to wait in suspense and fear. The days and the nights dragged. Why did not Chief

Ballard wire or write? we asked ourselves again and again. But we got some comfort out of that silence.

Tootsie Greyson haunted the public library and turned historical specialist. She at last found and copied for me from the Spanish:

"El Camino del Diablo was at first one of the desert missionary trails of the early padres from Sonora province, Mexico, to the missions across the Arizona desert, via the Gilas, to California. It is a horrible line of human passage, marked frequently with little Spanish rock crosses flat on the sands, indicating the final resting spot of those who had perished from heat and thirst along the perilous way. There are fifty-two little rock crosses on the edge of the sands at Las Tinajas Altas, the only decent drinking water between Yuma and Agua Dulce, which is the last fresh water pool of the Sonoyta river in the extreme northern part of the province of Sonora. The terrible Tule Desert lies between. The Tule water well is purveyed (or was in '68 and '69) from a dug well presided over by a lean Mexican and his wife, who sell to the miners going and coming to the Colorado river placers. It is vile tasting stuff, it is said, and causes vomiting. It is arsenous. The Tule mountains bound it on the north and south sides for several miles. At different places along the trail there are remnants of vehicles, frequent bones, the skulls and ribs of perished animals dragged hither and yon by wolves. The course is lined with yellow gray sand. It is not fine silt

or lake or sea bottom dust, but rather coarse sands which are sprinkled all the way with saguaros. The heat in July, August and September is intolerable. The mercury often rises to 150 degrees in the sun, and 120 in the shade is not uncommon. One hundred and fifty, the reader must remember, is the same degree of heat as scalding water. Sandstorms are frequent in the summer and fall, and overwhelm the stoutest traveler. These storms sometimes last for two or three days. They blind and suffocate, and with the heat, overcome even a trail burro, the safest thing on the desert. This railway is called El Camino del Diablo (meaning the Devil's Trail). It is truly well named, for it has been a lure of Satan to the awful perils of the Arizona desert."

When Tootsie Greyson showed me the copied passage I tried to hide my apprehensions.

"What do you think, Tootsie?"

"There is only one solution of this long silence, uncle," she said bravely, though there was a catch in her voice. "Skid came to Agua Dulce too late, found they had passed, and is on the Devil's Trail out there somewhere in the Yuma desert." There was a hysteric flash of her hands to her face, but instantly she controlled herself and went on with a little faltering in her confident manner, "His compass land points are too well in evidence for him to be misguided."

"But, Tootsie, he may have met Robert Greyson there and—"

"No; if there was a fatal contest one or the other would go back to headquarters. The best thing to do is to telegraph Chief Ballard at Buenos Ayres."

"But, Tootsie!" I exclaimed, with a sudden thought, "Skid might lie there in wait till Robert Greyson came back from the front."

"Skid *could* not wait. That would be impossible. He followed."

Was that intuition or logic? Later history showed she was right.

Skid Puffer, the records show, reached Agua Dulce a little *after noon* of the second day. That feat seems almost incredible when the distances are considered. There was not a single hoof-track to show that any one had passed. In a short time, nearly exhausted, they refilled their skins and, removing any trace that might lead to their discovery, hid themselves to the eastward behind some organ pipe cactus and mesquite bushes with the Papago on watch. Skid, exhausted, went to sleep. He was to take his turn at sunset.

When he awoke it was from the cold—in a desert, too, and the white of dawn on the Ajos. The Papago and one burro were gone.

It is from many sources of information that the following chapters fill in the record. A small part is from a little blood-stained diary, sweat soiled and warped with heat, much from the testimony of a famous trial at Indianapolis, the evidence of Captain Jack, Chief Ballard, Lem Mason, and several letters.

The little vest pocket notebook has an entry for Agua Dulce that reads:

"Agua Dulce, October 12th, 4 o'clock a.m. The Papago and one burro, with supplies missing. Deserted. Cerro Saladas on west; Tank hills on east; alkali pools southwest. Charlie went up trail Q.



THE DEVIL'S TRAIL

springs way. Greyson party passed early. Camped here though. Pinacate exactly southwest. Moctezuma exactly northeast. Monument by glass north end Cerro Saladas, No. 175, stone. I follow. About seven cool night hours to Tule Well. Double load with water here. Will angle off west when north of boundary, and follow Surveyors' new trail. Get help at front if I can find Surveyors."

Before Skid rushed off after his prey or to the front,—who knows?—he double loaded with water and speeded on as fast as his refreshed beasts could

carry him. Two hours after daylight he had passed the Repressa to the left,—the “stone dam” which collects a seepage that lasts throughout the latter part of the year. At ten o'clock the sun poured down scorching beams. He came to the last ridge roll. He stopped his panting animals and stole up to the edge and peered over. The yuccas were dancing in the boiling waves of heat. To the far right were the Pintas and farther, a little to their left, dimly seen, were the three black buttes of the Cabeza de la Prieta. Close at hand the grotesque saguaros writhed. To the left of the trail several white monument posts stepped on and upward to the southern parallel range of the Tule Mountains. Directly in front, like three blackish fishing bobs on rippling water, he saw something in the dust of the trail.

The sand-ridge ran diagonally southwest to the rising lava breakers of the range. He ran back to his animals and madly urged them on the near side of the sandroll to the south Tule Mountains. Traveling in a desert hollow in the soft desert sand in the middle of the day is almost intolerable. At one o'clock he reached the foot of a saw-toothed, lava-blasted peak opposite the Tule Well. The cactal growths obscured his animals from view. As he came to a rock-shaded passage, his mule sank at his feet and died. The burro, throbbing with exhaustion, dropped to its knees. He tore the packs off each, watered his spent burro, hid two water botas in the sand, hung one in the shade of a rock, scattered some screw beans on a rock for his burro,

and sank down in the shade of a rocky cul-de-sac nearly done for.

It was an hour of sunset when he awoke refreshed. The air was less ovenlike. And, blessed sight, the burro was contentedly standing, perhaps asleep. Grasping his rifle he began ascending the heights in the shadow. As he reached the higher places he worked around to the south. At the greatest altitude he began warily to squirrel around to the eastern side. With his field glasses he swept the eastern plain.

Three miles to the east and a little to the right was the latest camp on the Camino del Diablo at the Tule Well! Under a temporary awning by a fallen adobe house was a white man stretched out, fanning himself with his broad hat. Skid Puffer started as he suddenly saw coming in on the trail from Agua Dulce the two Yaq guides. They were staggering along, both Indians at times furiously lashing their exhausted brutes. When within a hundred yards of the camp well one of the animals sank down in the tule and was hidden from view. The Indians then deserting them ran ahead to the well. The other mule weaved, staggered, fell, rose again making desperate efforts to reach the blessed water.

The man under the awning rose up, excitedly ran out and seemed to be trying to interpret the signs and meanings of the guides. They pointed backward on the trail, across toward the figure on the height, pointed ahead and then went to the well and drank. The white man walked back and forth,

said something to the guides and pointed to the mule in the tules. But the guides ate and smoked, then rose and, carrying a skin of water out to the mule flat in the tules, dashed water on it. Then they returned, got more water and dashed it on the beast that lay half dead on the trail. It rose weakly and stumbled in to the Tule well.

Skid saw the white man stand motionless for a few moments. Then all was excitement again. The fresh mule was reloaded and the white man stood by it pointing ahead towards the Gilas.

His victim was about to escape to Las Tinajas in the Gila Pass on the trail to Yuma! He turned his glass to the Gilas and saw a leaden yellowish spot,—if that was Las Tinajas Pass which his blue-prints showed, it was at least twenty miles distant. The sun was getting lower, the sands were cooling; the figure on the mule at the well was clear to Skid's vision.

Suddenly the man became alive. He called the Indians out and was pointing northwesterly. There were exaggerated gesticulations, then quiet; they returned to their resting places. Presently the white man sprang on his loaded mule, started off a few paces, stopped and seemed to be in deep thought. After a few minutes he gave a quick upward face flash at the lowering sun, hesitated, dismounted and ran back and sat down in the shade with the guides.

And those few minutes that Robert Greyson delayed in his journey to Las Tinajas, later dragged in his fate.

It was long after that time when I found out something of what passed in Robert Greyson's mind as he sat there on his mule motionless, before the Tule desert well. Who was this implacable devil filled with fury and incredible ardor on his trail? His guide had told him about the big-eyed white man at Hermosillo. Later he knew that the dare-devil Arizona deputy ranger with this white man was after him. He had found at Altar that Black Jack had a warrant for his arrest. For what? Issued by whom? He did not know. He, himself, was several days late now, and had been nearly four weeks on his mission, and who could know of his route but Chief Ballard? Then Chief Ballard must have telegraphed East and found that his letter of recommendation was a forgery. Was Judge Greyson at the bottom of it?

It must have been his stepfather who hated him that wished to catch him for the punishment of the law. Yes; and that white man must be the young giant who had fought him in the Greyson dooryard in June. But who *was* this enemy? What could *he* want? What could *he* do?—this muscular demon who had left that splash of blood on his white shirt front?

Chief Ballard must have undone him with wires and letters; he who had sent the official deputy ranger on his trail, his secret course. Who else could know his route? But Black Jack, the desert terror, with the Papago, had deserted this wolf on his trail. In the devil's name, how had this lone white trailer

gained a day on his fast animals? Had he not himself ruined the Boni well?

How could this blood-hungry shadow now rise up out of the desert right at his heels?

His guides had told him that no man could travel a waterless, trackless desert at night. And why this ceaseless urgency, this ten days' hot trailing scarcely without stopping? And supposing this were true, when the trailer was in reach of the pursued, why had he run away? His guides had told him that and more. He was the big-eyed white tenderfoot seen at Hermosillo, the man with Black Jack, who had shot at them below Altar. Now the deputy had gone back and left the white man to himself. But why?

Ah! happy solution! It came to him like a flash. Captain Jack had gone back to headquarters to be ready there with warrants; the white man had angled off to the front and was waiting there for him. What luck! he would hasten on the trail to California. He would leave his camp guides behind him one camp on the trail prepared for anything. They would follow him to Yuma. He would discharge them there.

Skid Puffer, narrowly watching the mute figure at the well, could only guess at his intentions. He caught his breath, his eyes gleaming like a cat's as he saw the white man suddenly dismount, throw his hat aside and run into the shade. He had seen, too, that quick, upward flash of the face at the descending sun as he threw himself down. That meant he

would wait till the sands had cooled. He would start at dusk. The mule stood there loaded, ready to start, and the only sign of life it showed was the lazy switch of its tail.

When Skid Puffer saw that blind stare of the white man at the Tule well and guessed it was his intention to wait, he slowly, cautiously began to withdraw, as a panther at bay withdraws to assume a safer and surer position. He stole slyly around to the sun side of the rocks and breathlessly sighted his compass at the olive colored oasis at the southern foot of the Gilas.

"Forty-four west of north, sixteen for deflection—twenty-eight west of north—Las Tinajas Altas." He softly stuffed his compass in his pocket and pulled out his blue print. He nosed over it as his breast heaved with suppressed excitement. He understood the route now. He shot erect, crushed the map into his pocket and began to jump recklessly down the sun side of the rocks.

When on the lower places he tore blindly through the ill-smelling greasewood, the cat claw acacia, the needles of the prickly fig, the cruel "chollas," the thorns of the ocatilla, over the lava débris and, breathing like a racer, rushed on to his sleeping burro. He jerked the water bag from its rocky cleft and dashed some of its contents over his head and shoulders. A minute later he opened his packs, and spilled most of their contents out on the sand. Taking a handful of food, a blanket, his shackles, one burro feed, he wrapped them and tying them

to the water bag he threw the bundle across the burro's withers. That was the lightest load a pack burro ever carried on the Yuma desert trail. Skid buried the discarded stuff in the sand, and hugging the base of the range in the shadows he whipped his animal on. As the sun began to back under the western rim he stopped, climbed a declivity and gazed toward the Tule well.

The mule with a man on its back stood there motionless. He was almost ready to start.

CHAPTER V

THE DEVIL'S PARADISE

SKID urged his burro westward over the cooling sands. The grinding hoofs, the complaining scream of the pack leathers, the gush of the water in the pigskin, all seemed loud to his apprehensive ears. Once, twice, thrice, he nosed over his compass. His course so far was true.

He looked at his watch—eleven o'clock. He turned his panting beast directly north, and came suddenly upon the hard trail bed. He stopped, snatched his blanket off and, unfolding it before him for a guard, lighted a match and closely scrutinized the trail. Not a mark of passage. He listened intently; not a sound. He bent his ear to the dust, —only the eternal emptiness and silence.

He beat his burro to a weak gallop, a gait that a pack burro never knew; then stopped. How far was he in advance? Perhaps he could hide there by that saguaro and wait. He shuddered. No; he *could* not do that. He would be fair; he would capture his man face to face in the open. He would reach the water tanks first.

He was filled with exciting fears. A coyote sat by the trail, stared at him, sneaked after him for a

little distance, then slunk away. A lone yucca seemed like an Indian. How human a saguaro looked with its grotesquely imploring arms! How frequent now the white bones—ribs and skulls. He whipped his burro. It feebly galloped a few minutes and then slowed down. He gazed back, upward at the blazing desert stars. He stopped again. All was silent as a tomb, the coyote was gone, the air was cool. Only the empty, endless silence.

Presently there was a whitening on the sunrise side of the sky. He looked at his timepiece; three o'clock. He guessed he was three miles from the Tinajas. He left the trail a hundred feet and, paralleling it, went on. He would leave no marks for Greyson's eyes.

A half-hour later the pass was before him; the horned moon had sunk behind the Gilas and the trail was dark. The mighty black head of Las Tinajas glowered over him. He listened. He heard no sound before or behind him, but the entrance to the pass was full of mottled shadows, breathlessly still, cavernous, black.

He hid his beast far to the right in the saguaro oasis, and, exhausted, fell asleep.

Las Tinajas Altas at the Gila Pass is the central lure of that long furnace-hot highway between Quitobaquita spring and Yuma City on the red Colorado. On the gray-white sands near this yellow-green spot fifty-two white rock crosses mark a part of El Camino del Diablo's nameless human toll. Those seven high tanks of delicious water invite for a hun-

dred miles. Father Kino, the immortal pathfinder of the Sonoran and Arizona deserts, discovered them in 1699.

In rare seasons the lowest reservoir is almost dry. A few yards higher the second tank is reached by scaling sharp rising ledges, difficult for a traveler half spent with heat and thirst. Higher up, but far more easily climbed, is the third tank or reservoir, from which a thin line of water flashes and spits in a rocky crackway down to the second bowl. Many a half demented victim of the desert, stumbling away from the emptied or dry bowl at the bottom and seeing in his agonies that flashing trickle of water racing down to the main catch-all, has been wrought into a new frenzy with the music of its flow.

Chief Ballard, when explaining the Government maps to Skid Puffer, had said:

"If the desert traveler can beat the devil at his own game to this spot, then he is safe—unless the lower reservoir is dry. Then his imps have a holiday. The prospector, emigrant or fool finding it dry and hearing a trickling sound, looks up and sees the running water drop into the second pool. Then he knows he is safe. That is, if he is not entirely played out. It is only a few yards of a hands and knees climb. But if the fellow is faint, or very weak, perhaps feverish, with his tongue filling his mouth full, it's different. He begins to wiggle up and may get nearly to the top when, still more heated by the effort, the sunbeat and the labor of climbing, he slips, claws around, weaves, pauses,

wavers, buckles up and down he comes in a bunch like a squirrel shot out of a treetop. If a man is equipped right and uses his judgment, the Camino can be made without extra danger. Never go across that last stretch in summer except at night. Double load with water and travel light as you can."

When Skid Puffer awoke the sun was up an hour. As he lay gazing at the sky, he thought at first he was in some enchanted land of mystery and dreams. Then he sat up.

The black, angled, broken camp of the Letchu-guillas to the immediate south began to rear their low heads into a roseate rank of crimson sentinels. The Gilas peaks and towers and battlements lifted higher and higher, paused, trembled, then reached across one to another, as if in morning salutations. To the southeast the three black crowns of the Cabeza de la Prieta became blue, orange, pink, then stood up in a mass of glowing crimson. A few leagues above the head of the gulf old Pinacate purpled like the robes of a king, surrounded by his five hundred spent crater peaks, stood against the encroachments of the mighty sand dunes from the sea.

In the sky was a stilling sea of rippling glory, a glowing ocean over the great Cuchan waste. Water, water, water everywhere, blue greenish, amethystine, golden,—water, water, water, the longed for heaven, the eternal dream of torturing thirst of man and nature, the devil's desert paradise.

This was Skid Puffer's first glance into the Super-

nal, and forgetting human perils he gazed enraptured in earth's most enticing lure. He jumped up suddenly, breathlessly, for he saw coming towards him in the upper sea a monster man astride a more monstrous mule. Instantly he knew this was Robert Greyson, now almost to the tanks, but upside down. It was a grotesque vision and he could not understand, but he swiftly sped to the entrance of the cul-de-sac and, with his gun ready, hid behind the rocks. Amazed, he saw in the lovely ocean to the southwest, three mis-magnified ogres, one large, the others smaller, riding on a gallop erect but apparently far away.

He turned to the apparition on the trail, and saw the reflection grow smaller, detach, dissolve and slowly disappear. He looked back and beheld the three men ride through the upper sky-trail and vanish. The water here and there had gone out of the heavens; the Pinacates were turning dark and crouching lower; the Cabezas were squatting low, and the black was coming back again; the heavens were breaking up.

CHAPTER VI

THE BATTLE IN THE CUL-DE-SAC

HE had scarcely time to hide when Robert Greyson, watchful, suspicious, his Winchester ready, paused at the entrance of the cul-de-sac. He did not dismount at once; all appeared safe to him at last. His gun in half aim, he walked slowly along, his eyes searching for signs of an enemy. He paused by a rock; the place seemed silent and dead. The heat boiled. Suddenly he set his gun by the rock, tore at his garments and stripped himself to his waist. Rivulets of sweat were coursing down his dusty cheeks. He ran past the croucher behind the rocky wall and dipped his heated face into the cooling pool. As he bent and drank deeply his white flesh glistened. He dashed water over his shoulders, into his face, on his huge hairy chest. He stood erect, yawned, stretched, then plunged his head into the water again up to his ears, jerked erect, and with his chin poised in the air like a bird, permitted the cooling water to run down his broad back.

Skid Puffer also stripped to his waist, his gun in one hand, his shackles in the other, stole out as cautiously as a fish otter. He is within thirty feet, twenty, fifteen, twelve, he raises his gun in aim. The

bather dips in the water once more, throws it over him in great handfuls, shakes himself like a bathing sparrow, his movements showing the huge walls and sheets and curves of muscles writhing under his white skin.

Robert Greyson faintly hears an unusual sound, stops, listens and is about to plunge his face again. There is a pantherish shuffle, he whirls around. Instant terror sets his body rigid as if carved; his face ashens with horror and despair. Neither speak nor move. He has not a single chance for escape or defense. Vengeance, tiger-like, was so sure, it was playing with its prey.

But the pistol did not roar. Mumbling incoherently the ambushed man began to waver and sank to his knees, wriggled his face in his arms, shut his eyes, then waited for the roar. Only the silence of the desert. He heard the click of the hammer stop at the first clutch; still the silence, the waiting. With convulsive little jerks the face of the doomed man began to worm up, out. His rattish eyes gleamed at last over his elbows, at the poised gun. With infinite slowness the thumb began to haul back the gun-hammer to the last notch. It clicks sharply. The gun waits.

"Shoot! shoot!" he screamed as he blindly flung his arms wide in the air.

"Throw that gun down or I will blow your head off."

Skid turned like a flash. A determined, fat-faced man with a deadly eye gleam, stood crouched, ready.



"SKID PUFFER WAS ON THE HAIR-LINE EDGE OF LIFE AND DEATH."

W. H. P. 1894

The big man's finger was on the trigger, a big hole of blue steel was close to Skid's nose, and Skid Puffer was on the hair-line edge of life and death.

In turning Skid Puffer had lowered his aim; he had no chance. The man with the Winchester had the drop.

"Lieutenant Sykes, take his gun." A slim young man ran in, bent low sidewise, placed his cocked revolver on Skid Puffer's hand, then dropping his own as its muzzle touched the hand, he snatched Skid's gun to the ground. That was cat-like in quickness. The man with the Winchester stepped back, straightened and rested his rifle on the earth with his big hand over the lock.

"W'at's lay, Bob?"

Skid saw the glance of recognition. Not another word for an age. The sun beat down hotter than ever. The wary lizard shot along the rocks; a woodpecker hammered on a dead bole of a near saguaro; a horned viper waddled out of a hole in the rocks and stared at the men in green-eyed malignity; yet no word. The master man with his gun muzzle on the earth and his huge sunburned hand over the lock, the slim stranger to the side with his hand clutched over his revolver-butt in his belt, Skid white and silent, Greyson erect and panting, made a picture as ominous and as silent as the desert. There was not the slightest motion except the twisting eyeballs of the master man as he turned from one to the other of the stilled combatants.

"W'at's the lay, Bob, I ast you?"

"This wolf has been on my trail for weeks trying to kill me. I don't even know who he is. Let the dirty dog take me if he can." And Bob Greyson stepped a pace forward but stopped instantly as the fat man began to raise his gun menacingly.

"W'at's the lay, young man," he asked of Skid.

"I'm going to take him," were the only words that Skid Puffer uttered.

"Lieutenant Sykes, mark off two lines wall to wall seven steps apart. Gentlemen, step in."

Greyson stepped in. The line was outside of Skid's position.

"Gentlemen, the first man that steps outside them lines 'less ordered er knocked out'll get a steel-nose 45-40. Lieutenant, hol' your gun an' do the calling. Gentlemen, fight it out."

Skid Puffer threw his manacle at the Lieutenant's feet and turned and faced Robert Greyson. Four witnesses afterward told how went the battle in that oven-like cul-de-sac of Las Tinajas Altas on the thirteenth of October. Lieutenant Sykes testified:

"When the scout told me to take my gun and do the calling, I stepped up and said: 'Gentlemen, one round, no knockout count, no hitting below the belt, a regular stand-up to a finish.' Then I looked to the scout and he said, 'Right you air, Lieutenant.'

"There they stood like white giants, six foot or over, two hundred pounders, and muscles like big prizefighters. The man Puffer had the longest reach and better neck, his skin whiter; this defendant Greyson,—Bob, the scout called him,—had a darker skin

and heavier shoulders. But I tell you there was not much picking a choice; they both looked like big untamed fighting machines. I could tell by their muscles that they'd understand, so I said: 'Marquis o' Queensbury straight with no count. Let er go, gents.'

"There was a jump and both met in the air, kind of reared up like fighting lions. Then there was such fanning and ducking and tearing rights one would think they would rip their arms off. I don't think there was a square punch the first minute. I saw it was for blood, but them men was using foot work and head work just like they had been used to prizefighting all their lives.

"It was the fastest minute I ever saw with big ones. Then they slowed down and it was grunty lefts with guards. And you don't want to forget, it was hot as an oven right there, without rounds or towels. Them bare fists and left hooks begin to smash the skin and the red begun to run down. Maybe it was two minutes of the swiftest left hooks you ever saw, and I says to myself, 'It's a quick down.' It looked to me any one of them rights they'd been using with naked knuckles landing square 'most anywhere had a sleeper in it.

"They slowed down, fainted a few seconds, both panting. Then they flew in with those lefts harder than ever, the fastest I ever saw, and I guess every one connecting. Then like lightning up come Puffer's right plum clean under Greyson's guard and them bloody knuckles went flush right in the top of

Greyson's top chest. Lord! excuse me, your honor! it was like a kick of a mule. You could have heard it a block.

"And Greyson went stumbling back fifteen feet an' sat down hard two feet outside the line. I think that welt carried him two yards clean. But he came back on the run, crazy mad with a look in his eye that would scare the devil. He rushed Puffer all around the ring, though Puffer was raining lefts in like piston rods and Greyson not landing a single right square.

"The skin on both their chests was broken, their arms smeary, and the blood was running down below their waists. Puffer was just geared to the right pitch; Greyson was too high, and was running down the fastest. There wasn't a mark yet on Puffer's face, but Greyson had one eye shut and his face was all puffed up and skinned with glancing blows. He was very dirty too.

"I was looking all the time, but before I knew Greyson sank down kind of weak and Puffer jumped in to finish him—and ran right into a haymaker. It caught Puffer right over the heart; I saw where it landed plain. Puffer went back, maybe ten feet, stumbling and falling flat on his back. That was the fiercest punch in the game so far. Puffer was pretty slow getting up. Coughed twice, and then he came back slow. He was taking the benefit of the count without having it. Both were dirty now and the sweat was running through the smear.

"Puffer came back slow and set. Greyson set.

I saw right away both were using their heads. Just as I guessed I knew it would be fiddling now waiting for rights. They were both killing hot. Puffer seemed to tempt Greyson; and three times Greyson fanned the air with those right sleepers that did not connect. Puffer landed square just once, a center shot in the chest and the blood and flesh and dirt splashed out like from the heads of butting rams. I saw just as he did he was losin' steam. So he covered up and smothered, and Greyson fired in one after another, maybe landing a dozen 'bout as heavy as a tired lightweight.

"Greyson was wild to put in a finisher, but he was panting like a lizard, his legs was wabbly and his eyes glassy. While Puffer was getting some pretty stiff punches he'd give back to the hardest ones and did not seem to care for the lighter ones. I saw through his game, but he was hot and weak all right. I was just about to ask the scout to give them a minute between rounds. I looked at the scout and saw he was betting on Puffer all right, but he didn't understand the stalling. Looked like he was going to do the police act and stop the milling. He told me afterwards he thought Puffer was about all in.

"Crack! and Puffer brought up square on the side of the jaw and Greyson took more than the count to get up. I saw his jaw hung crooked. Game? He come right in for more. Chug! down goes he again. Up he come for more and weaker. Chug! down he goes on one knee and a hand. He come up,

slow and set square. He was awful weak. They fiddled a little. Chug! and down he went flat for the fourth time. When he got up he was about twenty foot from the pool. He wobbled to it, jumped in and came back. And before the scout had time to recover from his surprise they clinched. I run up and shoved my gun between their necks and said:

“ ‘Break or I will blow your throats out.’ I had told them to break twice before then, but they paid no more attention than bulldogs. They broke. The scout brought his gun up.

“ ‘Stop! Young man, go jump in the tank.’ Puffer walked panting like a lizard slow to the tank, straddled over, went under, straddled slow over the rim, came back and set. They was both clean now except the fresh red. Directly I saw Greyson backing Puffer all around, Puffer not doing a thing but cover. He looked weak, about ready to fall, kind of sunk down, and Greyson, thinking he was going, raved fer thirty seconds. Then when nobody was expecting it, up came Puffer with a right square on the point and Greyson fell back, rolled over two or three times, thrashed the ground and lay perfectly still.

“ Puffer had put all he had in him; there was not a half ounce left. It was his last punch. The last inch of his tape was out. He leaned up against the wall about a minute, wobbled pretty straight to the pool, began to wash and pretty soon came back smiling. He hadn’t a mark above his shoulders, but

he was bleeding fresh. It was the hardest, toughest fight I ever saw. They were equally matched. Puffer's stalling won."

"You got your man fair, pardner," said the scout to Skid as he came from the tank. "What do you want to do with him?"

"Give me my gun." The scout shook his head dubiously, but Lieutenant picked up the handcuffs and handed Skid his gun. As Skid took the weapon they were intensely alert; no one could tell what Skid would do next. Perhaps he would start down the incline a few steps further and pour the contents of all of his chambers into the prostrate still unconscious man. Skid holstered his gun, and saw for the first time another young man in army uniform furtively putting away his gun. He recognized now the three men of the sky trail.

Skid proceeded to his pack, caught up his shackles and a paper with a red seal on it, and going up to the scout said:

"I am a special deputy ranger from Tucson. I have regular papers. This is for Robert Greyson. I came to get him. He is my prisoner. Gentlemen, in the name of the law I call on you for assistance. Take the prisoner out to that saguaro; swing a blanket shade. Bathe him, clean him up, and snap these ankle chains on. Later put on the cuffs."

They instinctively knew that Skid Puffer was now the master man and all started to obey. The young men dragged the insensible man out and around the

end of the opening. The scout started to help, but Skid stopped him.

"Wait," was all that he said.

The scout related these facts as part of his testimony:

"Wen the Lieutenants drug Bob 'roun' the en' of the entry way an' out o' sight I was pullin' off my shirt 'cause I was goin' to help spoil thet drinkin' water myse'f. It was all-fired hot, smotherin'. I kind o' yanked my shirt over my head 'ith my back to 'im. Hearin' a queer'soun' es ef somebody was s'prised, I whirled 'roun', an' I was lookin' square into the peep hole o' my 45 :40. Nachurly I wiggled my han's right up in the air.

"'Lem Greyson, you low-lived dog!' says 'e.

"Under the circumstances I wasn't givin' 'im any sass. I never before thought thet hole in my gun was so big. A dog could hev crawled in it 'thout tetchin'. It looked shoot sure. I was s'prised 'at the hole was so big; I was supriseder seein' 'im pokin' thet gun in my face, an' teetotally scared to death wen 'e said 'Lem Greyson.' I was waitin' fer the boys to come aroun' worse'n a dyin' man wants water on the trail.

"'Lem Greyson,' he says, 'answer these questions fast es you can talk. If you lie or ef I *think* you lie or ef the young men come aroun' 'fore I'm done talkin' I'll hev to kill you.'

"I saw mighty quick I was in fer truth 45 :40 wide an' 'bout es fast es a repeater.

"'Wut's your name?' he asts.

“ ‘Lem Greyson,’ says I, like a flash of powder.

“ ‘Whut relation air you to Judge James Greyson?’

“ ‘Stepson by marriage, none by breedin’.’

“ ‘Did you ever steal horses down Logansport way?’

“ ‘I did,’ says I, not askin’ the privilege o’ the law about ‘criminatin’ myse’f.

“ ‘Where’s Bob’s preacher half cousin?’ he asts, quick as a kangaroo rat.

“ ‘Damfino,’ says I, quick as a trigger. I was fearful them men comin’ ‘roun’ the en’ o’ the entry.

“ ‘Did you help put Claire Greyson away for good?’

“ ‘You can shoot me all to —— any time, ‘ith my han’s down, ef I did. I liked her. She liked me. I have a letter in my trunk, mister, thet aint mor’n ten years ol’. She says she lets me out from hidin’ her baby.’

“ ‘Did you help hide thet baby?’

“ ‘Nen ‘e kind o’ squatted ‘at ef the truth didn’t flow right then an’ there Lem Greyson was vittals fer coyotes. I said, ‘So help me God, mister, I split on Bob on thet baby. I haint spoken to Bob till to-day fer mor’n fifteen years.’

“ ‘One more,’ he says. ‘Bout then I braved up an’ says, ‘Pardner, ef the truth is flowin’ right I’d ast you to remember them triggers air hair triggers, an’ mos’—tender.’

“ ‘What has become of Claire Mason?’

“ ‘I saw thet was the whole question. So I says

relieved an' lookin' 'im straight in the eye, ' God on'y knows. I don't.' He set 'is gun down soft and slow.

" ' Shake,' 'e says. I wasn't noticin' wether my han's was tired er not, but I was mighty glad to do the hand act. Nen he handed me my gun.

" ' Who in —— are *you?*' asts I.

" ' Claire's baby,' says he. And thet was all."

CHAPTER VII

IN SHACKLES

SKID PUFFER cautioned the lieutenants to extreme vigilance, begged Second Lieutenant Madrid to attend to his burro and asked the scout to make arrangements for the disposition of the prisoner. "Better get bandages, Lem, and as I am about played out, I'll take a nap down there at my camp. I can trust you, Lem?"

"I'll get Bob to Fort Yuma ef I lose my job for it. You can count on me. Sorry I didn't know who you was sooner an' saved thet fightin'. He'll swing. Go to sleep. I'll send over to the front, on'y three miles. Claire's boy is the real goods."

Robert Greyson began to come slowly to his senses. Darkness to him everywhere. His body ached with dumb pains; an intolerable odor of heated greasewood was in his nostrils; flies crawled over him in swarms. He could not understand where he was yet. He had no clear sense of anything save the smell of the greasewood, the tickling feet of the flies. What a hard bed it was! He moved and acute pains began to shoot through him, but there was the night around, no stars, no cooling air. He listened now, for his senses were growing more trust-

worthy. He heard afar as if in a dream the rati-ti-tap of the woodpecker. That was all. Woodpeckers at midnight! Impossible. Was he mad?

He felt the steam now of wet sands. He flung his arm out, only hot scorching sand beyond the bed blanket's edge. How hard his bed; only rocks are less restful than a blanket bed on hot desert sand. He sat erect and fiery tortures writhed through him. "Water, water," he thought. Then it came back to him in a swift rush of mental agony that overwhelmed his hurts. The fight, whipped almost to death with naked fists by that wolf trailer. A dread, indefinable, frenzying, made him cry out incoherently.

Where had all the men gone? Why this silence, this desertion? Had they, like Apaches, left him for the prey of wolves? Was he to starve there? Who was this desert shadow that turned up in impossible places, turned into flesh and conquering cruelty? What! midnight and the heats of noon? Flies swarming over him at dead of night, and not a star visible in cloudless skies? He moved his legs. Shackles! This was no hideous nightmare—he was alive, a prisoner.

Would Lem permit him to die there?

Robert Greyson's great advocate at the trial said in a fury of words:

"When a man is dying of thirst is he not already maddened? When a man wakes in a desert midnight and finds no heaven above him, feels flies crawling over his inexplicable hurts, is he not slipping

from the real? When a man on a peaceful mission, in the name of the United States Government, finds that he is being trailed by a human wolf and that wolf rising up like a specter of atrocious cruelty behind him, beside him, before him, when the very laws of nature seem broken in twain, is he not going mad? When a man stricken, gyved, hurt unto death, feels his senses slipping, the night becoming day, the danger that can be only far behind, rearing deadly in front; perishing with thirst though water is at hand; free as air and alone in the open though set to his death as firmly as the desert rocks; would not that man's soul, gentlemen of the jury, slip its bearings? He was mad then; he is mad now; he will die mad, though his previous life may have been as black as hell or as clean as the soul of a newborn babe."

Robert Greyson was a spent mass of tortured flesh and broken bones; his mind wavered. Nearly dead, torpid, as from a vast deep, he heard a voice. Some one stopped beside him.

"Well, Greyson, how do you feel?" asked Lieutenant Sykes. "Here's some water, can you sit up?" The broken man writhed up without a moan. He felt a vessel at his mouth, drank deep and revived.

"Here's some greasewood lotion, fine thing for fresh wounds—keeps flies off. I spilt the first bunch. You're badly used up, old man; ribs cracked, your jaw broke. Better lie down again; I'll bathe you." An admiring light swept through his face as he saw the flesh quiver and the muscles writhe without a

moan from the swollen lips as Greyson lay back on the blanket.

"Your peepers are shut." The Lieutenant pulled the eyelids apart. Greyson mumbled.

"What's that, Greyson?" asked the Lieutenant bending close.

"What's the lay?" he heard.

"Scout Greyson has gone to the front for bandages, medicines and wagon. We go to Yuma to-night by wagon on the trail east of the Gilas; better traveled." There was a short period of silence, a movement on the blanket, and Robert Greyson pulled his eyelids apart, and stared hungrily at the young man. The Lieutenant understood, and was silent.

"I won't tell him; he must ask," he thought. He arose and went to the pool and brought back a skin of water and doused his charge.

The vapor rose in clouds. Then came the terrible smart of the *hideondo* wash once more. Greyson struggled up to a sitting position, his face working as in the agony of a woman in travail, but not a moan. The Lieutenant wet his neckcloth and bound it round the sufferer's jaws; fanned him with his hat, then helped him to drink again.

"Where?" came almost inarticulately as Greyson nodded backward and turned his eyes with the question. The Lieutenant understood.

"Down at his camp in the cactus, asleep. All regular, Arizona state deputy. Papers all right; I read 'em." And the young officer fanned the

flies away with a monotonous swing in the heated shade. The wounded man seemed struggling with another inquiry. The Lieutenant bent his ear closely.

"Name," came mumbly.

"I'm not quite sure. The scout says he's the son of a woman named Claire Greyson, daughter of a big judge over in Indiana." Greyson with a faint moan sank back as if dead. At last he understood.

When Robert Greyson woke again he was only half conscious. He heard the grind of wheels in the sand ruts, the gurgle of water in the wagon casque, the clanking of harness chains, the intermittent scream of a loose felloe,—wondering what all this meant. He was almost awake; he dimly saw the stars, felt the draw of bandages, smelt the hot odors of greasewood, arnica and turpentine. A wagon jolt awakened him. He moved his feet, the shackles were there yet. But the stars did not blaze as desert stars blaze. His eyelids must be partly swelled shut. He tried to lift his hand to claw the lids apart. What! in handcuffs. Broken and tortured as he was he flinched to a sitting position. Ahead he saw dimly outlined the bobbing mules to the wagon, further onward two large men, one huge, with guns in leash across their shoulders. He heard the patty-pat of burros' feet on the trail behind. There followed two slim young men, silent. One spurred his brute suddenly and rode close to the tail of the wagon, his hand at his belt. The wagon

plodded on and the young man fell further behind. Every living thing was voiceless as the mottled shadows of the impending Gilas.

There is an entry in the little blood-stained notebook to be made here. "Fort Yuma, Mil. Res., Oct. 26th. In bed since arrival. Doctor says out of my head. Sort of overworked. G. recovering. His jaw and two ribs broken. Doctor says he's broken down for life. Ballard came over. Swore out a Federal warrant. G. will be taken East by U. S. marshal. Go via San F. to Chicago if able about the first Nov. Infernal hot here. Lem and Sykes take G. first Nov. if I can't start. Will wire first. Doctor just came in. Says quit writing; be easy; throw all things off mind. Feel blue. Am very tired."

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT HAS BECOME OF SKID PUFFER?

IT was over two weeks since we had received that last long letter from the Boni water-hole. We had studied the map till almost any of us could draw it from memory. If Skid was so near to his man on the ninth of October something *must* have happened within two weeks. We thought of that plunge through the cut-off in the unmarked desert at night and our hearts asked unceasingly, "What has become of Skid Puffer?"

We could think of no way to reach him by wire or letter. If he were lost, who would know? He was out of touch of any of the persons he had mentioned in his letters. Only Captain Jack Rodgers would know up to the ninth of October. We began to condemn Jack Rodgers after a while. And the more we thought of his advising Skid Puffer to start on that foolish, dangerous chase across deserts, the more bitter we became.

We had not been idle with our anxieties; we had not lain still on our fears, but what could we do to lessen our sleepless apprehensions? What effort should we make to lighten the gloom? The Judge and I confessed very bitterly to each other that we

had not had sense enough to take the train instantly to Tucson when we got the letter from that muddy, ill-smelling water-hole at Boni. Why had we not then telegraphed to Chief Ballard like sensible men? Ah! why not a dozen different things? Now it was the last of the month and we had kept the wires hot with messages of inquiry, which meant "What has become of Skid Puffer?"

The Judge looked up some official registers and telegraphed here and there. He recalled at last that the territorial governor was an old school friend. We blessed our stars when he thought of that. The upshot of his endeavors was that Captain Jack was recalled from official business and sent with trailers to Boni and ordered to follow the trail, follow it to Fort Yuma if necessary.

I had a message delivered from Tucson to Buenos Ayres and got answer that Chief Ballard had gone to Fort Yuma. We were unreasoning enough to complain among ourselves about his going to Fort Yuma. Why had he not stayed where he belonged?

Then we misdirected telegrams to *Yuma City, Arizona!* We asked the police department about Ballard, Skid and Robert Greyson,—three telegrams following each other about an hour apart. It was now the first of November. And that enlightened chief of police sent back that he had never heard of them or any Boundary survey. He also said that there was nothing on the police books of any arrests of such men. And when we got a second answer

to the last telegram we had sent his answer was eloquently brief:

"Nothing doing at this end."

We had been defeated at every point and did not know now what to do. There was a family council and it was decided that I should take a special train to California. That would cost us five thousand dollars. I was ready to start on the third day of November and was at the station bidding Mason, Tootsie and the Judge good-bye. I had promised dire vengeance on several people in the far West if I should get near them. I even promised to hunt up Papago Charlie and do something to him worthy of criminal indictment.

I had been promised that I should reach Yuma in 72 hours. I was ready, my foot on the steps of the coach, the engine panting, the reporters impertinently trying to uncover the program.

Tootsie, bless her dear soul! tremulously whispered: "Though things look uncertain and unlucky, I feel in my heart that Skid is coming back."

"Message for you, Judge," said the hatless depot agent, "dead-headed through by the railroad." The Judge jumped and I, knowing that at least one railroad train would not run off and leave me there, turned and read the message with the Judge. And Tootsie read it with us. Though six reporters tried to find out its contents they failed. In fact, the way the Judge carelessly folded up the message in

his left hand with a sort of aimless, careless twist of his fingers astonished me. It read:

“Nov. 3d, 18—.

“JUSTICE GREYSON, Indpls.

“Your wires Yuma City turned over to me Ballard swore Federal warrant Robert Greyson sent lake department first deputy marshal Smith others follow

“Daily Comdt. Ft. Yuma Mil. Res.”

Then the Judge canceled his train order, got a rebate promise, and with great dignity we entered the carriage and went home determined to study all night, if need be, to unravel the regular telegraph code.

It was midnight when we had determined what the message meant except, “Others follow.” That filled us with the deepest worry. I recall now the pallor of Alice Greyson. She was wrapped in a silence that no one seemed to notice except me.

The others retired and the Judge and I sat together in the library. “Others follow” was gripping our hearts as no other two words had ever done. “Others follow”? Did it mean that since Skid Puffer *could* not, others had sent that telegram? In the letter written on the Sonora trail Skid had said that if he could not make arrangements Chief Ballard or Captain Jack would! We recalled *that* a hundred times. Chief Ballard was at Fort Yuma, California, not Yuma City, Arizona; he had left his headquarters to make arrangements for sending

the prisoner home; had sworn out a Federal warrant; Deputy Marshal Smith was taking the prisoner to the U. S. Lake Department at Chicago. They had started on the *first!* Yet we could not swear to that. For a time we tried to think it meant the "first deputy marshal" was coming with the prisoner. But the Judge said there was no such distinction in the Federal police department as a first deputy marshal.

Why had Daily answered the telegram of inquiry? Why had not Ballard answered? But blackest misgiving of all—Why had not Skid answered it? The Judge said to me:

"Colonel French, we might as well face the inevitable. There need be no false alarms between you and me. 'Others follow' means just what you and I guess it means. I could not bear to put too black a face on the import of that message. Skid *could* not send that message and Ballard had it sent. The only thing we can do is to wire Daily. I will ask him *who* follows."

We had learned with mortification that a state line divided our telegraphic inquiry out in that western world. The curse was lifted to some extent from that chief of police. The Judge at his desk had written a message, marked it "rush" and telephoned it down to the office.

The next day was a day of deeper gloom. None of us had the moral courage to speak of "others follow" that entire day. - Once I came alone upon Alice Greyson half hidden in the shrubbery, and I

felt sure she had been weeping. She tried to deceive me, tried to deceive herself. She declared with a hysterical little laugh that she had been worried like the rest of us so long that she feared she was not herself any more.

But Tootsie Greyson! From first to last her eyes shone like stars of hope; her voice was steady and her words abounded with confidence. I wondered if she really felt as brave as she looked. Yet I knew she was honest.

That waiting for an answer to Judge Greyson's telegram to Commandant Daily! There had been an overworked telephone at the Greyson mansion and despite the high position of the great Judge, "Central's" nerves had grown acute. Later the wire itself refused to respond.

Supper was over and still no answer to that "rush" telegram. Nine o'clock and still no word. Eleven by the old clock under the stairs ticking out patiently, loudly, on a silent group of the waiting household, almost sick with suspense. One by one each stole to bed, all except the Judge. The lights are out except the library lamp with its green shade casting a deadly pallor on the leonine face of the lone watcher. The house was still. I retired; as I went by a door I heard a woman crying softly to herself.

Twelve by the clock. There is a tinkle in the corner; the Judge jumps to the telephone.

"Yes; this Judge Greyson. Read it? All right, wait till I get a pad. Go ahead. What? '*Have*

been unable, What's that? All right, '*unable to learn sorry.*' Did you say '*sorry?*' go ahead, '*will write.*' Is that all? Oh, the name, '*Daily, Comdt. Ft. Yuma Mil. Res.*' What's the date? What? all right. Now I will read it: 'Have been unable to learn sorry will write.' No, you need not send it down; will call for it in the morning." Then the Judge sat down with his face in his hands.

The telephone rang sharply out in the grave-like silence again. The Judge ran to the telephone, his eyes shone, the blood left his face.

"Yes, this Greyson. Wait till I get my pad; go ahead. 'Been sick got my man start home with him first November Lem comes also am well. Skid.'" The Judge slammed the telephone up without another word. He sank in the rocker for a brief moment too weak to stand. We found afterward that the telegram had been "hung up" en route four or five days.

The Judge came to, sprang for the stairway and bounded up the stairs. At that very moment (we learned after that) a cell door was closing on a weak prisoner and two men were registering from Arizona at the Grand.

The Judge pounded on doors and was shouting like a Comanche, "Skid is coming." It was like a night call to arms. There were clatter, patter, shuffle and shout, and all roads led to the library.

CHAPTER IX

A HERO'S RETURN

IN a minute, more or less, the daughters, the mother, Mason and I, in all states of excitement and in all stages of undress, were in the library. The Judge was at the telephone. He wanted the police department, or the telephone office, or the long distance, but first he wanted "Central" with a ravening hunger.

Tootsie Greyson was trolling around in her night-dress; Alice was in the flower of fashion like Tootsie, but with a black skirt extra; Mrs. Greyson, her white cheeks pink and her eyes shining like stars, was attired in a gingham wrapper and an opera cloak; Mason was demure in his sockless slippers, something else and a long raincoat; I, always having an eye to propriety, had the Judge's overcoat, lovely but much obscured pajamas and a display of bare feet. We knew two things—"Skid was coming" and the Judge wanted "Central." It was one of the times when in the swiftest hurry of life the telephone gets the devil in its bosom. When our hearts were dancing, when seconds seemed minutes, the soulless fluids, the dull currents, the plugs and levers and hooks and bells, became deaf, blind, voiceless. They

were alive but in convulsions. They woke up to buzz, clatter, tinkle, clink, jigger,—to try strong men's souls. The telephone bucked, taunted us, mumbled sullenly, roared, then went into a torpor and desert-like silence.

Some four thousand telephone subscribers, perhaps more, all wanted "Central" and all were trying to talk at the same time at that midnight hour. The Judge was pressing the receiver with great violence somewhere in the left temporal region, and was shouting, banging and prancing. The carpet under his feet seemed warm. At last he got: "Linesbusy-callagen."

We had been expecting that. The evidence pointed that way. There was a click of a key in the front door that none of us in the library heard. There were stealthy footfalls on the hall floor. Happy glowing eyes peered at the Greyson telephone full dress rehearsal through a crack in the library door.

Skid Puffer, spick and span, walked in.

There was a fiercely joyful, feminine scream and Tootsie was locked around Skid's neck. 'Alice, screaming and fainting, fled. The rest of us (excepting Mason) were trying to smother the Arizona special deputy. His bulk and his recent experiences in rare atmospheres may have preserved his life.

And while we tugged at Skid Puffer and swamped him with affectionate attention, while we noisily bombarded him with joyful exclamations and flying ques-

tions, Mason, white and still and neglected, sat sunken deep in a library chair in the corner.

The Judge and I had been planning for a month how we should introduce Skid Puffer to his father. That would be a delicate, even dangerous affair. We now fully comprehended the deadly enmity of the son. He had traveled through perils to punish one of his enemies and he might do something as desperate to the other. We were not excusing or explaining him; we took the facts as we knew them. We had planned the words we should say; thought out the persuasion we should bring; we would cautiously deliver the truth by degrees. Had we known of the affair at Las Tinajas Altas we should have been almost overwhelmed with the difficulties of the case.

Mason sat there for perhaps ten minutes on the edge of a volcano. He knew what his son believed of him and was as fearful of the results as the rest of us. It is possible that the Judge and I had brought out too darkly the danger of the proposed meeting. Three of us knew, or believed, when Skid understood he would be friendly to his father. But it would not be strange at all believing this man to be one of the murderers of his mother, he should leap on him and throttle him in that library chair.

When Skid saw Mason, he shook himself free from clinging embraces and stared. Mason's face was white. Suddenly the room, from being joyful with happy voices, became ominously still. The Judge rose. I do not believe that Skid Puffer saw

his secret trembling. I sat simply helpless, nerveless. Tootsie Greyson's face was snowy.

"I beg pardon of all of you, but who—who is this gentleman?" Skid asked. I thought then and think now that his voice was unpleasant, his glance that of personal injury.

"Ah, my boy, we had forgotten. This is—er," the Judge stopped but quickly recovered. "This man, Skid,—why, I am not going to introduce you till I explain a little. Then you will be as happy in knowing him as we are."

Mason had risen and stood facing his son.

"When Colonel French was East on this same case, you understand—his investigations brought him across this gentleman. He is now a member of our family. He has been deeply wronged, just as you have been. He is another victim of Bob Greyson. He has been wronged as cruelly, as unbelievably, as you have, Skid. That's the reason we have been planning about his meeting you. Colonel found that Bob got him in Sing Sing for two terms of fifteen and ten years for crimes of which he is perfectly innocent. We know all about it. We have the evidence, the transcripts of the testimony and the other legal papers. This man here has been in prison altogether nearly nineteen years. Bob Greyson did it.

"Through this man alone we have got the evidence that Bob is guilty of the crime of Claire's disappearance. The thing we proved while you were gone is this: This man's wife was murdered and

Claire was murdered by Bob Greyson and his half cousin, that preacher out there at Puffer's. Those two did it and saddled it off on him. There is no doubt, Skid, that our friend here," the Judge had taken Skid by the hand and led him a short step towards Mason,—“we have the evidence, we know there can be no doubt that—” and the Judge came to a full stop. I came to my senses then. I stepped quickly up to Skid.

“It's my turn now, Skid, the Judge has promised me this pleasure. I'm to make the introduction of this man who is now a beloved member of this family.” The Judge said afterwards that I was smiling, and looking as gracefully cool as ice.

“We have found him to be—as innocent as a child of any wrong. Skid, step up.” They were face to face and took each other's hands! Tootsie came up and, looking happy, expectant, stood close by Skid. I believe it was Tootsie more than any one else who assured Skid.

“Your father, Skid—Charles A. Mason.”

Just then Alice came in. Skid dropped his father's hand, took her in his arms and kissed her half a dozen times. Yes; it was a most emotional occasion.

CHAPTER X

THE CURTAIN FALLS

WE went to bed after the breakfast bell had tinkled. Our new day commenced after luncheon, at two o'clock. We got together in the parlor later and revived a thousand scenes and memories. We were so at peace with the world that we began to forgive several people that were guilty of western crimes. First, we absolved the chief of police whom we had not met. We agreed to sentence Papago Charlie to the shortest term, and unanimously recommended him to the mercy of the Court.

We had that ready American impulse to pass the hat for Chief Ballard, and after comparing numerous aspects of the testimony, concluded that Captain Jack after all was not so black as he had been painted by the inhabitants of Indianapolis. We determined at once that the telegraph company was not entitled to the respect of any white man. We agreed that "Central" still needed looking into, and that some telegraph managers stood near the limits of our vengeance.

My neglected affairs called from Chicago. It was now Tuesday, and I left them promising to be back Saturday night. When I returned I found that

Skid had been alone most of the time in his room. He had been "sleeping and was to catch up," they told me.

I was shocked at the change in some family arrangements. Mason and Lem were the guests of Angelina Puffer, and Skid was occupying his old rooms. The Judge was cold towards Lem, and Skid, so far as I could learn, did not manifest undue warmth toward his father. They told me that Skid had lain two weeks between life and death at Fort Yuma.

On an early Sunday morning in that November when the weather was like October at its best, Skid came down to me on the veranda, serenely erect and happy. He was himself again. He had aged a year or two; the look of maturity had fully come. There was not a hint of the boy of the swamp.

So far as I knew we were the only ones astir on that sun-filled November morning.

After the morning salutations I told him that on the day following it would be necessary to rearrange our guardianship affairs. We talked business a few minutes, then I said: "I suppose now, Skid, you will be quiet for a while. You ought to take a rest. I am just as happy as you are. You have done right in all this so far as I know. Now—let up. Get ready for some college."

"Colonel," said he tensely, the happy light going out of his face, "there's one more to get yet. I am going to get him."

And a black, fierce shadow of his past reached

over ominously into his great future and filled me with prophetic fears.

Just then we saw Alice, dressed in pink, walking across the lawn toward a seat beside the tennis grounds. It was unusual for a fashionable miss to be up so early on a Sunday morning. We watched her in her straightaway flight. We had a right to, for she was in the line of vision. If a young maiden, beautiful and fresh, attired in some sort of pink iridescence, wished to be up and out on an early Sunday morning, when other fashionable maidens in bedraggled locks and yellowish faces were yawning before their glasses, she certainly could not object to being looked at.

She proceeded straight to the bench, sat down and crossed her knees. She seemed very comfortable. She did not see us; did not look our way.

I recalled that I had business of urgent importance in my room. There are times when business may be business, even on a glorious October morning in November.

A moment later I had to look out of my window. I do love a beautiful Sabbath October morning in November. What sort of a day was it going to be anyway? I looked at the skies and then at the earth, and I saw quite by accident that Alice Greyson sat on the bench and that Skid was with her. Yes; she looked very comfortable.

The morning was delicious, so was the view—very delicious. I leaned my elbows on the viny windowsill, looked away across the green clothed hills, on

the nearer meadows, on the adjacent tennis grounds, and naturally at the bench. Before I viewed the further scene again I disinterestedly noted that the ex-deputy Arizona sheriff was teasing Alice Greyson. He had been guilty of that before. I think, too, on the very same bench.

Colonel French, ex-detective, rose up and pulled down the blind.

An hour or two after I saw Skid Puffer with a worried look on his fine face and Alice Greyson with a flame of joy on hers, slipping into the Greyson library where her parents were.

THE END

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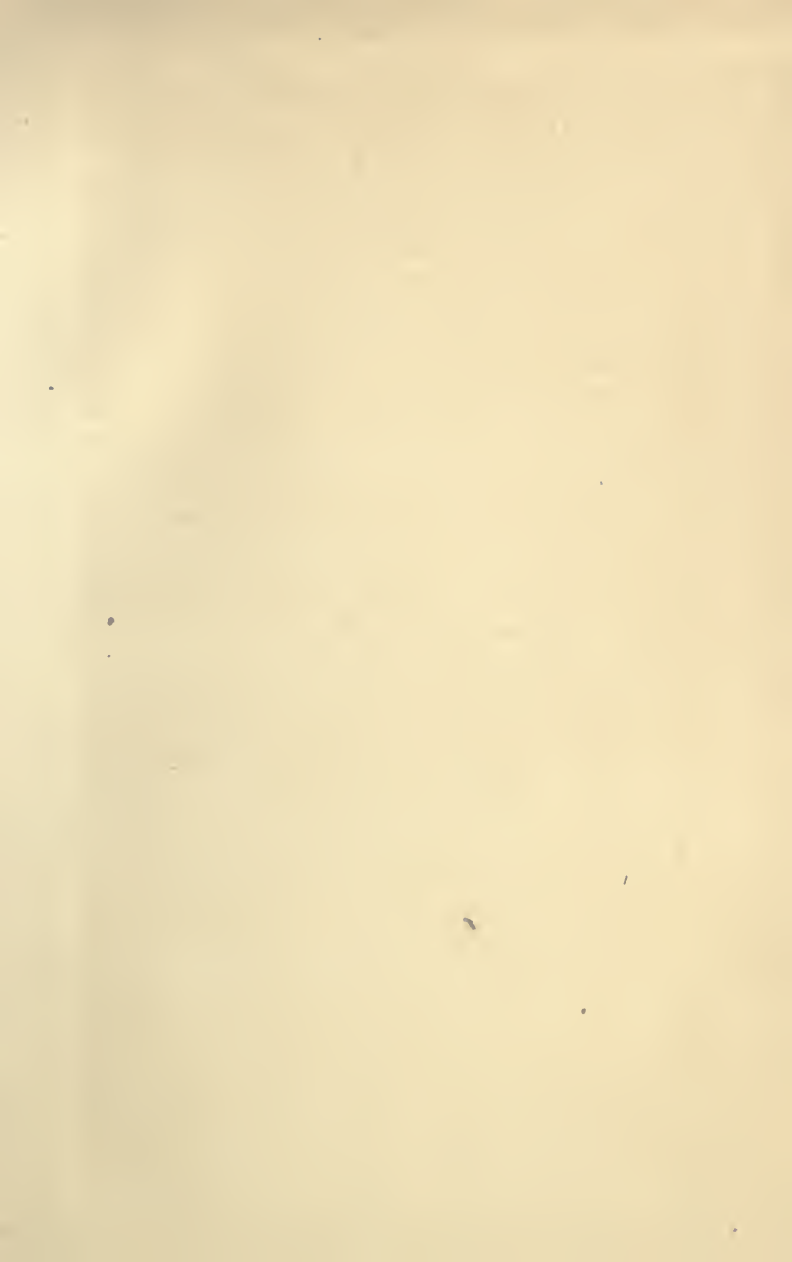
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