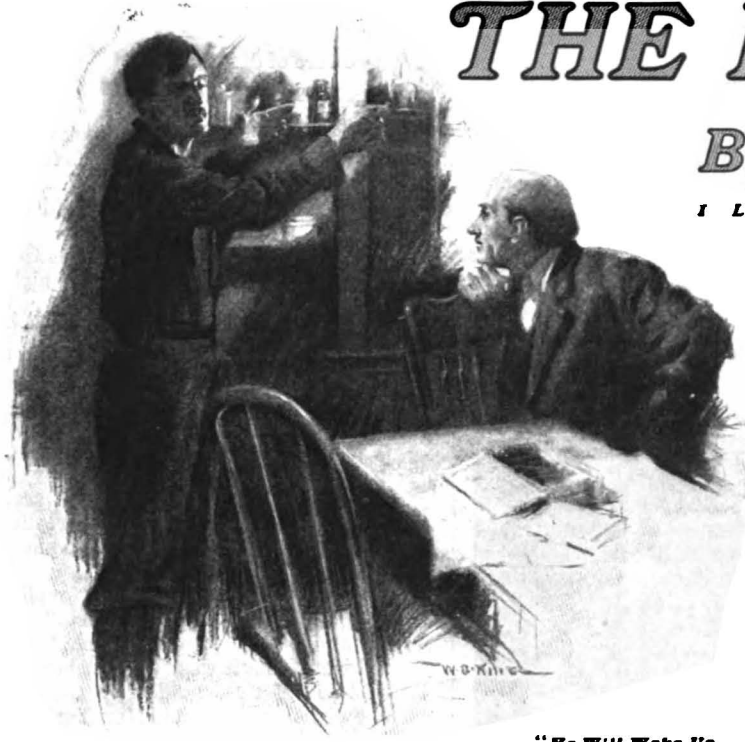


# THE NAMELESS THING

By Melville Davisson Post

ILLUSTRATED BY W. B. KING



"He Will Wake Up  
Because He's Got an Iron Heart, But It Will be Tomorrow Afternoon"

THE night was advancing. The rain pattered on the canals of mud that trailed off through the hills, on the great squares of rusted pipe piled along the railroad track, on the heaps of frayed cable, on the jam of wagons behind the freight shed.

The shanties on the edge of the hideous raw town were all dark, except a single one built on piles and opening with a decayed porch directly into the mud road. This was the office of the doctor—a single room, filled with shelves and bottles, a table, a chair or two, and a bed screened off with a calico curtain. Within, on the table, a new tallow candle burned in a tin candlestick. Hot tallow in a white pulpy mass was pushed up around the base of the candle, showing that a new one had just replaced one already burned out.

The doctor was walking backward and forward through this room. Sometimes he stopped before the window, dinged with smoke and dirt; but the night was like ink and he could see nothing. He was a young man with what had once been a delicate physique, but he was now bronzed and toughened. Sometimes, as he walked, the man paused as though to listen, but there were no noises save those of the rain.

An hour passed. Then, from the canal of mud running off westward into the hills, there arose a sound as though a lake of batter were being thrashed with a gigantic flail. At the sound the doctor's anxiety ceased; he came over to the table, thrust the candle more firmly into the candlestick and sat down. The gigantic thrashing sound increased, and a moment later the door opened and a man entered hurriedly.

The man was covered with soft yellow mud; it trickled in thick, viscous rivulets over his big Saxon face. He was no usual person—tall and muscular, with a thin, bony, hawk-bill nose, a head that was perfectly bald, and a wide, straight mouth. And, in spite of the evidence of his bald head, he was in the very prime of life. He looked around at the shelves of little bottles, the stove, the table covered with medical journals, old letters and scraps of paper, the saddle-pockets in the corner, the calico curtain screening the bed, and the nails in the wall that did service for a wardrobe.

"True to life, Charlie," he said.

"Why not?" replied the doctor, rising. "It is life."

Then he went over to a shelf, took down a glass jar half full of some amber-colored liquid and set it on the table. There was a stone pitcher with a broken mouth on an inverted nail keg by the window, and a cloudy glass. He rinsed out the glass and placed it beside the jar.

In the meantime, the big man got out of his rubber coat. He threw it with his hat on the floor and he wiped the rivulets of mud from his face with a handkerchief; then he noticed what the doctor was doing.

"Not for me," he said, "I've cut out the booze, Charlie; but if you have any tobacco in this joint, let me have it."

The doctor put a box of stogies on the table. They were strong, black and bitter from the green tobacco out of which they were rolled, but the big man seized upon them as though they were a sort of treasure, bit off the end of one and lighted it from the doctor's candle. Then he sat down and began to draw the smoke into his mouth and slowly release it, as though it were a soothing and delicious incense.

"This is a fine place you roost in, Charlie," he said; "I came from that flag station through a mud river."

big well out on Rock Creek. This town sprang up in a night; money has been pouring in here like water through a sluice. I knew that in such a place everything would be a sort of temporary makeshift—buildings half put up, everything cheap and flimsy, everybody taking a chance, and any sort of old stuff run in and made to do until the oil blew out and the boom collapsed. And, Arkman, I was right—you never saw so much money floating around. All kinds of birds have picked fortunes out of this mud hole—saloons, dance halls, faro joints. The corner drug-store offered me a thousand dollars a month to stand in its back room and write prescriptions for liquor. . . . And all the time I've been practising medicine."

"And straight . . . with your little old saddle-pockets?" said the big man.

"Arkman!" replied the doctor. "I'm the only man in this whole country that is straight. I'm the best citizen in it. The oil companies plunder this region as though it were a captured province, and the place is full of sharks, pirates and grafters. Arkman, I'm the only man that any one of them will either believe or trust. The farmers ask me about their leases; and the crooks come to me when they get in trouble. I'm full of the trusts and confidences of sick men and dead men. I've got the reputation that I wanted to get. I've been square! What I say is the truth and what I do is on the level. I'm the doctor, the lawyer, and the priest for this whole corner of hell!"

The doctor moved his chair nearer to the table beside which his companion sat. He caught his under lip between his thumb and finger. His eyes looked beyond the wall.

"It's been a hard life," he said.

"You can't imagine it. I haven't shirked the part! I've gone at every call, in rain and snow and mud up to the horse's belly. I've eaten food that would kill a dog; and I've slept on the floor, and in the saddle, and in beds so full of vermin that I had to burn my clothes to get rid of them. And I haven't selected out the good patients. By Jove, the part I was playing made that easy! The poor devils down on their luck have had the first call. It wasn't their fees I was after."

"Two years of that—four years, counting the nights! And all the time, Arkman, do you know what I've been thinking about? I've been thinking about a cabin on an ocean liner, and the smell of the sea, and the dock at Cherbourg, and the ride through the wheat fields and the red poppies, and Paris! And I've been thinking about the restaurants over there! And I've been thinking about a touring car and the great roads; and the feel of clothes that fit you; and the smell of a good cigar; and the taste of champagne; and the good things of life!"

"They've been hauling pipe," replied the doctor, "and with the rains the roads are batter." Then he added: "I could not be sure that you would come, but you are the only one whom I could trust."

"You might not have been sure that you could trust me," said the big man, "but I think you could have been sure that I would come. You came once when I sent the word. I'm a good Indian, Charlie."

"Well," continued the doctor, "I said to myself: 'Arkman's the man; he will come and he will stand up.'"

"You're half right, Charlie, anyway; I'm on the ground." Then he looked about him.

"How long have you been doing this sort of thing?"

"Well," replied the doctor, "I've been here two years. I located this for the place when the oil company got its

"That before your mind — And before your eyes the mud road, and a woman coughing herself to death with tuberculosis, and a child choking with diphtheria, and dirt and poverty and squalor. And half-cooked pork swimming in lard, to eat, and yellow biscuit, and coffee that would poison a cat!"

"How about it being good to be good—nothing in it?"

"Nothing in it!" replied the doctor; then he hesitated—"Oh, well, darn it, yes!—you're glad to help the poor devils. But that's not the point."

Again he stopped and remained for a moment silent.

"Well, what's the result? One is, that from being about the poorest excuse for a doctor that ever straddled a horse, I've got to be a good one." He moved the medical pamphlets on the table.

"I take all their truck," he said, "and I know who's guessing and who's seen the sick man sweating in his bed—that's result number one. Result number two is that I haven't five hundred dollars, while every Tom, Dick and Harry has made his pile and skipped. But I've got the thing I was going after. I'm above suspicion! There isn't a man, woman or child that could be convinced by an angel of God that the doctor could do anything wrong. They wouldn't believe it. You couldn't convince them. They'd laugh in your face; or they'd curse you till a fly wouldn't light on you."

"You haven't done it by halves, Charlie."

"Not I," said the doctor; "I planned to do one big job, and only one, and I took my time. I guess you didn't believe me. Well, that night in Chicago, when I turned the box upside down on the faro table and got up out of the dealer's chair, I meant what I said. No more little skin games for me! I took a turn through a fake college in Cincinnati and struck up here—playing my part and keeping my eye on the main chance. And now the job's ripe."

"What's in it?" said Arkman.

"Six hundred thousand dollars," replied the doctor. "A hundred thousand for you—five hundred thousand to yours truly. That may look like giving you the short end. But figure it up. You put in an hour. I put in two years—besides, I've kicked out the rabbit."

The big man whistled low, and softly.

"Good Heavens! Man," he said, "are you cracking a subtreasury?"

"The independent oil company has sold all of its producing wells to the central company, and the money's in the bank to close the deal," replied the doctor—"came in today."

"Got that straight?" said Arkman.

"Straight!" echoed the doctor; "I'm a director."

Again the big man whistled.

"What's the safe like? Can I drill it with a steel bit?"

"You won't have to drill it," replied the doctor. "I told you that everything was a temporary makeshift in this place—that's what I counted on—the safe is one of those big, old-fashioned junk boxes. All there is to do is to putty up the cracks of the door, leaving little holes at the top and the bottom, put an air pump on the bottom hole, a paper funnel full of pulverized powder on the top one, and suck the powder in with your pump, cover the door with a wet blanket and puff it off."

The big man took the half-smoked stogy from between his teeth.

"Charlie," he said, "people are sure not leaving their money in an old carpet-sack like that. There must be somebody watching it with a gun."

"There is," said the doctor.

"What's he like—a farmer?"



"Git in This Saddle Quick.  
A Scantlin' Fell at the Jones No. 1"

"Not by a long sight," said the doctor. "That watchman makes up for anything that the safe lacks. He sleeps in a cot set up against the safe door and he has an arsenal of shooting irons laid out all around him—and they're not there for looks either. He's no toy desperado, that man; he's the real thing. The bankers know that—that's the reason they trust the old iron box. With that man on the job, the money would be safe in a paper vault. They'd have to kill him; and, believe me, they'd have a mighty hard time doing it."

"Got him fixed?" said Arkman.

"I have," said the doctor.

"What's the figger?"

"Arkman," said the doctor, "do you suppose I'm organizing a syndicate? What do you imagine I've been playing the part in this God-forsaken mud-hole for? To end up with the same old game? Not I! I propose to remain above the suspicion of any man in this county. Don't you see what I've been after. I don't want to be hunted when this job's over. Listen! I'm going to bring the money up here and put it in my old saddle-pockets there in the corner. After a while the doctor's health will begin to fail; he will bear up as long as he can, then he'll take his old saddle-pockets and go down East to the experts. Word will come back that the doctor's all in. The experts will send him to Germany. And in its good time the word will come that the doctor is no more. And do you know what they will do here in this place? They'll build a monument to the doctor."

"But how about this Johnny with the guns? Got him lured away?" asked Arkman.

"Lured!" said the doctor.

"Eats out of your hand, then?"

"Arkman," said the doctor, "you didn't use to be a fool."

The big man blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Charlie," he said, "ain't this thing got a joker in it? You didn't mention this gentleman with the fortifications. You sent me a wax impression of the door key and you said the safe was rotten—but no word of this other little difficulty."

"There is no other difficulty," replied the doctor; "the watchman will be asleep. You will take hold of one end of him and I the other and we will lift him around out of the way; that's all there is to it."

The big man suddenly laughed without disturbing a muscle of his face.

"Your friend must be a mighty sound sleeper."

"He'll sleep tonight," replied the doctor.

The doctor rose and held the candle up to a little glass jar on the shelf. He turned the jar so the label could be read.

"With three of those morphine tablets in you, Arkman, you'd never wake up. That watchman's got four in him. He will wake up because he's got an iron heart, but it will be tomorrow afternoon, and it will take me four hours to do it."

For amazement and for admiration, the big man had one method of expression—the low whistle on a single note—and he gave it now.

The doctor sat down.

"It was all in the plan. I've worked up the case. The man has a little muscular rheumatism and I'm giving him soda."

Arkman chewed the end of his stogy, then he threw it away, got another out of the box and lighted it at the candle. For some time he was silent, then he spoke as though he pronounced a reflection.

"Now, that's what I call genius," he said. "Well, I'm glad the job's easy, because I'm going to chuck this sort of business."

"What's the matter with you anyway?" said the doctor anxiously.

The big man took the stogy out of his mouth and looked the doctor calmly in the face.

"I'm afraid!" he said.

The doctor's chair scraped on the floor as he thrust himself back with his extended legs.

"Afraid!" he said; "I thought there wasn't a living thing in the world that you were afraid of."

"There isn't," said Arkman.

"You're not afraid of the dead?" exclaimed the doctor.

"Nor the dead," said Arkman.

"What is it, then, that you're afraid of?"

"Charlie," said the big man, "I don't know."

The doctor looked at his companion as though he were a patient with some deadly obscure disease.

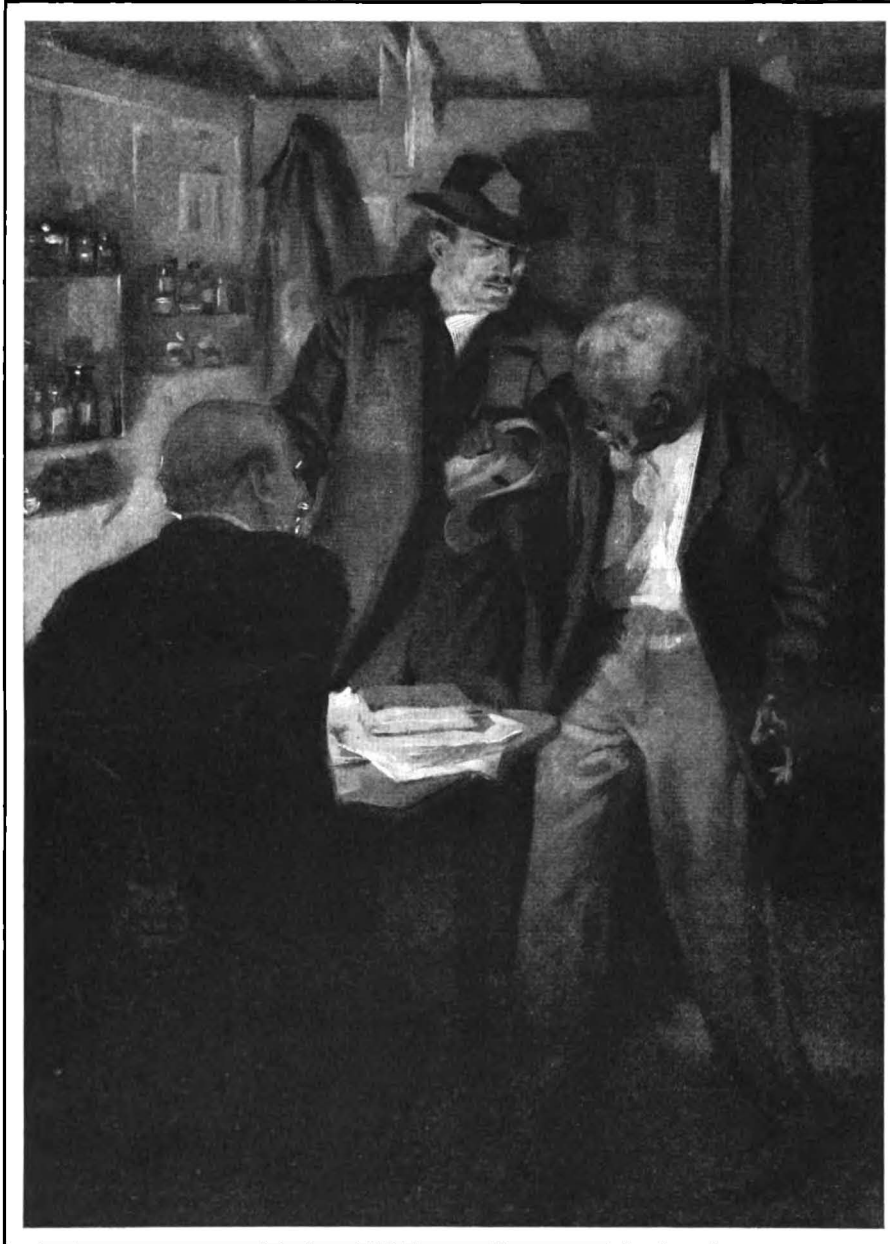
"Afraid of something and you don't know what it is!" he replied.

"No," replied the big man; "I don't know what it is. Nobody knows what it is."

"Hasn't it got a name?" said the doctor.

"Yes," said the man; "it's got a lot of names—none of them any good. You'd call it chance."

"Chance!" and the doctor laughed. "Why, Arkman, that's a word men invented to cover up their incompetency."



"What Can?" Cried the Doctor. "You'll Kill Somebody, You Fool!"

Chance! That's a word that means lack of foresight. When you say you're afraid of chance, you simply say that you are afraid of yourself."

"There," said Arkman, "I told you the names were no good. Sure they're not worth anything—any of them. To give a thing a name, you've got to know what it is; but nobody knows what this thing is; so all the names you give it mean something else. Then when you get to going on one of these names, you're not talking about the thing—you're talking about what the name means. Try them all: There's Providence! You don't believe there's anything that fits that name, now, do you?"

"I do not," replied the doctor. "The term implies that an authority, which has got the universe going according to a fixed set of laws, capriciously interrupts these laws at its pleasure."

"Sure," said Arkman, "the name's no good. But the racetrack name's no better, now, is it? When you say 'luck,' you begin to talk about something else right away."

"You begin to talk about something that's rot," said the doctor. "You are assuming that there is an influence external to yourself that impels events to assist you or to destroy you."

"There you are!" said the big man; "you can't name it, but it's on the job, Charlie. And when it starts out to land you, all your precautions are not worth a whoop."

There will be some little unforeseen accident that will put you to the bad."

The doctor made a gesture of disgust.

"Rot!" he said.

The big man chewed the end of his stogy.

"All right, Charlie—look where the boys are; look where they all end up: Sing Sing's full of them; Joliet's full of them; and look what they say."

"A man will say anything when he's soft," said the doctor.

"Was Vronsky soft?" replied the big man. "Was that old cockney Ponsford soft? I was with Vronsky the night he was hanged. He kicked the preacher out of the cell; and he sat there smoking a cigar, just as I am doing. And do you know what he said? 'The thing's crooked, Arkman; you can't beat it.' And Ponsford said the same thing—'T'int sife.'"

"Nonsense!" said the doctor. "The thing is probably only a per cent of accidents."

"But why is that per cent of accidents always against us?" replied Arkman; "that's what I want to know. I've thought about it often."

"Any preacher will tell you," replied the doctor; "step into a church."

"I did step into a church," said Arkman, "but it wasn't a preacher who told me. I was standing in the door one night downtown, in New York. It was raining, and a man who was waiting for a car came in and stood beside me. He didn't belong in the crowd; you could tell that by everything about him. He listened a moment and then he said to me:

"That's all folderol. Nature is laboring at some great work; those men who are useful to her purpose, who assist her, who aid her, she endeavors to preserve; and those who are useless or harmful, she endeavors to destroy—it's a law." And he went out.

"Wait a minute, Charlie—isn't that about the size of it? We're on the wrong side; we're not helping anything along; we're against it; we're not useful to the thing; we're in its way. And it's a-trying to get rid of us! Now that's what Vronsky meant when he said the thing was crooked; he meant that our side wasn't getting a fair deal—that there was something working against us. He didn't understand what it was; but he was a Slav with a head full of brains and he could see the thing at work. I've been watching it, Charlie, and I know it's picking us off! That's what makes me afraid. And there's another thing Vronsky said—'You can't beat it,' and you can't. Try to think of anybody that it didn't finally land. They've all got theirs, sooner or later. Count them on your fingers!

"Say! Charlie, anybody can see results. Even old Ponsford saw results—'T'int sife! Sure it's not safe! I saw that just as well as Vronsky, just as well as Ponsford, but I didn't understand why until that stranger told me.

"Charlie, what the deuce do you think we've been trying to do? We've been going up against the Thing that runs the whole universe—and we've been trying to beat it at its own game. See! It's playing all the time—all the time, day and night, morning and evening—to advance, advance, and to keep everybody and everything that helps it, and to get rid of everybody and everything that hinders it. And it knows everything, and it sees everything, and it understands everything. And us bucking a layout like that! The nerve of it!"

At this moment the latch of the door clicked.

The doctor arose and threw the door open. An old negro stood there. The doctor was angry.

"Didn't I tell you to clear out?" he said. "What's wrong with you—what are you hanging around for?"

The negro was frightened and he stammered.

"Yes, Doc," he said, "I'm goin', Doc, yes, sah;" and he shuffled away through the mud.

The doctor closed the door.

"Who was it?" said Arkman.

"A worthless nigger who sweeps out the office," replied the doctor. "He's a nuisance. He's always breaking something and he's always in the way, but somebody has to keep him."

The doctor stopped by Arkman and took hold of his wrist. The man's skin was cool and his pulse was deep and placid.

(Continued on Page 32)



## THE NAMELESS THING

(Continued from Page 6)

The big man smiled. "Did you think I was losing my nerve, eh, Charlie?" he said. "Judging from the gait you were hitting up that rotten line of talk, I did," replied the doctor.

"The talk's all right, Charlie, believe me." The doctor laughed.

"Then your mysterious influence ought to be on my side," he said; "I've been doing its work for a couple of years."

The big man took the stogy out of his mouth.

"Sure, Charlie," he said, "I hadn't thought of that."

The doctor continued to smile. "Well," he said, "we shall see if it is."

"And if it is, you stay on the job?"

The doctor sat down; his face lengthened into an ironical smile; he put out his legs and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"I'm willing to back my own intelligence," he said; "I've worked the thing out. I've considered everything and provided for every contingency—I'm not taking any chance. If your mysterious influence can trip me O. K.; I'll stay on the job." Then he jerked himself up.

"What drivell!" he said. "An incompetent jackass makes a rotten plan, and when it goes to pieces he says some supernatural agency threw him down; or some lotos-eater blows a big shiny bubble, and when it collides with the sharp edge of a fact he says that Heaven's against him! Or some old stiff forgets the part he's playing."

"Look at the men you've been talking about: Take Vronsky. He planned to kill Gates. He found out that the old man worked in his library with the window open. It was summer, and the library looked into the garden. Vronsky reasoned that he could go into that garden on a dark night, shoot Gates, and that under cover of the darkness no one would know who it was that had done it."

"Vronsky was right about several things: He knew that he could get away. He knew that no one would suspect him unless he was seen, because he was believed to be in Australia; and with his skill with a gun he knew that he would not miss. Moreover, he knew that, he being in the dark and Gates in the light, Gates could not see his assassin even if he were not instantly killed."

"Now that was all sound. Everything that Vronsky thought about, he figured out right—but there was one thing that Vronsky didn't think about. Well, he pulled it off the way he planned—and what happened? Gates saw Vronsky's face by the flash of the pistol and shouted his name as he fell. Now, what had Heaven to do with that?"

"Take Ponsford: What did he do? He'd cracked the Empire Bank and the whole country was looking for him. He was hiding over on the East Side, and he was safe; but he got lonesome one night, put into his pocket the small tool with which a burglar forces a window, and went down on Long Island to rob a house. The village police picked him up. When he saw them coming he threw his tool into the gutter. The police asked him what it was he threw away and he said it was a stogy."

"That was all right. The police believed him. They took him to the station-house, looked him over and told him he could go. Well, what did the old fool do? He sat round and got chummy with the police, and finally, when one of them offered him a cigar, he said that he didn't smoke!"

"Was that Providence, or luck, or chance? Nonsense! The thing is to make your plan exclude these contingencies."

"Man," said Arkman, "you've got to take a chance."

"No, you haven't," replied the doctor; "there's where your brains come in."

"Why, Charlie," said Arkman, "you're taking a chance right here. Suppose your watchman doesn't swallow his dope; there are a dozen things that might keep a man from taking a dose of medicine."

"There's nothing that will keep that man from taking his," said the doctor.

"Why?" said Arkman.

"Because he has already taken it," replied the doctor. "Damn it, man, do you think I'm a fool! I planned his medicine to run out today, and when he came here at nine o'clock for some more I gave him the tablets myself. I had to be sure of him; he'd shoot you to death before you got the key in the lock."

Again the big man whistled low and softly. He turned around in his chair; he put his hands together on the table. He looked at the doctor with a quiet smile.

"Charlie," he said, "you're a wonder!"

The doctor took out his watch. "It's about time we were getting the traps together," he said, and he rose. He started to go behind the calico curtains, when a sound reached him and he stopped. It was the sound of horses plunging in that canal of batter, and a minute later a voice called. The doctor went to the door. The night was black as ink and the rain pattered on the soft mud. A man riding a horse and leading another was there in the road.

"Is that you, Doc?" he said.

"Yes," replied the doctor.

"Then git in this saddle quick. A scantlin' fell at the Jones No. 1 and cut the driller's head open. The blood's spurtin' like a gusher."

"Damn it!" cried the doctor, "was there no one to put his finger on the artery?"

"Yes," said the man; "Hinkle's got his thumb on it, but he can't hold it there all night. Hurry, for Heaven's sake!"

The doctor sprang for his saddle-pockets.

Arkman got up. "Charlie," he said, "you're not going, are you?"

The doctor did not seem to hear him. He was jamming his arms into the sleeves of his greatcoat; the muscles of his face were stern and rigid.

Arkman went up close to him. "Come, Charlie," he said, "you're sure not going to throw the job?"

The doctor replied with an oath—and he was gone. The door banged behind him and the horses galloped in the flying mud.

The man went over to the little dingy window and looked out into the vat of ink. He stood there for a long time with his hands behind him. Finally he sat down, fingered the box of stogies, at last took one out, carefully cut the end of it and lighted it at the candle. The end of the cigar glowed and he sat motionless. Two hours passed. The man's face seemed to have lengthened and grown old.

Then the door opened and the doctor entered. Arkman looked up. The doctor flung his soaked coat into a corner, wiped the mud from his face with a dirty towel, jerked the calico curtain aside, and began to empty the contents of his saddle-pockets out onto the bed.

"Get up, Arkman," he said, "we've got to hurry."

The big man did not move.

"Hurry for what?" he said.

The doctor turned sharply.

"Are you asleep?"

"No, I'm not asleep," he said; "but you're not going to risk the job after that, are you?"

"After what?" said the doctor.

"After that—that—warning."

The doctor looked at the man a moment in astonishment, then he began to curse.

"Warning! Are you that big a fool? Don't things happen all the time; don't men come for the doctor at all hours of the night? Don't be an idiot."

"But, Charlie," replied the man, "you said —"

The doctor interrupted him with an oath.

"Are you still harking on that drivel?"

Then he turned savagely. "If you're going with me, come on."

"And if I don't go?" said the man.

"Then," cried the doctor, "I'll do it myself!" And he caught hold of the door. When his fingers touched the latch the door swung, and the old negro fell into the room. The doctor caught him by the collar and jerked him to his feet.

"You back here again!" he cried.

"Don't, Doc," the negro whined; "I want to tell you somethin'."

"Then why didn't you tell it when you were here before?" said the doctor.

"I . . . I . . . was 'fraid to," the negro stuttered.

The doctor shook him.

"Out with it; what is it?"

"This mornin', Doc, . . . when I was sweepin' . . . I spilled all the stuff out of one of them little bottles into the water bucket, an' I filled it up out of one of them cans."

"What can?" cried the doctor. "You'll kill somebody, you fool!"

"That can," replied the negro.

The doctor seized it. His face changed.

"That wouldn't hurt anybody," he said, "that's soda—now what bottle did you knock over?"

And the negro pointed to the bottle of morphine.