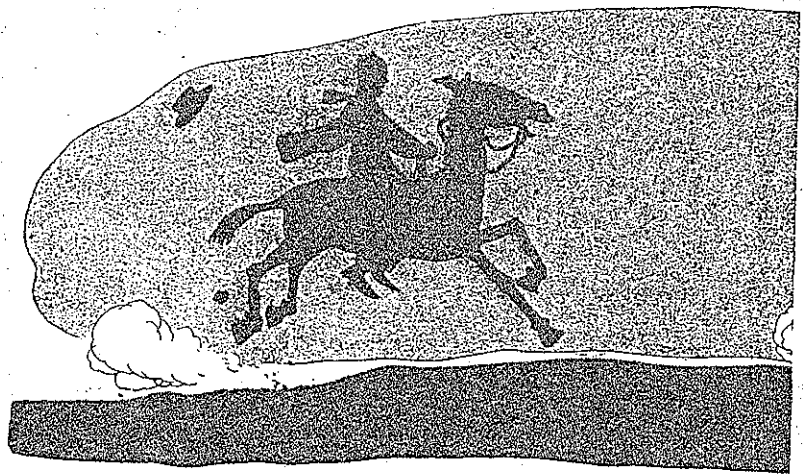


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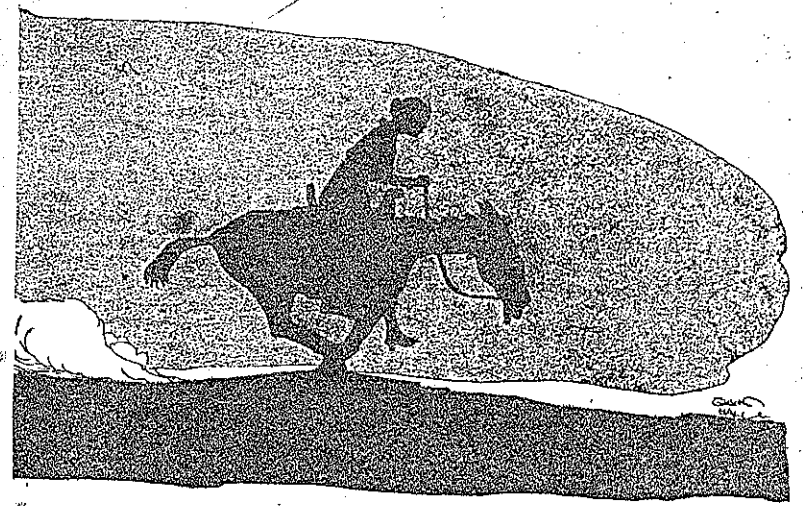
# “Some Liar”

A MOVING MELODRAMA  
IN FIVE HEADLONG ACTS

**R**OBERT WINCHESTER McTABB, who was commonly known as Bobby McTabb, traveling out of a Midwestern city for a concern that was engaged in the cheerful business of manufacturing coffins, with a sideline of interesting accessories such as graveclothes, shrouds, winding-sheets, cerecloths and cements,—that was the way Bobby emphasized himself in announcing his “line” to a new customer,—must have had more than a drop or two of Spartan blood in his veins. In fact, if we wish to take the trouble, it is possible to trace the McTabb name back to the third and fourth cousins of old Menelaus himself—and all the world knows that the Spartans were the most accomplished liars in history, and that in their public schools the course in Spontaneous and Progressive Lying took up much of the time that is now devoted to the four R’s. But there was never a Spartan in Sparta that had it over Bobby

McTabb. Circumstances which unfortunately culminated in the tardiness of his birth undoubtedly robbed Bobby of fame, a possible fortune and the attention of the historiographer. If he had lived in Napoleon’s day, for instance, what might not have happened to him? For it was Napoleon who said that the greatest liars made the greatest generals; and working along that theory he developed a number of shining examples, any one of which might have been Bobby himself. Even that white-bearded old profiteer Ananias—

But why digress? After all, this is the story of Robert Winchester McTabb and of a girl whose name was *not* Sapphira, and Bobby wasn’t of the sort to yield up the ghost as easily as the old man did, anyway. To come down to the boiled and skimmed essence of the thing, Bobby was what you would call *some* liar. This sounds bad in words.



By James Oliver Curwood

ILLUSTRATED  
BY QUIN HALL

It looks fairly provocative of indecent conjectures in print. But Robert Winchester McTabb wasn’t bad. He was the most likable chap one would care to meet, and when he sold a coffin or a hundred yards of winding-sheet he was so cheerful about it all that he left his customer with the genial feeling that it was almost a privilege to be allowed to die. Incidentally he was invited to dinner in more undertakers’ homes, and met more undertakers’ daughters, than any other man in the business. But in so far as women were concerned Bobby had a colossal ambition. It was to meet the ideal. How he achieved this ambition, and the tremendous adventure that came of it, and how it lifted him out of the rut of forty dollars a week and expenses to—

**B**UT this brings us back immediately to the question of liars. It must be understood, first off, that there are as

many kinds of liars as there are brands of cigars. There is the Pecksniffian liar, the Tartuffian liar the Janusian liar; the common hypocrite, the snake-in-the-grass sort, the jilt, the shuffler, the stool-pigeon; and there is the false witness and the impostor, the capper and the quack, the “saint-abroad-and-a-devil-at-home” kind, not to mention a few others. Then, also, there is the ordinary “fibber.” Now a girl with the prettiest mouth in the world and the softest eyes under heaven can fib divinely—and innocently. She’ll tell the man she loves that she doesn’t love him just to see him squirm. She’ll fib in girlhood, she’ll fib in wifehood, and she’ll fib in her beautiful old age—and call it fun. And now and then a man will lie for the fun of it.

That was what McTabb did. He could not have counted back to the beginning of the thing if he had tried. It must have started spontaneously in him,

like some sort of combustion, or by mere accident, for there had never to his knowledge been a Munchausen in his family. Bobby alone was responsible, and with him, under certain circumstances and conditions, the art of prevarication was developed into a fascinating sporting game. Yet never, in so far as one might depose against him, had he told a lie that had hurt or that had even indirectly caused harm. And another peculiarity of Bobby's was that his genius for invention found its outlet only among strangers. He lied, paradoxical as it may seem, for the clean and wholesome fun of it. To get away with it he was, of necessity, a first-class actor and whenever he came through with an unusually good bit of foolery, he was amused with himself for a week.

One would not have thought it of McTabb. He was thirty-six, with a serious and rather finely cut face, the eyes of a dreamer, and a manner that was both reserved and thoughtful. There was something inherently interesting about him—the sort of man a woman might have confidence in, under almost any situation, in spite of the fact that he was not above the decent average in height, was not handsome, and was not at any angle a spectacular being.

In the course of time Bobby's process of lying had become as natural to him as breathing. Possibly it was because he should have been an artist, a sculptor or a writer, and his subconscious self made the best of it by inventing for him a rare sort of castle-in-Spain existence and varied kinds of Alnaschar dreams to make bearable the funereal monotony of selling coffins at forty dollars a week and expenses.

For instance, Bobby would drop into a barber shop, and occasionally allow himself to be inveigled by a snappy pair of eyes and a flash of shining teeth to the manicurist's table, where the young woman would see at a glance that his hands were not accustomed to the enamel and cosmetic embellishment of her art. But the manicurist did not live who could make Bobby a whit embarrassed by the knowledge of that fact. Casually, in that very quiet and unemotional voice of his, he would say:

"Rather an unpretty pair of hands just now, aren't they? Well,"—with the slightest shrug of his shoulders,— "I'm lucky to have brought home *any* hands with me, so you wont think I'm imposing on you, will you?"

WERE the manicurist's interest and curiosity aroused? Instantly. Covertly she took in Robert Winchester McTabb's quiet, sensitive, clean-cut face, and a little thrilled and a little embarrassed herself, she would ask the question which Bobby knew would come; and Bobby would answer, "Two years and nine months in the Arctic, nine months of it fighting starvation." And after that, bit by bit, the girl would draw him out, and Bobby would skillfully let himself out, until for fifty cents he had acquired two dollars' worth of service and had become a hero in her eyes.

If he had actually lived the experiences he described, he could not have put the thing over better. It might only happen to be the Arctic. There was just as big a chance that it would be China, or Japan, or some South Sea island, or the War. For two years Bobby had gone strongly on the War, and he was one of the best-read-up young men in the country on that particular subject. In that war he had, at various times, played every part there was to play, from war correspondent and spy to aviation fighter and officer in the Foreign Legion, and his stage was usually the smoking-compartment of a Pullman. It was quite to be expected that occasionally Bobby had narrow escapes. One of these times was when, among his Pullman auditors, there happened to be a surgeon who had gone through the hell at Ypres, and who was "over" on a mission for his Government. Bobby, unfurling his colors before he had learned the other's identity, was almost gassed in the first charge; but recovering, he made such a masterly retreat with figures and statistics and things he had read that the surgeon was soon shaking his hand like that of a long-lost brother.

How far the whole thing would have gone, and where Bobby would have

ended if the girl whose name wasn't Sapphira hadn't come into the game just as she did, it is difficult to say. Bobby's "sporting game" had developed to its maximum at that time, and Bobby was almost beginning to believe some of the things he told about himself. The end—or at least the beginning of the end—came one day when Bobby, in rather a disconsolate mood, was traveling on a special assignment westward over the plains of the Dakotas.

He was, at the very moment the Fates were preparing to open fire on him, plunged in melancholy. The doldrums had him, high and low, and the particular reason for it was that this happened to be his birthday. As he looked out of the car window, taking in the bleak landscape that would soon be rolling itself into the foothills of the mountains, his mind traveled back and forth over the narrow limit of his existence, and it was gloomy enough. Thirty-six—and ten years alone! That, above all else, had been the tragic part of it. Until the time when his mother had died in the little honeysuckle cottage back in Vermont he had never spelled loneliness with a capital L. Today it was almost suffocating. Thirty-six—and not a woman's hand or lips to wish him a happy year to come! Without a family tie, without a home, without—

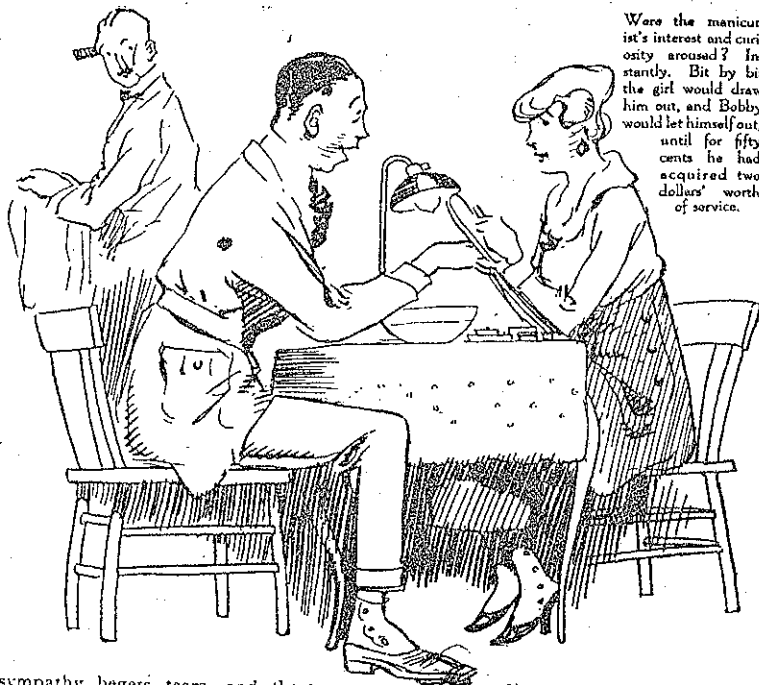
Fifty times, something had risen in his throat and choked him as he looked, unseeing, out of the window. Why was

When Bobby sold a coffin or a hundred yards of winding-sheet, he left his customer feeling that it was almost a privilege to be allowed to die.

it that a fellow's dreams never came true? Why was it that he had never met the right girl, and didn't have the home, and the kids, and everything that went with those things? The question ran through his mind in a



qualifying, apologetic sort of way. At the colossal age of thirty-six he had begun to realize that it was he, Bobby McTabb, who had made the great error. He was old. There was no getting around that fact. He was no longer at that stage where youth sat on the prow and pleasure took a hand at the helm. He would soon be forty. His declining years had already begun to toll the count for him—and what chance did a man have of dreams coming true on the downhill slide? Self-



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sympathy begets tears, and there were almost tears in Bobby's eyes as his loneliness sat on him, and as he thought of what might have happened, and what should have happened. For an hour he had scarcely sensed the stops made by the train, or the coming and going of passengers. It was then that he turned from the window, swung his chair a little and met the eyes of the girl two chairs down and across the aisle.

TO say that the face he was looking at was the vision of his dreams, that he had hoped for it, and that it had been the inspiration of his desires for an eternity or two, would have been expressing the situation with a temperateness out of all proportion to the thrill that leaped through Bobby's veins.

It was evident that the look in the girl's eyes was not a haphazard glance, a mere passing *coup d'œil* that he had happened to catch. She had been studying him as he sat there in his lone-

ness, and so intently was her consciousness fastened upon him that she failed to recover herself quickly when he discovered her. Her eyes sank into his soul, and for that first moment or two he did not see beyond them. They were the eyes of his ideal. Probably there were a million or so other girls in the world with eyes equally beautiful, but not one pair of them had ever looked at Bobby McTabb in that same way. They were dark and lustrous, with the glory of velvety softness in them that one sees most frequently in the eyes of young girls.

And then there came into her eyes, and into her face, a swift and exquisite change—the tiniest flush of embarrassment, a lowering of long silken lashes, a slow turning of her head away from him as she looked out at the passing landscape. The movement gave him a bewitching profile of her. It was all there, everything he had dreamed of; the heavy, glowing coils of brown hair,

breaking here and there in curling tendrils, as though it were struggling to free itself from its bondage; the soft curves of the neck; the little chin, with something deliciously suggestive of combative strength in the beauty of it, the poise of her head, the slimness of her, the color deepening still more in her cheeks, everything—everything was there! He drew a deep breath, with the curious feeling that he must be careful or she would hear it. He was conscious of his heart thumping in a mad sort of way, and in that moment he fell down upon his knees, heart and soul, and worshipped.

For a full minute he looked at her steadily, and his mind began gripping at something which lay beyond the physical perfection of her. It was the significance of the look he had caught in her eyes. It had been something more than curiosity, a great deal more than a casual glance. It was as if, for some mysterious reason, she had been weighing and measuring him. He observed now that one of her small, gray-gloved hands, resting on the sill of the window, was tightly clenched, and he was student enough of human nature to know that she was conscious of his scrutiny. He saw a sudden little tightening at her throat, and as slowly as she had turned away from him she faced him again. Again it seemed to him that her eyes were looking beyond his mere physical self. They met his own, calmly and steadily, the fathomless glow in them shadowed by a question and a doubt. A power over which he had no control drew him to his feet. He approached the vacant chair at her side, and said:

"I beg your pardon. May I sit with you?"

She smiled. It was not a happy smile. There was something almost tearful about it.

"I was going to ask you—soon," she answered him. "You looked so homesick over there—and I am lonely. Please sit down."

"Homesick—yes," he said, seating himself. "This happens to be my birthday, and I am—as you partly guessed—sick for a home I haven't got. It isn't a nice feeling, especially—"

THERE surged up in Bobby McTabb, riding over all other things within him, the old habit of make-believe. The girl had betrayed the reason for her interest in him. It was sympathy. And of all things Bobby wanted most on this thirty-sixth birthday of his the greatest were sympathy—and love. Her eyes urged him on. He thought he had never seen anything so beautiful. Certainly no woman's eyes had ever looked at him so steadily, so clearly, with that lingering doubt and question trying to hide itself away back in them. It was as if she saw in him something which he knew did not exist, and the impulse to confirm her belief, still a little uncertain in her, fanned itself into flame within him. He felt himself living in the absolute present, thrilled by the nearness of her until he was insensate to all thought of the next hour, or the journey's end.

"No, I guess it isn't a nice feeling," she said, and her glance rested for a moment on the long, curiously shaped scar in the edge of his hair. It made him flush a little, recalling the degrading situation of that unfortunate moment near Kalamazoo, Michigan, when one of his country customer's brood sows, weight four hundred pounds, had run a Marathon between his legs and pitched him headforemost into a harrow. "But you must remember that there are worse things," she added; and her eyes darkened, and her slim body seemed to grow just a bit tense. "And perhaps you are not feeling well because—because you have been hurt."

Her eyes rested for another glorious moment on his scar.

He nodded, with just a flash of that quiet, enigmatical smile which made him interesting to people.

"That may be it—partly."

She leaned ever so little toward him. The beautiful glow of her eyes was full on his face, and there was a restrained eagerness in her voice.

"You come from the East?"

"Yes."

"Far?"

"As far as one can come from."

"You mean the coast—New York, Boston, Philadelphia?"

Then and there Bobby McTabb drew sword with the fates, and crossed the Rubicon. He could have cursed himself in the next breath and flayed his tongue for committing him to a sacrilege.

"From farther than that," he said, and there was the quiet, self-constrained quality in his voice which had carried conviction along with his "sporting game" so many times before.

The girl's eyes grew bigger and darker. She drew in a quick, tense breath.

"You mean—France—the War?"

Bobby, swearing inwardly at himself, could not blind himself to the excitement she was struggling to keep him from seeing.

"I—I guessed something like that," she hurried on. "I was looking at you over there—for half an hour as you sat by the window. There was something in your face that—that made me want to know. I didn't think about the War. It was just your face. I knew there was some tragedy—something that had made you unlike other men. And it was over there that you received that hurt?"

Could he retreat in the face of a situation like this? Could he acknowledge himself a liar with her eyes looking at him as they were looking at him now—the very glow of her soul in them, the pulse of her heart in her parted lips? No, not Bobby McTabb!

"Yes, I got it over there," he said.

"But you are an American—"

"Of the Foreign Legion," he added. "We were smashed to pieces at Verdun."

"And your name is—"

"Robert Winchester McTabb."

"Mine is Celie Sterling."

SHE held out her two little gloved hands, and Bobby took them both. She did not draw them away from him quickly. For a moment or two her fingers tightened clingingly about his, and when she drew them from him, it was slowly and gently, and there was an unintelligible note in her throat. She must have seen the worship in Bobby's eyes.

"And you have looked upon death—a great deal?" she asked, in a voice so

low that one could not have heard it across the aisle.

"Yes, a great deal," replied Bobby, with the emphasis of a man who had sold more than sixty thousand coffins in his time, not to mention carloads of ceremonies, cerecloths and other accessories.

"I have read about the men in the Foreign Legion. They died like heroes. And you were one of them! You have seen men die by—by millions! You have looked upon death until it has ceased to be a horror for you. And you have killed men?"

It seemed to him that she would have cried out in protest if he had not answered in the affirmative, and he said it.

"Yes, I have killed men."

"You have killed a great many of them?" she entreated. "Haven't you?"

"I probably have," he acknowledged.

She leaned back with a still deeper breath.

"Then — I suppose — one more wouldn't make any great difference to you, would it? After all, killing is sometimes justice. You are one of the heroes who have gone through it all. You have killed men. And you could kill another quite easily, couldn't you?"

Her bloodthirstiness was adorable.

"True, killing is sometimes justice," said Bobby. "It seems horrible at first, but one gets used to it after a little. A quick stroke, a shot, your life or another's—which shall it be?"

Again her great dark eyes were looking at him without a quiver of their silken lashes.

"Why did you get up from your seat and come across to me?" she asked.

"Because," said Bobby, "because—"

And then, hesitating for a single instant, he spoke the one beautiful truth of his whole life. "Because I have been waiting for you ever since the day I became old enough to dream!"

If she had been older than she was, and a bit more wordly, she might have flushed or grown angry at Bobby's words. As it was, she might not have heard him, if one judged by watching her face. But that she had heard him, and that she was pleased, she confided honestly.

"And I wanted you to come over because I—I had faith in you," she said. "I didn't think you might feel that way. But I am glad. I don't feel that we are strangers. I feel—almost—as if—"

She hesitated.

"What?" he urged eagerly, leaning toward her.

"As if I might ask you to do me a great favor."

"I will do anything," he pledged himself, "—anything."

"Anything?" she questioned, bending forward so that her hand lay upon his again.

"Yes, anything. Any—"

were noble—and brave. And you've killed men! Haven't you? You said you had."

"He confessed with another nod."

"It's that which makes my faith in you so strong," she went on, her eyes bigger and darker and more deeply glowing than any human eyes he had ever seen before.

"Just that! You're brave. You can't fail. And you will do it! If



"I guessed something like that," she hurried on. "It was your face. I knew there was some tragedy—something that made you unlike other men."

thing in the world, if you mean what you just said—that you're glad I love you."

"I didn't mean just that—"

"But you said it!"

"And you are sure—because of that—you would do anything for me?"

His heart was too full for speech. She had let him take her hand in both his own. He held it tight, and nodded.

"I wouldn't ask you—I wouldn't dare—if you were like other men," she said.

"But you're not. I knew it when I watched you so long. There was something in your face that told me that you

you hadn't killed men, hundreds and hundreds of them, I wouldn't ask you to help me—I wouldn't dare! But it will be easy for you—so easy."

"What is it you want me to do?"

Her fingers pressed more tightly about his. She leaned toward him until he felt the intoxicating thrill of her breath in his face, and whispered in a tense, terrible little voice:

"I want you to kill a man for me!"

FOR a second or two Bobby was petrified.

"Kill—"

"Sh-h-h!" she warned, placing the tiny forefinger of her free hand to his lips. "You mustn't say it so loud!"

Bobby swallowed at a mysterious, lumpish thing that had suddenly gathered in his throat. Was it possible that he had found his ideal at last, won her almost, only to find her insane?

"Wh—who is it you would like to have me kill?" he got out finally.

"He's the man I'm going to marry!"

"Marry? Now what the dev— I mean the deuce—"

"Yes, I'm going to marry him unless I can get some one to kill him for me."

How gloriously near her eyes were! Bobby's Adam's apple gave another curious twist under his collar. He could see that she was in deadly earnest. The color had gone out of her cheeks entirely now. They were white.

"I wouldn't ask you," she said again, her low voice filled with a prayerful entreaty. "But you've killed so many men that one more won't make any difference to you—and it will mean so much to me!"

"And if I kill this—this scoundrel," said Bobby, speaking in the tone of a man coming out from under gas, "will you marry me?"

"Please wait," she begged. "Wait until you've done it—and then ask me. I think I'm going to like you awfully much. Sh-h-h-h, here comes the conductor!"

The conductor approached, and Celie drew back and sat with her head bowed a little until he had passed. It gave Bobby a ravishing view of the light shimmering in the thick, glossy coils of her hair. With his soul in his eyes he was devouring her when she looked up.

"For you—yes," he said, as if speaking to himself. "For you—anything. But why kill a man? Why not just—bear him up?"

"He must be killed," declared the girl decisively. "No matter how much you beat him up I'll have to marry him if he isn't killed."

"You mean," said Bobby, trying hard to get hold of himself, "that this reptilian wretch you're speaking about holds some terrible power over you, that he's forcing you—"

"That's it, that's it," she interrupted him, her voice quivering with a frenzied little note of despair that sent the real blood in Bobby's veins tumbling over itself in the mad desire to sacrifice himself for her. "It's a—a—terrible power, just as you have guessed. I can't tell you what it is now, but it's a matter of life and death to me. If I don't marry him, the most terrible thing in the world will happen. I've begged, entreated, tried to buy him off—have even got down on my knees to him. But nothing has availed. He must die—or I must marry him!"

Tears were in her eyes now—real tears. If they had been alone in the car, Bobby would have opened his arms and taken her into them. As it was, he patted her hand tenderly, and said: "Don't worry, dear. He's going to die!"

A glory of thankfulness leaped through the shimmer of her tears. She gave a little gulping sob,—Bobby thought it was a sob!—and freeing her hand from his clasp she dived down beside her chair, drew a small handbag up onto her lap, and opened it so that he could look into it.

"See!" she whispered. "I've come prepared!"

Bobby could not speak. He stared. He had never seen a bigger revolver!

She was about to give it to him when he put his hand over the bag.

"Leave it in there," he cautioned, the words squeezing themselves a bit hoarsely over the lump that had come into his throat again. "Leave it in! Some one will see it!"

"It's loaded," she announced exultantly. "It belongs to my father, who used to own a ranch down near Tucson. It's the kind the cowboys used to shoot rattlesnakes with. Father says the name of it is Forty-four. Is it big enough?"

"Plenty," said Bobby.

There was no suspicion of dampness in her eyes now. She was looking at him proudly. The color had risen in her cheeks until it was almost feverish.

"You are one of the two finest and bravest men in the world," she said unhesitatingly. "The other is my father."

"And the third—the one I'm—I'm going to kill," he asked slowly. "Who is he?"

From the end of the car a stentorian voice announced the first call for dinner.

"He is at Yellow Jacket—now," said the girl. "And his name is Sheldon Lewis Kellard. He owns the big mine there."

"Come on," said Bobby, rising a little weakly. "Let's go get something to eat."

For be it known that the mining town of Yellow Jacket, on the edge of a big Wyoming desert, was his destination; and furthermore that Sheldon Lewis Kellard was the man he was traveling westward to see!

So had the Fates spun the web of his doom!

## CHAPTER II

IN the dining-car, with the beautiful Celie on the opposite side of the narrow table between them, Bobby ran feverishly over the bill of fare inwardly praying for the munificent hand of Providence to save him. In every line he read the name Sheldon Lewis Kellard—and he ended by ordering chicken because he knew chicken must be there. What would Celie say, he wondered, if she knew of the letter of introduction in his pocket: a letter in which it was explicitly stated that he, Robert Winchester McTabb, was duly authorized by the Wolverine Casket and Cerement Company to act as their agent in the matter of purchasing a certain Michigan timber reservation of which the said Sheldon Lewis Kellard was owner! He felt distinctly ill, yet he succeeded in concealing any physical betrayal of his feeling. It occurred to him, as he tried to swallow the first mouthful of his dinner, that Fate had always played battledore and shuttlecock with him anyway. Oppression settled upon his soul, while he tried to keep his face tranquil. Across the table sat the girl he worshiped. But he would have to kill a man to get her. Something told him that if he showed the white feather for an instant, his hopes

of earthly paradise were gone forever. It was a deuce of a fix to be in—all because he had played the sporting game once too often!

Celie was sweetly oblivious to his mental perturbation. Under the glow of the brilliant lights over their heads her eyes were more glorious to look into than ever. And her hair! The thought of losing her after all these years of waiting and watching and dreaming made him shiver. Her faith in him was utterly demoralizing. He had promised—and she believed. And he had never killed anything bigger or more dangerous than a woodchuck in all his life!

Across the aisle a fierce-looking man with a black mustache was describing to a companion the exciting events of a recent lynching over the border.

Ugh!

"You're chilly," she cried softly.

There was almost a motherly tenderness in her voice.

"No—I—I was just thinking," he said. "I'm so happy, little girl, and it makes me shudder to think of the possibility of losing you. And—you know—this is liable to get me into trouble—both of us."

"It can't," she whispered back, digging a fork into the heart of her lettuce salad. "I planned it all out back there, while I was looking at you at the window. I was wishing it—and it came true. I was wishing for a hero like they have in the storybooks—and you came! You can't fail. I know it. As long as he has the letters I am in his power."

"Letters?"

"Yes," she nodded, crunching a mouthful of the crisp lettuce. "If he'd give up the letters, it wouldn't be necessary to kill him. But he won't."

"What kind of letters are they?"

"I can't tell you. But their possession means—everything." She turned a little. "Sh-h-h! I'm afraid some one is trying to overhear us!"

Not until they had left the dining-car and were back in their chairs, did Bobby press the question as to the scheme she had in her mind.

"I will send him a message," she said,



Bobby knew he was the sheriff. Bobby cut off in the direction of the mine.

by capturing official documents which gave to us the key to their greatest attack. You will understand—then—what you have omitted!"

THEN and there Robert Winchester McTabb told the thrilling story from beginning to end with all the finished artistry of the accomplished liar. It was by all odds the most guileful mendacity of his prevaricating career, for just so surely as he had lied himself into trouble, it now pressed upon Bobby that he must lie himself out of it. He was, verily, lying for his life. Through it all the girl sat like one in a half-trance, for never in history or fiction had she read

anything like this vivid malformation of the truth which Bobby impressed upon her. She paled in those tense and breathless moments when his life hung by a thread, and the color mounted into her cheeks and her eyes shot fire in the pride and excitement of his ultimate triumph as he raced over the countless bodies of the dead, a hell of fire and deadly gases about him—and the precious papers in his hand! The salvation of France! He had been that! And there he sat opposite her now, his quiet and sensitive face unexcited by what he was telling—the telltale scar revealing itself with the glory of the Star Spangled Banner in the edge of his hair!

She breathed deeply. He finished, and in finishing he made her understand

what she had omitted in her scheme of ridding the world of Sheldon Lewis Kellard. As he had taken the precious papers from Kaiser Bill, so would he take these still more priceless letters from this villainous son of iniquity at Yellow Jacket—more priceless because the Hohenzollern packet had meant only the preservation of an empire, while the letters meant her! He could have taken her in his arms then. He knew it. She would not have objected—and he restrained himself only because of the presence of others in the car. She covered her face with her hands and bowed her head, and he knew that she was choking back a desire to cry. He heard her whisper that he was the grandest man alive!

He went on with his plot. He swelled with it, like a pouter pigeon singing its love-song; he plotted for his life, for hers—and incidentally for the life of Sheldon Lewis Kellard. When he had done, she had taken her hands from her face, and was looking at him—like Niobe with stars in her eyes.

"And we will do this—to-night?"

"Yes, to-night."

"Oh, I do so feel I ought to get down on my knees and pray," she murmured softly. "You have saved me!"

"Don't do it here," he protested. "It wouldn't do any good. One little word from you will mean more for our success to-night than ten thousand prayers."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the right sort of an answer to this question: will you marry me to-morrow?"

He noticed the slow tightening of her fingers.

"Please don't think that I'm demanding a price of you," he added quickly. "It isn't that. I'll do it anyway. Only—if I knew—"

"If you knew—you wouldn't want to marry me," she interrupted, her lips quivering, as if she wanted to cry again. "A man like you—so noble, and brave, and true—no, you, wouldn't want to marry me!"

"I would. I swear it!"

"No, you wouldn't."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon

when they got off at the sand-ridden little town of Yellow Jacket.

### CHAPTER III

AS prearranged, Bobby and Celie got off separately. Yellow Jacket, formerly Bobcat Hole, was not spectacular as a town. It hung on the very edge of a long, thin forefinger of the big Wyoming desert, with a vast hinterland of cattle country in the direction of the North Platte. It was made up chiefly of a single street of sand-shot and unpainted buildings culminating in a barnlike structure which was still old-fashioned enough to cling to its original name of Bobcat Hotel. To-day, though it was four o'clock in the afternoon, Yellow Jacket was hot, and lay heavy with a suffocating dust.

Bobby saw little of its picturesqueness, and felt less of its discomfort. His eyes were on Celie, walking fifty paces ahead of him. He saw nothing but the pretty slimmness of her graceful body, the exquisite rhythm of her walk, the poise of her head, the *clip, clip, clip*, in and out, of her little ivory-shod feet. Was it possible, he asked himself, that fate had really destined she should belong to him? He felt within him the clammy chill of a great doubt. A couple of horsemen cantered past and enveloped him in dust. They were cowboys. When the dust had risen enough for him to see, Celie was entering the hotel. He hung back for a space, and when he followed her into the Bobcat, she had already disappeared. He wrote his name under hers in the soiled ledger, and observed that she had signed herself "Celie Sterling, Tucson, Arizona."

He went to his room, one floor up, and at the last moment asked the clerk who had carried his bag:

"Have you a room with a telephone?"

"Just one. I'd give it to you, but the lady got that a minute ago."

Bobby closed the door and went to the one window that looked out over the arid landscape desertward. The first thing he saw was the telephone wire!

It stretched out over a rabble of shacks, disappeared in a sea of undulating heat—and beyond that, half a mile distant, he saw the dumps and superstructure of the mine. Something told him that Celie was already busy, and that the wire was humming with the message that was to seal his doom, one way or the other. Involuntarily he shivered. He lighted a cigar and sat down. It was hot, and he was nervous.

He waited half an hour. A light tap came at the door then. In the same instant it opened, and Celie darted in. She carried something wrapped thickly in a newspaper. He jumped to his feet, and she thrust it into his hand. Her face was whiter than he had seen it before.

"It's all arranged," she said, in a voice so hard and tense that it startled him. "He wanted to come to the hotel at first, but when he learned that I wanted to see him secretly, — and alone, — I know that he was glad. I told him to bring the letters—that I would not believe until I saw with my own eyes. He will be at the mine office at nine o'clock. You — you won't fail me, will you? If you do—"

Her hands were clutched at her breast as she backed to the door. Before he could answer, she was gone.

A little dazed, Bobby unwrapped the weighty thing she had given him. It was the big forty-four revolver—loaded to the muzzle!

It was five o'clock when he went out again. He wandered up one side of the shadeless street, and down the other, and entered at last into a depraved-looking structure labeled "S. Finkel-

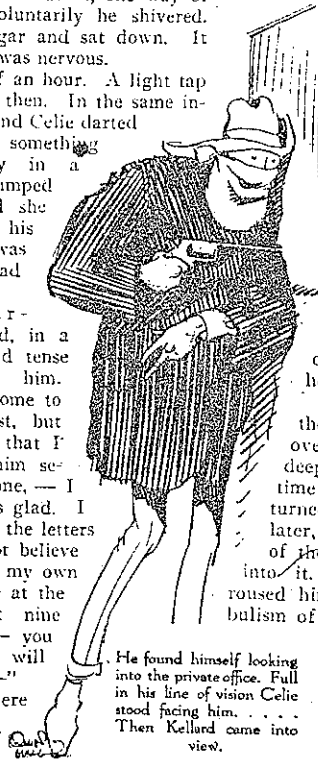
stein, Clothier." Here he bought a cheap slouch hat, a shoddy coat purposely three sizes too large for him, and a big handkerchief such as the cowboys wore about their necks. He did not know that from a window giving her an up-and-down view of the main street

Celie had watched him as he entered, and that her eyes followed him after he came out until he turned a corner two blocks up. He had no reason for turning that corner. He was not superstitious, but he felt the sudden chill of a clammy hand on his spine when he found himself face to face with the Yellow Jacket jail, and almost bumped into a ferocious-looking individual coming down its wooden steps. The man looked like a pirate only half tamed. Bobby knew he was the sheriff.

He cut off in the direction of the mine. The half-mile walk over a wagon trail four inches deep with dust gave him ample time for meditation. When he returned three quarters of an hour later, he knew the exact location of the mine office, and how to get into it. The shock of hard fact roused him utterly from the somnambulism of castle-building. He was no longer a make-believe hero, and his courage was like the temperature of a man with a fever, rising ebulliently at one moment, and sinking to the lowest ebb in the next.

He evaded the jail in going back to the Bobcat, and in doing so passed a small frame church out of which a small lean man with an unmistakable collar was just emerging. As he had recognized the sheriff, so now Bobby instinctively put away a mental picture of the little dried-up parson.

He went on to his room, dug himself out of the dust he had accumulated, shaved and descended to the dining-room. Celie was there—and so were half a dozen others, all men. He sat



He found himself looking into the private office. Full in his line of vision Celie stood facing him. . . . Then Kellard came into view.

at a table where he could look at her without being observed, and allowed his glance to travel about the room. He found that five other men had staked out vantage-points similar to his own, and that their eyes were on Celie as they ate. The sixth was an octogenarian, and he had boldly taken a seat opposite her. And Celie was a vision of soft and shimmering loveliness! He was amazed to see that she had accumulated most of the bill of fare about her plate, and was apparently enjoying it, entirely unconscious of the admiring stare of the six citizens of Yellow Jacket—and himself. Not until she rose to leave the room did she see him, and he caught for an instant the cautious glow of greeting in her eyes.

From the table next to Bobby came a deep and gusty sigh from the bosom of a corpulent individual whose bulging eyes roved the room challengingly.

"I've set my lamps on *some* females in my time," he announced, "but she's the prettiest I ever seen!"

When he returned to his room, he found a brief note from Celie slipped under his door. Again she implored him not to fail her in the last hour. At the bottom of the note she had signed herself Celie, and under the signature was a row of crosses—underscored.

If his courage required a final spur, that overwhelmingly significant row of little X's supplied it. At the advanced age of thirty-six he had not yet quite forgotten all the things that had gone to make up the romance of his boyhood, and his heart throbbed joyously as he counted them—an even dozen—Celie's first kisses!

It was a quarter after eight when he went unobtrusively out of a side door of the Bobcat, with the bundle of clothing, in which he had hidden the big revolver, hugged under his arm. Five minutes later he was on the dusty trail hurrying toward the mine. It was a glorious night. The stars hung over him by the million in a dome that was a phosphorescent blaze. There was no moon, but so brilliant were these stars that his shadow lay in a blotch at his feet. Midway between the town and the mine he stopped to listen. Was Celie ahead of

him, or behind? He looked at his watch. It was twenty-five minutes of nine. Probably she was ahead—and Kellard was already waiting.

HE hurried on, eyes and ears alert. He felt no longer the desire to hesitate. His blood ran strangely in his veins as the big dumps came in view. He forgot the jail, forgot the sheriff, forgot the hazard of the monstrous thing he was about to do. He was no longer Bobby McTabb, the dreamer; he was Robert Winchester McTabb, ready to do physical things for the girl he loved. After all he would have been a fighter—if he had gone "over there." He would have charged over the top with the rest of them. The thought was inspiring.

He made a detour into the shadow of one of the dumps, whence he could see the small building that was the mine office. It was lighted. Kellard was there!

Bobby dropped on his knees and again looked at his watch. It was ten minutes of nine. He took off his coat and hat then, unwrapped the bundle, and in their place put on the slouch and the misfit. The huge revolver he thrust butt downward into one of the coat pockets. With the big handkerchief in his hand he sneaked up behind a pile of debris fifty feet from the office and flattened himself against it, with his eyes on the window. Scarcely had he drawn a dozen breaths when a figure came up over the trail. It was Celie. For a space she stood twenty steps from him, and he could make out clearly the ghostly pallor of her face in the glow of the stars. He was filled with a curious exultation. He knew that she was looking for him, waiting for some sign, but he made neither movement nor sound. Once more he was Bobby McTabb the artist—dilettante in the fine art of drama! So much more powerful would the climax be if she thought that he had failed her!

Slowly Celie approached the door, opened it without knocking and entered. Before it closed behind her, Bobby heard the greeting of a man's voice.

Ten seconds later he was under one

of the four windows that lighted the small building. He took a chance, and raised his head cautiously until his eyes were on a level with the sash. He found himself looking into Kellard's private office, and through that into the outer room. Full in his line of vision Celie stood facing him, with her back against the door through which she had entered. In the glare of the electric illumination she was whiter than in the starlight. Then Kellard came into view. The man was holding out both hands, and speaking. Bobby could hear his voice only faintly. He was a big man. Bobby's first impression was that his clothes were tailored. Then he caught a glimpse of his face. It was the sort of face he hated. Kellard was smiling. Bobby caught the flash of a big diamond on his finger. A little later another blazed in his cravat. He observed this as Kellard turned, inviting Celie into the inner office.

He dropped down and listened. He heard the two enter the room, and heard Kellard as he closed the door. Now was his time! Hugging close to the wall he approached the entrance, pausing long enough at the step to tie the big handkerchief over the lower part of his face. An inch at a time he opened the door, wormed himself in, and closed it as cautiously behind him. Kellard's voice came to him distinctly now.

"I can't get your point of view, little girl," Kellard was saying. "Surely you don't think *she* would be mistaken!"

Before Celie had answered, Bobby's ear was glued to the door.

"I don't know," he heard her say in a hard, choking little voice. "I've—I've grown suspicious. I want to see them—read them—with my own eyes. That is why I am here. If they're as—as you both say—yes, I'll keep my word, and marry you. Isn't that fair?"

**B**OBBY'S heart was going like a hammer. And he knew that Celie's was almost choking her. Fiercely he clutched at the butt of the big forty-four in his hand.

For a moment there was silence.

"If I show them to you here—now—do you mean that you are ready to

marry me—to-night?" Kellard demanded then. "Of course we can keep it secret, and let the thing be pulled off properly at home. Do you mean that?"

"Perhaps—if the letters—"  
Bobby could hear the note of anguish in Celie's voice. It was despair! She believed that he had failed her—that in the last moment he had abandoned her to her fate! Kellard's chair scraped on the floor. Heavy footsteps went to the far end of the room. Very faintly Bobby heard the clicking turn of a knob to a safe, and after that there was a half-minute of terrible silence in which every engine of life in his body seemed to quit its work. Then the footsteps returned.

"There," said Kellard. "Pick out any one you choose. They're all alike."

Ten seconds more Bobby counted under his breath. Then he drew in a great gasp, threw back his shoulders and flung open the door.

"Hands up!" he cried.

The big revolver was leveled straight at Kellard's breast.

"Hands up," repeated Bobby. "And deliver!"

He had read that somewhere. It came spontaneously. He saw Kellard's hand half reaching out—and on the edge of the table was a revolver. Bobby, in his excitement, forgot the presence of a lady.

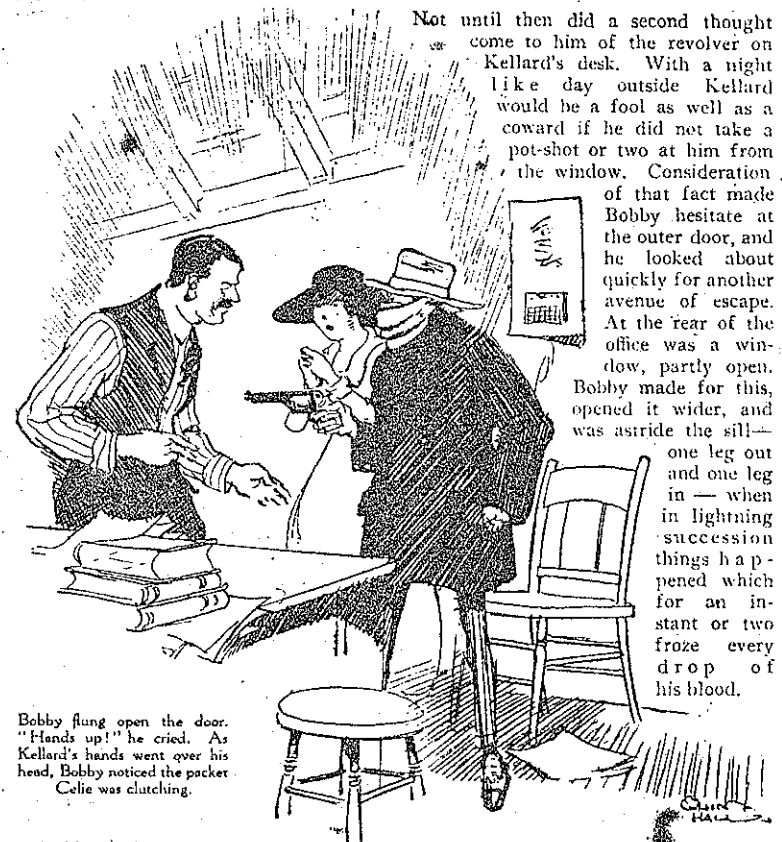
"Damn you, put up your hands!" he almost shouted.

Kellard's face turned from red to mottled gray. As his hands went over his head, Bobby noticed, as per schedule, the packet Celie was clutching in her hands.

"Gimme that," he demanded, holding out his free hand, with his eyes still blazing at Kellard over the big bandanna tied about his face. Celie held out the packet, and Bobby slipped it into his pocket. "Any more money in that safe?" he asked Kellard.

As a matter of fact there was. Beads of sweat were standing out on Kellard's face.

"Five thousand dollars," said Kellard chokingly. "Take that—and leave the letters you've just put into your pocket. They're worthless to you."



Bobby flung open the door. "Hands up!" he cried. As Kellard's hands went over his head, Bobby noticed the packet Celie was clutching.

Bobby backed toward the door.

"You can't pull anything as easy as that over Keddy Flynn," he chuckled, mentioning offhand the name of the notorious outlaw supposed to have been lynched a few days before. "And listen to me—I'm going to close this door, and I'm going to take my time leaving your shack, and if you make a move before I get away, I'll puncture you sure as daylight! Understand?"

As he retreated, with his revolver aimed at Kellard, he dared to take his first look at Celie. It seemed to him that she was almost on the point of betraying herself, and he darted out quickly and slammed the door shut.

Not until then did a second thought come to him of the revolver on Kellard's desk. With a night like day outside Kellard would be a fool as well as a coward if he did not take a pot-shot or two at him from the window. Consideration of that fact made Bobby hesitate at the outer door, and he looked about quickly for another avenue of escape. At the rear of the office was a window, partly open. Bobby made for this, opened it wider, and was astride the sill—

one leg out and one leg in—when in lightning succession things happened which for an instant or two froze every drop of his blood.

From Kellard's office came the sound of a revolver shot, a crash of broken glass, a woman's scream—and a hoarse, terrible cry from Kellard himself, followed by the heavy thud of a falling body!

**F**OR ten seconds Bobby sat astride the sill, powerless to move or make a sound. Physically and mentally during those ten seconds he was paralyzed, overcome by a horror which for a space his brain could not grasp. Weakly he pulled himself back into the room. He tore the handkerchief from his face and dropped it to the floor. Then he went back to the door, and opened it.



He knew—now—what he would find. On the floor, with his face turned up to the ceiling, lay Kellard. He did not look at Celie as he dropped on his knees beside him. Kellard was dead. The bullet had gone straight to his heart—and Bobby's eyes shifted to the table. The revolver was gone. Then he looked at the girl.

She was standing with her back to the wall, full in the glow of the electric light, and in her hand she held Kellard's revolver. Her face was the color of chalk, and in her eyes was a terrible fear. She was shivering. The revolver dropped from her hand. She tried to speak, but her lips made no sound. To Bobby she looked as if she had gone mad.

As he rose to his feet, she stretched out her arms toward him, and in the dry, choking sobs that came from her throat he heard her say:

"Why—why did you do it? Why did you do it?"

Yes, she was mad. She had killed Kellard—and her mind was gone. She was repeating the question—asking him why he had killed Kellard—over and over again as he went to her. He opened his own arms, and she came into them with a sobbing, pitiful cry, stroking his face with her two hands, and asking him that same thing until with a moan of anguish she flung her arms about his neck and buried her face on his breast. In those moments Bobby McTabb's soul rose above all earthly fears and problems. He strained her to him. He kissed her shining hair; he turned up her face and kissed her mouth, and her eyes that were flooding now with hot tears, telling her that he loved her more all other things on the face of the earth—that everything was all right, and she mustn't be afraid. In that glorious moment of inspiration and of love fulfilled, with her arms tightening more and more about his neck, he took upon himself fully and without hesitation the responsibility for the killing of Sheldon Lewis Kellard. Yes, Bobby McTabb would have gone over the top—"over there." He was the sort. And the girl knew it. He had done this for her. Her eyes blazed as she looked up at him.

There was a new fear in them now—a fear for him. If her reason was gone, she did not betray it. Her voice was steadier.

"We must hurry!" she cried. "We must get away!"

A plan of action had already leaped through Bobby's head. He picked up the revolver Celie had dropped and hurried her out of the room. He recovered the red handkerchief before they left the building, and after that ran with her through the moonlight to the edge of the dump where he had made his change. Here he buried the two revolvers, the slouch hat, the misfit coat and the handkerchief under a mass of rubble. Celie understood, and with her little hands she dug into the dirt and shale with him.

Then Bobby hugged her up close in his arms again and told her what he was going to do. That she had killed Kellard made no difference to him. More than ever she was his to fight for and to protect from danger from this hour on.

"I know where the minister lives at Yellow Jacket," he said, speaking quite calmly. "I am going to take you there, and marry you. Then we will get out of town. If we can reach the line of rail twenty miles north of here we'll make a run for the coast, and after that Japan, China, India. . . . My darling, out there the whole world is ahead of us!"

Her arms grew tighter about his neck. She lifted her face in the moonlight, and kissed him full on the mouth.

"Let's hurry!" she whispered.

#### CHAPTER IV

THREE quarters of an hour later it was over. Most of it passed like a dream to Bobby. He did not appreciate in himself the suave and circumspect manner in which he expressed his desire to the little dried-up minister of Yellow Jacket, to whom he extended a crisp twenty-dollar bill as he stated the business of his visit, thereby at the very beginning quite effectually clipping the wings of any overcurious

inquisitiveness that might have proved embarrassing for them. With a final hand-shake and a "God bless you, my children," the suddenly enriched little preacher watched them as they disappeared in the vast yellow sea of starlight, and not until Bobby knew they were beyond the range of his vision did he give way to the feelings within him. Then for two or three minutes he stopped close up against the protecting wall of a dark and uninhabited building that edged the walk, hugged Celie in his arms and between his kisses tried to tell her how happy he was—and ended it all by declaring that he would have killed a thousand men instead of one had it been necessary to achieve her. Over and over he repeated that she was his wife, that nothing could happen to her, and that already they were started on their long journey for the other side of the earth.

Those two or three blissful minutes might have stretched themselves into half an hour had not a man rushed suddenly past them from the direction of the mine. He was hatless and coatless, and his apparent excitement sent a cold thrill of horror up Bobby's spine. He felt Celie's body stiffen in his arms. From her lips fell a pitiful little cry when the man had gone.

"They've found him!" she whispered in a hard, strained voice. "Robert—

Robert—why did you do it? Oh, why did you do it?"

Bobby swallowed hard. It would be only a matter of a few seconds, he figured, before Yellow Jacket's black-whiskered beast of a sheriff would be on the job, and it was not particularly consoling at this particular moment to be repeatedly asked why he had done it!

"Sh-h-h-h! Be careful," he warned. "Nothing shall hurt you, my darling. Not a thing!"

"I know it. I'm not thinking of myself, Robert. It's you. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I'm to blame for it. I asked you to kill him. I made you kill him! I'm all to blame. But they wont hang me for it. They'll hang you. Oh, it's horrible, horrible!"

"It is," choked Bobby.

Suddenly her two hands were gripping frantically at his arm.

"But I wont let them!" she cried, and Bobby saw the beautiful blaze of fire in her eyes.

"It's all my fault—and if they catch us I shall lie! I'll tell them that it was I who killed Sheldon Kellard. Yes, I'll do it. But before that—before they get us—we must destroy the letters!"

"We—we buried them in the old coat," said Bobby. "I forgot to take them out. But they're safe there. No one will ever find them."

"Oh-h-h-h—if it hadn't been for the letters—" moaned Celie.



"Why—why did you do it?" she cried.

"You wouldn't be my wife," interrupted Bobby quickly. "Are you—sorry—for that?"

"No-o-o-o. Only I'd have married you just the same—if you hadn't killed him. And then—we'd have been so happy!"

Her eyes, soft with the glow of starlight, convinced him that she was not pretending. She did not know that she had killed Sheldon Kellard. The shock of the tragedy had been too much for her, and she was filled with the curious illusion that it was he who had fired the fatal shot. Otherwise she was in her right senses—adorably so. The way her eyes were looking at him gave him a new and sudden strength. He must win out! Half a dozen steps from them was a narrow aperture between the walls of the two frame structures near which they were standing. He pointed to the hiding-place.

"Conceal yourself in there, and don't come out until I return," he said. "I'm going to get a couple of horses or bust!"

**TWENTY** seconds later he was hurrying toward the corner of the main street. The idea in his head was like a thing of fire, and his heart thumped excitedly when he came to the intersection and faced the right. Half a dozen buildings up was the "Come Again" saloon—and at first glance Bobby judged half the country round had accepted the open

invitation. A score or more of saddled horses were hitched in front, and toward these he made his way with a definite determination. He chose the first two, unfastened them with the casual indif-

ference of ownership, and led them away. A blear-eyed half-drunken individual reclining on a box watched him go. Bobby saw him out of the corner of his eye, and began to whistle. He was still whistling when Celie saw him coming and darted out to join him.

"I borrowed them from in front of the saloon," he explained. "It's our one chance. If we can make that line of rail—"

"Make it!" cried Celie, her voice trembling with excitement. "They can't beat us—not if we have a little start. They're splendid! I know horses. On those we'll fairly fly!"

"You—you can ride—fast?" inquired Bobby.

"Ride!" Before he could lend her a hand, she was in one of the saddles. "Shorten the stirrups, please, and I'll show you!"

He performed the task with the sickening sensation of a

new and impending evil about to descend upon him. So far as he could remember he had never been astride a horse in his life. He was determined, if possible, to keep this secret to himself. He climbed into his saddle.



The suddenly enriched little preacher watched them as they disappeared.

"You set the pace. And don't go too fast. We must—save the horses."

With a little chirrup and a nudge of her heels Celie set off, and Bobby's mount followed like a shot. By quick action he saved himself. With both hands he took a tenacious grip on the pommel of his saddle, and for twenty minutes thereafter hung on for his very existence. If Celie was not actually flying, she was at least making very good speed. It was impossible for him to keep his eyes on her. His bridle-reins hung loose. All the bones of his body were suffering a series of concussions that made it impossible for him to draw in a breath without having it disjointed into numerous parts. He lost his hat. His tongue got between his teeth—and at last in the frantic hope of improving his situation he let go of the saddle pommel and flung his arms about the neck of his mount. Twenty minutes of that! And they had twenty miles to go! He gritted his teeth, determined to hang on until the last drop of his blood was churned to death.

Pride kept him from calling out. And that same pride made him pray; even in his agony, that Celie would not drop back to see with her own eyes the manner of his horsemanship. Then the thing happened that he had known would come sooner or later. His foot slipped out of one of the stirrups, and after a vain effort or two to recapture it he sought salvation by hugging his nag with his heel. Like a shot the cow-pony forged ahead, breasted Celie and passed her with a speed that drew some sort of protest from her. Bobby heard her voice. That was the last he did hear. He lost his second stirrup. He was conscious of a swift and twisting passage through midair that terminated in a cataclysmic shock when he landed.

**WHEN** Bobby came to, he was explaining to Celie that all his experiences in fast riding had been in flying-machines, and that in these days of modern warfare they didn't use horses at the front. Celie was kneeling in the deep sand at his side, her arms about him, pleading with him to get up quick—and run. Finally what she was saying got into his head.

"They're after us, Robert! I can hear them! They're on our trail!"

Bobby stiffened with a jerk. The world cleared before his eyes. He saw the stars, the yellow floor of the desert—and Celie. And then he saw their two horses standing patiently a few steps away. He stood up, a bit groggily, and with Celie's arm about his waist listened to the swift approach of his doom. Instantly his mind gripped the situation. It was futile now to make an effort to escape their pursuers. A few seconds more, and they would be in the hands of the law. He looked at Celie's face, white and haggard in the starlight, and drew her to him with a new and tender gentleness. She had not gone on because he had fallen! He bent down, and kissed her.

"You must promise me one thing," he said, so quietly and with so little fear in his voice that wonderment filled her eyes. "You must let me do all of the talking—all of it. Will you?"

She nodded, something choking back the word she tried to utter.

"If they ask you questions, you must remain quiet, or refer them to me. And don't let them see you are frightened. If you do that, all is lost. Understand?"

She nodded again.

In another moment a thunder of hoofs and a cloud of dust encompassed them, and with Celie held tightly in the hollow of his arm Bobby found himself staring, still another instant later, into the ferocious face of the black-whiskered sheriff of Yellow Jacket. And then there was a circle of those faces, malevolent and pitiless, circling him like a horde of wolves—and Bobby knew about asking questions that the hour had come when he must give up the ghost.

Also he became suddenly cognizant that the thing pressing against his stomach was the muzzle of a big revolver.

"Well—anything to say?" hissed the sheriff.

"Nothing—except that this is a pretty raw joke to play on a stranger in your town—if you call it a joke," replied Bobby, hugging Celie closer. "You're frightening my wife, sir!"

"The devil!" said the sheriff. "Bones, take a look at 'em and give us your opinion."

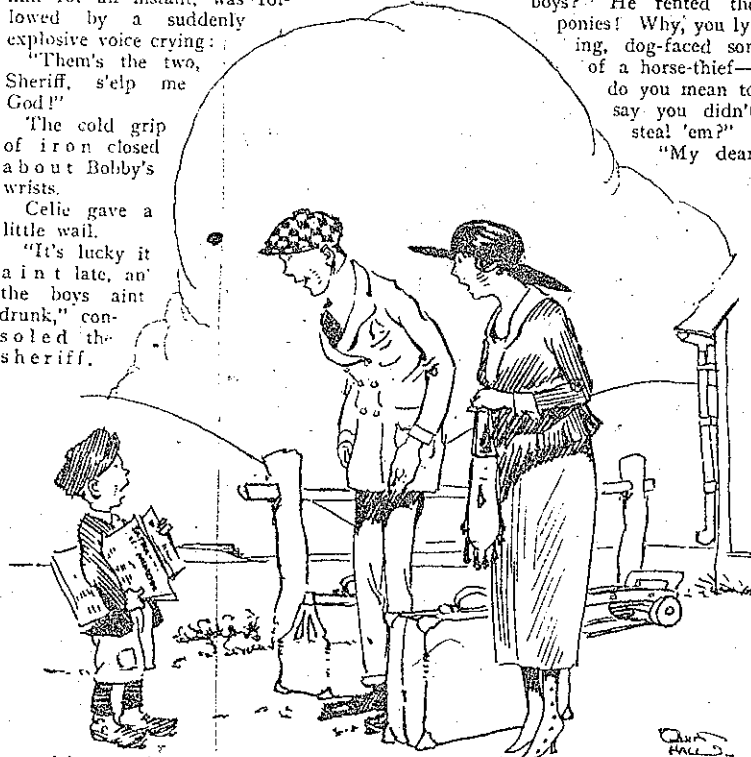
A space of silence, in which the vengeful eyes of a score of men never left him for an instant, was followed by a suddenly explosive voice crying:

"Them's the two, Sheriff, s'elp me God!"

The cold grip of iron closed about Bobby's wrists.

Celie gave a little wail.

"It's lucky it aint late, an' the boys aint drunk," consoled the sheriff.



A boy's voice bawled: "Ex-x-x-try)—Yellow Jacket Herald! All about last night's murder!"

"If they was, they'd lynch you quicker'n Jack Robinson, for you're the dirtiest, lowest-down coyote of a sneak this side o' Montana—you, hiding under a woman's skirts like you are!"

Bobby was grateful that the night hid his weakness, that it covered the tremble of his knees and the sweat of doom on his face. His last hour had come, yet even then he fought, as the boche fights at the last trench.

"I'm not hiding," he protested. "We just came out for a ride."

"A ride?" bellowed the sheriff. "A ride! Where'd you get the horses?"

"Rented them," said Bobby.

"Rented 'em!" The sheriff's voice rose almost to a yell. "D'ye hear that, boys? He rented the ponies! Why, you lying, dog-faced son of a horse-thief—do you mean to say you didn't steal 'em?"

"My dear

man, you're dead drunk," replied Bobby. "If I had stolen them, and we had wanted to get away, do you suppose we would have been standing quietly here when you came up? I ask you—would we have been sitting out here admiring the stars? We were just about to return to the village—"

"Village!" gasped the sheriff. Rage undefined rose in his throat and choked him. He turned to the men. "Boys, 'ave any of you got some matches? I want to take a look at this galoot!"

The flare of a match lighted up Bobby's pale face—and Celie's. The sheriff stared. Every eye in that circle of faces stared, and some one said in amazement:

"Good Lord, it's the little girl who come to the Bobcat!"

There was a crowding of men a little nearer. The sheriff was stunned. Bobby sensed the psychological moment—and caught it on the fly.

"It is my right to demand the reason for this outrage," he cried. "As yet you have done nothing but call me names and insult my wife. What do you mean?"

The sheriff cleared his throat.

"Them horses you've got was took from in front of the saloon," he began, "an' as we've had about fifty stolen in just that way, we figgered we had the thieves when we got you two. If we've made a mistake, we all beg your pardons, don't we boys?—specially the lady's. But how the dev—I mean how in thunder could you rent 'em?"

For barely a second Bobby hesitated. His mind shot back. He saw again the half-drunken human hulk leering from the box as he led the two horses away. His brain leaped to the excitement of the game—his game. He said:

"We just came into your little village this afternoon. To-night, as we were passing down the main avenue, we saw a large number of horses tied and saddled, and evidently for hire. There was only one man near them, a man who was, I regret to say, somewhat a little the worse for liquor, and him we asked if we might rent a couple of horses for a couple of hours. He said yes—that we might take two that belonged to him if we brought them back in one hour instead of two. I gave the man a dollar, and we were about to return when you rode down upon us."

"The devil!" gasped the sheriff.

He was unlocking the handcuffs about Bobby's wrists.

"The devil!" he repeated, as if in a daze. "Our village—the avenue! Boys, we've made a mistake! It was that drunken Reddy. You remember he had money when he came in, an' he took a drink before he told us some one had cut out the ponies."

A SWIFT gallop of hoofs interrupted whatever apologies might have followed. A man sprang from a horse, crowded his way through the cordon of men, and fairly dragged the sheriff away from Bobby and his wife. In a low, excited voice he said something that drew an amazed gasp from the sheriff. The hearts of Bobby and Celie stood still. Distinctly they heard the name Shelden Kellard!

The sheriff turned. In his face there was another look than that roused by his desert-born hatred of horse-thieves.

"Boys, Shelden Kellard is dead. He was murdered in his office sometime this evening."

The return to Yellow Jacket was at a walk. Even at that Bobby felt strange aches in his bones. An hour later they were in his room in the hotel. Not until then did Celie break down, and Bobby snuggled her up in his arms much as he would have snuggled a little child, and sat down in an old-fashioned rocker near the window that looked out over the telephone wires toward the mine, whispering consolation and love.

Bobby had purposely left the light out, and they sat in the glow of starlight coming through the window. He realized now that there was nothing they could do—nothing that could be done until the next day's train. Their fate hung by a thread, and every moment he feared the tramp of heavy footsteps on the stair. He was confident the things they had buried would not be discovered, but there was that other dread—the accursed combination of fact known as circumstantial evidence—Celie's appointment with Kellard, his purchase of the misfit coat, the hat and handkerchief, their hasty marriage, the borrowing of the horses and their taking separate rooms at the Bobcat. Could he lie himself out of a web like that? Involuntarily he shuddered. Celie felt his agitation, and her arms clung tighter.

"The letters," she whispered. "If it hadn't been for them, Robert— But I had to do it. I had to—or sell myself. You did it for me, and you haven't asked—why."

"I didn't care—much," said Bobby, a little dully. "It was you I wanted—just

you. Of course I couldn't help guessing, but I didn't care. I wanted you. I've wanted you all my life."

"I'm going to tell you—now," her voice whispered sobbingly. "It's terrible, but I must. It was my stepmother. She was East—six months. She met Kellard. She swears it was only a flirtation—that there was nothing terribly wrong. But she wrote the letters—and afterward—Kellard wanted me! Do you understand? He had the letters. He used them as a threat. I had no pity for her. But my father! Robert, to me the two most wonderful men in the world are my father—and you. He worshiped my stepmother. His faith in her was like your faith in me. I had to marry Kellard or see my father broken and ruined by the disclosure of the letters. At last I was coming to see Kellard, when I met you. My stepmother was urging me and I was doing it all for Father's sake."

He was pressing her face close to his. "Yes," he said, "I understand."

"And the ranch," she went on. "My father had owned it, as I said, Robert, but he gave it to me two years ago. It is my ranch—the Three Bar X, down in Maricopa County, Arizona, and there are five thousand head of cattle on it, all mine—and yours! We'll live there. Wont it be beautiful, Robert?"

"It—will," he said.

"YOU may have to know my stepmother," she went on, with a little note of pain in her voice. "But you'll love my dad. He'll visit us often. He was born on the ranch, and he'll love you, Robert. He loves a brave man—and a fighter."

"And I suppose—being that sort of a man—he hates liars?" said Bobby.

"Yes," replied Celie, squeezing her little nose closer into Bobby's neck. "It's funny why you mentioned that. He has always said that the two things he likes to do best are to kill rattlesnakes and send liars to jail. Isn't it odd?"

"It is," agreed Bobby. "And—er—who is your father, sweetheart?"

"Why, Robert!"

"I know, dear—you've told me his name, and where he lives, but I mean—er—what is he? His business, you know."

"Didn't I tell you his name was John Courtleigh Sterling?"

"Yes. But—"

"And you didn't know?"

"I—I never heard the name before," confessed Bobby.

"I—thought—you—must—know," she breathed. "And you didn't! Why, Robert, my darling old dad is the governor of Arizona!"

#### CHAPTER V

THE governor of Arizona—her father! And she owned a ranch—with five thousand head of cattle!

And now she was telling him again, with her warm lips close to his neck, that they'd live together on that ranch, and be happy all their lives, and that Dad would come down and see them often—if they were just lucky enough to get away from Yellow Jacket without the sheriff discovering that it was he who had killed Sheldon Kellard!

Through the long hours of the night they sat like that, waiting and listening for the thing they dreaded. It was midnight when Bobby found himself keeping the vigil alone. Celie was asleep in his arms.

Hour after hour he waited, and listened, and watched.

When they came for him, when they confronted him with the death of Kellard, what would she say? In that hour would she tell what had actually happened? If she did that, it would save neither—and two would pay the price for Kellard's life instead of one.

At length Bobby slept. Celie's eyes were looking at him when he woke. In her heart hope was flaming like the red sun that began to creep up over the edge of the southeastern desert.

They had not spoken when Bobby looked at his watch.

It was four o'clock. The early train eastward went at six.

"We must leave quietly and without excitement," said Bobby. "You'd better go to your room, dear. We'll go down at five-thirty."

Bobby thanked God that a drowsy

hireling was at the hotel desk in place of the proprietor who had welcomed them yesterday. He paid the bill, and with Celie's arm linked in his, they de-

parted slowly up the "avenue." There was no haste in their going. No one could have said that they betrayed the slightest sign of excitement.

But their hearts were beating like hammers. They did not speak. Their last great battle in Yellow Jacket they were fighting splendidly.

The train was on time, and when they heard the distant whistle of it, and finally the increasing rumble of it half a mile away, a low sob broke from Celie's lips.

In the same moment a boy's loud voice bawled out close at their heels:

"Ex-x-try—Yellow Jacket Herald! All about last night's murder!"

For an instant Bobby felt that some one had fired a shot at him. Then he turned casually and bought a paper.

"Didn't know that Yellow Jacket had a paper," he tried to say jokingly to the boy.

"We don't," was the rejoinder. "We git it out once a week, except when a murder happens. Then Pop allus gits out an extra."

Bobby thrust the paper into his pocket. Five minutes later, as the train left Yellow Jacket in a dust-cloud behind, he pulled it from his pocket. He looked at Celie. Her eyes were wide and staring. Then he spread open the front page.

There it was—in all the spectacular glory of hand-set type and full-page headlines. Sheldon Kellard murdered in his office! Shot through his window! And then—

"Oh!" almost sobbed Bobby.

Yes, there it was! Sheldon Kellard shot to death through the window of his office by his deadliest enemy, one-armed Sandy Duggan! And Duggan, half drunk, had come into Yellow Jacket and boasted openly of his crime!

The paper dropped from Bobby's nerveless fingers before they had more than finished the headlines. His eyes met Celie's. What a strange, wonderful look was in Celie's beautiful orbs at this super-joyful moment!

"I thought—it was you," he managed to say, in a husky whisper. "You had the pistol—in your hand—and the shot came, and he fell. And I saw no one else."

"I snatched the revolver from the table—when he started to get it. And you—you—Robert—you had a pistol—and the shot came and he fell.

Then happened the thing Bobby had known would come. His foot slipped out of the stirrup. . . . He lost the second stirrup. He was conscious of a swift and twisting passage through midair.

And I saw no one else—and it never occurred to me that anyone else could possibly—oh, Robert, Robert!"

"No, I didn't shoot him through the window," said Bobby. "I sure didn't!"