

1912

# Three Bangor Novels

Burt L. Standish

Gilbert Patten

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BAINBRIDGE OF BANGOR TALE OF THE BIG WOODS 10 CENTS  
BY BURT L. STANDISH

# TOP-NOTCH

TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

VOL. 8, No. 6

JUNE MID-MONTH ISSUE



THE CONCEPT

TIGHTWAD OF YALE

NEW COLLEGE BASEBALL  
SERIAL BEGINS THIS ISSUE



# TOP-NOTCH

## TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

June 15

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1912

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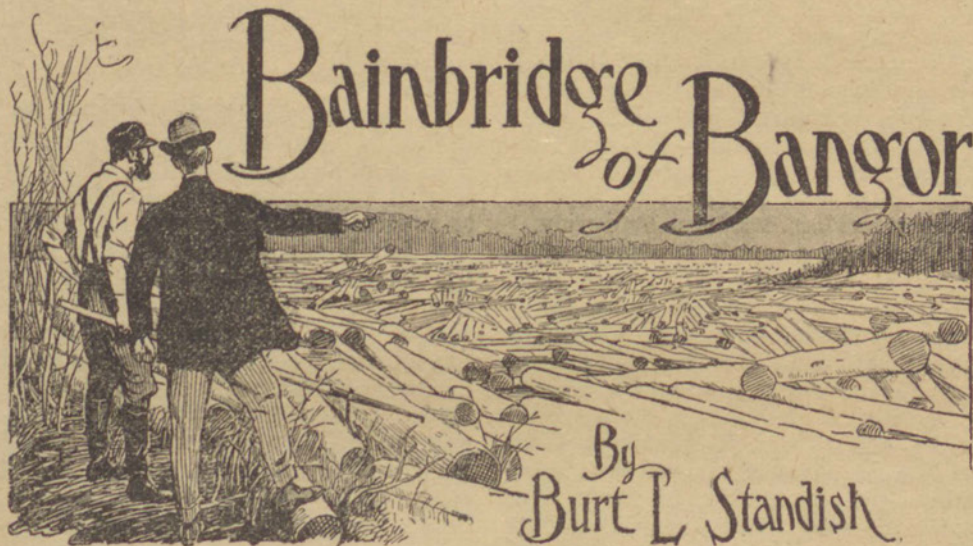


# TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

VOL. VIII

JUNE 15, 1912

No. 6



(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

## CHAPTER I.

### TROUBLE BREWING.

**T**HEY got a boom acrost the river, at the narrers, Mr. Bainbridge, an' their first drive is pilin' up back of it—a reg'lar jam. The hull Baskegan crew is down there, jest standin' around doin' nothin' but keep us from gittin' by."

There was a note of discouragement in the voice of the drive boss, which brought a swift frown to Bob Bainbridge's clean-cut, virile face, and straightened his heavy, black brows in a single line about his well-shaped nose.

"Well," he said sharply, "what of it? You've got a pretty husky crew yourself, haven't you? Why don't you get

'em all down here and cut his boom? He has no right to block the river."

Dick Rohne moved his big, muscular shoulders in a helpless sort of way. "Hank Gowdy's in charge," he explained, "an' you must have heard what he is, Mr. Bainbridge. He's got a gang of hellions like himself that are jest itchin' for trouble. They're pretty near two to one ag'inst us, an' if I tried any buttin'-in business, there'd be a rough-house as would end in killin'."

Bainbridge shot a swift, contemptuous glance at the powerful figure of the man who overtopped him by a good four inches, and his lips curled a little. He had suspected from the very first that Crane had made a mistake in appointing this fellow boss of the Se-bago drive. He had seen Rohne only



once in the offices of the big Triangle Combination, in Bangor, but he had sized him up then as a man with strength enough, and physical courage and technical ability, perhaps, though woefully lacking in the vastly important quality of decision. Events were proving his judgment correct with every passing moment.

In silence they walked rapidly past the roughly built general store, the few low houses, of slabs and logs banked with earth against the winter cold, and on over the bumpy trail which followed the windings of the river through gaunt, desolate, stump-ridden country, where striped maple, mountain holly, and sturdy juniper struggled through the ancient slash and rotting pine tops of former reckless, wasteful lumbering.

There was a certain superficial similarity in the attire of the two men. Both wore high, spiked shoes, heavy trousers, flannel shirts, and Mackinaw coats; but, while the riverman's outfit was of the coarsest, roughest description, that of Bainbridge, though well-worn, and without the least appearance of newness about it, showed the custom tailor and bootmaker in every line, from the snug fit of fine leather over his instep to the perfect hang of the coat about his broad shoulders.

In every other particular, however, they were totally unlike. Rohne was straight and tall, and stalwart as one of the native pines. Not an ounce of superfluous flesh encumbered his big frame, yet he gave one an impression of slow heaviness, more mental than physical, an impression which was heightened by the almost childlike expression of the troubled blue eyes. Bainbridge, on the contrary, was neither tall nor heavy. Well built and admirably proportioned, he seemed all muscle strung on steel wire; and every characteristic, from the light, easy, springy stride with which he covered the ground to the firm jaw and the keen dark eyes which dominated the mobile, expressive face, bore evidence of a fund of tremendous, irrepressible dynamic energy.

"Where's our own drive, Rohne?" he asked suddenly.

The riverman started slightly at the other's terse, snappy tone.

"I'm holding it about two miles up the river," he explained. "I didn't want to let it down to make trouble here, so I rigged up a boom till we could straighten things out below."

"Humph! How long has it been there?"

"Since day before yesterday."

"Jammed, I suppose?"

"Not bad. A stick or two'll start the key logs moving an' bring her down with a rush."

"Humph!"

The silence which followed lasted until they had rounded a sharp bend in the river bank and passed a thick clump of tangled undergrowth which had hitherto prevented a clear view upstream.

A few hundred yards ahead, a stubby, flat point of land nosed out into the river, cutting down its width to sixty feet or more. Spanning the stretch was a boom, made of heavy logs chained together and fastened securely at either bank. Behind it was the jam, a massive wall of logs piled up in seemingly inextricable confusion, some forced clear of the water and standing upright, others lying crossways, the whole having the appearance of a heap of gigantic jackstraws.

To the ordinary individual, unversed in lumbering conditions, the obstacle would have seemed insurmountable, for by this time the logs had become so wedged and crammed against each other and against the narrowing banks that, even with the boom taken away, the jam would remain immovable.

Bainbridge, however, seemed quite undisturbed. After a swift, comprehensive glance at the obstruction, his eyes veered quickly to the left, as if in search of something much more vital, much more likely to give trouble than this common, everyday phase of a riverman's life.

He found it instantly. Set a little back from the bank were two big tents, from one of which arose a thin column of smoke. A number of men lounged about in the open, some basking in the pale, sickly, yellow sunshine, others



strolling idly about, or leaning against the sides of the tents.

At that distance, there was nothing especially ominous in the scene; yet the young man's eyes narrowed a trifle, particularly as he took in the huge bulk of one particular giant, whose massive shoulders towered well above his companions, and whose heavy, square face was already turned expectantly down the river.

"Whittemore's not here, then?" he asked curtly, turning sharply on his companion.

"No; he's back in camp, getting ready to move, I understand."

"Gowdy's in sole charge of the drive, then. Does he give any reason for blocking the river and holding us up?"

"Nary one. Jest says we can go to the devil if we don't like his way of runnin' things. Says he may be there a week, an' not a log o' ours is goin' to git by till he's good and ready."

Bainbridge's lips tightened. He had already noticed where the highest water had thrown brush and debris among the bushes which lined the bank, and knew by this that the stream was beginning to subside from the spring freshets. A week's delay—less, even—was more than likely to see so great a falling of the water that the bulk of Triangle timber higher upstream would be stranded high and dry, to wait, a prey to rot and boring insects, the passing of an entire year.

Bob Bainbridge had, however, not the slightest intention of running this sort of risk. His jaw squared, and an expression of swift determination flashed into his clean-cut face.

"It looks very much, Rohne," he said grimly, "as if we'd have to find some means of making this roughneck Gowdy come down off his perch."

## CHAPTER II.

### THE STORM BURSTS.

**I**N silence the two men rapidly approached the camp of the Baskegan crew, every member of which had now turned to watch the newcomers curiously. Bainbridge neither quickened

nor slackened his pace; his face was quiet and undisturbed almost to indifference. Rohne kept beside him, but, though he did not lag behind, he gave that same impression of heaviness, as if his mind, hesitating and undecided, was not keeping pace with that of his companion.

As they came within earshot, the fellow Gowdy laughed raucously, made a brief, inaudible remark to the circle generally, which seemed to cause considerable mirth, and then turned back to stare at Bainbridge, an offensive grin on his square, rough-hewn, brutal face.

The young man's expression did not change a particle. He walked straight up to the group, passed a couple of "river hogs" lounging against stumps, and stopped before the massive figure of the giant foreman.

"I understand that you're in charge here," he said quietly.

"You understand right," retorted Gowdy, his full, whiskered lips curling contemptuously as he surveyed the lithe, seemingly slim figure before him. "What's it to you?"

"Merely this," Bainbridge replied quietly: "I should be glad to know how long you propose keeping the river blocked with your drive."

The giant roared raucously. "That's good, that is! *You'd* like to know, would you?"

He folded his hairy arms across the swelling chest, and emitted a resounding guffaw.

"I certainly should," Bainbridge answered tersely, quite ignoring the momentary interruption.

"Go to blazes, and find out, then!" rasped the river boss angrily. He was reeking with liquor, and, in a flash, the roughly jovial mood had given place to swiftly rising temper. "What business is it of yours, you smooth-faced, paper-collar dude?"

"It's this to me," retorted Bainbridge steadily, his eyes narrowing the least bit: "I happen to have a drive of logs upstream a ways that I'm going to bring down. The water's falling, and I haven't any time to lose. You've blocked the river without rhyme or rea-



son, and seem to be loafing your own sweet time away, regardless of other people. My name is Bainbridge—Bob Bainbridge. Get me?"

For a second Gowdy stood staring at him, swaying back and forth on his widespread, muscular legs. A wave of deep crimson had surged into his face, and the expression in his blazing eyes was that of one who is almost afraid to believe his good fortune.

"Bainbridge!" he roared. "Bainbridge, of Bangor! Blazes!" He took a sudden step forward, and shook a great, hairy fist, the size and appearance of a ham, in the other's face. "Why, you young whelp! I could break you in pieces with them two fists—I will, too! You're one of the dirty, thievin' gang down the river that's grabbed up all the timberland worth anythin' in the State. You're one o' the crowd that robs widders an' orphans an' turns 'em out to starve. You're as bad as your rotten father, an'——"

"Stop that!" The words came snapping from Bainbridge's lips like bullets from a gun. His face had turned a little white, and there was an ominous glitter in his eyes. "You keep that foul mouth of yours shut, or I'll close it for you!"

"You'll close it!" frothed Gowdy, his face purple. "You'll close it! Thunder and lightning!" He tore at his collar, and ripped the button off, exposing the great, hairy chest and powerful muscles of his massive, bull neck. "I'll wring you out like a wet rag, you miserable little runt!"

With a whirlwind motion of his arms, he shed his coat; but, swiftly as it was done, Bainbridge was quicker. Like a flash, he jerked off the encumbering Mackinaw and flung it at Rohne.

"Get back, Dick!" he commanded. "Keep the crowd off if they try to interfere; that's all."

Their lethargy and laziness swept away in an instant, the gang of rivermen were on their feet, and they formed in a wide ring even before Bainbridge had finished speaking. Their eyes blazed with the fierce, primeval lust for blood, old as the world itself. Their

lips were set in cruel, pitiless lines. Here and there big fists were clenched tightly, and strained muscles showed hard through flannel and corduroy, as if the owners longed to do more than merely watch.

"He'll eat him alive!" muttered one husky river hog disappointedly. "He'll smash him up before he knows what's struck him."

Indeed, it looked that way. In the brief instant that the two men faced each other, a dozen feet apart, the contrast between them was startling. Stripped of his bulky coat, Bainbridge seemed a pygmy beside the towering bulk of Hank Gowdy. With all the grit in the world, even with skill at sparring, he would be smothered, crushed, beaten down by sheer overpowering weight and muscle.

For a second the river boss stood glaring wildly at him. Then, with an inarticulate roar of fury, he launched himself forward like a maddened grizzly eager for its prey.

## CHAPTER III.

### SOME FIGHT.

**A**GILE as a cat, Bainbridge flung himself to one side to escape the frenzied rush of the angry giant. He knew that if Gowdy once got a good grip with those huge paws, the fight would be over almost in an instant, and so he dodged nimbly, thrusting out a foot, which caught the ruffian's ankle, bringing him down on one knee with a thud and a grunt.

He was on his feet again in an instant, however; for, in spite of his great bulk, he moved with surprising agility. There was a reddish gleam of ferocity in his eyes, and his teeth showed in a bestial snarl as he leaped at Bainbridge again.

Once more the latter dodged, this time landing a smashing blow on his opponent's chest as the big man passed him; but its only effect on Gowdy was to increase his fury.

Round and round the ring they padded, Bainbridge ducking, dodging, slipping to one side to escape being



caught in the giant's crushing embrace, and striking a blow whenever the slightest opening came. This was not the first fight of the sort he had participated in, and he knew the simplicity of the woodman's code of battle. With these primitive, simple-minded people, nothing was unfair in a fight. Their object was to get results, to do their man; the manner of accomplishment mattered not at all. Knuckles, butting, gouging, choking, kicking with spiked shoes—all were tolerated; and it followed naturally that the man who had ingrained in him the instinct of clean, decent scrapping was at a decided disadvantage.

Added to all this, the combination of whisky and pure, untrammelled rage kept Gowdy keyed up to a furious activity which was abnormal, and which forced his smaller opponent to use all his skill in defending himself and slipping out of tight places.

Once when Bainbridge thought a good opening was before him, and leaped in to take advantage of it, he received a tremendous buffet on the side of the head that sent him sprawling and brought a gasp of dismay from the white-faced Rohne. The blow was followed by a savage rush, and before Bainbridge could scramble to his feet he felt the long, sharp spikes of the riverman's shoe tearing the flesh of his thigh.

Like a flash, the fallen man rolled over thrice, with a rapid, vigorous twist which was second nature to a seasoned half back, bounded to his feet, and stood crouching, his face set and white with rage, his dark eyes blazing.

His blood was up. A swift anger rushed over him like a hot wave. In that instant the trammels and conventions of civilization seemed to slip from him, leaving him simple and primitive almost as the giant before him, blind to everything save a fierce determination to hurt the man who had hurt him.

Yet even now his mind remained clear and cool and active. He did not rush madly forward, but awaited the approach of his antagonist, balancing on

his toes, and giving Gowdy as well as the excited mob of half-drunken river hogs the impression that he meant to dodge away, as he had done so many times before.

"Why don't you stand up and take your medicine like a man, you putty-faced whelp?" roared the bruiser. "I'll git you if I has to keep after you all day, an' then I'll break you in bits, you——"

Like a flash, Bainbridge leaped forward. Smash! His fist shot out and landed squarely on the ruffian's mouth, cutting his lips and breaking off a yellow snag or two. Crash! The second blow took the giant fairly in the solar plexus, and would have been sufficient to put any man down and out whose abdominal muscles were not as hard as iron. At it was, Gowdy staggered back a step or two, with a gasping grunt, and a murmur of astonishment went up from the amazed circle.

"Parbleu!" cried one of the French Canadians excitedly. "Zee boy, he ees one hell cat!"

"Eat him up, Hank!" roared another man encouragingly. "Stop foolin' with him, an' eat him alive!"

"Ay bane tank that not so much a cinch," muttered a big blond Swede, his blue eyes sparkling with unwonted animation. "That young faller oll right."

Gowdy recovered swiftly, and advanced on his opponent with a slow, crouching gait, which was even more ominous than his previous wild rushes.

His long, powerful arms were half extended, the fingers curving inward like talons. His huge shoulders were hunched over a little, and his head drawn down. The eyes were wide open and glaring with demoniacal fury; a trickle of blood ran unheeded from the mouth, which was fixed in a bestial snarl of uncontrolled rage.

As he watched him coming, Bainbridge felt a slight, quickly suppressed shiver flickering along his spine. The ruffian had completely lost what little control he had ever had. To all intents and purposes, he was mad. Unless he won, Bainbridge realized perfectly that



his portion would not be merely a bad beating, or even a maiming, but worse. The ferocious blood lust in the other's glaring eyes told him that quite clearly; yet he waited.

He had a well-conceived plan, which he proceeded to put at once into operation. When Gowdy's tensely gathered muscles proclaimed that he was about to lunge forward, Bainbridge ducked, and darted past the bigger man, striking him a sharp blow on the side of the head as he did so.

As the giant whirled furiously, the process was repeated. Back and forth, round and round they went, and the old comparison of a terrier and a bull fitted the case admirably. Conserving every bit of strength and energy he could, Bainbridge dodged and ducked and slipped out of the giant's clutching hold with amazing skill, all the while getting in stinging blows on every part of the big body of his opponent, until the latter was almost blind with rage and impotent fury.

Gradually Gowdy's rushes became wilder and more futile; his jaws hung open, and his great chest heaved as he sucked in the air with a panting, gasping noise. Several times, in spite of the slighter man's caution, the ruffian's fist struck Bainbridge glancingly, but he was back again in the ring before Gowdy could follow up the blow.

The spectators, growing more and more excited, were kept busy getting out of the way, so that the ring was constantly billowing out at one side and closing in at the other. Amazement, incredulity, even concern were pictured on every face. Hank Gowdy had been so long the dominating character in this section of the Maine woods that they could scarcely believe their senses when they realized that he was actually being licked by a person half his size and less than half his brute strength.

There could be no doubt about it, however. The giant's breathing became more and more labored, his rushes wilder and lacking in power. The blood trickled down from cuts all over his face; the sweat poured into his eyes

and blinded him. Suddenly a swift change came over Bob Bainbridge. His eyes narrowed, and he seemed to have become a thing of steel. He stopped the dodging little rushes abruptly, and began a series of swift, light blows which dazzled the half-blinded giant. There was an instant's pause, and then the crash came.

The blow seemed to start from the youngster's very hip. His right fist shot out, and he leaped forward like a tiger to add the weight of his body to the blow which already held every ounce of reserve strength that was left him. It landed on the point of Gowdy's chin with a crash that brought an involuntary groan of sympathy from the excited rivermen, and sent the hulking giant hurtling backward, dead to the world before he even struck the ground.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE DOMINATING FORCE.

FOR a moment Bainbridge stood there, his chest rising and falling with the ebbing tide of his passion. He was a strange, compelling figure, with his tossed, disordered hair, his torn garments, and the trickle of blood flowing from a cut on one cheek; and, as he presently turned and swept the circle with those blazing eyes, more than one hulking riverman dropped his lids and shuffled nervously with his feet.

"Well," he snapped harshly, "any one else like to have a try?"

For a second there was no answer. There was not a coward in the entire Baskegan crew. As an organization, they had, in fact, a name and reputation for reckless bravery even among a class of men where courage is so common that it ceases to be a noticeable virtue. But there was something about this youngster's face, coupled with the astonishing feat he had just accomplished, which held and dominated the boldest among them.

Finally the Swede broke the silence with a nervous laugh. "Ay bane tank not, Meester Bainbreege. Ay don't tank any mans here care about fightin' you 'ust now."



The Canadian was staring dazedly at the prostrate giant, his head cocked on one side.

"Gowdy knock out," he murmured to himself. "Gowdy knock out! Mon Dieu! An' by zis boy! Et ees vairy fonny."

Bainbridge turned swiftly to Rohne, and took his coat from the foreman's arm.

"Get the gang down here right away, Dick," he said, in a low, quick tone. "Bring some powder, and get a hustle on. I'm going to clear the river *now*."

The man did not hesitate this time. Perhaps he was infused with some of his companion's energy. At all events, he whirled and set off upstream at a run which soon took him swiftly into a clump of high undergrowth and out of sight.

Bob watched him go, and then, without a glance at the prostrate Gowdy, who was now surrounded by some of his crew, he deliberately put on his coat, and strolled down to examine the jam.

He did this slowly and carefully, in the manner of an expert, walking out over the piled-up logs to midstream, and taking plenty of time to study the situation and decide on the spot where a charge of dynamite would do the most good. His movements were followed by many curious eyes, but when he returned to the shore and walked back to the Baskegan camp not one of the heterogeneous crew ventured to comment or question.

Gowdy was just beginning to stir as Bainbridge settled himself leisurely against a stump, his back to the crowd, and, pulling out pipe and tobacco pouch, filled up for a smoke. As he puffed leisurely on the brier, he listened interestedly to what was passing behind him. His anger had long since departed, leaving him cool and calm and unperturbed, as if the fight which had just terminated was a trivial, unimportant part of the day's work.

"Lemme up!" he heard Gowdy mutter, after a few preliminary moans and heaves. "Lemme get after him. I ain't never bin licked yet, an' I ain't now!"

"You fool!" snapped another voice shortly. "Aire you plumb crazy? You're all in, an' if you try any more monkeyshines you'll likely end up with a busted arm or a smashed head."

"But he ain't nothin' but a boy!" groaned the giant. "Think of it! Knocked out by a smooth-faced city dude! I won't never hear the last of it, Bill."

There was a sound of struggling, as if the ruffian was trying to get on his feet; but Bainbridge did not stir. It was followed instantly by a groan of pain, and presently a lower, only partially audible muttering:

"I'll git him yet—more'n one way—I'll make the whelp wisht he'd never got up against Hank Gowdy, so I will—I'll fix him somehow—why don't you help me up, you thickheads? I want a drink!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Bob saw several of the crew drag the boss to his feet and support him into the nearest tent. There was a faint smile on the young fellow's lips, which did not look as if the riverman's threats disturbed him very much; but it swiftly vanished when he caught sight of Dick Rohne, followed by a number of the Triangle crowd coming down the river bank at a dogtrot.

By the time they reached him, Bainbridge was on his feet, his eyes alert and snappy.

"You fix up the blast, Dick," he said tersely. "Make it a good one—half a dozen sticks, say. We haven't any time to waste playing with it, and a few logs more or less won't cut any figure. Hustle, now! Some of you boys come with me."

Three or four of the newly arrived rivermen followed him unquestioningly down to the jam. The majority of them had never set eyes on the young fellow before, but Rohne had told them a few things, and, besides, they recognized intuitively the type of man who knows what he wants and means to accomplish it if it lies within human power.

"Loosen up that boom, boys," Bob said pleasantly, the moment they



reached the point where the massive chain was fastened. "She's jammed too high to swing, but when the charge goes off we don't want any more resistance than necessary."

Two men leaped to obey his orders, and Bainbridge, aware at that moment that a bunch of the Baskegan outfit were hurrying toward him, turned swiftly to face them.

## CHAPTER V.

### A GIRL IN PERIL.

THE crowd must have numbered a dozen or more husky river hogs, led by a stalwart, black-haired fellow with fire in his eyes. Their approach was swift and determined, but, as they encountered the cool, disconcerting stare of the young man before them, they slowed down appreciably, their ardor seeming to wane. By the time they had reached the spot where Bainbridge was standing they did not look nearly so fierce as they had at first.

"Look here, young feller," the leader said blusteringly, after a momentary hesitation, "you can't go an' blow up this here jam, you know."

Bob's narrowed eyes met the other's. "Can't I?" he snapped. "And why not?"

The brawny riverman shuffled awkwardly under the fixed stare. "Waal, Gowdy's give orders it's to be let alone," he returned slowly.

"He has, has he? Perhaps you'll tell me what right he's got to block the river? Perhaps you'll tell me, if you can, what his object is in loafing around here with his whole crew for days without making an effort to loosen his jam and let his drive downstream? How about it?"

The man dropped his eyes, and a slow flush began to creep into his weather-beaten face.

"I guess you know the answer, all right," Bainbridge went on, when it became evident that the other was going to remain tongue-tied. "His idea is to hold the Triangle drive back and leave it stranded if he can. You can go back and tell Gowdy that this kind of a game

won't go down for a minute. I'm going to blow that jam when the charge is ready. Get me?"

"Our drive'll be ruined with nobody to look after it," the riverman muttered sullenly.

"That's none of my business," Bainbridge retorted sharply. "You've got hands enough here, eating grub and swilling whisky, to take care of it all right. If you'd got out of here a week ago, as you should have done, instead of squatting down to block us, for no reason at all, you'd have been as far as Bancroft by this time. All right, Dick; bring it out and I'll show you where to plant it."

Turning abruptly from the doubtful, hesitating spokesman of the rival outfit, he ran out over the logs, followed more slowly by Rohne, carefully carrying the blast, made up of half a dozen sticks of giant powder, equipped with caps and a short length of fuse.

Halting near the center of the jam, Bob pointed out to his companion a sort of cavern in the logs, into which the foreman dropped his burden, after touching a match to the end of the fuse.

There was a general scattering as the men made for cover. Bainbridge followed more leisurely, and was the last one to take refuge behind a big, burned stub, a little to one side of the camp.

A brief, tense pause followed. Then a great roar shook the atmosphere, and into the air spurted the cloud of explosion. Through the white smoke could be seen a column of water leaping upward, and with it half a dozen huge logs which had been thrown clear of the packed mass. A rain of splinters and bark followed, but even in the midst of this, Bob, followed by his men, ran down to the jam.

For a moment it seemed as if the explosive had been ineffective, but the practiced eyes of the rivermen noticed a faint, scarcely perceptible tremor agitating the apparently solid structure. Instantly, without waiting for an order, the crew ran lightly out over the logs, and began to pry them loose here



and there with their peavies. The whole mass quivered and seemed to change its position a little.

"That did the trick, all right," Bainbridge said, in a tone of satisfaction. "Now, Dick, it's up to you to hustle back and start our own drive along. Better take a couple of men and the canned thunder, in case you have to use a stick or two."

Rohne nodded, picked up the bag of explosives, called two of his crew, and was out of sight in short order. He had scarcely disappeared before Bob, watching intently, gave a warning cry which brought his men flying to shore. The next instant a great mass of the jam fell forward into the stream. Other logs followed by twos and threes, and then by scores. In ten minutes the whole great bulk of them had been seized in the released current, and they were whirled downstream, a bobbing, jolting, grinding mass.

"A couple more of you chase back and help Rohne," Bob said, turning to his men. "The rest better go up beyond that last bend and come down with the drive. We don't want to have her hang up again."

He turned quickly, and walked over to where the Baskegan crew were gathered, watching the proceedings, some sullen, uneasy, palpably anxious at the turn things had taken, others betraying only the cynical indifference of men who left the deciding of matters like this to their boss and were personally carelessly unconcerned as to how they turned out.

"Look here, Jack," Bainbridge said quickly to the man he had spoken with before, "you're the jam boss, aren't you? I thought so. Well, why don't you go ahead and take hold? If Gowdy's not able to look after things, why don't you follow up your drive until he comes to? You might better be doing that than standing around waiting for something to turn up."

The fellow stared, looked surprised, startled, doubtful; and then he protested that he hadn't been hired for a river boss, nor was he paid as one. Bob waved away his objections instantly,

made a few terse, pithy comments, with the result that, after a brief space of arguing, the riverman was convinced. Ten minutes later almost the entire crowd were hustling down the bank, peavies and cant hooks in hand, in hot pursuit of their drive.

Bob watched them for a few moments, a faint smile of amusement curving his lips. The dull, distant boom of an explosion brought his mind back to his own affairs and made him turn toward the river again.

It was then that he became aware for the first time of the young woman standing on the opposite bank, coolly regarding the rush of logs swept through the narrowed space by the dashing current.

There was a certain indescribable dash about the trim figure, with its short skirt just hiding the tops of the high laced shoes, the loose but perfectly fitting coat, the wide felt hat with a touch of jauntiness in the curve of the brim and the angle at which it rested on the wavy dark-brown hair. The impression Bainbridge received was one of easy self-reliance, which did not in the least detract from the subtle womanliness that showed in a dozen little ways.

For a good half minute he stared before he realized, with a start and a faint quickening of his pulse, that this independent, very woodsy-looking person was none other than a charming society girl he had met more than once at teas and receptions and dances in Bangor, and whom he admired not a little. Immediately he jerked off his hat, and bowed.

"How do you do, Miss Stafford?" he called, raising his voice to carry above the turmoil of rushing water and grinding logs.

Slowly the girl turned her head, as if aware of his presence for the first time, stared at him for a moment or two, and then nodded curtly, almost disdainfully, without speaking. She had never shown any especial cordiality toward him, but a chance meeting in the woods usually means more than a dozen encounters under conventional condi-



tions; and for that reason, perhaps, her cool indifference surprised Bainbridge and brought a touch of added color to his tanned face.

"Don't be nice if you don't want to," he muttered, a little petulantly, as he turned away.

Out of the corner of his eye, however, he continued to watch her movements, and was rather puzzled when he saw her turn upstream in earnest conversation with a fellow dressed as a woodsman, who had been standing a little behind her.

He did not realize what was in her mind until she stopped beside a canoe which had been drawn up on the bank some distance above the narrows. Then in a flash it came to him that she meant to cross the river, and, whirling, he started up his side of the stream at a run.

"Miss Stafford!" he shouted, as soon as he was within hearing distance. "You mustn't try to cross now. There's a drive of logs coming, which will be here at any moment."

There was no response whatever. As far as the girl was concerned, Bob might not have existed. She continued to argue with the guide, who, from his gestures, was plainly unwilling to enter the canoe. Then suddenly, with a determined motion of her head, she moved swiftly forward and shoved the frail craft into the water with practiced ease. In another moment she stepped lightly in and took up the paddle.

Too late the guide leaped forward in a futile effort to grab the canoe and hold it back by main force; his clutching fingers missed by barely six inches. At the same instant Bainbridge rushed to the water's edge and waved both hands peremptorily.

"Go back!" he shouted. "You can't cross—you mustn't try! You'll be caught in the jam."

The girl did not even look at him. She seemed to be entirely taken up in driving the craft forward with clean, powerful strokes.

Bob caught his breath with a sudden intake, and glanced desperately upstream. As he stared, hoping against

hope that perhaps she might make it, after all, his fears were realized.

Around a bend, not two hundred yards away, shot a great pine log, the forerunner of the drive, carried along with ever-increasing speed by the swift current. Close behind another bobbed into view; then a whole phalanx of them. In sixty seconds the entire river would be filled with these monstrous engines of destruction, any one of which, striking the canoe, would smash the frail craft like an eggshell.

## CHAPTER VI.

### AT THE RISK OF LIFE.

FOR the tiniest fraction of a second Bainbridge stood rooted to the ground with dismay. Then in a flash his mind perceived the only possible way out of the desperate situation, and, disregarding the almost hopeless character of the chance, he whirled about, and ran upstream as he had never run before.

As he ran, he tore off his coat and flung it from him. An instant later he bent over and scooped up from the ground a pike pole of tough ash, shod with an iron point, which one of the careless rivermen had dropped there.

With this balanced in his hand, he raced on until he reached a point abreast of which bobbed three or four logs, just behind the two that headed the drive. Even then there was no appreciable slackening of his speed. Gripping the pike pole about the upper end with both hands, he dug the iron point into the ground, and a second later his lithe, muscular body was shooting out over the water in a curve which would have been beautiful to see but for the gasping suspense of it.

There were only three witnesses to the amazing, reckless feat—the cook of the Baskegan crew, the hulking, bruised giant peering from the turned-back tent flap, and the guide across the stream; but each of them, rough and callous as he was, felt his heart miss a beat and his blood turn cold.

Bainbridge seemed to hang motionless in the air for moments. Then, swift



and straight as a plummet, he flashed downward, struck a log squarely with his spiked shoes, drove it under water a good twelve inches, wavered perilously, recovered his balance with an effort, and was swept on downstream, swaying gently from side to side.

Save for that first involuntary shrinking of the muscles while he was dropping through the air, Bob gave no single thought to his own peril. He hadn't time. His eyes were fixed on the girl ahead, who, aroused now to her danger, was paddling frantically; his mind busy gauging the distance between them and calculating at what point they would come together.

With his pike pole, by shoving against the others, he was strenuously thrusting the log he rode farther outstream and farther ahead. Presently he leaped from it to the next one, and thence to another. Each time the unstable tree trunks bobbed and rolled perilously, and it demanded some lively footwork to keep from going under.

At length he reached the last log of a row, and paused, keeping his place by light touches of the pole now and then. With anxious eyes, he saw one of the foremost pieces of timber shoot past the stern of the canoe, with only a few scant inches between. There was a brief, tense pause, and then suddenly he dropped the pole and flung himself down on the very end of the log just as the girl made a wide sweep with her paddle and turned the craft downstream in a desperate attempt to escape her pitiless, indomitable pursuers.

Had she made this move a moment or two before, it might have succeeded, but it was too late now. A second later there was an ominous thud, and an ominous crackling sound, as the timber struck the canoe glancingly and tore a great strip from the side.

Miss Stafford gasped as she felt the lurch and the deluge which poured in upon her. The next instant she gasped again. An arm, rigid and hard as iron, suddenly encircled her waist. There was a swift, desperate struggle against the treacherous, rolling log, a horrible sinking, which seemed as if it were

never going to stop, and at last she found herself half crouching, half lying against a man's heaving chest, the water well above her waist, and one hand unconsciously gripping the fold of a soaked flannel shirt.

"You're not slipping, are you?" asked a cool, quiet voice.

"I think not," she returned, doing her best to emulate the other's nonchalance.

"Would you mind—er—catching hold of me with your other hand, too?" pursued Bainbridge calmly. "We're going through the narrows in a minute, and I'll have to have both arms free for balancing."

Without comment, she reached up with her free hand and twined her fingers in his leather belt. She was glad that her face was hidden, for she knew it must be scarlet with the rage and mortification which possessed her. She hated herself intensely for having been the cause of bringing about such a situation. She even hated Bainbridge because he was a witness to her humiliation.

Oddly enough, the one emotion she did not feel was fear. Perhaps it was because of the other things which filled her mind, or possibly something of the man's cool confidence was added to her already very adequate courage. At all events, she did not shrink nor tremble even in the foamy rush of the swifter current; and when at last the log was carried into a little backwater close to shore, the dominating thought in her mind was one of thankfulness that the mortifying experience was over.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A BLOW IN THE FACE.

AS the log was carried by the current into the little cove, Bainbridge slipped off, carefully steadying the timber as he did so.

Then, without hesitation or questioning, he put both arms around the girl, and lifted her from the cramped position.

"You really needn't do this," she protested hastily. "I can't get much wetter than I am now."



"But you might stumble, or something," he smiled. "And, anyhow, it's not exactly hard work."

Carrying her lightly and easily, he splashed ashore, and let her down gently on the bank.

"There!" he said cheerfully. "Feels rather good to have something solid underfoot again, doesn't it?"

For a second she did not answer. Her fingers were busy patting her hair into place with quick, unconscious, feminine movements. Then she produced a sodden handkerchief from a pocket and sopped her face ineffectually. Finally she bent over to wring some of the water from her dripping skirt.

"Yes," she said, at last, in a cool, impersonal tone, "it certainly does."

She flashed a single swift glance at his eager, admiring face, and dropped her lids.

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Bainbridge," she went on quickly, "for coming to my rescue. It was a most courageous thing to do, and it probably saved my life."

"Please don't say a thing about it," he said hastily. "It was nothing at all compared with your grit. I never saw such nerve in a girl in all my life."

A faint line of something like annoyance flashed into her forehead, and her eyes veered to the river again.

"It wouldn't have done any good if I'd lost my head, or fainted," she returned briefly. "I suppose it was foolish to try to cross, but I had to get to the store this morning."

"It wasn't foolish if you knew nothing about the drive which was on its way down. I suppose you didn't hear me when I shouted to you not to try. The river was making a lot of noise."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, yes, I heard you. I thought I could get across ahead of it, though." She shivered the least bit, and stamped a foot which looked absurdly small, even in the heavy laced boot. "I think I'll go on down to the store and have Mrs. Hobbes dry my clothes," she added. "It's getting rather chilly."

"Of course," he agreed hastily. "You ought not to have stood here a

minute. If you don't mind, I'll walk along with you."

She did not seem wildly enthusiastic over the idea. "Please don't feel obliged to," she said hastily. "I can manage very well alone. You have your men here to look after, haven't you?"

Bob glanced keenly around, and saw that the crew was spread out along the river and on it, working with everlasting vigilance to keep the drive in motion and prevent another jam forming. Dick Rohne was in charge again, and everything seemed to be running smoothly.

"I reckon they don't need me now," he smiled, as he fell into step beside her. "My foreman's all right under ordinary conditions, but when he runs up against a proposition like this drunken river boss of Whittemore's he falls down completely. He wired me yesterday that he'd been held up for two days by this jam, so I had to chase up here and clear the way for him."

There was a second's pause, during which Miss Stafford walked on, her eyes set straight ahead of her.

"So it was you who blew up the jam, not Gowdy?" she remarked presently, in a rather odd tone.

"Yes. He had no right to keep the river blocked."

"Still, isn't it rather—unusual to blow up another man's timber without giving him anything to say in the matter?"

There was something in her voice which made Bainbridge glance swiftly down at her face, but he saw nothing but the delicate curve of one cheek and the corner of a small mouth set in rather firm lines.

"Under ordinary conditions, perhaps it is," he answered softly; "but there are times when one has to take things into his own hands. Every hour that my drive was held up meant that much more labor in working the logs, on account of the rapidly falling water. In less than a week the biggest part of them would have been stranded high and dry. It would have been worse than foolish for me to wait the pleasure of this Gowdy, who calmly blocked



the river, for no reason whatever that I can find out, and has been camped here nearly a week, loafing and drinking his time away."

Miss Stafford shrugged her shoulders slightly. "Perhaps he had a reason that you didn't know about. Isn't it possible that he might have been waiting for another drive to come down, so that he could handle the two together?"

Bob's face flushed a little at her tone. "It is," he agreed curtly; "but I have yet to learn that any man has the right to obstruct navigation, no matter what his reason may be. As well stretch a boom across the Penobscot and take toll from every passing vessel. My action may seem a little high-handed to you, Miss Stafford, but——"

"Really, Mr. Bainbridge," she interrupted coldly, "I haven't the least interest in your actions. I was simply arguing on general principles." They had reached the general store by this time, and stopped before it. "Thank you again for what you have done for me—and good-by."

She made no effort to shake hands; her fingers were linked loosely behind her back. Bainbridge was vaguely conscious of the underlying antagonism of her manner, but he was so little used to being treated cavalierly by women—or men, either, for that matter—that he set it down to a very natural annoyance and chagrin at having placed herself, by her own foolhardiness, in the awkward position from which he had rescued her.

"I hope it won't be good-by," he said hastily, with a smile which lit up his whole face. "I shall probably be about here for a bit, and surely we'll meet again?"

She turned slightly, one hand resting on the latch of the door, and for the first time looked him squarely in the eyes.

"I think not," she returned, in a tone of finality. "I am staying with my friend, Miss Whittemore, at her father's woods camp. It is not at all likely that I shall be down at the river again while you are here."

For an instant after she had van-

ished, Bainbridge stood staring at the closed door, his cheeks crimson, and an angry glint in his dark eyes. He had a feeling as if he had been lashed across the face with a whip, and the cutting, biting quality of her voice still sounded clearly in his ears.

The next second he whirled round and strode back along the river trail, hands clenched, and black brows making a single line from temple to temple.

"So that's how it stands, is it?" he muttered presently. "A friend of the Whittemores—humph! I suppose the old man's filled her full of stories about that deal we're trying to put through, until she thinks I'm a regular all-round villain. Strikes me, though, that, under the circumstances, she might have let me down a trifle easier."

He walked rapidly on in silence, and gradually his face cleared. At length he shrugged his shoulders and smiled a little.

"Oh, well, what's the odds?" he murmured. "She has a right to her opinion, and, since it seems to be a pretty positive one, I reckon it's up to Robert to forget her."

Somehow, that did not prove to be so easy. Bainbridge threw himself heart and soul into the task of rushing the drive downstream, but now and then during the frequent cessation of action the thought of Edith Stafford slipped back into his mind, in spite of his determined effort to keep it out.

And that night, as he stretched himself out by the blazing fire at the temporary camp, a dozen miles or more south of the little settlement, he seemed to see amid the shadows of the circling woods the slim, straight figure, with every graceful curve outlined by the soaking skirt; the flushed face, with its firm, sweet lips and level gray eyes, which stared into his with so much cold unfriendliness.

The picture made him wince a little and move his wide shoulders uneasily, while, deep down within him, he felt a nagging, persistent bitterness at the thought of being so misjudged by a girl he could have liked more than any he had ever met.



## CHAPTER VIII.

## THE BIG TRIANGLE.

IT was shortly after two the next afternoon when Bob Bainbridge swung himself off the train at the Bangor Station, and, leaving his check at the express office, with instructions to have the heavy suit case sent out to "Pinecrest" that afternoon, walked briskly up Railroad Street toward Main.

A stranger never would have guessed that this immaculate, perfectly groomed young man had just come from the woods. His well-cut brown suit was without a wrinkle. The modish overcoat of a harmonizing shade looked as if it might have come from the tailor's that very morning, only Bainbridge would never have dreamed of patronizing a local tailor. The flat-soled, shapely tan shoes had just the right amount of polish, while gloves, shirt, scarf, and pin had all been carefully selected to blend into the color scheme. In most men the combination might have seemed foppish, but there was something about young Bainbridge's clean-cut, virile face and alert manner which acquitted him of any suspicion of being other than he was—a man and a thoroughbred.

Turning into Bangor's busiest thoroughfare, Bob strode on with that easy, swinging gait, shoulders thrown back and eyes sparkling with sheer joy of perfect physical well-being and a mind at rest from any immediate cares. Now and then he nodded to some passing acquaintance, and presently, as he came within sight of a large, square, granite building rearing its stately height above more modest neighbors, his pace slackened involuntarily, and his eyes traveled over the massive pile with a certain pleased appreciation.

There was something about it which aroused keen pleasure within him, and always had. There was no frittering carving to mar the majestic outlines, no frills and furbelows and frivolous decoration to spoil the stately façade. Its beauty lay entirely in perfect proportion and massive strength. Honest simplicity was its keynote, and it had al-

ways pleased Bob to think that his father had so well expressed in stone and marble the dominating characteristics of his own big, simple personality.

The glow died suddenly from the young man's face, and he sighed a little. He had been immensely proud of that father of his, who for three terms had been governor of his State, and afterward the guiding spirit of the great Triangle interests, whose control of the whole vast lumbering industry in Maine was but a part of their widely varying activities.

Though its founder had been dead more than a year, the "Big Triangle" still flourished. It had been Bainbridge, Tweedy & Crane in the old days, and it was that still, for the ex-governor's interests had descended *en bloc* to his only son. But sometimes, as he sat at his father's desk, or presided over one of the informal meetings of the firm, where matters of such vast importance were settled in an almost offhand manner, Bob was smitten with a sudden apprehensive doubt as to whether he was filling his father's place and carrying out his policies even with superficial success.

It had not been an easy place to fill. Besides being honest and upright and honorable to a degree, the governor had possessed a brain of extraordinary caliber, and a personality which was amazing in its farsightedness and accuracy of judgment. He had built up the most of the vast interests in which he was so deeply involved by means of an all-abiding faith in the future and a talent for generalship which few, even among capitalists, possess.

That, at least, was how Bob sized up things, and more than once he regretted that he had not plunged into business the instant the blow came, instead of striving to dull that poignant, haunting sense of loss by spending precious months in flying from one corner of the globe to another.

Happily of late he had begun to feel more and more confidence in himself. Things were growing clearer. Situations unfolded their intricacies with less mental effort on his part. Perhaps in



time he might come to have a little of that grasp on affairs which he felt should be his by right of inheritance.

Entering the wide portals of the Triangle Building, Bainbridge was whisked to the top floor, and presently, passing through the big general offices, made his way directly to the unobtrusive-looking door on which was stenciled the simple legend:

**JOHN TWEEDY,  
PRIVATE**

Entering unceremoniously, as was his habit, he found not only the stout, jovial owner of the office, but also his other partner, Elihu Crane, in earnest consultation. Both stopped talking abruptly, and turned to greet him with a pleasure somewhat tintured with surprise.

"Well, well, Bobby," chuckled Tweedy, "this is quite a surprise! Didn't expect you back so soon. Help yourself to a chair, and tell us all about it. What was the trouble, anyhow? That wire of Rohne's sounded as if the bottom had dropped out of everything."

Bainbridge dropped into a chair, and, pulling out a plain gold case, selected a cigarette, and lighted it leisurely.

"Exactly what you'd expect from a fellow like Rohne," he said decisively. "He made a mountain out of a molehill. With all due respect to you, Mr. Crane, he didn't strike me at all as the man for the place."

The third member of the Triangle—slight, slim, and wearing a Vandyke—raised his eyebrows a little.

"He's one of the most experienced rivermen we've got," he retorted, with some heat. "His record is A-one. I know from personal observation that he can hustle a drive along in double-quick time."

"I haven't a doubt of it," Bainbridge returned composedly. "Under ordinary conditions, he can't be beat, but put him up against something out of the way, and he falls down, as he did in this instance."

"Still," began Crane, "I don't——"

"Don't stop to argue now," inter-

rupted Tweedy impatiently. "Let's have the facts. What was the trouble, Bob? What did you find?"

"Simply this: Jas Whittemore's crew was camped just above Hancock, had the river blocked with a boom and a jammed drive, and their roughneck foreman not only declined to let us by, but to give any reason whatever for his action. Rohne told me that they'd been there a week, not doing a blamed thing but loaf and booze."

The stout man's deep-set blue eyes sparkled combatively. "Well," he queried, "what did you do?"

Bainbridge smiled faintly. "Persuasion failing, I was obliged to use force," he answered succinctly.

"Ha! Good! But just how?"

"I had to sail in and wallop this Gowdy to begin——"

"What!" gasped both men together. "Not Hank Gowdy?"

Bob nodded. "That was his name, I believe."

Tweedy lay back in his chair, and laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks. "Some day you'll give me apoplexy, Bobby. You talk as if thrashing this notorious roughneck was as easy as stepping down to Jake's for luncheon."

"Believe me, it wasn't easy," Bainbridge returned frankly. "It was one of the toughest scraps I ever got mixed up in, but it had to be done. After he was down and out, the rest was a cinch. I left the drive early this morning well below Beebe's Corners."

"Good boy!" chuckled Tweedy. "That's the way to handle 'em. Show 'em you're able to knock the packing out of 'em, and you won't have any more trouble." He paused an instant, his low forehead wrinkling thoughtfully. "Whittemore's man, eh? I s'pose his idea was to hold us up so's we'd pay his price for the tract we want."

"That's the only way I can figure it out," Bainbridge returned. "You're certain that seventy-five thousand is too much?"

"Of course it is!" snapped Tweedy emphatically. "I've gone over the whole blessed territory myself, and I know



what I'm talking about. Fifty is a fair price; anything more a simple gouge, and we won't pay it! I'm not even sure it's worth that," he went on, after a momentary pause. "Our lawyer's looking into his title, and has run into some things which look mighty involved. I shouldn't wonder if the time came when he'd be sorry he didn't take us up. By the way, Bobby, can you run on to New York to-night?"

"I guess so. About the N. H. & M. deal?"

"Yes. Fuller wants to talk over the financing, and, since you've looked after that from the start, you'd be the best one for him to see. I'll wire him you'll show up around noon to-morrow."

He pushed a button, scrawled off a telegram, and handed it to a boy, with orders to have it sent at once. Bainbridge rose leisurely from his desk.

"Guess I'll run along, then," he said. "Nothing special, I suppose?"

"No. Just stick to the plan we outlined together—that's all."

The young man nodded, and moved toward the door. With his hand on the knob, he paused suddenly and turned.

"By the way," he said quickly, "you haven't run across those papers relating to the Allagash Tract, have you?"

Tweedy frowned slightly, and Crane, who was staring out of the window, glanced swiftly over his shoulder.

"No," the stout man answered promptly; "no, I haven't. They don't cut any ice, though. We're safe enough without them."

"I suppose so," Bainbridge murmured; "but it seems odd that they haven't turned up in all these months. Well, by-by. See you Friday, anyhow."

"Sure!" Tweedy lit a fat, black cigar, and stuck it jauntily into the corner of his small mouth. "Better take my car, Bob. You'll make better time, and I won't get away from here for an hour, after all."

Bainbridge found the big touring car waiting at the curb, and ten minutes later he was whirled through the granite gateposts of Pinecrest and was driven up to the terrace of the rambling,

solid, stone structure which was famous far and near for its beauty and costliness.

Pausing a moment in the hall to greet his aunt, who kept house for him, he told her his plans, and then hastened on to his own suite, which had once been his father's. Giving brief instructions to his valet about packing, he sat down before the huge antique marquetry affair, part bookcase, part secretary, to look for his notes on the N. H. & M. matter.

As far back as Bob could remember, the massive piece of furniture had stood just where it was now. His father had always used it, and for that reason the son continued the practice, when he would have infinitely preferred a modern roller-top desk. While this was very beautiful, and no doubt extremely rare, it was not exactly convenient. Within were dozens upon dozens of small drawers, which all looked alike, and which were most confusing. One was constantly putting something away in one of them, and then having to look through a number before it was found.

This proved to be the case now. Bob was perfectly sure he had placed the notes in question in a certain drawer on the left-hand side, but a careful search failed to bring them to light. He looked through a number of others, and then the idea occurred to him that perhaps the single sheet of paper had slipped behind.

Removing the receptacle, he thrust his hand in, and felt the rustle of paper. He was about to withdraw it, when his fingers encountered a small, round surface like a thin button, on which he promptly pressed. There was a sharp click, but that was all. A moment later, however, glancing at the outside of the secretary, he discovered that his efforts had caused a narrow, shallow drawer to appear amid the ornate intricacy of the inlay.

"Well, what do you know about that!" he exclaimed interestedly. "I'll be hanged if it isn't a secret drawer—just like a story! Wonder if there's anything in it?"

As he bent swiftly over it, he was



disappointed to see that the compartment was empty, save for two very modern-looking keys, quite small, and strung on an ordinary steel key ring. There was also a label attached, and, as he read it, Bainbridge gave a low whistle.

"Jefferson Safe Deposit Company!" he muttered, "That's funny. I didn't know dad had a box in New York."

For a moment or two, he stood staring absently at the keys. Then he dropped them into a side pocket.

"I'll just run in there to-morrow, and see what it means," he said aloud. "It would be a good joke if those Allagash papers were stowed away there without even Tweedy knowing anything about it. The laugh would be on him decidedly. Isn't that bath ready yet, Kellog?"

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE SAFE-DEPOSIT BOX.

**S**HORTLY after eleven next morning, Bainbridge stepped off the train into the chaos of the temporary station that is still incongruously called the "Grand Central." Handing his bag to a porter, he followed the attendant out to the cab stand, took a taxi, and was driven directly to the Plaza.

Here, freshened by a bath, shave, and change of linen, he made an appointment by telephone to lunch at a downtown club at half past twelve with the senior partner of Fuller & Mellish.

During the meal, and afterward, in Fuller's private office, they discussed the financing of the new railroad in which the Big Triangle was so interested, and Bob placed the matter so clearly before the banker that the latter promised a definite answer the next morning, after he could hold a final consultation with his partner.

This meant remaining in New York for another day, but Bainbridge was not particularly sorry. Something about the great city had always appealed to him tremendously, and he made it a point to keep in touch with the life there by frequent brief visits during the season.

2B

Before leaving the building, he phoned Jack Van Sicklen, an old college mate, and made an appointment for dinner and the theater for that evening. Then he sought a taxi, and was driven to the Jefferson Safe Deposit Company, on Union Square.

The manager, a man of about sixty, with courtly, old-fashioned manners, listened in attentive silence to Bob's statement of the case, nodding his gray head now and then in acquiescence.

"Yes," he said, at length, after he had consulted a ledger, "the Honorable Mr. Bainbridge has a box here, the rent of which was paid for two years in advance. I very much regret to hear of his death, my dear sir. If you have the necessary papers, there will be no difficulty in transferring title to you."

Bainbridge drew from his pocket an envelope containing the various official documents which had been necessary in settling his father's estate, and handed it to the older man.

"I scarcely think it would be worth while for me to continue using the box," he said. "My business affairs are centered in Bangor, and it will be more convenient to use the vaults there. I came to-day for the purpose of examining the box and removing anything it may contain."

"As you like, sir."

For ten minutes there was silence in the office as the manager went over the documents with methodical care. Then he arose, led the way into the vaults, and stood by while Bob opened the box he indicated.

It was not a large one, and the contents consisted of eight or ten long, heavy, more or less bulky envelopes, sealed, and bearing various indorsements in the elder Bainbridge's well-known hand. Bob shuffled them over, noticing such cryptic titles as "Fish River Property," "Forbes-Kipper," "Penobscot Trolley Franchises," and the like. He smiled a little at the sight of one envelope labeled "Allagash Tract," and then, gathering them all together, turned to the manager.

"They seem to be merely records of



various transactions," he volunteered. "That accounts for the executors missing nothing of importance in settling up the estate. If you will have the necessary papers made out, I'll sign them and relinquish the box."

On the way uptown, Bob surveyed the bundle of papers rather curiously. It seemed decidedly odd that a man like his father should have maintained a safe-deposit box in New York unknown to his partners or any of his friends, and left no hint of such a thing among his effects. He must even have destroyed the receipt for that two years' rent, or else hidden it away as securely as he had hidden the keys.

It was odd—decidedly odd—and Bainbridge made up his mind to examine his find as soon as he reached the hotel. In the lobby, however, he ran into a couple of friends, and the remainder of the afternoon passed so swiftly that he had barely time to dress and get down to Rector's in time to meet Van Sicklen.

He had already reserved a special table by telephone, and he had scarcely entered the restaurant before the head waiter spied him and came hurrying up.

"Good evening, Mr. Bainbridge," he said deferentially. "It's a good while since we've had the pleasure of seeing you here."

"Almost a month, George," Bainbridge laughed, slipping out of his coat and handing it to the attendant. "Altogether too long a time to be away from New York, but I'm pretty well tied down at home. Has Mr. Van Sicklen come in yet?"

"Not yet, sir. I'll bring him over directly he arrives, sir."

He led the way to a choice table set for two, and drew out one of the chairs.

"Send Otto over here, won't you?" Bob requested. "I'm used to having him look after me."

The head waiter waved away the man to whom the table belonged, and summoned another from a distant part of the room. To him Bainbridge gave a careful, comprehensive order for the

dinner, and had just finished when Van Sicklen appeared.

There was the usual careless, abrupt greeting of good friends who never show quite how glad they are to see each other, the joshing give-and-take, the swift sally of question and answer, and then they settled down to the leisurely, luxurious meal, which lasted until an hour that brought them decidedly late to the orchestra of a nearby theater, where the latest musical comedy was still playing to jammed houses.

Supper followed the play, and it was long after midnight when Bob finally entered his room, switched on the soft, shaded lights, and dropped into a cushioned wicker chair with a sigh of pleasure.

## CHAPTER X.

### FEET OF CLAY.

THIS sort of thing never wearied him: The lights and music, the crowds and bustle, the sense of rush and whirl and pleasure-seeking, the gleam of jewels, the sparkle of bright eyes, the sound of gay laughter—all appealed strongly to Bainbridge.

He realized perfectly how a little probing would suffice to unearth tragedy and sordid misery beneath the glittering surface; but he did not choose to probe. Deliberately he took everything at its surface value, because of the mental relaxation it brought him, because in so doing he felt that he was keeping out of the deadly rut of provincialism which had been the fate of so many men he knew. Such an attitude would have been impossible in a native New Yorker, but Bainbridge's visits were so comparatively brief and far between, his life and surroundings in the Eastern State so very different, that he always returned to Broadway with a freshness and verve and keen capacity for enjoyment of that amazing thoroughfare and all it had to offer.

Presently he arose, whistling a bar or two from one of the catchy songs he had heard that night.

"Corking good evening," he mur-



mured, as he approached the dressing table. "I'd hate like the mischief, though, to go through that sort of thing every night in the week. Too much like eating nothing but candy. By Jove, I've forgotten all about those papers! Well, the morning is still young, and I may as well tackle 'em now."

He carried the package to a table, drew up a chair, lighted a cigarette, and slit the flap of the first bulky envelope.

A number of papers fell out upon the table, some large, some small; some were folded several times, the creases turned slightly yellow with age; others were flat, single, oblong sheets. There were letters in the well-known hand of John Tweedy and Crane; others were signed by men whom Bob had never known, but whose names were vaguely familiar. Their tone varied from the intimate "Dear Bob" to the more formal "Honorable Robert Bainbridge." All were written during the early period of his father's official residence in Augusta.

Puzzled, but much interested, Bob picked up the first letter at random, and read it carefully through. When he came to the end, his heavy, dark brows were drawn down in a frown; but, without a pause or comment of any sort, he took up another. Halfway through this one, he stopped abruptly and flung down the paper, his face flaming.

"It's a lie!" he burst out furiously. "How dared they write such things to dad? How dared they believe that he'd even think of such dirty——"

He broke off abruptly, and sat staring at the paper he had just cast aside, the color ebbing slowly from his face. Presently his hand stole forth, hesitated, the fingers trembling a little, and at last touched the sheet, and turned it over.

And there, staring up at him with horrible distinctness, was an indorsement in his father's familiar hand. Instead of being tossed into the fire, as it deserved, the infamous letter had been docketed and filed away in the private safe-deposit box of the former governor.

"I don't believe it!" Bob exclaimed again; but this time a subtle change was in his voice. "I *won't* believe it! It's impossible! There's been some awful mistake."

Like a flash, he bent over the heap, and snatched up another paper. Reading it swiftly and carefully, he flung it aside, and caught up a third. When he had finished that, his face was set and white, his eyes tortured. Not a word did he speak; he did not even pause. With dogged, despairing perseverance, he kept on at his task until the last scrap of writing fluttered from his fingers to the cluttered heap of documents, and the whole wretched, sordid story became clear.

It was the old, old story of a man— young, brainy, and eager to get on— being placed in power by a State machine, and then cajoled or forced by that machine into misusing his power for the selfish aggrandizement of the chosen few.

Bob read it in every line of those yellowing letters—between the lines even. At the beginning, he had chanced to open the envelope whose contents came first of all in point of date, and so was able to trace every phase of the unequal conflict. To be sure, only one side of the correspondence lay before him, but it was not difficult to reconstruct the other.

That first veiled, but unmistakable, proposal for the acquiring of vast tracts of State timberland was there, in the writing of John Tweedy, the machine boss. The governor had indignantly refused to lend himself to such a deal. Then pressure was applied; the screws turned a trifle. The official protested, but in less vehement terms. More arguments followed, subtle, powerful arguments which veiled a threat; and little by little the elder Bainbridge weakened. At last came capitulation, total, complete, humiliating, and he joined the forces of dishonest graft.

In spite of the bewildering chaos of his mind, Bob was conscious, first of all, of a deep, abiding pity for the man who had struggled so desperately against such overwhelming odds. He



had tried to be straight. If only those others had let him alone, he would have made his own way, carved out his own path without the aid of bosses or corrupt machines. It was ambition rather than covetousness which had been the cause of his downfall.

But swiftly that thought was swept away by the shock, the bitter, unavailing grief, of the awakening. For a space, the young man sat rigid, with tense, white face, and tortured eyes, staring into nothingness. Then suddenly he stood up and crossed slowly to one of the windows.

His father! He pressed his hot face against the glass. Across the wide expanse, lit by rows of opalescent globes, loomed tier upon tier of windows, some dark, others still agleam with lights. Below him taxis whirled and scurried and chugged, circling in toward the entrance or darting away from the great hostelry. A woman's laugh, clear, mirthful, irrepressible, floated through the other open window, and stabbed him like a knife.

His father! How could there be laughter anywhere when he had just discovered that the idol he had worshiped so long and fervently had feet of clay?

He thought of the times innumerable when he had wondered with hopeless discouragement whether he would ever reach the plane on which that idol stood. He thought of the times when temptations had assailed him, and he had fought them back, and conquered, because of that ideal he had set before him, that hope that some day—long hence, perhaps—he might grow to be "just like his father."

A laugh burst from his lips—bitter, mirthless, the eloquent expression of a soul in agony. Turning from the window, he walked slowly back to the table and sat down.

His face set in grim, determined lines, he took up another envelope, and opened it. When he had examined the contents, he laid them aside without comment, and tackled the next. For more than an hour he sat there, reading steadily, and not a sound escaped

his lips, save now and then a quick, stifled gasp as he winced under the shock of some new and unexpected light on the swift degeneration of the character he had revered.

The fall of the *Honorable* Robert Bainbridge had been horribly swift, dreadful in its ease and sureness. From being the unwilling tool of others worse than he, he himself had developed rapidly to the position of leader of the gang. From carrying out, more or less under compulsion, the plans of Tweedy, Crane, and other of their ilk, his brain became the source of plots and plans which shaved the margin of the law only because of his cleverness and the power he exercised so wrongly.

Once, when some particularly odious proceeding was brought to light with all its underhandedness and wealth of sordid detail, the young man's face quivered, and he put one hand involuntarily before his eyes.

"Why did I ever have to know?" he groaned. "Why did he ever keep these things, instead of burning them?"

There was but one possible answer to the question. Bad as was the light the papers threw upon the governor's character, it showed up those of his associates to an even worse degree, and gave to their possessor a tremendous power, which could be used, if necessary, to force them to do his bidding. The governor had doubtless realized this. What he did not foresee—as few men ever do—was the possibility of death mowing him down in his very prime, without warning, without a chance even to whisper to his associates the whereabouts of the ghastly legacy he was leaving his only son.

With grim determination born only of a definite purpose, Bob waded wearily and painfully through every envelope but one. It was indorsed "Forbes-Kipper," and as he tore it open he gave a long sigh of relief at the thought that the torturing task was almost finished.

He might have left this last collection unread, only for his determination to go on to the end and have done with it. Surely, he thought, he had dis-



covered the worst. There could be nothing added to what he had already found. He had no conception of what was yet in store for him as he shook the papers out on the table and began to read.

Suddenly he stopped abruptly, his eyes wide and full of swiftly gathering horror. He lifted one hand dazedly to his forehead, and dropped it again, tightly clenched, to the table. He forced himself by sheer will power to read on, a line, a paragraph. He turned the page, his mouth twitching, and his whole face quivering like raw flesh under a red-hot iron.

Then his self-control snapped like a breaking thread. The paper fluttered from his fingers. A low, stifled cry of utter despair burst from his lips. His head fell forward among the scattered papers, and his body was shaken by sobs.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE BOLT.

JOHN TWEEDY leaned back comfortably in his chair, and bit off the end of a cigar with a single snap of his sharp, white teeth.

"Well, the kid ought to be here soon," he remarked, feeling in his pocket for a match. "The train's in."

Crane gave a slight start, and glanced swiftly up. "Hum! Yes, I suppose he will," he murmured absently.

The stout man cocked an inquiring eye at his partner, while he lit the cigar and tossed the match into the wastebasket.

"What's ailing you, Ellie?" he asked, with some sharpness. "That's twice this morning you've been woolgathering."

Crane moved his shoulders uneasily, and stroked the brown beard with long, slim, rather nervous fingers. "I can't help thinking about those papers, John," he returned slowly.

"Huh!" grunted Tweedy contemptuously. "Ain't you got anything better to do than that? If you got to fret, why don't you pick on something that your fretting would do some good?

Haven't I told you time and time again that they ain't in existence?"

"I know you have," Crane retorted pettishly; "but that don't prove it that I can see."

"Pough!" sniffed the fat man, with an emphatic wave of one plump hand. "I tell you, I searched every nook and corner the very day he died. I went through his desk here, and that clumsy thing he had out at his place. I turned over every scrap of paper in the vaults downstairs and at the Penobscot Trust, without finding a trace of 'em. What more proof do you want? He destroyed the lot before he died—if he ever had 'em to destroy—take my word for it."

Crane did not look altogether convinced. "They might have been hidden away where even you couldn't find them," he said, in a dispirited tone.

"Likely, ain't it?" retorted Tweedy scornfully, "after all this time's gone by? It's my belief, Ellie, that those papers never existed. I'd be willing to put up odds that Bob was simply throwing a big bluff into us. We never got a peep at 'em, you know."

"I wish I could be sure of that," Crane sighed. "He had them once, you know, and he might have kept them as well as not. When I think of what I've put on paper, especially after he was one of us, and the thought of danger never occurred to me, I always get cold feet. What if the kid should run across them somewhere, now that he's got this fool notion in his head about some of the Allagash papers being missing?"

"You may well call it a fool notion!" snapped Tweedy, in sudden anger. "And who started him going, I'd like to know? If you hadn't been such an all-fired idiot——"

He stopped abruptly as the latch clicked, and, swiftly as young Bainbridge entered the room, the older man was quicker in forcing an urbane smile to his plump face.

"Well, well!" he chuckled. "Back again, eh, Bobby? I was just saying to Ellie that you ought to——"

He paused, his bright blue eyes fixed



intently on the youngster's face, and slowly the smile faded from his lips. Bob stood quietly against the closed door, gazing at the stout man from under brows which bridged his well-shaped nose in a single heavy line. He looked tired and worn, almost haggard, but it was not that which startled Tweedy. There was a deep, underlying expression in the youngster's eyes and about his sensitive mouth—the expression of one who has drained the cup of life to the last bitter dregs, of one whose every illusion has been suddenly destroyed by a tremendous mental shock. His mouth was hard and cynical and scornful; his jaw indomitable; his eyes cold and determined, yet softened oddly by an undercurrent of infinite sorrow.

"Why, what's the matter, Bobby?" exclaimed Tweedy solicitously. "You look as if you'd been having a devil of a time."

"I have," returned Bainbridge quietly.

"Didn't Fuller come over?"

Yes."

"Then what the mischief is the trouble?" Tweedy persisted, with some impatience.

As the young man came slowly forward toward the desk, Crane gave a gasp, and then began to tremble. Tweedy, on the contrary, sat quite undisturbed. There was no tremor in the plump hand which rested on the desk slide, black cigar between the pudgy fingers. The expression in his blue eyes, as he stared up at the towering figure of his young partner, was one of anxious solicitude for the latter's well-being—nothing more.

Though there was a chair close beside him, Bainbridge did not take it. He stood with elbows resting on the desk top, staring scornfully down at Tweedy.

"I've found out the way the affairs of the Big Triangle are conducted, that's all," he said quietly, scornfully.

The stout man stared. "Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Is that all? Why, you've been doing nothing else for months, Bobby."

A flare of passion leaped into the young man's eyes, and his fists clenched. "Months!" he retorted bitterly. "I only wish I had, instead of being tricked and fooled and blinded at every turn." He brought one muscular fist down on the desk with a crash that made Crane wince. "But now I *know*! Now I'm wise to every dirty, rotten, corrupt deal which has gone through since the company was formed—every cursed one, I tell you! And there's going to be something doing!"

Still Tweedy's face did not change perceptibly. With perfect composure, he thrust the cigar between his teeth and puffed on it luxuriously.

"Anything you may suggest will be considered with the greatest care, my dear boy," he returned coolly.

"I think it will," Bainbridge retorted significantly. "Not only considered, but acted upon promptly."

He hesitated an instant, flashing a contemptuous glance at the agitated Crane, and then his eyes swept back to the imperturbable features of the stout man.

"This is what's got to be done, and done at once," he said harshly. He drew a folded sheet of paper from his pocket, and held it between his fingers. "Restoration has got to be made to every individual and every firm this company has robbed since its inception."

"Robbed!" put in Tweedy, with a very plausible show of indignation. "Oh, come now, Bob, that's going too far! Everything we've ever done has been strictly within the law."

Bainbridge's eyes blazed ominously. "Yes," he sneered, "the law as you've twisted it and turned it to suit your rotten purposes! The law that you've shaved so close that if you hadn't had money and political power you'd have landed in the penitentiary long ago. But it's robbery just the same, and you've got to make good. There's the list of those from whom you've stolen as surely as if you'd picked their pockets or dynamited their safes."

He twitched the paper open, and flung it down before Tweedy's eyes.



## CHAPTER XII.

## TO RIGHT A WRONG.

FOR a space there was silence as the stout man's eyes raced swiftly down the closely written sheet. Crane, his face white and his lips trembling, peered over his partner's shoulder in a nervous, half-frightened manner; but, oddly enough, he was the one to break the silence.

"But this is impossible!" he shrilled, his covetous nature stung to the very quick by the appalling total at the foot of the sheet. "This would mean ruin!"

"Oh, no, it wouldn't," Bainbridge returned coldly. "You forget the square miles of State land you grabbed, at a cost of about twenty-five cents an acre. I only wish there was some way of giving that back, but I can't figure it out. You forget, too, the years you've had possession of these other lands and industries, and all the other things, and the money you've pulled from them. You won't be ruined, by a long shot."

Crane's face was florid, and he tugged frantically at his beard. "But I tell you——"

"That's enough, Ellie!" interposed Tweedy, putting a firm hand on his partner's arm. "You're excited. Nothing ever came of getting flustered."

He turned to Bainbridge, his manner quite cool and composed. He no longer puffed at his cigar, however. It was still clutched between his pudgy fingers, but it had gone out.

"Now, look-a here, Bob," he said composedly, "let's talk this over quietly and sensibly. I repeat what I said a moment ago: All of our dealings have been within the law. We've done nothing more than a score of other men have put over in a smaller way. You can see for yourself that the handing out of these big sums of money and turning back property which has been ours for years would not only cripple the firm badly, but would give people all sorts of impressions as to the manner in which we had acquired it."

"I can't see how they'd suggest more than they already do," Bob retorted coldly. "They're not all blind fools, as

I've been. That line of talk doesn't impress me a particle."

For the first time, Tweedy began to show symptoms of impatience.

"It doesn't, eh?" he snapped. "Well, may I ask what you propose to do if we absolutely decline to carry out these philanthropic proposals of yours? There's been a lot of hot air around here, but I've yet to see anything like proof of the astonishing statements you've been making."

Bainbridge's eyes gleamed. "Don't worry yourself about that. I have proofs enough. You were probably not aware that my father had a box in the Jefferson Safe Deposit Company, of New York."

Crane gave a start, and even Tweedy looked disturbed for a moment, though he quickly recovered his composure.

"Well, what of that?" the big man questioned easily.

"Day before yesterday I opened it and took out the papers it contained." His voice was hard as flint; his eyes steely. "Every scrap of writing received by my father regarding the deals I've mentioned was preserved there. I rather think the attorney-general could work up some sort of a case out of them."

"But you wouldn't dare!" gasped Tweedy. "It would ruin your father's reputation! Can't you see that, Bob? Whatever the firm has done, we were all in it equally. You can't throw mud on your father—a man who did everything for you, and who can't defend himself now."

A quiver of pain flickered over the young man's face, but in an instant his expression was hard and indomitable as ever.

"I mean to see a wrong righted, regardless of any other consideration," he retorted doggedly. "It wouldn't be easy for me to make public this scandal, but I'd do it as a last resort. I've shown you the alternative. You have it in your power to settle the matter without going to extremes."

Tweedy's plump face hardened; his eyes grew steely. The transformation was swift as lightning, and so subtle



that, though scarcely a line of face or pose changed, one had a sudden impression that the ungainly rolls of fat which incased him were but a covering to hide an inner creature as hard as iron and as immovable.

"So," he murmured, "that's your attitude, is it? You'd blacken your own father's character? You'd hold up to public shame the name of a man who's in his grave?"

He paused a second or two, his small, deep-set eyes fixed intently on Bainbridge's face.

"Do you remember the acquisition of the Brody tract, up in Aroostook?" he asked suddenly.

Bainbridge frowned in a puzzled way. "I remember drawing up the papers just after I came back from Europe," he said shortly. "There was a flaw in the title, I believe."

"No, there wasn't."

"You certainly told me there was something wrong," Bob said positively. "I remember paying the lawyer who looked it up, and giving the witnesses money for the trouble they had been put to in testifying."

"You're mistaken, my dear boy." Tweedy's voice was soft and purring. "I had nothing whatever to do with the case. I purposely left everything in your hands. There was no flaw in their title, except what you deliberately placed there. You *bribed* the witnesses to testify falsely. You——"

"You damnable liar!" roared Bainbridge furiously. "How dare you say such a thing? You know perfectly well that I knew nothing whatever of the matter except what you told me. I acted altogether under your instructions. I believed what you said about——"

"But I tell you I gave you no advice," Tweedy countered blandly. "I knew nothing of the matter, which was in your province. The papers were all drawn up by you, and signed by you alone. I even took the liberty of signing letters to these false witnesses with your own rubber stamp. You see? It would grieve me very much, my dear Robert, to have this made public. I should really hate to see you making

brooms or sewing shoes down at Thomaston."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### DEFIANCE.

FOR a full minute Bainbridge stood glaring at the stout man. In a flash, he had realized the trap that had been laid for him and into which he had walked so unsuspectingly. He had a wild desire to seize the bull neck of the scoundrel sitting there so quietly and choke the breath out of his ponderous body. It was the primeval outcry of brute force against unscrupulous cunning, and for a second the struggle to retain his self-control was a hard one. His muscular hands clenched and unclenched themselves. His eyes gleamed and his face was flooded an angry red. Slowly this faded. He swallowed hard once or twice, and gradually the tenseness of his muscles relaxed.

"You can do your damndest!" he snapped, in hard, brittle tones. "Perjure yourself if you will. Tell what dirty lies you please. You can't stop me that way. I'll put up the biggest fight I know how, but if I land in prison I won't go there alone."

Tweedy stared at him incredulously, a dull red mottling his fat face. "Do you realize what you're saying?" he rasped, a little of his rage and disappointment showing in his voice. "Are you crazy as a June bug?"

Bainbridge shook his head, and his lips crooked into a smile which sent the shivers down Crane's spine.

"No," he said slowly, his eyes narrowing. "Not crazy any more, Tweedy. Not any crazier than Rupert Forbes, who's been tucked away in some accommodating private asylum for three years—*because—he—knew—too—much.*"

The shot went home. Crane turned livid, and seemed to shrink in his chair. The color ebbed swiftly from Tweedy's face, leaving it a dull, unhealthy gray. There was a brittle crackling as the cigar was crushed into a shapeless mass by the spasmodic clutching of the pudgy fingers and fell unheeded to the floor.



"You threatened me with State's prison, Tweedy," Bainbridge went on swiftly, his eyes gleaming with triumph, "but how about yourself? You couldn't browbeat this Forbes into selling out his interest in the trolley line you wanted to control, and so you forged his name to the stock transfers. You forged it, Tweedy—you alone. And then the whole lot of you got scared at what you'd done, and had this poor fellow, who is as sane as you or I, put away in some private asylum on the bribed testimony of a crooked doctor. Think of it! Putting a sane man among a lot of lunatics; stealing three years out of his life! And all to hide your own dirty, contemptible crime. You've always kept on the right side of the law, have you? I hate to think what chance you'll have when this comes out, Tweedy. Looks to me as if you'd have a far better opportunity of seeing Thomaston Prison from the inside than I."

The stout man sat glaring at Bainbridge in impotent fury.

"You can't prove anything," he snapped, at length. "The doctor died six months ago."

"I don't need his testimony," Bob retorted. "I've got something better. Besides, Forbes is still very much alive."

"You don't know where he is," rasped Tweedy, the color coming slowly back into his face.

"I can find out," Bainbridge returned coolly. "Well, how about it? Going to be sensible, and avoid all this scandal by doing what I want? You'd better. It's much the safest way, and pleasantest, too."

Tweedy's face suddenly took on an expression of dogged, inflexible determination, and he sprang to his feet with a vehemence which sent the desk chair crashing to the floor.

"No!" he roared furiously. "You can go to the devil with your wants! No man has ever forced me yet by threats, and no man ever will. Do your worst! Take your story to the attorney-general. Give it to the newspapers if you want to. Blacken your own fa-

ther's name if you will. Find this Forbes if you can. I'll fight you to the last ditch, you cub, and I guess it won't be me who'll go under!"

With a swift tightening of the jaw, but without a single spoken word, Bainbridge bent over, and, picking up the sheet of paper he had handed his partner, turned on his heel, and left the room.

For a second after he had disappeared there was tense silence in the office. Tweedy stood immovable, his ponderous legs spread wide apart; his ponderous, powerful face still hard and inflexible as iron, the glinting, steely eyes glaring at the closed door as if he had the power of seeing through the thick mahogany and was following the progress of his enemy.

"Why didn't you temporize?" almost wailed Crane. "Why did you send him off like that, John? He'll ruin you—ruin us all. Better to give up something and do what he wants than—"

"Bah, you spineless jellyfish!" rasped Tweedy, glaring at the smaller man. "Haven't you got any gumption at all? Do you s'pose I'm going to let a whelp like that lord it over me and bleed me of a cool million or more?"

"But it may be worse than that!" protested Crane. "What if he takes those papers to Augusta?"

"I'll have 'em sidetracked before they ever get to Thompson," retorted the big man composedly. "We've done it before; we can do it again."

He bent over, jerked his chair into an upright position, and sat down again.

"But the newspapers——"

"We can snap our fingers at everything they print," retorted Tweedy swiftly. "Don't you see, we can throw the blame for everything on Bob? He's dead, and can't squeal. The only thing that worries me is Forbes. If the cub should manage to get him out there'd be a row. Luckily he don't know where the fellow's confined."

"But he'll find out," whimpered Crane distractedly. "It won't take him long, either."

"Brace up, for Pete's sake, Ellie!" snapped the fat man tartly. "We can



take him out and put him where he won't be found, can't we? That's the only thing to do, and it's got to be done quick. The cub's got to be followed from now on. Mebbe there'll be a chance of getting those papers away from him, too. There's a whole pile of chances if we look sharp."

He pressed one fat thumb against an ivory button, and held it there until a boy came running.

"Send Cawley in here right away, boy!" he snapped. "Hustle, now!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

### GETTING INTO ACTION.

**W**ITHOUT turning to right or left, Bainbridge walked swiftly through the office, took the elevator down, and hastened at once to the street, where his car was waiting.

"Crank her up, Dick," he said briefly to the chauffeur. "I'm going to drive."

The man leaped to obey, started the powerful engine pulsating, and had barely time to spring to the footboard before Bob threw in the clutch and swept away from the curb, headed south.

He had hoped and believed that Tweedy would give in to his demands, but the boss' declaration of war, while unexpected, in nowise lessened his dogged determination to win out. During the tedious trip from New York, he had carefully planned for every possible contingency, so there was no time lost now in deciding what move to make.

Rupert Forbes had been a resident of Waldo County, and, as such, had been declared insane by the regular commissioners of lunacy sitting at Belfast, the county seat, thirty odd miles down the river. The matter had been entirely regular. A supposedly reputable physician, whose specialty was mental disorders, had sworn the man was unbalanced. The commissioners might well have been excused from entertaining the slightest suspicion as to the crookedness of the whole proceeding. Forbes was a man with certain

decided eccentricities, and with an ungoverned temper, and it was more than likely that under stress of his rage and fury at the position in which he found himself, he might have shown seeming symptoms of madness which would deceive the ordinary layman.

The thing to do now was to go before these commissioners, prove to them the nature of the mistake they had involuntarily made, and bring about Forbes' appearance before them for a new and honest examination into his sanity.

Bainbridge felt that he had no time to lose. Just what steps Tweedy would take to thwart him he did not know, but it was certain that his former partner would act swiftly and to the point.

Consequently he wasted not a moment in pushing the car through Main Street at the highest speed he dared. They whirled away from the business section into the suburbs; past the great ice houses and lumber yards which lined the river; through a brief stretch of country toward Hampden, where, on the outskirts, were more lumber yards and busy, humming sawmills, with their heaps of logs and new planks and piles of sawdust perfuming the air with the clean, aromatic scent of spruce and pine and hemlock. In a trice the village, too, was left behind, and they sped out along the curving main road to Winterport, Searsport, and Belfast.

In the early part of the ride, Bainbridge glanced anxiously back now and then to see whether or not he was being followed; but, having left Winterport behind without noting anything suspicious, he decided that he had obtained such a lead that not even Tweedy's satellites could catch up with him.

It was near two when he pulled into Belfast, having made the run in something under an hour and a quarter, and drove directly to the courthouse. Here, with some little trouble, he found that the commissioners had held a sitting that morning and would not meet again for two or three days, at least.

Undaunted, Bainbridge started on a still hunt for the chairman, one Colonel Edwards, and had the good fortune



to find him in the very building. The commissioner was more than courteous. When he discovered the reason for Bob's errand, he took him into an empty committee room, and there listened with absorbed interest and swiftly growing indignation to the astonishing story.

"Outrageous!" he exclaimed, at last, when he had carefully examined all the papers. "I'm afraid, Mr. Bainbridge, there is no question that a disgraceful miscarriage of justice has occurred. I can assure you that there will be no difficulty whatever in securing the release of Mr. Forbes for reexamination by the board."

"But can that order for release be procured to-day?" Bob asked anxiously. "I understand that you don't meet again until Monday, and I'm afraid if we delay that long it will give Tweedy and his crowd time to put in their oar. Forbes is in a private asylum, and I suppose it would be possible for them to remove him, wouldn't it?"

"Hum! Yes, I'm afraid it would. He was committed to the Oak Island Sanitarium at the solicitation of Tweedy, who claimed to be a business associate and close friend; and it would be quite possible for the latter to transfer him to some other place. I thought you said, though, that you gave them the impression you didn't know where he was confined?"

"So I did," Bainbridge returned. "But they must know it wouldn't be much of a trick for me to find out."

Edwards nodded. "True," he agreed. "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. It won't be quite regular, but the situation is decidedly out of the ordinary. I'll hunt up the other members of the board this afternoon and have the necessary papers issued. They'll be put in the hands of a regular officer, who will be ready to accompany you the first thing in the morning."

"That's very good of you, colonel," Bob said gratefully. He hesitated an instant, his face thoughtful and a little worried. "I hate to impose on you, but wouldn't it be possible for us to put this through to-night? The sanitarium on Oak Island is out in the

Reach. If the officer was ready by six o'clock we could make the run in my motor boat in little more than two hours. Of course, I'd see that the man was well paid for working out of hours."

"But do you think it at all likely that they would make a move before to-morrow?" the commissioner asked incredulously.

"I know Tweedy," Bob retorted grimly. "He's not one to let any grass grow under his feet, especially at a time like this. I'd feel much safer if we didn't waste a single possible moment."

Edwards frowned; then his eyes snapped. "I'll do it!" he declared emphatically. "You bring your boat in at the steamboat wharf at six to-night, and I'll have an officer with the papers there waiting for you. How's that?"

"Corking!" Bob ejaculated, gripping the other's hand. "That makes everything all right, and I'm a thousand times obliged. I'll beat it back right away, and there'll be plenty of time to come down by water before six."

Hurrying out of the courthouse, he glanced searchingly to right and left for any signs of Tweedy's emissaries. He could make out no one who seemed suspicious among the men passing back and forth or lounging against the building, while the few motor cars in sight were unfamiliar.

He stepped to the side of his own machine, and was about to leap in when a sudden thought made him stop abruptly. The next instant he had located a public telephone across the way, and was headed toward it.

The phone was a party wire, but, being unoccupied, Bainbridge had no difficulty in getting the Bangor Boat Club, whose commodious house and float was situated on the river above the city. To the steward he gave orders to have his power boat, the *Witch*, filled up with gas and water, furnished with an ample basket of lunch, and generally equipped for a run of a hundred miles. That off his mind, he hastened out and leaped into the car.

"Reckon that'll fix things all right,"



he thought, as the machine glided down the street. "They can't possibly guess I'd start out to-night. Looks as if things would go smoothly enough, after all."

He might not have been quite so confident had he remained in town a little longer. Scarcely five minutes after he had disappeared, a short, slim, wiry-looking man of forty odd emerged from a shop some doors away from the one at which Bainbridge had telephoned, but whose instrument happened to be on the same line. There was an expression of quiet satisfaction on the fellow's face as he hastened down the street and around the corner. Within three minutes he was seated in a powerful gray car which had been waiting on a side street, and was speeding through town to cross the bridge and take the road to Bangor.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE GIRL IN THE CAR.

SCARCELY two miles out of Belfast, Bainbridge was annoyed by having a blow-out. A hasty investigation disclosed a long, deep cut in one of the rear shoes, which had so weakened the rubber that it was a wonder it had lasted half a mile.

"Must have run over a broken bottle," he explained, as the chauffeur made haste to jack up the car. "Hanged if I remember seeing any glass along the road."

There was no time to speculate as to the cause, however. Both men fell to, and, by dint of tall hustling, had the spare shoe adjusted and blown up in less than twenty minutes.

As they sped on toward Searsport, Bainbridge driving, Bob fancied once or twice that he heard the humming of a car behind them. He could not be sure, however, and, anyway, he was driving his own machine so fast that the other did not get close enough even to be seen.

He swept through the sleepy, elongated village with hardly a slackening of speed, and whirled on toward Stockton. For a mile or more all went well.

Then a sudden, startling explosion made him come to a stop with brakes grinding, and leap out after the chauffeur, his face furious.

The right-hand rear shoe was absolutely flat, a gaping, jagged hole five inches long showing close by the rim.

"Blazes!" rasped Bainbridge. "That shoe was new last week. I'll be hanged if I——"

He broke off abruptly, and, dropping down, examined the tire closely, jerking off his glove and passing his fingers over the gash. In a second he had realized the truth. No glass had done this damage. The shoe had been cut with a sharp knife; not entirely through, of course, but just near enough to keep it together for a few miles. No doubt the other tire had been treated in the same way, only Bob had been in too much of a hurry to discover it.

"Did you leave the car while I was in the courthouse?" he asked tersely, as he straightened up again.

"No, sir," returned the chauffeur promptly. "Er—that is, I only stepped into a store half a minute for some cigarettes."

"That was time enough," Bainbridge said grimly. "It didn't take that long for them to do the damage. It wasn't your fault. I was a fool not to warn you——"

He paused, his eyes narrowing. A big, gray car had leaped into sight around a bend, and was thundering toward them. It came on without the least slackening of its great speed, siren shrieking, and a wide, fan-shaped dust cloud dragging in its wake. It was past in a moment, but not before Bob recognized it as one of John Tweedy's cars, and realized in a flash that the enemy had scored a point.

For an instant he stood rigid, staring along the road, eyes flashing, and jaws set. Then he whirled back to the chauffeur.

"We've got to get a shoe somewhere, Dick, and get it quick," he snapped. "You chase back to Searsport, and try for one there. If you can't get it, phone the garage in Belfast, and tell them to hike the shoe to me by the fastest car



they've got. If I can swipe one from a passing machine I'll do it, but don't count on that. Hustle all you can. Here's some money."

The chauffeur yanked off his coat, snatched the money, and, without a word, started down the road at a run.

Bainbridge watched him disappear around the bend, and then, having jacked up the car and removed the useless shoe, he began to walk restlessly back and forth along the roadside. How long he kept up this monotonous tramping he did not know. It could not have been more than twenty minutes, but it seemed infinitely longer before he heard the sounds of a machine approaching, and turned eagerly, with hand uplifted to stop it.

It was a smallish touring car, driven by a woman, but it had begun to slow down, and was almost upon him before he recognized, with a gasp of surprise, the attractive features and level gray eyes of Edith Stafford.

"How do you do?" he stammered, flushing a little. "I beg your pardon for having stopped you. I'm in a desperate hurry to reach Bangor, and was in hopes I might borrow a shoe from you. But I see they wouldn't fit."

Her eyes flashed to one of the rear wheels, and back to his face. "No, it wouldn't," she agreed briefly.

He hesitated an instant, wondering whether she meant to give him a lift, but it became swiftly apparent that she had no such intention. In another second she would be out of reach, so he summoned his resolution, and did what was more than repugnant to him.

"Would it—be possible for you to give me a lift as far as the boat club?" he asked, in a low tone. "I shouldn't trouble you, but it's a matter of—vital importance for me to be there before five."

His face was purposely turned away from her, but he could almost feel the look of surprised displeasure leap into her eyes. The pause which followed seemed interminable.

"I don't know that it will be any trouble," she said coldly, at length. "Will you get in?"

With a word of thanks, Bainbridge tore a sheet from his notebook, hastily scrawled a few lines of explanation for the chauffeur, which he pinned to one of the seats of his own car, and then stepped in beside her.

The ride was a strange one. At first Bainbridge ventured two or three commonplace remarks, but he met with so little encouragement that he presently relapsed into silence. Already he was conscious of a strong regret that he had asked this favor of her. Her coolness hurt him desperately, for now he could guess the reason for it. She looked upon him as one of the Big Triangle, not only in name, but as an equal participant with Tweedy and Crane in graft and corrupt practices. It was no wonder she disliked him, but understanding that did not make it easier for Bob to bear.

At length, by a strenuous mental effort, he managed to tear his thoughts from her, and returned to a serious consideration of his predicament, quite oblivious of the fact that Miss Stafford herself, under her coldly indifferent exterior, was very far from being as detached and uninterested as she seemed.

She had not set eyes on Bob Bainbridge since that humiliating encounter in the woods, and she had been aware from the first moment of their meeting this afternoon of a strange, almost startling, transformation in the man's face and manner.

In just what it consisted she could not tell, but it aroused her interest more than she admitted even to herself; and now that he seemed to have fallen into a sort of abstraction she ventured occasionally to steal a curious glance at him out of the corner of her eye.

His face seemed to have become oddly older and infinitely more serious. His jaw was square and determined. There was a bitter, cynical curve to his lips, and a somber sadness in his eyes, where before had been only light-hearted, careless gayety. He looked like a man who had received a great shock of some sort, and Miss Stafford was conscious of a swift, impulsive sympathy. Surely, she thought, this was



not the face of one who could be guilty of the things she had been told about him and until now had firmly believed. She wondered if there could possibly have been a mistake. Then she realized how impossible that was, and her lips straightened firmly.

Doubtless he was worrying over business troubles. Perhaps some of his underhand schemes had fallen through. She told herself that she was glad, thankful, and for a little while she was quite pleased with the notion. But now and then during that odd, silent ride she was aware again of that queer, stirring sympathy which seemed to make itself felt in spite of her determination to keep it down.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### DISASTER.

THEY had passed through Hampden, and were just ducking under the railroad on the outskirts of Bangor when Bainbridge straightened up with a slight start.

"I can't tell you how much obliged I am, Miss Stafford," he said impulsively, turning to her for almost the first time. "If you'll drop me at the Bangor House as we pass, it will serve my purpose nicely."

"I thought you wanted to go to the boat club?" she said abruptly, guiding the car across the trolley tracks.

"I do, but that will be taking you out of your way. I can get hold of a car or something to take me the rest of the way."

She was a little annoyed at herself for being so impulsive, but had no intention of backing down.

"It won't delay me more than a few minutes," she returned. "I can just as well go round by the asylum into Mount Hope Avenue."

"Then I'll impose on your kindness a little farther," he returned, with one of his old-time smiles. "Every minute is valuable to me now."

It was after five, and as they sped up Main Street the sidewalks were filled with home-going throngs. Perhaps at no other hour could be seen so well

the curious medley of people which, in spite of its size and up-to-date progressiveness, gave Bangor the air of a frontier town.

Clerks, stenographers, and conventional business men rubbed elbows with stalwart, tanned giants from the big woods, who strode along noiselessly in moccasins, or clumped over the pavements in rough, heavy boots. Sailors, fresh ashore from some newly arrived coaster, straddled about in twos and threes, some of them decidedly under the influence of liquor, while here and there one of the Old Town Indians padded his silent, flat-footed way past groups of giggling stenographers.

It was all too familiar for Bainbridge to pay any special attention to it. Besides, he was occupied in searching for signs of the men he knew were trying so hard to thwart him.

As they passed the Triangle Building, he noticed that Tweedy's car was not waiting in its accustomed place; nor was it in front of "Jake's," where the stout man so often stopped for a social drink on his way home. It looked very much as if more important business was taking his attention, and Bob could guess accurately what that business was.

With a light, easy, accustomed sureness which Bainbridge admired even in his abstraction, the girl guided the car through the crush of traffic in Market Square, swerved to the right, and slid across Kenduskeag Bridge. On out State Street they went, through the burned district, where even now were visible on every side signs of the disastrous fire of two years ago; past rows of detached frame dwellings, which grew farther and farther apart, and finally curving toward the river again, to run for a distance parallel to the railroad track before the car came to a stop at Hogan Road.

"Thank you a thousand times," Bob said, as he leaped out. "Some day, perhaps, I can tell you how much you've done for me."

"It's been no trouble," the girl answered coolly, annoyed at the difficulty she had in keeping to that indifferent,



impersonal manner. "I'm glad to have helped you out. Good-by."

Bob watched the car swing round and circle northward. Then, with a swift frown, he hastily crossed the tracks, and, almost at a run, struck into the crosscut leading to the boathouse. He was much later than he had thought he would be, and there was not a minute to be lost.

Rounding the wide veranda which overhung the water, he gave a quick exclamation of relief at the sight of his power boat moored beside the float. An instant later the steward came out of the house, smiling.

"Everything's all ready, sir," he said quickly. "Joe's looked after the gas and water, and the lunch is in the cabin. The machinist got the engine working at last, so——"

"What machinist?" snapped Bainbridge swiftly. "What the mischief are you talking about, Brown?"

The steward's jaw dropped. "Why, the man from Apgar's. He said he had orders from you to put the engine in shape. He and his helper haven't been gone ten minutes, sir."

For a second Bainbridge stared, his face paling. "And you let him monkey around my boat?" he gasped, at length.

"Yes, sir," stammered the other. "I thought it was all right, sir. He was here half an hour, and he said——"

"Blazes!" roared Bainbridge, his face furious. "I never gave any such orders. The engine was all right. It didn't need repairing. But now——"

He broke off abruptly, flung himself down on the float, vaulted into the boat, and dashed forward to the engine. For a second he bent over the latter, and then a groan burst from his tightly pressed lips.

The machinery was absolutely useless. Parts were broken, others missing entirely, and his practiced eye told him that it would take days to put it in condition. It was quite evident that Tweedy had scored again.

For an instant Bob stood staring blindly through the port at the wide sweep of the river, with its spreading acres of log booms.

"I won't be beaten!" he burst out furiously. "He shan't win—he shan't!"

Then hope flashed into his eyes as he remembered the other motor boats kept at the house. None of them were as swift as his, but they would do at a pinch, and he would not hesitate in using one.

In less than five minutes he had discovered the bitter fact that each and every one had been made as useless as the *Witch*. Tweedy's men had been nothing if not thorough.

Bob's blood was up, and he hesitated no longer. Swiftly passing the perturbed steward without a word, he ran to the telephone and called the number of a man who made a business of renting motor boats. The fellow was deeply regretful, but there was not one left in the place. They had all been taken out that afternoon.

Undaunted, Bainbridge called another of the same ilk, only to receive the same information. By this time he was beginning to feel the furious, impotent helplessness of one caught in a trap. No matter which way he turned, he seemed to encounter the iron will and astute cunning of his former partner. Still he did not give in—he would not. His hand was lifted to remove the receiver for the third time, when suddenly, through a window near at hand, he saw something which fairly took his breath away.

Gliding swiftly down the river, the last rays of the setting sun glinting on immaculate white paint, and reflected from rows of polished windows, was John Tweedy's small but luxurious yacht, the *Panther*. She was coming from Tweedy's private boathouse farther upstream, of course. Where she was bound Bainbridge realized perfectly, and the knowledge, coupled with his own helplessness, drove him desperate.

"I won't be beaten!" he rasped again, yanking down the receiver.

It was the same old story. Tweedy seemed to have corralled every available boat in town. Bob called half a dozen places where at any other time



he could have hired or borrowed a boat with ease, only to be told that there was nothing doing.

Finally, despairing of success, he twitched the pages of the phone book over to the Belfast list.

"I'll get Edwards and tell him what's happened," he muttered. "Maybe he'll go, or send some one with the officer. I'll be hanged if I—— By Jove!"

The chugging of a motor boat brought him to his feet like a flash, the directory falling unheeded to the floor. In a moment he was out on the float, waving to the man at the wheel of the power boat, which was already headed in toward the float.

"Will you rent your boat?" he shouted, the instant it was within speaking distance.

"Sure!" was the drawling response. "That's my business."

Bainbridge did not even wait for her to touch the float. He had an odd feeling that the change in luck was too good to be true; that the boat and skipper might vanish into thin air at any moment. Consequently, when the former was still three feet from the float, he made a flying leap, and landed in the cockpit.

"Which way?" the skipper inquired laconically.

"Belfast," returned Bob, "and hit'er up all you can."

The owner nodded, and threw the wheel down, sending the craft around in a wide, graceful curve into the swift current of the river.

"Open her up a bit, Hank!" he called to some one in the small, roughly built cabin.

There was a hoarse, muffled response, and presently the boat shot forward at a speed which delighted Bob, and told him that, in spite of her somewhat disreputable appearance, she was equipped with an unusually powerful engine.

He was inwardly congratulating himself on this when suddenly a bulky figure, with lowered, shaggy head stooped through the narrow cabin entrance, and, straightening up, revealed the sinister, rough-hewn features of Hank Gowdy.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE TURN OF THE TIDE.

AS he recognized the face, still disfigured by the marks his own hands had put there, Bainbridge caught his breath with a swift intake, and every muscle grew tense and rigid. Too late he fancied he saw why this boat had been secured so easily, when not another one was to be had throughout the city. It was part of Tweedy's plot to get hold of him and make him safe. Any one but a fool would have suspected that before, he told himself bitterly, and then he realized dazedly that the hulking giant was smiling sheepishly.

"H'ware ye, Mr. Bainbridge?" he said hesitatingly. "You look sorter surprised to see me."

"I am," returned Bob briefly, still on guard.

"Can't blame yer much," Gowdy said awkwardly. "Y'u see, I was in Mike Flynn's speak-easy, an' happened to hear 'em plannin' as how they was goin' to hire up all the motor boats, an' smash yours a-purpose, to keep yer from goin' some place—where, I dunno."

"Who was planning?" Bob asked swiftly.

"That skunk Cawley!" the big man retorted, with heat. "He was pickin' out fellers to take the boats out on the river."

"Hum!" Bainbridge began to breathe more freely. He was an unusually good judge of character, and the man before him had every appearance of speaking the truth. "And what then?"

"Waal, I goes over to Brewer an' gits me friend Hooper here, that has a good boat, an' we hustles acrost the river. We'd 'a' got here sooner, only Jim had to take a customer o' his over to the train."

For a moment there was silence as Bainbridge stared at the fellow in a puzzled way.

"But why did you do this?" he asked presently. "I thought you—er—had it in for me."

Gowdy looked sheepish, and dropped his eyes. "Waal," he stammered, "I



did, a mite, at first; but when I see y'u go after that girl, I—I sized y'u up for a real man, an'—waal, it kinda made a difference. Besides," he finished, with swift relief, "I'd do anything to spoil Ed Cawley's game."

Bob burst into a laugh, in which surprise, intense relief, and good-fellowship were oddly mingled.

"Put it there!" he exclaimed, thrusting out his hand impulsively. "You're all to the good, Gowdy, and I won't forget this in a hurry. By Jove! We will spoil Cawley's game, after all—and another crook's game, as well. Can you speed her up any more?" he went on, turning quickly to the owner of the boat. "You saw the *Panther* go down? Well, we've got to beat her into Belfast. Can you do it?"

"I reckon so," drawled Hooper quietly. "The *Panther* ain't no great shakes for speed. The *Jennie H.* will catch her somewheres around Bucksport. Jest hit her up a mite more, Hank."

Gowdy disappeared to obey orders, and Bainbridge, tingling with joy, and thrilled with this unexpected turn of the tide, suppressing a strong desire to let out a few wild whoops of sheer relief, clambered forward over the cabin until he stood upright at the bow.

Below him the water churned and splashed and beat against the hull as they raced swiftly down the river, past wide stretches of logs held in place by the great booms. The dusk was swiftly falling. Here and there the city lights sprang up and twinkled in the gathering darkness. Nearer at hand, the many wharves reached out like shadowy hands striving to clutch the small steamers, coasters, and ungainly lumber vessels which bobbed at their moorings. The great, bulking ice houses loomed vague and indistinct. The vast lumber yards along the shore made patches of light and shade.

On they swept. Past high, green banks clothed in pine and hemlock, with more twinkling, widespread lights gleaming from isolated farmhouses on the distant hills. Now and then a steamer chugged past them going upstream, or they slid by a heavily laden

lumber barge floating down with the current.

By the time the lights of Bucksport appeared ahead, it was almost dark, and Bob got only a vague glimpse of the turf-softened outlines of old Fort Knox.

Not ten minutes later he made out a dull, shifting gleam, and turned hastily around.

"There's the *Panther*, I think!" he cried eagerly.

"That's her," was the taciturn response from Hooper. "Don't fret, son. We'll pass her in two shakes."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE SILVER LINING.

WITH wide, startled eyes and flaming cheeks, Edith Stafford stared at the man who had been her father's lifelong friend, and whom she had known almost from childhood.

"I never heard of anything so horrible!" she cried furiously. "To steal three years of your life! To deliberately thrust you among a lot of mad people, when you were perfectly sane! Oh, it's infamous—infamous!"

She caught her breath in the excess of her emotion, and then went on swiftly, with flashing eyes:

"I hope you'll have them punished as they deserve—every one of them! I hope you'll send them to prison, and make them suffer a little as you have suffered. Heavens! When I think that I actually owe my life to Bob Bainbridge, it—it's enough to——"

"Hold on there, Edith!" broke in Rupert Forbes abruptly. "What sort of an idea is this you've got in your head? You're not classing young Bainbridge with that crowd of cutthroat ruffians, I hope?"

She stared—doubt, perplexity, amazement mingling in her eyes. Suddenly she caught her breath, and a gleam of something like hope flamed into her face.

"I thought——" she stammered. "There seemed no doubt—— Isn't he—one of them?"

The man ran his long, slim fingers



through the thick mass of gray hair. His dark eyes were full of fire.

"No," he replied. "I thought you knew. I thought you understood. He said you helped him. Why, child, but for Bob Bainbridge, Heaven only knows where I'd be now! Three days ago he found the papers concerning my committal in a safe-deposit box in New York. He tried to make Tweedy right the wrong he had done, and when that scoundrel defied him Bob took matters into his own hands. He got the release papers from Edwards. He was fought at every turn by Tweedy's men. They cut his tires, ruined his motor boat, did a thousand and one things to delay him until they could take me away from Oak Island and hide me where I couldn't be found. They even shot at him from Tweedy's yacht as he passed them in the river; but he kept on like a bulldog, beat them to the island by a safe margin, and forced that ruffian who runs the asylum to give me up. Best of all, he's got those scoundrels down on their very knees before him now."

While he was speaking, the girl's face was a picture. Bewildered amazement, distress, horror even, as she remembered her attitude toward Bainbridge, flitted across it in rapid succession. For a space joy struggled with the other emotions, but it was swiftly vanquished and disappeared.

"He never—knew—the truth—about his father till then?" she gasped, at length.

Forbes shook his head. "No; he idolized him. He hadn't the slightest suspicion of the truth."

The girl's lips trembled, and her whole face seemed to quiver with pain. For a second she stood immovable, staring at the man. Then swiftly she turned her back and fumbled in her sleeve for something.

"He must have—suffered—horribly," she said, in a choking voice. "I shall—never forgive myself for being such a beast. I should not have believed what people said."

She broke off abruptly, and turned with flushed cheeks and moistened eyes

as the door opened and Bob Bainbridge hesitated on the threshold.

"I beg your pardon," he said hurriedly. "I—I thought you were alone, Mr. Forbes."

Swiftly stepping back, he had almost closed the door when Miss Stafford sprang forward impulsively.

"Mr. Bainbridge!" she called, in a very small, very frightened voice. "Please wait—just a moment."

Surprised, he stepped back into the room, unconsciously closing the door behind him. As she came slowly toward him, that half-frightened, half-appealing look in her eyes, it flashed across his mind that, in spite of the self-reliance he had so admired, she was really very tiny and very feminine. When she reached him, she put out one small hand, with an odd, impulsive gesture.

"Wi-will you forgive me, Mr. Bainbridge," she stammered, "for being—so hateful?"

He looked gravely down into her wide gray eyes. "There's really nothing to forgive," he said quietly. "You had no way of knowing. It was perfectly natural for you to act as you did."

"Oh, but it wasn't!" she protested vehemently. "I—I should have known better than to be such a cat. Do you suppose you'll—ever forget?"

A sudden whimsical smile curved his lips and drove the somber look from his eyes. He seemed to have forgotten that he still held her hand rather tightly.

"I might," he answered quickly, "on one condition."

"Yes?" Her voice was eager.

"That you'll forget I was ever one of the Big Triangle."

A faint reflection of his smile seemed mirrored in her face. Her eyelids drooped.

"You were never really that," she murmured softly, "except in name."

THE END.

*In the July TOP-NOTCH, out June 1st, will appear a sequel to this story.*



**RUNNING THE TEST**

LONG COMPLETE NOVEL  
BY RALPH BOSTON

**10 CENTS**

# TOP-NOTCH

TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

VOL.9, No.1

JULY, 1912



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NEW YORK

"BALKED"

**HATCHED IN SEATTLE**

STIRRING TALE OF  
A TONG MYSTERY



# TOP-NOTCH

## TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

July

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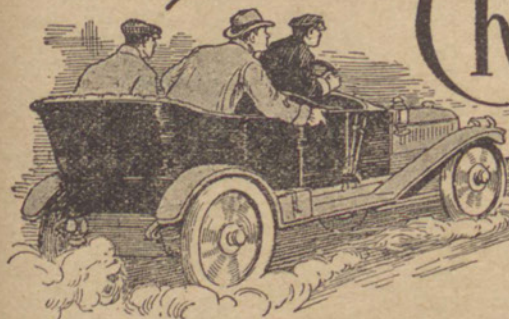
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# A Sequel to "Bainbridge of Bangor" The Portals of Chance



By  
Burt L Standish

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

## CHAPTER I.

### A SCRAP OF PAPER.

**B**AINBRIDGE hung up the receiver, and sat silent for a moment, his heavy black brows drawn down into a straight line above his well-shaped nose. Then he arose quickly, and turned to the hotel clerk.

"I'll take a look at that room, Alf," he said. "You left everything just as you found it, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. There's nothing else there but the bag and a few things on the bureau. I'll show you right up."

He stepped from behind the desk, and led the way to the second floor, Bainbridge following.

The room which had been assigned to Rupert Forbes looked out on Main Street. There was a bed, bureau, washstand, small table, two straight chairs, and a so-called easy-chair. The bed was smooth and untouched. A good-sized black-leather bag stood open on the chair to the left of the bureau; on the latter lay a brush and comb, some handkerchiefs, and a box of cigars. Everything appeared as if the owner had started to unpack, and then stepped out of the room, expecting to return directly.

There was no sign whatever of a prolonged absence being intended.

Bainbridge had not expected to find any. From the first his belief had been absolute that something totally unexpected and unforeseen had caused the disappearance of Forbes.

Of what that something consisted Bob had no definite idea. Of course, the thought of Tweedy had occurred to him long ago—Tweedy, with his bland, child-like exterior, which masked an utterly unscrupulous cunning, and a personality as hard and as cold as steel. Both he and Crane had reasons to strain every effort to put out of the way so dangerous an opponent as Forbes.

But what chance had they of success? That was the question which troubled Bainbridge. Bribery was not to be considered. No sum on earth was large enough to induce Forbes to go over to the enemy. His hatred for the man who had forged his name in order to get control of certain stocks, and then conspired to place him in a private asylum that he might thus be prevented from exposing the other crimes, had vexed and grown, until it dominated his whole being.

Force, in a small town like Belfast, was quite impossible; deception almost



equally so. For Forbes was no child, and he knew Tweedy and what to expect from him.

Puzzled, troubled, seriously alarmed, Bainbridge made a swift but thorough examination of the room. The bag contained nothing but clothes and small personal belongings. Evidently what letters and papers Forbes possessed concerning the affair were on his person, which was an added reason for worry. The cigar box lay open, its contents disturbed, and a dozen missing, as if some one had hastily scooped up a handful of the cigars before leaving. The wastepaper basket to the right of the bureau was empty. Bainbridge even picked it up, and examined it closely, for he realized how valuable would be a certain mysterious letter if he could come upon it.

It looked very much, however, as if Forbes had thrust that carelessly into his pocket before departing, and Bob was beginning to feel that hopeless sense of failure which comes with a total absence of clues to work upon, when suddenly something caught his eye, and, with a sharp exclamation, he dropped on his knees, and thrust one arm underneath the bureau.

It was little enough, to be sure—merely a scrap of paper torn from a letter, with no more than a dozen complete words on it—but it was something, and Bob's eyes brightened as he dropped into a chair and bent frowningly over it.

you hustle  
ston boat and  
a glimpse of  
I won't be ba

"‘You hustle,’" he murmured under his breath. "‘ston boat.’ Jove! That's the Boston boat, of course. It was delivered just after she'd made a landing yesterday, too. I thought you said you touched nothing in this room, Alf," he went on sharply, looking up at the clerk.

"I didn't, sir," Carr answered promptly. "Not a blessed thing."

"Somebody did!" Bainbridge declared. "This is a piece of the letter that boy brought yesterday afternoon;

I'm sure of it. Mr. Forbes tore it up and threw it into the basket, and somebody's taken the other scraps away. Ask the chambermaid about it right away, won't you? Find out what she did with the other pieces, and—— I tell you what—bring her here, and I'll talk to her."

In a flash Carr had disappeared, and Bob resumed his study of the bit of paper in his hand. The writing was totally unfamiliar, but, though there were scarcely three consecutive words on any one of the four lines, Bainbridge gained from them an odd impression of the sense of the entire epistle.

"Somebody wanted him to hustle down to the Boston boat," he muttered eagerly. "Somebody that wanted a glimpse of him because they wouldn't be back for some time, I suppose. Humph! Now who could it have been? Forbes must have known the writer. He'd never rush off that way on a stall; he's too suspicious. But who—— Well, what happened to the other scraps?" he went on, as Carr appeared with a decidedly flustered young woman in cap and apron.

"I put 'em in the range, sir," she stammered. "They was only a few scraps, an' I'd cleared up all the other rooms before, sir. I hope I—didn't do nothing wrong, sir."

Bob's face cleared at the sight of her distress. "No, of course not," he answered quickly. "You couldn't possibly have known that they were of any use. I'm sorry, that's all. By the way, did you happen to notice what was on any of the pieces? Was there a picture of a steamer, or a name?"

She nodded instantly. "Yes, sir," she returned eagerly. "Before I crumpled 'em up I saw part of a steamer with 'Camden' printed under it, and I thought that somebody must 'a' been writing from the Boston bo't."

Bainbridge sprang to his feet, his eyes shining.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "You thought right. It was the *Camden* that went out last night, Alf. You've got to hustle out with me, and see if we can locate that boy. I'll get Welton to let you off.



He can look after things while you're gone. This is important."

## CHAPTER II.

### NOT A TRACE.

THE boy was found with less trouble than they expected. He proved to be one Jimmy Kline, an urchin of twelve or thirteen, who hadn't missed a landing of the Boston boat for years.

Having discovered him, however, it was more of a proposition to make him talk. At first he flatly denied having delivered a letter to Rupert Forbes at the Windsor Hotel, but when Carr stuck to it that he was the boy he broke down and began to sniffle.

"It ain't fair for you to make me tell," he sobbed. "He said he'd skin me alive 'less I kep' my mouth shut."

"Who said that, Jimmy?" Bob asked quietly. "The man who gave you the letter?"

"Uh-huh! He gimme a quarter, too." Bainbridge smiled. "I thought so. That was 'con' talk of his, Jimmy. He couldn't hurt you even if we let him—which of course we won't. Now, I've got half a dollar floating around loose"—he took out the coin, and held it temptingly in his hand—"which I'll turn over if you'll tell me all about this man. How about it?"

There was a prolonged struggle between avarice and timidity, but at length the former conquered. Even then the story had to be dragged from the youngster by dint of constant and repeated questions, and the recital took up a good deal of valuable time.

It appeared that, before the *Camden* had even made fast, the boy had observed a man standing close to where the gangplank would be thrown out. He was big and broad, with a ruddy, smooth-shaven face, and from the way his eyes roved impatiently about the dock, Jimmy fancied that he might have a bag to carry, and edged closer.

A moment later the man caught his eye, hesitated a second, then lifted a peremptory finger. He was the first to leave the boat, but he carried no bag; and the boy was just wondering what

was wanted when the stranger pulled a letter from his pocket, and stated that he wished it delivered at once to a man staying at the Windsor Hotel. He would give the boy a quarter for carrying it that short distance, but explained that it was a sort of joke, and threatened the youngster with all sorts of dire penalties if he did not keep his mouth shut about it. Jimmy was to hand the letter to Mr. Forbes, and not wait an instant for the latter to ask any questions. Neither was he to return to the wharf until the boat had gone.

Curious, but pleased at being able to make a quarter so easily, the boy obeyed instructions to the letter, handing the sealed envelope to Mr. Forbes, and hurrying promptly away from the hotel.

At this point in the narrative the youngster came to a dead stop, as if there was nothing more to tell. Bainbridge stood regarding him shrewdly for a moment in silence.

"And then you hustled back to the dock, to see what was going to happen?" he said suddenly.

"How'd you know?" gasped the boy, his eyes widening. "I—was hid in the waitin' room."

"So I thought," Bob returned pleasantly. "Peeking through the window, weren't you? Exactly! Well, what did you see? Did Mr. Forbes show up?"

"Ye-yes, sir."

"Was the tall man waiting for him?"

"Yes, sir. They shook hands like they was friends, and went inside the boat."

A faint, puzzled frown flashed into Bob's forehead. His eyes were keen and eager; his whole face alert.

"Did he come off the boat again?" he asked quietly.

The boy shook his head.

"You're sure?" Bob persisted.

"Uh-huh! I stayed there till the boat left, an' he didn't show up again. He couldn't have left no other way, either. Mebbe he was jest goin' down to Camden, sir."

"Maybe he was—and maybe not," Bainbridge murmured, half to himself.

For a second he stood still, his clear-cut, virile face quite impassive. Then



he dropped the silver coin into the boy's ready hand.

"You've earned it, Jimmy," he said hurriedly. "Don't worry about what that fellow threatened. He won't bother you again. Come on, Alf; I'll take you back."

Bob was silent as they were whirled back to the hotel in the big touring car, but his brain was working swiftly. Beyond Belfast there were but two places, Camden and Rockland, at which the regular steamers touched on the run to Boston. It would be necessary to learn if Forbes had left the boat at either of these places.

For nearly a week Tweedy and Crane, Bob's former partners—as a matter of fact they were his partners still, for no actual dissolution of the firm had taken place—had kept him quiet by professing that they meant to give in to his demands, and restore to former owners vast timberlands and other properties, which the Big Triangle, as the firm was called, had acquired through corrupt political influence and graft, if not by downright criminal practices. Finally the young man refused to listen longer to clever arguments and specious evasions.

But with his first step he was given check by this singular disappearance of Forbes, the man on whose testimony he depended more than on that of any other living being, to support him in the fight against the corrupt ring that so long had plundered the State. Forbes had good cause to be grateful to young Bainbridge, through whose efforts he had been released from a private sanitarium in which Tweedy and Crane had caused him to be held a prisoner for years.

True, Bob had in his possession the incriminating papers, unexpectedly found in his father's safety-deposit vault in New York, by means of which he felt certain he could bring the rascals to their knees. But the publication of the damning facts which those documents disclosed would reveal to the world the shame of former Governor Bainbridge, Bob's father, now dead; would show that, though honored by friends and

neighbors, and proclaimed a model statesman and upright gentleman, he had permitted himself to become the tool of the grafters, and had profited greatly through sharing in the looting operations of the corrupt ring.

Bob had hoped to be able, without resorting to such extreme measures, to force Tweedy and Crane to make such restitution as was possible to their victims. Not even to save his father's name, however, would he philander longer. The papers should be placed in the hands of the attorney-general, with whom he had an appointment for three o'clock that afternoon. On his way to Augusta, the State capital, he could run to Camden and Rockland, and make inquiries about Forbes, and still reach Augusta in time, barring unexpected delays.

"I'll lay them by the heels now if it takes a leg," he muttered once or twice on the run from Belfast to Camden.

At the latter place the steamship agent was sure no person answering the description of Forbes had left the boat the previous night. The Rockland agent, interviewed less than thirty minutes later, was equally positive that Forbes had not got off there.

"It's Augusta next, and then to Boston," murmured Bainbridge, hurrying back to his car. "We'll have to go hungry, Dick," he said to the chauffeur. "Hit it up as soon as we strike any decent roads outside of town."

The roads between Rockland and Augusta were far from first class. In spite of Dick Barton's careful driving, they were delayed by punctures, and it was almost three when they crossed the Kennebec at Gardiner. Fifteen minutes later Bob hurried up the steps of the imposing statehouse in Augusta, and made his way at once to the offices of the attorney-general.

"Will you take my card to Mr. Thompson at once, please?" he said to the clerk who came forward to inquire his business. "I had an appointment with him for three."

"I'm sorry, sir," the other answered, "but Mr. Thompson isn't in at present."

Bainbridge stared. "Not in!" he re-



peated in astonishment. "You mean he couldn't wait? It's only ten minutes past the hour, you know."

"Very true, sir; but he hasn't been here since shortly after one."

For a moment Bob stood staring at the man in frowning surprise, unable to understand what this new development portended.

"Are you expecting him back this afternoon?" he asked at length.

"I really couldn't say, sir. He went out in a hurry, without leaving any word about his return. If you'll let me have your name and phone number, I'll call you as soon as he shows up again."

"You don't even know where he's gone, then?" "No, sir."

There was another brief pause. Then Bainbridge squared his shoulders a little.

"I'll telephone later this afternoon, or in the morning," he said, as he turned away. "If he should come in, you might mention that I've been here. Robert Bainbridge is the name."

Outside in the corridor, the door closed behind him, Bainbridge moved slowly toward the rotunda, trying to think up a plausible reason for what had happened. The appointment had been arranged for that day and hour, without possibility of mistake. Garrett Thompson was, moreover, a thoroughly businesslike man, not at all in the habit of throwing people over in this careless manner. What, then, had occurred to take him from his office without leaving word of any kind?

It seemed more than puzzling to Bainbridge, and he was still pondering over the matter when he turned a corner and came suddenly face to face with the possible answer to his question—John Tweedy, plump, pink-cheeked, blue-eyed, and wearing the placid expression of one who is at peace with himself and the world!

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE THREAT.

WELL, well, Bobby!" chuckled Tweedy comfortably. "This is really a pleasant surprise. I had no idea I'd run across you here in Augusta."

Bainbridge stifled with difficulty the rush of anger which surged up within him at the sight of the man he felt to be responsible for the two serious setbacks he had received that day.

"Didn't you?" he returned. "Any particular reason why I shouldn't be here?"

"Oh, no—none at all," said Tweedy blandly. "I only thought you might still be hunting for our interesting friend, Rupert Forbes."

In spite of his determination to remain perfectly cool and nonchalant, Bob felt a wave of crimson flooding his face, while his muscular fingers clenched themselves tightly.

"So you admit being responsible for that, do you?" he said angrily.

Tweedy shrugged his plump shoulders indolently. "Why not—when there's nobody around but just us two?" he drawled. "I warned you, Bobby, that you couldn't carry out your foolish schemes as easy as you thought. Why, son, we've been up against fretting little things like you a dozen times, and are still doing business at the old stand. You can't beat us. It's impossible. You'll not only get yourself in bad, and burn your fingers, without hurting us a particle. Take the word of an old codger who's weathered a lot worse storms than this, and is still about as seaworthy as the next one."

He paused a second, his deep-set blue eyes fixed keenly on the young man's face.

"Better give it up, Bobby," he went on, in that same tone of subtle persuasion. "Better let bygones be bygones, and come back to the fold. You won't find us such a bad lot. When he was your age your father had just such highfalutin' notions, but he soon came to see that our business methods were no different from those of any other men with power and opportunities; and the determination to get on in the world."

A flicker of pain quivered across the young man's face, leaving it white and set and doggedly determined.

"And how did my father come to lose those highfaluting notions, as you call them?" he demanded harshly. "Because



he was in your power. You had made him governor of the State, and could unmake him if you chose. You threatened and wheedled him. You gave him the choice between political ruin and moral degradation, and he—took the—latter."

There was a catch in the young man's voice, but he brought his teeth together with a click.

"But you can't work me that way," he went on, almost fiercely. "I haven't any political aspirations. I've lived as decently and squarely as I know how. You can't get anything on me. There isn't a single way by which you can keep me from showing up every dirty, crooked deal you've ever put through—as I'm going to."

"You have a good-sized fortune," the stout man murmured. "I wonder whether you'd still be so strenuously righteous if something happened to put you on your uppers?"

The young man's eyes flashed. "Try it!" he retorted. "I don't see how you can do it, but if you stripped me of every cent I'd still fight you to the last ditch."

"In which you'd undoubtedly be buried," commented Tweedy cynically. "A reformer of any kind hasn't as much chance with us as a snowball in Honduras. And one without money or backing— Consult your intelligence, my dear boy. You'd develop into a crank with a grievance, and nobody would pay any attention whatever to you."

"That's where we differ," Bainbridge returned curtly. "I refuse to believe that the bulk of people enjoy being bled and bullied and trod down by a ring of grafters. As I said before, you can't get anything on me. You can't rake up any foolish thing I've done in the past, as you have with so many other men who've tried to put the curb on you, and magnify it into a scandal or a crime to hold over my head until I give in."

"You forget your handling of the Brody affair," Tweedy blandly remarked.

"That's a lie, and you know it!" Bob

exclaimed hotly. "You planned it from the beginning. I only carried through some of the details, without having the faintest idea they weren't perfectly straight."

"Who's going to believe that, in the face of the very excellent evidence I was at pains to create?" the stout man inquired coolly. "Who's going to know that it didn't all emanate from your fertile brain? But that isn't all. It pains me to observe that you very much underestimate our power and resources. Have you forgotten that we control not only the political situation, but most of the newspapers in the State? A word from me will start their clever reporters burrowing into your record, and what they discover will—er—find a prominent place on the front sheet."

There was a faint significance in the older man's words which did not escape Bainbridge. Nevertheless, Bob did not hesitate.

"They can't discover anything which doesn't exist," he retorted defiantly.

Tweedy smiled—a slow, curious smile. "Not at all impossible," he murmured. "They're a mighty clever crowd—mighty clever; and libel suits are hard things to win in the State of Maine. It would be too bad, Bobby, to have this good name of yours you were mentioning a while back blackened up a bit—now, wouldn't it? Your friends—"

"Any friends of mine who'd believe a single one of the lies you'd fake up about me wouldn't be worth keeping," Bainbridge returned swiftly. "I don't give a hang what they think—not a single one of them!"

Tweedy raised his eyebrows slightly. "Not even that very charming Miss Stafford, of Bangor?"

For a second Bob stood staring at the older man, his face white with anger, and an expression in his eyes which sent a flicker of uneasiness across Tweedy's impassive countenance. He took a single impulsive step forward, as if he meant to fling himself bodily on the older man, but in a second he had recovered his self-control.

"You scoundrel!" he cried, in a voice



which fairly shook with passion. "So that's your game! I thought I knew the worst of you. I thought there wasn't a dirty, contemptible trait I hadn't guessed. Bah! You're worse than a yellow dog. I've a good mind to——"

He thrust his head forward, and his narrowing eyes, boring into Tweedy's deep-set blue ones, saw something there which thrilled him with a savage joy.

"Afraid!" he cried exultantly. "John Tweedy, the great man—afraid! To think I never guessed it before. Listen!" He caught the other's fat wrist in a grip which made the bulky man quiver and shrink against the wall. His set, dogged face was thrust forward within a few inches of the politician's heavy, flaccid countenance. His eyes glowed with a determined fire. "You can't bribe me!" he said, in a hard, inflexible voice. "You can't scare me! I'm going to stick at this until I win out. But if you start this slandering game, look out! That's all."

He loosened his grip on the plump wrist, and cast it from him as if it had been a snake. Without a word or even a backward glance, he hastened on down the corridor toward the rotunda, leaving behind him a man whose heavy form fairly shook with anger, and on whose fat, white face was an expression of cold, venomous fury which was not pleasant to look upon.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE VAULT OF THE BRAMPTON TRUST.

**O**UT in the bright, clear sunshine, Bainbridge took a deep breath of pure air, as if anxious to clear his lungs of some foul, noxious vapor. Then he paused at the top of the wide flight of steps, to consider his next move.

The presence of Tweedy in the State capital was explanation enough for the failure of the attorney-general to keep the appointment, for Bob was realizing by leaps and bounds the tremendous influence wielded by the man. Whether or not Garrett Thompson was a willing tool was of little moment. The important fact was that he had disap-

peared, no one seemed to know where, and there was no telling when he would be back.

"But even Tweedy can't keep him out of the way forever," Bob muttered to himself. "He'll have to be here by the end of the week. In the meantime I might as well slip down to Boston and try to find some trace of Forbes."

As he reached the side of the car he paused again, glancing down at the package of papers in one hand. It would be a decided nuisance to drag them around with him; moreover, he had not missed that single swift, covetous glance Tweedy had cast upon the parcel during the first moments of their meeting.

"There isn't much he wouldn't give to get his hands on them," Bob thought grimly. "I reckon it's up to me to stow them away in my safe-deposit box."

He had taken his seat beside Barton, and was just about to tell the chauffeur where to go, when a sudden thought struck him, and he snatched out his watch. It was twenty-five minutes of four.

"Hang it all!" he exclaimed aloud. "It's too late. They close at three."

For a moment or two he was stumped. If he were only in Bangor, where he was well known, it would be a simple matter to have the vaults opened for his special benefit, as he had had occasion to do several times before. Here in Augusta, however, he was in no position to ask such a favor. He did not use the box which had been taken by his father years ago, once in six months, and only retained it on the chance of its some day being convenient. He might, of course, have left the papers in the safe at the Augusta House. They would, no doubt, be perfectly secure there; but Tweedy was in town, and somehow Bainbridge's appreciation of that individual's cunning and resource was waxing stronger and stronger, and he had an instinctive dislike to running the least risk in a matter which was so important.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed all at once, his eyes brightening. "There's George Clinton, down at Brampton. If I can



get hold of him he'll open his bank vault for me, sure enough."

There was a momentary pause while he swiftly consulted a time-table. Brampton was a thriving town some fourteen miles southwest of Augusta. He had just about time to motor down there and back to Richmond to catch the Maine Central train for Boston. The question remained whether his old friend and classmate was still at the bank, and, if so, whether it was in his power to accommodate Bainbridge to this extent.

The latter made haste to seek a telephone and call up the Brampton Trust Company. It was Clinton himself who answered.

"Why, sure, Bobby," he said readily, when Bainbridge had put the question. "Delighted to accommodate you. It takes two of us to open the vault, you know, but the chief was here a minute ago. Just hold the wire till I find out if he can wait." There was a brief pause, and then Clinton's voice sounded again: "He'll be here half an hour longer. Can you make it in that time?"

"I think so," Bob answered. "I'll do my best, anyhow. Thanks very much, old man. See you in thirty minutes."

Bainbridge whirled into Brampton with just two minutes to spare. Leaping into in front of the neat, prosperous-looking brick building which housed the trust company, he hastened inside. His friend, a brisk, breezy, pleasant-faced chap of twenty-seven or eight, with level eyes and curly brown hair, met him just inside the door.

"Welcome to our city!" he cried, as he gripped Bob's hand. "Haven't seen you in a hundred years. How goes it, anyhow? First of all, though, let's get this bale of thousand-dollar bills stowed away before the old man begins to fret. He's not a bit crazy about working overtime, I can tell you. This is the first afternoon in over a month he's stayed down so late. You've met him, haven't you? No? You've got a treat before you, then."

Taking Bainbridge by the arm, he piloted him past the silent, deserted cages of the teller and clerks, knocked

briskly on the ground glass of a mahogany door, and drew him into the president's private office.

Bob's swift impression of Abner Q. Greer was that he was a testy, irascible, hard-fisted man; the sort whose god is the main chance, and who would extract the very last iota of work out of his employees. Even as he dropped the limp hand, the young fellow wondered how the other happened to be so accommodating when there was nothing to be made out of it.

"I suppose it's because of my money," he thought. Aloud he said: "I'm very sorry indeed to put you to so much trouble, Mr. Greer; but I have to go to Boston unexpectedly, and it was too late to put some important papers into my box at Augusta."

"No trouble at all, sir," returned the older man, in a tone which was almost pleasant. "Glad to help you out. Papers, eh? That's good! I thought perhaps it was cash, and I didn't care particularly about the responsibility. Just step this way, and we'll straighten you out directly."

He stepped out of his office, and followed Clinton, who had already opened a wicket and switched on the lights in front of the steel vault. In turn the two men worked, twirling the combination with swift, accustomed fingers, until at last Clinton shoved down on the heavy handle, and pulled open one of the ponderous doors. Bob then handed the package of papers to the president, who stepped into the vault, and glanced around hesitatingly.

"That steel box that Townsend gave up last week is still empty, isn't it, George?" he asked presently.

"Yes sir. I believe I've got the key in my pocket."

"Good! We'll put it there, Mr. Bainbridge, and then there'll be no question of anybody's so much as touching it."

"Anywhere you say, Mr. Greer," Bob returned. "The shelves of the vault are safe enough, I should think."

"Quite so, quite so," Greer answered hastily. "But the teller has access to the vault during the day, and this will make things doubly secure."



Clinton found the key, opened the box, and when the old man had dropped the packet in, shut down the lid and locked it again.

"I guess that will hold you for a while, Bobby," he said, as they left the vault, and swung the heavy doors into place again.

He lingered behind a moment to turn the combination knob, while Bainbridge followed the president through the wicket.

"I'm greatly obliged to you, Mr. Greer," he said quickly. "I'll feel much more comfortable about those papers now, and I won't trouble you with them for more than a day or so."

"No trouble at all, sir—none whatever," the president returned, one hand on the knob of his office door. "Glad to help you out. Come for them any time during banking hours. Glad to have met you, sir. Good day."

There was another limp handshake, and the older man had almost closed the door when Clinton halted him.

"I've finished that bond list, sir," he said quickly, "so I think I'll go out with my friend."

"Very well," came through the crack of the door. "I shall be here for a few minutes longer to finish a letter. Good night."

Out in the street, Clinton began to chuckle. "Evidently you made a hit, Bobby," he commented. "I haven't seen the old man so amiable in weeks. I wonder whether he'd have gone to all that trouble if you hadn't been Bainbridge, of Bangor, with wads of filthy lucre at your back?"

"That same uncharitable thought occurred to me," Bob answered. "However, it doesn't matter much what his motive was, so long as those papers are safe."

"They're that, all right," Clinton returned emphatically. "The vault's a jim-dandy, for its size, and it can't be opened without yours truly being on hand. Besides, that little strong box isn't to be sniffed at, and I've got the only key in existence right here in my jeans."

## CHAPTER V.

## THE BOMBSHELL.

IN Boston, the following day, Bainbridge learned that a man answering the description of Forbes had left the steamer in what seemed to be a condition of intoxication, accompanied and assisted by two men, who had taken him away in a cab. And one of those two men had been recognized and spoken to as "Mr. Crane."

Before long Bob was at police headquarters, giving a statement of the case to Con Hepbron, a clever detective, who promised to do his best to trace the missing man. Then, after lunch, the determined young man caught a return train for Augusta.

It was after six when he reached the capitol. He did not put up at the Augusta House, but sought a quieter, less conspicuous hotel, for he wished to keep the opposing forces as much in the dark as possible concerning his presence in town, at least until he had managed to get hold of the attorney-general.

He had an early dinner, and at a quarter past seven he entered a closed telephone booth, and called Garrett Thompson's residence. A man's voice, subdued and carefully modulated, answered. Bob surmised it was the butler.

"Is Mr. Thompson at home?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Who——"

"He'll be in his office to-morrow, then?" Bainbridge interrupted.

"Yes, sir. Who shall I say——"

"Thank you! Good-by."

The receiver clicked into place, and Bob left the instrument and the hotel without delay.

"I won't give him a chance to duck this time," he thought, as he made his way toward the garage. "Tweedy's very likely to inform him that I've left town, so he won't be expecting me."

At the garage Barton had just strolled in after his supper. Bainbridge talked with him for a few minutes, told him to have the car ready at a quarter past eight, sharp, then returned to the hotel.

He spent the rest of the evening in his room composing a letter to Edith



Stafford, a girl in whom he was keenly interested for other reasons than that she was the friend of the missing Forbes, who had once been associated with her father in a business way.

It was not an easy letter to write. In spite of the fact that he cared more for this charming Bangor girl than for any other he had ever seen, nothing even approaching the sentimental had ever passed between them. The girl had begun by detesting him because of what she thought he was, having been led to believe him even harder and more unscrupulous than his father. Since the truth had been made plain, her attitude was that of a good friend and comrade, who was vitally interested in his fight against Tweedy and the ring of corruptionists.

Even Bainbridge, with every sense sharpened by his feelings for her, could detect signs of nothing deeper.

The result was that, though he set out to give her a simple account of his progress—or lack of it—since he had last seen her, words and phrases of a very different sort kept slipping in, constantly necessitating new drafts, and making progress extremely slow. At length, however, he reached the last paragraph:

You must expect to see all sorts of canards about me in the papers. I'm quite sure that Tweedy will persist, in spite of the silly, rather melodramatic threats I made. He must realize—as I did after I had left him—that I could never carry them out. A case of assault against me would be meat for him. He'd probably call it attempted murder. It would be a splendid chance for him to start in motion the machinery of the law, which he controls so scandalously, and, before I knew it, I'd be just where he wants me—tied hand and foot, and helpless, so far as any further fighting is concerned.

I only mention this to prepare you for things which may make you ashamed of having had even the slightest sort of acquaintance with the unspeakable creature they will doubtless paint me.

Having posted this, Bob went to bed. He was up fairly early, bought a paper in the lobby, and went over it carefully while waiting for breakfast. Somewhat to his surprise, he found no evidence of Tweedy's carrying out his threat.

"I wonder what's holding his hand?"

Bainbridge murmured, as he attacked some fruit. "It's not at all like him to back down."

He could think of no good reason, unless it was that the manufacture of a really interesting scandal took time, and presently he dismissed the subject from his mind. After all, it did not matter much. He meant soon to put the boss into a position where he would find it impossible to pull any of the wires or exercise the power he now boasted about so confidently.

Barton was waiting at the garage, and the trip to Brampton was made comfortably and leisurely in three quarters of an hour. Bob found the vault only just opened, and, at Clinton's invitation, he went into it while the latter unlocked the strong box, and took out the package of papers.

On the way back to Augusta, Bainbridge untied the parcel and shuffled hastily through the contents, more for something to do than from any notion that they were not all right. The long envelopes, each bearing the former governor's indorsement, were as he had left them. He even drew out one or two papers, but hastily thrust them back with a sigh, and fastened the bundle. Even now the very sight of these things hurt him, and brought home to him with renewed pain the thought that in exposing Tweedy and the other members of the ring he would also be holding up to public shame the name of his own father, whom he had revered until his eyes were opened, and whose memory was still very dear.

Shortly after ten he entered the outer office of the attorney-general, determined to see that official if he had to camp there all day. To his astonishment, the clerk he had talked with two days before came hastily forward.

"Good morning, Mr. Bainbridge," he said deferentially. "Will you please step this way? Mr. Thompson left orders that you were to be shown in as soon as you appeared."

Though he made no comment, Bob was decidedly puzzled. This did not look in the least as if Tweedy, or anybody else, was trying to prevent him



seeing the attorney-general. What followed had still less that appearance.

Mr. Thompson greeted him pleasantly, and at once apologized for the broken appointment of two days ago. It seemed that a sudden message from his wife that their boy had been hurt by an automobile sent him flying to the shore without even leaving word where he had gone. Happily, the child's injuries were not as serious as appeared at first, and he was able to return the next day.

Throughout the interview the official's manner was most friendly and encouraging. He was tremendously interested, almost excited, over the prospect which the papers opened up. If they were all that Bainbridge promised, he said, a shake-up would follow such as the State had never known.

It was impossible, of course, for him to go through the mass of documents then. Bob had not expected that. The official promised, however, to take the utmost care of them, and asked the young man to return the next morning to hear his opinion, and to talk over the matter in detail.

Consequently, Bainbridge left the office feeling decidedly elated. There was no doubt as to Garrett Thompson's good faith. That was apparent in every word he said, in every gesture almost. He had the reputation, moreover, of being one of the few thoroughly upright, incorruptible members of the administration, placed there by the powers behind the throne as a sop to the reformers.

Bob was so eager to hear his opinion of the mare's nest that had been unearthed, and to learn what steps the official proposed taking to make the most effective use of the bomb which had been placed in his hands, that he reached the office a good fifteen minutes before the time appointed.

Early as he was, Garrett Thompson was evidently ahead of him, for the clerk ushered him at once into the private office and departed, closing the door carefully behind him.

From the moment of his entrance, Bob realized that something had gone wrong. At the sound of the closing

door the attorney-general turned slowly in his revolving desk chair. He made no attempt to rise; evidently he did not mean to. His face was cold and set, without a glimmer of a smile. His eyes, full of an infinite contempt, seemed to take in the young man's whole figure in a single sweeping glance.

"You have looked over the papers, sir?" Bainbridge asked swiftly, the idea which had absorbed him for twenty-four hours offsetting even this frigid reception.

"I have!" retorted Garrett Thompson, in a scathing tone, "and your effrontery amazes me. They are palpable, bare-faced forgeries!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE SHATTERING BLOW.

FOR a second Bainbridge thought he had not heard aright. "I don't understand you," he said. "How can they be forgeries?"

Thompson's lips curled. "That's what I should very much like to know," he answered sarcastically. "How any one possessing a particle of common sense could have hoped for an instant to impose upon me with these bald, crude scrawls is something I quite fail to understand."

For a second Bob stood staring at him with flushed face and hardening jaw. Then his chin tilted.

"You say those papers I gave you yesterday are not genuine?" he demanded.

"I most certainly do. For the most part, they are the crudest sort of forgeries. I am amazed that a man of your standing should stoop to such a contemptible, dastardly attempt to blacken the character of your own father, as well as——"

"That's a lie!" broke in Bainbridge, his voice quivering with passion. "How dare you say such a thing! I found those papers by accident in a safe-deposit box in New York, where my father had placed them over a year ago. Had there been any possible means by which I could have kept his name clear, and still brought to book the gang of



grafters who have fastened themselves like leeches upon the people of this State, I should have done so. I gave Tweedy his chance. I offered to withhold this information if he would disgorge his——"

"Ha!" exclaimed the attorney-general, his eyes snapping.

"Yes, I did that," Bainbridge affirmed. "I juggled with justice to that extent in order to try to save my father's reputation, yet you accuse me of deliberately blackening it by forgeries."

Thompson's face was brick-red, and his eyes were flashing sparks, but he retained his self-command admirably. With the deliberation of one holding himself in leash by sheer will power, he arose, picked up a package from his desk, and handed it to Bainbridge.

"Be good enough to take these absurdities and yourself out of my office," he said icily. "What your object is in making this astonishing attempt at deception I do not know. It is just possible that you may be a reformer laboring under the delusion that the end justifies any means. I do not know. At least, I am giving you the benefit of the doubt, and I shall not call you publicly to account. But let me tell you this, young man: if you ever attempt to make any use of those wretched forgeries in any way whatever, I shall see that the law acts swiftly and without mercy. Good day."

Fairly bristling with righteous indignation, he dropped down in his chair, and turned his back. For a second or two Bob stared at him, his face flaming and his lips parted for a sharp retort. Then, conquering the impulse, he squared his shoulders, and marched out of the room without a word.

He was furiously angry, in spite of his apparent coolness, and once in the corridor he made his way straight to the offices of the chief executive. There was but one explanation for the extraordinary transformation in Garrett Thompson. John Tweedy had got at him overnight, and, by means of threats or cajolery, won him over.

"We'll see whether you can play fast and loose this way, Mr. Thompson,"

Bainbridge muttered angrily. "We'll see what the governor has to say about your methods."

His dictatorial air and determined manner took Bob as far as the governor's private secretary, but there he was halted. His excellency had not yet arrived, that official informed him. Moreover, there were important matters which would keep him busy for the entire morning, if not the greater part of the day. If the gentleman would leave his name and business, however, it might be possible to arrange an appointment for late in the afternoon.

This Bainbridge decided not to do. The first white heat of his anger had cooled by this time, and he was beginning to wonder whether Tweedy's baleful influence might not extend even to these sacred precincts. At any rate, it would be better to take no chances of a rebuff. He would match cunning with cunning, and think up some means of catching the governor off guard.

To do this he must have time to consider things quietly. Still carrying the fateful packet, he left the statehouse, and told Barton to drive out of the city—anywhere, as long as it was good and far away.

The chauffeur turned westward, and they had left the outskirts of Augusta several miles behind them before Bob, sitting in the tonneau, slowly, almost unconsciously, began to slip the rubber bands from the thick bundle of papers he held, and unfold the wrappings.

"Forgeries!" he muttered, his anger rising afresh at the remembrance. "He's got the biggest nerve of any man I ever knew."

His lips curled as he stared at the long, heavy envelopes, with their indorsements in that clear, distinctive hand he knew as well as he did his own.

"Forgeries!" he repeated contemptuously, drawing out the contents of one envelope, and spreading them on his lap. "With all his cleverness you'd think he'd have picked out a better——"

He stopped abruptly, and stared at one of the letters lying open before him. He snatched it swiftly up, and examined it closely, his face paling and his breath



catching in a queer little gasp. For a second he sat absolutely still. Then, with hands which shook a little, he seized the other documents, and ran them over in feverish haste.

Finally he scrambled them all together, thrust them under a cushion, and shook out the contents of another envelope, which he examined in that same tense, breathless manner.

His face flushed and paled, and flushed and paled again. There was an expression of dazed, horrified bewilderment in his dark eyes; a film of moist beads showed suddenly on his wide forehead.

At last he dropped both hands limply into his lap, and sat staring straight ahead of him, his heart full of cold despair.

The attorney-general had been right, after all. The papers he had treasured so carefully were not the ones he had found in the New York safe-deposit box. Somehow, somewhere, those had been removed, and for them had been substituted these wretched, absolutely worthless frauds.

## CHAPTER VII.

### WHO DID IT?

FOR a few minutes Bainbridge sat there in the grip of that hopeless despair which comes at some time or another to the strongest man. It seemed to him that no matter how carefully he laid his plans, they were doomed to failure. Wherever he turned, he felt the tremendous power of Tweedy and the gang of corrupt grafters who were bent on his destruction at any cost. It was like running up against a stone wall; like struggling against the mythical, many-headed hydra, which, when one neck was severed, instantly grew two other evil serpent heads to take its place.

Was there no corner of the State, no walk of life, to which that baleful influence did not penetrate? Bob wondered despairingly how the ring had ever got its strangle hold on such a man as Garrett Thompson, whose absolute integrity

had never been questioned before. The temptation or necessity must have been very strong for such a person to succumb.

Suddenly Bainbridge straightened up with a quick tightening of his jaws. Was it Thompson he had to blame for the substitution? Why wasn't it just as possible for the papers to have been tampered with while reposing in the vault of the Brampton Trust Company? To be sure, it needed two men to work the combination of that vault; but it was open all day, during which time the papers had lain in the steel strong box to which George Clinton held the only key.

A week before the possibility of his old friend playing the traitor would have been utterly out of the question. But Bob was growing hard and callous. He was losing faith in everybody. Why should not George have been won over by the ring, as well as the attorney-general?

He glanced swiftly around. They were just passing through a small, straggling village.

"Where are we, Dick?" he asked abruptly.

"Litchfield, sir."

"Ah! Well, head for Brampton at once. Drive to the trust company."

The hopeless look had passed from Bainbridge's face, leaving it again hard and dogged and determined. He did not mean to give in. He was not beaten yet. Swiftly and methodically he went through all the papers, to find out just where he stood. Not more than three or four original documents remained, and those were ones which reflected only on his father. Some of the most incriminating, on which he had counted more than any others to prove his case, were missing altogether. The remainder were represented by crude copies which scarcely deserved the name of forgeries. The substitution had been accomplished with Tweedy's usual thoroughness.

Bob had scarcely replaced the worthless trash in the various envelopes, and made a neat parcel of the whole, when the car drew up before the red-brick building on the main street of Brampton. Alighting hastily, Bainbridge entered,



and turned directly to Clinton's private office. The cashier was there, and alone.

"Well, this is a surprise, Bobby!" he said, in his brisk, cheerful manner. "What's up? Sit down and tell us the tale of woe. You look worried."

"I am," Bainbridge admitted succinctly.

He did not sit down at once. Instead, he stood looking searchingly into Clinton's eyes. They were nice eyes, clear, level, with a mirthful gleam in their brown depths, tempered with a touch of concern at his friend's evident trouble. They met the latter's glance squarely, earnestly, without the quiver of a lash; and in that long, silent moment Bob decided that nothing on earth could have induced this man to stab him in the back.

His face relaxed a little as he dropped into a chair beside the desk. Though the realization infinitely increased his perplexities, he was conscious of a feeling of relief.

"I'm more than worried, George," he said quietly. "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Not a bit," returned Clinton promptly. "Fire away, and I'll answer 'em to the best of my ability."

"This vault of yours," Bainbridge began slowly. "Are you quite sure it takes two people to open it?"

"Absolutely. Greer and I each have only half the combination."

"No way of Greer finding out your half?"

"Certainly not. That's something I don't trust anybody with—not even him."

Bainbridge hesitated a moment, a faint frown furrowing his forehead.

"Has anybody access to it during the daytime?" he asked at length.

"Not unless I'm around," Clinton answered crisply. The mirth had vanished from his eyes, leaving them keen and sharp and a trifle perplexed. "We open it in the morning for the clerks to take out the ledgers and money under my supervision. Then it's closed again till quitting time. What the mischief are you driving at, old man? It isn't

possible that anything went wrong with those papers you left here?"

"Something went decidedly wrong with them. Either during the time they lay in your vault, or while in the possession of Garrett Thompson, the attorney-general, the originals were stolen, and a lot of worthless forgeries left in their place."

For a moment the room was so still that the crinkling of a shade at a half-open window seemed like the report of a pistol. Clinton sat staring incredulously at his friend, a rush of crimson dyeing his face to the roots of his curly brown hair.

"Stolen!" he snapped out the next instant. "But that's impossible, Bob—at least, here. I've told you the system I use with the vault. Nobody goes in it without my being on hand—not even Greer. In the old building we had one of the tellers swipe a bunch of negotiable bonds; that's why we're so careful now. Besides, that strong box is as good as a small safe any day, and the key hasn't left——"

He broke off abruptly, with a queer sort of gasp, and the bright color faded swiftly from his face.

"You don't——" he began, in a hard voice.

But Bainbridge had seen the question in his narrowing eyes, and shook his head quietly.

"Not now," he said quietly. "When I first found out about the substitution I was wild enough to believe anything, but the minute I set eyes on you, old fellow, I realized how crazy I was. If you have time I'll tell you a little of what I'm up against, and you'll understand why it is I wonder sometimes whether every man on earth isn't crooked or hasn't his price."

There was something in his voice which brought a swift affirmative response from Clinton, and as Bob briefly outlined the things which had followed the discovery of that safe-deposit box in New York the other man listened with absorbed interest. By the time the recital was finished the cashier's eyes sparkled with anger.

"By Jove! what a lot of scoundrels!"



he exclaimed. "I knew a little of how things were run, Bobby, but this is worse than I ever imagined. To think of their winning over Thompson, who, we always supposed, was A-one. Of course, he must have been responsible for those fake papers."

He stopped abruptly, and stared at Bainbridge with the look of one to whom something very curious and very interesting had just occurred.

"Say!" he went on swiftly. "Do you know that Tweedy owns stock in this bank?"

"Of course I don't," Bob replied. "Do you suppose I'd have come here if I had? How much?"

"A fifth of the hundred thousand capital. What's more, we have a good slice of the State money on deposit here. I wonder if— Pshaw! It's impossible. With every desire in the world to get at those papers of yours, Greer wouldn't have done it—he absolutely couldn't. I tell you, old man, I know! Even if he had found out my half of the combination—which I don't admit for an instant—the strong box remains. There's only one key to it, and that's been in my possession every minute of the time. The box couldn't be forced with anything less than dynamite, and you saw yourself when I unlocked it yesterday that there wasn't so much as a scratch on it anywhere. It's out of the question, of course, but the coincidence is rather odd."

"Decidedly so," Bainbridge said.

He asked a number of questions, which disclosed the fact that Tweedy and Greer were on comparatively friendly terms, or as much so as the latter was on friendly terms with any one. But, though a motive was thus established, not a single possible way by which the president could have got at the package of papers presented itself.

Clinton even had his superior help him open the vault on the pretense of checking up some securities, but without telling him of Bainbridge's presence. Then, when the old man had returned to his office, the two friends made a thorough examination of the strong box, but with no satisfaction.

"Nothing doing," Clinton sighed. "I was sure before that it hadn't been tampered with; I'm positive now. Thompson's your man, Bobby; take my word for it."

It certainly seemed so. Nevertheless, as Bob was driven rapidly on the return to Augusta, racking his brain as to a possible means of getting a hold on the attorney-general, his mind harked back several times to the significant fact that Tweedy and Greer were more than chance acquaintances.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE MAN ON THE TRAIN.

DURING the remainder of the day and night a dozen wild schemes for forcing the truth from Thompson passed through Bob's brain, only to be discarded as impracticable. Against such a man, secure in his official position, and in the reputation he had made for himself, persuasion would be utterly useless; force equally so. As for bribery, while Bainbridge felt no compunctions in fighting his enemies with their own weapons, he had no intention of giving the members of the ring the hold on him they were so eager to get. Besides, he had a notion that Thompson had not yielded to money, but, like his own father, to ambition and a love of power.

Be that as it might, Bob finally decided that it would be almost hopeless under present conditions to count on any help from the papers which would have proved his case so irrefutably. The instant they reached Tweedy's hands he would destroy the whole batch, of course. There remained but a single card to be played—Rupert Forbes.

If Hepbron succeeded in his search for the man there would still be a mighty good chance of putting Tweedy, at least, behind the bars. Forbes needed no papers, no evidence, to prove his case. His name had been forged to stock transfers which could not be destroyed. Any first-class, unbiased handwriting expert could bear witness to that crime. Any competent mental specialist could testify not only that the man was perfectly sane,



but that he had never been deranged, and that his committal to the private asylum on Oak Island had been the result of a conspiracy to prevent his appearing against the man who had robbed him.

Unfortunately the detective had failed so far in finding any trace of this vital factor in the game. Bainbridge had received no word whatever from the man, and as he descended to breakfast the following morning he determined to take an early train to Boston and look into the matter.

He bought his usual paper, and, after he had given his order, spread the sheet out before him. An instant later a grim smile curved his lips at the sight of the heading of one of the columns on the front page.

The article was brief, but amazingly clever. It mentioned no names, it really told nothing definitely; but as a means of arousing interest, and stirring the curiosity of the reader to the bursting point, it could not have been surpassed.

It hinted in thrilling, awe-inspiring terms that a dastardly attack was being made not only on the administration, but on certain great State industries by a number of political malcontents and renegades, headed, it was supposed, by a man whose name was widely known. It dwelt at length on a mysterious interview which had taken place in the state-house the day before, at which the unscrupulous leader of this attempt to upset good government was supposed to have delivered his ultimatum.

It bristled with such phrases as: "His excellency could not be seen," "The attorney-general denied himself to visitors for the remainder of the day," "Senator So-and-so refused to talk for publication," "The well-known capitalist, John Tweedy, who is staying at the Augusta House, had nothing to say," and so on indefinitely. Without stating a single actual fact, it gave the impression that something tremendous was in the air, and it was calculated to put the average reader on his tiptoes, scarcely able to wait for the additional details which the astute editor promised to ferret out "in time for our next issue."

"Clever," murmured Bainbridge, as he attacked the breakfast. "Exactly like those ads which start in by saying: 'Watch this space,' and proceed little by little to enlighten the anxious public. In this case, however, I have a notion that they'll devise a more stirring dénouement than usual."

Quite unperturbed, he finished his breakfast, and started for the station. He had reached a point where he almost ceased worrying over the future. The papers he regarded as lost beyond recall; no effort of his, however strenuous, could bring them back. One of the best detectives in the country was on the trail of Forbes, and Bainbridge could do nothing whatever to aid him. It was one of those moments of calm which come sometimes in the midst of stirring events. A storm might follow, but Bob did his best to forget that completely, and to rest and relax his tired nerves while he could.

There being no parlor car on the train, Bainbridge took his seat in the smoker and lighted a cigar. There were perhaps a dozen other men in the car, none of whom he knew, and he was consequently somewhat surprised presently to notice that a young fellow sitting across the aisle seemed to be unusually interested in him.

The stranger was slim and dark, with keen black eyes and straight black hair. He was dressed in very good taste, and looked to be about Bob's own age or a trifle older; Bainbridge's first thought was that he might be some chance acquaintance he had forgotten.

To test this theory, he met one of the other's furtive glances fair and square, his lips curving the least bit in a faint smile. Instead of bowing, the stranger turned testily away, a dull red creeping up from the turnover collar.

Some three minutes later, however, the young man arose in a nervous, impulsive manner, crossed the aisle swiftly, and bent over the back of the seat in front.

"You're Mr. Bainbridge, aren't you?" he asked, in a low, pleasant voice.

Bob nodded. "I am," he returned



calmly. The notion had just come to him that perhaps the ring had put a man on his trail, though this was certainly an odd way for a sleuth to start operations.

An embarrassed smile flashed into the stranger's face, and he straightened up a little, so that his hands showed as they clasped the back of the plush-covered seat. They were rather unusual hands, too, shapely and muscular, with long, slender, vibrant fingers, such as one sees sometimes in a watchmaker or a man proficient in the most delicate sort of mechanical work.

"I've always wanted to meet you, Mr. Bainbridge," he said slowly, "and thank you for what your father did for me. I never got a chance to thank him, you know. I never even had a chance to prove that I was grateful, or to show him that I realized how much I owed to him until the other night, when I did my best to help his son and his two partners out of a hole. I'm Jack Berliner, you know. Of course, you heard about it from Mr. Tweedy."

## CHAPTER IX.

### FRESH HOPE.

FOR the fraction of a second Bainbridge sat quite still. His quick-acting brain had realized in a flash that he had stumbled on something which had to do with his fight against Tweedy, and which might be invaluable. Who this stranger was he had not the least idea, but he knew that it was up to him to string the fellow along until he had what information he wanted. His heart was thudding unevenly, and his nerves tingling, and he managed to retain an outward semblance of cool composure, even to summon a smile to his lips.

"It was very good of you to come to the rescue," he said quietly. "I'm sure that what you did more than clears the debt you owed my father."

The dark chap's eyes flashed, and he made an eloquent, emphatic gesture with his hands. "No, sir-ee!" he exclaimed swiftly. "I couldn't do that if I lived a thousand years." He cast a swift

glance about, and, seeing that most of the other passengers had gathered around a card game at the other end of the car, he went on in lower tones: "When Governor Bainbridge pardoned me, he did what not one man in a hundred would have done. I was tried and sentenced fair. I was one of the best cracksmen in the business, if I do say it myself, and they caught me with the goods. Nobody but a man like your father could have guessed that I was sick of it, and meant to turn over a new leaf, and live straight after that job. But he gave me my chance, and I did live straight, too. A lifetime isn't long enough to pay a debt like that."

He paused, a strange light in his eyes, and stared for a second at Bob, who was almost afraid to breathe, lest he should break the spell.

"Do you know, Mr. Bainbridge," Berliner went on presently, in a different tone. "I hated like sin to open that vault the other night. It's funny, isn't it, how a fellow falls in love with respectability, and gets to hate his old ways? If it hadn't been on your account, and because there really wasn't any stealing about it, I'll be hanged if I'd have done it."

At last Bainbridge understood. Inside him everything seemed to be bubbling up in a wild froth of joy and relief and excitement. He had an insane desire to laugh aloud, which he suppressed with difficulty. And back of everything was a swift appreciation of Tweedy's diabolical cleverness in using this ex-crook's gratitude as a powerful weapon against the very man for whom it was felt.

"And how did you—open it?" was all he said. "I've been really very curious."

Berliner laughed, and spread out his slim, sensitive fingers.

"With these, of course," he answered. "Sense of feeling, you know. Sort of a gift, I reckon. I can feel the tumblers drop when I'm turning the combination with the other hand." He illustrated in pantomime against the back of the seat. "For such a simple thing it took me the



dickens of a while. When I was in practice I could work 'most any combination in short order."

"How about the strong box?" Bainbridge asked, his eyes fixed intently on the other's face.

"Skeleton keys," Berliner answered succinctly.

Bob's gaze never wavered. He was studying the other keenly, searchingly, trying to understand what lay beneath the surface.

"That was Tuesday night, wasn't it?" he asked. "You returned the papers, I believe——"

"Wednesday night," supplied Berliner, as the Bangor man had hoped he would. "They didn't have time to go over them that same night, so Tweedy said."

There was the briefest sort of pause before Bainbridge could bring himself to voice the last question:

"And you say—you really did this because you wanted to help me out?"

"That's what."

"You wouldn't have done it for Tweedy alone?"

"Not on your life! He started in first with some hot air about bringing up some old trick I'd turned unless I did what he wanted, but pretty quick I told him to can it. 'You can cut that out right off the bat,' I says. 'I got a boney-fide pardon from the governor, and that clears me of everything. You can't scare me into thinking you've got anything on me, 'cause you haven't. But,' I says, 'there's something else. Is this going to help young Mr. Bainbridge? Is he in on the deal?' 'Of course he is,' snaps back Tweedy. 'Ain't he my partner?' 'Enough said, then,' I says. 'I'll do what you want for him because his father made an honest man of me; but nobody else on earth could make me put my hands to a safe door again.'"

Bainbridge drew a long sigh of relief, and leaned back against the stuffy plush curtains.

"Turn the seat over, and sit down, won't you?" he said, in an odd, repressed tone.

Slightly puzzled, the other did so;

then, with a swift, impulsive motion, Bob bent forward, his eyes flashing.

"Tweedy lied to you!" he said, in a low, vibrating voice. "He lied to you from beginning to end! We are not friends, but the bitterest enemies. I've found out what sort of a rotten grafter he is, and I mean to show him up. Those papers would have done it. I put them in the vaults of the Brampton Trust in order to keep him from getting hold of them. You thought you were replacing them that second night, but you weren't. You simply put back a bundle of forgeries, not worth the ink they were written with. Tweedy kept the others. You see what's happened? Instead of helping me, as you wanted to, you've been gulled into playing right into the hands of a man who would stop at nothing—absolutely nothing—to bring about my ruin."

For a second after Bainbridge ceased speaking, Berliner sat staring at him in tense silence. His face had turned brick red, and on his crimson forehead a vein throbbed and pulsated rapidly. His eyes were wide and full of rage, which was the more terrible because of the man's unexpected self-control.

"Is that straight?" he ripped out at length.

"Every word of it."

"The hound!"

The suppressed fury in the man's voice was indescribable. Suddenly he half rose from his seat, only to subside again with an audible grinding of his teeth.

Bainbridge was watching him eagerly, intently. "What do you mean to do?" he asked quietly.

"Do!" cried Berliner. "I'm going back to Augusta and show up the rotten scoundrel! I'm going to police headquarters and blow the whole deal! And then I'm going to find Tweedy and smash—his—fat—face—in!"

Bainbridge's brain had been working swiftly, and now his lips curved in an odd, faint smile.

"That would be gratifying, but hardly practical," he said slowly. "I can tell you a much better way of getting square than that."



## CHAPTER X.

## CROSSED WIRES.

THE two men left the train at Brunswick. There would be no east-bound train for nearly an hour, so Bainbridge hastily led the way to a garage, and within ten minutes they were being driven swiftly back to Augusta.

Whether or not he was taking a wise step Bob could not quite determine. He had no hope of recovering the papers. They were undoubtedly lost beyond recall. But he felt that there was just a chance of frightening Abner Greer, by suddenly confronting him with the ex-cracksman, into implicating his more astute partner in crime, John Tweedy.

This might have been accomplished much more simply, of course, by the direct testimony of Berliner himself, for the man was ready to risk even his liberty to repair the damage he had unwittingly been the cause of. Bob would not hear of it, however. Knowing Tweedy as he did, he felt that the boss would slip out of it somehow, just as he had slipped out of so many more serious situations.

There had been no witnesses to Tweedy's first interview with Berliner. One of his henchmen, Ed Cawley, had accompanied the cracksman to Brampton to take charge of the papers and to return the substitutes. On both occasions Cawley and Greer were the only witnesses to the opening of the vault. The situation, therefore, resolved itself into a contest in veracity between an ex-criminal and a man with every advantage of wealth and power and influence on his side. The result could not be for a moment in doubt. Tweedy would win, Berliner would be sent up, and harm, rather than good, would come of the attempt.

But if Greer could be forced into implicating the arch-plotter, that was altogether a different matter. Whether it could be worked or not, Bob had no idea. At least there was a chance, and if it succeeded it would be one more nail for the coffin of the State boss.

At Gardiner, Berliner was left in the store of an acquaintance to await Bain-

bridge's return. Bob had no intention of risking a chance encounter with any of the ring, which would spoil his game at the very beginning.

It was half past twelve when they reached the garage in Augusta. Barton was not there, but the proprietor said he was just across the street, having dinner, and promised to find him and have him at the hotel within ten minutes.

At the Pequoit House, Bob dismissed the hired chauffeur, and went at once to the telephone booth to call up Clinton and make sure of catching Greer that afternoon. Giving the number to the operator, he entered the booth, and closed the door. He had scarcely taken up the receiver when, without the slightest intention, he found himself listening to a conversation between two men:

"I tell you he's kept some of 'em out. I know, because I went over the batch three times before burning 'em."

"But how could he?" The second voice was faint and far away, and held a querulous intonation. "I thought you told me that Ed never let them out of his sight."

Bainbridge gasped, and the sudden, tumultuous beating of his heart drove the blood, a hot, crimson flood, into his face. The speakers were John Tweedy and Elihu Crane, the third member of the Big Triangle! Moreover, they were talking about——

"He lied to me!" snarled the boss angrily. "He admits now that the old fox slipped 'em into his office for a minute while he was helping shut up the vault."

"I told you not to trust anybody in that deal!" snapped Crane icily. "If you'd gone yourself, as I advised, this wouldn't have happened. What's missing?"

Bob's eyes were wide and eager and bright as stars. He pressed the receiver closer to his ear, hoping, praying that no interruption would come for a minute or two longer.

"Two letters about the Fish River property—you know what they were. The Allagash agreement; that account of the Penobscot Trolley franchise that Greer was so scared about; the——"



"Hush!" groaned Crane. "That's enough. The most dangerous of the lot. You've made a frightful mess of the whole affair. We've got to get them back, and do it soon." There was the briefest sort of a pause. "Listen! I'll leave Portland in less than ten minutes. I can just catch the train." Click! The voice was cut off in a flash, and the irritating tones of central drawled:

"Excuse me, please. You wanted Brampton two-seven-seven, didn't you?"

"Yes," answered Bainbridge. "And please hurry."

Scarcely able to restrain his impatience, Bob shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, while the girl took her time in making the connection. His brain was in a whirl; he could scarcely credit the good fortune that had come to him on the wings of chance.

Some of the papers—and the most precious—were still in existence. Abner Greer had retained them, either because their contents implicated himself, or—what was more likely—in order that he might have a hold on the more powerful Tweedy. All Bob had to do was to beat Tweedy to Brampton, confront the president with Jack Berliner, and—

"Hello!" he snapped. "Brampton Trust? Give me Mr. Clinton, please."

He did not try to make his friend understand. He simply found that Greer would be in after one-thirty, hinted that something new and important had developed, cautioned George to keep his mouth shut, and rang off.

Hastening past the desk, he remembered Hepbron, and stopped to tell the clerk where he was going, and give orders that any messages arriving by wire should be forwarded at once. Then, snatching a letter the man handed him, he hurried out to where his own car was waiting, leaped in, and was off.

## CHAPTER XI.

### A GOOD BLUFF.

THE letter was from Edith Stafford, and before reaching Gardiner Bob had time to glance hastily through it. There were, however, other matters of such vital interest to be considered that

he soon thrust the epistle into his pocket, to be gone through carefully at another time, and gave himself up to planning the coup he hoped to make.

Berliner was overjoyed at the unexpected turn things had taken.

"I hope I'll meet that lying scoundrel face to face!" he said vindictively, as they flew along through the open country. "I'd sure like to give him one straight from the shoulder."

"I should say, if we delay long enough in Brampton, your wish is quite likely to be granted," Bainbridge answered, with a shrug. "I only hope they won't show up too soon. I'd hate very much to have them appear before we get what we want from Greer. We'll have to depend mostly on bluff, you know; and I have a notion that, with Tweedy and Crane to back him, Greer would stiffen up decidedly, and probably throw us down hard."

Once off the main road, and safe from any chance of being overtaken by Tweedy, Bob told the chauffeur to slow down, and take things easy. He did not wish to enter Brampton until the president was safe back in the bank. The shock of being suddenly confronted with Berliner—a shock which they had planned to give Greer—would be rendered negligible if they should chance to encounter him in the street.

It was, therefore, a quarter of two when the car approached the trust company from the side opposite that on which the windows of the president's office opened. Bob entered first alone, and, finding the coast clear, made haste to smuggle his companion into Clinton's private office.

There was no time lost in outlining the situation to the amazed and furious cashier, who approved of their plans with an almost savage eagerness.

"Yes, he's alone," he said grimly, as he sprang up and started toward the door. "Come on, Bobby. I can hardly wait to tell the old sinner what I think of him."

He led the way straight to the president's office, the door of which he thrust open without the formality of knocking. Annoyed at this unwonted intrusion



upon his privacy, the older man glanced up swiftly, his lips parted for a sharp reprimand. The words were never uttered.

For an instant his eyes rested on the black, angry face of Clinton in uneasy wonder. Then fear leaped into them, and his face turned white as parchment as Bainbridge and Berliner followed close behind.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Greer," Bob said blandly, closing the door behind him. "No doubt you understand what I'm here for."

For a second the president did not answer. One hand was gripping the chair arm with a force which brought out the bony knuckles dead white against the brown, wrinkled skin. The other rested on the desk, and trembled visibly. His face was white, and stricken, and old; his eyes so despairing that Bainbridge was conscious of a sudden touch of pity.

It was emotion wasted, however. There was a convulsive swallowing on the part of the older man, a sudden stiffening of his gaunt frame, and a second later he spoke with a very fair simulation of his usual sarcastic manner.

"I may be dense, sir," he retorted, "but I must confess that you have the advantage of me."

Bainbridge raised his eyebrows. "Indeed?" he murmured. "Then I shall have to be explicit. I want those papers." His voice took on a sudden hard, inflexible quality. Greer began to tremble again. "The man who opened the vault at your behest and extracted personal property belonging to me, which you replaced with forgeries, has confessed. Unless you restore them to me here and now, without delay and without quibble, I'll go straight to the nearest magistrate, and have a warrant issued for your arrest."

Greer's momentary pose of defiance vanished like a pricked balloon, and he sank back in his chair, his lips white. The blow had fallen with such unexpected suddenness, the manner of Bainbridge was so hard and unrelenting and sure, that his collapse was not to be wondered at. Twice he moistened his dry lips before he could speak.

"The papers—are no longer in—my possession," he stammered.

"Not all of them, perhaps," Bob flashed back instantly; "but out of those you sent to Tweedy you kept back, unknown to him or any one else, six or eight. I want them. You understand?"

The president stared at the young man before him as if he were something uncanny. How did he know what Greer himself had fondly supposed no one knew? How had he found out something of which even the all-powerful Tweedy was in ignorance?

For a moment or two the president sat dazed and helpless. Then his crooked brain began to work again, haltingly at first, but with swiftly increasing acumen and cunning.

Supposing he saved himself by giving up those papers, what did he lose? Nothing, save a weapon he had hoped to have against the powerful State boss. Tweedy would never know. When he found certain ones missing from the bundle of papers, he would suppose that they had never been preserved by his late partner. If he did suspect and inquire of Greer, all the latter had to do was to deny that he had ever seen them, and stick to it.

The color came slowly back into the president's thin, narrow face; the tense, strained expression faded. The situation was presenting possibilities he had failed to see in that first awful moment of shock. It began to look as if he would be able to extricate himself from an exceedingly tight place, after all. He cared nothing for Tweedy or any of his other associates as long as they remained in ignorance of his treachery.

"Supposing what you say is true," he said quietly, a touch of sly cunning in his narrowing eyes; "supposing that I am in a position to hand you these papers. Do you agree to let the matter drop, totally and completely?"

"I do!" Bainbridge returned. "Of what Mr. Clinton's attitude will be I have no idea."

Greer frowned and flashed an anxious glance at the angry face of his cashier. Here was a new complication, but one which he would, no doubt, be able to



handle somehow, in spite of the fact that the young man owned a very considerable block of the bank stock.

"You pledge your word to remain absolutely silent concerning my share in the matter from this time forth?" he went on, turning back to Bainbridge.

Bob hesitated. He did not care about tying his own hands to that extent. It was impossible to tell what the future would bring forth; what need might some day arise for making the whole matter public. A qualified refusal was trembling on his lips, when, all at once, he heard the low, vibrant humming of a powerful motor car. It might be only a coincidence, but still there were not many high-power cars in Brampton.

"Yes," he answered quietly.

With a quick, satisfied nod, Greer arose, and hastened to a small safe built into a corner of the room. Outside, the car was coming nearer and nearer. Bob prayed that the safe might be open. It was. The president swung the door ajar, fumbled for an instant in an inner drawer, and straightened up with a long envelope in his hand—just as the car stopped directly in front of the bank.

"There, sir," the older man said, extending the envelope to Bainbridge. "I shall trust you to keep your word."

Bob leaped forward, and took the packet from his hand. Like a flash he had torn it open, and whisked through the contents. It was all right. They were the papers he had never expected to see again—the papers which would restore his strangle hold on the ring. He thrust them back into the envelope with a sign of relief, just as the silence was shattered by a booming, angry roar, which could have come from but one man in the State of Maine:

"I don't care if he is busy! Get out of my way, or I'll have you fired out of your job before you can get back to your desk!"

With a gasp of horror, Greer fairly flung himself on Bainbridge, and tried to tear the envelope from his fingers. Bob twisted easily out of his frenzied grasp, however, tucked the papers safely into an inner pocket, and buttoned his coat.

Thwarted in his attempt to recover what had suddenly become so infinitely precious, the president staggered back and collapsed into his chair with a moan of utter despair.

Berliner squared his shoulders; Clinton's frown vanished, and was swiftly replaced by a look of eager expectation. And in a flash those four pairs of eyes, each holding a different expression in their depths, were turned toward the closed door.

## CHAPTER XII.

### BUSTED.

AN instant later the door was flung open to admit two men. The first to enter—big and bulky and impressive, seeming to dominate the situation by sheer physical force—was Tweedy. The other, who kept slightly in the rear, was short and slim and inconspicuous, with a Vandyke beard, at which he plucked nervously now and then, and a pair of pale, close-set eyes, which never seemed to rest long on any one object. This was Crane.

It might have been noticed, however, that while Tweedy stopped short, and stared at the group before him with an expression on his heavy face which was very much akin to dismay and consternation, it was Crane who swiftly and quietly closed the door, and set his back against it, his glance flitting from face to face, his own features remaining absolutely impassive.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Bainbridge said, with a grim smile. "You have arrived about thirty seconds too late."

Tweedy's jaw dropped, and for a second his heavy, pendulous face took on a look of extreme discomfiture. Then he glared at Jack Berliner fiercely.

"What's that man doing here?" he demanded loudly. "I know him. He's a convicted felon. He ought to be in jail. Why don't you answer, Greer? What's he——"

A vicious nudge from behind made him break off abruptly. There was a murmured word, a sharp glance, and, with an incoherent mumble of protest,



the great, the mighty Tweedy gave place to another; it was Crane who now stood to the front, sweeping the interested quartet with his shifting eyes.

"This is quite a surprise, Bainbridge," he said coolly; but his suaveness was tempered by a terse, snapping undercurrent in his voice. "You say we are too late. Might I ask just what you mean?"

Bob's lips were parted for a triumphant retort, when suddenly he remembered his promise, and closed them again.

"I rather fancy you must know without my telling you," he returned, after a momentary pause.

Crane's lips curled. "We have not all of us your advantages in higher education," he said sarcastically. "If you will be good enough to cease uttering enigmas, and talk plain English, we shall be very grateful."

A faint flush came into Bainbridge's face, and his eyes narrowed. "You want plain English? Very well, Mr. Crane, you shall——"

A sharp knock at the door made him stop and glance in that direction. Crane turned to open it, but George Clinton was ahead of him. The intruder proved to be a telegraph boy, with a message for Bainbridge.

The latter stepped swiftly forward, signed the book, and ripped open the yellow envelope, every eye in the room fixed on his face as he did so.

He would have been more than human had he not shown a little of the satisfaction and triumph which filled his soul at the sight of the single line of writing the sheet contained. This display was repressed in an instant, however, and, smoothing the telegram between his fingers, he turned again to Crane.

"You want plain English," he repeated, in a terse, hard voice, "and you shall have it. When you persuaded this man here"—and he made a swift gesture toward Berliner, whose face was black as any thundercloud—"by a tissue of lies to open the vault of this bank that you might steal my property, you thought you'd turned a mighty neat trick

which would put me just where you wanted me. You failed. I still have evidence which will put you both behind the bars of the Maine State prison as surely as I stand here. What's more, I mean to place that evidence without a single moment's delay before the governor himself, and we'll see what sort of a defense you'll have to offer him."

"Bah!" snarled Crane contemptuously. "A fig for your evidence! A pack of forgeries such as you tried to work on Garrett Thompson—not worth the paper they're written on."

Bainbridge shrugged his shoulders slightly. "You'll have some difficulty proving that these are forgeries," he retorted, unable to resist the temptation of making the little man wince. "Two letters about the Fish River property—you know what they are." He mimicked Tweedy's angry tones so perfectly that the fat man started in dismay. "The Allagash agreement. The account of the Penobscot Trolley franchises—and others. Taking all in all, they make about as damning a collection of documents for their bulk as I've ever seen."

Crane's face had turned livid, and he darted a glance of suspicion at Greer which made that individual cringe in his chair and turn white. His spirit was undaunted, however, and he turned back to Bob, his eyes sparkling with hate and defiance.

"Perhaps in addition to all these other bits of evidence," he snarled viciously, "you've got that precious lunatic, Forbes, up your sleeve, ready to bring him forward at just the psychological moment of this promised investigation into our manners and morals."

Bob's lips curved in a delighted smile. "Not up my sleeve," he returned, almost pleasantly; "but Hepbron, a detective employed by me, wires me that Rupert is on his way to Augusta. When he arrives I'll bring him around to your hotel, if you'd like to talk with him."

This was the last straw that broke Crane's already strained self-control. Livid with fury, his slight frame shaking with the passion which gripped him, he began a tirade of denunciation, defiance, and abuse which swept the smile



from Bainbridge's lips, and made him take a swift step forward.

"Stop that!" he cried sternly. "That sort of talk may go with your satellites and henchmen, but it won't with me. Keep a civil tongue in your head, or I'll give you a good, old-fashioned wallop-ing." He hesitated an instant, his face hard and determined.

"Just one thing more before I leave you," he went on swiftly. "You may think, in spite of everything, that I haven't got you. You'll be wrong. You may think you're going to wriggle out of this scrape, as you've squirmed out of certain others, by bribery and corruption and every cowardly, criminal dodge the mind can conceive. You won't. I give you my word, here and now, that I'm going to break up the ring of rotten grafters who are misruling the people of this State into so many pieces that no human being can ever put it together again, and nothing on earth can stop me! Get that? Come, fellows, let's go."

In absolute silence the three young men filed past the furious, vindictive Crane; past the cowering, frightened Tweedy, from whose ponderous figure, and pendulous, mottled face, every trace of dominance had vanished, and walked out of the room.

The door had scarcely closed behind them before Jack Berliner gave a start, and half turned.

"Ain't I going to have a whack at the cur?" he exclaimed disappointedly.

"Didn't you get a good look at him just now?" Bob asked quietly.

"Sure, but——"

"String up a pillow in your room to-night, and punch that instead," Bainbridge broke in contemptuously. "You'll get as much satisfaction out of it as you would in hitting Tweedy just now."

As they moved toward the front of the bank, from the closed door of the president's office came a surge of wrangling voices, shrill and deep, quavering and snarling, which rose and fell interminably, like the noise of breakers on a rocky coast.

"Sounds as if Greer was getting his,"

Clinton chuckled delightedly. "I hope they give it to him good."

It was at least half an hour later, and the car was leaving the last straggling cottages of Brampton behind, before Bainbridge remembered Miss Stafford's letter, and made haste to draw it from his pocket.

This time he did not hurry, but read it slowly and carefully, with now and then a sparkle in his eyes or a faint smile curving the corners of his sensitive lips.

When he had finished he turned back and reread the last paragraph:

The end of your letter provoked me a little. Were you fishing for compliments, or were you really in earnest? Of course, you don't know me awfully well, so at the risk of falling into your little trap I shall tell you here and now, explicitly, that I am not in the least a flighty, weather-cocky sort of person. I made a mistake about you once, but that was before I knew you at all, and there was some slight excuse. But now, nothing the newspapers may print against you, nothing which people may say—and people can say some very nasty things, you know—can make me ashamed of you or lose faith, or cease for a moment to give you my fervent good wishes for success in the wonderful fight you are making against such desperate odds.

Bainbridge replaced the letter in its envelope, and put it carefully away in an inner pocket. For some time he sat staring straight ahead of him, with unseeing eyes. Then he sighed faintly.

"She's a thoroughbred, if there ever was one," he murmured to himself.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### A MASTER OF MEN.

JOHN TWEEDY, limp as a wilted weed, flabby as a jellyfish, gazed hopelessly at Elihu Crane, who had finally ceased to snarl and rage about the room like a caged wild cat.

"It's no use, Crane," said the broken-spirited boss, "we're done for, and you might as well realize it. He'll keep his threat to go straight to the governor, and so he'll get those infernal papers before Thompson, who'll find they ain't forgeries this time. He's got Forbes again. Berliner'll peach, and take the chance of ducking Thomaston, Prison



by turnin' State's evidence. Why, 'twouldn't surprise me if even old Greer got a hustle on to abandon a sinking ship—the cursed, sneaking traitor!

"We're up against a granite wall at last—up against it," he went on. "That infernal, ungrateful young wolf, son of the man we made governor of the State for two terms; son of the man we took into partnership, and made prosperous and rich and powerful; this ingrate has turned on us, and pulled us down, and means to strip us of everything.

"He'll do it, too, Elihu," the big man continued, in a queer, plaintive whine, in ludicrous, pathetic contrast to his usual tones of bluster and arrogance. "He can't be stopped. We've tried. We've played every card. I was for trying to placate him, but no, you said fight. You thought we could down him because he was young and inexperienced. I had doubts all along. I saw the devil in him; I saw he was a fighter to the last ditch. I saw——"

"Oh, for mercy sake, cut the whine!" snarled Crane, waving his hands wildly above his head. "We're whipped; I know it. We're whipped because you've lost your nerve, and there isn't an atom of courage left in your carcass. We'll

have to make the best terms we can, that's all. We'll have a chance for that, for it never would do to have all the truth come out—the governor'll realize that. If it did, our party'd never hold an office in the State in the next twenty years. We'll have to make terms, and mebbe we'll be able to save enough from the crash to keep us from becoming town charges in our old age. Now let's put our heads together, and try to reckon out what we will do to save a few crumbs."

"You mean," sighed Tweedy, "let's put our heads together to reckon what Bob Bainbridge'll let us do. We've got to ask him. We've got to knuckle to him. We've got to crawl."

Crane's contempt for his partner was complete. "Crawl," he sneered. "Crawl as much as you like, but, take it from me, you'll never gain anything from Bainbridge that way. He's a man, and it's men he respects. Why, if I could have him in your place to carry through my ideas and plans, I could hold this State in the hollow of my hand for the next twenty years. He's a natural master of men, and there ain't nothing he wants and goes out after that he won't get."

### Muffs for Men

ALTHOUGH the muff is now exclusively an article of feminine apparel, it was when first introduced to England, toward the close of the sixteenth century, used by both men and women.

In fact, in the seventeenth century it was generally regarded as an essential part of the dress of a man of fashion. The muffs then used were somewhat similar to the present fashion—large and bulky.

### Savages in Cops' Clothes

MUCH money is made out of cast-off English police uniforms. Quantities are bought by African traders, and exported to various parts of the "Dark Continent," where they are exchanged for palm oil, ivory, skins, and other merchandise. It is by no means an uncommon sight to see a swarthy savage dressed in the uniform of a London policeman, and wearing the regulation helmet of the force.

### Beaten by His Hair

THERE are times when I envy my hair," remarked the man who had failed in seventeen different business enterprises.

"Because why?" queried his wife.

"Because it is coming out on top," explained he of the many failures.



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# TOP-NOTCH

## TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

VOL. 9, No. 2

JULY MID-MONTH ISSUE



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# TOP-NOTCH

## TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

July 15

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1912

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NEXT ISSUE, THE AUGUST, OUT JULY FIRST



# Crucial Fire

By  
Burt L. Standish

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)



## CHAPTER I.

### THE DESERTED CAMP.



WIDE sweep of the guide's paddle sent the canoe into the dusky shadows of the giant hemlocks overhanging the narrow, crooked stream. Following a swift, practiced downward thrust of the bit of polished ash, causing a swirl of boiling, bubbling water, the frail craft snuggled its nose against a sloping bank of soft, vivid moss, strewn with fragrant pine needles.

Miss Stafford stepped ashore with the lightness of one thoroughly at home in this rather tricky type of craft, and glanced searchingly around. It was very still and very shadowy here among the towering pines and hemlocks, and, though she knew that just beyond that screen of balsam thickets lay the camp of her friends, the girl was conscious of a faint, unwonted uneasiness. A single straight line showed suddenly between her delicately penciled brows, lending an odd touch of firmness to the otherwise distinctly feminine face.

"I thought you said Miss Whittemore would meet me here," she said, turning toward the guide, who now stood leaning on his paddle.

"That's what she told me, miss," the man answered, in a harsh, unpleasant voice, his glance shifting toward a break in the thicket. "I reckon mebbe she's back in camp lookin' after supper."

Miss Stafford's frown deepened as her eyes swept over the hulking, unprepossessing figure before her. In a way, she had looked upon the man more or less as one does a machine which, at the pressing of a button or the pushing of a lever, accomplishes what it is designed to do, and nothing more. Now, for the first time, she began to wonder whether she had not taken a great deal for granted when she accepted without question his explanation of her friend's failure to meet her at the little railroad station and allowed the guide to bring her these eighteen miles into the trackless Maine wilderness.

It was characteristic of Miss Stafford, however, that no hint of this inward uneasiness showed in her face.

"Quite possible," she agreed coolly. "We'll just go up and find out."

Without further delay, she turned and started along the faintly defined patch which led from the creek back into the forest. There was no trace of hesitation in her manner; the way was very familiar. She swung rapidly along



the winding, twisting path, both gloved hands uplifted to thrust aside the thick, low branches of the young firs and balsams; the heavy, high-laced boots crunching twigs and small branches underfoot; the whole slim, brown-clad figure a charming picture of youth and strength and perfect independence.

The thicket was of considerable extent. Though a practical lumberman, Jasper Whittemore had a love of nature and a sense of the beautiful, which had caused him to leave untouched the immediate surroundings of the small shack where he stayed while looking after the cutting and getting out of the timber. It was far from the main logging camp, but so screened by vegetation that Miss Whittemore and the friends she so often had up there for a week at a time were never troubled by the crowd of rather rough woodsmen.

Edith Stafford pushed hurriedly through the last mass of bushes and stepped swiftly out into the little glade. Here a dusky twilight reigned. The trees reared their straight, symmetrical heights like the columns of a cathedral, their interwoven tops making a thick canopy through which but a feeble ray of the setting sun penetrated. Vague, mysterious shadows infolded everything, blurring even the familiar outlines of the trim, low-roofed, sprawling cabin which stood not more than fifty feet away.

The girl saw enough, however, to start her heart thudding unevenly—enough to send a queer, unpleasant shiver down her spine. No bright, welcoming gleam of firelight shone through the open door from the rough stone fireplace of the living room. The door was not even open. The solid shutters were fastened tightly over every window. Desolation cried out to her from every side and brought her teeth together over her lips to keep back the startled exclamation swelling into her throat.

For a moment or two she stood quite still, fighting bravely for self-control. A dozen bewildered questions and vain regrets flashed through her mind in an instant. Where was Celia? Where was Mr. Whittemore? It could not be pos-

sible that she was alone in the woods, eighteen miles from civilization, with this hulking riverman, of whom she knew nothing except what he had told her!

The possibility speared her with a sudden chill. Then the fear which had kept her from turning around gave place to a greater horror of having the man so close behind her. Summoning all her resolution, she whirled swiftly.

"What does this mean?" she demanded severely. "There's——"

She broke off abruptly, the blood draining swiftly from her face. The guide was not there! No one was there! The balsam thicket from which she had just emerged was as still and immovable as everything else about her.

She held her breath, and listened, but only the rapid pounding of her heart sounded in the eerie, uncanny, horrible stillness of the glade. Unconsciously she lifted her clasped hands to her breast. Her eyes flashed fearfully to right and left, and it seemed to her agitated fancy that the swiftly deepening shadows were creeping toward her with a horrid, stealthy motion, like weird creatures of the woods bent upon her destruction.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE GRIP OF THE WOODS.

FOR a full minute Miss Stafford stood rigid. The conviction which had been slowly forcing itself upon her for the past few minutes was now a dreadful certainty. Not only were the Whittemores not here, but they had not come into the woods at all. The telegram signed with her friend's name, asking her to come up to the camp for a few days, had been a deliberate forgery. Up to this moment she had not questioned the genuineness of it, for she knew that Celia had planned a short trip to the woods after her visit to Moosehead was over. She had been a bit surprised at her friend's failure to meet her at the small settlement of Hancock, but the presence of the guide and his explanation that Miss Whittemore was busy straightening out the camp made



this seem reasonable enough, especially to one who had not been troubled by a passing doubt regarding the affair.

Miss Stafford was a young woman of considerable nerve and cool independence. She had been brought up to take care of herself, and, though she was really very feminine, with nothing in the least mannish or eccentric about her make-up, she had never experienced an attack of hysterics or a fainting spell in all her twenty-two years.

The present situation, however, was enough to get the nerve of any one. To be alone in the trackless Maine woods, eighteen miles from the nearest settlement, with darkness coming on, was bad enough in itself; but it was not that which caught the girl in a grip of terror, and made her tremble in every limb. She was not alone; that was the worst of it. It was incredible that the guide should have brought her here only to abandon her in the deserted camp. The person who had forged that telegram must have done so with a purpose. Who the unknown was, or what that purpose could be, she did not know; but she had a horrible conviction that somewhere, not far away, perhaps watching her at that very moment, some one was lurking, biding his time to make his presence known.

The thought sent a wave of faintness over her which she had to fight down desperately with all the will power which was in her. She must keep her head at any cost!

The shadows were deepening with sickening swiftness. Only the trunks of the giant trees were visible now in the failing light. Their tops were quite lost to sight in the shrouding darkness which made even the near-by cabin little more than a blurring bulk against an almost inky background.

Suddenly a hope flashed into the girl's mind; perhaps she might force an entrance to the log structure. She would be little better off, but at least she could make a fire and banish some of these nerve-destroying shadows. An instant later she was running lightly and swiftly over the soft carpet of pine needles toward the cabin.

She tried the door first, flinging herself against it with all her strength, but made no impression whatever upon the solid planking. In almost frantic haste she went from one window to another, bruising her hands even under their covering of heavy dogskin gauntlets, with an equal lack of success. It seemed the irony of fate that those stout shutters and heavy iron bolts, which at other times had filled her with a comforting sense of security, should now, by keeping her out, heap despair upon the terror that beset her.

Reaching the door again, the girl leaned against it, with a long sigh of utter weariness. She was as tired as if she had tramped the whole distance from Hancock. What a fool she had been to leave the little settlement on the mere word of a man she had never seen before! A picture of the cramped, crowded general store with stout, buxom Mrs. Freund smiling at her from behind the rough counter flashed into her mind and made her fairly sick with longing. Then suddenly she began to wonder whether by any miracle of chance the treacherous guide had left the canoe floating at the landing place.

It seemed most unlikely, but her brain leaped at the possibility, and in a moment she was moving swiftly and silently back toward the stream, finding her way more by instinct than by sense of sight; for by this time she could scarcely see a dozen feet before her.

She pushed through the tangled thickets, her heart fairly in her mouth. The intense stillness frightened her, but a sound of any sort would have been paralyzing. She had a horrible feeling that hands were stretching out of the darkness to snatch at her. And it was with a sob of thankfulness that she stumbled out at length onto the mossy bank, a streak of blessed daylight showing through the thinning branches, the cheerful murmur of running water sounding in her ears.

For an instant she hesitated, not daring to face the worst; then, with a quick, determined movement, she hastened a few steps to the left, bent over the stream, one hand clasping a stout



branch, and looked. The dying light was sufficient to shatter the fragile hope. Her quest was vain.

Even though she had told herself that there was small chance of the guide's having left the canoe there, the hope that he might have done so was all that had forced her through the interminable balsam thickets. She had pictured herself leaping into the light craft, thrusting out into the stream, and paddling with frantic haste away from this desolate place, out of the net which seemed to encircle her as invisibly as a spider's web, yet strong as spun steel.

The shock of failure brought with it an overwhelming rush of despairing weakness. Crouching there on the soft moss, she tried desperately to think what was left her to do. The creek was the only highway she knew leading to the outer world. There was a rough wagon road somewhere, she remembered vaguely, but it led to the lumberjacks' quarters in the depths of the wilderness. If she could only find the beginning of it, the long, weary tramp through the darkness could hold no terror half so gripping as the helpless waiting for that unknown something which could not long be delayed. But how could she hope to find the trail?

The faint cracking of a twig struck on her tense ears like the explosion of a bomb. In an instant she was on her feet. In another she was flying blindly away from the stream straight into the depths of the forest. Branches lashed her face, but she did not feel them. She stumbled, once or twice she fell, but she was unconscious of anything until she found herself panting, half sobbing, her back against the sturdy log wall of the cabin, her head bent forward, and her eyes striving to penetrate the black thickets from which she had just emerged.

Some one was following her. She could not see him; she could not hear him; she only knew some one was there. And the terror of the unknown was more dreadful, more nerve-racking, than any visible, tangible danger could possibly have been.

All at once the harsh scream of an owl sounded across the stillness. It was so sudden, so totally unexpected, that the girl's knees crumpled under her like paper, and, with a low gasp, she slid into a limp heap on the soft pine needles and lay quite still.

### CHAPTER III.

#### "THE CRAB."

MISS STAFFORD was firmly convinced that only the sudden appearance of a lighted lantern saved her from going quite mad. Of course, it wasn't really as bad as that. It takes a great deal actually to upset a well-balanced brain. She would probably have fainted, or gone into hysterics, or taken some other means of relieving her overwrought nerves without permanently or even temporarily losing her mind.

As it happened, she did none of these things. At the moment when an ominous humming was beginning to sound in her ears, she caught sight of a spot of light flickering among the trees, and instantly became more composed.

Just how to account for this effect is a little difficult. She had no hope that the lantern was carried by a friend, but the mere fact that some one was approaching with a light which would banish the unknown terrors of that awful darkness was encouraging. Moreover, the gleam appeared in almost the opposite direction from the river, and there was just a chance that the newcomer might be a woodsman having nothing to do with her predicament, who would act as her protector.

Consequently, as she eagerly watched the approach of the swaying, flickering light, her courage began to return, and she became more composed. The fact that no further sounds came from the balsam thicket was also reassuring; and presently she scrambled noiselessly to her feet, moved softly to the corner of the cabin, and waited.

She would see the newcomer long before he discovered her presence, and she had made up her mind that if there was anything suspicious or alarming in his appearance or manner, she would



slip quietly around the building, steal into the tangled undergrowth which bordered the little glade, and remain hidden there until daylight, if necessary.

The light danced and swayed among the tree trunks, growing rapidly brighter and more cheering. Presently Miss Stafford could see that two people were approaching, instead of one, and realized that they were walking straight toward the cabin. A moment or two later she realized, with a sudden suffocating sense of joy, that one was a woman.

For an instant she could scarcely believe her eyes, but there could be no doubt of it. A man carried the lantern, for she could make out distinctly his trousers tucked into the heavy, high-laced boots. As clearly, she could see his companion's swinging skirts; and, though their bodies and faces were in the shadow, she felt at once that they must be Celia and Mr. Whittemore.

They had been called away unexpectedly, of course. That accounted for the whole nerve-racking business. Probably they had intended getting back in time to meet her. The strange disappearance of the guide meant, undoubtedly, that he had simply gone to look for them. What an idiot she had been to be so frightened!

With a stifled gasp of relief, the girl left the shelter of the cabin and ran toward them with all her speed.

"Oh, Celia!" she cried, as she approached. "You have no idea how thankful I am to see you. I've been frightened almost to——"

The words died on her lips, and for an instant her heart seemed to stand still. The man had suddenly raised his lantern, bringing the faces of the two into sharp relief. He was not Mr. Whittemore, nor any one she had ever seen before. As for the woman, Edith almost screamed aloud with the shock of beholding that face instead of Celia's glowing, wild-rose prettiness.

It was lean, and brown, and wrinkled, with thin lips drawn over toothless gums, and a great hooked nose, seeming almost to meet the protruding, tufted chin. All that was as nothing, however, compared with the eyes which

dominated the whole withered, aged countenance. They were bright, deep-set, and black, and gleamed incongruously with life and fire and palpable wickedness.

In the second that she stood staring, spellbound, Miss Stafford remembered the day, months ago, when she had glimpsed this same hag flitting through the trees some miles to the eastward of the camp. Celia had caught her friend's arm and urged her homeward almost at a run, explaining that the creature was one of the scourges of that section of the big woods.

She was known far and near as Mother Jones, though most of the French-Canadian lumberjacks called her "The Crab," while the bosses, whose crews she debauched with vile liquor, applied to her various other unflattering sobriquets. Besides her main business of illicit liquor selling, she was reported to have various side lines, such as smuggling, stealing from camps, and the like. Altogether, she was the bane of the lumbermen's existence, but, try as they might to convict her, she had so far proved too clever for them.

When Edith Stafford realized that this was the creature who was approaching, she quite lost her head, and, with a startled cry of terror, she whirled and fled blindly into the darkness.

## CHAPTER IV.

### IN THE NET.

THE man's voice rang out in a hoarse bellow for her to stop. Then came an odd, uncanny pad-pad of pursuing feet, and an instant later a skinny hand clutched her arm with astonishing strength, bringing her to an abrupt halt.

"There, there, dearie!" cackled the old woman, when Miss Stafford had ceased her vain efforts to tear herself loose; "there ain't nothing to be frightened of. Why, old Mother Jones wouldn't hurt a flea, let alone such a lovely young critter as you be."

Edith suppressed a shudder, and faced the hag with the courage of desperation.

"How dare you touch me!" she de-



manded. "Where are my friends, the Whittemore's?"

The dreadful old woman chuckled delightedly. "Where, indeed! They were detained, my dear, an' sent word for Mother Jones to take care of you till they showed up."

Miss Stafford turned white, and flashed a despairing glance at the man, who had come up and stood close beside her. He was burly and rough-looking, with an unnaturally red face, but he did not seem actually vicious.

"Won't you tell me what it means?" she appealed to him. "What is it you want of me, and what—do you mean—to do?"

The fellow laughed rather foolishly, and Miss Stafford caught more than a whiff of alcohol. Too late, she realized that he was far from being himself, and wished that she had remained silent.

"Don't be afraid, miss," he returned, with tipsy gravity and solicitude. "We don't want you; we're after bigger game."

Her eyes widened. "Then why have you——"

"Jest a sort of bait," he chuckled. "There's a feller, Bainbridge by name, down in Bangor, who's been raisin' ructions an' makin' hisself kinda disagreeable to certain parties. When he finds the charmin' young lady he's keepin' comp'ny with is up here alone, he's likely to drop everythin', an'——"

"Shut up, Jim Brody!" snapped Mother Jones suddenly. "You ain't even got the little sense you was born with."

The man's face took on an injured expression. "Well, ain't I right?" he queried, in an aggrieved tone. "Won't he chase up here after her an' give 'em a chance to——"

"Shut up, you fool!" repeated the old woman, her eyes gleaming fiercely. "You're drunk!"

"Ain't drunk!" he retorted stubbornly; "'n' ain't a fool. I'm tellin' you jest what Tweedy's man said this mornin' when he was sendin' the——"

With incredible agility, the old woman leaped forward, her hideous face thrust

out and her blazing eyes holding the man's dazed blue ones in thrall.

"You shut your fool mouth!" she snarled significantly, "or you'll be sorry all the days of your life. Men that blab don't last long around these parts. Understand? Well, we'll git along, then."

She caught Miss Stafford's wrist again and jerked her unceremoniously across the glade. Brody's jaw dropped, and his face seemed to pale a little, as if an inkling of what she meant had penetrated his fogged brain. He made no comment, however, but took his place on the other side of Mother Jones; and the oddly assorted trio moved briskly forward, the lantern shedding a little circle of light about their feet, which seemed only to emphasize the outer surrounding blackness.

The girl no longer protested or hung back. Those brief, broken sentences had given her the key to a situation which at first struck her as utterly absurd, and then chilled her blood with the realization that it was only too plausible.

Bob Bainbridge and she were very good friends indeed, though nothing of the sentimental had passed between them. The girl had begun by misjudging the youngest member of the Big Triangle, that powerful, unscrupulous organization which had such a strangle hold on the industries of her native State. She had been led to believe him even more corrupt than his father, from whom he had so lately inherited a big share in the business—his father, whose name, in common with those of his partners, Tweedy and Crane, was synonymous with graft and land-grabbing, packing of juries, influencing judges, and every possible sort of corruption which could be safely put through by means of the tremendous grip the ring held on the dominating political party.

But later Miss Stafford had learned the truth. She had found that the young man had been totally ignorant of his father's reputation, and that of the latter's associates. The shock of awakening, brought about by the discovery of a secret collection of papers which showed up the ring only too clearly, had been a



terrible one; and when young Bainbridge recovered from it he set about with grim determination to right the wrongs for which the Big Triangle was responsible.

The girl had been his confidante in every detail of the fight which followed. Realizing that their corruptly won wealth and position of power was menaced, Tweedy and Crane had resorted to every unscrupulous means at their command to prevent those papers from being made public. They had almost succeeded, but not quite; and, only two days before, Edith had received a long letter in which Bainbridge told her that it was only a question of hours now before he would place those incriminating documents before the governor himself.

Miss Stafford realized that the ring had been forced into the last ditch. She knew enough of their methods to feel sure that they would stop at nothing to silence the man who was so dangerous to them. It was quite possible that they had taken this despicable means of luring Bainbridge into the woods, where they practically reigned supreme, and where, in the guise of accident, almost anything might happen with little chance that the responsibility could be cast upon them.

The thought terrified her beyond words. She tried to tell herself that Bob would see through the trick and refuse to place himself in the power of his enemies; but deep down in her heart she knew that he was not the sort of man to let physical danger stand between him and a woman in peril.

He must be stopped. There must be some way of warning him of the danger which lay before him. If she could but escape somehow and make her way back to Hancock in time to keep him out of the woods!

She came to herself with a start, and glanced swiftly around. The shadowy trees were thicker than ever, but much smaller than those in the glade, and plainly a second growth. Underfoot were rotted remnants of ancient slashings. On every side were dense tangles of witch hobble, maple, and other hard

woods. Miss Stafford might have passed this way before, but she had not the slightest recollection of it.

"Where are we?" she demanded suddenly. "Where are you taking me?"

"Never you mind," snapped Mother Jones acidly. "You'll find that out soon enough. Come along, now; no nonsense!"

She jerked viciously at the girl's arm, evidently still resentful at Brody's babbling; and, flashing a sidelong glance at the hideous profile, Edith felt a cold chill flickering on her spine.

A moment before, she had prayed fervently that Bainbridge might stay away, but now her resolution began to waver. Unless he came, what was going to happen to her? She was completely in the power of this creature, and every moment was adding to the fear and loathing the hag inspired. She had told herself that if she could bring Bainbridge to her side by a single spoken word, she would refuse to utter it. How long would that determination last?

## CHAPTER V.

### WHAT THE TELEPHONE TOLD.

AS young Cheney strolled back through the car and disappeared, Bob Bainbridge glanced out of the window, a heavy frown returning to his clean-cut face. He had nothing in particular against the fellow, except that his father was one of John Tweedy's closest friends, but neither had there ever been anything in common between the two which would warrant the affected, empty-headed chap deliberately seeking him out on the train for no other purpose, apparently, than to bore him with idle chatter about a recent house party at Moosehead.

"I don't give one whooping hang whether there were six good-looking girls there, or sixty," Bob growled irritably; "even if one of 'em was Celia Whittemore. She's good fun, and all that, but I never was very crazy about just pink-and-white prettiness. Besides, I've got something a whole lot more important than her to think about."

He had failed in his efforts to induce



the governor to take steps against Tweedy and the ring of political grafters. In spite of the fact that the papers in his possession contained absolute proof of criminal practices which should by right have put the other members of the Big Triangle in prison, the chief executive had declined to act upon them.

He had given as his reasons the irretrievable harm such a step would do to the dominant political party, the possibility of a great business depression—even a panic—resulting, and other specious excuses which were not in the least convincing to young Bainbridge.

Bob saw instantly that the evil power of the ring gripped even the highest office in the State, and, though the blow was a bitter one, it made him only the more determined to down the grafters.

"Very well, Mr. Duncombe," he had said coldly, as he stood up to end the interview. "Since you refuse to take the matter up, I'll see what the people at large have to say about it. I have a notion that their verdict will be somewhat different."

He left the statehouse, drove directly to the station, and took the first train for Bangor. It was his intention to place copies of his documents, their authenticity properly sworn to, in the hands of every editor of importance in the State. If they, through fear or influence, refused to publish them, he would do so himself in some form which could be distributed broadcast.

It was nearly one o'clock when he reached Bangor, and he drove directly to the old Bainbridge estate, out on Stillwater Avenue. He had not been home for nearly a week, and, having greeted his aunt, who kept house for him, he hurried up to his rooms to get into another suit.

While the valet was laying out a complete change of clothes, Bob went into his den and sat down at the telephone. He had an irresistible desire to talk to Edith Stafford. It seemed ages since he had seen her, and, though he knew he would have no time to call that afternoon, he wanted just to hear her voice and ask her to keep the evening for him.

It was her widowed mother who answered the call.

"Why, no, Mr. Bainbridge," she said, in answer to his question; "Edith isn't here. She went up to the Whittemores' camp yesterday for a few days."

"The Whittemores!" Bob exclaimed, in astonishment. "Why, I thought they were at Moosehead—or, at least, that Miss Celia was."

"She has been there, but evidently they went up to camp without stopping here. At any rate, they're there now, for Celia telegraphed yesterday asking Edith to come up at once, and saying that she would meet her at Hancock. She'll probably be back by the end of the week, at the latest."

Bainbridge let the receiver click into place, and stared frowningly at the wall in front of him. It seemed odd that he could have got things so mixed up. He had a very decided impression that Paul Cheney had left Moosehead barely twenty-four hours ago, and that Miss Whittemore remained behind at the Randalls' camp. Even if she had intended departing for her own place that afternoon, it would be quite impossible for her to reach Hancock ahead of the train Edith had taken from Bangor. Of course, she must have gone ahead of Cheney, but still—

"Everything is ready, sir," the valet announced from the doorway.

"All right, Kellog," Bob returned absently. "You needn't wait."

The man withdrew noiselessly, and for a moment or two longer Bainbridge sat silent. Then, with a determined movement of his shoulders, he reached out for the telephone directory, flicked over the leaves until he found the number of the Whittemore house, and called it.

The maid who answered said that none of the family was in town. Mr. Whittemore was, she thought, in Boston. Miss Celia was visiting at Moosehead Lake. No, she was quite sure none of them was at the camp. They intended going up there in about a week, but would probably stop off a day or two in Bangor before that.

Thoroughly alarmed, Bob instantly



called up Whittemore's office, and found that the maid was right. The lumberman was on a trip to Boston, from which city he would not return for several days. His partner was quite certain that there was no one at the woods camp.

As he slammed the receiver into place and sprang to his feet, Bob's jaw was set, and his face had turned a shade less brown. Something was wrong—decidedly so. Of what it was he had no idea. He only realized that the girl he cared for had gone alone into the great woods at the summons of a telegram which could not possibly be what it purported, and the thought galvanized him to action.

Jerking out his watch, he saw that he had barely twenty minutes in which to catch the afternoon train north, and with a single leap he reached the dressing-room door.

"My woods clothes, Kellog!" he snapped. "Be quick!"

He was tearing off his collar and scarf as he spoke. The valet ran to a closet, seized some garments, and flung them on a table; then he dove for a pair of heavy high shoes. For a moment or two the air seemed filled with flying wearing apparel.

"Don't stop to help," Bainbridge ordered, as he dragged on a pair of khaki breeches. "Get a car around from the garage instantly. I've got to leave here inside of five minutes, so hustle!"

Four minutes later he ran down the great staircase and shot out of the wide doors toward a high-speed runabout that had just driven up. Flinging himself into the seat beside the chauffeur, he called out an order which sent the car whirling down the curving drive, out between the massive granite posts, and along Stillwater Avenue toward the city.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE MAN WITH THE GUN.

THROUGH the forest several miles to the northeast of the Whittemore camp a young man was trudging briskly. He was tall and well set up, with a thick crop of blond hair decidedly in

need of cutting, keen, clear blue eyes, and a purposeful mouth. His fair skin, not tanned, but burned to the color of a brick, and peeling in spots, bore evidence to a somewhat prolonged exposure to the sun and wind. So did his rough, heavy shoes, worn at the heels and scratched and cut in many places. So likewise his clothes, which were torn and wrinkled and altogether disreputable. A small pack was strapped to his back, while hanging to a heavy leather cartridge belt was an ax, a sheath knife, and, in a holster, an automatic thirty-eight. His pockets bulged with many things, among them a thick notebook and several folded papers. As he walked, he whistled cheerily.

The young man did not look quite like an ordinary camper. He was alone, to begin with, and his outfit was rather meager for one who had come into the woods for mere pleasure. Neither did it seem likely that he was on a walking tour; men do not choose the trackless Maine woods for that sort of diversion. Lastly there was on his mobile face the unmistakable expression of one who has brought a trying, difficult, arduous matter to a successful conclusion, and is just a little bit pleased over his cleverness.

Presently he came out of the forest upon a wide stretch which had recently been cut over. On every side were piles of slashings. Tops lay propped on the limbs like wood in a fireplace, their resinous needles sear and brown, dried to a crisp by the heat of a rainless spring and early summer. Everywhere throughout the tangled mass of waste showed the butts of great trees cut off breast-high when the snow covered the ground, a good five feet or more of the best timber in the log left there to rot.

The young man surveyed this evidence of wasteful, reckless lumbering with a slight frown, and his whistling ceased.

"I don't know a thundering lot about the practical part of the business," he muttered, as he toiled laboriously through the wilderness; "but I'll be hanged if I don't think they leave about as much as they take out. There's wood



enough here to carry half the people in the State through a winter."

He made no further comment until he reached the other side of the three-quarter-mile stretch. He needed all his wind for other purposes. As it was, when he finally scrambled up a steep, stony rise half an hour later, he was breathing hard and streaming sweat from every pore.

"Whew!" he gasped, sinking down under the shade of a sturdy hemlock. "That sure gets a fellow's wind. I thought I was in pretty good shape, too."

After a few moments of mopping his crimson, perspiring face, the young man slipped the pack from his back, settled comfortably against the tree, and drew the leather-covered notebook and several papers from his pocket.

Unfolded, one of the latter proved to be a map drawn on oiled paper of a district divided into sections, many of them bearing brief notes in a fine, clear hand.

"Nothing crooked here," he murmured, after a moment's study of the tracing. "Too near civilization to risk it, I reckon." They've got a clear title to this tract, all right, though I'd hate to think how they worked it. This must be Whittemore's section."

He turned a little to glance down into the shadowy depths of the primeval forest which awaited in solemn, patient grandness the devastating ax and saw which must one day be their portion. He was thinking regretfully that such a day could not be long delayed, when suddenly he realized, with a flash of keen, swift interest, that standing close by the massive trunk of a noble pine was the figure of a man.

Just why he disregarded the first natural impulse to make his presence known, the blond chap could not quite tell. In the big woods, chance encounters become events instead of casual incidents. There was a curious immovability about the stranger, however, and such an odd expression of purpose in his attitude, that the watcher remained silent.

His first thought was that the un-

known was after bear. It was out of season, to be sure, but the natives of the big woods usually have small scruples about breaking the game laws. The stranger's bent head as he peered steadily past the tree trunk, and the position of the rifle he carried, seemed to proclaim him a would-be poacher.

For fully five minutes the young man sat there in perfect silence, his eyes trying to penetrate the depths of the silent forest, or fixed intently on the motionless figure of the stranger. Then suddenly, though he could not hear a sound, he knew that something was approaching. The unknown had stiffened abruptly, and was beginning to lift his rifle little by little to his shoulder.

In another moment the watcher heard a faint rustle among the trees, which grew rapidly louder. The next instant his blood turned cold as a moving object appeared within the range of his vision. He saw that it was no deer or bear, but a *man*, whose life was threatened.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE NEWSPAPER MAN.

THE shock was so totally unexpected that for an instant the blue-eyed chap sat staring stupidly at the unknown individual who was walking straight into this deadly trap. Then his glance veered incredulously to the man behind the tree. The rifle was raised to his shoulder now, and its owner was taking aim with a deliberation which proclaimed his murderous purpose.

"Drop!" yelled the horrified witness, springing suddenly to his feet. "Down! Quick!"

The words had scarcely left his lips before the crack of the rifle split the silence. The newcomer crashed face downward among the ferns, but whether in time to escape the murderous bullet or not, it was impossible to say.

With a hoarse cry of rage, the man who had given the warning yanked out his automatic, and fired three shots in quick succession at the spot where he had last seen the would-be assassin. Then, realizing that the ruffian had dis-



appeared, he plunged down the incline, heard the sound of crashing bushes to the right, whirled, and started in pursuit.

His efforts were unavailing. Evidently the unknown was much more familiar with the country than he, for the noise of his flight through the tangled undergrowth grew swiftly less distinct. The emptying of the automatic had no effect whatever, and at length the pursuer, realizing how futile was his attempt, stopped, and turned back toward the more open forest just as the bushes were parted hastily, and a tall, broad-shouldered, pleasant-looking young man stepped into view.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the blond chap, his face lighting up. "He missed you, then?"

The other smiled. "Thanks to you, he did. I've an idea, though, that if it hadn't been for that very timely yell of yours, I'd have been punctured good and proper. I suppose he got away?"

"Yes; but perhaps we can trace——"  
 "I'm afraid not," put in the dark-haired man. "He knows the country too well." His smile deepened, and he held out his hand. "My name's Bainbridge," he added, "and I'm very glad to meet you."

"Mine's Cabell," returned the other promptly, as he shook the proffered hand, "and I——"

He broke off abruptly, his eyes widening.

"Say," he went on swiftly, in a rather different tone, "you're not Bob Bainbridge of Bangor, are you?"

"Why, yes, I happen to be."

There was a brief pause, during which Cabell's face changed curiously. It seemed to grow suddenly hard and cold; his eyes narrowed, and a swift frown flashed between his light brows.

"I guess I'd better go back and get some things I left on that hill," he said abruptly, without glancing at his companion.

The latter nodded, and fell into step beside him. He had noticed the sudden transformation, but decided to pay no attention to it. No doubt the fellow was one of those who thought him part and

parcel of the Big Triangle in every sense of the word. It would be an easy matter to correct the misconception, but Bob had neither the time nor inclination to give an explanation to a man he would probably never set eyes on again. He simply walked along beside the other, chatting easily and lightly, in spite of Cabell's almost churlish coldness. When they reached the knoll they would part, each to go his own way, and the affair would be finished.

A trifling little breeze had scattered Cabell's papers over a considerable radius, and, as a matter of course, Bainbridge helped him gather them up. Having rescued the map from a bush some rods away, Bob was at quite a loss to understand the sudden rush of color which showed through the other's sunburn as he almost snatched the tracing from the extended hand and folded it carefully.

"Well," he said defiantly, "I suppose you know now what I'm here for?"

Bainbridge lifted his eyebrows a trifle. "I really can't say I do," he returned politely. "Some matter to do with lumbering, perhaps?"

Cabell frowned incredulously. "Oh, come now! You're not as dense as all that!"

Bob's smile vanished, and his lips tightened. "I may be dense," he retorted curtly; "but so far I haven't acquired the habit of lying. If you wish me to know, you'll have to tell me in plain English."

His tone brought the color flaming again into Cabell's face, and a glint of anger flared in his blue eyes. For an instant he stood scowling doubtfully at his companion. Then suddenly he squared his shoulders in a determined way.

"I will!" he snapped harshly. "Do you know what I've been doing for the past three weeks? I've been tramping over the better part of this country—especially the northern part. I've inspected the Fish River Tract belonging to the Big Triangle, and I've gone over every foot of the State land for three miles north of that. I'm a reporter on



the staff of the *Portland Lance*. Are you beginning to catch my drift?"

He paused for a second, but, though his face had taken on an expression of keen interest, Bainbridge made no comment.

"I see you are," Cabell continued triumphantly. "I thought you'd sit up and take notice! My paper sent me up here to get evidence of frauds practiced by your company—and I've got it! You pay a miserable eighty thousand dollars for a strip of lumber along the Fish River, and then not only cut that, but four times as much more belonging to the State, to which you haven't a shadow of a right. You stole it, that's all! Millions of feet of timber filched from the people in a most barefaced manner. Thousands and thousands of acres stripped and ruined. You needn't smile. I've got it all here"—he tapped the notebook in his pocket—"and I rather think it will make something of a stir when it comes out in print."

Bob's eyes were very keen and bright, his attitude calmly indifferent.

"I should fancy it might," he murmured coolly.

"It will!" snapped Cabell, provoked at the way his bombshell had fizzled. "It'll make a commotion that will send some big bugs sky-high, and very likely will land 'em down in Thomaston for a term of years. Maybe you think you can stop it from coming out, but you can't—not even by exercising every bit of pull you have down in Augusta."

Bob's expression had suddenly grown serious as he realized that he was wasting precious time.

"My dear fellow," he said abruptly, "I haven't the slightest intention of stopping you. Take your story to the *Lance* with my best wishes for success. Unfortunately I'm pressed for time just now, and can't stop any longer. I hope the fact that you are in arms against the Big Triangle won't prevent you from letting me thank you again most sincerely for saving my life?"

He held out his hand, and Cabell, in spite of his prejudice, clasped it firmly. Then, with a brief good-by, Bainbridge swung down the hill, and was soon lost

to sight among the tangled waste to the westward.

"Bluff, of course," the reporter murmured, as he turned from watching him. "He certainly does it well, though. I s'pose I was a fool to give our plans away, but he sort of got me riled. Funny, but he don't seem at all like what I thought Bainbridge of Bangor, would be."

He glanced suddenly up at the sun, and gave an exclamation of annoyance.

"Jove! I'll have to do some tall hustling to get down to Hancock before dark. Hadn't an idea it was so late."

Hurrying down the hill, he struck off through the woods in a southeasterly direction, and soon disappeared among the shadows. He was scarcely out of sight before there was a slight rustling in a thick tangle not twenty feet from where the two men had stood, and an instant later a slim, muscular boy of about eighteen squirmed into the open and sprang to his feet.

He was dressed almost in rags, but his face was keen and intelligent. For a second or two he stood hesitating, his bright eyes glancing first after the reporter and then across the clearing where Bainbridge had disappeared. Finally, with a quick movement of decision, he started almost due south at a run.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE SIGNALING FINGERS.

CLARK CABELL had not gone far before he realized, with no little chagrin, that for once his usually keen "nose for news" had gone back on him. In his astonishment and discomposure over the discovery of Bainbridge's identity, he had failed to make any inquiry regarding the reason for the murderous attack upon the young capitalist. The latter's cool ignoring of the affair had helped not a little to this end, but still it was an omission which annoyed the reporter decidedly.

"Some poor cuss the gang has robbed trying to get even, I suppose," he thought, as he swung along through the



woods. "They have a way of taking the law into their own hands in these parts. I wish to thunder I'd made sure, though. It might have added a dramatic little touch to my story."

It was too late to repair the omission now, so Cabell presently thrust it out of his mind and devoted all his attention to finding the rough corduroy road he had been told about, which would lead him by devious ways to the little settlement of Hancock.

It was a good hour before he struck it and turned briskly southward. He had made about four miles in this direction when he rounded a bend, and saw, sprawling on a boulder a couple of hundred feet ahead, the tall, gawky figure of a half-grown boy.

He was roughly dressed, and his big hands and feet made him look like an overgrown puppy. His face was dull and stupid, with a yawning mouth, and round, blinking eyes. As the reporter came up, he rose awkwardly.

"Be your name Clark?" he mumbled.

Cabell nodded. As a matter of precaution, to prevent his errand being generally known, he had passed under that name during his sojourn in the woods.

"Yes," he said shortly. "What of it?"

"Nawthin', only Jed Bock wants ter see yer," was the drawling response.

The reporter raised his eyebrows. Bock was a small independent lumberman with a bitter hatred for the Big Triangle, which had led him to give much valuable information to Cabell concerning their more than questionable methods. The newspaper man flattered himself, however, that he had pumped the old fellow quite dry.

"Wants to see me?" he repeated. "What for?"

"I dunno. Suthin' new about what he was talkin' to you before, was all he says. He says you was goin' out to-day, an' gimme five cents to git down here an' head ye off. I've sot here more'n three hours, an' it ain't worth it."

His voice was whining, and his dull eyes full of the injustice of his case.

Evidently he considered that he had been very badly treated.

Cabell frowned a little. He could not imagine anything vitally important turning up since his interview with Bock the day before, and yet he disliked losing a single opportunity for making his case against the lumber robbers as strong as possible.

"Where is Bock?" he asked briefly.

"Mother Jones' Tavern—leastwise, he'll be thar at six o'clock," returned the ragged youth. "Ain't ye goin' to gimme five cents more for waitin' so long?"

"Perhaps," the reporter said shortly. "Where is this Jones' Tavern?"

"Over that way." The boy jerked a thick thumb vaguely toward the west. "'Bout five mile."

The prospect of another night in the woods was not especially alluring to Cabell. On the other hand, if he did not go he might miss some valuable information, to his later regret. It took only a moment for him to decide.

"Are you going that way?" he asked.

"Nope. I'm goin' straight back home."

"Still, if I gave you a quarter," Cabell suggested, "I guess you'd manage to take me to the tavern first, wouldn't you?"

The boy's eyes gleamed covetously. "An' five cents besides for waitin' so long?" he questioned.

"All right; make it thirty cents," the reporter agreed impatiently. "Only let's get started right away."

Without further objection, the youth shambled off down the road at a clumsy dogtrot, which Cabell, to his surprise, found some difficulty in keeping pace with. For a scant half mile the way led along the corduroy track. Then the guide turned abruptly to the right, and plunged through the bushes into a narrow, overgrown path which twisted tortuously through tangled thickets, over ancient slash and rotting stumpage in a bewildering manner which made the newspaper man thank his stars that he did not have to traverse it alone.

There was no attempt at conversation between the two. The boy seemed



bent on earning his money in the shortest possible time, while his companion had no inclination to waste effort in talking to such a stupid bumpkin as the fellow seemed to be. He would have been decidedly amazed could he have seen the youth's face, instead of only the back of his head. The dull, listless expression had vanished utterly, giving place to a look of keen, alert intelligence. The eyes sparkled with gleeful cunning, and the loose lips were pressed tightly together in a determined, purposeful manner, which, had he been aware, would have been most disquieting to the man who followed without the slightest suspicion of treachery.

Unfortunately for Cabell, he had not the conception that there could be anything wrong. He had heard vaguely of this so-called tavern, and gathered that it was simply a deserted lumber camp whose inmates managed to exist in a squalid way by housing any chance woodsman who happened to be caught at nightfall in the vicinity. There were rumors, too, of its being the headquarters for the illicit sale of wretched liquor to the lumberjacks, but that did not trouble Cabell. At the present moment he was not engaged in an investigation of the temperance problem. He meant simply to have his interview with Bock, and then, if the place was as bad as it had been painted, he would go off into the woods, and make his camp under the pines, as he had done so often before.

It was almost six when they emerged into a clearing of considerable extent, and the guide announced laconically: "Here she is!"

The reporter gave one long, searching glance at the ramshackle, tumble-down edifice which stood on the farther side, and instantly decided that a bed under the stars would be altogether preferable to this.

The place had evidently at one time been a camp of some size, with a bunk house for the men, an eating shack, a supply shanty, and all the other appurtenances of a well-equipped outfit. After its original purpose had been served, the new occupants—probably,

squatters, who calmly took possession—had apparently torn down everything but the bunk house, and, using that as a starting point, produced this rambling, distorted, squalid, unsightly structure.

All about it were strewn tin cans, broken utensils, and rubbish of every sort. There were no signs of garbage, but the presence of a number of roaming pigs proclaimed the only reason for its absence from the scene.

As they approached, the place seemed quite deserted. The lumbering youth, now dull and stupid again, was quite at home, however. Having made sure of his thirty cents, he pushed through a sagging door, with the mumbled remark that he would see if Bock had come, and disappeared.

In a few minutes he returned with a slouchy, bearded man of thirty-eight or forty.

"You're Clark, ain't you?" the latter inquired. "Waal, Bock ain't showed up yet, but he'll be along any minute. He's allus on time to a dot. Jest step in, won't ye, an' rest yerself?"

After a moment's hesitation, Cabell followed him into the bare, dirty room, and sat down gingerly in one of the straight chairs beside the rough, home-made table. The bearded individual, George Kerr by name, as he promptly informed the reporter, took another chair, and proceeded to perform his self-imposed duties of host in the absence of Bock.

"Yes," he drawled, swinging one leg over the other, "Jed's a great un for bein' on the dot. When he sends down word this noon as he'd show up at six, I says to the old lady, says I: 'Better kill a chicken, old gal, 'cause Jed'll be here for supper, an' likely his friend.' She done it, an' it's stewin' now, as nice a fowl as ever was. Smell it?"

Among the many other odors of the place, Cabell was quite unable to distinguish anything in the least approaching the aroma of a stewing chicken. Nevertheless, he lied promptly, hoping thus to start Kerr rambling on again, and allow him to watch a curious and very unusual proceeding which was going on back of his host.



The ceiling was of rough boards, crudely laid, and full of knot holes. In the farther corner was an especially large hole, and the reporter had not been seated half a minute before he was amazed to see two fingers thrust through it, twitch for an instant, then disappear.

Only his training in self-possession kept Cabell from betraying surprise at this extraordinary proceeding. As it was, he expressed gratification at the prospect of so appetizing a supper, and, taking off his hat, began leisurely mopping his forehead with a handkerchief, under cover of which he watched the knot hole fixedly.

Swiftly the fingers appeared again, and made that wriggling, signallike motion, and Cabell observed with growing wonder and curiosity that they were slim and white and daintily feminine. A woman in the room above was evidently doing her best secretly to attract his attention, and the realization sent the young man's blood to tingling, and brought a sparkle of excitement into his eyes.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE TRAP.

**I**T'S hot for this time o' year. What do you say to a glass o' nice cool beer?"

In his absorption, Cabell had quite missed the first part of the sentence, but, as he dropped his handkerchief into his lap, and glanced at Kerr, his expression was deceptively cool and collected.

"Beer—here in the woods?" he questioned, with a fairly accurate smile of significance.

Kerr guffawed. "I see you're wise, all right. O' course, I wouldn't offer it to everybody, but, seein' as you're a friend o' Jed's, I kin trust you."

Cabell had not the slightest desire for beer, especially in a place like this, but he made no protest when Kerr rose and shambled across the room. He would do anything to get the fellow out of the way even for a moment, for the fingers had disappeared, and in their place a folded scrap of paper was being thrust through the knot hole.

The door had scarcely closed before the paper fluttered to the floor. The reporter slipped quietly out of his chair, snatched it up, and crept noiselessly back to the table.

It was a long, narrow strip torn from the margin of a newspaper, and at first Cabell was unable to decipher the hastily penciled words which covered both sides. Quickly shifting his position, however, so that the light from the dingy window shone directly on the paper, he was more successful. The scrawl ran:

Don't let any one see you reading this. I am Edith Stafford, of Bangor, and I have been kept a prisoner here for more than two days by the dreadful creature they call Mother Jones. I am never left alone, but I found a bit of pencil this morning, and am writing this sitting by the knot hole while I pretend to read. I heard your voice just now, and know you cannot be one of those who are keeping me here. For Heaven's sake, help me to get away! If you can't manage it alone, then get help from Hancock or somewhere. Above all, if you can only find him, warn Mr. Robert B—

The note broke off abruptly, and for a second or two Cabell sat staring at it, his face flushed, and his eyes shining with excitement. Edith Stafford here! Though he did not know her personally, he was quite aware of her social position in Bangor, and it seemed impossible that she could actually be a prisoner in this wretched hovel so far from civilization.

His first swift impression was that it must be a hoax of some kind. But, as he glanced again at the ragged strip of paper, he felt somehow the sincerity and genuineness of the appeal, and he was stirred by it.

Impulsively his hand dropped to the automatic hanging by his side, and he half started to his feet, intending to force his way to the floor above, when the heavy tread of the returning Kerr made him drop back upon his chair and thrust the note swiftly into his pocket.

Knowing nothing of this old rookery, it would be better for him to catch Kerr off his guard, and force him, at the pistol's point, to show the way to the room where the girl was imprisoned.



With a sociable grin, the bearded man set two glasses of beer down on the table, and resumed his seat.

"There you are!" he chuckled, drawing one of the dirty glasses of "suds" toward him. "Not bad stuff, neither. Here's how."

More to distract the other's suspicions than anything else, Cabell drained his glass almost at a draft, and set it down with a slight shudder. The stuff was horrible, and he wished he had taken it more slowly. Nevertheless, he complimented his host on the brew, and a moment later his hand dropped negligently and easily to his hip, resting within a few inches of the holster.

It was at that instant that the ghastly realization flashed into his mind that the gun was not loaded.

For a second he could not believe that he had been guilty of such criminal negligence, but the desperate hope was swiftly killed by recollection. He had emptied the revolver after the would-be assassin of Bob Bainbridge, and he had not refilled the chamber. At first his mind had been so filled with the identity of the man he had saved that there was room for nothing else. After that he had not given the matter another thought.

"Fool! Fool! Fool!" he kept repeating to himself, vaguely conscious that Kerr was babbling on about something or other, but paying no attention to what it was.

Then he began to wonder by what subterfuge he could get away from his companion long enough to slip a few shells into the chamber of the automatic. He might say that the room was hot, and step to the door for a breath of air. It *was* hot, without any doubt. He fumbled for his handkerchief; then, discovering that it was on the floor, bent over to pick it up.

The action made him oddly dizzy, and when he straightened up and began to mop his perspiring face he was conscious of a queer buzzing in his ears.

"Funny that—B-Bock doesn't—show up," he said, and was struck with the peculiar, far-away sound of his own

voice. "I—I think—I'll step to the—door—and see if he—isn't coming."

He saw Kerr's lips move, but heard only an indistinct rumble of sound. Then, and only then, did a horrible suspicion flash into his mind.

With white face and drawn lips, he dragged himself determinedly to his feet, and stood there swaying. He could scarcely see the door, which looked miles away. He felt as if there was not a particle of strength left in his body. He was not even conscious that Kerr had slipped from his chair and plucked the automatic from the holster.

He tried desperately to clear his clouding brain, and for an instant succeeded. In that single bitter moment he realized to the full the appalling nature of his plight. He thought of the girl above, whom he was now powerless to aid. He thought of the precious papers in his pocket, the fruit of three laborious weeks, which it might now be impossible to replace. Then a rush of deadly physical nausea sent him toppling back upon the chair, his head falling limply forward on the rough, stained table.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE MAN IN THE DOORWAY.

THE racking sickness was the only thing which kept Cabell from completely losing consciousness. For a time, to be sure, he was oblivious to everything, but the period was comparatively brief; and though the spasm left him weak and dazed and washed out—quite helpless, in fact—he still retained the power of realizing dimly what was going on about him.

The room was in semidarkness—or seemed to be. For a long time he was unable to tell how much this impression was due to reality and how much to his drugged brain. He was pretty sure, however, that two or three men were talking together near the door, though the humming in his head prevented him from hearing more than a word or two of what they said.

He had been drugged, of course. Knock-out drops, or something equally



effective, had been put into his drink. It had been planned deliberately. But why? That was what he wanted to know. For what reason had they done it? It could not have been because of Miss Stafford's note. Dazed as he was, the reporter felt quite certain that Kerr could have known nothing of that. It seemed equally impossible that Bock had played the traitor and given these men a clew to the reason for Cabell's presence in the woods. But was Bock here? Had he shown up at all? Cabell strained every effort to collect himself and hear what they were saying.

"—great thing, Jim. Jest wait till the boss gets his blinkers on this hyer book. He won't be tickled—oh, no! The rotten sneak was goin' to have it all printed in the papers."

This was uttered in a loud, triumphant voice which penetrated to the reporter's numbed senses and made him wince. It was his notebook they were talking about. But how had they found out about it? Who had told them?

A lower voice mumbled a question which was answered by the man who had first spoken—Kerr, it sounded like.

"He'll be here to-night or the fust thing in the mornin'. Don't make any matter when he comes, though; he'll find everything here O. K. I wisht to thunder Frenchie'd show up, though. I'm gettin' kinda anxious to know how he made out with— What? Oh, you needn't be afraid o' him. He's a dead un."

Nevertheless, the voices were lowered, and for a time Cabell heard no more. Instinctively he refrained from lifting his head. It seemed that he had no chance against these men in his present weakened, stupefied condition; but he had a vague idea that it was better to let them think him unconscious.

Presently some one crossed the room, and a moment later the flare of a lamp dissipated the darkness. The lamp was deposited with a thump on the table close to Cabell's head, and at the same time something else was dropped beside it.

By imperceptible movements, the reporter managed to shift his position so

that he could peer forth beneath one outstretched arm, and his pulses quickened as he saw that they had laid his notebook down scarcely a foot away. It was one of the most tantalizing things he had ever experienced, for he believed it might as well be hidden in the midst of one of those woodsy tangles miles away for all the chance he would ever have of regaining and retaining possession of it.

His gaze wandered across the room to where three figures lounged against the wall. He did not recognize them, for their faces, as well as everything else in the place, were blurred and indistinct.

One after another, several more burly woodsmen drifted in. They all asked for Frenchie, but Cabell paid little attention to their other remarks. His head was throbbing furiously by this time, and, though he tried to think and plan, he seemed quite unable to focus his mind on anything. Over and over he kept asking himself that single monotonous question: Who had betrayed him? Somehow the answer refused to come.

He was quite oblivious to the fact that the door had been flung open again, and with rather more force than usual. He even missed the tense, breathless, dramatic pause which made itself felt like a series of powerful electric waves coursing around the room. He only came to himself when some one sprang up suddenly, sending a chair crashing backward to the floor, and a single name, uttered in a harsh, vibrating voice, penetrated his fogged brain:

"Bainbridge!"

It was the answer to his question. Like a flash, Cabell flung back his head, and stared. The blur seemed to vanish, and he saw Bob Bainbridge standing in the open doorway, his head high, his shoulders squared, and a faint, cool smile on his handsome face.

The sight acted like a sudden douche of icy water on the half-stupefied reporter. He sprang to his feet, unconscious of the effort it cost him, and, clutching the chair back, stood there swaying.

"You coward!" he cried, his face



distorted with fury. "You miserable, rotten coward! Instead of fighting fair, you take to thugs and drugging! You're worse than your miserable, land-pirate partners! I was a fool to think——"

He faltered, and fell silent. For all the response Bainbridge made, he might have been utterly oblivious to the furious tirade. His eyes were not even turned toward the reporter, but roved swiftly from one to another of the hulking ruffians gathered about the door. His attitude was tense, alert, and eager, as if he were waiting for an explosion of some sort which he knew could not long be delayed.

It was the action of these other men which stilled Cabell and brought that dazed, bewildered expression back into his face. They had leaped to their feet by this time. Some of them stood half crouching, fists doubled. Others were edging forward little by little. Every eye was fixed on the newcomer, and the expressions on the rough, brutal faces told Cabell in a flash that he had made a terrible mistake. Whatever else Bainbridge was, one thing was certain: These ruffians had acted at no behest of his. They were not henchmen and satellites, but bitter, deadly enemies, each and every one of them panting to put their clutch upon him.

It was Kerr who broke the tense silence.

"Blazes!" he roared triumphantly. "Here's luck! Don't let him get away, boys! Slip between him an' the door—quick! We've got him jest where we want him!"

Bainbridge smiled.

## CHAPTER XI.

### AGAINST HUMAN WOLVES.

A WAVE of weakening reaction sent

Cabell staggering against the table, but he caught the edge of it with both hands, and for a few moments managed to hold himself erect. As through a hazy mist, he saw the crowd of woodsmen make a swift, concerted forward rush at the single intruder, who seemed to await their coming without a tremor.

8B

Almost gnashing his teeth in impatient fury at his helplessness, the reporter tried instinctively to stagger forward. He had a vague idea that he might do something to aid Bainbridge against those overwhelming odds, but his legs refused to support him, and, with a groan of despairing anger, he reeled back and collapsed again upon the chair.

A second later there was a sharp thud of knuckles meeting flesh, and a man fell backward out of the crowd, struck the wall with a crash, and crumpled to the floor.

Cabell cried out faintly, hoarsely, with a fierce joy, and his spreading fingers closed unconsciously over the notebook lying on the table. One ruffian was down and out, but there were still five men and a boy left. How could Bainbridge hope to win out against five men, all of them big and husky and hard as iron?

Another smashing blow; another man came hurtling across the room, stumbled, fell, and landed against the table with force which made the dingy glass lamp reel. It was Kerr, panting, disheveled, a streak of blood trickling down his cheek, the glare of wild ferocity in his eyes.

"Two!" counted Cabell huskily, trying to push back the swimming mist through which he beheld the scene.

His eyes veered back to the struggling group by the door. The human wolves had closed in on Bainbridge, and were snapping at him from every side. One hung around his waist; another was trying to trip him; while a third, with shaggy head lowered, and great, clutching hands outstretched, was doing his best to get a strangle hold on Bob's throat. The fourth man and the boy were dodging about, waiting an opportunity to rush in.

Suddenly Cabell's groan of despair changed to a gasp of joy. Bainbridge had clasped the wrists of the would-be strangler in an iron grip. His head went swiftly forward, his shoulders dropped, and then lunged up in a mighty heave which sent the burly woodsman over his back straight through the door,



to land outside in the darkness with a dull, bone-cracking thud.

"Three!" muttered the reporter; and then sharply: "Look out!"

His brain was clearing swiftly, and he saw the third man draw back for a fierce kick straight at Bob's groin. Evidently Bainbridge saw it, too, for he flung his body to one side with a twist which sent the clinging assailant directly in line. The heavy boot struck the ruffian on one shoulder with a force which brought a yell of pain from his lips, and made him release his hold. When he tried to regain that hold, Bainbridge leaped agilely away, caught the boy a buffet on the side of the face which sent him sprawling, and squared himself to meet the frenzied rush of the remaining two men.

It was at this moment that Cabell, happening to glance down at Kerr, saw something which turned his blood cold. The fellow had made no effort to rise, but crouched against the table, supported by one elbow. His eyes were filled with unutterable fury; in his free hand was a revolver, which he had leveled at Bainbridge; he was evidently awaiting a good chance to pull the trigger.

The reporter did not stop to wonder whether he had the strength to get on his feet. He *had* to do it. It was a question of must, regardless of any other consideration. He gripped the table, and surged up. The next instant he brought one foot down with all the power that was in him, straight on that outstretched hand.

Flesh and bone crunched under his heavy shoe. Kerr yelled with the sudden pain. The weapon struck the floor and exploded with deafening crash, the bullet lodging harmlessly in the wall.

Thrilled with savage joy, Cabell kicked the weapon into a far corner of the room, and moved forward, intent on using his partially recovered strength in aiding Bainbridge. He had scarcely left the table and thrust the notebook automatically into his pocket when the uneven fight was terminated abruptly.

Of the three remaining assailants, Bainbridge had disposed of one while Cabell was occupied with Kerr. An-

other—he whose shoulder had been dislocated by the kick of his own friend—cowered against the wall, all desire to fight evidently gone from him. As the reporter turned, Bob was grappling with the last one, and Cabell will never forget that instantaneous picture as long as he lives.

The ruffian was big and massive, with a thick bull neck and tremendous shoulders. Apparently he had been doing his best to gouge his opponent with powerful thumbs, for there were several bleeding scratches just under Bob's right eye. It was equally plain that the cowardly act had roused Bainbridge to the highest point of fury. His eyes were glaring fiercely, his lips were set, and his face was purple with rage.

With the practiced swinging surge of a trained athlete, Bob lifted the fellow from the floor without apparent effort, held him for an instant, then hurled him straight across the room as if he had been a bag of meal.

There was a crash as the man's body struck the table and carried it over; another splintering smash caused by the breaking lamp; the whole room winked out as if a black curtain had been suddenly dropped before Cabell's eyes.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE BEACON OF CATASTROPHE.

FOR an instant the reporter was dazed by the pitchy darkness. Then Bainbridge's voice broke the stillness:

"Can you walk, Cabell?" His voice was a bit jerky and uneven, but that of a man who was master of himself and the situation.

"Yes, I think so," the newspaper man returned huskily.

"Let's get out of here, then. Give me your arm, and I'll help you."

Cabell stumbled forward through the darkness, one hand outstretched, and almost at once he ran into Bainbridge, who was moving toward him. A firm, muscular arm was slipped through his, and drew him toward the door. A moment later the door closed behind them, and they were under the stars.



Bainbridge filled his lungs with a long breath of the crisp, clean night air.

"Jove!" he exclaimed. "It's certainly good to get out of that hole and be able to breathe again. Let's hike along. This won't be a particularly healthy neighborhood for either of us when that gang in there comes to."

Without waiting for Cabell's response, he drew the reporter across the clearing, skirted the forest for a short distance, and plunged in among the trees in a manner which showed that he was quite familiar with his surroundings.

It was some time before Cabell could bring himself to speak. The fresh air and exercise were rapidly driving the mists from his brain, but it was decidedly hard to put into words the shame and regret and intense gratitude which filled him. At length, however, he pulled himself together and broke the rather prolonged silence.

"I want to—apologize—most humbly, Bainbridge," he stammered, "for what I said to you back there—and thank——"

"Don't!" interrupted Bob quickly. "You haven't anything to thank me for. What little I did doesn't affect the debt you placed me under a few hours ago. I'm mighty glad for the chance to pay it up so soon."

"But I was a cad to think you had anything to do with the drugging and all the rest of it," Cabell protested. "You see, I wasn't myself, and I couldn't understand; and your coming in that way, when nobody else in the woods but Jed Bock knew what I was here for, seemed as if it couldn't be a coincidence. Still, if I hadn't been so dazed and stupid, I think I'd have realized that you couldn't be capable of such a dirty trick."

"Well, it's all straightened out now, so let's forget it," Bainbridge said lightly. "You were drugged, then? I wondered if that wasn't it. The minute I looked through the window I knew something queer was going on, but I can't understand yet how you came to be there when I left you headed for Hancock."

"I don't understand myself," Cabell said slowly. "The boy got me there by

a pretended message from Bock. Of course, Bock didn't show up, but even at that I'd have been all right if I hadn't been such a fool as to drink that glass of beer. I——"

The words died on his lips, and he stopped still, overcome with an awful sinking wave of horror.

He had forgotten the girl!

"Wait!" he gasped hoarsely, catching his companion's arm in an almost frenzied grip. "We've got to go back!"

"Back?" Bainbridge repeated, in astonishment. "Why, what——"

"I'm a cursed fool!" interrupted Cabell furiously. "There's a girl back there—a prisoner. She dropped a note through the floor, asking——"

*"Who is she?"*

The words came snapping from Bob's lips, hard and brittle, but with an undercurrent of passionate insistence which made his companion's nerves quiver.

"Mum—Miss—Stafford," the latter stammered, "of Ban——"

He broke off abruptly, and, turning, ran after Bainbridge, who was crashing back through the undergrowth toward the clearing as fast as he could go. It was so dark that Cabell had only the sounds of Bob's progress to aid him. He ran full tilt into tree trunks, he tripped and fell headlong over projecting roots or tough vines. His hands and face were torn and lacerated, his breath began to come in gasps, but still he kept on, driven by that bitter, lashing, tormenting realization of what he had done.

How could he have forgotten—how could he? It seemed an utter impossibility, yet it was only too true. Dazed as he was, and distracted by Bainbridge's unexpected appearance, followed so swiftly by that amazing, unequal fight, the thought of the girl had vanished utterly from his consciousness.

Presently he caught up with Bainbridge, who had slowed down, realizing that a headlong rush through the pitch-black woods was worse than a waste of time. Together they proceeded at a dogtrot, but without the interchange of a single word. Cabell was trying to buoy himself by the hope that they



might yet succeed in the rescue. The girl would still be there, and, even if the crowd of furious men had recovered from the punishment they had undergone, it would be possible to force their way into the house, especially with the advantage of surprise, and reach the room where Miss Stafford was imprisoned. To his credit, the reporter gave no thought of the peril he was running into. He was only too thankful that he had recovered his strength and would be able to give a better account of himself than he had earlier in the evening.

They had gone on for half a mile or more, when all at once Cabell sniffed suspiciously. All day the air had been quite still, but within the last hour a little breeze had sprung up from the south, and certainly at that moment it had borne to him a distinct whiff of burning wood.

That Bainbridge smelled it also was plain from the way he quickened his pace almost to a run. Cabell kept with him, but neither spoke a word. As he hurried on, dodging trees and thrusting out both hands to protect his face from the bushes, the newspaper man was thinking with quickened pulses of that ever-present, lurking horror of the big woods—fire.

Swiftly it seemed as if his fears were realized. A glow like a red beacon began to show through the trees ahead, faint at first, but growing rapidly brighter as they advanced. The smoke became perceptibly thicker, sifting through the heavy branches in little gusts and eddies.

Bainbridge ran straight toward it, and Cabell followed. It looked to the reporter as if the fire was in the very clearing about the tavern, and he knew they had no time to lose if they wished to reach it before the building caught.

It was not until they burst through the last screen of trees into the open that he realized with a choking gasp of horror the awful truth.

The tavern itself was a mass of flames!

Fire poured out of doors and windows, lighting up the clearing with a baleful crimson glow, sending up clouds

of smoke which the rising breeze caught and carried northward in thick gusts and eddies. It burst through the walls and roof, licking yellow tongues which seized upon the tinder-dry planks and consumed them with a loud, spiteful cracking. It was a sight which made Clark Cabell shiver, in spite of the hot throbbing of his blood that seemed threatening to burst his veins.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### ASHES.

THE two men tore across the clearing, stumbling, tripping, but never pausing for an instant. As they approached the burning building, the heat made them throw up their hands to shield their eyes; their hair was singed, and their skin blistered.

Suddenly Cabell saw his companion stop abruptly, whirl to one side, and seize a man who stood staring stupidly at the flaming furnace. It was Kerr, dazed and bewildered by the catastrophe.

"Where is she?" Bob rasped, shaking the fellow violently. "What have you done with Miss Stafford, you dog?"

The fellow cringed under the glare in the young man's eyes.

"I dunno," he mumbled.

"Did you get her out?"

"I dunno," repeated the man dazedly. "I ain't seen her. Most o' the others is out, but I ain't seen her."

Bainbridge flung him into a clump of bushes; then, as he turned toward the building, a horrible thing happened. From somewhere in the depths of the flames came a cry—shrill, high-pitched, and full of terror and mortal agony—the scream of a woman! It turned Cabell sick and faint, and brought a hoarse gasp from Bob Bainbridge's white lips as he flung himself toward the fiery furnace.

Instantly the reporter realized his companion's purpose, and leaped forward just in time to catch Bainbridge around the waist with both hands.

"You can't go in!" he shouted. "It's sure death! You couldn't live a minute!"



With a snarl of fury, Bob twisted around, his face distorted, and struck at Cabell with all his strength.

"Let go!" he panted. "Let go, or I'll smash you!"

Dizzy and half blind with pain, the reporter interlocked his fingers, and held on with every ounce of strength he could muster.

"You can't go," he repeated doggedly. "You'd only throw away your life. I don't believe it's she. She was in this room on the corner, and it's burned to a cisp. She can't be there now. It's some one else."

He ducked his head, fully expecting another blow, but it never came. Bainbridge's clenched hands dropped suddenly to his side, and Cabell felt the muscles of his body relax. The reporter raised his head, but Bob's face was turned away.

"You won't go, will you?" begged Cabell.

"No."

The tone of utter, desolate despair made Cabell's heart throb. He loosened his grip, but Bainbridge did not move—he made no sound. He stood there facing the burning building for a full minute. Then suddenly he whirled about and ran swiftly back to where Kerr had risen slowly and painfully to his feet, and stood staring again at the crimson flames with a dazed, stupefied fascination.

"Where are the others?" Bob rasped, gripping the fellow by the arm.

"Hey?" muttered Kerr dully.

Bainbridge gave him a vicious shake.

"The men who were in there," he shouted fiercely; "the ones you said got out; where have they gone?"

"I dunno," the man whimpered, shrinking as if from an expected blow. "They beat it—over that way."

He jerked a trembling thumb toward the southeast. For a second Bob kept his hold on the fellow; then both hands dropped to his sides.

"Brody's shack?" he demanded.

"Mebbe so," quavered Kerr. "I don't rightly know."

Bainbridge turned swiftly to Cabell, his face set in determined lines.

"I'm going to follow them up," he said briefly. "There's just a chance that she may be with them—perhaps."

He started rapidly across the clearing, and the reporter followed without question. Cabell's heart was cold and dead within him. He longed to say a comforting word or two, but could not bring himself to utter them. He was weighted down with a conviction that Miss Stafford had perished. If she had escaped with the others, Kerr, who had been on the spot from the beginning, could scarcely have failed to see her. Events which followed only served to strengthen this fear.

Bainbridge led the way through the forest in utter silence. He did not make a single stop in all those six weary miles, and when at length they reached the rough one-room log cabin which for years had been the home of Jim Brody, a shiftless loafer of the woods, he strode up to the door, and kicked it open without an instant's hesitation.

The single room, lighted dimly by a smoking lamp, contained five men and a boy, most of whom bore evidence on their faces of the recent encounter at the tavern. They were sitting listlessly on boxes or the cluttered floor; but, as the door banged open, they started up, with frightened, half-guilty expressions and gathered instinctively in a defensive group.

Bob shot a swift, despairing glance around, as if seeking against hope and reason the girl of whom there was no trace. Then, with a long, shuddering sigh, his eyes ranged over the brutal faces of the men before him, and he began to question them in a cold, dead voice which made the reporter shiver.

At first the ruffians swore fervently that they knew nothing of any girl being in the tavern, but Bainbridge swiftly forced the truth from them. Miss Stafford had been there, but since the fire, not only had she disappeared, but old Mother Jones was also missing.

The conflagration had been caused by the careless dropping of a lighted match in a pool of oil from the broken lamp. It had spread with such inconceivable rapidity that the men on the ground



floor had barely escaped with their lives. If the Crab, with all her knowledge of the inside of that rabbit warren, had perished, not a single hope remained for the safety of her prisoner.

At no time did the men show the least inclination of wreaking their vengeance on Bainbridge. They were stunned and bewildered by the catastrophe, but, more than that, the expression in the young man's eyes awed them into inaction. When at length he left the cabin and closed the door behind him, a concerted sigh of relief went up from those who stayed behind.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE FOREST'S ANCIENT ENEMY.

**W**ITHOUT a word, Bainbridge turned back over their trail. He walked slowly and heavily, like a man without plan or purpose. Cabell, his heart full of bitterness and infinite regret for the tragedy of which he had been the indirect cause, kept close behind.

At length the leader stopped. There was a brief pause.

"There's a trail to Hancock somewhere hereabouts," he said presently, in a tired voice.

Somewhat surprised, Cabell fumbled in his coat, and, drawing out a pocket flash light, pressed the button. The brilliant spot of white light fell directly on his companion's face, and showed it set in the hard, bitter, tragic lines of one who has lost that which makes life sweetest and most desirable. As if he realized that the light would betray emotions he chose to conceal, Bainbridge turned away.

"That flash will make it a simple matter for you to pick up the trail," he said. "It must be some twenty or thirty rods farther on. You can't miss it with that battery, and it'll be daylight in little over an hour. You'll make Hancock in time for the first train down, and be in Portland this afternoon."

He paused an instant as he drew a long, thick envelope from his pocket.

"You have a good case against the

Big Triangle, you told me. Well, these may help you."

Cabell took the envelope instinctively. "I—don't think I understand," he faltered, in a bewildered tone.

"Read them, and you will," was the grim reply.

After a second's hesitation, the newspaper man seated himself on a big log, and shook out a dozen or more folded papers.

For several moments there was silence as he glanced swiftly through those papers by the light of the pocket battery.

Suddenly he gave a gasp, and his trembling thumb slipped from the button, plunging everything into darkness. A series of swift, intermittent flickers followed as he fumbled with the key. When the light finally flashed up again, he raised his head, and stared.

"You can't mean what you say!" he exclaimed. "Why, these"—he swallowed hard in his excitement—"would mean complete annihilation for your firm."

"Exactly," Bainbridge returned, with a kind of suppressed fierceness.

"But you?" stammered Cabell dazedly, rising.

"I've been fighting the ring tooth and nail for the past month," retorted Bob swiftly. "I want to see Tweedy and Crane get what's coming to them. I began because I found out how crooked they were, but now I've got another reason. They're responsible for—*her*—being here in the woods. She was lured from Bangor to lead me into their trap. You understand? You see what I mean? I haven't time now to bother with the ring at large, and to put the public wise to their corrupt game. I leave that to you, while I devote my energies to the punishment of—two murderers."

His voice was hard as steel, and absolutely pitiless. His eyes had narrowed, and his whole face looked like the marble expression of cruel, inflexible purpose. In spite of himself, Cabell shuddered a little.

"But aren't you coming, too?" he asked presently. "Surely you don't mean to stay——"



He did not finish the sentence, for a sudden odd change had taken place in his companion's face. Bainbridge had turned slightly, and was staring into the blackness to the northwest with a keen intensity which contrasted vividly with his listlessness of a moment before, and made Cabell instantly follow the direction of his eyes.

At first the reporter could see nothing unusual. Then slowly he was conscious of a faint, nebulous sort of glow far off in the distance and considerably below them. It paled and flickered, seeming to die out altogether, only to show itself afresh the next moment.

"Shut off the light," Bainbridge ordered suddenly.

With the glaring spot of electric light quenched, the distant glow became much clearer. There must have been a break in the tree through which they had a glimpse of the long, sweeping slope leading down to the valley where they had left the tavern burning. Yet somehow, even at that distance, the wavering, flickering line seemed something quite different from that blazing, crackling, concentrated pile of flames.

"It doesn't look like the burning house," Cabell said quickly.

"It isn't." Bob's voice was sharp and distinct. "It's spread to the woods. I ought to have thought of that. The old slash and rubbish beyond the clearing is like so much tinder, and this wind is in the right quarter to do the most damage. I'm going to hustle down there and see what I can do. You can find your way out alone, I reckon. Good-by, and good luck."

He held out his hand, but the reporter did not take it.

"Could I be of any help if I went along?" he asked, after a moment's hesitation.

Bob raised his eyebrows. "Possibly," he returned. "Every man counts at a time like this. The minute they get wise, the people will hustle in from all sides; but it may take time. I thought you were in a hurry to get back to Portland."

"So I was, but I've an idea I'd like to see this through."

Bainbridge eyed him for an instant in silence. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "If you want to come, I'll be mighty glad to have you," he said simply.

Without further words, he started down the slope at a brisk jog, Cabell by his side. Now and then they exchanged brief remarks as they hurried through the woods. The talk was desultory, and wholly about the fire, its probable beginning, and possible seriousness; but the reporter noticed a sharp energy in his companion's manner, which fostered the belief that Bainbridge more than welcomed this chance for strenuous, diverting effort. If it accomplished nothing else, it would at least take his mind at intervals from the dull, poignant suffering which filled his soul.

As they neared the valley, the dawn began to break, gray as the ashes of dead hopes. The flames were no longer visible, but to the northward a line of smoke rose in billowy clouds, which the wind seized and whisked forward as soon as they rose above the treetops.

Bob stopped once or twice and stared long and anxiously toward the spot where the tavern had stood.

"There's precious little backfire," he said presently, half to himself. "I wonder if it's possible that any one's down there beating it out. It certainly looks that way."

At length, after one of these inspections, he abruptly changed his direction, heading almost due north, with a slight swerving toward the west, which would carry them very gradually toward the burned-out area.

"The front of the fire's the dangerous point," he explained. "As near as I can make out, it's eating through our old slash now, but it won't be long before it strikes black timber. It's running straight toward a section Jasper Whittemore bought last fall, and beyond that is our best tract in this country. I'm going to let the backfire go, and hustle up where we'll be needed the most. Somebody else will be sure to come along later who can look after the tail end of it."



It was almost an hour later that they came within sight of the burned-over section. Soon after that they encountered a number of lumbermen hurrying along under the direction of Jed Bock.

The latter greeted them enthusiastically, being almost as cordial to Bob as he was to Cabell. He had by no means lost his hatred for the Big Triangle, but the intense anxiety of the veteran woodsman to save his forests had made him call a temporary truce.

"Looks purty bad, boys," he said, drawing down his bushy eyebrows anxiously. "I'm afeared we won't head her off afore she gits inter Whittemore's stand."

"Anybody else on the job?" Bainbridge asked swiftly.

"Yep. Bloss an' three men to the west'ard. They'll work north, an' jine us in front. Metz, Whittemore's foreman, is ahead with some o' his men an' two o' the fire patrol. Also, I hear Tweedy an' Crane is somewheres in the woods; what for, I dunno."

He glanced slyly at Bob, but the latter made no comment. He had no doubt that his two former partners had come upon the scene for the purpose of settling the dangerous Bainbridge for good and all.

Well, he reflected grimly, they should have their settlement, though it might be decidedly different from the one they had planned.

Rapidly they made their way forward, Cabell noticing with approbation the thoroughness with which the men ahead of them had snuffed out the backfire. He began to think that, after all, the conquering of a forest fire was not the difficult thing it had been painted.

Presently, however, as they approached the main conflagration, he began to change his mind. At first he was conscious of a distant roaring which seemed somewhat ominous. Then far ahead through the dark lines of trees, he saw the leaping, waving, flickering line of fire. At some places it was not more than two or three feet high; at others it leaped up, a solid wall of flame, racing to the tops of stunted evergreens, to burst into a bloom of

yellow that instantly scattered its blazing petals on every side. A crackling roar filled the air. Sparks shot up in showers, drawn as if by suction. Blasts of heat rushed against the reporter's face, warning him to keep his distance.

The men swerved to the right, searching for some gap in the line through which they could make their way. At last they came upon a wide outcropping of rock, and raced over just before the line of fire closed in on the other side.

Instantly they broke into a run at a command from Bock, and speedily drew away from the devouring monster. Twenty minutes later they reached a point where five men were working feverishly with sharpened hoes to keep in control a small backfire they had started, in the hope of burning over a stretch in front of the big blaze too wide for the wild blaze to jump.

George Metz, a tall, alert-looking man of about forty, was in charge here. He gave a slight start of surprise at the sight of Bob, but greeted him with a nod, and told him where there were a few spare hoes. Five minutes later Bainbridge and Cabell were working beside the others with desperate fury, as if their very lives depended on stopping the progress of the flames.

The line had been skillfully laid out to include a high ledge of bare rock which extended far to the west, and would act as an effectual barrier at that end. If they could only bring their operations up to this, they might be reasonable sure of success. Already the line extended to within a hundred yards of the nearest jutting corner, but the fire was coming with amazing rapidity.

Wisps of smoke began to drift through the tree aisles. The cool breeze carried with it blasts of hot air. The roaring increased, and at length the gleam of flames could be seen racing up the long slope.

The men redoubled their efforts, working feverishly with hoes, mattocks, and axes. Soon the dense clouds of smoke choked and the waves of heat blistered them. Sweat burst from every pore in streams which made little wriggling channels on their sooty faces.



Still they kept on frantically; then, when they were within a scant hundred feet of their goal, the galloping flames charged up the slope, drove them away, whirled around the end of the line, and began greedily to lick up the underbrush and thick carpet of pine needles on the other side.

A discouraged groan arose, but Metz merely shrugged his shoulders as he drew one sleeve across his streaming face.

"Have to try again, boys," he said philosophically. "We want to get a hustle on, too."

Without a word, the men snatched up their implements, and followed their leader, to take up another stand farther on.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE BREATH OF DEATH.

ONCE more that discouraging process was repeated. Then the wind veered abruptly in a manner which looked almost providential for Jasper Whittemore, and began driving the flames to the northeast. Thanks to this and to some very effective work on the part of the fighters, the fire was kept from eating its way into the valuable stand of black growth which was the chief asset of the firm of Whittemore & Blaine.

Unfortunately, however, it was headed straight for some of the Big Triangle's best holdings, with a chance of gathering tremendous headway in the intervening stretch of inflammable slash and tops and refuse.

Bob worked like a Trojan; not because he cared a snap for the money loss such destruction would bring upon the firm, but because he had the true woodsman's ingrained desire to save the forest from its deadliest enemy.

He strove tirelessly in the vanguard of fighters. His hands were raw, his hair was singed, and his skin blistered, his back was almost breaking; but still he would not give in. Sometimes he found Cabell slaving beside him. Again it was a totally strange woodsman. Or again he would find himself quite alone

for the moment in the midst of smoke and flame and blistering heat.

It was during one of these moments, toward the middle of the afternoon, that he paused for a second to rest at the edge of a little glade well to the eastward end of the line. On his left a sharp wall of rock rose precipitously. On his right the fire had advanced somewhat beyond the glade, and seemed, oddly enough, to be circling back.

Bainbridge wondered whether the wind was changing again. He hoped so devoutly. These sudden shiftings sometimes preceded rain, and if that would only come——

Suddenly he gave a start as a man burst out of the trees on the other side of the glade, and came toward him at a waddling run. For a second he could scarcely believe his senses. Then he was sure. It was John Tweedy beyond doubt. What he was doing here in the very front of the fire Bob had no idea; but his eyes gleamed fiercely as they rested on the fat, perspiring face of the man who had sent the girl he loved to her death.

He did not stir, and Tweedy waddled on a few steps more before he saw the silent figure standing there. Then he stopped short, and stared, his face turning suddenly pallid, his eyes full of an overwhelming panic. For a second he made no sound or movement; but, as Bob finally took a single step forward, he gave a shrill squeal of fright, and, making a stumbling turn, fled at the top of his speed straight back into the murky, smoke-filled forest.

Bainbridge watched him disappear—a hard, cynical smile twisting his lips. The wind had changed once more, shifting still farther into the west. Already the smoke was thicker in the glade, and he could hear the crackling of approaching flames more and more distinctly. Tweedy, running straight into them, would quickly face the alternative of losing his precious life or turning back to face the man he had wronged. Bob told himself that there would be no question as to his choice. The "Big Boss" had always been an arrant bluff and coward.



For several minutes, as he waited for the fat man's reappearance, Bainbridge considered with savage pleasure the anguish of mind which would follow the former's discovery of his plight. But, as the time passed and Tweedy did not reappear, a strange, incongruous uneasiness began to steal over Bob. He tried to tell himself that he was glad, that no torture was too agonizing for the monster; and yet all the time he had a vivid picture of the round, helpless face, with eyes growing wild with terror as the fire approached; the bewildered rushings to and fro when smoke obscured his vision; the frantic wringing of those plump, well-kept hands as all sense of direction became lost.

For a moment or two he strove to thrust the picture from his mind, but it was impossible. Then, in a flash, his warped mental attitude seemed to drop from him, and he realized with a shudder the real nature of the dreadful thing he had been contemplating.

"Great heavens!" he gasped, flinging down his hoe. "I *can't* let that happen. I must have been mad!"

Without a second's hesitation, he started at a run across the glade, and plunged into the woods beyond, now so thick with smoke that he could see scarcely a dozen feet ahead.

As he raced along, he realized that the fire was coming toward him obliquely, for the high ledge of rock, while an insurmountable barrier against the flames, also acted as a sort of forced draft which sucked them forward.

The smoke grew thicker, but Bob did not slacken his pace. With smarting eyes and gasping breath, he tore on, sick at the thought of what he had been tempted to do.

Now he could see the flames dancing, writhing, leaping forward with awful swiftness. A second later a wild cry rang out:

"Bobby! Bobby! For the Lord's sake!"

It was Tweedy calling to *him* for help, and the sound stabbed Bainbridge like a dagger thrust. He ran on a dozen steps or more, and then he saw a figure stumbling toward him. It was

Tweedy, hat gone, hair singed, his coat smoking with the heat and ready to burst into a flame at any instant.

Before Bob could support him, the big man collapsed in a heap on the ground, and caught the younger man about the knees in a despairing grip.

"For Heaven's sake, save me, Bobby!" he sobbed wildly, his upraised face distorted with fear and horror. "I wasn't—the one who got her up here—I swear it—it was Crane. He never told me till afterward—I'll give up everything—do anything you want—only don't leave me here to die like a rat!"

Bainbridge dragged him to his feet, and slipped an arm about the heavy body.

"Come!" he panted. "We'll have to—run for it; but we'll get out—somehow."

He turned back toward the glade, dragging the exhausted man with him as best he could. Strangled, gasping, feeling their way forward, they managed at last to reach the edge of the little clearing; and then Bob's heart sank within him at the sight of the dense pall of smoke hanging over the place, with thicker clouds rising from every side. It looked very much as if the fire had swept around behind them, cutting off escape in the only direction that a moment before had been left them.

Still, Bainbridge did not pause, but urged his companion forward. His teeth were clenched, and his face was set in the dogged, indomitable lines of one who would never give in as long as he had an ounce of strength left in his body.

Tweedy stumbled, staggered, tripped his way half across the glade, then slid into a heap on the ground. He was evidently quite helpless.

"What'll we do?" he wailed pitifully. "I can't go on. I can't move."

Again Bob dragged him to his feet. "Stand up for a minute," he ordered harshly. "Now, put your arms over my shoulders. Clasp your hands around my neck if you can. That's it. Steady, now."



He bent his back, and caught Tweedy's bulky legs with both hands. There was a heave and a cracking of muscles, and in another second he was staggering, swaying onward, the heavy man lying inert on his shoulders.

What followed was more like some horrible nightmare to Bob than actual reality. He went reeling onward for what seemed interminable miles, keeping close to the rocky wall by instinct. The smoke choked and blinded him. His muscles grew cramped and rigid. The weight of Tweedy became almost intolerable.

At first the fat man kept up a continuous moaning which mingled with the roar and crackling of the flames; but presently this ceased as the heat grew fiercer and more intense. Bob wondered vaguely whether Tweedy had died from fright. Such things had happened. It did not occur to him, however, to leave the man, and try to escape unhampered. He had undertaken to get him out, and he meant to do it or perish with him. Personally he did not care very much whether he himself escaped or dropped from sheer exhaustion in the path of those licking waves of fire which seemed to encircle him on every side.

On and on he toiled, his brain becoming more dulled and wavering with every suffocating breath he drew. Presently he began to have odd, grotesque fancies. It was no longer Tweedy he carried on his back, but a great load of granite blocks to which some fiend was constantly adding. He could not throw it off, because it was fastened to him by heavy chains, and so he did not try.

Then there came a gap in which he was unconscious of anything. His senses were leaving him. He was unaware of moving, and yet realized dimly that he was still staggering on. The smoke was strangling him. The heat blistered even his half-shielded face. At last to his dulled ears came a sound like running water. His cracked lips twisted in a ghastly smile of utter disbelief. There was no water left in all the world—nothing but smoke and fire. He tripped, stumbled, fell headlong.

There was a splash and a feeling of delicious, heavenly coolness which half roused his fading senses for an instant. The load of granite had changed unaccountably into Tweedy.

He drew the older man's head up against his own shoulder, realizing somehow that he must not let the water reach above the heavy, sagging chin. Everything about him seemed a glaring, lurid crimson. He flung one arm over the white face of his old enemy. His own head dropped forward, and everything winked out like a snuffed candle.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### NO DREAM TO WAKE FROM.

WHEN Bainbridge struggled back to his senses, he was lying wrapped in blankets on the edge of a thicket. There was a tang of smoke still in the air, but it was nothing to what it had been. He raised himself on one elbow, and then discovered that Clark Cabell sat beside him.

"So—you got—us out?" he said, at length, in a low tone.

"We found you after the fire had swept over," the reporter answered. "By Jove, old fellow, it was the closest thing I ever heard of! We'd given you both up as lost."

"How's Tweedy?" Bob asked, after a pause.

"All right, only pretty well done up. He's lying over yonder talking with Crane."

"And the fire?"

"I reckon they've got it pretty well under control. That shift of wind helped a lot, and the breeze is beginning to fall now. All the boys are fighting it to the westward. Say, you don't want to do that! Better lie still a while, and rest."

Bainbridge pushed the blanket impatiently to one side, and staggered to his feet.

"I'm all right," he said, as Cabell sprang to help him. "A little wobbly in the knees, but nothing else."

He hesitated for an instant, and then moved slowly toward the screen of



bushes from beyond which came the sound of voices.

"You can go to the deuce, Crane!" came in Tweedy's familiar tones, weak, perhaps, but uncommonly spirited. "I promised the boy, and I'm going to keep that promise if it busts us. He saved my life! Is that nothing? But for him I'd be a crisp." His voice trembled a little, but he went on stoutly: "What's more, I'm sick to death of the whole rotten business! You see what it's brought us to. After this——"

He stopped abruptly as Bob stepped into view, and for a moment he looked at the younger man, his lips quivering. Then he tried to get on his feet, but dropped back with a sigh against the stump which had been propping him up.

"Bobby," he said, almost timidly, "would you—shake hands?"

His blue eyes were wistful and appealing. Without hesitation, Bainbridge bent over and clasped the soft, pudgy, blistered hand in his own blackened, sooty fingers. He did not glance at Crane. The shock of his experiences seemed to have purged his soul of every desire for revenge. A look of understanding passed between himself and Tweedy; then he dropped the latter's hand, and leaned against a tree.

"I was just telling Crane," the fat man went on eagerly, "that I'm going to stick to everything I promised you. I'll yield everything, and make every possible restitution. We'll do whatever you say, Bobby, toward righting the wrongs of the company——"

"I'll never consent to it!" Crane snapped out, with sudden viciousness. "I'll never be a party to any fool——"

Bob raised his head and looked steadily at the man, who relapsed into instant silence.

"We don't need your consent," retorted Tweedy emphatically. "We'll do it without you—in spite of you. And, Bobby"—he glanced appealingly at Bainbridge—"then you won't need to make those papers public. I'm not thinking of myself so much as of your father. We were chums, Bobby, and I'd hate to see his name—smirched.

You can keep them until everything's straightened out, and then destroy them. You'll do that, won't you?"

"If you keep your word, I will."

Bainbridge turned abruptly, and walked back to where Cabell leaned wearily against a stump.

"Would you mind handing back those papers I turned over to you a while ago?" he asked quietly.

An expression of surprise, mingled with intense disappointment, flashed into the reporter's face. He hesitated an instant, his forehead wrinkled with perplexed regret. Then slowly—very slowly—he slid one hand into the breast pocket of his coat, and drew out the precious envelope, which he handed over with extreme reluctance.

"Thank you," Bob said, putting the papers carefully away. "I'm sorry to take them back, but Tweedy has promised to make restitution, so it won't be necessary to publish them. You see," he explained listlessly, as he dropped down on the ground beside Cabell, "my father was—mixed up in it, too, and I'd rather not drag his name into it if there's any other way."

For a long time he sat silent, staring into space. The reaction from incessant physical activity had left him dull and spiritless, conscious of that bitter, gnawing ache, that empty desolation which filled his soul. Suddenly he looked at Cabell.

"You've had no news—of her?" he asked briefly.

The reporter shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said gently. "I've asked almost every one I saw to-day, but not a single one of the men have seen her."

Bainbridge turned away, his teeth set in his under lip. Cabell could not bear to look at him. He felt that if he had a single glimpse of his companion's face just then, his own strained self-control would snap like a thread. All through that long strenuous day—longer by far than any day he had ever known before—his thoughts had never traveled far from the tragedy which he had really brought about. Amid the smoke and flames and blistering heat, that heavy, numbing sense of responsibility never



left him. His nerves were raw and quivering, his composure threadbare, ready to crumble at a touch.

Presently Bainbridge arose slowly, and the reporter, with a slight start, turned his head apprehensively, as if afraid to see what was mirrored in the other's eyes.

"I'm going back," Bob announced briefly.

His jaw was set and dogged. His eyes shone with inflexible determination. Cabell drew his breath in a swift catch of horror.

"Back?" he repeated incredulously. "You don't mean—back *there*?"

"Where else?"

"But it's a dozen miles or more away," the reporter protested. "You're all in, and I don't see how you could possibly walk that distance before dark. Besides, why——"

"I don't mean to walk. Metz and his men rode in on horses, and I'll borrow one, that's all. As to why——"

He paused an instant, his face working. Then from under his drooping lids the dark eyes glowed strangely.

"It's because I've got to!" he exclaimed fiercely. "It's because I must know the truth! I'm going back to search those ruins until I'm absolutely sure."

Cabell shuddered a little, a vivid mental picture of the ghastly task flashing before his eyes.

"Is that—necessary?" he asked, in a low tone. "Have you any shadow of a hope left? Wouldn't the actual proof be a needless torture?"

Bainbridge moved his shoulders a little. "Perhaps," he answered huskily. "I don't know. I've got to do something. I can't rest until I'm sure, and so—I'm going."

The reporter stood up quickly. In his mind was a strong conviction that the trip back to the scene of the tragedy would be wasted effort, but he would not let Bainbridge take it alone.

"Do you mind if I come along?" he asked quickly.

Bob hesitated an instant, searching the face of the man before him. Then he shook his head.

"No," he returned quietly. "I'll be mighty glad to have you with me."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE REAL AWAKENING.

THEY found the tethered horses in charge of a half-grown boy. Bainbridge did not ask permission to borrow two of them. He simply informed the youth that he was going to use them for a few hours, saddled up, and departed through the woods with Cabell.

The easiest trail to the clearing skirted the glade surrounding the Whittemore cabin. They entered it close to the log structure, and were riding past when Bob noticed that the door was slightly ajar, though everything else about the place looked shut up and deserted.

"I wonder if Whittemore can have come in?" he mused, reining in his horse. "I suppose I'd better make sure. If he's here, he'll be anxious to know how they're progressing with the fire."

Without further delay, he swung himself to the ground, and pushed through the door, the reporter following close behind. The sitting room, in which they stood, showed no sign of recent occupancy. The arrangement of the furniture was stiff and orderly. There was a coating of dust over everything. The rough-stone fireplace gaped, cold and empty.

A puzzled look flashed into Bainbridge's face, and his lips parted as if he meant to speak, when all at once his glance rested on a row of hooks behind the door, holding a sweater or two, several old hats, and other articles of apparel.

One of the hats was of soft brown felt, water-stained and battered. The brim was turned jauntily up on one side, and in the faded ribbon was stuck a single draggled crimson quill.

As Bob's eyes fell upon the hat, he gave a start, and his lips quivered. Then he walked over to it, and stood for a moment or two quietly staring. At length he lifted one hand, and touched the brim softly, gently, with a tender-



ness which brought a blur to Cabell's eyes.

"It was hers," Bob murmured, as if talking to himself. "She wore it the day we first really met. She fell into the water, and I was lucky enough to pull her out."

Suddenly his self-control gave way. Through all that long, trying day he had kept a grip upon himself, but now the sight of this intimate, personal belonging of the woman he had cared for more than any one else in all the world broke down his defense.

"It isn't right!" he grated, his voice quivering with the emotion which was torturing him. "It isn't fair! There's no justice in it! A girl like that—what has she done—to deserve—such a death? I'd have given—my life for her a thousand times, but—there was no chance, and now she'll never know."

Hands clenched and eyes swimming, the reporter took a step forward. Then he stopped abruptly, with a strangled gasp of dazed incredulity.

Through the shadowy doorway leading into the next room a slim figure flashed into view. Heedless of Cabell, she ran straight toward his friend, and clasped one uplifted arm with both her hands.

"Don't, Bob—don't!" she sobbed. "You'll break my heart! I'm not dead. I——"

There was a hoarse, wordless cry of incredulous joy. For an instant Bainbridge stared in speechless wonder at the flushed, lovely face, with its tear-filled eyes and quivering mouth raised to his. Then his arms flashed out and closed round her.

"It's you—you—you!" he gasped, in a strangled voice. "My dear——"

At this point the reporter recovered his powers of locomotion, and tiptoed softly through the door, his face glowing with bewildered delight.

"I never knew it was you fighting down there. I wasn't even sure you were in the woods. I couldn't see that end of the room through the knot hole, and when the noise began I thought

they were fighting among themselves, or with the strange man."

"But what did you do when the fire started?" Bob asked.

He was holding both her hands in his, as if he feared she might suddenly vanish. Edith Stafford's face was streaked with grime, and her hair rumpled, but she seemed much too happy to be aware of these slight detractions from her beauty.

"I didn't know the place was afire," she answered. "Old Mother Jones had been drinking, but she watched me like a hawk, and I was afraid of her. When the rumpus started she was asleep. Before that I thought her shamming, but when she was not aroused by the noise I lost no time in trying to get out. There were stairs leading down into the back room, and I got away by the back door. I ran away into the woods, and never stopped till I was completely exhausted. Then I looked back, and saw the light of the fire. As soon as I could, I got farther away, but I was bewildered and lost in the dark. It was a dreadful night!" She shuddered. "But when morning came I found myself here, and here I've stayed."

"A dreadful night," said Bainbridge, thinking of all that had happened, and for the moment of the cry that had reached his ears from the midst of the flames—the cry of an evil old woman awaking to find herself perishing by fire.

"I was too utterly worn out to stir another step after I got here," said the girl. "I managed to smash a board in one of the kitchen shutters with a big rock, and got in that way. There was plenty to eat, and I had planned to stay here overnight and start for Hancock the first thing in the morning. I opened the front door to let in some air. When you came up so suddenly I was in the kitchen. There wasn't time to close the door, or do anything. I thought that you might be one of those ruffians. Oh, I can never forget last night!"

"A dreadful night," repeated Bob, his strong arms clasping close the slender form. "But it has been followed by a glorious day."