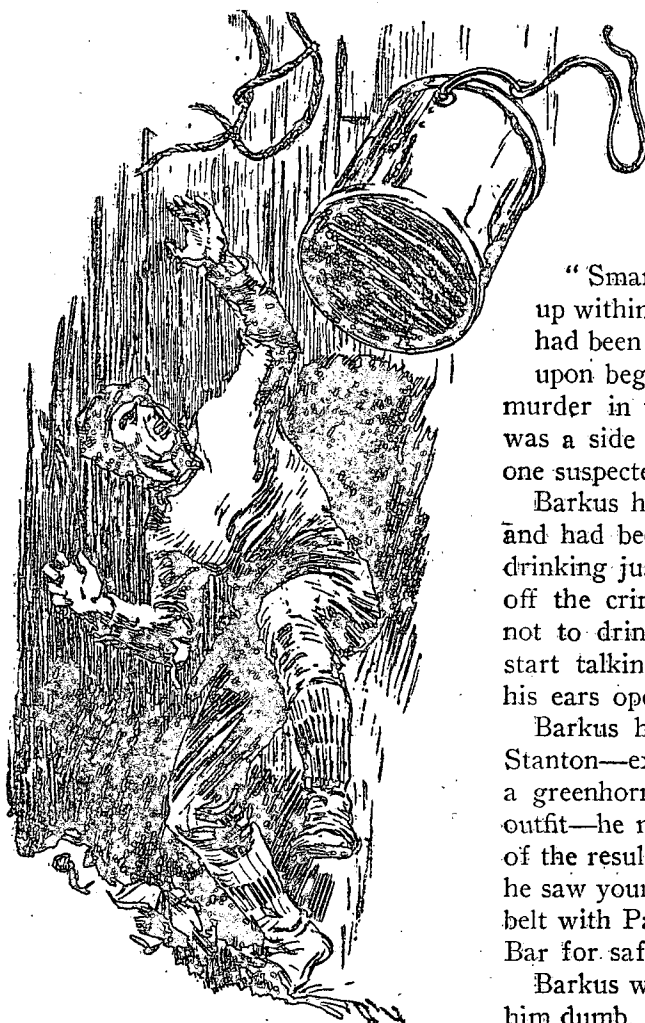


# Thread of Life

By CLIFF FARRELL



*A piece of yarn and a bucket were the only weapons of a trapped man against his would-be murderer*

"Smart" Barkus had him sized up within an hour as just the type he had been looking for. Barkus thereupon began planning Ken Stanton's murder in a fishy, offhand way that was a side of his character which no one suspected.

Barkus had already killed one man, and had been summering in Reelfoot, drinking just enough to keep his mind off the crime, and still being careful not to drink so much that he would start talking about it. He had kept his ears open, too.

Barkus had nothing against young Stanton—except perhaps that he was a greenhorn. But Barkus needed an outfit—he needed it to take advantage of the results of his other killing—and he saw young Stanton deposit a money belt with Pat Murphy in the Killarney Bar for safe keeping.

Barkus was aware that men thought him dumb. He was a warped, squatty individual with long arms that dangled loosely as he shambled with a tired forward slant. He had small, dull eyes, a sharp mouth—and the remainder of his face was lost in an inch-long mess of greasy whiskers that were never trimmed, and yet never seemed to increase their length.

They had tacked that nickname—Smart—on him because Barkus, in an

His partner was trying to kill him

**K**EN STANTON, wearing a gray wool sweater and socks that his mother had knitted for him on a farm back in Ohio, was as raw a chechacko as ever had hit Reelfoot on the Koyukuk, the day he landed on the last boat to run the river before the freeze-up.

attempt to offset general opinion, made it a point to boast of his brightness. "I'm too smart for 'em!" was one of his stock expressions.

Well, he had been too smart for them this time. They had never missed the man he had done in. The victim had been only another ripple in the human tide that had gone out of Reelfoot the previous winter—and like a ripple, his disappearance had not been noted. That was what Barkus had stayed in Reelfoot all through the dull summer to ascertain. He was safe now in cashing in on his crime.

So he waited another day, then bought a drink for Stanton in Murphy's place. The freeze-up was starting. The boom of drift ice came from the Koyukuk like a growling undertone to the buzz of conversation in the crowded bar, where men were impatiently awaiting the time for the jump-off into the gold country.

Barkus sized up Stanton again, and saw a sandy-haired, freckled, muscular young giant of about twenty-three years.

"Who yuh goin' in with?" Barkus asked indolently.

Stanton shook a discouraged head. "Haven't found a trail mate," he admitted. "They don't seem to care for greenhorns."

Barkus nodded. "This is a sourdough country, young feller." Then he dropped his voice. "Meet me outside."

**B**ARKUS led Stanton to his shack—a chilly hovel that smelled like a dog kennel—and played his ace immediately by displaying his last three ounces of gold. A mere speck in the worn poke that Barkus opened, it caused Stanton's blue eyes to widen.

"There's more where it come

from," Barkus winked. "I struck it just before the break-up last spring, but I had ter leave an' come out. What do ye say?"

Stanton hesitated. He did not particularly cotton to Smart Barkus as a partner. He was revolted by the filth of the shack, and by the man's own appearance. There was something else about Barkus that Stanton could not make up his mind about—something deeper and more repelling. Yet gold was gold. Barkus was a sourdough and he knew the country. He had a definite prospect.

"Why do you pick me?" Stanton asked.

Barkus winked again. "Because I'm too smart fer 'em," he whispered. "They don't know I got it. They figger I'm a-workin' a day-wage bar som'eres, an' that don't int'rest 'um. They won't watch me, an' they won't give a damn what ye do—fer ye're a greenie. But if we mushed out tergether, some trail louse would git suspicious. But I'm too smart fer 'em! Up here, everybody watches everybody else.—But we won't go out tergether. We'll join up the river. How's that?"

Stanton looked at the gold again. "Sounds good," he finally said. "What will it be? Fifty-fifty."

Barkus summoned an injured expression. "Cert," he said. "Now, here's what ye'll need fer yer half of the outfit."

He began listing the pack investment that Stanton would make.

**T**HUS it was that a week later they joined forces. The freeze-up had come, and their meeting point was twenty miles up the Koyukuk. Stanton had already camped, and Barkus came mushing in at dusk—with only a meager pack on his back.

Stanton said nothing about this, though he was surprised. He had invested his stake in a four-dog outfit, a tent, snowshoes, tools and rope. Now he realized that Barkus had led him a trifle astray on the fifty-fifty promise. Barkus was furnishing little but his own trail experience.

Various other things came to light before they reached the fork of the John River, with winter's heavy hand compressing the land into chilled steel. Barkus developed rheumatism whenever the going was heavy, thereby throwing the grueling work of breaking trail on the young redhead. Barkus also was in the habit of hunting ptarmigan and porcupine while Stanton made camp and got supper started. But Barkus never brought in a kill. As a marksman, his rating was zero.

One day Stanton clipped the head from a ptarmigan at sixty feet.

"Ye're a purty good shot, ain't you?" Barkus remarked.

"Came within an ace of making the international team at Camp Perry, two years ago," Stanton grinned.

That made Barkus thoughtful. Well, there were plenty of other ways of killing a man; one didn't have to risk a miss with a gun.

They reached the John, and veered for the heart of the Endicotts, mounting into a rugged white land, with the river the only highway. Barkus breathed easier now. There was little or no prospecting up the John. The main interest was centered to the east, in the Coldfoot district. Only twice, on the Koyukuk, had they encountered other mushers—and Barkus had been careful to make it clear that he and Stanton were only accidental companions for the day. That would avoid embarrassing questions when he came out alone in the spring.

Stanton had learned much in those hard days on the mush. His shoulders had hardened. This was work of the cruelest sort—but he liked it.

It was not the work that silenced him and thinned his grin. It was Barkus. The chechacko was wondering if gold really was worth the ordeal of enduring such a misfit for a partner.

Stanton was clean of mind and body. This might have been high adventure—the sparkling road to romance—but for Barkus.

Stanton believed that behind Barkus's thick brow and stolid face no thought into the future or a second in the past ever stirred. He was wrong! The thing that he had sensed at their first meeting, and which still came upon him occasionally, was the murder purpose that was never out of Barkus's mind. But Barkus intended to wait. He had need of Stanton's muscles for a time yet.

Eventually, they struck away from the John and up a nameless creek; and after three days of hard mushing in forty-below temperatures, Barkus exposed his sharp yellow teeth in one of his rare demonstrations of good humor.

"We'll be there, come ter-morrer, kid," he said. "Then we'll pick a likely spot, an' start workin'. I'm hopin'-we don't have ter go deep. Never kin tell, though."

Stanton smiled too. Perhaps the very toil of sinking a shaft would give him relief from Barkus's continual presence.

THE next morning they again turned off, this time into a "pup"—a tiny tributary to the creek. Barkus nearly missed it, for its mouth was a mere depression in the

shore, and it was choked with brush and snow.

They mounted it for three miles. Then Barkus for once willingly took the lead, though the going was heavy, necessitating the use of the big webs to pack it.

Finally Stanton, at the pole, heard Barkus shout from around a bend. Stanton shoved the dogs faster, rounded the elbow—and then bitter disappointment overwhelmed him. To come this far—to endure Barkus so long—for this! Before him was a flat where the high banks dropped away and leveled off, just as Barkus had pictured it. But they were too late. Someone had beaten them to it. A cabin, a snow-covered tailings dump, and the winter-bound skeleton of a windlass, and a boiler at the shaft mouth, stood in the flat.

Barkus was cursing. "Of all the sneezin' luck! Some joker's been workin' the claim all summer."

Stanton was too beaten to talk. They found the door of the shack open, and a drift of snow blocking it.

"S'funny," Barkus snarled. "Why the devil didn't he close 'er up tight? This'll be worse than siwashin'."

Barkus was being smart. He let Stanton make all the real discoveries.

Stanton made them rapidly. "Say!" he exclaimed. "That jigger must have pulled out in a terrible hurry. Here's his clothes, mouldy and rotting away.—And look! Flour and beans. His gun, too."

Barkus pretended indifference. The chechacko went outside, and finally climbed down the mouldy rope ladder into the shaft. A moment later his shout brought Barkus to the mouth of the diggings.

"Look!" Stanton said, lighting a match at the bottom.

Barkus pretended a horror he did not feel. "By hominy, kid!" he gasped. "The pore feller!—Dead!"

Stanton came up, pale and depressed.

Barkus looked around, and nodded sadly. "I savvy it now. He was workin' the shaft alone.—See! He had a trip hook tuh dump the bucket. But the rope broke, an' the bucket killed him. It's happened before."

Stanton searched about the shack, but found nothing to identify the victim. It was growing dark, so they camped near the creek. Neither felt like occupying the shack.

**I**N the morning, Barkus dug through the snow and chopped some frozen gravel from the tailings dump while Stanton silently prepared breakfast.

Now Barkus knew exactly what he would find as he washed the gravel in hot water beside the fire. He had tested this dump the previous spring. Barkus considered it a lucky day when, after a disastrous and fruitless quest farther up in the Endicotts, he had mushed down this pup on his way out. He had been surprised to stumble across this claim, for on his way up the previous fall, Barkus had passed this flat up as worthless.

Barkus had arrived in mid-morning, and the prospector was down in the shaft. With his usual stolid cunning, Barkus had not announced himself until he had tried a pan or two of the gravel that was being drawn up from the depths. That test had made a murderer of him.

The rest had been easy. He had merely ambushed himself beside the shaft until the prospector, knocking off for a noon snack, came climbing up the rope ladder. Barkus recalled the

swift flash of horror in the victim's face as he saw the club descending. He could hear again the thud of the body as it struck the bottom. Then Barkus had pounded the hoisting cable apart, and dropped the iron bucket down on the slain man. It was an airtight case of death by accident—due to the broken cable.

Now Barkus simulated intense excitement as he reduced the gravel to a thin film of black sand. The sand was flecked with gold.

"Stanton!" he cried. "We're rich!"

The chechacko looked at the pan and drew a deep breath. "But it's not ours," he finally said slowly. "That poor guy must have relatives somewhere."

Barkus was astounded. "He didn't stake it," he cried. "Ye're not really meanin' that ye're softie enough ter pass up a fortune. Yer a bigger fool than—"

"Stow it!" Stanton said curtly. "Do you think I'm a thief?"

Barkus saw that he would have to take another course. "Mebbe ye're right, kjd," he mumbled. "But ye're forgittin' that I was on the ground first. How 'bout workin' it an' goin' halves with 'em—if we find any heirs?"

Stanton shook his head.

"Somebody else might stumble across it an' grab the whole thing," Barkus argued desperately. "It ain't staked, I tell ye."

There was some logic in that. "I'll think it over," Stanton said. "Let's get him out of the shaft and bury him. Perhaps we can identify him."

THEY had plenty of cable and rope to replace the hoisting length and the ladder, which was of doubtful strength. After an hour they were ready, and Barkus descend-

ed into the shaft. Soon he gave the signal, and Stanton worked the windlass. The body of the victim appeared on the surface. Time had worked considerable havoc, but when Barkus came up, he declared he had made identification.

"That's pore Pete Ainsley from Port Yukon," he stated. "Me an' him prospected outta Forty Mile in the old days."

"Any family?"

Barkus shook a doleful head. "Pete tole me he didn't have a soul in the world."

Stanton reserved judgment. He believed Barkus would have lied in any event.

They thawed a grave, and buried the prospector.

"Wal, what d'ya say?" Barkus asked when that task was ended. "We got a better right ter this claim than any duck in the world. Why, ol' Pete would rather I get it than anybody."

"I'd prefer to try some new ground," Stanton argued.

Barkus flew into a rage. "Ye'vealy sap!" he snarled. "Gold's where ye find it. We kin sink shafts in this blasted country till we die of old age—an' maybe never hit color. This here is a placer. It's plenty rich—too rich ter last. It probably could be cleaned out in one season. An' if we don't do it someone else will."

Stanton looked at the pan, now frozen, where the gold glistened among the black sand. It would be worth while, even if the lion's share went to others.

"All right," he finally agreed. "But only on condition that we hunt any rightful heirs and give them their decent share. He may have relatives who need it."

They began. The boiler and steam



points were in fair condition, and that made the work easier. They reached bed rock within a week, and the gravel was rich in gold.

Stanton privately called it Dead Man's Claim, but Barkus had no such notions. Now that he had won Stanton over, he was cheerful—even ambitious. But that eventually passed. Even the fact that each day saw the gravel mound increased by so much potential wealth, failed to inspire Barkus after a month of it, and little by little he began to ease the main burden of the labor onto the young redhead.

One day, Stanton, toiling in the drift at forty-five feet, found the steam failing. He mounted, and located Barkus dozing beside the stove in the shaft. The fuel for the boiler was exhausted—the fire dying.

Two months' accumulation of resentment boiled in Stanton then, and he picked Barkus up by the collar and shook him.

Barkus, frothing venomous curses, tried to reach his rifle, but Stanton seized the gun, kicked Barkus out into the snow, and then ejected all the shells and appropriated all the ammunition in the shack.

"From now on, you do your half of the work," he told Barkus grimly.

"Gimme thet gun!" Barkus snarled.

For answer, Stanton booted him toward the shaft.

But Stanton had read the murder flare in Barkus's eyes. From then on, he wore his six-shooter, even when he was in the shaft; and he cached all the ammunition far away in the ridges.

**S**PRING came, and softened the land. They turned the steam points on the gravel, and began washing it through a long-tom.

They were now racing to beat the breakup. They had the cream of the pay dirt now; for two weeks the pan had showed only meager colors.

Finally the job was finished.

They sat looking at each other across the table in the shack, pokes containing more than four thousand ounces of gold between them.

"Still figgerin' on lookin' for someone ter give it to?" Barkus sneered.

Stanton nodded. "But in any event, we'll keep our fair share. We earned it."

Barkus's eyes did not rise from the table. The time to strike had come. He had already delayed over long.

"We better mush in the mornin'," he mumbled. "If the John breaks before we get down, we'll have a hell of a time."

Stanton did not sleep that night. The old impression that Barkus had something deep in his mind was once more upon the redhead in full force. But Barkus did not stir from his bunk during the night.

"Better take the rope an' cable with us," Barkus proposed the next morning.

The sled was loaded, and the dogs were helping their impatience to hit the trail.

Stanton agreed, and swung down the shaft to release the ladder from its moorings at the bottom. Barkus began fumbling with the hoisting cable.

The heavy iron bucket—the same that Stanton believed to have killed Pete Ainsley, was sitting on the edge of the shaft's mouth—still attached to the hoisting cable. This cable, in turn, was wound about the windlass spool.

Stanton freed the ladder at the bottom and was reaching for a rung to ascend when it was jerked upward, out of his hands.

He looked up, and saw Barkus's face briefly. Then it vanished. Something else partially blotted out the light, and Stanton dove headlong into the drift just in time to escape the heavy gravel bucket which struck with a smash, bounded a foot into the air and fell back in the bottom of the shaft.

Following it came the swishing coils of the released cable. With a final *plop!* the end came down. The hoisting cable had been cut! The rope ladder was gone!

Stanton peered out and up. Far above—only forty-five feet, but it seemed an infinity—was a tiny circle of daylight, bisected by the spool of the windlass. How remote, how precious that glimpse of sky seemed to the redhead!

Like a hammer-blow, unnerving terror struck Stanton. The gloom of his chill prison, together with a million horrible thoughts, crushed upon him as the weight of sea depths squeezes a diver bereft of his air pressure.

The ladder, and the cable—his only threads to life—were gone. He had been a fool. He had allowed himself to be lulled into security. Barkus had got him after all.

Stanton shouted hoarsely, but there was no response. Then he heard the dogs. Their yelps grew fainter, and at last lapsed into silence.

Barkus had left him here to die—just as he had left Pete Ainsley. As if in sudden revelation, Ken Stanton now knew that Barkus had killed Ainsley also.

STANTON tried the shaft wall first with his fingers and then with his knife. It was hopeless. At this depth the walls were frozen like flint.

He picked up the cable end. It had been cut. Barkus had been smart. No one knew that they had prospected together, and even if Stanton's body was found, it would look like an accident. The disappearance of the rope ladder would arouse suspicion if anyone even bothered to consider that angle.

Barkus undoubtedly would destroy the dogs and sled upon reaching the John, and pack down to Reelfoot, probably caching most of the gold until he could safely smuggle it out of Alaska.

Stanton drew his gun and eyed it. Well, he had one means of avoiding starvation—a better and quicker way of wooing death.

The picture of his mother rose before him. She would be knitting in the bay window of the living room, overlooking the calm Muskingum.

He fingered his gray, knitted sweater, for he had not donned his parka. His toil-hardened fingers trembled. The sweater was worn now, after all these months of labor, its elbows ragged and torn. Stitch by stitch his mother had made the sweater—and the socks too.

Suddenly Stanton sat down and began to pull off one of his packs—a desperate hope in his face. Next he stripped off the sock. Toes and heels of the sock were also worn through. But the knee-length leg was intact.

In the gloom of the shaft, he probed among the weave for long, breathless minutes. Finally he gave a sigh. The sock began to unravel.

AN hour later, Stanton was ready. He had carried the cable and bucket into the drift, and cleared the shaft bottom of every loose pebble or obstructing lump. A coil of gray yarn lay in a spiral on the floor:

Stanton stood, pointing his revolver up the shaft, aiming with every nerve taut. He had managed to remove a tiny bolt from the cable clamp on the gravel bucket. The bolt was sitting in the end of the gun now, one end of the coiled yarn tied to it. Stanton had pried the bullets from the shells in the gun, and wadded the shells with clay.

Slowly he squeezed the trigger. *Bang!* The bolt was hurled up—up—up. It cleared the top of the windlass—and then disappeared beyond the rim of the shaft.

Stanton gave a heartsick groan of despair. The violence of the explosion had snapped the yarn instantly. He sat down, weak from the reaction. But soon he rose, and inspected the gravel bucket again. He could find no more loose bolts. But the bucket's fall had sprung some rivets. He found a broken pick, and managed to force a small rivet free. This time he quadrupled the yarn for the first twenty feet, where the strain was greatest.

Once more he aimed. *Bang!* The rivet sailed upward; the coil of yarn unreeled smoothly. It had not broken.

Stanton, his fist squeezing the gun, watched the rivet as it seemed to pause, lazily. Then it ticked the windlass—and fell dismally back down at his feet. It had been so close—and yet so far.

Once more. The rivet landed outside the shaft this time, but he managed to drag it back without breaking the yarn.

A fourth try, with the same result. Stanton drew his sleeve across his forehead. Only two more shells. He coiled the yarn again; then stood for throbbing seconds steadying his arm.

*Bang!* The rivet ascended, seemed to hang with tantalizing deliberation as a vague speck in the sunlight. He

could hear the swish of the yarn as it played out.

Then—Stanton gave a sob. The rivet struck the spool lightly—trembled, seemed to hang there for an age—and began dropping down.

He gave a cry of misery, but it quickly changed to a shout of hope. *The yarn was still playing out!* The rivet had fallen across the windlass spool. At last he had a link with the surface—a mere spidery strand of wool it was true—a veritable thread of life.

He lowered the rivet within reach. The yarn now made a double strand that hung from the windlass.

Stanton pulled off his sweater and began seeking the key to its intricate weave. Eventually he found it, and began unraveling it. His throat tightened as the revelation of the infinite toil that had gone into its manufacture was revealed to him. Why, there seemed miles of the strand; and it had been woven stitch by stitch, bit by bit, by loving, patient hands.

He measured it into thirty-yard lengths, by the chin and arm method. Eventually he had a woven string of ten strands of wool. Then, removing his other sock, he added two more strands to it. The wool was heavy and fairly strong, but some of its fibers were worn; these he did his best to discard. Finally he tested it, and was somewhat heartened.

He drew it over the windlass by means of the single strand. Now he had strengthened his hold on life by more than ten-fold.

**B**UT life was not his yet. He lifted the hoisting cable—and was dismayed. It was dishearteningly heavy; fifty or sixty pounds. He measured it carefully, and cut its



length to a bare forty-five feet, in order to lighten it.

Then he tied it to the braided yarn, and began drawing it up. There was no danger until thirty feet of its weight had lifted up the shaft. Then Stanton began to sweat, coldly and sickly, for he could feel the strain on the yarn.

Inch by inch he pulled, praying. The cable end touched the spool.

Then came an agony. The end of the cable refused to slip easily over the spool! Stanton dared not try to force it over, for the least extra pressure on the wool would snap it. He tried again and again.

Then, with Stanton shaking from nerve exhaustion, magically it slipped over. Next came the problem of securing one end to the spool forty-five feet above.

The bail on the ore bucket was removable, being set into sockets into which the heavy strap-iron hooks of the bail were introduced by means of trap slits in the bucket sides. But the bail weighed another ten pounds. Would the wool strand hold? Stanton first managed to bend the bail into a more acute hook, then attached it to the cable. He next tied the loose end of the wool strand to the bail.

He eased the bail as high as he could reach, and drew the upper end of the cable down toward him. Soon the weight of the descending cable offset the added weight of the bail, and Stanton breathed easier. But accordingly, the strain again started on the yarn when the cable's weight began to drag on the up-going end. But the yarn continued to hold.

Then came the final gamble—the most desperate of all. If the hook did not catch, if it slipped on over the

spool, the yarn would be snapped and the whole contrivance would fall back into the shaft. His thread of life would be broken.

Stanton jerked the cable, and the hook grated on the spool, trembled, swung from side to side—and then clung there, precariously.

Stanton held the cable taut, for the least slackness might free the bail. He managed to tie his gun to the cable end—and then he swung himself up, hand over hand. Then his bleeding hands grasped the framework of the windlass, and he dragged himself over the edge and lay like a dead man.

Finally he arose and stretched his arms upward in thankfulness. It was late afternoon. He had been fighting for his life the whole day. Stanton brought up the cable, the yarn, and his gun. The yarn he coiled and pocketed. He also coiled the cable and shouldered it. It was heavy—but it and the yarn would be evidence. Then he started on Smart Barkus's trail.

THREE weeks later, grim-faced men emerged from Pat Murphy's saloon in Reelfoot. A miners' meeting had just ended. Two of the group were half-carrying a sobbing wretch who knew that it was useless to plead for his life. Another miner was tying the traditional two folds and thirteen knots of a hangman's hondo.

They gathered under a tree. As the noose was put into place, the afternoon sun caught a wisp of gray on the cable. The rope was the very hoisting cable that had lifted Ken Stanton to safety—and the bit of gray yarn was still tied to it. Smart Barkus never knew how Ken Stanton had escaped from the shaft.

THE END.

# The Golden City

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

Author of "The Radio War," "The Radio Pirates," etc.

*It was Adams Mayhew against a mad genius—with the existence of a lost Pacific continent at stake*



Chaos pursued them as they ran

## LEADING UP TO THIS CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT

**A**DAMS MAYHEW, American sailor, is in one of the queerest situations any man ever faced. His predicament began when he was lost overboard from the whaling barque Alaska as it was lying becalmed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. When he came to the surface after plunging into the sea, his ship was no longer visible.

Instead, near at hand was the shore of a city of Oriental splendor. Hauled out of the water by the inhabitants of this Golden City, he soon became one of them, learned their language and made

friends—and an enemy. His best friend is Julo, a magistrate of the city, who takes him into his home. He meets Marta, Julo's wife; Porto, a young man who resembles himself very much in appearance; Eleria, the girl with whom Porto is in love, and with whom Mayhew falls in love, and Tirio, centurion of police and Porto's avowed enemy.

Despite the splendor and happiness of this strange city, and of the continent of Mu upon which it is located, it is menaced by a misshapen and diabolically clever dwarf who calls himself the Spider. The Spider has his underground throne in the volcano, Pele, which his followers worship, and he is determined to gain control of the continent.

Mayhew, gaining his confidence and admission to his realm, learns of the Spider's occult powers, which enable him to send his assassins to any place he wishes, merely by having them step through a screen of smoke. Tirio, who also has many followers, joins forces with the Spider. Mayhew, before escaping from the caverns, learns the purpose of the canals that the Spider is having dug from the sea to the interior of Pele. If the Muians do not accede to his demands, he will let the sea pour into the volcano, causing an explosion that will devastate the earth.

Having learned this, Mayhew hastens back to the Golden City.

This story began in the Argosy for May 13.