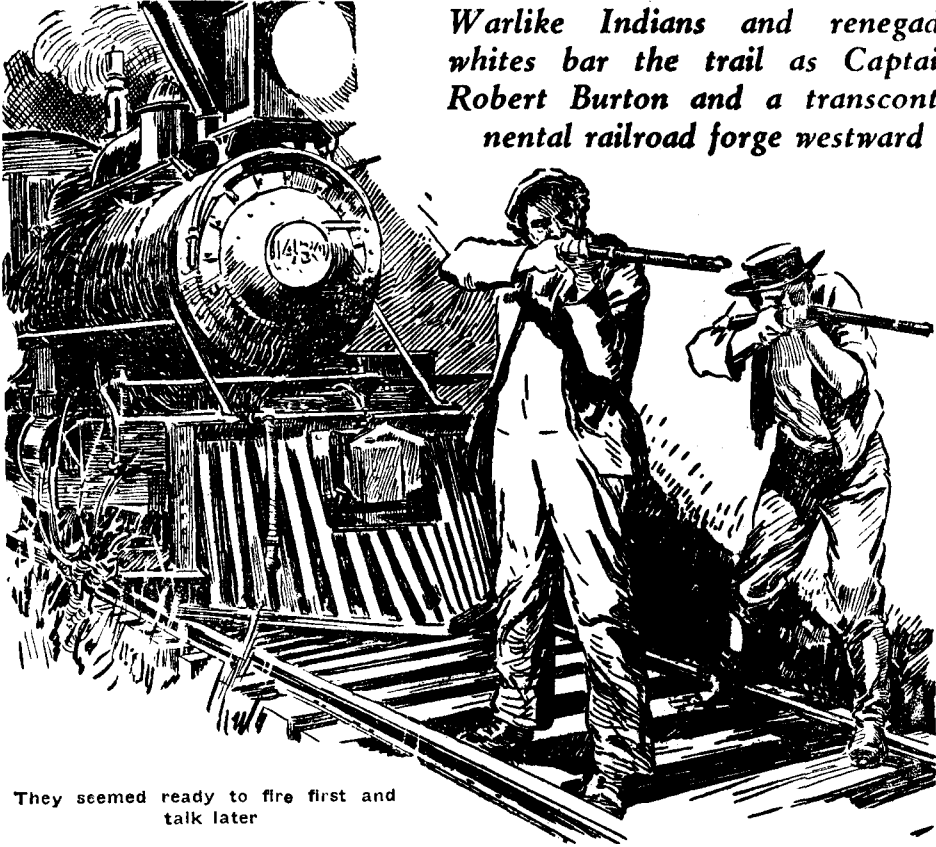


Captain Long Knife

By F. V. W. MASON

Author of "Captain Redspurs," "Captain Renegade," etc.



Warlike Indians and renegade whites bar the trail as Captain Robert Burton and a transcontinental railroad forge westward

They seemed ready to fire first and talk later

CHAPTER I.

TRAIN WRECK.

UNCERTAINLY revealed by the yellow-white glare of the distant headlight, two figures crouched beside a right-of-way so new that not even weeds had sprouted on its side.

"'Tis a freight," panted the shorter of the two men. "But will yon train stop?"

"Hope so, Mac. Those Cheyenne Dogs can't be so far behind now—and it'll be 'taps' pronto if the train runs by."

While his companion in a grimy checkered shirt crossed to the bank above the single line of tracks and, gripping a long barreled revolver, peered into the blue-

black darkness of the Nebraska night, the speaker bent, hastily struck a match and held it to a wrinkled shred of paper. A tongue of flame flared into existence just long enough to reveal a rugged, perspiring face so gaunt that at first glance one might have taken it for an Indian's. Had an observant man been looking on he would have further glimpsed a fringed buckskin hunting shirt, a wide Mexican belt which was elaborately mounted with silver, and a sombrero of distinctly Mexican cut.

"If they dinna stop, Bob, what will we do?" The long limbed Scot came scrambling down the bank again, his features taut.

"Fight fo' our lives, Mac, when the

Dogs catch up. Reckon the Cheyennes are mighty mean to prisoners—least they were when I was a kid back in Kansas.”

“Domn those red de’ils. They’re no sportin’ gentry to be shootin’ horses. I hated to lose them.”

“Better lose them than our scaps,” observed the taller man. “Or this.” He patted a bulging army haversack which slatted over his left hip and partially obscured a red stripe running down the side of his breeches.

“Aye. Yon siller should buy us respect and some braw lassies at Kearney.”

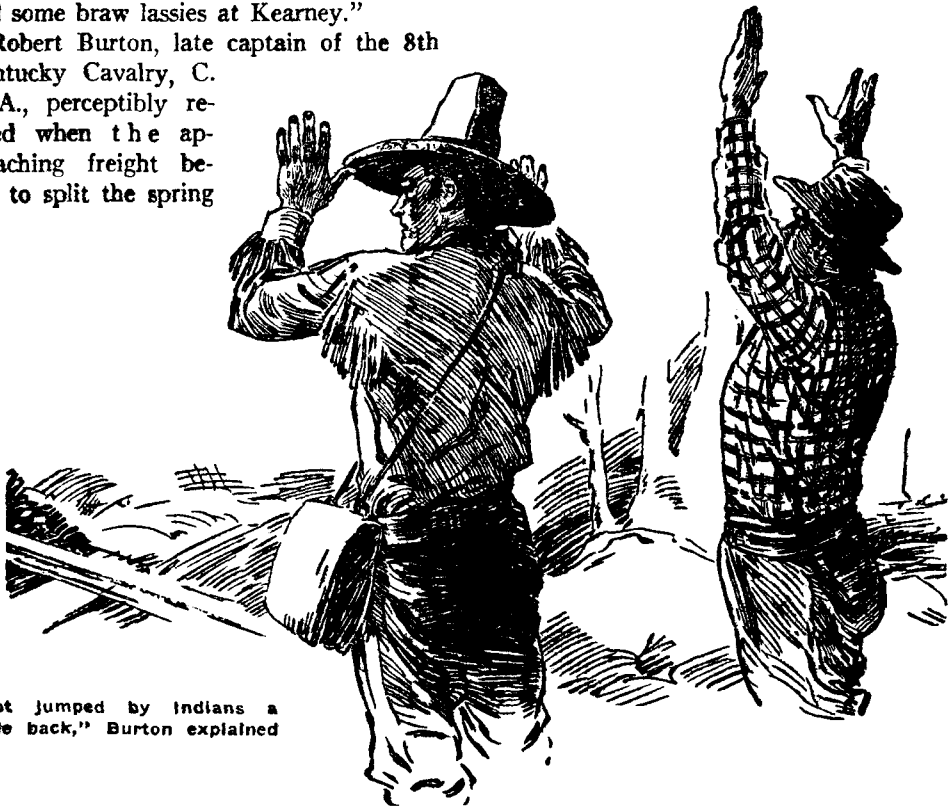
Robert Burton, late captain of the 8th Kentucky Cavalry, C. S. A., perceptibly relaxed when the approaching freight began to split the spring

erate when a pair of hard featured firemen jumped down, each levelling a carbine and obviously ready to fire first and talk later.

“Keep your dukes up, both of yez. What the hell you want?” growled the foremost, a bearded giant with a greasy cap pushed askew on the back of a mop of yellow hair.

“Got jumped by Indians a while back,” the taller figure explained. “Better look sharp—”

“Aw, they’s always hostiles ’round



“Got jumped by Indians a while back,” Burton explained

night’s stillness with an abrupt whistling for brakes. Clattering, clanking and panting like a winded behemoth, a balloon stacked locomotive ground to a halt with its immensely long cow catcher not sixty yards from the sweat drenched fugitives, and like a single angry eye its coal oil headlight picked out the silver ornaments on Burton’s belt.

“Don’t shoot!” called the ex-Confed-

here,” grunted the second fireman. “Lousy Cheyennes—you ain’t scared of ’em, are ye?”

“Domned right,” snapped Colin MacKaye. “Ye’d better be, too; the country’s full o’ the bloody de’ils.”

“Injuns?” From the cab’s window protruded a grimy, partially bald head. “Them critters scarin’ tenderfeet agin? Haw! Haw!”

In the darkness Captain Burton's lean face flushed as he hurried towards the steam oozing monster. "We've been puttin' up a fight all afternoon."

The bearded fireman peered through the gloom. "One of 'em winged you, 'pears like. Arrow or shot?"

"Arrow," Burton replied briefly. "Just a graze."

"'At's good—arrer wounds ain't no joke—damned Comanche plugged me in the leg this spring."

"Shake a leg, you hombres," the engineer called down. "We gotta get rollin' if we're to put ol' 15 in Willer Crick on time."

Robert Burton paused. "You got any soldiers aboard? These hills are crawlin' with Cheyennes and a sprinklin' o' Brule Sioux."

The engineer spat contemptuously into the darkness. "Nary a trooper aboard, but to hell with them red cusses." He sent a rush of steam roaring up to make the low bare hills resound. "They's a passenger car tacked on the end. Jed'll take yore fare if you got any dinero." So saying, the engineer disappeared into the locomotive's cab and a fireman rapidly fed logs into Number 15's firebox until sparks from its gunnel went whirling madly off to the east.

"Better hurry." The second fireman passed his carbine up to the engineer and swung aboard. "But don't worry, boys, those blasted devils shoot at us sometimes, and once in a while some crazy buck tries to rope the smokestack, but that's all they ever do."

MEANWHILE Burton was, with long quick strides, leading the way towards a dim glow of lights far to the rear, the thrums of his hunting shirt softly tapping on wide, weather beaten shoulders. "Union Pacific R. R." Ghostly white the words glimmered on a long succession of cars.

Ever scanning the velvet blackness beyond the Platte, the fugitives passed a stock car in which horses stamped and

squealed, destined for the end-o'-track. Next they hurried past flat cars heaped with precious ties, little dreaming that each one had in his treeless prairie country cost well over three dollars.

A brakeman perched on a box car's roof waved a warning hand as he yelled, "Better shake a leg, boys. Bully Brooks ain't waitin' long in these parts."

"Thanks," said Burton, and over his shoulder glimpsed the glare of flames licking from the smoke stack to tinge the locomotive's smoke a furious scarlet.

Number 15's whistle screeched impatiently, then the trucks of a lone passenger car, coupled on just before the freight's chunky caboose, groaned and the two fugitives swung lightly onto its steps as the freight recommenced its westward journey.

When Captain Robert Burton opened the coach's door he found himself looking on as oddly assorted a company as he had beheld since, as a gangling stripling, he had deserted his father's Kansas farm to join Bedford Forrest's hard riding, ever hungry troopers. Lord! How much water had flowed down the Mississippi since then.

Four smoky lamps were shedding an amber glare on the car's interior and only poorly revealing details. Near the door a couple of sunburned soldiers on furlough lolled on their seat frankly fondling a pair of painted trollops who, in gay, overly frilled garments, promptly fixed eyes at first appraising and then languishing on this tall, not unhandsome figure so effectively framed in the coach doorway.

When MacKaye closed the door behind him a hard faced passenger glanced up from a poker game played on a suitcase and briefly studied the newcomers.

"Heyo," he drawled and shot none too clean cuffs of celluloid. "What comic opera you in? 'Chased by Redskins' or 'The Midnight Escape'?"

Burton grinned at the gambler. "Hope you play the title rôle sometime," he said as he strode by, followed by Colin MacKaye, late of Her Britannic Majesty's Household Cavalry.

By far the greater number of passen-

gers were men—alike only in alertness of manner and the need of soap and water. Among them the black haired man in the wide sombrero recognized clerks, contractors, soldiers, laborers and surveyors; all evidently headed for the roaring mushroom towns farther west. It was a curiously vigorous crowd, Burton realized, for not a person in the car but was armed one way or another. Several soft spoken, long mustached individuals were veritable walking arsenals with three or four revolvers supplementing knives and daggers at their belts. Hardly a man but had a carbine or a rifle of some sort propped against the seat beside him. Even the handful of painted, shrill-voiced women carried pearl-handled derringers tucked into their handbags, or—as in the case of those Burton had already noticed—brazenly dangled their deadly little pistols at the end of bright ribbons made fast to belts of rattle-snake skin.

THE fugitives made their way towards an unoccupied seat, and Burton in particular was hampered by his heavy haversack in his progress over mounds of baggage stacked in the aisles. All at once the train lurched violently on rounding a curve and one of his elaborate steel and gold spurs caught in a carpet bag, so that he staggered and half fell into the lap of a young woman who, heavily veiled, sat dozing amid a heap of luggage. Burton's hand encountered the sleeper's knee and perforce he clutched its softness to recover himself.

"Oh! You—you—I!" Instantly the hand of the girl in the dark blue traveling costume flashed up and dealt him a ringing slap along his lean brown cheekbone. Furiously blood rushed into a long scar which, starting above the new passenger's ear, ran forward along the edge of his blue-black hair.

"Why, why, ma'am—I didn't mean—I—" he fumbled for words, conscious of a pair of very outraged brown eyes.

"It seems," the girl observed in cutting accents that banished his propitiating smile,

"that if there are any gentlemen west of Omaha you are not one of them."

"But really, ma'am," Burton struggled erect, the lamp light glinting on the tang of a curious long bladed knife he was wearing on his right hip just back of a holstered revolver, "I meant no offense—I lost my balance."

"Three Western 'gentlemen' have also managed to 'lose their balance,'" the girl snapped, her cheeks suddenly aflame because guffaws and loud laughter arose from all sides.

Despite the jolting of the car, Burton straightened, gray eyes humorously asparkle, and he managed a jerky little bow as he drawled, "In that case, ma'am, you must be plumb magnetic."

"Why—I—I—" Another furious crimson tide surged into the girl's smooth cheeks and her bright lower lip crept vexedly between small and even white teeth. "Of all the impertinent—"

"Leave be, Bob," advised the Scot, who had settled himself on the vacant seat and was enjoying the scene no little. "Ye'd best catch some rest, my lad, or your braw lassie will be thinkin' 'tis a scarecrow come home to roost."

Grinning a little, Emperor Maximilian's late supporter turned toward his companion, the red stripe on his dark blue trousers gleaming briefly.

"Heyo, soldier, settle us a bet," called a gaunt individual in the seat behind Mac-Kaye. "Joe here 'lows by them blue pants that yore a Yank. But I say you talk Secesh."

Burton's teeth flashed in a smile which had smoothed many a rough path for him.

"Collect your bet, stranger. These blue pants were made in Tampico. Durin' the late war I was a Reb."

The thin faced man nodded eagerly. "Shake, mister, so was I. Fought all through in Longstreet's Corps, Army o' No'thern Virginny."

Burton clasped the grimy outstretched hand and noted, as he sank into his seat, that the speaker wore a very threadbare gray blouse on which plain horn buttons

had replaced golden ones which no doubt had soon disappeared after Appomattox.

"And say, Johnny, I wouldn't sit so nigh the window after we pass Willow Creek," the Virginian advised as he bit off a chew of tobacco from a plug tendered by a buck toothed companion who boasted an enormous pair of ginger colored whiskers.

"Why?"

"Them damned Injuns take a pot shot sometimes; by law of averages even a red-skin can't miss *all* the time."

"Thanks, I'll look out." Once having placed the heavy haversack between his feet, Burton eased the Colt revolver onto his lap, twisted his sheath knife into a comfortable position and, while the Scot relaxed, fell to surveying the other passengers.

MOST of these unshaven, red faced men wore fragments of blue or gray uniforms and had an old soldier look about them. Near at hand sat a grizzled cavalry sergeant engaged in a noisy game of rondo cooloo with a pair of privates and a flashily dressed "drummer." The girl in blue, he noted with inward amusement, still sat rigidly erect with indignation written in every line of her small head and softly rounded shoulders.

Longstreet's veteran observed his interest and raised his voice over the deafening clatter of the car wheels.

"Touchy little Yankee," he grinned. "You sho' caught a mean clip."

"She's right pretty," Burton replied uneasily. "I didn't mean to bother her."

"One of them spoiled high and mighty gals from the East," grunted the ginger whiskered man. "Been ordering everybody 'round here like they was niggers. Wal, she'll learn better—out here everybody's got to do for themselves."

"Who is she?" Burton inquired, then flushed, surprised that he should have found even half a thought for any girl save Enid Culver. How wonderfully patient Enid had been—never doubting, never complaining, always sure that he'd come

for her—as he now was coming to claim her.

"She's a Miss Valcour, the conductor told me. 'Lowed her pap's a Senator—one of the railroad backers, most likely."

"Queer he'd let her travel alone—"

"She ain't alone—got a maid with her, but the maid's scared stiff of Injuns and is hidin' out in the baggage compartment. There's a couple more flighty fee-males in there with her. But speakin' o' Injuns, how come you to get that arrer hole in yer sleeve?"

Burton's bronzed features contracted a little. "My pardner and I got chased by a bunch of Cheyennes towards sundown. They killed our horses 'bout a mile from the railroad, but we fought 'em off and got away after dark."

Robert Burton was so entirely casual that Mistress Valcour's small, high held head turned and she shot the long-legged figure a fleeting glance.

"Did you say 'Injuns'?" Three or four passengers turned in their seats.

"Yes. Southern Cheyennes—seemed right mean, too."

"Reckon that'll be Turkey Leg's outfit or my name ain't Phil Crockett—blast their bloody souls! Cavalry from Fort McPherson's been chasing 'em," explained the Virginian. "So I reckon they'll be headed back to the Republican by now."

"Mebbe," grunted the ginger whiskered man, his body swaying to the jolt of the uneven road bed.

"Horse soljers never ketchum Dog Soljer, only North Scout," mumbled a Pawnee Indian who, wrapped in a glaring scarlet blanket, was steadily drinking wh ky from a canteen. "Dog Soljer run too fast."

"Well, what's it to us?" growled one of the gamblers. "Damned redskins ain't never bothered a train yet. Think they're sperrits—I allow."

"Mebbe they ain't wrecked none, but they've sure shot at 'em plenty," volunteered a man in the uniform of an infantry corporal. "Killed five passengers last week alone—"

"Mebbe the ladies had better go to the baggage car," suggested Crockett, the Virginian. "Pass the word up—gals are a sight too scarce 'round here for us to let the little darlings get hurt by lousy Cheyennes."

Heads were bent forward as the suggestion was relayed forward. Apparently it was well taken, for presently the two Cyprians from the front of the car and a couple of less obvious charmers a few seats ahead of Burton caught up their skirts and, simpering and giggling a good deal, departed.

A few moments later the aristocratic girl in blue was the only woman remaining in the car, the narrow door to the baggage compartment having swallowed up the rest.

The drunken Pawnee commenced to snore, and Burton composed himself to think of Enid—Enid! No longer half a continent, only a hundred miles ahead.

The car wheels had commenced to grind on a curve when all at once the locomotive's whistle screamed, its wail was as terrifying as anything from a human throat. Viciously the train bucked twice ere Burton's brain had registered the sensation, and the passenger car shot sickeningly upwards into space, then it crashed amid a terrific crackle of snapping wood and shattered glass. Loud sounded agonized howls, screams and curses as the caboose toppled into the rear of the car, in a brief instant crushing the baggage compartment to bloody kindling.

The kerosene lamps having gone out, Burton was flung madly through a lightless hell filled with objects that struck him from every angle. Then his head came sharply in contact with something and he saw more lights than he had seen since the siege of Fort Donelson.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIGHT BY THE TRAIN.

IT was a scene worthy of the brush of Gustave Doré which gradually materialized before Robert Burton's dazed and swimming eyes. By a queer flicker-

ing light he could make out a double row of seats above him; nearer at hand seemingly detached arms, legs and hands wildly or feebly beat the air. Desperately he lashed consciousness back into his benumbed body when a gray, snakelike streamer of acrid wood smoke crawled over his chest and stung his nose. Also spurring the necessity for swift action resounded the outlandish screams of passengers pinned in the wreckage and, worst of all, the hideous "*Ah who-o-o wahl!*" war screech of the Southern Cheyennes.

The ex-Confederate found that he was lying under some light débris on the roof of the half demolished coach which, in its death agonies, must have turned completely over. Painfully he pulled free and at the same time tried to orient himself. He soon perceived that the smoke was coming from a blaze at the other end of the car—a car full of squirming, groaning and mangled people; spearlike splinters had wrought ghastly injuries.

"MacKaye!" he called frenziedly. "Colin! Where are you?"

"Aiblins in hell, dinna ken," came a muffled voice, then a groping hand struck Burton's side. "I'm no hurt, are you?"

"No, let's get out." Eyes full of stinging smoke, Burton frantically felt for his guns. One of them had disappeared, but the other was still in its holster.

"This way! Come this way!" yelled a frantic voice. "Hyar's a big hole."

Slowly the two squirmed over mounds of luggage and loose car seats, and more than once Burton's groping hands encountered warm and impassive flesh. The light of flames ever mounting outside the coach now began beating in through the shattered windows to reveal such horrors as the soldier of fortune had not seen since the dreadful massacres after the intaking of Queretaro.

"Keep your head." Burton fought down a panic-stricken impulse when a puff of hot smoke beat in his face and filled his eyes with scalding tears. "Enid Culver—you've got to get out—Enid! Enid!"

Purer air presently told him he must be

nearing a hole in the side of the shattered passenger coach, but he paused when his fingers encountered something smoothly soft amid the bits of shattered glass and jagged splinters. Just then the fire flared and he found himself with his fingers grasping the skirt of the Valcour girl. Whether Senator Valcour's daughter was dead or not, he could not tell, but she was quite limp, and there was a dark trickle creeping from the corner of her mouth which was gruesomely marring the pallor of her chin.

Other survivors, seen like grotesque hobgoblins amid the ruddy tinted smoke, were crawling by him, bumping and floundering into him, whimpering and making little animal noises of fear. Hotter grew the bitter smoke, for the flames were spreading with appalling rapidity to inject a new note of horror.

SOMEHOW Captain Robert Burton staggered onto his feet after gathering the girl's slight body in his arms, to follow Colin MacKaye's big figure out through a hole where splinters seemed like gigantic teeth. Hot tears streaming down his cheeks, coughing, staggering and grinding broken glass under foot, the ex-captain suddenly emerged into blessed fresh air. His ears filled with a dreadful clamor, he instinctively eased his burden to earth and sank flat—must see what was going on—now he was nearly blind. Presently his eyes cleared to behold a sight which brought home the desperation of his position.

Blazing coals from the locomotive's fire-box had set fire to the foremost freight cars and so furnished light for a horde of half naked, hideously daubed Cheyennes to swarm like ants over the rest of the wrecked train. Nearer at hand five or six passengers were crouched half dazed on the raw earth of the embankment, rubbing their eyes and coughing; and two more, bleeding from ugly splinter wounds, lay watching the fire-lit saturnalia, all the while panting like hurt animals.

Characteristically, Burton was the first

to recover, to perceive the extreme peril of the wreck's survivors. At any minute the Cheyennes would be turning to other and grimmer amusements. Though more passengers came crawling and squirming out of the wreck, a swift glance at the survivors told Burton that their chances were slim indeed. So few of them had weapons of any kind.

"How many rifles we got?" he called to the men nearest him.



ROBERT BURTON

"I got one. I got a Wesson—"

"That all? Then some of us must get back into the car—get guns. Any guns we can find. MacKaye!"

"Aye, Rob?" The gaunt Scot crawled over a burst portmanteau and made a wild figure when crackling flames revealed a long scratch across his chin.

Anxiously Burton studied the surrounding terrain—noted a low hillock some sixty yards to the right.

"Colin," he called over the roar of the flames and the insane screeching of the Cheyennes, "take—men up to—knoll. This girl, too. Might make a stand there."

"Aye," the Scot nodded, and turned quickly to the breathless survivors. "Any of ye ken how to fight a skirmish?"

"Reckon so—had four year o' practice," panted a surveyor in the remains of a gray uniform. "Where ye-all goin'?"

"After guns—" Burton called back as two more coughing men, their clothing as-molder, came staggering out of the inferno. Shouldering these aside, Burton and the grizzled cavalry sergeant he had previously spoken to shielded their faces from the heat and re-entered the shambles. He began to feel about in the tumbled debris for anything resembling a firearm.

Then, for the first time since the coach had taken its mad plunge to destruction, Burton recalled his heavy haversack. An icy pang shot through him. Good God, the fruits of two years of desperate fighting down in Mexico was about to vanish in flame and smoke! Where was that bag which meant so much to the future of Enid Culver?

It was characteristic, however, that instead of searching for the all-important haversack, he recalled the helpless men without and maintained his quest for firearms.

Four rifles and a pair of revolvers were the sum of Burton's success when the flames drove him towards the hole again. He encountered the cavalry sergeant, singed and blistered, crawling in orange-hued murk.

"I got five carbines and a pin-fire," he yelled. "C'mon, cap'n, we gotta go—Injuns are gettin' hep."

"Get me out! I'm burning! Help! Help! Ah-h God! Kill me—I can't stand it!"

It was heart-rending to turn away with such piteous appeals making the night resound, yet Burton knew he must. Helpless, unarmed men were awaiting his return and, judging by the blood-freezing ululations of the triumphant Cheyennes, the sooner he got to the knoll top the better.

AS the ex-Confederate lurched towards the great wound in the coach's side his foot caught in something which would not come loose when he kicked. The flames were licking nearer so he stooped awkwardly because of his armful of firearms and tried to cast off the entanglement. No luck. Damn! His fingers flew

along a leather strap, then they tingled when they came in contact with a familiar stamped leather surface. His lost haversack! It was the work of an instant to whip out his long knife and slash through the sling strap which had been imprisoned by a fallen beam. Then, bent under his doubly precious burden, he re-emerged onto the right-of-way.

Swaying like a drunken man, his hunting shirt blackened and smoking in several places, Robert Burton stumbled down into the ditch and through blinding tears made out a trio of passengers limping towards the summit of that little knoll he had indicated. Already from the top of it brief jets of flame were beginning to rake the night in feeble defiance to an increasingly heavy rain of arrows which came whispering through the smoke like soft-voiced messengers of doom.

Higher flared the burning train, lighting the whole Platte valley, until the river's jet waters so violently threw back the crimson glare that it seemed as if a river of blood were flowing towards the distant Missouri. From inside the blazing passenger coach sounded a shot, another shot.

"Poor devils," Burton panted as he labored up the hill. "Reckon I'd do it myself."

"Hurry up!" hoarsely yelled the cavalry sergeant who had got a brief lead while Burton salvaged his haversack.

"They coming?"

"Yes. Shake a leg or the vermin will cut us off."

Only a few yards behind and half screened by smoke had appeared some swift, shadowy figures. The ex-Confederate raced up beside his companion. "We won't make it like this. Grab these rifles—I'll try to stand the brutes off a bit."

"Like hell you will, Johnny Reb—I'm a-stayin', too," the sergeant grimly retorted.

"Damn it! Do as you're told," Burton snarled. "Need those rifles up yonder—Get 'em there! This bag, too!"

And such was Burton's innate gift of authority that the sergeant obediently took

the haversack and the firearms and went panting up the sandy slope.

Redly outlined by the flaming wreck, the ex-Confederate knelt and swiftly adjusted the sights of a salvaged Spencer carbine. He was as cool, he found, as clear seeing and calculating as he had been in any of those deadly little skirmishes which had flickered up and down the Mississippi valley.

A disorganized line of dismounted Cheyennes broke through a smoke pall hanging over the right-of-way; in their van ran a splendidly built savage who waved the dripping scalp of the gray-haired engineer.

Dropping on one knee, Burton threw his sights on the leader, the Spencer's recoil jarred his shoulder, and the big Cheyenne threw his hands up and, spinning half around, fell heavily.

It was all a question, the soldier of fortune realized, of whether those weapons he had sent to the knoll top would be delivered in time to help him. Jaws tight locked, he next threw his sights on a crude yellow cross drawn across the chest of a sub-chief who wore a wolf mask headdress. His excitement growing, Burton this time felt no recoil, but the Indian crumpled and tripped the braves at his heels. At the same instant Burton sent an empty cartridge case tinkling onto the ground.

Five shots left. Because the attackers were closing in faster now he quickly shifted aim and, with all the skill of an experienced skirmisher, selected the most headlong of the screeching savages.

ANOTHER and still another shot he sped, but nevertheless the Cheyennes swept on, their sweaty, seminaked bodies a gleam in the firelight. An arrow sighed by scant inches overhead, then another plunged itself up to the feathers in the earth before Burton's spurred black boots.

Only ten yards away were the foremost of the fantastically painted savages when with his fourth shot he dropped a hulking savage who had entwined half a bolt of blue silk about him.

Damn! Had an arrow struck down the cavalry sergeant? Why didn't those men up yonder open fire? A few seconds more and it would be too late. A chill sweat suddenly sprang out on his brow.

"Fire, you fools!" he shouted over his shoulder. "I can't keep this up. Fire! For God's sake! Fire!"

A confused clamor came to his ears and only a scattering of shots answered his appeal. Too bad, no Enid now. Well, he'd shoot to the last minute, then break for the knoll top. Not that he'd ever get there—

His sixth shot he barely got off at point blank range, then the Cheyennes were leaping all about him. Clutching hands were outstretched and screeching cries that made the howls of hungry wolves seem like lullabies rang in his ears when, with his last cartridge, he singled the face of a towing chief who wore four tall *coup* feathers twisted into his braided scalp lock.

Burton gave ground in order to club the heavy carbine and glared about for an opening, but it seemed that hell had disgorged its choicest fiends. The throbbing red glare only revealed a thronging pattern of faces hideous beyond imagination. Snarling like wolves, and thrusting with feather and scalp decorated lances, a band of Dog Soldiers closed in, though Burton used his carbine like a flail and crushed the skull of the foremost. He dodged a viciously swung war ax, wheeled and with his heavy boot delivered a shattering kick to the stomach of a second assailant. Thus he gained time to swing the carbine again, but he was only postponing the inevitable. Subconsciously, he was well aware of it—the Cheyennes were too many.

Frantically now, the soldier of fortune swung his carbine, felt it thud against firmly yielding bodies. Hands clawed at him from the night, seized him, jerked him sideways—backwards. Out of the chaos knives glittered evilly before his staring eyes. It was the end; he braced himself for the sting of steel, but from the hilltop there now rolled out a steady volley such as only veteran soldiers can deliver. The eddy of

Indians about Burton thinned miraculously and only a quartet of braves remained to thrust and hack at him. Another volley crashed out and more writhing shapes dotted the slope of the knoll; some fell screaming, some without a sound. Two of the ex-Confederate's immediate assailants seemed to have been swallowed up by the night.

Still furiously attacked, he retreated a few steps and, though the muscles of his arms felt like red-hot wires, he whirled the ruined carbine above his head and beat down the guard of a stalwart brave who wore a coyote headdress. Howling, the Cheyenne sprang back, his shattered left arm limply a-dangle and ran off down the hill, but the remaining warrior refused to be daunted and, raising a war knife, he leaped in upon the breathless and sweat-blinded white man.

BURTON gave ground when he found that the carbine's stock was gone and so shortened as to be nearly useless—but another volley from the knoll top sent the returning raiders springing back to the shelter of the right-of-way. Thus Burton's struggle with the Dog Soldier became a duel pure and simple. No vainglorious fool, Burton tried to expose his enemy to the fire from above, but the wily Cheyenne always kept him for a shield until, redly outlined by the fire, he raised his glittering knife and sprang. Burton slipped and went down, but he braced himself and, following the code of the frontier which permits no niceties in combat, kicked upward with all his failing strength. His heart seemed to be pierced by an icy arrow when the Indian twisted in mid-air and so caught the kick on his thigh.

"Ugh-h!" The savage's grunt of pain hinted at what might have happened had the kick gone to its mark—the stomach.

Howling with pain and fury, the Indian swung and the deadly blade hissed by Burton's ear. The latter ducked and at the same time grabbed at his holster, but to his utter dismay the revolver was empty. Damn! Then he was on his feet again.

Dimly conscious of shouts from the knoll top and a gale of fearful yells from below, the adventurer's hand flashed to the back of his silver mounted belt and closed on the rawhide rattan handle of his bowie knife which boasted ten inches of razor sharp steel. Barely he got it free; the war knife was hovering over his head again.

Anticipating a further retreat, the Indian leaped forward as he struck and so slashed at empty air when Burton, instead of retreating, surged forward, his body bunched behind his knife hand. There followed a thudding impact that jarred the white man's whole body as his nostrils became filled with rancid body odors of the Cheyenne; the knife met an obstacle which held a split second, only to yield, and then the ten-inch blade slid home and Burton's knife hand was drenched by a warm flood. Expertly he pressed down on the handle before jerking out the long knife. The savage squalled once like a trapped cougar, then, as Burton spun away, collapsed on his face.

At the outcome of the duel a shout went up from the knoll top where knelt the handful of survivors. Fourteen in all they proved to number, with scant ammunition and even scantier hope, for, just as Burton, gasping and all but spent, stumbled into a hollow atop the knoll, a fresh swarm of mounted Indians came furiously galloping around the end of the burning train. Setting up a blood freezing clamor, the dismounted Cheyennes who had previously attacked sprang up from the ditch and joined their fellows in a furious assault upon the knoll.

CHAPTER III.

"SURRENDER OR DIE!"

"AMMUNITION'S verra near oot." Hardly had Burton flung himself down when Colin MacKaye called this cheering bit of news.

"Save it, then! Stop this fool snipin'!" Thin face gaunter than ever, Burton caught up a rifle and adjusted its sights with

trembling, blood slippery fingers. That two of the passengers had already fallen under the hail of arrows he saw at a glance, and beyond them the girl lay motionless, a long length of blue gartered leg protruding lax from beneath voluminous but disarranged skirts.

"Circle's too big," Burton snapped in summing up the situation. "Everybody fall back five yards. Quick! None to fire till I say so—"

"Yeah — let the bloody devils ride closer," yelled a cowboy when the mounted Cheyennes commenced their inevitable tactics of riding about the hiflock in a slowly tightening circle. Waiting like wolves eager to tear their prey, the swarm of dismounted savages gathered, waiting—waiting.

"Ain't got but ten shots," grimly related the train's red-bearded conductor. "How many you got, sergeant?"

"'Bout fifteen," snapped the cavalryman, his broad yellow chevrons turned to orange by the roaring conflagration. "Savin' the last one for myself if them Cheyennes bust our ring."

"Everyone aim low — we're shootin' down hill, don't forget." Burton's voice rang above the turmoil like the blast of a brazen trumpet. "Count three between volleys. Seems like our only chance is to punish 'em so bad they'll haul off—"

The group of embattled passengers made an unforgettable group as they heard the sands of their lives running low. No two men were garbed alike; some were well dressed, others in the roughest of section hand clothes. Cowboys, soldiers, gamblers, trainmen and merchants, they waited for the word of this gaunt young man with the quick gray eyes.

Nor were the weapons of the doomed handful any less varied. Perhaps nine of them were fortunate enough to be armed with Spencer repeating carbines such as Burton had used during his personal battle to cover the cavalry sergeant's retreat. In addition there was a sprinkling of obsolete Sharp's carbines, clumsy single shot affairs just a shade better than old time muzzle loaders. A brakeman with the broken

shaft of an arrow sprouting oddly from the left shoulder of a grimy undershirt was clutching a long barreled pin-fire such as were furnished to U. P. train crews. Those who had revolvers laid them ready to hand.

"Cain't never stand them off," sobbed a wild-eyed youngster. "Oh, God! they must be a thousand o' them red butchers."

"Not over a couple of hundred," lied Burton. "We can drive 'em off easy—it's often been done by less men than us."

But his confidence failed him when he reflected on the appalling shortage of ammunition—no amount of nerve could make up for powder and lead. He stifled a bitter groan.

A resounding united screech made the fire-reddened heavens quiver and Burton promptly shot a quick glance to the left and right.

"Steady, boys! Here they come!" How tensed were the unshaven, red-brown faces of his companions. The battle light was gleaming in MacKaye's eyes as he cuddled a Spencer stock to his cheek; the cavalry sergeant with one of his enormous black walrus mustaches drooping over the lock of his carbine was singing a ribald song. Yonder crouched the wounded brakeman, cursing steadily save when he paused to spit blood. And just behind him lay Mistress Valcour, her lovely face incongruously placid.

A SWELLING thunder of hoofs told him the mounted Indians were at last preparing to ride in, converge and overwhelm the survivors. Being to the left of the burning train, the mounted attackers were very plainly to be seen and offered tempting targets, but such was the power of Burton's personality that not a shot was fired even when the ground commenced to tremble under the impact of six hundred odd hoofs.

"Wah-wah! Wah!" A splendidly proportioned and nearly naked savage on a white pony suddenly rode out ahead, brandished overhead a heavy carbine as if it had been a stick and began motioning to the right and left.

Though Death had been Captain Robert Burton's shadow very many times during the past six years, there was something awesome, something unnerving about this vista of painted riders, countless swaying lances, guns and war bonnets.

In spite of himself, Burton's forefinger quivered when it crept through his Spencer's trigger guard. He'd wait until the foremost horseman passed that Indian he had slain with his knife and then—

A lifetime dragged by, louder swelled the infernal clamor—closer.

"Now!" And in company with fourteen others he pressed his trigger.

Instantly a ring of smoke smothered the knoll top and the bitter reek of burnt powder stung Burton's nose.

"One!" While peering through the smoke he began to count and snapped forward the ejector lever. "Two!" He sent the empty cartridge case spinning onto the parched soil. "Three!" Through a gap in the rose-hued powder smoke he glimpsed, and aimed at, a fantastically daubed chief who held aloft a lance garnished with scalps and *coup* feathers. But an over-eager young warrior rode in between at the last minute and for his pains was knocked off his pony.

When the echoes of the second volley, diminished by the two single-shot carbines, had rumbled back among the barren hills across the Platte, many things were happening out in front. Confusedly, the ex-Confederate could distinguish the ear piercing shrieks of wounded horses, the thud of bodies falling heavily to earth, but still the Cheyenne attack was pressed with unaccustomed vigor.

A third volley—become ragged because of the difference in the various defenders' speed of fire—was fired into howling faces not fifty feet away. The ground beneath Burton's carbine barrel cast back the brief glow of the discharge and his ears buzzed from the concussion of the reports all about. Would they still press on? He feared so. The whole world seemed filled with swaying feathers, spurts of fire, rearing horses and nightmarish painted faces.

Rising on one knee, Burton, the cavalry

sergeant and MacKaye formed a steady nucleus about which the others formed, but the timorous youth uttered a queer bleating sound and ran away in a suicidal attempt at flight.

The fourth volley delivered at point blank range and lighting up the hostile array wrought fearful execution. To Burton's amazement an incredible number of Indians seemed to go down; for the moment it did not occur to him that one car-



COLIN MacKAYE

bine bullet was killing as many as three men.

Up, relentlessly up, surged the tide of attackers, and Burton's thoughts became disjointed— Could he reload? Were the Cheyennes breaking through? He blinked and coughed, for the air was full of noise and his nostrils were stung by acrid burnt powder smoke. His heart stopped! God help those taken alive. Yes, the Cheyennes were actually about to ride over the hilltop. No time now for volley firing. Burton fired his fifth shot point blank into the ochre and red daubed chest of a brave at whose saddle bow a brace of fresh scalps were shedding gruesome red drops onto the pony's brown and white forelegs.

Up, up, seeming grotesquely tall, the Indian towered above him when the pony reared. But the beast must have gone over backwards for there was only a gap before him when Burton arose from catching up a

revolver he had previously appropriated from a fallen man. Even while he cocked it, a shot banged in his face and singed away one of his eyebrows. Half dazed, he extended the Colt at full length and fired into an outlandish face, then got to his feet in search of a fresh adversary. But to his amazement there was no one nearer at hand than MacKaye and the bareheaded, wildly cursing cavalry sergeant. Streaked with powder, they were frantically searching their pockets for ammunition.

CHARACTERISTICALLY, the Cheyennes had veered off in the very moment of victory—a weakness which had, and would go, to save the lives of those who toiled to span the vast “American Desert.”

“Beat ‘em off, by Gawd!” roared a black bearded trapper suddenly drunk with triumph. “Blew the bloody devils off’n the hill.”

“Your napper’s all right this time,” called the wounded brakeman. “They won’t be coming back.”

“The hell they won’t!” panted the cavalry sergeant, looking up from the bandage he was clumsily adjusting about his right forearm. “Ain’t but eight of us left now.”

“I tell you, they *ain’t* coming back!” the brakeman insisted as if he dared not, would not, face the possibility of being mistaken. “They won’t! They won’t!”

The slopes of the knoll, Burton saw, presented a scene of carnage calculated to give pause to even such ferocious warriors as the Red Shields, Elk Horn Scrapers and Dog Soldiers below. In fact the gentle grade on the track side of the hillock had, in those three frenzied minutes of battle, become a hideous shambles, carpeted with the grotesque forms of dead and wounded horses, and the still or silently writhing forms of the Cheyennes. Warriors on foot had already begun—as was their invariable custom—to drag away the less exposed dead and wounded. They offered tempting targets, but the wild eyed whites made no effort to shoot at them.

They had good reason, for six of the fifteen men who had commenced the engagement now lay sprawled in curious and tragic positions. Across the diminished circle a gambler, his gay red silk waistcoat dyed a deeper red, lay doubled up with a Kit Fox arrow plunged up to its feathers in his throat.

“How many cartridges—got left?” Burton panted while directing a further constriction of the already shrunken line of defenders.

“Two.” “Ain’t got none.” “Two.” “Ain’t got none.” “Anybody got some .38s?” “Yeh, four. Ye can have two.”

Even Captain Robert Burton’s cold courage was shaken. An average of three shots apiece was left and the foot of the hill was still swarming with Cheyennes growing furious as they counted their losses. Surely, with the next attack, Dog Soldier scalping knives must run very red. A glance at the rigid, sweaty faces showed that not one of the eight but heard the Dark Angel’s wings whistling over this bare, corpse littered hillock.

“Mebbe we could git some ca’ttridges off’n the dead Injuns,” suggested the wounded brakeman.

“Shucks! What’s the use o’ pretendin’?” drawled the black bearded trapper. “We ain’t going to last longer’n a snowbird in hell. Lucky I had my fun in Julesburg last week. I allow Kansas Kate c’n hunt her up a new sweetie to-morrey.”

But revolt surged in Burton’s being. How ironic to have survived the great battles of the Civil War; to have come unscathed through a dozen murderous clashes between Emperor Maximilian’s mercenaries and the fiendishly cruel Indians of Juarez and Diaz, only to perish thus in an insignificant skirmish beside a wrecked train.

“Think! You must think!” clamored inward voices. “Maybe there’s a way out of this somehow.”

HIS furious search for an idea was interrupted by a voice hailing from the foot of the hill, and speaking guttural English!

"Hey you up thar—ef you surrender peaceable, ol' Turkey Leg sw'ars to let yer keep yer hair—"

"Who's that?" Burton demanded of the sergeant in a quick undertone.

"Must be one o' the Bent brothers," growled the cavalryman as he bit off a chew of tobacco. "May God blacken their blasted faces! They're a pair o' renegades livin' with the Cheyennes."

"Shall we believe yon clapperclaw?" MacKaye's voice sounded quite level.

"Hell no!" The trapper cut in. "George Bent'd be one o' the first to spill your guts onto yer feet."

"No!" the brakeman cried, his lips trembling. "Let's bargain! We're done, anyhow, and they'll sure kill us if we fight."

"It's better to kill ourselves than let the squaws do it," a lanky cattleman pointed out. "I ain't trustin' no Injun!"

"Me either—"

Burton cupped hands and called down the hill. "Tell Turkey Leg we'll fight it out. There's twenty-five of us with plenty o' ammunition. Come on, and we'll give you another dose like that first one!"

"Twenty-five, hell!" Charged with contempt came the gruff reply from below. "We know they ain't more than half a dozen of ye left and yer out o' ammynition."

And therein lay the crux of the situation, but to Burton came that idea which had been eluding him. Lowering his voice he called to his companions, "Listen, it may cost our necks, but we've got to try a bluff. Are you game?"

"Aye," promptly agreed the Scot. "I've never yet gone aglax on Rob Burton's say so."

"What's yer idear?" the trapper wanted to know without turning his head.

"We'll fire some shots in the air. That'll convince them."

"For God's sake, no!" quavered the brakeman, making desperate, pleading little gestures. "They know the truth and we'd be helpless then."

"No!" "No!" Two others joined in vigorous objection.

"Don't be damned fools! This is our only chance, otherwise we're doomed." Burton's voice rang in a fierce undertone. "Do as I tell you!" He raised his voice. "Go to hell, you lousy renegade—we've got ammunition to burn. Listen to this!" Then, in a breathless stage whisper, "Everybody fire!"

Though each man knew that by that shot he came nearer to an end dreadful past imagining, all save the brakeman and one other pointed their weapons at the sky and sent a salvo hissing towards those cool and incredibly peaceful stars.

"Another!"

Grim jawed, Burton slewed and levelled his Colt full at the brakeman's twitching face, "You, too, damn you!"

Though cursing impotently, the train man obeyed and, even as the amazed yells of the savages echoed the first volley, a second roared out.

"How's that?" Burton sprang up, quite unconscious of the wild figure he made thus redly outlined by the fire below. Hatless, with fringed shirt and red striped trousers fouled and bloody, he stood against the purple-black background of the sky and waved a defiance with his now quite useless Spencer. "Maybe you'll believe us now?"

"Like hell!" came back that taunting voice. "We're a-comin' for yer in a minute and then ye'll wish to Gawd ye'd listened to me!"

"Now, you damn' fool," snarled the wounded brakeman. "I hope you're satisfied."

"'Twas a braw try, Rob, but it looks like we're lost," remarked MacKaye and, pulling out an envelope, he commenced to write rapidly something on its back.

CHAPTER IV.

FLIGHT.

ENDLESS minutes dragged by, keying overwrought nerves tight as piano strings while by the throbbing glare of the burning train a swarm of garishly caparisoned looters milled over the plunder.

Twice groups of horsemen collected, and Burton felt an icy fist squeeze his heart, but each time the counter attraction of a fresh car being broken into postponed the end.

Burton saw a hulking, half drunken Dog Soldier leap off his war pony, knot one end of a bolt of blue silk to the tail of his sturdy little beast and then, leaping astride again, go careening off over the prairie with yards and yards of the precious stuff rolling behind him. Delighted howls greeted the idea and others copied the scheme, until very shortly the whole flame-tinted plain was alive with screeching, madly galloping warriors weaving a fantastic pattern. Others wantonly smashed cases of lamp chimneys, hacked through stores of harness and dressed themselves in queer bits of feminine attire.

"When's the next freight due?" Burton turned to the brakeman from whose back the trapper was, with rough skill, extracting the broken arrow.

"Number 3's due along in an hour," came his surly response. "But the glare's sure to scare them off."

"Would there likely be any soldiers on it?"

"Dunno," the speaker choked off a groan. "At Kearney they said there are some replacements due for the Second Cavalry, and they'll soon be going up to Fort Sedgewick." The fellow uttered another whistling gasp of pain.

"Why not clear out of here and try to meet Number 3 on the other side of the curve?" someone suggested. "They ought to be warned—might think it was only a common wreck and speed up—"

"Can't do that," the cavalry sergeant objected promptly. "They'd be on us in a minute."

"I'll go," suddenly stated the trapper. "One of us ain't likely to be seen. Maybe I can find a way—I know this prairie same's the butt o' my six-gun."

"If he can find a route we can quit the hill one at a time," Burton suggested. "Here—maybe we can fool 'em."

When the trapper had cautiously backed

out of the shallow pit he had scooped from the surface of the hill, Burton entered it and arranged one of the useless rifles so that its barrel tilted over the edge. Next, he placed across its breach an abandoned hat and so created a dummy which might be convincing in this uncertain light.

Breathless, well aware that discovery meant instant death, the defenders of the knoll top one by one crawled off into the darkness and, like so many shadowy baboons, followed a trail indicated by the trapper. At the end of five minutes only the stiffening dead, Colin MacKaye, Burton and the unconscious girl remained.

"All right, out with you, Mac—"

"No. I'll not leave ye." The Scot's ruddy features contracted stubbornly. "Ye'll be needing help wi' the lass."

"Please go," the ex-Confederate pleaded earnestly. "If I don't get away I want you to tell Enid that I—" he unconsciously adopted a phrase learned from his courtly Virginian mother, "that I was ever her unworthy but devoted servant, and that I was honored to have ever had her love. Also say that she can do no better than to trust you, my friend."

The Scottish adventurer's angular jaw tightened amid the shadows and he nodded. "As ye wish. But yer an unco' fine mon, Robbie—I'll never meet a finer. Good luck to ye."

IN an instant his grimy, checkered shirt had vanished behind the clump of sagebrush, leaving Burton and the motionless girl alone on the knoll top and listening to noisy quarrels of savages who were now engaged in drunken combat with each other.

When he bent over the Valcour girl his hopes of saving her ebbed sharply. Had she suffered a fatal concussion or internal injuries in that infernal shaking up?

"Miss Valcour, can you hear me?" he muttered, his lips close to her small ear. "Rouse yourself! For God's sake!" But there came no motion to those extraordinarily long eyelashes resting on the pallor of her cheek like tiny black feather fans fallen on a white silk cushion.

Perhaps she was dead. He bent, placed his ear to her chest, but the thickness of her garments and the clamor of the marauders made it impossible for him to hear anything. That each passing instant brought more imminent a return of the Cheyennes he was well aware, so he tested her pulse, but could find no stir.

"No use gettin' killed for a corpse—even a pretty one," he reflected and on seeing the neck of a pint bottle protruding from the gambler's coat pocket he snatched it out. Next he slid from its sheath his long, dreadfully dimmed knife and deliberately severed the heavy silk about her throat. He then quickly bared the tender contours below and, bending low, pressed his ear to the smooth, warm flesh. He was encouraged to detect a faint heart-beat, so he promptly uncorked the whisky bottle with his teeth, raised the unconscious girl to his knee and tilted some of the powerful Bourbon between teeth that were white and regular as moonstones on a necklace.

Almost at once the beat of the heart beneath Burton's fingers grew stronger; so in order to ease her compressed diaphragm he laid her flat again and still further mutilated the dark blue dress before cutting a row of corset strings, which operation allowed her chest to fill deeply.

"Funny critters, women," he reflected. "It's a wonder they can breathe—all laced in like this."

Since the Cheyennes were beginning to gallop madly in all directions, it behooved him to work fast, and he fed her more whisky. There was a premonitory flutter then Mistress Valcour's eyes slid open.

"—I what—? Oh, get away! Go away!"

Angrily, Burton pressed a hand over her mouth, quite forgetting that in this red half light his fringed shirt, long jet hair and deeply bronzed features must have looked shockingly Indian-like.

"Quiet," he breathed, "Cheyennes—all 'round us."

As he spoke her eyes probed his with a frightened glare he could not analyze. Probably she had suffered a concussion and was still dazed.

"Swallow this," he directed curtly, "and for your life keep still!" He raised the whisky to her lips and fed her the fiery fluid until she coughed, then, raising the bottle himself, took a long pull; there was plenty of grim work still ahead.

Critically he viewed her voluminous skirts and then he shook his head. "You couldn't run in a Sibley tent like that. Take it off."

"Why—what— Oh!" Mistress Valcour had for the first time discovered the fact of her exposure and she sat up, feebly clutching together the slashed material.

"Did you do this?"

"Yes. Had to." Burton saw nothing of the look she cast him, for he was already crawling over to the smallest of the slain men. "Get rid of those skirts," he directed over his shoulders, "and I'll throw these pants over. Hurry up."

JESSICA VALCOUR started to protest, but the ex-Confederate cast her a look so savage that she shivered and obediently began to fumble with divers hooks and buttons.

Burton found it far from easy to drag off a slain teamster's buckskin breeches; first, because they were comparatively new, and second, because he dared not show his head above the clump of sage.

As he worked he heard the swish and swirl of silk; then, quite oblivious of her déshabille, he turned and flung the garment over to his companion. Sobbing a little, she awkwardly began to pull on the breeches, giving Burton time to inspect his pistol and to rig a new loop for his precious haversack.

His preparations for flight completed, he turned and, to his horror, saw the Valcour girl sitting bolt upright. She made an unforgettable picture with her pallid features gilded by the flames and her coppery hair glowing as if the flames were among her curls instead of two hundred yards distant.

"Get down, you fool!" he snapped and jerked her flat. "You'll give us away! Now follow me. Quick!" So saying, he squirmed off down that same gully which

the other fugitives had followed. But evidently the girl had been seen for a sudden screeching rent the firelit heavens and there followed an ominous clatter of hoofs. Rigid, the ex-Confederate paused listening—eyes wide and every sense alert— Were the Cheyennes coming this way? No, they were riding around the bend in the track, which argued that it was another of the fugitives who had been seen.

"Come on," he urged when they reached the lee of the knoll. "Reckon it's now or never—stay by me and run till you drop."

He caught her hand, held it tightly, then, slipping and stumbling, the strangely assorted couple raced down the knoll past the tumbled corpses of many men and horses. Instinct, and the wisdom of a veteran soldier, warned him it was safer to veer away from the line of retreat used by the other fugitives. He was encouraged to see the girl could run, and apparently was regaining strength with each passing instant.

When the yells of roving savages swelled louder, Burton pulled the girl into the momentary protection afforded by a thick clump of willows bordering a dry gully. Panting, his perceptions dulled by unbroken nerve strain, Burton nevertheless froze to a sudden immobility and listened. From up the gully had sounded a subtle noise.

"Stay here," he instructed the breathless girl and, drawing that curious knife of his, the ex-Confederate commenced to creep forward through the underbrush. All at once he detected an ominous outline—squirmed forward a few more yards and was puzzled to distinguish a pair of ponies standing quite still. On one of them sat an Indian who was leaning forward and mumbling incoherently to himself.

"A wounded Cheyenne, by God!"

Clenching the long knife between his teeth, Robert Burton crept on with the sinuous silence of a rattler until he perceived his error. The brave though still astride his travel pony, had tilted back his narrow head and was noisily drinking from a champagne bottle.

Though the travel pony shied, Burton's spring was accurate and he dragged the besotted Red Shield back from his saddle to the earth. Promptly the long knife's razor sharp blade slid into that hollow which lies between the shoulder joint and collar bone.

Frantic with fear, the Cheyenne's beast would have lunged away and been lost but, thanks to a Cheyenne custom, the loose end of the pony's hackamore was secured to the belt of the malodorous Red



ENID CULVER

Shield who was still feebly struggling in Robert Burton's clutch. At last the warrior relaxed on the cool sandy earth.

AFTER soothing the frightened pony, Burton next darted across the sand of the creek bed to secure the battle pony which was still contentedly cropping willow leaves. Hurried by strident screeches from the darkness, it took the ex-Confederate but an instant to convert the pony's hackamore into a rude bridle, for even if the Valcour girl could ride, she would never be able to manage this half trained beast with a single rawhide rein.

"Can you ride?" he demanded once he had rejoined the dazed daughter of Senator Valcour. "If you can't, reckon I'd better lash your ankles under this cayuse's belly."

"I—I can ride."

"Mount up, then!"

With a single powerful sweep, Burton lifted the Valcour girl onto the black and white travel pony and then, with accustomed ease, he vaulted onto the second animal.

It was, he was pleased to discover, a powerful beast, but reasonably tractable to pressure on its feather decorated hackamore.

Drunken howls from the knoll top told him that there would be no time for planning—they must cling to the shelter of this dried creek bed as long as possible and then trust to speed. Already the searchers on the hilltop were scattering in pursuit of the survivors who, temporarily at least, had escaped them.

Willow twigs cruelly whipped the adventurer's face once he kicked the battle pony to a gallop. Before he realized it the sheltering gulley came to an end and the open country loomed just ahead. Throwing an anxious glance over his shoulder he beheld the Valcour girl riding after him, body bent low on her mount's neck and with one hand buried in the mane while the other desperately clutched the rude bridle.

"You're doin' fine," he encouraged. "Now pull yourself together, 'cause we've got to ride mighty hard from now on to save our hair."

The two burst from the protecting shrubbery with all the suddenness of deer roused from their retreat by ranging hounds.

Fervently Burton hoped they might dash across the skyline and, unseen, cross a ridge which would hide them from further observation. His prayer apparently was answered when the scream of a distant locomotive whistle warned of the approach of Number 3.

Even while the wind whistled about his long black hair, and the precious haversack thumped and thudded against the small of his back, Bedford Forrest's ex-captain prayed that those men who had so valiantly fought on the knoll top would reach the protection of the freight—most especially Lieutenant Colin MacKaye,

Laird, Soldier of Fortune and trustworthy friend.

CHAPTER V.

THROUGH THE NIGHT.

WHETHER their escape was due to the lure of liquor and other appealing loot behind, or due to the skill with which Robert Burton doubled and looped back on their trail before riding over a hard pan of earth, neither Jessica Valcour nor her thin featured guide ever knew. Before long, however, they were galloping steadily on through a vast stillness.

"Oh-h, please stop!" faintly came the girl's plea. "I—I simply can't ride any farther."

"You've got to," came her companion's inexorable retort. "I know you're tired and sore, miss, but 'tisa'n't a patch on how you'd feel if some Cheyennes were to cut our trail. No. It wouldn't be safe for us to really halt short o' the south fork o' Dismal River. Keep goin'!" Emphasizing his warning, the ex-Confederate lashed his black and white pony to a fresh burst of speed, at the same time steeling himself against tears which, starting from the girl's great eyes, slid slowly down over the pale sheen of her cheeks.

"That's it! You're doin' mighty well!" he cried, more than a little impressed with her courage. "Keep it up a little while longer. The Indians would never reckon we've ridden straight north into Sioux territory—they'll be lookin' for us to the south."

"For Heaven's sake stop," Mistress Valcour burst out after another half hour of furious riding beneath the cold and distant stars. "My legs are raw."

"It's better than the torture stake!" How little did she dream of the exquisite agonies the Cheyenne squaws could devise!

"Oh, I hate you!"

"There's no help for it," came the tall rider's inflexible reply. "I've got an arrow wound in my arm, and that don't feel like anythin' to brag about."

On and on over the level, sagebrush-dotted plain the two fled from the scene of disaster while the stars swung ever higher in the heavens and far behind them the sound of rifle fire rose briefly and then faded away. Burton wondered on the fate of the fugitives.

When at last they came to an alder fringed creek and their hard ridden animals had sp'ashed out knee deep, Burton reined in to breathe the ponies and to allow them a few mouthfuls of water. On the far bank the girl, who had slid off her mount, raised a defiant, quivering face.

"Go on and leave me!" she sobbed. "I—I don't care if the Indians do come—I—I won't ride any farther."

"We'll go on presently," not ungently insisted Burton as he also dismounted, to scoop up a few handfuls of water which was cool, but bitter with alkali. "Better take a drink and stretch out for a few minutes, then button those pants right and maybe you won't chafe so. Here, let me adjust those waist laces for you."

"Let me alone! Don't touch me!"

"You sure are mighty unreasonable," drawled Burton with deceptive indifference, then he carefully inspected the cinches of both rude saddles. "Out this way people are gen'rally grateful for having their lives saved." He fixed on her a calm, disapproving look. "If you hadn't been so shaken up in the wreck and might be just a little out of that pretty head of yours, reckon I'd spank you just to teach you a few manners."

"Spank me? Oh-h, you beast!" Outraged, the girl sprang to her feet and confronted him bravely enough, though her legs wavered with weariness.

"Ah! I understand—I shouldn't expect more from one of those dreadful Rebels who have brought such misery to our country. You are, I suppose, a typical Southern gentleman?"

TO Mistress Valcour's vast surprise, Robert Burton merely grinned, then he stooped and began to scour his long knife with some sand from the river

bed. Good, he was successfully stinging her to fresh energy—to a renewed mental and physical effort. Kindness evidently could not evoke such a reaction.

"And you, I reckon, are a No'thern aristocrat?"

"Do you know who my father is?" stormed Mistress Valcour.

"Only that he's the father of a right pretty gal."

"He's Senator Valcour—chief promoter for the Union Pacific! He'll have you punished for this."

Wickeder grew Burton's smile and his silver mounted belt glinted faintly as he advanced.

"Punished for what, miss?"

She was aroused, all right, her rather square-shaped mouth set in exasperated lines. "For insulting me in the train; for ordering me about as if I were your body slave—and for pawing me when I was unconscious and unable to defend myself. Look at me!" And she indicated her ripped and tattered blouse. "The work of a cowardly beast!"

The enormity of her injustice stung him, so that he towered above her, his lean face dark with wrath.

"Paw you, eh? Well, miss, if I hadn't 'pawed you,' this"—he flicked a lock of her hair which hung in a heavy mantle to her waist—"would be decoratin' some Dog Soldier's lance right now. And," his teeth glinted in a hard smile, "if I ever were to 'paw you' I'd not take you unconscious—I like 'em to fight a little—makes things interestin'."

"Oh-h." And fear crept into her expression, silencing her bitter tongue.

Hardened by long years of war, calloused by the sight of too much human suffering, Robert Burton's scheme of things had undergone many alterations.

"Now let's understand each other." His features relaxed not a whit. "I think you're useless! One of those whimperin', soft-handed doll-women who set themselves up to sneer at girls who've heart and ambition enough to come out to this wilderness, fight Injuns, outlaws and the sun; who can love

deeply enough to work and fight for their men and help settle this country." Carried away by the long strain of the past day, he went on. "You'll sho'ly be tickled to hear that I despise your sort—wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole, if 'twas to please myself. Your father's *dinero* and power don't rate deuce high with me. If this was back East I'd sho' ride off and let you find your own way home, but since it's not, reckon I'll have to see you into North Platte."

"I only regret that I am forced to be indebted to you—you will be well rewarded," the girl said in a stifled voice and there was a bewildered light in her eyes. Wanly, but dauntlessly, she faced him when he led up the ponies. "I am not going to mount for another hour."

"You're going now, if I have to tie you on."

"Oh, don't be so stupid, we've lost the Indians and I'm tired out."

"We may have lost those Indians," he corrected grimly, "but this country's alive with hostiles, and I've not got but two shots in this Colt. Do as I say."

"I won't."

As he bent to pick her up, Mistress Valcour brought her small hand stinging against his hollow cheek; but even as he straightened in fury she slumped forward on the damp sand quite unconscious.

"Poor little fool," he murmured as he splashed water onto the pallid marble of her face. "Too bad to drive her so hard."

"I—I'm sorry—and I've been most unreasonable," she whispered when she had presently returned to consciousness. Silently, she yielded to his insistence that they continue their flight.

BUT Jessica Valcour proved to be really too weak to sit her pony when once he lifted her on. She bent so far forward that the glittering banner of her hair became commingled with the coarse mane of the Cheyenne's pony. Thus she remained outlined against the stars until Burton swung up onto the larger and more powerful bay pony then, with arms surprisingly

gentle, he swept her onto the pony before him.

"Now, miss," he directed, more than a little conscience-stricken, "just you put one arm 'round my neck."

In a gesture of exhausted surrender one slim arm crept up and then Jessica Valcour sank back into the sinewy hollow of his left arm, her small head tilted back and her delicate features reflecting the pale light of the stars.

Thus they rode on over the dwarfing immensity of the prairie, alone amid a breathless silence to which only the stamp and shuffle of hoofs afforded a relief.

Soon began the eerie pre-dawn howling of wolves and coyotes, and then dense coveys of quail and sage hens commenced to flush out of the sunburnt buffalo grass and sagebrush. As the light increased, the horizon moved continually farther away, revealing to the hollow-eyed rider a vista of dun-hued prairies, terminated here and there by a row of pale hills—hills which might have been sandbanks unnumbered ages ago when the glacial waters of Lake Algonquin had covered this nearly treeless region.

How far they had ridden during the night, Burton could only conjecture, but it must have been close on to forty miles and every fiber of his tough body ached with fatigue.

In an effort to forget the throb of his wounded arm, he fell to planning his next steps. In North Platte he'd clean himself up, buy some new clothes before he boarded the next train for Julesburg and then—smiling, he glanced down at his heavy haversack. How softly blue her eyes would shine when he gave Enid those glowing emeralds gotten in the sack of the governor's palace at Tezenbajo; how white would a certain strand of pearls gleam against her shapely throat. The diamonds he'd convert to cash—they ought to bring many stacks of golden coins which would start them off without having to scale that oft-underestimated barrier to happiness called poverty.

Thus he was musing when a distant noise drew his gaze to the left. He straightened

a little in his saddle and glimpsed very far off to the left the rising of a puff of smoke—another. Indian signals? He reined in but presently caught the glimmer of the new sun's first rays on what must be a distant window.

Good! His senses of time and direction were functioning as well as ever. Yonder must lie North Platte, dying and deserted base camp for the U. P. and jumping-off place for its successor, wicked, murderous Julesburg, the newest "Hell on Wheels."



JACK SMILEY

Again his self-communing was interrupted when the girl's arms about his neck tightened and, drugged with sleep, she raised lips as soft and brightly red as though fashioned of scarlet satin.

"Kiss me—darling—" she murmured, and for the life of him Robert Burton never knew why, with a gay smile, he obeyed her.

CHAPTER VI.

JOURNEY'S END.

ONE of the passenger coach's wheels had a little flat spot which clacked regularly, maintaining a soothing rhythm which, however, had no effect on Captain Robert Burton. Each clack served as a reminder that there were so many less yards separating him from Enid Culver.

Four years to a day since he had seen her on that last leave from Vicksburg.

On glancing through the long unwashed windows he could see a troop of dusty blue cavalry riding two and two along a road which ran parallel to the tracks. The poor devils in the rear platoon were eating dust, for all the handkerchiefs tied over their noses. How familiar a sight it was to see steel glinting from the pall of golden dust.

A quiet chuckle made him relax, to see lines of grave amusement on the red-brown visage of Colin MacKaye.

"Losh, mon, are you wushing to get at 'em?"

"No," Burton laughed. "But I reckon I'll sho'ly look twice at a blue uniform till the day of my death. Horses look like they're comin' back from patrolling the line."

"Aye. Aiblins they're replacements for the 2nd Cavalry—'Twas a patrol o' them saved our lives last night. Losh, I'll no be quick forgetting the run I made for the last hundred yards. Every second I thocht to feel a ball or arrow in my backside, but the patrol came up in time. A pretty bicker it was for maist half an hour."

Absently Burton fingered a new sombrero bought in decaying North Platte. "I heard it in the distance—How many of you got through?"

"There was ainly three o' us, Rob. Yon big, fierce-swearin' sergeant and the black bearded trapper." MacKaye sighed. "The bloody de'ils caught yon poor brakeman just behind me, and they had his hair off before a mon could say 'MacGregor'!"

The taurine bellow of the conductor could be heard in the next car. "Julesburg in ten minutes! Julesburg in ten minutes!"

Chuckling, the Scot reached up to the luggage rack and took down a brown slouch hat. "I'd ha'e given a lot to have seen ye lugging yon hoity-toity Valcour lass. Ha! Ha! And both of ye hating the other!"

"Sho'—she just don't understand this country," the Southerner drawled. "Anyhow, I'll never see her again."

"Dinna be so sure—I heard she was heading for Julesburg, too."

"Reckon she won't be bothered, not with her father a big politician and promoter of the road. Senator Valcour will be as rich as Midas, no doubt."

"He'll be nae so rich soon—I'm thinking," the Scot remarked and dodged the end of a huge duffle bag swinging past from a miner's shoulder.

"Why?"

"In Platte they were saying the U. P.'s nigh to bankruptcy," MacKaye stated soberly. "'Tis rumored Congress has refused mair subsidies unless the line reaches Big Spring within the month. The officer boy o' the troopers said it's near impossible what with the desert ahead, and the Cheyennes, Sioux and Crows harryin' the laborers. So, aiblins, yer proud beauty wilna be so proud come a month mair."

"Did anyone else agree?"

"Aye, the station master in North Platte. He told us while we were waiting for them to find your ugly carcass, he's so sure o' ruin he's looking around for a likely farm. 'Twas he that said old Senator Andrew Valcour has his last saxpence invested i' the road."

THE engineer whistled stridently for brakes as the train clattered by a village of fifteen or twenty teepees, around which squaws toiled in the brilliant sunshine and wolfish dogs scavenged while, a short way out on the prairie, small naked boys watched a herd of grazing ponies.

The couplings banged and rattled, dust swirled in the open windows through which could be seen a slow plodding 'bull train. The huge white tops of the freight wagons, glinting in the sun, marked the passage of a convoy headed for Julesburg or for Fort Sedgewick farther down the South Platte. How slowly the long horned, brown and white oxen moved, how dense was the cloud of snuff colored dust almost obliterating the hindermost wagons.

"Julesburg! All off. End o' line!" A brakeman thrust a beery, unshaven face in the door and in the same breath swore at

a puff of wood smoke from the locomotive which curled about him. "Julesburg! Beware of pickpockets!"

"And everything else," grunted a fat little passenger in a stovepipe hat and checkered red waistcoat.

Julesburg! Just outside of this mushroom of canvas and raw board shacks was the Culver ranch. Enid! Joy inexpressible welled into Burton's heart. Enid at last!

A few minutes later Burton and MacKaye stepped out onto the crude earth platform of Julesburg amid the terrific noonday sunshine. At that instant the ex-Confederate experienced a strange sensation—it was as if he had contracted a mysterious fever. Energy—vital, elemental in quality—was in the air, written in all those broad, sunburnt faces. A free swing to the stride, a determined set to the shoulders. Vigorous were all the types, restless, rude and primitive—yet attuned to a new momentum that swept one along like a mighty current.

Differently, the Scot expressed the same idea. "Losh, Rob, and look at all the people. Are they not braw and lusty? And I thocht it was a wilderness oot here."

"It seems we're wrong, Mac," Burton muttered. "I sho' miscalculated, too."

The ex-Confederate found the scene before his eyes absolutely unique in his experience—more than that. There must have been at least two thousand people on hand to welcome the arrival of the noon train. All over the right-of-way swarmed soldiers off duty, dirty looking Indians with hard black eyes and clad in buckskins and gay blankets.

Present in great numbers were certain well dressed, pale faced gentlemen who gazed at the newcomers with chill and speculative eyes. There were shirtsleeved railroad men, brawny Irish baggage smashers and a host of picturesque loafers who cursed and scratched themselves while gaping at the descending passengers.

By an effort Burton pulled himself together. "Come, Mac, let's *andar* out of this. I must find Enid."

MacKaye's hand closed on his arm and the Scot, with a chuckle, begged, "In a minute; aiblins ye'll be amused to watch this."

A FILE of sunburned soldiers, bayonets a-sparkle in the sun, were busy clearing a path to the last car of the train, and along this proceeded an infantry major in company with a gray haired man in a well fitting black coat and riding breeches. It chanced that Burton and his friend stood on a little rise and so could see over the heads of the crowd and thus obtained an excellent view of Jessica Valcour's appearance on the coach's platform. She was, he noted, more radiantly lovely than ever in a black costume which made the most of her pale features and slim waisted figure.

"Losh! So she had all yon car to herself," MacKaye commented when not another passenger appeared. "'Tis evidently somewhat to be a politician's bairn."

"She's not blue eyed," Burton corrected absently. "Her eyes are violet. Will you look at that!"

A bearded sergeant barked an order, the soldiers stiffened and presented arms and the crowd quieted somewhat to look on in frank curiosity when the gray haired man hurried forward.

"Oh! Father—" Her cry carried even to where the adventurer stood absently brushing dust from his red striped trousers. Jessica Valcour almost sprang from the lowest step into the old man's extended arms and, clear as a bell, her rich tones came once more. "Oh, father, I hope that silly little accident didn't upset you."

"Merciful Laird," muttered MacKaye, "and she called last nicht 'a silly little accident.' I canna tell whether she's clean daft or a verra braw lass."

Back down the path opened by the guard he who must be Senator Valcour led his daughter to a buggy drawn by two restless black thoroughbreds. A uniformed driver touched his hat as correctly as any of General the Honorable Sir Hubert MacKaye's coachmen back in gray, dour old Edinburgh.

A roar of raucous laughter burst from the crowd and made the hot air quiver. Even the engineer thrust his head out of his cab and guffawed.

"Dudes! English!"

"Lickspittle! Haw! Haw!"

"Give my best to the Queen!"

Burton felt MacKaye stiffen, but the Scot relaxed as quickly.

Their merriment became Homeric when a gambler in the act of assisting two handsome young trollops into a buckboard feigned great indignation to the bearded loafer holding the reins.

"Touch yer blasted hat," he roared. "Can't yer see their ladyships is comin' aboard?"

The gap toothed man in shirt sleeves stared, comprehended, and obeyed with mock civility.

The crowd howled with amusement, and angry hues flooded Jessica Valcour's cheeks, but neither the promoter nor the infantry major paid any attention. Even Burton chuckled.

"Come on, Mac, let's be getting on to the post office."

They found it across a wide and dusty street directly opposite the Casement Brothers' huge portable warehouse, but so swamped with business was it that the impatient captain was forced to join a long line leading to a small, heavily barred window. While they waited, Burton absently scanned a fly-blown collection of hand-bills advertising the rates of Holladay's Overland Stage and the charges of Messrs. Russel, Majors & Waddel, freighters. Besides these there were the notices of real estate sharks and dozens of "Wanted, Dead or Alive!" posters from the U. S. marshal's office.

A singularly unpleasant voice impinged upon Burton's ears. "Yer seen that new gal of Jack Smiley's?" The speaker was a flushed, bottle-nosed individual with a weeping walrus mustache.

"Hope to kiss a pig if I didn't, Hank," replied a narrow faced individual who looked like a human weasel. "By Gawd, she's shore prettier'n a speckled pup. I

ain't seen such purty yaller hair since I was knee high to a pra'rie dog. Jed Parkins was sayin' Jack really got spliced to her. That gospel?"

"Jack married? Haw! Haw!" sniggered Walrus Mustache. "They's been three Missus Jack Smileys since the U. P. rolled out o' Columbus. Jack's shore got a handy way with the frails."

"Why shouldn't he? He c'n afford it. Heard say the King of the Hills is easy makin' him five thousand a night."

"Wal, some people shore are shot in the tail with luck," grunted the first speaker and shuffled on towards the little window. "Yessiree, that noo gal o' Jack's shore gives cards and spades to all the others, or I'm a greaser. She's got class, this one has."

FINALLY it was Burton's turn at the window and, heart in mouth, he asked the collarless, squint eyed postmaster about the Culvers.

"Culver?" he said vaguely. "Culver?"

"Yes." A twing of apprehension made Burton speak sharply. "Of course you know George Culver. He runs a rancho near here."

The other grinned, spat expertly at a cuspidor behind him. "Culver, oh, yes—He was here before the railroad come."

Almost husky with joy, Burton pursued his inquiry. "Do you know whether Miss Enid Culver is in town or out at the ranch?"

"Miss Culver? Say," the postmaster's bloodshot blue eyes narrowed a little, "you ain't a feller called—Benton—no—Burton, air ye?"

"Why, yes. Did Miss Culver leave any message?" Painful was the thumping of Burton's heart.

"Why, I — no—" the postmaster drawled. "I jest guessed who ye were. She used to post letters to ye—and you used to send her some with funny stamps onto 'em, didn't ye?"

"Yes." Burton's smile widened. "Where is she now?"

The postmaster blinked and caught up a

package of letters. "Reckon you might find her over to the Julesburg House, mister. She was thar yesterday. All right, next!"

Burton turned away in a seventh heaven of anticipation and the postmaster began to drop packages of letters into the pouch of a mail orderly from Fort Sedgewick.

"All right, Rob?" inquired the Scot, his blue eyes very solicitous.

"Right as rain— Come on, you old Chinchero!"

Of the busy, restless crowds, Captain Robert Burton saw nothing, and it seemed he trod on a velvet carpet inches deep. It was only MacKaye's alertness that saved him from being trampled by a group of screeching, half drunken cowboys who came galloping recklessly down Julesburg's deeply rutted main street and waving half empty pint bottles.

"Losh, what a toon!" MacKaye grunted when, at a doorway, appeared two painted and daubed women clad only in pink chemises. These hailed in piercing tones to offer their charms in no uncertain terms. A few strides farther down a boardwalk the bleached and bedizened inmates of dance hall came running out, passed their arms through those of the newcomers and cried:

"In town for a spree, boys? Come in, buy Mimi and Lottie a drink. Aw, don't be shy, boys; let's get acquainted. We're only young once!"

Energy! Even in its lower strata the new West seethed with it. No pale inhibitions, no strangling if refining traditions here. All was for to-day and to-morrow. Yesterday was lost in a nameless grave.

By the time the unpainted board façade of the Julesburg House was seen down the main street, the long-striding, soldierly companions had been accosted no less than a dozen times. They were passing the Golden Queen saloon when staccato shots and a hoarse scream of mortal pain rang from its depths, bringing inescapably home the fact that death as well as life was swift in "Hell on Wheels."

But for the moment the significance was lost on Robert Burton. Striding along with

the inimitable swing of a cavalryman afoot, he hitched the precious haversack higher on his shoulder, tramped by the row of cow ponies and cavalry chargers which drowed or gnawed idly at a hitching rail and headed towards a series of broad steps leading to the Julesburg House. Enid! *Would she be there?*

On the porch sat several women, some of them in decent, somber colored dresses, others in the gayer frilled garments of Lilith's daughters. At the sight of every wide skirt, of every bonnet, Burton's heart lifted like that of one who, on a swing, feels it reach the apex of its arc and pause that breathless second before it begins its downward swoop.

With characteristic tact, Colin MacKaye turned aside at the door and gently clapped his friend's buckskinned shoulder.

"I'm thinkin', Rob, I'll e'en go and sample a specimen o' the local whusky. Aiblins you and the bonnie lassie will ha'e somewhat to talk aboot. Ye'll find me at yon Blue Star."

And so the gallant, rawboned third son of the MacKaye of Glenkaye turned aside and was gone even before Burton could utter a half-hearted protest.

WITH the same peculiar tingling in his fingertips he had felt on the eve of Corinth, Captain Burton automatically straightened his hunting shirt, wiped off the new sombrero and with a peculiar clutching at his muscular throat he swung up the steps and entered the sudden gloom of a rudely furnished lobby. He was about to cross to the reception desk when, through a near-by door, he glimpsed the back of a girl's golden head. Though she was bent over a writing desk and with her back turned, his whole being told him it was Enid Culver. No mistaking the glorious silver-gold sheen of her hair, no mistaking the smoothness of the nape of her neck.

Heart drumming like a partridge's wings, Burton sped across the gritty, carpetless floor and entered the stuffy little writing room. She did not look up and her pen

went on scratching evenly across the paper. He had to make a deliberate effort to speak.

"Enid," he choked.

Her pen stopped in mid-motion as if the hand of an invisible giant had halted it.

"Enid, my own darlin'!"

Enid Culver uttered a breathless gasp, sprang up and stood facing him, expressive gray-blue eyes wide and her bright mouth parted in astonishment.

"Oh, my own honey!" In an instant his long, hungry arms enfolded her soft suppleness, just as he had imagined on so many hundreds of nights when he lay in bivouac under the hot stars and velvety skies of old Mexico. Dizzily, he sensed the well-remembered fragrance of her hair in his nostrils and felt the tremulous warmth of her lips. His body seemed to melt inside and his brain went whirling dizzily through realms of ecstasy.

A hand fell cruelly pinioning his shoulder. "Say, you!"

Spun off balance, Robert Burton swayed and caught a glimpse of a tall man with a strong square face that was dominated by pointed mustaches and small eyes that were keen and as evilly blue as dagger points. No puma could have struck faster or harder than Robert Burton. One of his fists dealt the blond aggressor a jarring blow under the heart, and a split second later the other caught him a tooth rattling *smack* on the side of the jaw. But nevertheless the blond man remained on his feet.

With a wholly primitive viciousness, the raging Burton pressed his attack, ignoring Enid's low wails of dismay until, at last, the other went over backwards with a resounding crash. His fall knocked over a desk and an inky spray spattered the garish wall paper. Quite unconscious, Burton's attacker lay on his back, the skirts of his black frock coat hung out like grotesque sable wings; and suddenly revealed were the mother of pearl butts of two derringers, protruding from the pockets of a waistcoat of flowered yellow silk.

"You swine! Get up—" Burton thun-

dered, but the blond man remained motionless, so he stooped and snatched out the weapons. Only then did he turn, flushed and apologetic. "I'm sorry, honey, I couldn't help it," he panted and tried to take her arm, but she shrank away.

"Oh, Bob, Bob! You shouldn't have hit him. He—he'll kill you. You—don't know who he is—"

"I've killed other men," Burton's tones flicked like a whip lash, "and I'll kill him as soon as he can stand on his feet."

"But you—mustn't. You—you don't understand." Ghastly pale, Enid backed away, holding out trembling hands. "Oh, go away," she moaned, "please go."

"Go away! Did you say *go away*?" A glacial current seemed to have supplanted the blood in Burton's veins. Nonsense, Enid Culver couldn't be telling him to go away!

Immensely tall he looked as he crossed to stand before her, red striped blue legs a little apart, and with that heavy haversack still dragging at his left shoulder.

"Go away? Honeybird, you didn't mean that—"

"You must go," she wailed, her face distorted with terror. "That—is Jack Smiley—my husband!"

CHAPTER VII.

BURTON CELEBRATES.

"YOUR husband!" It seemed as if one of those thousands of shells Burton had watched burst was now exploding inside of him, blasting out his life, withering his stomach, bowels and lungs. "Your husband!" he repeated and all of a sudden the haversack seemed to weigh incalculable amounts.

"Yes," unexpectedly the girl blazed at him as women will when tortured by their own acts. "It's all your fault! Can't you see? Father and Paul were killed by the Crows—I—I got tired of waiting and waiting—growing older, having no life—no love."

Love! Burton swayed, but she railed on.

"Jack was here; he was good to me!" With a wild flurry of dove-gray skirts, Enid Culver darted across the room to catch up the big, brutally handsome blond head into her lap and crouch there gazing up in illogical defiance at her anguished lover.

"Oh, you fool," she wailed. "You utterable fool! Why did you leave—go off to Mexico like that? Do you think I'm growing any younger?"

"But—" his tongue seemed to be fashioned of thick felt, "but you promised, and I was getting money for us." He made a stricken, half gesture to the haversack. "I joined Maximilian—fought—"

"Fight!" Savagely her accents rang out and it seemed she could grow no paler and yet keep consciousness. "Yes, that's all you're good for—that's all you'll ever be, a down-at-the-heel soldier of fortune! I'm sick and tired of work. You know I've slaved ever since I was old enough to walk. Look at my hands now." She held them out trembling, ridiculously small, white, and covered with gems. "Oh, I—" At the agony in his deep-set gray eyes she faltered and broke off short.

"But—I—why—you wrote less than six months ago." The words issued painfully from his sun cracked lips, as though each one was being dragged out by a windlass. "You told me you still—if you had only said—" He again made small, ineffectual motions with his muscular, long fingered hands as he read the change written there in her features. She was still Enid, but unfamiliar now. Why? He realized that her hair was arranged in a new and alluring mode; her dress was a little too revealing of curves which had matured since last he left her, slender half child, half girl. What was it she was saying?

"Get out, you fool! Get out! Jack will kill you when he comes to. Get out! You poor romantic fool!"

From behind sounded a loud trample of feet and in the writing room door appeared a thick bodied fellow in shirt sleeves and with black hair slicked flat with bear's grease. Other faces, startled, strangely incredulous, loomed over his shoulders.

"My Gawd!" he rasped in awed tones. "Why, *the fool's hit Jack!*"

"What! Knocked out Jack Smiley?"

A hint of awe invaded the hot and curious faces peering in at the door. Apparently it was something to have knocked out Jack Smiley.

The black haired man's hand started to creep towards his food spotted waistcoat, which successfully roused Burton from his agonized stupor. In a deadly calm now he spun on one heel and in his right hand a long barreled Colt .44 materialized as by a conjuring trick.

"Stand back!" he commanded, and before the savage glare in his eyes the crowd fell back. In his ears a name was dinning like a fire alarm's insistent clatter. Jack Smiley? Jack Smiley? Where had he heard that name? In a flash returned a vision of the walrus mustached cattleman gossiping in the post office. Snatches of his conversation returned. "Jack Smiley's newest sweetheart—" "They married?" "No, three 'Mrs. Smileys' since—Columbus—"

Burton's voice rang out again, this time harsh as the caw of a raven.

"Reckon we've both made a mistake, Enid," he cried, hitching higher his haversack. "Only I've found out mine in time—good luck to you—" And then he shoved aside the black haired man and marched out, leaving Enid Culver numbly crouched above the inert form of her protector.

AN ominous crowd had already gathered in the Julesburg House's stuffy little living room and women of all sorts were scurrying to shelter, but the noisiest talkers fell silent or lowered their voices to an indistinct mumble when they beheld Death looking out through the eyes of this bronzed young fellow in the red striped breeches.

On the hotel's threshold the captain stopped, laughed stridently and called out, "Come on, everybody! Drinks on me! I'm invitin' you-all to the Golden Queen, and we'll drink—drink, by God, as none of you've ever drunk before!"

At each stride the mad turmoil raging in Robert Burton's soul increased with a cumulative effect much as a brook, fed by freshets, first stirs uneasily, then grows magically until it becomes a raging, all-destroying torrent; so the black despair in the ex-Confederate's brain grew.

In frenzied gayety he slammed apart the swinging doors of the Golden Queen.

"Drinks!" he yelled in that far carrying parade ground voice which had marshalled so many gray battalions into line of battle. "Come on, friends, name your poison—everybody drinks! I aim to get rid of thirty thousand dollars before midnight."

In vain did Colin MacKaye, running thunderstruck and dismayed out of the Blue Star, clutch his friend by the arm and hoarsely demand what had happened. In vain did he plead with this frozen faced man not to fling away the hard earned spoils of war.

Glass in hand, Burton only laughed harshly and looked at his friend.

Roaring with delight they came; loafer, teamster, gambler, capper and section hand. Sweating, shouting and swearing joyously, they crowded in until the Golden Queen could hold no more, and Burton drank, matching drinks with all and sundry. But for all the effect the raw red whisky had upon him it might have been tea. One by one he tossed magnificent, flawless diamonds gashing onto the bar, and at each one the motley throng clamored like a starved wolf pack at the sight of meat.

"Oh, mon, mon! Dinna do this," MacKaye pleaded. "There's no wumman in the world worth sic madness!"

"Shut up, you." A ruffian with a bruised looking face wagged a pistol under the Scot's nose. "Let him spend—he's havin' an aces-up time for his *dinero*."

Cases of champagne fired volleys of corks up to the raw pine rafters, then sent their golden contents sparkling across the bar, and the haversack was half empty when the last bottle was drained.

"What! No more champagne?" Bur-

ton cried, and abandoned his efforts to tuck a champagne cork into the beribboned sleeve of a pretty, tired-looking dance hall girl. "It's an outrage!"

"Come on over to the Prairie Belle," the girl whispered in his ear. "More room there. This place has been drunk dry."

"A good idea," he agreed owlshly, but when she tried to slip an arm around Burton's neck he shook her off impatiently. Several ugly free fights were raging, so it was with difficulty that he, ever watched by the appalled Scotsman, gained the door. Apparently the clamor had drowned out his latest invitation, for no one had the wit to follow him, and villainous raw liquor usually reserved for soldiers and Indians, was still pouring across the scarred bar top in a steady stream.

OUT into the sunset Burton wavered, and there he paused to laugh, emitting mirthless mechanical sounds such as certain birds and animals make. Great God! Yesterday at this time he'd been riding along, maundering over Enid Culver. A romantic fool! She was right! That's what he was. She had hit the mark that time.

"Come, mon, ha'e you done wi' yer madness?" Deep anxiety was written in MacKaye's eternally red face. "Dinna throw awa' the rest o' yer siller."

"Sorry, Mac, but I'm going to make this day just as horrible as I can. There's merit in consistency, they tell me."

The two were half way across the wide main street when a buggy suddenly pulled up before them, and Captain Robert Burton, his face flushed, found himself looking into the familiar features of Jessica Valcour. She sat with a uniformed orderly by her side.

"Captain Burton, I—I was looking for you."

With ironic grace, Robert Burton bowed from the waist—that same courtly kind of a bow his ancestors had made back in Virginia—before they had heard the call of Empire and had struck out for the rich wildernesses of Kansas.

"I—I came to ask if you would dine at the Fort to-morrow with my father and me. I—" at the queer intensity of his look she flushed, dropped her eyes and stammered, "I feel I owe you an apology."

"Captain Burton will be delighted to go," MacKaye hastily cut in, and nudged his friend when Burton made no immediate reply.

"Reckon I'll come, all right," Burton drawled as he fought to forget the rending pain in his heart, "if you still want me to-morrow."

The girl stiffened and obviously fought down a sharp retort. "We shall expect you then at seven to-morrow night. We Valcours are given to keeping our word. Drive on, Perkins."

Nettled by a flick of the orderly's whip, the black thoroughbreds surged on and the buggy vanished around the stern of a lumbering Conestoga wagon, and so Jessica Valcourt heard nothing of Burton's strident laughter which MacKaye made no effort to stop. He was listening with a very grave expression to the words of an army officer, a lieutenant with soft brown sideburns, who stepped up and said in a hurried undertone:

"Get your friend out of town!"

"He'll no run awa'," MacKaye replied.

"But *you must!*" urged the other in deadly seriousness. "If you're his friend, get him out of Julesburg drunk or sober. Jack Smiley runs Julesburg, and your friend has beat him to a pulp, they tell me. Get him away at once—it's his only chance."

There was no mistaking the earnestness of the bronzed young officer's plea.

"But are there no police?" the Scot was amazed. "Ha'e ye no law here?"

"None save that of the gamblers and their six-guns." The young officer looked nervously about as he added, "There are two or three hundred toughs in this town—all owe Smiley a favor of some kind. Boot Hill's humpbacked with poor devils who haven't done a tenth of what your friend has—"

Once the friendly officer had hurried off,

MacKaye manfully tried to reason with the somber eyed stranger Robert Burton had become, but he merely laughed and swung on across the dusty road towards the Prairie Belle.

"By auld Cloutie, to pass him oot is the only way," the Scot murmured. "Then, aiblins—"

At the more spacious bar of the Prairie Bell, Burton plunged even more furiously into his insane prodigality, despite a natural revulsion that flowed back against his will, as mist from a waterfall rises in the opposite direction to the cataract.

By now word had gone all over Julesburg that the madman who had knocked Jack Smiley unconscious was resuming his spree, and a steady, ill smelling stream of inhabitants hurried to join in lapping up the flood of alcohol decanted at the Prairie Belle.

WHEN the sun sank in its usual burst of breath-taking glory, and the kerosene lamps began to cast a red-yellow glare over the swarm of hot and loud voiced humans, hairy, red faced men fought, rough fellows with calloused hands sang, painted women giggled and picked pockets, and certain hard-eyed citizens lured drunken simpletons into games of chance.

Slouched on a chair placed on the bar, haversack between knees and presiding over all the raucous carnival sat Captain Robert Burton. Drink after drink he tossed off, but their only effect was to deepen his color and to add a more somber glow to his eyes.

Beneath the chair stood Colin MacKaye, very erect, hand on gun, and his anguished blue eyes searching the crowd for a possible murderer. Discordant music burst from a disheveled orchestra in a far corner and the garish saturnalia rolled on towards its climax.

It was near midnight that Captain Robert Burton's uncertain fingers, on delving into the haversack, scraped its bottom and encountered but two objects. One was the gem of the whole collection, a necklace

of superb emeralds; the other, a jeweled comb which had once graced the shapely head of a Mexican peeress.

"Here! Look—all of you!"

A shout went up when the bareheaded ex-Confederate rose unsteadily to his feet and, his head brushing the rafters, stared down through the miasma of smoke veiling the Prairie Belle.

"For the ladies!" he shouted, and held the necklace on high. "Ladies forward!"

A deep roar of excitement drowned out all other noises, then the throng surged forward, fascinated.

"Give it to me!" "No! Give it to me!" "Stand back, you bleached hussy."

A swarm of cursing, pushing dance hall girls fought their way up to the very foot of the bacchanalian throne. Hungrily they eyed the prize—pled for it, slobbered, whined and wheedled. Hands tipped by writhing fingers, hands brown, red and white, clawed upwards, but Burton, laughing contemptuously only held the gorgeous necklace higher.

"Quiet! Quiet!" he roared then paused undecided until, standing apart from the crowd, he glimpsed a girl clad in the yellow, short-skirted costume. Unhappy, apparently out of place, she stood quite alone, staring up at the gaunt spendthrift with a curiously puzzled look. Odd, but her small and clearly modelled features seemed to have breeding in them.

"Oh, Rob! Rob!" MacKaye implored in a final effort to retrieve something from the wreck of Burton's fortune, "dinna throw awa' yon bauble. 'Tis worth a gude ten thousand."

Jabbering, intrigued, the crowd fell back when Robert Burton, after having tossed the jewelled comb to the bartender, leaped to the floor. His long face might have been carved from oak, so brown and hard was it when he drove his way through the throng and halted before the sable haired girl in yellow. She flinched before the stark tragedy in his eyes and started to shrink away, then, as if she remembered something, she forced a dreadful, mechanical smile and faltered.

"Evenin', honey—can I—may I—?"

Her voice died away in a sharp click when Bedford Forrest's captain bowed his quaint, Old World bow and said, "For you, Miss—Miss—?"

"Lulu Jameson," supplemented a hoarse voice. "A brand new gal round here."

"In you, Miss Lulu, I pay honor to the whole of your lovely and fascinating sex!" And while cheers, mingled with the snarls of disappointed women, rang in his ears, Burton clasped the necklace of green fire about Lulu's neck. To his numbed surprise he watched the painted smile fade, saw her lips tremble and two tears slide slowly over her faintly rouged cheeks.

A shout was rising from the crowd: "King and Queen o' Julesburg! King an' Queen o' Julesburg! Get 'em a coach! A buggy—anything!"

NOW that the last of the jewels was gone, Burton's reserve cracked and he flung an arm about the slim waist of the girl in yellow, crying, "Come on, honeybunch. You're my queen tonight, let's go!"

Out into the street poured the shaggy saturnalia, shouting, fighting and laughing. Shots were fired into the air somewhere near at hand. A buggy was found and into it the rough men and painted women bundled Burton and Lulu Jameson. Other Cyprians and dance hall girls clambered onto the buggy's floor or stood on the steps kicking high in the air and kissing all and sundry. Amid a fresh salvo of shots, the rout commenced to reel down the main street.

"By the great leapin' Moses, never was a nig't like thish be-fore," bellowed a drunken prospector. "C'mon, Ted—le's watch the fun."

"Ki yi-yi!" whooped a scarlet faced cowboy. "I'm a lobo wolf from the Brazos an' it's my night to howl!" And, throwing back his head, he did so very realistically.

"Never gonna see so much fizzy again," babbled a soldier who swayed along while from his pocket protruded long necks of

two or three champagne bottles. "Come on, baby!"

In front of the triumphant carriage capered an enormous, red bearded bull whacker who, at regular intervals, leaped high into the air, cracked his heels and screeched, "Ho-o-raw f'r Bully Burton, the bhoy wid a heart o' gold."

And so the mad parade swayed on towards the prairie on the edge of town where stood the homes of the wealthier citizens.

Burton, laughing crazily, sat, one booted foot cocked on the buggy's dash-board, with one arm about Lulu Jameson's waist and with the other waving a champagne bottle.

Suddenly a light flared at the second floor window of one of the larger houses, and Burton's glazing eyes made out a single figure which, as the buggy was dragged by not thirty feet away, peered out with affrighted eyes. He dimly recognized Jessica Valcour, so he rose to his feet, swept off his sombrero and made a deep bow.

"See you to-morrow!" he yelled, and then sank back into that unconsciousness which awaits men who have absorbed far too much alcohol.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HANGING.

FIVE thousand imps, it seemed, were beating on Robert Burton's temples with red-hot sledges, and his tongue felt even thicker and drier than it had when he got lost in the terrible deserts of Sonora. Little by little, a measure of confused consciousness returned, and with it a great perplexity. Where was he? Why did his head hurt so infernally? And that arrow wound in his arm was throbbing like the devil. If only the giddy rushing of something in his head would stop. Presently he perceived it was a bed he lay upon; a bed neither hard nor uncomfortable.

Gradually it all came back to him. Enid! His insane eagerness to be rid of all which might remind him of her and the incurable

wound she had dealt him. Though his stomach seemed to be inhabited by swarms of butterflies, he finally succeeded in opening his eyes to find himself looking up at the resinous beams and raw shingles of a roof.

Lord, how his head throbbed! What a childish idiot he'd been! He felt as a man feels who begins to convalesce from a delirious sickness. The devil! He'd best be stirring—Smiley was evidently not of the type to wait for an enemy to make the opening move. Smiley! His muscles contracted a little at a reminiscence of that scene in the writing room of the Julesburg House.

But where was he? By exerting a huge effort he got up on one elbow and found himself to be lying, fully dressed, on top of a clean green counterpane.

Judging from the bare little chest of drawers and a horsehide trunk, this must be the Jameson girl's own retreat. It bothered him that he did not remember how he had come here, nor where he had gotten that lump on the back of his head.

Moving with extreme caution, Burton got to his feet and smiled to see that his Colt and pistol belt were slung from the back of a near-by chair. Of his new sombrero there was no trace—which was not surprising. No fool, Robert Burton knew the thing for him was to get out of Julesburg as quickly and as quietly as possible; to stay probably was to be murdered.

He tiptoed away from the bed, and in passing noticed a basin of water, a cloth and a bottle of arnica. So? The Jameson girl had evidently washed him off and bathed that bump on the back of his head.

He found a hollow, resounding stair and cautiously descended it to the rear of what appeared to be a small warehouse. Inside, he could discern stacked dry goods of all kinds, bales of blankets, rows of lanterns, stacks of horse collars, bales of ready-made coats, boxes of caps, hats and shoes. From the front of this emporium he heard sounds of activity and therefore hurried off into the early morning stillness—the sun was not yet up.

After rubbing eyes which felt like red-hot marbles set into his skull he fell to planning. First he'd get something to eat, and then he'd hunt up MacKaye. He studied Julesburg for the first time, sanely, dispassionately, and noted that, at this early hour, the boom town lay largely quiescent, with all its tawdriness and false pretense pitilessly revealed.

A jackass over beyond the railroad began to bray just as he started for a grubby little lunchroom near the freight depot where the mounds of railroad supplies loomed like man-made hills against the glory of the sky.

MECHANICALLY, he felt in his pockets. Nothing. Even his gold seal ring bearing a crest brought from England by his cavalier ancestors was missing.

"Jameson girl might have left me that," he murmured, and was sobered by the realization that once more he faced life with no more assets than the clothes on his back, a good shooting eye, and a decidedly mediocre Colt .44.

"That means I'll have to find Mac before breakfast," he decided, and set off behind the row of houses forming Julesburg's main thoroughfare. Here and there he came upon drunkards snoring in the lee of lumber piles, or out in the open where they had chanced to fall.

Where would he be likely to find MacKaye?

He halted a much befreckled barefoot boy who carried a milk pail over one arm and a battered stool in the other.

"Gee, mister," the boy called, "if yer hurry ye can see it!"

"See what?"

"They's goin' to be a swell hangin' right soon. Wisht I could go, but, dang the luck, I gotta milk that blamed old cow—paw will frale me plenty fervent if I don't."

Despite his throbbing head, Burton was a little appalled at the youth's eagerness. "A hanging! You ought to be glad you're goin' to miss it."

The boy stared and then spat in brag-gadocio. "Glad? No, I ain't; I seen easy twenty-five of thirty hangings round this town, and this is fixin' to be a peach. Ol' Jack Smiley's sheriffs know how to put on a swell necktie party."

"What had this fellow done?" inquired the man in the red striped breeches—quite without intending to.

"I dunno. Teddie Jennifer 'lowed this hombre was eatin' down at Sis Jackson's reteraw when a no-'count feller by the name o' Dirkin comes in and sets fer to pick a fight with the stranger. Well, this here stranger feller seed he had to fight, so him and Dirkin cut loose together, and Dirkin got plugged. Then some depooty sheriffs jumped the stranger and they've took him off down the road."

Burton, despite the hardening of recent years, felt a sense of shock; imagine a boy like this holding human life so cheaply.

"Tell me," he inquired, "have you heard or seen anything of a tall, red faced man with blue eyes and a scar across his left cheek?"

The freckled boy's eyes widened. "You mean a feller wearin' one o' them funny Greaser belts with silver and blue stones onto it?"

"Yes." Burton felt relieved—he had been just a bit worried. "Where did you see him?" Then something in the lad's manner made him clutch the urchin by a ragged, blue-cotton shoulder.

"Why—why, good God, mister," he stammered, and backed away a step, "that's the feller them sheriffs is fixin' to hang!"

It was as if a fist had hit Burton at the base of his brain, and in an instant the last fogs were dispelled. "Which way'd they go? Quick!"

"Down 'long the railroad track 'bout half a mile out o' town." A grimy, wart speckled hand indicated the direction. "They's a passel o' cottonwoods down yonder where most of the hangin's take place."

His head at once a seething cauldron, and yet an efficiently throbbing piece of

mechanism, Burton dashed down the main street and, throwing caution to the winds, established an undeniable claim to the attentions of a "necktie party" by appropriating the fastest-looking horse he could find among a group hitched to a rail outside a grain dealer's office.

OATHS and an outraged shout pursued the ex-Confederate as he swung into the saddle to drive his spurred heels home with a vicious jab and race past the Prairie Belle, the Julesburg House and the rest of the raw habitations. Once out on the prairie he again and again jabbed the really fast animal he had seized until it put on a furious burst of speed that made the wind tear by his ears and set the long thrums of his hunting shirt to fluttering like ragged battle flags in a breeze; yet he felt it was a snail he bestrode.

As he rode he checked his revolver. MacKaye! Colin MacKaye! Of course his gaunt Scotch friend was still all right. He'd get there in time and there'd soon be a smart skirmish; if there weren't too many of Smiley's men, well—in a few moments he'd know.

Bent low like a jockey, begrudging every inch of resistance to the wind, he urged the black at an arrow-like speed through low clumps of dewy sagebushes.

Endless ages seemed to elapse before the yellow-green tops of some cottonwoods showed beyond a bend in the dusty trail he followed. That must be the grove the boy had mentioned, for several horsemen had but recently passed this way; a fact proved by fresh prints seen dark against the dim colored earth. Off to his right the harassed rider thought to hear the jingle of a bridle chain and the trample of a cavalcade riding slowly along, but his attention remained trained upon the outline of those cottonwoods which were momentarily showing up in more detail.

Abruptly the trail swung around a rise, then led under a low swinging cottonwood branch, and so he galloped into the outskirts of the grove. Eyes darting about like thrusting rapiers, he drew back the

cold steel of his Colt's hammer, braced himself for quick thinking and quicker shooting.

The black horse's splendid speed carried him into the shade of the first tall cottonwoods almost before he knew it. Frantically his eyes raked the spaces between the rough gray-brown trunks. Ha! Yonder stood a couple of tethered broncos, and beside them two men in argument over an object one of them held. A red mist whirled before Burton's eyes when he recognized the disputed object to be MacKaye's silver and turquoise belt. The two stiffened when they beheld the deadly eyed apparition and leaped aside.

Sunlight gleamed briefly on a barrel when the man nearest whipped up a rifle and sent a bullet moaning by Burton's ear. A split second later the gray faced horseman's Colt spat flame and he with stubby Wesson rifle screamed and staggered sideways, clutching at the side of a soiled, red checked shirt.

Where was MacKaye? The rider could see nothing of his friend, so he abandoned his first impulse to fling himself off and fight the other enemy on foot.

The black shied at the howling of the wounded man, and a second later a shot cracked from the left. Frozen with anger, Burton fired at a half seen, black hatted form crouched behind a clump of sun dried willows. He spurred straight towards the bush, and then, as the fellow stupidly sought a new protection, the ex-Confederate shot him down. The wounded man, a bullet in his groin, was screaming horribly, and Burton raised his voice to make the whole shadowy dell resound.

"Colin! Colin! For God's sake, where are you?"

There were apparently no more enemies near by, so he spurred forward among the rough, sun dappled boles. "Colin! Where are you?"

A SHADOW crossed his face, drew his attention upward, and then the hairs on the back of Robert Burton's neck squirmed and lifted. From a limb dangled

a hideously contorted figure—a form at once familiar and unfamiliar. God! Could that dreadful purplish face be that of Colin MacKaye, the gallant gentleman who had stood so sturdily beside him during three long years of strife?

Already shaken, Burton's nerves almost snapped when, in an instinctive but forlorn hope he forced his frightened mount to approach the appalling, gently swaying object. No use—those glassy eyes told that the MacKaye of Glenkaye's third son had departed on the Eternal journey.

"Too late! Too late!" demonic voices dinned in the anguished ex-Confederate's ears and assaulted his reason. Then louder, more real voices impinged upon his torment. "Which way did he go?"

"That way! See his hoss's tracks!"

Through a gap in the trees Burton caught a glimpse of Jack Smiley's cruelly handsome yellow head agleam in the new sunlight as, hatless, he headed a small swarm of riders galloping furiously back along the route by which he must have quitted the cottonwood grove.

Fury indescribable seethed in Robert Burton's soul. Twice within twenty-four hours had the same man robbed him of what was nearest and dearest—Kill! Kill! Kill! His first and well nigh irresistible impulse was to charge straight at Smiley and, come what might, exact the one just payment. A calmer inner instinct, born of his tumultuous existence, however, told him he would never live to reach Julesburg's unofficial, but unquestioned overlord.

Even as Burton reined aside there now arose from another side of the glade a new and equally menacing clamor. "Horse thief! Horse thief! Cut him off, you in there!"

The cold sweat of anguish standing out on his bronzed forehead, Burton wrenched the black around on its hind legs and dropped low over his neck when a shower of bullets came hissing through the branches. He could hear them going *ta-cot! tchuk!* into near-by trunks and branches. Ahead of him twigs and green

leaves came sailing lazily through the air as he rode headlong for a break in the trees.

Glancing over his shoulder, Burton counted some fifteen or twenty riders, whooping and yelling like fox hunters, coming tearing out of the cottonwoods and, foremost of all, galloped Smiley, easily recognizable by his bare yellow head.

It was treacherous under foot because countless gopher and prairie dog holes formed just so many traps for the gelding's flying hoofs, but luckily the fugitive's stolen horse proved surefooted above the average. Before two miles of flat or gently rolling prairie flashed by, the chase had become strung out in a long line at the head of which Smiley still rode. Next, bunched well together, came three individuals who rode bent low, and after them a lengthening line of riders.

A fierce hope began to fill Burton's heart. Possibly, when Enid's paramour and MacKaye's principal murderer was far enough separated from the rest, he could wheel quickly and then perhaps the atrocity of the cottonwoods would not burn so terribly in his soul.

It was after the three riders behind Smiley had fallen back a good bit that the yellow haired gambler commenced to close in more rapidly on his quarry, unaware that Burton gradually and without seeming to was checking the black.

When half a mile more of dry prairie had

flickered by, and over his shoulder the fugitive could make out details of a strong red face seen over the bay's ears, he drew a long breath, wheeled, and was starting back when, to his amazement, he discovered that Smiley had already turned and was retreating towards his companions.

"Yellow, after all! How could Enid fall for such a creature?" But when he beheld the trio also wheel and ride madly back towards Julesburg, the ex-Confederate's puzzlement grew and, ever cautious of an ambush, he reined in.

His heart leaped like a speared salmon. No wonder Smiley and his satellites were retreating for dear life! From a near-by gulch was pouring a disorderly column of Indians. They were too far off to tell to what tribe they belonged, but in all probability they were Northern Cheyennes, Kiowas on the war path, or a band of Sioux raiding south of their accustomed haunts. In any case they raised a long drawn cry and, amid billows of yellow dust, turned their ponies to head off the lone rider.

The Indians or Smiley? For an instant the grim featured rider hesitated. There was a chance he might shake off the Indians, while it meant sure death to turn back. Accordingly he headed towards a distant line of low hills which seemed to offer some sort of refuge. Purposefully, the Indians whipped their ponies, ceased their clamor and took up the interrupted chase on fresh animals.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



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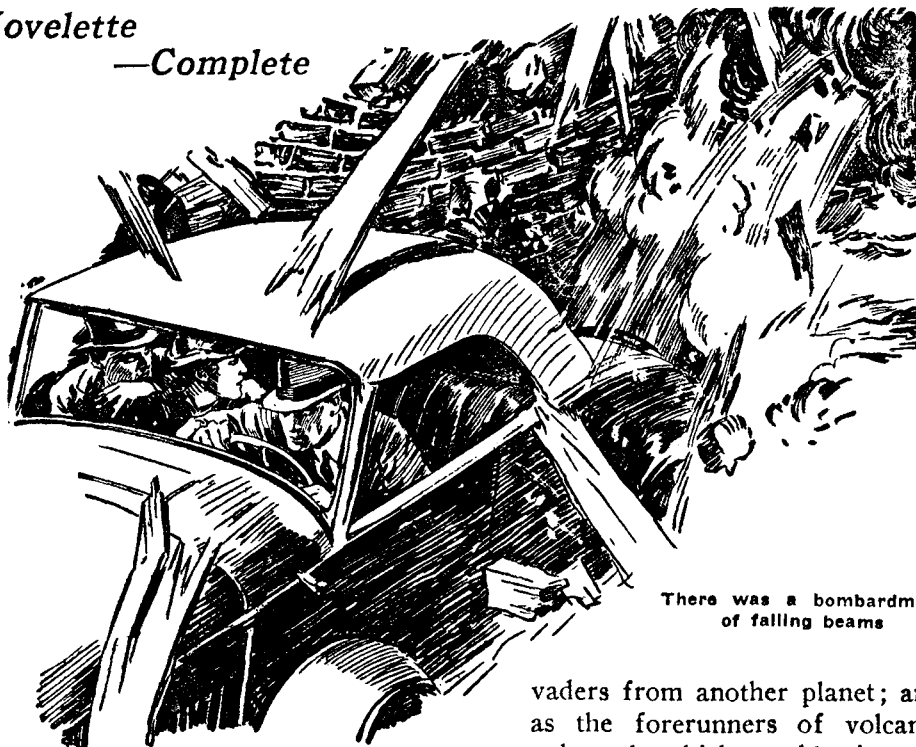
The Rollers

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "War of the Purple Gas," "The Earth-Shaker," etc.

*Monstrous tornadoes were ravishing the Nation's capital—and
there was one invisible force that could halt them*

Novelette
—Complete



There was a bombardment
of falling beams

CHAPTER I.

PHONY TORNADO.

EVERYBODY remembers the Rollers. For something better than two weeks they were certainly the strangest and toward the last the most terrifying of all known "natural" phenomena. They were explained at the time as freaks of natural electricity; as weapons of unparalleled deadliness devised by a foreign power for the conquest of the United States; as methods of destruction used by in-

vaders from another planet; and as the forerunners of volcanic upheavals which would wipe out all civilization along the Atlantic Coast. But not many people remember that these same Rollers which terrified a seaboard began in a very modest way. During the time of their occurrence, they seemed to grow and evolve as if they were malevolent living entities of earth and stone. They attained to mountainous size, to be measured only in hundreds and thousands of feet. But at their beginning the Rollers seemed deadly, yes, and malevolent too, but on a scale which by comparison is minute. Kent Berkeley saw the first one of them