

Crater's Gold

A NOVEL

BY PHILIP CURTISS

XXIII



If you can keep butter down there, why can't you keep cows?"

Mrs. Fields gazed fiercely at the group standing around the entrance to the old mine shaft and demanded a flaw in her logic.

"The container for the thing contained," murmured Stiles, softly. "What is true of the part is true of the whole." But Mrs. Fields did not hear him, and the others were too intent on amazing facts to have time for abstract excursions.

"Cows?" exclaimed Eksberger, looking down at the hole. "Are there cows down there?" A look of incredulity spread over his face. "Say," he said, "don't try to tell me that Bugby's steers are still there."

"I don't try to tell you anything," retorted the housekeeper, with a fierceness which was almost witchlike, "except that no Bugby or anybody else has a claim to a hoof or a horn."

"For Heaven's sake, how many are there?" demanded Eksberger.

"Four," replied Mrs. Fields, her lip trembling, "and a three days' calf. It was him that was talking Spanish," she had to add, however, with a twitch in the lines of her face which only made her expression the grimmer. "The quilt I'm willing to pay for."

"They are your cows, then?" asked Stiles.

Mrs. Fields looked at him as if the issue had come to a head at last. "They most certainly air my cows. Did the judge want to think I was working for nothing the last four years?"

Eksberger and Baumgarten looked at Stiles as if this were a matter which he understood; and he did, to a certain extent. His talk with Pullar had prepared

him for developments such as this, but it was hardly a matter that he wished to reopen. He stood gazing down at the hole in the cellar, saying nothing, but Mrs. Fields was determined to have it out on the spot.

"I hain't any papers, but I'm willing to go to law on it before I'll give them cows up. The calf is mine, anyway."

"Nobody is going to take your cows away from you, Mrs. Fields," said Stiles, quietly. "How long have you had them down there?"

"When did you come?" parried his housekeeper.

"Three weeks ago," answered Stiles.

"Well, then, they've been there two weeks." She still looked at him with lingering suspicion, but in her queer, crooked old mind honesty fought with defiance. "You come on a Tuesday and they went in there the following Saturday. I had 'em up in the woods for a month while the judge was counting the towels and winding up the estate, but after you come it was too far to go up there nights."

Stiles looked at the fierce little figure and there came to his mind the pitiful picture of that frail old woman stealing out at night and trudging her bitter, determined way through the dark, silent woods to care for and shield her one little property. Her mountaineer ancestors, guarding in secret their flocks and herds from Saracen bands, could have done no better.

"Look here," he said, suddenly, Eksberger or no Eksberger, Baumgarten or no Baumgarten. "Did my uncle leave you anything in his will?"

"Your uncle never made no will. You ought to know that."

Stiles hung his head, but, like Mrs. Fields, he wanted to have it out now.

"And for four years he never paid you a cent?"

For the first time since he had known her Mrs. Fields visibly softened. "He was a man accustomed to using his money—what money the judge let him have."

"So you took the cows?"

"The first year he told me to call the Clark cow my own, and after that they wasn't much said about it. They was another spotted heifer that was still his but that died last fall of being bloated."

"But what I don't get," broke in Eksberger, "is how you ever got them down there."

He spoke loud enough so that Mrs. Fields heard him and she turned to him with a snort. "They's plenty o' ways if you only know them."

Stiles hastened to intervene.

"Would you be willing to show us?" he asked, gently, but, while the forced strain was telling on Mrs. Fields, she still managed to summon one last show of fierceness.

"That's understood, then, that the cows is mine?"

"Full and free, without let or restraint, without secret covenant or implied reservation," Stiles answered, with a smile, "and before two witnesses—three," he amended, as Rose, seeing that none of her companions had been eaten alive, slowly conquered her fear and came across the lawn.

"And the calf, too?" insisted Mrs. Fields.

"The calf, too."

"Come on, then."

Rose met the group returning to the main house under the trudging lead of the little old woman, and her face implied a question.

"Fall in," called Eksberger, gaily. "We're going to explore the mine."

As if she had hardly heard him, Rose looked at Stiles and he repeated Eksberger's exact words. "There's no danger at all," he added, and, timorously, Rose walked along with them.

In her kitchen Mrs. Fields lit a lantern and led the way through the hall to the cellar stairs, where she turned.

"This ain't the way I got them in," she explained, laconically.

She led her explorers down the rickety stairway, and, turning at the bottom, held up the lantern while they followed,

Rose last of all. As they left the main floor they were met by a smell of mold and their faces were brushed by cobwebs. Rose shivered but kept on bravely.

The cellar floor was of dirt and wave-like in its levels, but sooty windows helped out the lantern and Stiles with his party looked around. There was little to see except the base of the immense chimney which filled a considerable part of the cellar. Along the walls were innumerable crocks and earthen jars of all sorts and shapes, and a rusted machine of which not even Mrs. Fields knew the purpose. "I got them in there," she said, and pointed to the closed door of the hatchway.

Indeed, relieved of her secret, Mrs. Fields was—for her—actually garrulous. A brisk and almost hysterical amiability had come over the dour and defiant woman who had waited grudgingly on Stiles for three weeks. Was it relief? he wondered. Had the guilty knowledge of those four pitiful cows hidden under their feet been gnawing at her vitals ever since his arrival, furnishing her with the source of a mental turmoil as great, in its homely way, as Lady Macbeth's, transforming her from a harmless, gossipy woman-of-all-work to a hostile old crone? It could be. Four cows to her meant the prop of old age.

Behind the chimney, the cellar continued under an ell, a space without windows, and here, in the floor, the lantern showed a slanting passage leading into a gaping hole. Beside it were big piles of dirt.

"Why, it's fresh!" exclaimed Baumgarten, leaning down and examining it in the light of the lantern.

Mrs. Fields stood still and said nothing while Baumgarten took up a shovel. "Some one's been digging here."

The old woman smiled, a thing Stiles had never before seen her do. "A cow's a pretty big animal," she replied.

Baumgarten straightened himself and looked at her, his hands on his hips. It was a mannerism of his, one of his detestable mannerisms. One would never have believed that it could be noble, but it was at that moment. It was an attitude of utter respect. At the sight of those huge piles of dirt and the sight

of that little old woman, bent and frail in the light of the lantern, the pompous, well-fed New-Yorker had seen, in its every atom of pathos, the picture that Stiles had seen the moment before.

"Well, my gosh!" he said, slowly, and of that, too, every syllable was laden with pure respect.

Before them the blackness of the gaping hole apparently led into the base of the wall.

"But some hole was there?" suggested Stiles.

"Oh yes, there's always be'n a hole," replied Mrs. Fields with the same willingness, "one that you could go in with stooping. The frost broke it in, I guess, or perhaps boys did it long ago. We used to keep butter to cool there and your uncle used it for—for things he wanted—but it was too small for a cow."

"And you shoveled it out?" said Stiles.

"The wall was broke anyway," said Mrs. Fields, fearfully.

She turned the wick of the lantern higher and led the way into the tunnel. It was here that the old woman had evidently done her heroic and secret digging, for the passage sloped very steeply for ten or twelve feet through new, fresh earth so soft that the explorers sank into it to their ankles, while once a sifting of loam came tumbling down off the walls. Baumgarten, who was in the lead, after the housekeeper, stopped fearfully.

"It won't fall," said Mrs. Fields, turning. "The top's just the same as it always was. I only dug out the bottom."

At the end of the slope they came suddenly into a large subterranean gallery where the footing was hard. Mrs. Fields stopped with the lantern and the others gathered around her. Here they could stand erect and, looking up, they saw that the top and the sides were held up by hand-hewed beams set close together. Stiles looked back the way they had come.

"How long did that take you?" he asked.

"Only four nights," she replied.

Stiles and Baumgarten looked at each other and the latter shook his head in

despair. Rose, who had come through the tunnel clinging to Stiles, slipped one hand through his arm and one through Eksberger's. With a little shudder, she drew them both close to her for protection as she had done the first night. Mrs. Fields held the lantern over her head and its light brought out weirdly the wondering, upturned faces.

What a band to gather in that dank gallery of a lost colonial mine to unearth by flickering lantern-light the marks of men forgotten a hundred years! —Eksberger the trumpet of Broadway, Baumgarten the ponderous and immaculate salesman, Rose the dainty and fragile comedienne—all the picture of utter sophistication but all now subdued and with faces transformed by awe and wonder.

Stiles reached over his head and touched one of the beams gingerly. The surface, which still bore the marks of the adze, was seemingly hard enough but it gave to his touch and showed that the heart of the wood was soft and rotted.

"This must have been the end of a sap," he said. He looked back toward the cellar. "I don't know much about mining, but I shouldn't have looked for copper so near the surface."

"I don't guess they knew very much about it themselves," volunteered Mrs. Fields in her new sociability. "My father's grandfather, he was a miner, and my father always told about hearing him say that all the copper he ever see would go in a four-quart pail."

It occurred to Stiles that such a rush of confidence had better be drawn on. It might never come again.

"Mrs. Fields," he said, "the judge told me that your family was Spanish."

Mrs. Fields grunted. "That's what they say. I don't know whether it's so or not. My father, he might have known."

Stiles looked at Rose, then at Baumgarten, then at Eksberger. The lantern-light was strong enough, but their faces brought no response, no indication that they saw anything strange in the statement. At this new wonder, he realized, he must marvel alone.

Only a few, few years before, this woman's fathers had lived in the Pyrenees. Before the Moors, before the

Goths, before the Romans, before the Phœnicians, before the Celts, before the first faint traces of history itself, her race had established itself and, through all the milleniums of wars and migrations in Europe, had bitterly kept its purity intact. A hundred years, fifty, this side of the water and even the memory had been lost. Without a struggle, the Basque had become plain Yankee. Even the name had been stunted. A nasal Inchgerry was all that remained of it now.

Stiles looked at the others standing around him, their upturned faces greenish pale in the lantern light. For that matter what did any one of them know of his heritage? What did Eksberger, what did Baumgarten, both Americans, unable to speak a syllable of another tongue? Could either one have told with certainty where his family had lived three generations before? What had he known himself—or cared—until the death of the last of a fading line had brought him back to close the book on a name he did not even bear? Except for that accident he would have been just like the others, living, smugly, a life of which the very roots did not go back of yesterday. On the other hand, the judge knew. The judge saw as living figures men who had died before this country was born—Solomon Crater, the “massacred” uncle, the West “Injy” merchants. But the judge, for all his tradition, for all his background, how was his life the richer? Where was his culture from Harvard? Where was the thrill of his shipwreck near Singapore? Where was his romance of the days of the forty-niners? Wherein even did he speak purer English than Eksberger? The judge? As Baumgarten would have said, with a shrug, “There you are!”

“But where are the cows?” asked Eksberger, suddenly.

“They’re here just a piece,” replied Mrs. Fields. “The rest is easy. Don’t step on the beams, they’re soft.”

She picked up the lantern and led the way down the passage in which the timbers arched overhead like the ribs and deck beams of a ship. At intervals one or two lay fallen. She rounded a curve and, for a second, the light of the lantern came to them only by reflection.

“It smells like the circus,” said Eksberger.

“That’s them,” replied Mrs. Fields. “Soo, Blacky!”

Around the curve they came suddenly into a very large underground chamber where the four cows were standing, chewing their cud with the nonchalance of domestic animals, perfectly unconcerned as long as they were fed. With a proprietorship which was mounting to pride, Mrs. Fields held the lantern over the tail of the farthest. She looked at the visitors expectantly and Rose followed Stiles at the safe distance from the animal’s heels.

“The darling!” she exclaimed, her eyes brightening in the lantern light. Between the last cow and the wall, a little black head looked up at her in friendly impudence and widespread little black legs tottered in front of her. Suddenly she burst into a laugh. “What in the world has he got on?”

Mrs. Fields looked at Stiles. “It was tore anyway,” she said. “I thought you’d cotched me that night. If you’d come three or four minutes later, you would have.”

“If I’d come three or four minutes later,” replied Stiles, “you might have been shot.” He picked up the corner of a pink padded quilt which was tied with a girth of bed-ticking around the little black calf. “You’re welcome to it,” he said. “What else is there here?”

The vault in which they were standing had evidently been used for some sort of headquarters, possibly the head of the shaft, for the top was still ceiled with planks, while rotted boards crumbled into a sort of red dust under foot.

“This is as far as it goes,” replied Mrs. Fields, “leastways as far as it goes now. The rest is water. Better not go there,” she called suddenly. “You’ll break your neck!”

With his usual talent for exploration, Eksberger had started strolling nonchalantly around the cavern, but he stopped with a start at the house-keeper’s voice. One scare was enough from that mine. With a willingness almost effusive, however, Mrs. Fields picked up the lantern and walked to his side.

“Careful, now,” she warned, “if you

want to see it. Don't git ahead of me."

On the opposite side of the chamber to that by which they had entered was the rotted frame of a broad, heavy doorway with two planks propped criss-cross to bar it. Mrs. Fields took these down, and, holding the lantern at arm's-length before her, she shuffled through the doorway, not lifting her feet from the ground, while, inch by inch, the others followed. For eight or ten feet from the doorway the footing sloped moderately and then, with a jerk, the housekeeper stopped. At their feet, like the mouth of a funnel, yawned inky blackness. The old woman picked up a chunk of dirt and tossed it off into space. With a velvety, uncanny silence it vanished from sight while the faces in the lantern light, leaning over Mrs. Fields's outstretched arm, waited tense and expectant. Five seconds passed and then came a faint hollow splash.

"Water," said Baumgarten, significantly.

"I should say it was water," exclaimed Eksberger, in a dry voice, "and except for the grace of Heaven it might have been me."

"Don't, Charlie," said Rose, with a shudder. "Hadn't we better get back? It might fall or something."

"If it hasn't fallen for a hundred years I guess it won't fall now," replied Mrs. Fields.

She drew back her lantern from over the shaft and turned, but as she did so, Eksberger, crowding forward, made a sudden motion to throw an old piece of iron and struck her arm violently.

"There, you've done it!" she cried.

The lantern flashed up and down and then there was utter darkness.

XXIV

Curiously, it was Baumgarten, Baumgarten the pampered sybarite, who rose to the crisis.

"Don't any one stir an inch," he said, in a low, firm voice.

Before that, there had been an instant of light and dark and of confusion in which nobody had been quite sure what had happened. After that, they had found themselves standing in damp,

pitchy blackness, hearing one another's breathing.

Even when Baumgarten's voice came out at their shoulders, no one else dared to speak. Each waited for some one else to ask the terrible question. Finally, from sheer tension, Rose began to sob, softly. Some one else began to stir. After that, without asking, they all seemed to know that they all were still there. Stiles suddenly discovered that he had been standing with eyes tight shut. He opened them slowly, cautiously, but it made no difference. It was just as black as before, but, curiously, with his eyes open, he seemed able to hear better—and smell. He could now smell distinctly the cold, swamp air from the shaft at their feet.

Again Baumgarten took command. "Light a match, somebody."

There was another silence and again all felt a foreboding of what would prove to be the awful truth. In a queer, strained voice, Eksberger spoke what they knew was the common fate: "I haven't got one. Have you?"

Nobody answered and Eksberger broke out in a sort of falsetto, "Stiles, light a match," and then, as Stiles did not answer, he cried out in fright: "Stiles! Stiles!"

"Yes, yes, I'm here," answered Stiles. He had become conscious of a faint scent from Rose's gown and he had been wondering whether it would reassure her or only startle her the more to touch her. After he had spoken he did put out his hand and touched her shoulder. Like a child she came into his arm and he held her. He could feel her heart beating rapidly. There was another moment of that uncertain groping and then Baumgarten could be heard in a husky voice:

"I think I've got just one, but for the love of Heaven don't anybody move."

With ears strained, they waited ages while Baumgarten fumbled through his pockets. They could hear his stiff collar creak as he moved his arms. "Here it is," he said at last. "Now give me the lantern."

"The lantern?" cried Mrs. Fields. "The lantern is down the hole!"

A sinking feeling seemed to follow. Baumgarten grunted at last:

"Well, anyway, we'll make the most of it."

He could be heard making motions to strike the match, but Stiles stopped him.

"Wait a moment," he said. "That match is precious. Before we light it, let's find out where we all are."

"I'm here," said Miss Fuller, speaking two inches under his chin.

"Who's that?" asked Stiles, as his groping hand touched a coat-sleeve.

"That's me," replied Eksberger. "Here's Stuffy. Where's Mrs. Fields?"

"All right, now," commanded Stiles. "Keep hold of hands."

"Are you ready?" called Baumgarten. They could feel him poised.

"All ready," said Stiles.

The breathing became strained again as they waited nervously for the brief moment of light. Once, twice, they heard the match rub over cloth and then a muttered word—"Hell!"

"What's the matter?" asked Eksberger, pettishly.

Baumgarten did not reply and the match again rubbed over cloth. "I thought so," he said at last.

"What's the matter?" insisted Eksberger.

"It's a safety match. I knew there was something wrong," muttered Baumgarten after a moment, "because I never carry matches in that pocket, never carry 'em loose anyway."

They stood helpless, waiting for any suggestion.

"If I were only sure just where the door is," complained Stiles.

"It's right on my left," said Eksberger.

"Well, is it?" insisted Stiles. "I'm all turned round."

"Rose must be nearest," suggested Baumgarten. "She came in last."

"Just the same," said Stiles, "it won't do to take any false steps. We can't be a foot away from that shaft."

"I think I can find it," said Mrs. Fields, "if you hold on to me."

"Are there any other holes?" asked Stiles.

"Yes, two," replied Mrs. Fields. "I know where they be. You hold me up and I'll try it."

Feeling her way over faces and coats, she made her way, each man passing her

up the line until she reached Stiles. "Now then," she said, with assurance, "but take little steps. Don't stir up the dirt."

With one hand clutching her arm and with the other supporting Rose, Stiles followed her, inch by inch. Behind him Eksberger held his arm and Baumgarten clutched Eksberger's.

"This would be funny," said Eksberger, "if—"

"Well, it isn't funny," interrupted Baumgarten. "You save your jokes until we get on safe ground."

Shuffling and testing the ground with his feet, half carrying Rose, it seemed to Stiles fifty yards before his foot struck something hard.

"What's that?" he exclaimed.

"The door sill," replied Mrs. Fields. "Step high and then you're all right."

The inner chamber was blacker if possible than the head of the shaft, but the air was better and they felt almost as if they had reached home.

"Are we safe?" asked Rose, as she felt Stiles relax.

"Safe and sound," he replied. The girl slipped out of his arm but fumbled her hand through it in the now familiar way.

Behind them, Baumgarten and Eksberger could be sensed moving around, but not one of them could see six inches ahead. The blackness was so oppressive, so different from the darkness of a room, that they felt themselves groping as if to ward off something, even when standing still.

"Now you stay there," commanded Mrs. Fields, "and don't move hand or foot."

A minute later her voice could be heard from an incredible distance. "All right, I've found it."

"Found what?" called Rose, eagerly.

"The entrance to the passage," explained Baumgarten.

"Stand still," commanded the housekeeper sharply, and with that parting word the shuffling and rustling of her movements suddenly ceased.

"Mrs. Fields!" called Stiles, but no answer came.

With her departure, a loneliness and a vagueness more dread than ever seemed to settle down in the vault and

with it a silence. Each one felt that all of the others had gone and hesitated to say the first word. After a moment, out of the cavern, came a slow rustling sound.

"What's that?" asked Baumgarten in a low voice.

"The cows," replied Stiles.

"Oh," muttered Baumgarten. "I'd forgotten they were there."

There came another long silence and then Eksberger spoke with tentative cheerfulness. "You there, Rose?"

"Yes, I'm here."

Another silence.

"Where are you, Stuffy?"

"I'm here."

Some quality in the black, echoing void seemed to change their voices from place to place, for, when Eksberger spoke again, he seemed to have moved from behind Stiles to far off on his left.

"Well, anyway," he exclaimed, decidedly, "I'm going to sit down. No, I'm not, either," he added, hastily.

"What's the matter?"

"Wet—and cold as ice. Say," he suggested in a lower voice, "suppose she never came back."

"Don't worry," answered Baumgarten from some other point in black space. "She may not care about us but she'd never abandon those cows."

"I know, but suppose she fell down a hole herself."

"Oh, don't," begged Rose, almost sobbing and Baumgarten intervened.

"Cut it out, Charlie, cut it out."

Unconsciously they were relaxing, becoming accustomed to that uncanny conversation, questions and answers heard in familiar voices but shot out of changing points of the darkness from figures invisible. There followed a very long silence but a silence more tolerable and then Eksberger's voice could be heard saying, musingly:

"I wonder if cows would get blind if you left them down in a place like this long enough."

With the fatuous earnestness of people stranded, uneasy, and helpless, their voices discussed the idea for minutes. One who has wondered what people would do if suddenly voileyed out of their usual world, cast on a desert island, or, for that matter, translated to another

planet, would do well to study that moment down in that damp pitchy mine, when once the first wave of fright had subsided.

"I knew a man once," said Eksberger's voice. "He was a comedy juggler."

Even in the solid darkness, Baumgarten could be felt bristling with a sudden and jealous interest.

"Who was that?" he asked, sharply.

"Nobody you know," replied Eksberger's voice, teasingly. "He was one of the 'Juggling Jordans'—his real name was McCarthy—but he lost three fingers in the revolving door of the post-office in Montreal and then he couldn't be a juggler any more, so he went to training beagles."

"Training what?" asked Rose from Stiles's elbow.

"Beagles," replied Eksberger. "What did you think I said?"

"I thought you said eagles."

"Eagles!" retorted Eksberger, scornfully. "How could he train eagles?"

"I don't see why he couldn't train eagles just as well as he could train beagles. What are beagles?"

"Dogs," replied Eksberger from the height of superior knowledge.

"Well, what did he train them to do? Tricks?"

"Tricks?" snorted Eksberger. "Of course not. He trained them to hunt."

"Hunt what?" persisted Rose.

"Why, why—" answered Eksberger. "I don't know. What do beagles hunt, anyway?"

"Search me," said Baumgarten, speaking apparently from a comfortable, stationary attitude in the darkness. "What do they hunt, Stiles?"

"Foxes or something, don't they?" suggested Stiles, startled at his own sudden bass voice. "I never saw one except in a picture. All I know is that they always wear white gaiters when they hunt them."

"The beagles?" asked Rose.

"Oh, say!" interrupted Eksberger, impatiently. "Who's telling this story, anyway?"

"Go ahead," said Rose, demurely. "Juggling Jordan lost three fingers in the post-office and went to training beagles in white gaiters. What then?"

"I've forgotten what I *was* going to say, now," replied Eksberger. "What were we talking about?"

"About cows getting blind if you left them in a mine long enough," suggested Stiles.

"Oh yes," Eksberger recalled. "That was it. Well, this fellow used to do a trick in which he caught five lighted candles between the fingers of each hand."

"I see why he had to quit," suggested Baumgarten, and then he added: "That must have been some hand he lost. I've only got four spaces in mine."

In the darkness Eksberger counted. "Well, anyway what difference does it make? Call it four. The point was that he hadn't tried to do this trick for four or five years, but one day he was going out to his barn when a fellow came along with a—"

"Listen!" whispered Rose, suddenly. "What was that?"

Instantly all of them were listening intently. At first they heard nothing, then two cows clashed horns at the other side of the cavern.

"Cows," exclaimed Eksberger. "Well, anyway—"

"Keep still," whispered Rose. "It wasn't that. I heard somebody talking."

They stood in silence.

"There!" whispered Rose, and all of them heard a faint crackling sound.

"It's Mrs. Fields," said Eksberger aloud, but Baumgarten checked him roughly. "Keep still. It's behind us."

In the darkness Rose pressed against Stiles while all of them strained their ears. There was no doubt about it now. They did not dare move, they did not dare even turn, but more and more distinctly, behind them, came the crackling sound as of some one walking over brush.

"I hear it!" whispered Eksberger, and distinctly they heard a mumble of voices. Some one of them stirred.

"Stand still!" ordered Baumgarten.

The crackling grew suddenly louder at their backs and then a voice said so clearly that it seemed to be right in the room:

"Twenty-five thousand dollars!"

xxv

As the crackling had sounded nearer and nearer, the little group in the cavern

had, by some process of gravitation, drawn in closer. Its members found themselves touching one another, seemingly counseling silence. Again the voice was followed by crackling and then it sounded again, this time over their heads. It was a casual voice, speaking casually:

"It hasn't changed since I was a boy. The very same rubbish is here."

Eksberger's face leaned across Stiles's. "Pullar," he whispered, but all of them knew it already. "I know where he is," Eksberger whispered. "He's in the old cellar. It can't be ten feet."

"Sst!" ordered Baumgarten, but then came a shout almost at their elbows—"Hallo-o-o!"—a pause and then a shout from far off—"Hall-o-o-o!"

It was Eksberger's happy lot in life to assume continually that he had discovered things already perfectly obvious to every one else. "Do you get it?" he whispered. "That's what he's doing. He's shouting down here. He said that he used to count nine. I'm going to answer."

"Shut up!" hissed Baumgarten.

For a moment it did seem as if Eksberger had disclosed their position. For a moment there was a silence and then a voice, a woman's voice, spoke precisely and a little impatiently: "You must see how we feel about the whole matter, Judge."

In recalling that moment afterward, three of the four would have sworn that they looked at one another and grinned, darkness or no darkness, but whether the judge saw or not, they were never to learn, for his voice was a mumble.

"We don't want to be unjust or hasty," went on Mrs. Pullar, "but you must realize that all of us have spent a great deal of pains and money up here. We think of the town as our own. We discovered it, in a manner of speaking."

It was too much for Eksberger. "What did I tell you?" he whispered, exultantly, but no one replied. They were listening too keenly, but a low mumble from the judge was their only reward. Mrs. Pullar herself must have moved, for after that her voice, too, was only a mumble, then suddenly down it came clearly again:

"Isn't that how you all feel, Louise?"

"The question being," whispered Eksberger, "who is Louise?" and this time nobody checked him. They had all wondered that.

At last, slow and profound as that of a judge on his bench, came the voice of the judge in the cellar above:

"As to who discovered this place, ma'am, they might be those as would want to dispute you."

"Good old judgie," whispered Eksberger.

"But, Judge, of course you know what I mean."

"Yes," drawled the judge, slowly, "I know what you mean."

There came a silence and, knowing the judge, they could see him deliberate.

"They was a feller"—his voice came at last and Stiles chuckled aloud, for, as if he had been on the spot, he could see Mrs. Pullar's impatient tolerance—"they was a feller come up to see me one time with a project for doing away with the locks on the Erie Canal. He was a nice feller, too. His name was Spencer. Well," he broke off suddenly, "did you find him?"

The listeners below heard a crash on the debris of the cellar above and then Pullar's voice, "No, he's not there yet, but Mrs. Fields has come back and she says he'll be there in a minute."

"That's nice to know," whispered Eksberger, but the use of his name so calmly up there had given Stiles the strangest start of the whole afternoon. It seemed such a ridiculous and yet such an uncanny link between the sane world above and that fantastic place in which they stood, so impotent, below. It was like hearing people speak of you after you were dead. Above them the voices were sounding in mumbles again. Only from time to time did a sentence come down with that strange and almost magnified clearness. One came to them finally in Pullar's voice, spoken with that same incredible matter-of-factness:

"Well, Judge, if you'll be good enough, I guess we'd better go in and wait. You won't come with us, dear?"

"Dear" evidently would not, although they could not hear her say so, for the next thing they heard was Pullar's voice:

"Why don't you and Louise take the car and then send it back?"

There seemed to be reasons why not, for Pullar gave in. "Well, be careful crossing the brook. I'll be home for dinner."

There followed more crashing and then a long silence. The group in the mine began to relax and stir when there came a new voice, presumably that of Louise: "Ooh, isn't it black? I'm going to throw something in."

"Please, please," urged Mrs. Pullar's voice, and her arguments evidently were sound for no splash followed. Instead came Mrs. Pullar's half-whining tones: "Bob is so unreasonable. He ought to have done this two weeks ago. Now it will cost us three times as much."

In the darkness, Stiles started to move, but Baumgarten checked him. To Stiles's amazement, he had apparently been debating the same ethical point. "Keep still," he whispered. "We can't help it. If they don't want it heard, they shouldn't say it."

With some hesitation, Stiles fell back in his place and, after a series of mumbles, Mrs. Pullar could be heard again:

"Father was always in terror that some one would try to start up the mine. They'd be fools to do it, but just imagine what Eden would be like all full of coal heaps and miners!"

Louise seemed to murmur a question, for Mrs. Pullar replied:

"What? Oh no, the judge says he'll never do that. He's the kind of man to let things run on just as they are. It's not the mine so much we're afraid of, but suppose that Mr. Eksberger really did buy it."

There came a responsive murmur above and Eksberger nudged Stiles. At least he nudged somebody and it happened to be Stiles. Again came the voice protesting:

"Well, I don't think it's nonsense at all and neither does Bob and neither does Jack. The judge doesn't seem to say much one way or the other, but just imagine if once he should come here and build—"

Beside him, Stiles heard Eksberger chuckle so loudly that he missed the rest of the sentence above. The reply from the unknown Louise came in the usual

murmur and then Mrs. Pullar cried out, indignantly: "What would it mean? What would it mean if Mr. Eksberger and all of those people once got a foothold here? Why, don't you realize that—"

She had stopped for a moment but, before she could finish, Stiles had turned quickly and taken a half-step toward the mouth of the shaft. He threw back his head and shouted in deep, rolling tones:

"Arma virumque cano!"

He waited a moment and then added in a slow, mournful wail of utter despair:

"Lingua toscana in bocca romana."!

Above them the group in the mine heard a shriek and a crashing, another crashing and bumping sounded right in the cavern and then a light flashed into the chamber.

"You scared the cattle," said Mrs. Fields. She had come at the moment around the curve in the gallery bearing not only two lanterns but individual candles for the return trip. "Young Pullar is up-stairs waiting to see you," she added. "His wife and another lady is out looking down the old cellar."

"I bet they're not there now," laughed Eksberger; then he turned to Stiles. "What did you want to do that for? If you'd only kept quiet I might have learned something about myself."

"You've said it. You might," answered Baumgarten, gruffly. "Let's get out of here."

He took a lantern from Mrs. Fields and they fell into line, but, with the rescue, Eksberger was in high humor.

"Stuffy," he cried, from his place in the line as they walked through the gallery, simple enough in the lantern light—"Stuffy, you didn't get me. You don't know what's happened the last few days. You don't know what those people are scared of me for."

"I know a damn sight more than you think I do," retorted Baumgarten. He had held the party together largely by his own will the past hour and his nerves were going. "Charlie," he added, "you ought to hire a tutor so that you could get wise to yourself."

Eksberger stopped and turned. "What do you mean get wise to myself?"

For reply, Baumgarten merely waved

his hand. "Hold up that candle. You're dripping the grease all over your coat."

"Holy Moses!" he exclaimed with relief, a moment later, as, the last of the line, he burrowed his way out of the tunnel, "I never thought that a cellar would look sweet to me."

"Me, either," said Eksberger. "Let's get up. I want to stand in the sunlight."

"You'll have to hurry if you want to do that," remarked Mrs. Fields. "It's quarter to seven."

"Quarter to seven?" exclaimed Rose. "And my train went at six." She turned to Stiles quickly and looked at him suspiciously. "Did you do that on purpose?"

Stiles drew a long breath. "Hardly," he answered. "Not all of it, that is."

"Stiles," said Baumgarten, "if I thought that you did *any* of it on purpose I'd throw you back in that hole and seal up the entrance."

"In the mean time," said Eksberger from the foot of the stairs, "haven't you people been underground long enough?"

"Don't wait for me," called Stiles, and he himself turned to his housekeeper. "Did you?" he asked. "Did you tell Mr. Pullar where we were?"

Once back in a normal world, however, Mrs. Fields seemed to have drawn back into her shell, to give signs of her old taciturnity.

"I never was much of a hand to tell things," she said, gruffly.

When he reached the main floor, Stiles pushed hurriedly ahead of the others. In the study he found no one, but in the little-used parlor on the other side of the house he heard low voices. He entered and found a self-conscious group which looked up at him, startled. The judge was standing in front of the mantelpiece; Pullar was wandering back and forth, while his wife was sitting nervously on the horse-hair sofa holding the hand of a younger woman with a sweet but, at the moment, very pale face. On the table was a handkerchief and a glass of water. It was very cheap, he told himself afterward, but he couldn't help it. He walked toward Mrs. Pullar with cheery briskness.

"This is very delightful," he said.

Mrs. Pullar looked at him searchingly,

but as usual she had self-control. "Mr. Stiles, may I present you to my sister-in-law, Mrs. Cady?"

The sweet-faced woman looked up and smiled wanly. Stiles bowed. "I think I have met Mr. Cady. Can't I get you some tea or something?"

"Oh no, please don't," replied Mrs. Pullar. "We didn't really intend to come in—" but for once in her presence her husband asserted himself.

"Thanks ever so much, Stiles," he said, "but it's very late. The truth is that the judge and I came up here to talk business."

Stiles said nothing and looked expectant. Pullar looked at the judge, then turned back to Stiles. "You'll hardly care to have us disturb you now. I wonder whether you would be willing to meet us at the judge's this evening."

Stiles was not unprepared for this, but he hesitated. "I think that I can," he said, slowly. "In fact, if you hadn't come to see me I should have come to see you. Would nine o'clock be too late?"

"Any time you like," replied the judge. He looked at Stiles curiously. "Ain't getting restless, air you?"

"No," replied Stiles, "not restless exactly." He looked at Mrs. Pullar and his eyes narrowed just a trifle. It was the last fling of that look of defiance that they had thrown to each other the night before. She understood it and looked, embarrassed, out of the window. "Not restless," he repeated. "I think that I am getting a little homesick."

XXVI

"To-morrow morning," said Rose, decidedly, "seven o'clock will find me seated on the station platform, ticket in hand, waiting for the nine-o'clock train."

They were walking out from dinner and Stiles turned from the door. "Have you found your visit as terrible as that?"

Rose did not deprecate. "You can't say yourself it was very restful."

Stiles looked at his watch. "As long as you stay until seven to-morrow, I will not object. I've got to go to the judge's in half an hour. Promise me solemnly that you will not run away before I get back."

"Don't worry," replied Rose. "I'm not going to move one foot in this country without a body-guard and a searchlight."

Stiles looked out at the darkness under the trees but, in comparison with that of the mine, it was mild and inviting. "As a searchlight," he said, "I am a comparative novice but as a body-guard I am noted from coast to coast."

Half an hour later they came up the steps and Stiles entered the house. When he came out he called to Baumgarten:

"Mrs. Fields says that a messenger came this afternoon to have you call up New York. I'm afraid there's no telephone nearer than town. Will you walk down with me?"

Baumgarten looked at him a moment. "I'll come," he said, shortly.

As they fell into step in the road, Stiles remarked, "Of course there wasn't any message."

"I understood that," replied Baumgarten, gruffly. "Going to sell your place, are you?"

"Yes," replied Stiles, rather astonished. He thought a moment and then added, "I presume you don't want to buy it now?"

"It was take it or leave it, Stiles," replied the other man, quietly. "I never go back on my word."

There might have been a note of real resentment in his tone. Stiles understood that he would never know what had been written on that slip of paper that he had refused to look at, but the resentment, if it really existed, extended only to that one transaction. Otherwise Baumgarten was friendly enough.

"Given up your idea of living here yourself?" he asked.

"I'm old," answered Stiles, "too old to learn. If I were Pullar it would be heaven, but I haven't the figure for tweeds. I thought I could do it. I thought I was sick of New York—"

"If it gets in your blood it never gets out," interrupted Baumgarten, quickly. "Take Rose, now. She's always been talking about a house in the country."

"She told me she had," answered Stiles, quietly. He had finally learned that frankness was the only policy with this man. His companion did not misun-

derstand the brief sentence and walked along moodily.

"Of course," said Stiles, "if I could have New York come to me now and then as it has this week—"

Baumgarten broke in, roughly: "Stiles, New York will never come to you again as it has this week."

Stiles made no reply and they walked in a silence again almost hostile.

"About this meeting?" suggested Baumgarten, quickly.

"When a man goes to fight a duel," said Stiles, "he takes along a friend who knows something about pistols. When he goes to talk business, he takes a friend who knows something about business."

"I ought to know something about it," replied Baumgarten. He added: "You heard your answer down in the mine, didn't you? Ask 'em for forty thousand, let 'em beat you down to twenty-five, then stick like a burr."

As if he were planning a sale in his own New York office, Baumgarten began once more to talk smoothly and confidently:

"Nine-tenths of the land in this town is owned by members of a corporation known as the Eden Realty Company."

"I knew that," said Stiles, "but how did you know it?"

Baumgarten snorted. "I don't do things blind. I found that out the day I came. It is a voluntary association, incorporated under the laws of the state of Massachusetts, and empowered to do about everything in the world except commit murder. Actually it is a land-owner's protective league designed to keep out the roughnecks. The minute I found that out I knew there'd be nothing doing with Pullar for me. That's why I came directly to you. It made me mad in a way."

"You don't call yourself a roughneck, do you?" asked Stiles.

"I'm no lily-of-the-valley," replied Baumgarten.

At the judge's house, Pullar and his brother-in-law were waiting stiffly in the old parlor and the four bowed silently with the ridiculous formality of men who may have seen one another all day but meet at night to transact business. The judge came in behind the others, a suspi-

cious twinkle in his eye. He was going to enjoy this scene.

Stiles saw no reason why time should be lost.

"Without beating about the bush," he began, "I understand that you gentlemen and others are prepared to purchase my property. Am I correct?"

There was a silence. Pullar looked at old Colonel Cady and the latter cleared his throat. "You are correct."

"Well, then," continued Stiles, "I have drawn up a deed."

He took a paper from his pocket and handed it to Pullar. Pullar opened his eyes as he read it.

"By any chance are you a lawyer, Stiles?"

"No," replied Stiles, "but I speak the language."

"Perhaps you had better read it," suggested the judge, and Pullar began:

"Know all men by these presents that I, Andrew Stiles of the city and county of New York in the state of New York, for divers good causes and considerations thereunto moving—"

Pullar looked up. "I guess I can skip this," he suggested. The others nodded and he went on:

"—especially for the sum of one dollar and other considerations received—"

"Just a minute," interrupted Colonel Cady. "We can hardly proceed until we know what the other considerations are."

"May I suggest," replied Stiles, "that before we touch on that point you read the conditions attached."

Pullar turned over the sheets, mumbling hurriedly over the formal phraseology. "Is this what you mean?" he asked, "'Said members of the said Eden Realty Company do agree and covenant'?"

Stiles nodded and Pullar read aloud:

"Said members of the said Eden Realty Company do agree and covenant, collectively and individually, and do hereby bind themselves by acceptance of this quit-claim deed, to the following reservations:

"1. No mining or other enterprise for gain or profit with the exception of agriculture, husbandry, horticulture, or herding, shall ever be practised in or on the said property . . . and on violation of this clause . . . all

title in the said property shall revert to the grantor or his heirs or assigns.

"2. A cottage erected on any part of said property at the expense of the said Andrew Stiles may be maintained for the benefit of one Mary Jane Fields, widow of—"

"Asahel Fields," supplied the judge, promptly, and Pullar wrote it into the deed:

"—and by her occupied during her lifetime or pleasure.

"3. Access to and the right to take from the said property any books, furniture, documents, monuments, relics, or any other articles of historical or artistic interest whatsoever shall be given at any time to Judge Abner A. Tyler of the said town of Eden in recognition of his faithful stewardship of said property and other property of the present and previous title-holders."

Pullar looked up from the sheets. "My word! Stiles," he exclaimed. "Is this a quit-claim or your last will and testament?"

"Both," replied Stiles, "so far as Eden is concerned."

Pullar continued his reading:

"4. A plot to be designated by said Andrew Stiles and not to exceed one acre, comprising the sites of both the old and new Crater mansions so-called shall be held in perpetual trusteeship by said Abner A. Tyler and such successors as may be hereafter appointed. All houses, barns, stables, granaries, and other buildings whatsoever now standing on the said plot shall be razed at the earliest practicable moment and the ground so graded as to remove all traces of such buildings, the expense of this action to be borne by the said Andrew Stiles. Thereafter no buildings or edifices of any kind shall be erected on such plot with the exception of a memorial to be designed and designated by the said grantor, Andrew Stiles."

Pullar looked up. "That seems to be all."

"That is all," replied Stiles.

The colonel was stroking his mustache. "You have made a good many conditions, Mr. Stiles."

"Those are the only conditions on which I will sell."

"Hum," said the colonel. A long pause followed and then he suggested: "Now as to the other considerations. I take it for granted that you do not mean to sell your property for one dollar."

Stiles smiled but for a moment he did not reply.

"Gentlemen," he said at last. "It has—well, I may say that it has come to my ears that you would be willing to pay twenty-five thousand dollars."

Pullar and Cady looked blank. Baumgarten and the judge smiled.

"The property, you understand," said Colonel Cady, slowly, "has no such intrinsic value at all. There are merely certain abnormal circumstances which have given it what I may call a fictitious value." He looked toward his brother-in-law and made the slightest motion of his head. Pullar spoke:

"Is that your price—er, Mr. Stiles?"

"Are the conditions otherwise acceptable?" insisted Stiles.

The brothers-in-law looked at each other. "I think so," said Pullar.

"Well, gentlemen," said Stiles, quickly. "The conditions, as Mr. Cady says, are—abnormal. I am not a philanthropist; neither am I a blackmailer. Three weeks ago the price of that property was seven thousand dollars. Seven thousand dollars is the price to-day."

"You're a fool, Stiles, an absolute fool," remarked Baumgarten as, half an hour later, they walked up the dark village street.

"That," said Stiles, "is one of the things I now can afford to be. It is one of my new luxuries."

"It's a strange luxury," muttered Baumgarten, "but I don't see what you wanted me for."

Stiles laughed. "I thought you'd enjoy it."

"I did," Baumgarten replied. "It was regular stage stuff. And I'll have to grant," he added, a moment later, "that if you wanted to be such an ass you did it in style. I'll bet you've even got a picture of the memorial."

"I have," said Stiles, simply. "I've enjoyed that, too. The place where the houses stood will be leveled and turfed and a small stone put up."

"With your name on it?"

"With nobody's name on it," answered Stiles, stiffly. He did not intend to say more, but he was, at the moment, in rather exalted mood and he drew from his pocket an envelope. "This is what it will be."

Baumgarten took it and stopped to read in the light of one of the faint street-lamps. On the envelope was a rather neat sketch of a simple stone column and on it the plain inscription:

Here Lived

And Died

An American Family

The instant that he had given the envelope Stiles regretted it. If Baumgarten should laugh he believed that he would strike him, but Baumgarten did not laugh. He handed it back and walked on without a word.

"Stiles," he said a moment later, "I told you that you had something worth more than that copper mine."

Stiles did not ask what it was and he did not have to for Baumgarten went on, "Class, Stiles, class!"

After that almost anything could be said between the two men and Baumgarten knew it.

"Stiles," he said, slowly, "you know why I ask. Are you going to marry Rose Fuller?"

"Yes," answered Stiles, quietly.

XXVII

Judge Tyler walked up the platform of the Eden station to find Rose and Stiles looking up the track for the nine-o'clock train, but the presence of Stiles, in clothes which had lain in his trunk for three weeks, did not seem to surprise him. He seemed more concerned to explain, almost shame-faced, his own presence.

"I mistrusted you'd all be leaving this morning. So you're going, too?"

"Yes," said Stiles. "To stay now would be anti-climax."

The word seemed to do for the judge as well as another, for he was looking back over the hills with dreams of his own. "I thought so. I thought so. Your grandfather, old Major Crater, was just such a one. He'd be here for months, content as a mud-turtle, then *puff!* he was off."

Eksberger, with Baumgarten's help, had been trying to draw out from the reticent station-agent the number of weeks which would probably elapse before a freight-car could be secured to take his motor back to the city, but at sight of the judge he came up and held out his hand.

"Judge, how are you?"

The judge looked him up and down as he always did. "In the words of the *Felsted Courier*," he said, "I see you're leaving our midst."

"Yes," laughed Eksberger, "but, Judge, let me whisper you something. Just as soon as I get things right, I'm going to come back here and buy me a nice little farm."

"Yes," replied the judge, slowly, "yes, I've heard men say that."

Baumgarten joined them with twinkling eyes.

"Judge," he said, heartily, "do you ever get down to the big city?"

The judge looked over the hills. "No," he said, slowly. "No, I don't go away—any more."

He did not convince his hearer any more than Stiles had done.

"Nonsense, Judge!" exclaimed Baumgarten. "The trouble is that, unless you know the inside, you never see New York as it ought to be seen." He reached into his pocket and drew out a card. "There's my telephone number. Now some fine day you make up your mind, just get on a train and come down. We'll show you the time of your life—a bang-up dinner, a show, and then Eksberger here will take you behind the scenes."

The judge seemed unmoved and Baumgarten thought the inducement wasted. He repeated. "Ever been behind the scenes in a theater, Judge?"

The old man looked over the hills and at last he smiled faintly.

"Behind the scenes in a theater?" he asked. "Just once. It was in Rome, Italy." He mused a moment over the recollection. "They was a feller—"

Up the track the train whistled.

[THE END.]

Hunting With the Lords of the Dezertas

BY MAJOR CHARLES WELLINGTON FURLONG, U. S. A.



THE revenue man's safe fell through two floors when his office in Funchal burned—fired it himself they said, because he was suspicious of a Lisbon inspector who had been sent to Madeira. When the ruins cooled, the safe was opened with great ceremony by the inspector, the padre, and the mayor while all Funchal stood about on tiptoe. They found—nothing in it. As a consequence, the estate of its owner was auctioned off. It included the Dezertas, three uninhabited islands east of Madeira, which Messrs. Harry Hinton and Charles Cossart¹ of Funchal bought for two thousand pounds—that's how two Englishmen became the "Lords of the Dezertas."

One balmy morning Hinton² spread an admiralty chart before me on the table of his spacious office into which the lazy air wafted sounds of industry mellowed by the time-lapsed romance of the old port that seemed to muffle modernity. The smell of sugar told of the great factory which, with Hinton's other interests, gave employment to a large proportion of the Madeiran peasantry.

"You see," said Hinton, pointing, "Chao, here, is the smallest island of the group, a scant mile in length, but Dezerta Grande, high and mountainous, is six and a third miles long, while Cu de Bugio, so called because it resembles an

ape's back, runs about four and a half—a group of the Great Atlantic. Cossart and I hunt over them every year. We've decided to make it a bit early this time and go with you. José! send for old Peraicha and Barbudo."

Two islanders, hats in hand, were ushered in. The gorilla-like aspect of the taller was emphasized by a slight hunch and short neck, obscured by a grizzled beard—hence *Barbudo*, the bearded one, patriarch of his clan. The other, old Peraicha, was short and wiry, and despite his sixty-eight years his eyes glittered keenly in a tanned, wrinkled face. The two men came from Caniço, tucked away in a coast pocket east of Funchal.

When not veiled in storm-clouds with which the *leste* (east wind), sweeping across from the Sahara, so frequently enshrouds them, the Dezertas may be seen from Caniço. For centuries the men from there have climbed the Dezertas in search of the *orchilla*, for its purple dye, and have hunted shearwater gulls (*Procellaria puffinus*) for their fat, flesh, and feathers.

From the pick of these hardy men my hosts drew their "beaters," who, during the hunts for wild goats, drove the game from their retreats in the crags and caves of the cliffs. Thus "beating" has become a trade, which Caniço has handed down—like its history—from father to son for many generations.

The following day the little 100-ton steamer *Açor* headed along the Madeiran coast and took aboard about twenty of the Caniço outfit: nine beaters, four gun-bearers, a cook, two helpers, and a boat's crew to assist in landing. Our party comprised Hinton, Cossart, Mr. Welsh, Jr., of Funchal, Erving, and myself. Amory, who had set sail earlier, with Portuguese friends aboard our schooner planned to meet us at Grand Dezerta in Castanheira Cove.

¹ Capt. Charles B. Cossart, who served with the British army in France, is junior member of the noted firm of Brown, Cossart & Co. of Funchal. In the firm's letter-book of commercial transactions between Madeira and London since 1745 much Madeira history is written.

² Harry Hinton, Esq., is the most prominent figure in Madeira. The most important commercial relations between the Portuguese government and Madeira usually resolve themselves into "*La questão Hinton*." Once, when asked if he knew Hinton, the late King of Portugal remarked, "Oh yes, he is the man who nearly overthrew my government."