

The Pig-Skin Belt

By Edward Lucas White

I

Be it noted that I, John Radford, always of sound mind and matter-of-fact disposition, being entirely in my senses, here set down what I saw, heard and knew. As to my inferences from what occurred I say nothing, my theory might be regarded as more improbable than the facts themselves. From the facts anyone can draw conclusions as well as I.

The first letter read:

“San Antonio, Texas,
January 1st, 1892.

My dear Radford:

You have forgotten me, likely enough, but I have not forgotten you nor anyone (nor anything) in Brexington. I saw your advertisement in the New York *Herald* and am glad to learn from it that you are alive and to infer that you are well and prosperous.

I need a lawyer's help. I want to buy real estate and I mean to return home, so you are exactly the man I am looking for. I am writing this to ask that you take charge of any and all of my affairs falling within your province, and to learn whether you are willing to do so.

I am a rich man now, and without any near ties of kin or kind. I want to come home to Brexington, to live there if I can, to die there if I must. Along with other matters which I will explain if you accept I want to buy a house in the town and a farm near-by, if not the Shelby house and estate then some others like them.

If willing to act for me please reply at once care of the Hotel Menger. Remember me to any cousins of mine you may see.

Faithfully yours,
Cassius M. Case.”

The name I knew well enough, of course, but my efforts to recall the individual resulted only in a somewhat hazy recollection of a tall, thin, red-cheeked lad of seventeen or so. It was almost exactly twenty-eight years since Colonel Shelby Case had left Brexington taking with him his son. Colonel Shelby had died some six years later. I remembered hearing of his death, in Egypt, I thought. Since his departure from Brexington I had never heard of or from Cassius.

My reply I wrote at once, professing my readiness to do anything in my power to serve him.

As soon as the mails made it possible, I had a second letter from him.

“My dear Radford:

“Your kind letter has taken a load off my mind. I am particular about any sort of arrangements I make, exacting as to the accurate carrying out of small details and I feared I might have difficulty in finding a painstaking man in a community so easygoing as Brexington. I remember

your precise ways as a boy and am basking in a sense of total relief and complete reliance on you.

“I should buy the Shelby house and estate on your representations, but I must see for myself first. If they are the best I can get I shall take them anyhow. But please be ready to show me over every estate of five hundred acres or more, lying within ten miles of the Court House. I wish to examine every one which is now for sale or which you can induce the owners to consider selling. I want the best which is to be had. Also I want a small place of fifty acres or so, two miles or more from the larger place I buy. Money is no object to me and the condition of the buildings on the places will not weigh with me at all.

“So with the town house: I may tear it down entirely and rebuild from the cellar up. What I want in the town is a place of half an acre to two acres carrying fine, tall trees, with well-developed trunks. I want shade and plenty of it, but no limbs or branches growing or hanging within eight feet of the ground. I do not desire shrubbery, but if there is any I can have it removed, while I cannot create stout trees. Those I must have on the place when I buy it, for I will have the shade and I will have a clear sweep for air and an unobstructed view all round.

“I am not at the Menger as you naturally suppose. I merely have my mail sent there. I am living in a tent half a mile or more from the town. At Los Angeles I had the luck to fall in with a Brexington nigger, Jeff Twibill. He knew of another, Cato Johnson, who was in Frisco. I have the two of them with me now, Jeff takes care of the horses and Cato of me and I am very comfortable.

“That brings me to the arrangements I want you to make for me. Buy or lease or rent or borrow a piece of a field, say four acres, free of trees or bushes and sloping enough to shed the rain. Be sure there is good water handy. Have four tents; one for me, one for the two niggers (and make it big enough for three or four); one to cook in and one for my four horses, they are luxurious beasts and live as well as I do. Have the tents pitched in the middle of the field so I shall have a clear view all around. The field must be clear of bushes or trees, must be at least four acres and may be any size larger than that: forty would be none too big for me. I want no houses too close to me.

“You see I am at present averse to houses, hotels and public conveyances. I mean to ride across the continent camping as I go. And in Brexington I mean to tent it until I have my own house ready to live in. I am resolute to be no man’s guest nor any man’s lodger, nor any company’s passenger.

“I am coming home, Radford, coming home to be a Colonel with the rest of them. And I shall be no mere colonel-by-courtesy: I have won my right to the title, I won it twice over, years ago in Egypt and later in Asia.

“Thank you for all the news of the many cousins, I did not realize they were so very numerous. I am sorry that Mary Mattingly is dead, of all the many dear people in Brexington I loved her best.

“I shall keep you advised of my progress across the continent. And as questions come up about the details of the tent-equipment you can confer with me by letter.

“Gratefully yours,

“Cassius M. Case.”

I showed the letters to one and another of my elder acquaintances, who remembered Cassius. Dr. Boone said:

“I presume it is a case of advanced tuberculosis. He should have remained in that climate. Of course, he may live a long time here, tenting in the open or living with the completest fresh air treatment. His punctiliousness in respect to self isolation does him credit, though he carries it further than is necessary. We must do all we can for him.”

Beverly said:

“Poor devil. ‘Live if he can, die if he must.’ He’ll die all right. They’d call him a ‘lunger’ out there and he had better stay there.”

The minister said:

“The lode-star of old sweet memories draws him homeward. ‘Mary Mattingly,’ yes we all remember how wildly he loved Mary Mattingly. While full of youth he could find forgetfulness fighting in strange lands. Now he must be near her although she lies in her grave. The proximity even of her tomb will be a solace to his last days.”

We were prepared to do all that sympathy could suggest. Mr. Hall and Dr. Boone gravely discussed together the prolongation of Case’s life and the affording of spiritual support. Beverly I found helpful on my line of finances and creature comforts. As Case’s leisurely progress brought him nearer and nearer our interest deepened. When the day came on which he was to arrive Beverly and I rode out to meet him.

II

Language has no words to picture our dumbfounded amazement. And we were astonished in more ways than one. Chiefly, instead of the lank invalid we expected to see, we beheld a burly giant every characteristic of whom, save one, bespoke rugged health. He was all of six foot three, big boned, overlaid with a surplus of brawn, a Samsonian musculature that showed plain through his negligent, loose clothing; and withal he was plump and would have been sleek but for the roughness of his weather-beaten skin.

He wore gray; a broad-brimmed felt hat, almost a sombrero; a flannel shirt, a sort of jacket, and corduroy trousers tucked into his boots. It was before the days of khaki.

His head was large and round, but not at all a bullet head, rather handsome and well set. His face was round too, and good-natured, but not a particle as is the usual round face, vacuous and like a full-moon. His was agreeable, but lit with character and determination. His neck was fat but showed great cords through its rotundity. He had a big barrel of a chest and his voice rumbled out of it. He dominated the landscape the moment he entered it.

Even in our astonishment three things about him struck me, and, as I afterwards found out, the same three similarly struck Beverly.

One was his complexion. He had that build which leads one to expect floridity of face, a rubicund countenance or, at least, ruddy cheeks. But he was dead pale, with a peculiar tint I never had seen before. His face showed an abundance of solid muscle and over it a skin roughened by exposure, toughened, even hardened by wind and sun. Yet its color was not in agreement with its texture. It had the hue which belongs to waxy skin over suety, tallowy flesh, an opaque whiteness, a pallidity almost corpse-like.

The second was his glance: keen, glittering, hard, blue-gray eyes he had, gallant and far younger than himself. But it was not the handsome eyes so much as their way of looking that whetted our attention. They pierced us through and through, they darted incessantly here and there, they peered to right and left, they kept us generally in view, indeed, and never let us feel

that his attention wandered from us, yet they incessantly swept the world about him. You should say they saw all they looked at, looked at everything seeable.

The third was his belt, a mellowed old belt of pig-skin, with two capacious holsters, from each of which protruded the butt of a large-calibre revolver.

He greeted us in the spirit of old comradeship renewed. Behind him Jeff and Cato grinned from their tired mounts. He sat his big horse with no sign of fatigue and surveyed the landscape from the cross-roads' knoll where we had met him.

"I seem to recall the landmarks here," he said, "the left hand road by which you came, would take me through to Brexington."

Beverly confirmed his recollection.

"The one straight ahead," he went on, "goes past the big new distillery you wrote me about."

"Right again," I said.

"The road to the right," he continued, "will take us by the old mill, and I can swing round to my camp without nearing town."

"You could," Beverly told. "But it is a long way round."

"Not too far for me," he announced positively. "No towns or distilleries for me. I go round. Will you ride with me, gentlemen?"

We rode with him.

On the way I told him I expected him to supper that evening.

"With all my writing, Radford," he said. "You don't seem to get the idea. I flock by myself for the present and eat alone. If you insist I'll explain tomorrow."

Beverly and I left him to his camp supper.

Dr. Boone and Mr. Hall were a good deal taken aback upon learning that their imagined invalid had no existence and that the real Colonel Case needed neither medical assistance nor spiritual solace. We four sat for some time expressing our bewilderment.

Next morning I drove out to Case's Camp. I found him sitting in his tent, the flaps of which were looped up all around. He was as pale as the day before. As I approached I saw him scrutinize me with a searching gaze, a gaze I found it difficult to analyze.

He wore his belt with the holsters and the revolver-butts showed from those same holsters. I was astonished at this. When I saw it on him the day before I had thought the belt a piece of bad taste. It might have been advisable in portions of his long ride, might have been imperatively necessary in some districts; but it seemed a pose or a stupidity to wear it so far east. Pistols were by no means unknown in our part of the world, but they were carried in the seclusion of the hip-pocket or inside the breast of one's coat, not flaunted in the face of the populace in low-hung pig-skin holsters.

Case greeted me cheerily.

"I got up too early," he stated. "I've had my breakfast and done my target practice twice over. Apparently you expect me to go with you in that buggy?"

I told him that I did.

"Come in and sit down a moment," he said in a somewhat embarrassed way. "This suggestion of our driving together is in line with your kind invitation for last night. I see I must explain somehow."

He offered me a cigar and though I seldom smoke in the morning, I took it, for, I thought smoking would fill up the silences I anticipated.

He puffed a while, in fact.

“Have you ever been among feudists in the mountains?” he queried.

“More than a little,” I told him.

“Likely enough then,” he went on, “you know more about their ways than I do. But I saw something of them myself, before I left America. Did you ever notice how a man at either focus of a feud, the king-pin of his end of it so to speak, manifests the greatest care to avoid permitting others to expose themselves to any degree of the danger always menacing him; how such men, in the black shadow of doom, as it were, are solicitous to prevent outsiders from straying into the penumbra of the eclipse which threatens themselves?”

“I have observed that,” I replied.

“Have you noticed on the other hand,” he continued, “that they never show any concern for acquaintances who comprehend the situation, but pay them the compliment of assuming that they have sense enough to know what they are doing and to take care of themselves?”

“I have observed that same too,” I affirmed.

He puffed again for a while.

“My father,” he returned presently, “used to say that there are two ends to a quarrel, the right end and the wrong end, but that either end of a feud is the wrong end. I am one end of a feud. Wherever I am is one focus of that feud. The other focus is local, and I have removed myself as far as may be from it. But I am not safe here, should not be safe anywhere on earth; doubt if I should be safe on the moon, or Mars, on a planet of some other sun, or the least conspicuous satellite of the farthest star. I am obnoxious to the hate of a power as far-reaching” . . . he took off his broad felt hat and looked up at the canvas of the tent-roof . . . “as far-reaching as the displeasure of God.”

“And as implacable,” he almost whispered. “As the malice of Satan.”

He looked sane, healthy and self-possessed.

“I am nowhere safe,” he recommenced in his natural voice, “while my chief adversary is alive. My enemies are many and malignant, enough, but their power is negligible, and their malignancy vicarious. Without fomenting their hostility would evaporate. Could I but know that my chief enemy were no more I should be free from all alarm. But while that arch-foe survives I am liable to attack at any moment, to attacks so subtle that I am at a loss to make you comprehend their possible nature, so crude that I could not make you realize the danger you are in at this instant.”

I looked at him, unmoved.

“I shall say no more to you,” he said. “You must do as you please. If you regard my warnings as vapors, I have at least warned you. If you are willing to share my danger, in such degree as my very neighborhood is always full of danger, you do so at your own risk. If you consider it advisable to have no more to do with me, say so now.”

“I see no reason,” I told him without even a preliminary puff, “why your utterances should make any difference in my treatment of you.”

“I thought you would say that,” he said. “But my conscience is clear.”

“Shall we proceed to business?” I asked.

“There is one point more,” he replied. “Have you ever been in mining camps or amid other frontier conditions?”

“Several times,” I answered, “and for some time at that.”

“Have you ever noticed that when two men have been mutually threatening to shoot each other at sight, pending the final settlement, neither will expose women or children to danger by being in their neighborhood or permitting them in his, if he can prevent their nearing them?”

“Such scrupulosity can be observed,” I told him dryly, “nearer home than mining camps or frontier towns.”

“So I have heard,” he replied stiffly. “When I left America the personal encounter had not yet taken the place of the formal duel in these regions.”

He puffed a bit.

“However,” he continued, “it makes no difference from what part of the world you draw the illustration; it is equally in point. The danger of being near me is a hundred times, a thousand times greater than that of running the risk of stopping a wild or random bullet. I cannot bring myself to expose innocent beings to such danger.”

“How about Jeff and Cato?” I asked.

“A nigger,” declared Colonel Case (and he looked all the while as he spoke it) “is like a dog or a horse, he shares his master’s dangers as a matter of course. I speak of women and children and unsuspecting men. I am resolute to sit at no man’s table, to enter no man’s house, uninvited or invited. All who come to me knowingly I shall welcome. When you bring any one with you I shall assume that he has been forewarned. But I shall intrude upon no one.”

“How then are you to inspect,” I queried, “the properties I expected to show you?”

“Business,” said Colonel Case, “is different. When people propose to do business they assume any and all risks. Are you afraid to assume the risk of driving me about in that buggy of yours?”

“Not a particle,” I disclaimed. “Are you willing to expose the people of Brexington to these dangers on which you descant so eloquently and which I fail to comprehend?”

Colonel Case fixed me with a cold stare. He looked every inch a warrior, accustomed to dominate his environment, to command and be obeyed, impatient of any opposition, ready to flare up if disbelieved in the smallest trifle.

“Radford,” he said, slowly and sternly, “I am willing to take any pains to avoid wronging anyone, I am unwilling to make myself ridiculous by attempting impossibilities.”

“I see,” I concluded. “Let us go.”

III

As we drove through the town he said:

“This is like coming back to earth from another world. It is like a dream too. Some streets are just as they were, only the faces are unfamiliar. I almost expect to see the ghosts of thirty years ago.”

I made some vague comment and as we jogged along talked of the unchanged or new owners of the houses. Then I felt him make a sudden movement beside me, and I looked round at him. He could not turn any paler than he was, yet there had been a change in his face.

“I do see ghosts,” he said slowly and softly.

I followed his glance as he gazed past me. We were approaching the Kenton homestead and nearly opposite it. It had an old-fashioned classic portico with four big white columns. At the top of the steps, between the two middle columns, stood Mary Kenton, all in pink with a rose in her jetty hair. She was looking intently at us, but not at me. Case stared at her fixedly.

“Mary Kenton is the picture of her mother,” I told him.

“Her very image,” he breathed, his eyes steadily on her.

She continued gazing at us. Of course she knew whom I was driving. My horses were trotting slowly and when we were opposite her, she waved her hand.

“Welcome home, Cousin Cassius,” she called cheerily.

Colonel Case waved his hat to her and bowed, but said nothing.

The Shelby mansion did not suit Colonel Case. What he wanted, he said, was a house at the edge of the town. When he had made his selection he bought it promptly. He had the outbuildings razed, the shrubbery torn up and the trees trimmed so that no limb hung within ten feet of the ground; above they were left untouched, tall and spreading as they were and almost interlacing with each other. The house he practically rebuilt. Its all-round veranda he had torn down and replaced by one even broader, but at the front only, facing the entrance, the only entrance he left. For he entirely closed the back-way to the kitchen and side-gate to the stable, cutting instead a loop-drive around the house from the one front entrance.

Except for this stone-posted carriage-gate with the little foot-path gate beside it, he had the whole place surrounded with a fence the like of which Brexington had never seen. The posts were T-beams, of rolled steel, eight feet tall above ground, reaching six feet below it and bedded down in rammed concrete. To these was bolted a four-foot continuous, square-mesh wire fencing, the meshes not over six inches at its top and as small as two inches at the bottom, which was sunk a hand's breadth below the surface and there held by close-set clamps upon sections of gas-pipe, extending from post to post and bolted to them. Inside this mesh-fencing, as high as it reached, and above it to the top of the posts, were strung twenty strands of heavy barbed wire, the upper wires six inches apart, the lower strands closer. Inside the fence he had set a close hedge. As the plants composing it were large and vigorous when they arrived from the nurseryman, this was soon thick and strong. It was kept clipped to about three feet high. The flower-beds he abolished and from house to drive and drive to hedge soon had the whole place in well-kept turf.

Behind the house he had two outbuildings erected; at one corner a small carriage-house and stable, capable of holding two vehicles and three horses; at the other a structure of about the same size as the stable, half wood-shed and half hen-house.

Watching the carpenters at work on this and regarding the nine-days-wonder of a fence, several negroes stood in talk one day as I passed. They were laughing and I overheard one say:

"Mahs'r Case shuah am' gwine tuh lose no hains awf he roos'. Mus be gwine tuh be powerful fine hains he gwine raise. He sutt'nly mus' sot stoah by he hains. He sutt'nly dun tuk en' spain' cunnssdd'ble money awn he faince."

The interior of the house was finished plainly and furnished sparingly. The very day it was ready for occupancy he moved into it and ceased his camp life. Besides Cato, an old negro named Samson acted as cook, and another named Pompey as butler. These three made up all his household. Jeff was quartered in a room over the carriage-house.

Before his residence was prepared and while he was still camping he bought Shelby Manor.

"Nothing like obliging one's cousins," he said. He also bought two adjoining farms, forming a property of over a thousand acres. This he proceeded to equip as a stud farm, engaging a competent manager; refitting the house for him and the two smaller houses for his assistants, the overseer and farmer; abolishing the old outbuildings; putting up barns and stables in the most lavish fashion. He bought many blooded mares and created an establishment on a large scale.

About two miles out of town on the road past his house, nearly half way to Shelby Manor, he bought a worthless little farm of some forty acres. This he had fenced and put in grass, except a small garden-patch by the house, which he had made snug and where he had installed an elderly negro couple as caretakers. The old man had formerly belonged to the Colonel's father, and was

named Erastus Everett. All the other buildings he had removed, except a fair-sized hay barrack standing on a knoll near the middle of the largest field. This he had new roofed and repaired and given two coats of shingle stain, moss green on the roof and weather gray on the sides. In it he had ranked up some forty cords of fat pine wood. Near the house was built a small stable, which harbored the two mules Case allowed uncle Rastus.

Besides this he had built a number of low sheds, opening on spaces enclosed with wire netting. Soon the enclosures swarmed with dogs, not blooded dogs, but mere mongrel curs. Not a small dog among them, all were big or fairly large. Uncle Rastus drove about the country in his big close-covered wagon, behind his two mules. Wherever he found an utterly worthless dog of some size he bought it, if it could be had cheap, and turned it in with the rest. Before a year had passed uncle Rastus had more than a hundred no-account brutes to feed and care for.

Colonel Case was not a man to whom anyone, least of all a stranger, would put a direct unsolicited question. Uncle Rastus was more approachable. But the curious gained little information from him.

“Mahs’r Cash ain’ tole muh wuff’r he keepin’ awl dees yeah houns. He ain’ spoke nuffin. He done tole muh tur buy ’um, he done tole muh to feed ’um. Ahze buyed ’um en’ Ah feeds ’um.”

Once he had established himself Case lived an extremely regular life. He rose early, breakfasted simply, and whatever the weather, drove out to Shelby Manor. He never rode in the forenoon. At his estate he had a pistol-range and a rifle-range. He spent nearly an hour each morning in pistol and rifle practice. He never used a shot-gun, but shot at targets, running marks, and trap-sprung clay-pigeons with both repeating rifle and revolver. He always carried his two repeating rifles with him, and brought them back with him. Several times, when I happened to accompany him, I watched him shoot.

The first time I was rather surprised. He emptied the chambers of one revolver, made some fifty shots with it, cleaned it, replaced the six cartridges which had been in it, and put it in its holster. Then he did the like with the other. Then he similarly emptied the magazines of one of his rifles, made some fifty shots with that, cleaned it and reloaded it with the original cartridges. So with the second rifle.

I asked him why he did so.

“The cartridges I go about with,” he said, “are loaded with silver bullets. I can’t afford to fire away two or three pounds of silver every day. Lead keeps my hand in just as well as silver, and the silver bullets are always ready for an emergency.”

Against such an imaginary emergency, I conceived he wore his belt and kept his two rifles always at hand.

After his target practice he talked with his manager, looked over the place, discussed his stock or watched his jockeys exercising their mounts, for an hour or two. Once a week or so on his way back to town he stopped to inspect uncle Rastus’ charges, and investigate his doings. His early lunch was almost as simple as his breakfast. After his lunch he slept an hour or more. Later he took a long ride, seldom toward Shelby Manor. Always, both in going and in returning, he rode past Judge Kenton’s mansion. At first his hour of starting on his ride varied. Before many days he so timed his setting forth as to pass the Kenton house when Mary was likely to be at her window, and his riding homeward when she was likely to be on the portico. After a time she was sure to be at her window when he passed and on the portico when he repassed, and his departure and return occurred with clock-work regularity. When she was at her window, they never gave any sign of mutual recognition, but when she was on the portico she waved her hand to him and he his hat to her.

Towards dusk in summer, after lamp-light in winter, he ate a deliberate dinner. It never seemed to make a particle of difference to him how early he went to bed or how late, or whether he went to bed at all. He was quite capable of sitting all night at cards if the game was especially interesting. Yet he never made a habit of late hours. He was an inveterate card-player, but play at his house generally ceased before midnight and often much earlier. He could drink all night long, four fingers deep and often, and never seem the worse for it. Yet it was very seldom he did so. Habitually he drank freely after dinner, but no effects of liquor were ever visible on him. His liquors were the best and always set out in abundance. His cigars were as good as his liquors and spread out in similar profusion. His wines at dinner were unsurpassable and numerous. The dinners themselves could not have been beaten. Uncle Samson was an adept at marketing and a superlative cook. Pompey was an ideal butler. They seemed always ready to serve dinner for their master alone without waste or for a dozen more also without any sign of effort or dismay. As Case made welcome to his dinner table as to his card table anyone who happened to drop in, he had no lack of guests. All the bachelors of Brexington flocked to him as a matter of course. The heads of families were puzzled. One after another they invited him to their houses. His refusals were courteous but firm: for explanations he referred them to me. Most of them accepted my dilution of his utterances and acquiesced in his lop-sided hospitality. One or two demurred and laid special siege to him. Particularly Judge Kenton would not be denied. When he was finally convinced that Colonel Case would not respond to any invitation, he declared his resolution not to cross Case's threshold until his several visits there were properly acknowledged by a return call at his house. Intercourse between him and Case thereupon ceased. Judge Kenton, however, was alone in his punctilious attitude. Everybody else frequented Case's house and table. His house indeed became a sort of informal club for all the most agreeable men of the town and neighborhood. It was not mere creature comforts or material attractions which drew them there, but the very real charm of the host. Even while he was tenting, before the house was ready for occupancy, he had made friends, according to their degree, with every man in and about Brexington, white or black. Everybody knew him, everybody liked him, everybody wondered at him.

IV

Case was in fact the most discussed man in our region of the world. Some called him a lunatic, dwelling especially on his dog-ranch, as he called it, and his everlasting pig-skin belt with the holstered revolvers, without which he was never seen at any hour of the day, by any one. It was difficult for his most enthusiastic partisans to assign any colorable reason why he should maintain a farm for the support of some two hundred totally worthless dogs. Their worthlessness was the main point which uncle Rastus made in buying them. Often he rejected a dog proffered for little or almost nothing.

"No seh," he would say. "Dat ar dawg ain' no 'count enuff. Mah'sr Cash he dun awdah muh dat Ah ain' buy no dawg wut am' pintedly no 'count. Dey gotter be no 'count. Ah ain' buyin' um lessen dey's wuffless en' onery."

Scarcely less easy was it to defend his wearing his twin revolvers even with dinner-dress, for he put on evening-dress for dinner, with the punctiliousness of an Englishman in the wilderness, put it on as often as he dined and yet wore it so naturally and unobtrusively, that no more than the incongruous belt did it embarrass the guests he made at home in any kind of clothes they happened to be wearing. His admirers pointed to this as a kind of exploit, as something of which

only a perfectly sane and exceptionally fine man could be capable. They adduced his clear-headed business sense, his excellent judgment on matters pertaining to real estate, his knowledge of horseflesh, his horsemanship, his coolness, skill and exceptional good temper at cards, as cumulative proofs of his perfect sanity. They admitted he was peculiar on one or two points but minimized these as negligible eccentricities. They were ready to descant to any extent on his personal charm, and this indeed all were agreed upon. To attract visitors by good dinners, good liquors, good cigars and endless card playing was easy. To keep his visitors at their ease and entertained for hours with mere conversations while seated on his veranda, was no small feat in itself and a hundred times a feat when their host obtruded upon them the ever visible butts of his big revolvers and kept a repeating rifle standing against each jamb of his front door. This tension of perpetual preparedness for an imminent attack might well have scared away everybody and left Case a hermit. It did nothing of the kind. It was acquiesced in at first, later tacitly accepted and finally ignored altogether. With it was ignored his strange complexion. I had myself puzzled over this: after long groping about in my mind I had realized what it reminded me of, and I found others who agreed with me in respect to it. It was like the paleness one sees for the half of a breath on the face of a strong, healthy man when in sudden alarm, astonishment or horror his blood flows momentarily back to his heart. Under such stress of unforeseen agitation a normal countenance might exhibit that hue for a fraction of a second, on Case's visage it was abiding, like the war paint on an armor-clad, drab-gray and dreary. Yet it produced no effect of gloom in his associates. He not only did not put a damper upon high spirits but diffused an atmosphere of gaiety and good fellowship.

And he did so not only in spite of his ever-visible weapons and of his uncanny, somber complexion, but also in spite of the strange and daunting habit of his eyes. I had seen something like it once and again in a frontiersman who knew that his one chance of surviving his enemy was to shoot first and who expected the crucial instant at any moment. I had watched in more than one town the eyes of such an individual scan each man who approached with one swift glance of inquiry, of keen uncertainty dying instantly into temporary relief. Such was the look with which Case invariably met me. It had in it hesitation, doubt, and, as it were, an element of half-conscious approach to alarm. It was as if he said to himself:

"Is that Radford? It looks like him. If it is Radford, all right. But is it really Radford after all?"

I grew used in time to this lightning scrutiny of me every time he caught sight of me. His other friends grew used to it. But it was the subject of endless talk among us. His eyes had an inexplicable effect on every one. And not the least factor in their mystery was that he bestowed this glance not only upon all men, but upon women, children, animals, birds, even insects. He regarded a robin or a butterfly with the same flash of transient interest which he bestowed upon a horse or a man. And his eyes seemed to keep him cognizant of every moving thing before, behind and above him. Nothing living which entered his horizon seemed to escape his notice.

Beverly remarked:

"Case is afraid of something, is always looking for something. But what the devil is it he is looking for? He acts as if he did not know what to expect and suspected everything."

Dr. Boone said:

"Case behaves somewhat as if he were suffering from a delusion of persecution. But most of the symptoms are conspicuously absent. I am puzzled like the rest of you."

The effect upon strangers of this eerie quality of Case's vision was by no means pleasant. Yet his merest acquaintances soon became used to it and his intimates ceased to notice it at all. His personal charm made it seem a trifle. Night after night his card room was the scene of jollity. His

table gathered the most desirable comrades the countryside afforded. Evening after evening his cronies sat in the comfortable wicker chairs on his broad veranda, little Turkish tables bearing decanters and cigars set among them, Colonel Case the center and life of the group.

He talked easily and he talked well. To start him talking of the countries he had seen was not easy, but, once he began, his stories of Egypt and Abyssinia, of Persia and Burmah, of Siam and China were always entertaining. Very seldom, almost never did he tell of his own experiences. Generally he told of having heard from others the tales he repeated, even when he spoke so that we suspected him of telling events in which he had taken part.

It was impossible to pin him down to a date, almost as hard to elicit the definite name of a locality. He gave minute particulars of incidents and customs, but dealt in generalities as to place and time. Especially he was strong in local superstitions and beliefs.

He told countless tales, all good, of crocodiles and ichneumons in Egypt, gazelles and ghouls in Persia, elephants and tigers in Burmah, deer and monkeys in Siam, badgers and foxes in China and sorcerers and enchanters anywhere. He spoke of the last two in as matter-of-fact a tone as of any of the others.

He told legends of the contests of various Chinese sages and saints, with magicians and wizards; of the malice and wiles of these wicked practitioners of somber arts; of the sort of super-sense developed by the adepts, their foes, enabling them to tell of the approach or presence of a sorcerer whatever disguise he assumed, even if he had the power of making himself invisible.

Several legendary anecdotes turned on this point of the invisibility of the wicked enemy and the prescience of his intended victim.

One was of a holy man said to have lived in Singan Fu about the time of the crusades. Knowing that he was threatened with the vengeance of a wizard, he provided himself with a sword entirely of silver, since the flesh of a wizard was considered proof against all baser metals. He likewise had at hand a quantity of the ashes of a sacred tree.

While seated in his study he felt an inimical presence. He snatched up his silver blade, stood upon the defensive and shouted a signal previously agreed upon. Hearing it his servants locked the doors of the house and rushed in with boxes of the sacred ashes. Scattering it on the floor, they could see on the fresh ashes the footsteps of the wizard. One of the servants, according to his master's instructions, had brought a live fowl. Slicing off its head he waved the spouting neck towards the air over the footprints. According to Chinese belief fowls' blood has the magical property of disclosing anyone invisible through incantation. In fact where the blood drops fell upon the wizard, they remained visible, there appeared a gory eye and cheek. Slashing at his revealed enemy the sage slew him with the silver sword, after which his body was with all speed burned to ashes. This was the invariable ending of all his similar tales.

Stories like this Case delighted in, but beyond this penchant for the weird and occult, for even childish tales of distant lands, his conversation in general showed no sign of peculiarity or eccentricity. Only once or twice did he startle us. Some visitors to town were among the gathering on his veranda and fell into a discussion of the contrasting qualities of Northerners and Southerners. Inevitably the discussion degenerated into a rather acrimonious and petty citation of all the weak points of each section and a rehash of all the stale sneers at either. The wordy Alabamian who led one side of the altercation descanted on the necessary and inherited vileness of the descendants of the men who burnt the Salem witches. Case had been listening silently. Then he cut in with an emphatic, trenchant directness unusual to him.

"Witches," he announced, "ought to be burnt always and everywhere."

We sat a moment startled and mute.

The Alabamian spoke first.

“Do you believe in witches, Sir?” he asked.

“I do,” Case affirmed.

“Ever been bewitched?” the Alabamian queried. He was rather young and dogmatically assertive.

“Do you believe in Asiatic cholera?” Case queried in his turn.”

“Certainly, Sir,” the Alabamian asserted.

“Ever had it?” Case inquired meaningly.

“No,” the Alabamian admitted. “No, Sir, never.”

“Ever had yellow fever?” Case questioned him.

“Never, Sir, thank God,” the Alabamian replied fervently.

“Yet I’ll bet,” Case hammered at him, “that you would be among the first to join a shot-gun quarantine if an epidemic broke out within a hundred miles of you. You have never had it, but you believe in it with every fiber of your being.

“That’s just the way with me. I’ve never been bewitched, but I believe in witchcraft. Belief in witchcraft is like faith in any one of a dozen fashionable religions, not a subject for argument or proof, but a habit of mind. That’s my habit of mind. I won’t discuss it, but I’ve no hesitation about asserting it.

“Witchcraft is like leprosy, both spread among nations indifferent to them, both disappear before unflinching severity. The horror of both among our ancestors abolished both in Europe and kept them from gaining a foothold in this country. Both exist and flourish in other corners of the world, along with other things undreamed of in some complacent philosophies. Leprosy can be repressed only by isolation, the only thing that will abolish witchcraft is fire, fire Sir.”

That finished that discussion. No one said another word on the subject. But it started a round of debates on Case’s mental condition, which ran on for days, everywhere except at Case’s house, and which brought up all that could be said about personal aloofness, pensioned dogs, exposed revolvers and pig-skin belts.

V

The mellow fall merged into Indian Summer. The days were short and the afternoons chill. The weather did not permit the evening gatherings on Case’s veranda. No more did it allow Mary Kenton to sit in her rocker between the two left-hand columns of the big white portico. Yet it was both noticeable and noticed that she never failed to step out upon that portico, no matter what the weather, each afternoon; that in the twilight or in the late dusk the wave of her hand and the sweep of the horseman’s big, broad-brimmed felt hat answered each other unfailingly.

The coterie of Case’s chums, friends and hangers-on gathered then mostly around the generous log-fire in his ample drawing-room, when they were not in the card-room, the billiard-room or at table. I made one of that coterie frequently and enjoyed my hours there with undiminished zest. When I dined there I habitually occupied the foot of the long table, facing Case at the head. The hall door of the dining-room was just at my right hand.

One evening in early December I was so seated at the foot of the table. The weather had been barely coolish for some days, the skies had been clear and everything was dry. That night was particularly mild. We had sat down rather early and it was not yet seven o’clock when Pompey began to pass the cigars. No one had yet lit up. Some one had asked Case a question and the table

was still listening for his answer. I, like the rest, was looking at him. Then it all happened in a tenth, in a hundredth of the time necessary to tell it; so quickly that, except Case, no one had time to move a muscle.

Case's eyes were on his questioner. I did not see the door open, but I saw his gaze shift to the door, saw his habitual glance of startled uncertainty. But instead of the lightning query of his eyes softening into relief and indifference, it hardened instantaneously into decision. I saw his hand go to his holster, saw the revolver leap out, saw the aim, saw his face change, heard his explosive exclamation:

"Good God, it is!" saw the muzzle kick up as the report crushed our ear drums and through the smoke saw him push back his chair and spring up.

The rest of us were all too dazed to try to stand. Like me they all looked toward the door.

There stood Mary Kenton, all in pink, a pink silk opera cloak half off her white shoulders, a single strand of pale coral round her slender throat, a pink pompom in her glossy hair. She was standing as calmly as if nothing had happened, her arms hidden in the cloak, her right hand holding it together in front. Her rings sparkled on her fingers as her breast-pin sparkled on her low corsage.

"Cousin Cassius," she said, "you have a theatrical way of receiving unexpected visitors."

"Good God, Mary," he said. "It is really you. I saw it was really you just in time."

"Of course it is really I," she retorted. "Whom or what did you think it really was?"

"Not you," he answered thickly. "Not you."

His voice died away.

"Now you know it is really I," she said crisply, "you might at least offer me a chair."

At that the spell of our amazement left us and we all sprang to our feet.

She seated herself placidly to the right of the fireplace.

"I hear your port is excellent," she said laughingly. Before Case could hand her the glass she wavered a little in the chair, but a mere swallow revived her.

"I had not anticipated," she said, "so startling a reception."

We stood about in awkward silence.

"Pray ask your guests to be seated, Cousin Cassius," she begged. "I did not mean to disturb your gaiety."

We took our chairs, but those on her side of the table were turned outward toward the fireplace, where Case stood facing her.

"I owe you an explanation," she said easily. "Milly Wilberforce is staying with me and she bet me a box of Maillard's that I would not pay you a call. As I never take a dare, as the weather is fine, and as we have all your guests for chaperons, I thought a brief call between cousins could do no harm."

"It has not," said Case fervently; "but it very nearly did. And now will you let me escort you home? The Judge will be anxious about you."

"Papa doesn't know I am here, of course," she said. "When he finds out, I'll quiet him. If you won't come to see me, at least I have once come to see you."

Case held the door wide for her, shut it behind him, and left us staring at the bullet hole in the door frame.

One morning of the following spring Case was driving me townward from Shelby Manor, when, not a hundred feet in front of us, Mary Kenton's buggy entered the pike from a cross-road. As it

turned, mare, vehicle and all went over sideways with a terrific crash. Mary must have fallen clear for the next instant she was at the mare's head.

Case did succeed in holding his fiery colts and in pulling them to a stand-still alongside the wreck, but it was all even he could do. I jumped out, meaning to take the colts' bits and let Case help Mary. But she greeted me imperiously.

"Cousin Jack, please come sit on Bonnie's head." I took charge of Bonnie in my own fashion and she stood up entirely unhurt.

"How on earth did you come to do it, Mary?"

Colonel Case wondered, for she was a perfect horsewoman.

"Accidents will happen," she answered lightly, "and I am glad of this one. You have really spoken to me, and that is worth a hundred smashes."

"But I wrote to you," he protested. "I wrote to you and explained."

"One letter," she sniffed contemptuously. "You should have kept on, you silly man, I might have answered the fifth or sixth or even the second."

He stared at her and no wonder for she was fascinatingly coquettish.

"I don't mind Jack a bit, you know," she went on. "Jack is my loyal knight and unfailing partisan. He keeps my secrets and does everything I ask of him. For instance, he will not demur an atom now when I ask him to throw Bonnie's harness into the buggy and ride her to town for me.

"You see," she smiled at him dazzlingly, "another advantage of my upset is that the buggy is so smashed that you cannot decently refuse to drive me home."

"But Mary," he protested, "I explained fully to you."

"You didn't really expect me to believe all that fol-de-rol?" she cried. "Suppose I did, I don't see any dwergs around, and if all Malebolge were in plain sight I'd make you take me anyhow."

Inevitably he did, but that afternoon their daily ceremony of hand-wave from the portico and hat-wave from horseback was resumed and was continued as their sole intercourse.

VI

It was full midsummer when a circus came to Brexington. Case and I started for a ride together on the afternoon of its arrival, passed the tents already raised and met the procession on its way through town from the freight yard of the railroad. We pulled our horses to one side of the street and sat watching the show.

There were Cossacks and cowboys, Mexican vaqueros and Indians on mustangs. There were two elephants, a giraffe, and then some camels which set our mounts snorting and swerving about. Then came the cages, one of monkeys, another of parrots, cockatoos and macaws, others with wolves, bears, hyenas, a lion, a lioness, a tiger, and a beautiful leopard.

Case made a movement and I heard a click. I looked round and beheld him with his revolver cocked and pointed at the leopard's cage. He did not fire but kept the pistol aimed at the cage until it was out of range. Then he thrust it back into its holster and watched the fag-end of the procession go by. All he said was:

"You will have to excuse me, Radford, I have urgent business at home."

Towards dusk Cato came to me in great agitation.

"Mahs'r Cash done gone off'n he haid," he declared. "He shuah done loss he sainsus." I told him to return home and I would stroll up there casually.

I found Case in the woodshed, uncle Rastus with him. Hung by the hind legs like new-slaughtered hogs were a dozen of the biggest dogs of which Rastus had had charge. Their throats were cut and each dripped into a tin pail. Rastus, his ebony face paled to a sort of mud-gray, held a large tin pail and a new white-washer's brush.

Case greeted me as usual, as if my presence there were a matter of course and he were engaged upon nothing out of the common.

"Uncle," he said, "I judge those are about dripped out. Pour it all into the big pail."

He took the brush from Rastus, who followed him to the gate.

There Case dipped the brush into the blood and painted a broad band across the gravel of the drive and the flagstones of the footpath. He proceeded as if he were using lime white-wash to mark off a lawn-tennis court in the early days of the game, when wet markers were not yet invented and dry markers were still undreamed of. He continued the stripe of blood all round his place, just inside the hedge. He made it about three inches wide and took great pains to make it plain and heavy.

When he had come round to the entrance again he went over the stripe on the path and drive a second time. Then he straightened up and handed the brush to Rastus.

"Just enough," he remarked. "I calculated nicely."

I had so far held my tongue. But his air of self-approval, as if in some feat of logic led me to blurt out:

"What is it for?"

"The Chinese," said Case, "esteem dogs' blood a defense against sorcery. I doubt its efficacy, but I know of no better fortification."

No reply seemed expected and I made none.

That evening I was at Case's, with some six or seven others. We sat indoors, for the cloudy day had led up to a rainy evening. Nothing unusual occurred.

Next day the town was plastered with posters of the circus company offering five hundred dollars reward for the capture of an escaped leopard.

Cato came to my office just as I was going out to lunch.

"Mahs'r Cash done gone cunjuhin' agin," he announced.

I found out that a second batch of dogs had been brought in by uncle Rastus in his covered wagon behind his unfailing mules, had been butchered like the former convoy and the band of blood gone over a second time. Case had not gone outside that line since he first made it, no drive to Shelby Manor that morning.

The day was perfect after the rain of the day before, and the bright sunlight dried everything. The evening was clear and windless with a nearly full moon intensely bright and very high. Practically the whole population went to the circus.

Beverly and I dined at Case's. He had no other guests, but such was his skill as a host that our dinner was delightfully genial. After dinner the three of us sat on the veranda.

The brilliance of the moonlight on and through the unstirred trees made a glorious spectacle and the mild, cool atmosphere put us in just the humor to enjoy it and each other. Case talked quietly, mostly of art galleries in Europe, and his talk was quite as charming and entertaining as usual. He seemed a man entirely sane and altogether at his ease.

We had been on the veranda about half an hour and in that time neither team nor pedestrian had passed. Then we saw the figure of a woman approaching down the middle of the roadway

from the direction of the country. Beverly and I caught sight of her at about the same instant and I saw him watching her as I did, for she had the carriage and bearing of a lady and it seemed strange that she should be walking, stranger that she should be alone, and strangest that she should choose the road instead of the footpath which was broad and good for half a mile.

Case, who had been describing a carved set of ivory chessmen he had seen in Egypt, stopped speaking and stared as we did. I began to feel as if I ought to recognize the advancing figure, it seemed unfamiliar and yet familiar too in outline and carriage, when Beverly exclaimed:

“By Jove, that is Mary Kenton.”

“No,” said Colonel Case in a combative, resonant tone like the slow boom of a big bell. “No, it is not Mary Kenton.”

I was astonished at the animus of his contradiction and we intensified our scrutiny. The nearing girl really suggested Mary Kenton and yet, I felt sure, was not she. Her bearing made me certain that she was young, and she had that indefinable something about her which leads a man to expect that a woman will turn out to be good looking. She walked with a sort of insolent, high-stepping swing.

When she was nearly opposite us Case exclaimed in a sort of chopped-off, guttural bark:

“Nay, not even in that shape, foul fiend, not even in that.”

The tall, shapely young woman turned just in front of the gateway and walked towards us.

“I think,” said Beverly, “the lady is coming in.”

“No,” said Colonel Case, again with that deep, baying reverberation behind his voice. “No, not coming in.”

The young woman laid her hand on the pathway gate and pushed it open. She stepped inside and then stopped, stopped suddenly, abruptly, with an awkward half-stride, as if she had run into an obstacle in the path, a low obstruction like a wheelbarrow. She stood an instant; looked irresolutely right and left, and then stepped back and shut the gate. She turned and started across the street, fairly striding in a sort of incensed, wrathful haste.

My eyes, like Beverly’s, were on the figure in the road. It was only with a sort of sidelong vision that I felt rather than saw Case whip a rifle from the door jamb to his shoulder and fire. Almost before the explosion rent my ear drums I saw the figure in the roadway crumple and collapse vertically. Petrified with amazement I was frozen with my stare upon the huddle on the macadam. Beverly had not moved and was as dazed as I. My gaze still fixed as Case threw up a second cartridge from the magazine and fired again, I saw the wretched heap on the piking leap under the impact of the bullet with the yielding quiver of totally dead flesh and bone. A third time he fired and we saw the like. Then the spell of our horror broke and we leapt up, roaring at the murderer.

With a single incredibly rapid movement the madman disembarrassed himself of his rifle and held us off, a revolver at each of our heads.

“Do you know what you have done?” we yelled together.

“I am quite sure of what I have done,” Case replied in a big calm voice, the barrels of his pistols steady as the pillars of the veranda. “But I am not quite so clear whether I have earned five hundred dollars reward. Will you gentlemen be kind enough to step out into the street and examine that carcass?”

Woodenly, at the muzzles of those unwavering revolvers, we went down the flagged walk side by side, moving in a nightmare dream.

I had never seen a woman killed before and this woman was presumably a lady, young and handsome. I felt the piking of the roadway under my feet, and looked everywhere, except downward in front of me.

I heard Beverly give a coughing exclamation:

“The leopard!”

Then I looked, and I too shouted:

“The leopard!”

She lay tangible, unquestionable, in plain sight under the silver moonrays with the clear black shadows of the maple leaves sharp on her sleek hide.

Gabbling our excited astonishment we pulled at her and turned her over. She had six wounds, three where the bullets entered and three where they came out, one through spine and breast-bone and two through the ribs.

We dropped the carcass and stood up.

“But I thought . . .” I exclaimed.

“But I saw . . .” Beverly cried.

“You gentlemen,” thundered Colonel Case, “had best not say what you saw or what you thought you saw.”

We stood mute, looking at him, at each other, and up and down the street. No one was in sight. Apparently the circus had so completely drained the neighborhood that no one had heard the shots.

Case addressed me in his natural voice:

“If you will be so good Radford, would you oblige me by stepping into my house and telling Jeff to fetch the wheelbarrow. I must keep watch over this carrion.”

There I left him, the two crooked revolvers pointed at the dead animal.

Jeff, and Cato with him, brought the wheelbarrow. Upon it the two negroes loaded the warm, inert mass of spotted hide and what it contained. Then Jeff lifted the handles and taking turns they wheeled their burden all the way to uncle Rastus’, Case walking on one side of the barrow with his cocked revolvers, we on the other, quite as a matter of course.

Jeff trundled the barrow out to the hay barrack on the knoll. He and Cato and uncle Rastus carried out cord-wood until they had an enormous pile well out in the field. Then they dug up a barrel of kerosene from near one corner of the barrack. When the leopard had been placed on the top of the firewood they broached the barrel and poured its contents over the carcass and its pyre. When it was set on fire Case gave an order to Jeff, who went off.

We stood and watched the pyre burn down to red coals. By that time Jeff had returned from Shelby Manor with a double team.

Case let down the hammers of his revolvers, bolstered them, unbuckled his belt and threw it into the dayton.

Never had we suspected he could sing a note. Now he started “Dixie” in a fine, deep baritone and we sang that and other rousing songs all the way home. When we got out of the dayton he walked loungingly up the veranda steps, his belt hanging over his arm. He took the rifles from the door jamb.

“I have no further use for these trusty friends,” he said. “If you like, you may each have one as a souvenir of the occasion. My defunct pistols and otiose belt I’ll even keep myself.”

Next morning as I was about to pass Judge Kenton’s house I heard heavy footsteps rapidly overtaking me. Turning I saw Case, not in his habitual gray clothes and broad-brimmed semi-

sombrero, but wearing a soft brown felt hat, a blue serge suit, set off by a red necktie and tan shoes. He was conspicuously beltless.

“You might as well come with me, Radford,” he said. “You will probably be best man later anyhow.”

We found Judge Kenton on his porch, and Mary, all in pink, with a pink rose in her hair, seated between her father and her pretty step-mother.

“I sent Jeff with a note,” Case explained as we approached the steps, “to make sure of finding them.”

After the greetings were over Case said:

“Judge, I am a man of few words. I love your daughter and I ask your permission to win her if I can.”

“You have my permission, Suh,” the Judge answered.

Case rose.

“Mary,” he said, “would you walk with me in the garden, say to the grape arbor?”

When they returned Mary wore a big ruby ring set round with diamonds. Her color was no bad match for the ruby. And, beyond a doubt, Case’s cheeks showed a trace of color too.

“Father,” Mary said as she seated herself, “I am going to marry Cousin Cassius.”

“You have my blessing, my dear,” the Judge responded. “I am glad of it.”

“Everybody will be glad, I believe,” said Mary. “Cassius is glad, of course, and he is glad of two other things. One is that he feels free to dine with us tonight, he has just told me so.

“The other” (a roguish light sparkled in her eyes) “he has not confessed. But I just know that, next to marrying me, the one thing in all this world that makes him gladdest is that now at last he feels at liberty to see a horse race and go to the races every chance he gets.”

In fact, when they returned from their six-months’ wedding tour, they were conspicuous at every race meeting. Case’s eyes had lost their restlessness and his cheeks showed as healthy a coloring as I ever saw on any human being.

It might be suggested that there should be an explanation to this tale. But I myself decline to expound my own theory. Mary never told what she knew, and her husband, in whose after life there has been nothing remarkable as far as I know, has never uttered a syllable.