

# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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## Contents for July-August, 1923

*Thirteen Thrilling Short Stories*      *Two Complete Novelettes*  
*Two Two-Part Stories*      *Interesting, Odd and Weird Happenings*

SUNFIRE	-----	FRANCIS STEVENS	2
	<i>Harrowing Events Which Startle Five Adventurers Who Land Upon a Faroff Island</i>		
THE OUTCASTS	-----	GEORGE WARBURTON LEWIS	14
	<i>A Story of Stark Adventure With an Uncanny Climate</i>		
THE ROOM OF THE BLACK VELVET DRAPES	-----	B. W. SLINEY	18
DOCTOR X	-----	CULPEPER CHUNN	21
	<i>A Good Short Story</i>		
THE TWO MEN WHO MURDERED EACH OTHER	-----	VALMA CLARK	23
	<i>A Remarkable Novelette</i>		
THE STRANGE CASE OF JACOB ARUM	-----	JOHN HARRIS BURLAND	33
	<i>A Sardonic Novel of Witchcraft</i>		
BLACK CUNJER	-----	ISABEL WALKER	46
	<i>A Short Tale of Black Superstition</i>		
SHADES	-----	BRYAN IRVINE	49
	<i>A Realistic Ghost Story</i>		
VOODOOISM	-----	WILL W. NELSON	55
	<i>A Special Article About a Weird Oult</i>		
SEÑORITA SERPENTE	-----	EARL WAYLAND BOWMAN	57
	<i>A Strange Tale of the Mayan Snake Worshipers</i>		
THE ROOM IN THE TOWER	-----	D. L. RADWAY	61
	<i>A Terrifying Ghost Story</i>		
RIDERS IN THE DARK	-----	VINCENT STARRETT	63
	<i>A Grim Tale of Self Sacrifice</i>		
MANDRAKE	-----	ADAM HULL SHIRK	66
	<i>An Uncanny Tale of a Flesh Colored Plant</i>		
PEOPLE VS. BLAND	-----	THEODORE SNOW WOOD	69
	<i>The Mysterious Midnight Visitor Played an Important Part in this Murder Trial</i>		
THE EVENING WOLVES	-----	PAUL ELLSWORTH TRIEM	73
	<i>Final Installment of this Exciting Tale of Chinatown</i>		
THE CORPSE ON THE THIRD SLAB	-----	OTIS ADELBERT KLINE	76
	<i>Weird Tale of Happenings in a Morgue</i>		
THE GUARD OF HONOR	-----	PAUL SUTER	79
	<i>The Author of "Beyond the Door" Spins Another Eerie Tale in His Masterful Style</i>		
THE CAULDRON	-----	PRESTON LANGLEY HICKEY	85
	<i>True Adventures of Terror</i>		
THE EYRIE	-----	THE EDITOR	87

# THE OUTCASTS

By GEORGE WARBURTON LEWIS

**U**NDER the half-exposed roots of a small oak, ingeniously screened from detection by chance passers by, crouched a small gray rabbit. A winter wind shrieked through the denuded tree-tops of a narrow strip of wood which shabbily clothed the tortuous ice-ribbon of what had been a creek. It was a bleak, cheerless day.

The rabbit suddenly lifted his alert ears, then as quickly dropped them flat upon his furry back and crouched yet closer to the earth. His round pop-eyes grew larger, his nostrils quivered at clearly scented danger, and instinctive fear clutched his timorous heart.

The next instant, like a missile from a catapult, he launched his lithe body outward and downward. He struck the surface of the frozen creek with something of a shock, his out-thrust claws strove vainly for a hold, and he turned over and slid far along the ice.

In the same instant a heavy club, hurled by a master hand from behind, crashed upon the ice a bare yard ahead of him. Thinking to flee from the nearest peril, he sprang up frantically and leaped away to the rear. Scarce two bounds and a great dark object loomed sheer above him.

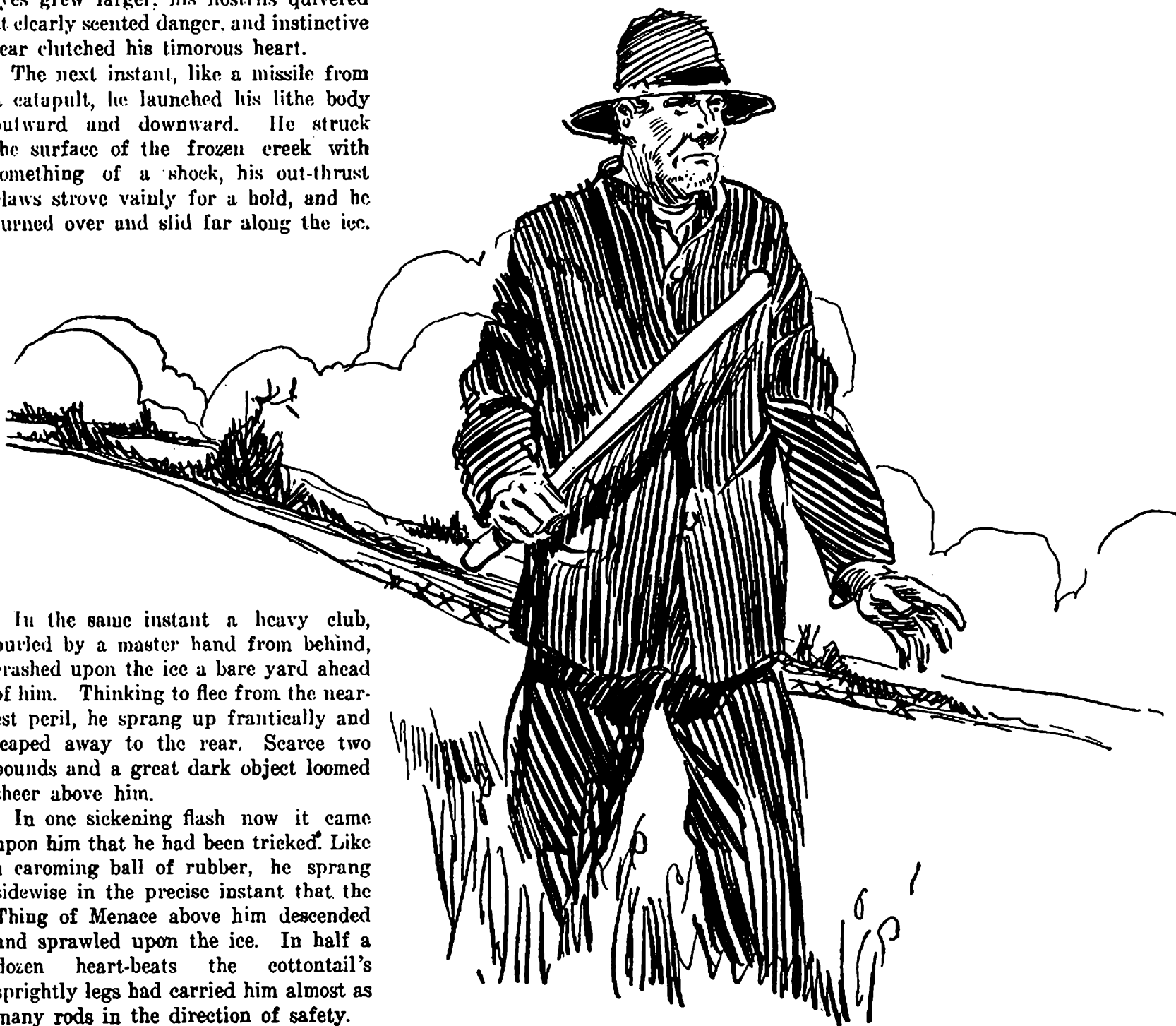
In one sickening flash now it came upon him that he had been tricked. Like a caroming ball of rubber, he sprang sidewise in the precise instant that the Thing of Menace above him descended and sprawled upon the ice. In half a dozen heart-beats the cottontail's sprightly legs had carried him almost as many rods in the direction of safety.

The sprawling thing struggled to its feet with an oath that rang to the heavens—and lo! it was a man.

As his voice resounded along the wooded hillside the look in the man's face changed. What had been grim purpose became faint apprehension. He glanced about quickly as though he expected to see some one approaching. No living thing was anywhere to be seen, however—the January wind, shrilling through the naked branches of the trees, was the Man's only companion.

A few snowflakes sifted down and whirled crazily before the blast. The Man regarded them listlessly, perhaps for a full minute; then he vented another oath, but, unlike the first, it was a guarded, if bitter, execration that hinted at a desire to keep aloof from man, to betray his presence to no person or thing that might be hostile to his aims.

The Man advanced and recovered his club, lying where he had driven it with all his strength at the nimble quarry; then, shivering in his meager clothing, he



moved forward surreptitiously along the ice, his eyes eagerly searching every cover for game, his thick club poised for a quick, deft blow. But evidently all game had deserted its wonted habitat of the creek banks.

Slowly, anxiety crept into the hunter's eyes and played under the mask of a recent beard. The whinny of a horse, feeding in a contiguous stalk-field, at one time startled him almost into a run; and once again, when what sounded like a baying of hounds came from ahead, he turned aside and forced his way into a resisting hazel thicket, where he waited a long time, listening breathlessly.

After a while the Man heard what seemed to be the same baying from a point more distant. Other hunters than himself, he surmised, were abroad, hunting, mayhap, similar game, but how much more did success mean to him than to them!

After a time the Man chanced upon an ear of corn in an otherwise clean-husked field. He tore the grains from the cob with brute eagerness and swung on across the field in search of other ears.

A giant jackrabbit rose before him and bounded away, his long black-tipped ears standing vertical, his easy, rhythmic leaps showing the slight exertion that was companion of his assurance. The Man clenched his teeth and flung his club with all the might of an arm not long since powerful.

His weakness surprised, nay, mildly terrified him. His club fell far short and the long-eared ranger of the prairies loped out of sight at a derisively slow pace before his incredulous eyes. The Man even fancied he perceived something fiendishly human in the open mockery of the rabbit's effortless escape. He uttered a little groan of despair before he again stumbled onward toward the nowhere of his goal.

FOR another hour he pushed forward, following the winding course of the stream. Where the ice-road of the creek crooked round a wooded spur the Man came face to face with a great wolfish dog.

The hunter stopped abruptly, perchance slightly startled, and stared a little suspiciously at the shaggy stranger, his club ready. But the dog showed no sign of hostility. His out-lolling tongue looked dry, as from extreme thirst, and his lean flanks heaved as from the exertion of a long chase. It was obvious to the Man that the distressed stranger had sought the creek for water, only to find ice.

They stood regarding each other in silence, the Man and the dog, the one grim

of countenance and great of bulk—truly a menacing figure; the other amiable, fairly exuberant with good nature, his brown eyes smiling and his ragged bush of a tail wagging a message of friendliness to all the world. Apparently he wanted but a single word of encouragement to bound forward and lick the Man's hand in token of meek servility.

But the Man did not pronounce the one word that might so readily have gained him a friend, wherefore the dog waited. The latter, being only a brute, could suspect nothing of the dark purpose that was slowly taking root in the other's brain, else he would have turned away in alarm and fled from the Thing which, having come upon it unexpectedly, he had mistaken for a *man*.

Studiedly, calculatively, the Man took stock of the stranger. The dog, meanwhile, did not budge, but his great bush of a tail suddenly ceased wagging and his small pointed ears seemed all but to hide themselves in the coarse hair of his shaggy coat. It was as if some vague distrust of the Man had forced itself unbidden upon him.

"Come here, you fool!" said the Man at last, half whimsically, and, cheerfully obedient, the dog gave a playful bound and buried his dry muzzle in the speaker's free hand, whining in friendly canine fashion, heedless of the ominous club.

The Man drew one hand out of his glove and stroked the dog's tangled coat.

"Ha! you tramp," he exclaimed, "you're a regular boneyard under all that mat of hair, ain't you?"

The Tramp, thus happily named, thrashed his ragged tail about in high glee. He only stopped after a space to lick the blue ice with his pasty tongue, as though he would make clear to the Man his grievous plight. But the gray hard face of the other remained destitute of pity. The bleak cynicism in his expression even seemed to stand out in bolder relief.

"We're sure two of a kind, ain't we, vagabond? And after all it may be a lucky thing for *me* we met. . . . You see, old fellow, I'm starving. You look as if you knew what it meant to starve, yourself. If you've ever been as hungry or as desperately miserable as I am now you'll not think hard of me for what I've got to do. Yes, yes! I know you're anxious to be friendly all right"—at the dog, suspicion put to rout, snuggled closer to him—"but there's only *one way I can see you* at present," he went on, his drawl growing as cold as wind blowing off ice. "You see, I've got to *live, vagabond—and by God I'm going to live!*"

The ferocity of some wild thing of prey, cornered, of a sudden had come into the human thing's wheezy voice. After a moment he added, half to himself, as if in justification of his fell design:

"You're only a useless, half-starved tramp-dog, anyway."

At the accusation the vagabond suddenly ceased licking the ice and raised his head. For a moment he gazed steadily into the Man's eyes with every appearance of human comprehension. But the Man was familiar with the ways of dogs, as with the ways of men. He was not disconcerted.

He drew from his pocket a heavy-bladed knife, with which he somewhat laboriously gouged a little cavity in the ice, carefully preserving the resulting chips. Swinging his arms rapidly, he slowly forced the sluggish blood into his blue-gray hands until presently they tingled and glowed with comparative warmth. This done, he assembled the chips, a double handful. The melting action of his hands was assisted by his steaming breath.

Gradually the water dripped through his fingers and filled the small cavity in the ice, which was the one way to obtain drink, since the ice itself lay in a single solid cake clear to the creek-bottom.

The Man turned from his labor to find the Tramp watching him intently, his small wolflike ears perked forward in pathetic eagerness.

"There—take it!" jerked out the Man in a voice that was almost a croak.

He rose with difficulty, club in hand.

"That's the last you'll get—or need—for a d—d long time," he muttered, half inaudibly. His lids had narrowed and the pupils of his shag-browed eyes might have been points of flame.

The vagabond wagged his flail-like tail gratefully and was lapping at the tiny pool before his dry tongue had reached its surface. Towering above the unsuspecting brute, the Man stretched his long arms tentatively. There must be no bungling, he thought; he reasoned that his life was at stake.

When the tiny hole was all but dry he suddenly gripped the club in both hands and swung with mighty force for the tramp-dog's head.

A MILLION echoes resounded through the lonely little wood as a chorus of shrill, agonizing cries contended dissonantly with hoarse, full-throated human curses.

The vagabond staggered blindly away from the fatal lure of the sweetly reviving nectar, too dazed, too horribly numbed for flight, a great lamp pushing

out the tangled hair on one side of his head. Gradually his tremulous yelps became low howls of pain that dolefully simulated a distressed human voice.

The Man labored to his feet, for the force of his wide-swung blow had carried him off his precarious footing. His club had fallen at a wrong angle. The fury of chagrin showed in his face, but a great fear was tugging at his heart—fear lest the tumult of his accursed fiasco had been heard.

Meanwhile, he eyed the wounded dog warily as if expecting to be attacked. But the Tramp, having smothered his howls of pain, stood whining now, trembling forelegs braced apart to help his equipoise. After a little while he held his disfigured head sidewise and gazed up at the Man out of bloodshot eyes, cowed, vastly afraid, yet there seemed to be something of inquiry as to the Man's motive in the vagabond's steady look.

"Come here and shut up your infernal whining," said the Man after a moment; "and don't make this thing any worse." His growing weakness made him the more bitter. He hesitated to risk the clamor in which a second attempt on his companion outcast's life might result.

At his command the Tramp edged nearer, strangely enough, groveling, his rag of a tail drooped between his legs in abject submission.

"We've got to get out of here," muttered the Man, glancing about nervously. That which he had not had the strength to kill he would now take back as a companion and friend. It was policy. "I wish I'd thought before," he wheezed, noting the injury he had inflicted on the Tramp. "Maybe—maybe you could have caught a rabbit! But you'd play hell catching one now," he murmured grimly, regarding fixedly a tiny trickle of red that came from the Tramp's nostrils.

They went away together, the Man and the dog, both animals now, equally outcasts, the one of man, the other of man's institution, society. To all appearances they were as good friends now as before, only now the four-legged one watched the other's movements. But the higher animal felt that he had nothing to fear from the baser one, on whom he could practice any treachery, and he therefore burdened his rapidly waning strength with no useless vigilance.

And thus they went on—hunting, the Man with all the intelligence and artfulness that God had given him, the dog more weakly, inertly, as the journey lengthened, from pain and loss of blood.

About the middle of the forenoon the Man narrowly escaped detection by sev-

en or eight men whom he chanced upon, encamped in a ravine. All were heavily armed, and the Man knew all too well that they were a sheriff's posse. Again, later in the day, the outcast caught sight of two men armed with Winchesters. They were quite near him before he became aware of their presence, but they gave no sign of having seen either him or the Tramp.

He quickly concealed himself behind a hedge and watched one of the men pointing at a wolf, which had showed itself boldly in a nearby cornfield. After a time the men separated, and one of them, a lean giant, turned and came as straight toward the Man's hiding-place as though he had divined the outcast's presence. Fortune had indeed turned traitor.

A thought of his own late perfidy came to him, but he did not wince. Morally, he did not often wince; physically his courage was merely that of many another man.

He watched the tall man come nearer, steadily nearer; a large man, he was, with an easy confident stride. His calm eyes swept his surroundings leisurely, and his cool slow manner seemed in discord with the vigilance of the man-hunter. But as the man in hiding continued to watch the other, he was suddenly shaken by a tremor that rippled through every fiber of his being.

"Great God!" he whispered to the deaf and unanswering earth, "it's him!"

THE Man recognized the sheriff of his town county—a man whose record of efficiency as an officer of the law had long since been written in letters of blood.

The outcast flattened himself yet closer to the earth, visions of grim walls and iron bars torturing his confused brain. Must his eleven days' awful struggle end in captivity? The thought of it kindled a new desperation in his heart.

The animal that is in all men was uppermost in the outcast. It served partly to master, to hold his terror in check, for cunning in animals is not unlike art in men. A fugitive from justice, wanted for a crime which, day on casual day for eleven such periods of torment, had by turns repelled, frightened and haunted him, the social outcast was at last at bay.

The tall sheriff came swinging slowly forward along the ridge. In a moment he was opposite the quarry. Through the apparently insufficient screen of outstanding branches he seemed to look squarely into the fugitive's eyes. For perhaps the tenth of a second he hesitated—then went on.

But the Man feared that he had in reality been seen, that the sheriff, believing him armed, had only feigned ignorance of his presence—was going straight to fetch his posse, the identical men he had seen encamped in the ravine. The fugitive was certain he knew. The sheriff's ruse was to avoid bloodshed by surrounding and overawing him. The terrible thought came to the Man like an electric flash, and simultaneously all compunction deserted him.

Every other consideration was instantly subordinated to the love of life. If he had not been essentially so before, in a twinkling the Man now became the animal wholly.

The sheriff had barely passed him when he bounded to his feet like a waiting tiger and swung his thick club. Came the supreme test of human quickness. Only the officer's keen ear warned him, for he had not caught sight of the fugitive in hiding. Like lightning the sheriff wheeled half round, his rifle at hip, but the descending club met him fair; he dropped inertly, his undischarged weapon still gripped in his hands.

The tramp-dog, coming up at the sound of the scuffle, stopped a few feet short of the gruesome object on the ground, sniffing warily, his forelegs forward as if to favor prompt retreat. The coarse hair on his fleshless back stood up like spines. He gave a single deep growl. His bloodshot eyes, oddly enough, were not on the motionless thing on the ground, but glaring at the Man, and in a way that was strangely sinister.

The sheriff's body was left where his slayer had so lately lain in hiding behind the hedge, only the corpse, as a matter of design, was somewhat better screened from observation.

The fugitive crawled a hundred yards through a weed patch, dropped into a little gully and descended toward thicker shelter. He was armed now with the spoil of his late conquest, a Winchester. The vagabond still followed him. The trickle of blood from the unhappy brute's nose had ceased and he looked somewhat revived. Haply he had found water or a bite of food somewhere.

Soon the sun was down. The shadows deepened among the trees where the two strange fugitives, one by unexplainable choice, picked their way onward.

Once the psychological something that drove him forward in the face of nature's protests nearly forsook the Man. He sank to the ground cursing desperately in a voice that was woefully faint and wheezy and which seemed to belong to nothing that was human. It was not dissimilar to the death wail of some dying animal. The dog waited patiently

beside him until his companion regained his feet. This the fugitive noted dully, wondering vaguely if the starving tramp-dog was destined to profit by his finish even as he had hoped to profit—to live—by the death of the dog.

It was by accident that the Man's dimming eyes all at once lighted on something that instantly fixed them in a stare of incredulity. On the vagabond's pendulous chops was the purpling stain of fresh blood, and, adhering to the corners of his great mouth, was the unmistakable gray-brown fur of a rabbit. In the Man, unbelief gave way to conviction, and conviction to instant and insane passion.

"Why—damn you!" the one brute arraigned the other, "you've actually caught a rabbit—and sneaked away and eaten every hell-fired bit of it by yourself! . . . And—it was the drink I gave you that enabled you to catch it—"

The dog shrank from the Man instinctively as the latter thrust out a trembling forefinger in accusation.

"That rabbit would have meant—would have meant life to me," whined the fugitive despairingly, "and you—a miserable, good-for-nothing tramp-dog whose life ain't worth a copper—you sneaked off and—ate—a—whole—rabbit!"

The Man's disheartened tone was like the wail of one who faces execution. An odd glitter had suddenly dissipated the listless, lifeless look in his heavy-browed eyes.

The vagabond shrank yet farther away from his accuser, as though he understood and repented. But the Man was obdurate, resolved. He leveled the Winchester evenly at his companion's head, but, suddenly remembering the value of silence, he lowered the weapon, leaned it conveniently against a tree and selected a club.

No sooner was the club in the Man's hands than the tramp-dog rose guardedly from his haunches, all fear seemingly having left him. The Man saw this and knew by logic what the brute knew by instinct, but as always the higher animal felt confident of his superiority over the lower one.

"I'd kill you now even if I didn't have to," wheezed the Man.

The tramp-dog's bloodshot eyes were steadily following the club. His small

pointed ears stood forward in a strangely menacing expression and the shaggy hair along his great dark-gray back bristled savagely.

The Man surveyed the dog and comprehended; but already they had begun circling and the rifle was between him and the dog that seemed all of a sudden to have strangely changed.

"Great God!" choked out the Man as a horrible misgiving resolved itself into seeming certainty; "it's a wolf!"

THE vagabond advanced a pace and paused, his sharp muzzle pointing, a foreleg raised intently. He might have been some great, disheveled pointer stalking game. The Man stood irresolute, club clenched in hands.

"You were a damn' strange looking dog from the first," he muttered, remembering.

A little courage came back to him as the lapsing seconds stayed the crisis and he recalled the vagabond's wound and his weakened condition. However, he had lately regaled himself with a rabbit, bitterly thought the Man.

Barely two paces separated the outcast from his unwisely discarded Winchester. Holding his club before him as a shield, he gave a sudden spring for the weapon and salvation. It was the crucial moment. His fingers were almost closing upon the rifle when a flash of gray went up from the ground in a diagonal streak that might have been a tongue of lightning.

There was a single half-stifled growl, followed by a sputtering cry of horror, and they went down together, the Man and the dog, the one conscious of a mighty tearing at his whiskery throat and instinctively fumbling for the heavy-bladed knife he carried, the powerful jaws of the other gripping with all the desperation of brute ferocity, as though the tramp-dog comprehended the true life-and-death nature of the contest.

The Man fought as shrewdly and as calculatively as though his adversary were a man and not a brute. He had reason to know the value of a good knife, and at last he got hold of and held the weapon, open-bladed, in his free hand; but because of the precious seconds necessarily lost in bringing it into play, the slashes he finally drove at the wolf-dog's exposed flank were so feeble that they

scarcely more than penetrated the tangled mat of the vagabond's shaggy coat.

AT MIDNIGHT the wolf-dog, after a swift, noiseless flight came to a standstill before a bush-screened cave in a rugged wood, many miles from the scene of his battle with the outlaw. The pale light of a winter moon, filtering down through naked tree-tops, robed him now as if in a plaid coat of curiously patterned silver and ebony, fantastically outlining the sharp angles of his fleshless body and recasting him in a periphery as of some dread werewolf, grim, gaunt and terrible.

One watching him now could not have said with certainty whether he was dog or wolf. Ever and anon he peered back uneasily along his trail and listened, after the wary manner of his late companion. But behind him there was naught but moonlight and silence and distance interminable.

As he stood motionless, gazing away to the rear, something of queer contentment after the day's work seemed to grow into the vagabond's aspect. Something in his very poise, nay, in the way he held his swollen and disfigured head, seemed to announce that with him all was well. Once again he moved forward, then once more he paused and ran his bloodshot eyes back over the moon-silvered trail: Silence, brooding, mysterious.

He lifted his wounded head and contemplated the westering moon with an expression that was somehow not unlike that which depicts the processes of a reasoning human mind. His mouth was a little way open, his snow-white teeth showing between lips that were drawn back in the unmistakable semblance of a wide and exultant grin! After a moment he cast a final glance backward, then trotted forward as silently as a shadow and disappeared in the cave.

In the ragged halfbreed the gentle ancestry of the dooryard dog had fought an all-day fight with the savage strain of the great timber-wolf, but the more fiercely vital of the contending elements had won at last, and the vagabond, guilty now of a tragic and awful thing of which his lingering dog instinct vaguely accused him, had gone back forever to the wary wanderers from which he had descended, and from whose silent lurking places in the shadowy forests he had strayed for the space of a generation.

