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ACTION STORIES

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by **TED
ROSCOE**

**BUCKSHOT
GOLD**
NOVELET
by
**BENNETT
FOSTER**



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Front Cover**

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ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

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*"Quick Molly!" Tom
commanded, "Get in-
side!"*

BUCKSHOT GOLD

By Bennett Foster

Ex-Ranger Tom Harmes wanted peace when he nestered in Climax. But that powderkeg town didn't let Colt-weary lawmen forget their gunsmoke past.

TOM HARMES crowned out across the saddleback of the pass, his thirty head of steers and his pack horse ahead of him, and dropping down

the long slope toward the park in the aspens, looked with approval at the good green grass. Here, in this mountain park or in one like it, the steers would fill

their winter gauntness so that, when Fall turned the aspens yellow, they would weigh out as beef. Across the park, close-set by the aspens and the growing spruce, a mine dump made a gray scar against the slope, and Tom Harmes' square-hewn face lighted momentarily as he saw the cabin and the dump. Unless he had missed the trail, this was the park he sought. The stage driver had said to turn west at the canyon end, and Harmes had turned west.

The steers, reaching the grass, spread out, fan wise, and the bed-horse dropped his wise head and began to graze. There was water in the park if the straggling line of elders did not lie, and there was surely pasture. Harmes reined Dusty to a stop and, weight on one stirrup, scanned the scene.

Sitting there in front of the aspens he was boldly outlined against their greenery. Down in the park the bed-horse raised his head and then lead thunked into aspens behind Tom Harmes and the flatly wicked report of a rifle rang across the grassland.

Harmes straightened and slid the .38-.55 carbine from its boot under his right fender. Dusty came alert, and again the rifle spanked the quiet. There was no mistake. In the aspens across the park a man was shooting at Tom Harmes.

Dusty came down the slope, weaving under knee pressure, presenting a twisting, head-on target at full speed. In Tom's hands the Winchester became a thing alive, the flame licking from its muzzle like the wicked forked tongue of a snake as he sent lead searching among the aspens.

An old tale this, a thing that Tom Harmes had done before, a vicious, nasty story that must soon be ended. The steers scattered and the packhorse ran and Dusty crashed into the aspens and stopped, sliding on his hind feet as Tom Harmes set him down. Up the slope, horses threshed through brush and there was a fleeting glimpse of a bay hide and a man bent low in a saddle. The crashing died away and Tom Harmes, pushing shells into the loading gate of the Winchester, drew a long breath.

He had not thought it possible. He had crossed New Mexico Territory, had

come three hundred miles to avoid this thing. In the Indian Territory there was many a man, many an outlaw, who would kill Deputy United States Marshal Tom Harmes if he could. But in these climbing hills, who would fire on Tom Harmes, cowman?

There was quiet in the aspens and the park. Tom Harmes started Dusty once more, weaving slowly among the aspens until, reaching the ridge top, he could scan country. Deliberately he rode his circle, seeing the horse tracks deep in the leaf mold. Two men then, and they had been on foot when they spied Tom and fired those shots. But they had been mounted and in a hurry when Dusty came charging across the little park. The riders had gone west, over the ridge and into heavy timber. Tom reined Dusty back and sent him skirting through the aspens again toward the park.

His face settled into grim, harsh lines as he reached the opening. He had come far enough. This was the stopping place. Here in this park he would stay, and if they wanted Tom Harmes, cowman, and let him alone, well and good. But if they wanted Tom Harmes, marshal and gunman and fighter, then they could have that, too. This was the end of the trail, as far as Tom Harmes was concerned.

HE waited there cannily at the edge of the aspens for sometimes men came back. Always give a man time, was Tom Harmes' motto. It seemed, presently, as though his waiting would bring reward. Dusty cocked black-tipped ears and looked toward the right and Tom saw a horse coming into the park, the rider sitting jauntily. He watched horse and rider come on and then rubbed a hand across his eyes, for surely he was deceived. The rider was a woman. Still Tom waited until, certain that his eyes told the truth, he could wait no longer, and rode out.

The girl saw him at once and altered her course. At ten feet both reined in.

Tom Harmes saw brown hair, bright enough to be almost red, straying from beneath a Stetson hat, red lips and smooth cheeks tinged by the blood beneath the skin, and a firmly rounded chin. But it was the girl's eyes that held him.

They were brown and limpid as water that runs slowly into a deep pool, and there were gold flecks in them.

"Good mawnin'," Tom drawled.

The girl said, "good morning," crisply, and added a question: "Are these your cattle?"

"Yes, ma'am." Tom looked at the grazing steers and then back to the girl.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm puttin' the steers on grass," Tom answered deliberately. "The stage driver told me that there was a park up here with a cabin that was deserted, an' plenty of grass. Sorrel Park, he called it."

"Sorrel is over the ridge to the north." The girl gestured with a smooth, brown hand. "This is North Alder."

"I'm sorry," Tom acknowledged the correction.

"Not but that you're not welcome here," the girl said quickly. "I don't own all the park."

"Thanks," Tom said dryly. "My name is Tom Harmes, ma'am. I expect that I'll go on to Sorrel Park. I'll need a cabin. This one is open an' I thought . . ."

"It's being used though." The girl smiled. "My partner lives there. I'm Molly Sherman, Mr. Harmes, and my partner and I have a claim here in North Alder."

"Yore pardner?" Tom's voice showed his astonishment.

Once more the girl laughed. "I work in the assay office in Climax," she explained. "Sometimes I grubstake prospectors for half of what they find. I've known Packrat almost five years, and I grubstaked him."

"Packrat, ma'am?"

"Packrat Moran," the girl amplified. "He was in Climax not long ago and told me that he had something interesting to show me."

"Ma'am," Tom drawled, "does yore pardner shoot at strangers an' does he have a horse?"

Momentarily anxiety glinted in the brown eyes. "Of course not," Molly Sherman answered quickly. "I doubt if Packrat has a gun, and I know he hasn't a horse. He has two burros but . . . Why? Did someone try to shoot at you?"

"It was maybe a mistake," Tom Harmes answered thoughtfully.

"You were shot at, and the cabin door is open. You didn't see Packrat?" Alarm took the place of anxiety.

"Not unless he rode a horse," Tom drawled slowly. "Two men went out ahead of me when I came across the park. I . . ." He stopped. Molly Sherman had wheeled her bay and was riding at a lope toward the cabin. Dusty leaped forward, from dead stop to run in one jump as Tom touched him with the spurs.

BAY horse and dun horse reached the cabin at the same time. The girl flung herself from the saddle. Tom, dismounting more slowly, reached the cabin door a step behind her. Inside the cabin a table was overturned and a bench lay on its side. The bunk was a litter of tangled, tattered bedding, and on the sheet-iron stove a frying pan, the beans in it dry and hard, spoke of a man's being disturbed in preparing a meal some time before.

"Packrat!" Molly called. "Packrat!"

Something scurried from beneath the bunk across the floor to disappear in a hole. Tom Harmes said gently, "He ain't here, ma'am."

"But where?" The girl faced him, searching his face with her eyes. "Where could he have gone?"

Tom stepped into the cabin, crossed to the stove and examined the beans. The coffee pot was dry and when he shook it there came the swish of dried grounds. "He was cookin'," Tom said slowly. "Gettin' a meal. An' somethin' or somebody came in on him. He fought it. Here's . . ." Harmes stopped abruptly. A brown rusty smear stained the tangled bedding, and on the dirt floor there was a spot, darker than the dirt.

"That's blood!" The girl's voice was sharp.

"It's blood," Tom agreed.

"Then. . ."

"Ma'am," Tom Harmes said, "yore pardner ain't here. He's been hurt. I'll look around."

"I'll go with you," Molly Sherman declared.

There was no use in arguing with that

tone of voice. Tom shrugged. "Suit yorese'f," he drawled.

Outside the cabin one place of concealment was in evidence: the mine dump. Together Tom and Molly Sherman climbed the dump and, reaching the windlass, stopped. Tom's nose told him that the search was ended here, even before it had half begun. Tom Harnes had smelled that odor before, the faint, sickening sweet smell of decomposing human flesh.

"He's down there," Tom said quietly. "There ain't no use to look, ma'am. He's dead."

The girl, too, caught the odor and her face blanched. For an instant she stood stock still and then, with uncertain step she moved toward the edge of the dump. Tom caught her arm and helped her down the loose rock slope. "You've come from town," he drawled. "Is there law there?"

"In Climax?" The girl had recovered herself to an extent. "There's Mr. Wreckerly."

"An' he . . . ?" Tom prompted.

"He's chairman of the Vigilante Committee."

An instant's pause. Then: "We'd better ride an' bring him out here," Tom said slowly. "We'd better bring men, too, an' some rope. They'll want to get the body out of the shaft, an' they'll want to know. Can you go?"

The girl seemed to brace herself. "I'll go," she answered.

"Then," drawled Tom Harnes, "we'll go."

II

DUSTY could singlefoot and Molly Sherman's bay horse had a little foxtrot in level country. They kept side by side as the trail allowed and when they were over the ridge south of the park, the trail was wide enough. The ride across North Alder and the ridge had been silent, but now Molly Sherman began to talk.

"They called him Packrat," she said suddenly, "because he would never kill one of them. Wherever he had a camp the place was always overrun with packrats and chipmunks and rock squirrels.

He never harmed anyone or anything. Why would they kill him?"

"Mebbe," Tom said slowly, "it's not yore pardner in the shaft. Mebbe. . . ."

"It's Packrat." There was utter finality in the girl's voice. "I know."

Tom accepted that.

"Why?" Molly's voice was a plaint. "Why did they do it?"

"He told you he'd have somethin' to show you," Tom answered. "He was lookin' for gold, wasn't he?"

"Of course. That's why. . . . Do you mean that he found it? Do you think he made a strike?"

"Why else? He must have found it. What kind of a man was yore pardner? Did he talk much?"

Training asked the question, long years of law work, or asking this and adding that until a sum was reached. At thirty Tom Harnes had ten years of just that sort of thing behind him, and habit was strong.

The girl's brown eyes examined him curiously. "Why do you ask that?"

"Because if he talked, men would know he'd made a strike. Find out who he talked to, an' you've got a lead."

Molly shook her head. "Packrat didn't talk," she said definitely. "Once, a long time ago, he found a mine. A man cheated him out of it by recording the claim before Packrat could. Packrat told me that. He wouldn't talk to anyone except me."

"An' did you talk?"

There was shock in the brown eyes. "I. . . . No! Not to anyone who would do this."

"But you did talk?"

The red lips trembled. "I can't remember. Of course, they knew in Climax that I'd grubstaked Packrat. They teased me about it, but I don't think I said anything. I'm sure I didn't."

The man's broad shoulders lifted and fell as he shrugged. "That makes it harder then," he drawled. "Harder for you, I mean. It makes it a little easier on me."

"Easier on you?"

"I'd thought that there was someone who knew me in the country," Tom explained. "On account of the shots. I mean. I guess I was mistaken. They

were there, lookin' for what yore pardner had found, an' I rode down on 'em. That was all."

"But . . . why did you think it was someone that knew you?"

"I was," said Tom Harmes, "an officer, up to a month ago. I've got enemies. I'd quit all that, I thought. Then it looked like I couldn't quit when they shot at me."

"An officer?" the girl repeated. Tom nodded. Silence came for a while, broken only by the rhythmic sound of the horses' travel. Then the girl said: "I see."

Tom Harmes wondered if she did? Could she, could anyone, see why he had left his job, why he had traveled, why he had invested his meager savings in a bunch of gaunt steers and had put that other kind of living behind him? A man gets tired of looking for other men, he gets hardened and calloused; and behind everything that happens he sees a motive, a crooked, devious scheme. He doesn't become afraid—Tom Harmes did not know the meaning of the word—he gets weary. Tom had put all that away, he hoped.

The canyon widened, angled to the right, and Climax lay before them, sprawled out along the canyon floor, a little street of buildings, a mill and mine dump at its end, cabins and shacks set on the hillsides with paths leading down from them.

"Mr. Wreckerly will be at the mill," Molly Sherman said. "They've closed down the mine. They're waiting for a pump to drain it."

THREE horses were tied to the hitch-rail close beside the mill and in the office to which Molly conducted Tom, were the riders: a tall, grave-faced man who was Glen Wreckerly; a stout, bearded man who was introduced as Len Woods; a narrow, hard-faced fellow who chewed tobacco and who had a mean eye, and he was Carl Borgsum. They listened to Molly's hasty story and to Tom's added details.

From the pocket of his vest Wreckerly pulled a heavy gold hunting-case watch and looked at it. "Four," he stated. "We'll have time to go and come back before dark. Carl, you get five men, any

five that aren't busy, and horses, and a coil of rope. You'll go with us, Len?"

"I'll be ready in ten minutes," Len Woods answered, and hastened from the office. Wreckerly glanced again at the watch and then, opening the back of the case, wound it with a small silver key, the while he asked more questions. Borgsum had already gone out upon his errand, and Tom relaxed, resting his square shoulders against the back of a chair while he answered Wreckerly as to his business in the country.

Borgsum came back in a short time, and Len Woods returned, bringing another man, and they trooped out of the mill office. They mounted and rode, Molly Sherman between Glen Wreckerly and Tom Harmes. Her bay kept close to big dun Dusty, and somehow there was satisfaction in that to Tom.

The steers were grazing in the park and the hobbled pack horse watched curiously as the posse approached. The riders dismounted at the cabin and glanced in, then made a procession to the mine dump. Len Woods and another lowered the pole ladder and went into the shaft, and Molly stayed away, close to the cabin, while the body was brought out of the shaft and while Doctor Barry from Climax made an examination.

Packrat Moran was an unlovely thing and as the others talked, Tom brought a blanket from the cabin and spread it over its erstwhile owner. His voice was harsh when he interrupted the conversation. "We'd better bury him. He does no good lyin' here."

There was more talk and a debate as to the site of the grave, then Len Woods took a pick and Tom a spade and in the shade of a spruce above the shaft, they began to dig. The blanket-wrapped body went into the grave, and Glen Wreckerly, his head bare, said a prayer. It seemed fitting that grave-faced Glen Wreckerly should pray. Molly stood by, white-faced, while earth was shoveled in.

Back at the cabin once more, the men made a little knot, with Molly and Tom outside it. They talked and examined the cabin and talked again, and the only decisive thing was said by Glen Wreckerly.

"Murder!" Wreckerly pronounced, his

face grim. "I've been too lax. I'll call a meeting of the committee when we get back to town."

Idly, Tom Harmes wondered what good a meeting of the Vigilante Committee would do, but he did not voice the thought.

Then Wreckerly looked at his gold watch and the shadows grew long across North Alder and it was time to go. Horses were untied and mounted, while Tom Harmes stood by, watching.

"You aren't going to Climax?" Wreckerly asked.

"My steers are here," Tom answered. "They need the grass. Likely I'll take them on to Sorrel Park tomorrow."

"I see," Wreckerly said. "Then you'll be here tonight."

"I'll be here."

Wreckerly walked off to his horse, and Molly Sherman, close beside Tom, spoke suddenly. "Won't you stay on here?"

"Why?" Tom's grave blue eyes searched the girl's face.

"Isn't this as good as Sorrel Park?"

"I've never seen better grass," Tom answered. "Do you want me to stay?"

"I . . . He wouldn't be so lonely, would he? If you were here? You could use the cabin if it pleased you; and . . . will you stay?"

"Because of what he found? He was killed, you know."

The girl's eyes were troubled. "I wasn't thinking of that," she said. "I was thinking about him being up there all alone."

Tom nodded slowly. "I'll stay," he agreed. "At least until you send somebody out to look after things."

Impulsively the girl held out her hand. Tom took it, feeling its warm and slender strength. "Thank you," said Molly Sherman.

"They'll take you back to town," Tom said. "Good-by."

III

PACKRAT MORAN

Born

Died in May, 189--

TOM HARMES finished placing the headboard he had carved, and turned away. He had been in North Alder Park

for three days and time hung heavily on his hands. He rode daily but the steers had located in the park and did not stray, and the horses stayed close. The headboard had been a means of time-killing, just as the desultory searching that he did, served to fill idle hours. Tom knew that he would not recognize Moran's strike if he found it. Rock was just rock to Tom Harmes.

Tom was not lonely. There was a chipmunk that came to sit on the edge of the table in the morning, and chatter until he was fed. A family of tame rock squirrels lived in the mine dump, and there was a big packrat that boldly stared at Tom with beady eyes and was not frightened at all, scurrying away only when approached too closely. Tom called the Packrat "Honest John" and had already experienced a little difficulty with the gentleman. Honest John had stolen a cartridge and carried it off to his cache, and now his eye was on Tom's spurs.

Returning to the cabin after placing the headboard, Tom cast about for something else to do. He was standing in the middle of the cabin when he heard Dusty nicker, and going to the door saw that the immediate solution to his problem was at hand. Molly Sherman and a man who walked and drove a burro, were coming across North Alder. Tom went out to meet them.

The girl greeted him and introduced her companion as Mr. Able. Able was typical of a breed, Tom thought. The man's bright small eyes did not remain fixed on one object, but constantly shifted; and his face was hidden behind a whiskery bush. His clothing, clean enough, showed plenty of hard wear, while his hat had lost all semblance of shape.

"Animas Able," the old prospector amplified Molly's introduction. "Molly thought I could come out here and look around."

The girl's brown eyes were anxious. "You won't mind, will you?" she asked.

"Not a bit," Tom answered.

Able went into the cabin and the girl spoke again. "He was Packrat's friend. I thought. . . . You really won't mind his being here?"

"Why, no," Tom drawled. "I can pull on to Sorrel Park with the steers."

"But I don't want you to go. Please don't."

"Why not?" Tom questioned. "You've got a man out here now."

"Don't you see?" The girl's voice was desperate. "Two of you will be safe." She hesitated a brief moment and then continued. "Animas really knows mining. My father used to say that Animas was one of the best rock men he'd ever known, even if he is a little bit queer."

"Queer?"

"He thinks that he can talk with the dead. That's one reason he came. He says that Packrat will tell him where to look for what he found. That's why they call him Animas."

"Animas." Spirits! Tom grinned. North Alder Park was certainly a stopping place for some choice specimens. First, Packrat Moran who tamed chipmunks and packrats and rock squirrels; then Tom Harmes, peace officer, a fugitive from his job; and now Animas Able who believed that he could talk with ghosts and who thought that the spirit of Packrat Moran would tell him where to look for a mine.

"I see," Tom Harmes said quietly, amusement still in his eyes.

"You'll stay?" Molly questioned. "You won't think I'm trying to run you away?"

"Why, there's no point in my going if it's all right for me to stay," Tom replied. "I'm settled here."

The girl smiled, released from her anxiety. "You haven't found anything, Tom?" she questioned. "You haven't seen anyone or found anything that would help?"

"That would help, how?" Tom smiled. She had called him Tom as unconsciously as he, in his mind, called her Molly.

"That would help discover who killed Packrat.

"No. I haven't."

Animas came out of the cabin and headed for his burro. "I'll get my bed," he announced. "Then I'll build a bunk over against that east wall. There's room for one there."

"Yo're more interested in findin' out who killed Moran than you are in what Moran found," Tom stated when Animas was gone.

The girl looked up to meet his eyes. "I am," she agreed frankly. "You see, I feel responsible for his being killed. If I hadn't grubstaked him he wouldn't have come to North Alder and if I'd come out when he asked me to, he wouldn't have been killed."

Tom shook his head. "Yo're not responsible," he assured.

"But I feel as though I were," she insisted.

"You weren't." Tom's voice was curt. He was wondering if this brown-eyed girl would have felt the same responsibility had he, Tom Harmes, come to the same end as had Packrat Moran. She had asked him to stay here in North Alder, to take a chance with death.

Molly answered the question that was in his mind. "You can take care of yourself. You're different from Packrat or from Animas. But I've been worried, just the same. I asked you to stay but if anything had happened. . . ."

That got home to Tom. It had been a long time since anyone had worried about the safety of Tom Harmes.

"I'm goin' to get dinner pretty soon," he announced. "You'll stay?"

"I can stay until afternoon," the girl assured.

Animas was unloading his pack beside the cabin.

"If you got time then I'll show you what I've done," Tom said awkwardly. "I kind of fixed a headboard for Moran. I didn't know all about him, but I put down his name."

As they climbed the side of the old dump, Molly's hand fell on Tom's arm and she left it there. She stood beside him, surveying the headboard and, when they turned away, she spoke. "You look hard," she said. "You're not."

Somehow that was a compliment.

TOM cooked dinner and the three sat down together to eat. If he had been worried about his new companion, his fears were lessened at the meal. Animas washed, and combed his hair before coming to the table, and his manners there were singularly neat. He suggested a grace before the meal and, while the others waited, spoke one in a tongue that was unfamiliar to Tom. When Molly was

making ready to leave after dinner, Tom questioned the girl.

"Latin," Molly explained. "I don't know where he learned it, Tom."

Tom Harmes rode back to Climax with Molly. She had insisted that she go alone but Tom, saddling Dusty, said: "You'll not go ridin' in these hills by yoreself. Not if I know it."

On the ride in to town Molly talked freely. She was, Tom estimated, about twenty, ten years younger than he, but not many years younger in experience. Molly Sherman had not had an easy time. Her father had died two years before. Sherman had been an assayer and had worked for Wreckerly. Wreckerly had employed a man to take Sherman's place, but had kept Molly in the assay office.

"Sometimes," the girl confided, "I've thought it was charity. I thought he kept me there because he was sorry for me. But recently I've thought . . ." She stopped, her cheeks flushed with color. Reading that sign, Tom knew that Wreckerly had been paying more than charity courtesy to Molly Sherman. In the blue-eyed man a small anger arose. What business did Wreckerly, a man twice the girl's age, have in courting her? Without realizing it, Tom Harmes was definitely jealous.

"That's one reason why I grubstaked Packrat Moran," Molly said. "I guess it's in my blood. Dad used to do it, too. He wasn't strong and he couldn't get into the hills himself, but he always lived in hopes that some day a man he'd grubstaked would strike it rich and that we'd be independent."

In Climax, at the assay office, Tom was introduced to Molly's boss, an elderly man named Connors, and examined with interest the furnace, the assay scales and the other tools that were used in the business; while Molly gave him a brief summary of the method by which ore was assayed. Then promising that he would return her horse to the livery barn, Tom left.

Having delivered the bay to the livery, and leaving Dusty tied to a hitchrack, Tom strolled along the street. In a store close beside the Mint Saloon he left an order, asking that his purchases be put into a sack. He paid for them and then, with

a little time to wait, went next door to the Mint Saloon.

The Mint was unoccupied save by a bartender and a man that Tom took to be the proprietor. Going to the bar he leaned an elbow on its top and as the bartender approached, he recognized the man. The bartender was Shorty Grice who had worked in a saloon at Woodward when Tom Harmes had visited that town on business. The recognition was mutual.

"Tom Harmes!" Shorty exclaimed. "What are you doin' over here?"

"I've got a few steers in the hills," Tom answered briefly. "How is it with you, Shorty?"

"Good enough!" Shorty wanted to talk. "When'd you leave the Territory? Are you hooked up with the marshal's office over here?"

"No," Tom answered. "I left over there a month ago. I'm not in the business any more, Shorty."

"Come here, Logan," Shorty ordered. "I want you to meet Tom Harmes, one of the best peace officers the Indian Territory ever saw. Shake hands with Jake Logan, Tom."

Tom shook a limp hand. Logan offered a drink and Shorty served it. There was some desultory conversation and then Logan went out. Shorty was harmless and he had a lot of news, and Tom stayed in the Mint, listening and asking an occasional question, in no hurry to go back to North Alder and the cabin and Animas.

While he loafed, men came into the Mint. Some of these had accompanied Wreckerly's posse when Moran's body was discovered, and the talk turned to that tragedy. Among the newcomers was Carl Borgsum, lean and taciturn and perpetually scowling. Borgsum watched Tom intently.

"An' you never have found a thing that would give a clue as to who killed him?" Len Woods asked. He was beside Tom, leaning on the bar.

"Not a thing," Tom answered.

"Mebbe," Carl Borgsum said pointedly, "you don't want to find anything. Would that be it, Harmes?"

Instantly Tom was alert. He had seen this sort of thing before, this deliberate challenge. Borgsum had the stamp of

a troublemaker, a gunman. There was only one way to deal with men like Borgsum. A gunman picked a quarrel, knowing all the way through what he would do, and, therefore, having the advantage. But a man who took the jump, who took the play himself, put the gunman at a disadvantage and sometimes averted trouble.

"Just what do you mean by that, Borgsum?" Tom challenged. "Are you tryin' to ride me?"

Quick glances passed between the men in the saloon, and one, nearest the door, went out hurriedly. Apparently these men knew Borgsum for what he was: a troublemaker, a killer. They moved away from Tom and from the lean man.

"What," Borgsum retorted, "would you do if I was tryin' to ride you, Harmes?"

BORGSUM wore a big gun on his left side, the butt pointed forward for a cross draw. Eyeing that weapon, Tom remembered a thing that he had learned long ago when he first joined the U. S. Marshal's force in the Territory.

"I think," Tom Harmes drawled, "that it would make me just a little sore, Borgsum, an' that I'd send you home for yore spurs. I don't take ridin'."

"By God, you'll take it if I want you to," Borgsum blustered, typically bullying, relying upon a reputation that Tom Harmes did not know. "You turned up mighty pat out there in North Alder. You were right on deck. Mebbe you'd been there longer than you said. Mebbe you'd been there too long."

"You mean," Tom drawled, "that I'd been there long enough to have killed Moran. That's what yo're tryin' to say. I'll not remind you that I hadn't unpacked my horse an' that the driver of the stage seen me bringin' my steers up the canyon. It ain't necessary. You've got a loud mouth, Borgsum. Maybe you don't like me stayin' in Alder Park? Is that it?"

"I just don't like yore stayin'," Borgsum snapped. "You been too long in the country, Harmes, an' too long in town. Get out of Climax!"

"Or . . . ?" Tom suggested.

"Or I'll run you out!"

"Start runnin' me then!"

Tom was close to Carl Borgsum, close enough. To get room for action Borgsum would take a step back and go for his gun. He might shoot, he might not, but Tom thought that he would. The sudden flare-up in the Mint Saloon had all the earmarks of a framed job. Borgsum began his backward step and the reaching movement of his right hand across his body, and Tom Harmes used the thing he had remembered. His broad and powerful left hand shot out to clamp on Borgsum's wrist. Smooth, compact shoulder muscles jerked and Tom's right hand came up swift and hard beneath Borgsum's extended arm. There was a pop as of a broken stick as Borgsum wilted, his face contorted and white with pain, his gun clattering useless to the floor of the Mint. Tom let go his grip and Borgsum's arm dangled limp, broken at the elbow. He had struck harder than he had intended, Tom thought, but that was all right. Here was a bully who, before he tried again, would have to learn to shoot with his left hand.

"I've broke his arm," Tom said calmly, turning toward Shorty. "He'll need some help to get to the doctor."

Borgsum, beads of perspiration on his face, white ringing his lips, sank groaning to the floor.

"Good God!" Shorty exclaimed. "Tom . . . you. . . ."

"I didn't want to kill him," Tom drawled. "Get him to the doctor, some of you. That arm's hurtin' him like hell."

The Mint's door opened and Glen Wreckerly, followed by Logan, came in hurriedly. "What's happened here?" Wreckerly demanded. "I'd heard that there was trouble. I . . . What happened to Carl?"

Instantly voices babbled, answering the question. Tom stood motionless, watching Wreckerly. Len Woods, pushing himself forward, reached Wreckerly's side.

"I seen it," Woods announced quickly. "Harmes broke Carl's arm. Carl was tryin' to pick a fuss an' he went to pull his gun."

"Is that right, Harmes?" Wreckerly's dark eyes searched Tom's face. "Did he try to draw on you?"

"That's right," Woods assured. "It's the gospel, Wreckerly. I thought for a minute there that Carl was goin' to kill him. Carl's been drinkin'."

"I won't have trouble in Climax!" Wreckerly snapped. "I won't have it. Harmes, if you started this. . ."

"I didn't start it," Tom Harmes stated flatly. "I finished it. One man tried to run me out of this town an' he had no luck. Don't you try it, Wreckerly."

Absolute silence filled the Mint Saloon. Glen Wreckerly was the big man of Climax, owner of the mine and the mill, head of the Vigilantes, respected, honored, obeyed and feared. And this rock-faced newcomer poised in front of the Mint's bar, and flung a defiance into Wreckerly's face. No one knew just what would happen, just how Wreckerly would react.

Glen Wreckerly flushed, the color suffusing his dark cheeks. For an instant he was tense, and then, relaxing, he spoke.

"I'm a fair man, Harmes. Len here says that the quarrel was forced on you and that Carl reached for his gun. I'll investigate that. I'll not have trouble in Climax."

"While yo're investigatin'," Tom's voice was thin, "I'll get my groceries an' go home. I'll be out in North Alder in case you or anybody else wants to talk to me."

Deliberately he walked past Wreckerly and, reaching the door, paused with his hand on the knob and looked back. Borgsum was off the floor now, two men supporting him, and Glen Wreckerly had faced around so that his eyes, dark and burning with his anger, met Tom's. "Take notice, gentlemen," Tom Harmes drawled, "I'm leavin' town, not bein' run out of it." The door opened under his hand and he walked on out.

NO one came to North Alder Park. Nothing happened. There were no repercussions from the swift action in Climax. Tom Harmes was surprised and, as two days went by, a little worried. There should have been something, some happening. Men like Carl Borgsum did not work alone. Borgsum's breed always had a gang to back them. Maybe

—Tom allowed himself this doubt—it had not been a frame-up after all. Maybe Borgsum had just been drunk and ugly and, like the bully of any little town, intent on trying out a newcomer. There was a pattern to these things, Tom Harmes knew, but the pattern here was changed and it puzzled him.

On the third day after the noon meal, Glen Wreckerly and Len Woods came out from Climax. Animas was outside the cabin reading a book, and Tom was inside, puzzling about Animas. He could not fathom Animas at all. The old man had built a shelf above his bunk and put his personal possessions on it. Several dog-eared volumes occupied the shelf, and curiosity prompted Tom to examine them. One book was written in Greek, two more were in Latin, and the third was a heavy, tattered volume of Shakespeare's works. All were inscribed on the flyleaf: "Arthur Horatio Able" and one had, in addition to the name: "Magdalen College, Oxford." Now what would an Oxford man who read Greek and Latin and Shakespeare be doing in North Alder Park? Particularly a man who believed in ghosts? It was a minor mystery and occasionally Tom turned to it as a relief from the greater mystery of Packrat Moran's death and the search for its cause.

Animas called: "Company, Tom," and Tom came out to greet Glen Wreckerly and Woods.

At first it was Woods who talked. He commented on the condition of the cattle, on the beauty of the park, and asked questions. Had Tom found anything that might lead to a solution of Packrat Moran's death? Tom said that he had not. A lull came in Woods' conversation and Wreckerly broached the subject for his visit.

"I came out to apologize, Harmes," Wreckerly said. "I was upset in Climax the other day. Len had told me how it was and Shorty Grice tells me that you were a peace officer in the Indian Territory, and he vouches for you. I thought that you had pushed the quarrel on Borgsum, but I was mistaken."

Having made the brief apology, he held out his hand, and Tom, perforce, took it. "That's all right, Wreckerly,"

Tom said. "We all make mistakes."

"Borgsum," Wreckerly said, "is still in Climax. You broke his arm and Doctor Barry set it. Borgsum will stay until the doctor says that he can travel, then he'll go. I knew that he had a bad reputation but I thought he'd be afraid to try a thing like that in Climax. He should have known better."

"There's no use talkin' about it," Tom drawled. "I didn't want trouble any more than you did."

"Grice tells me that you could have killed Borgsum as easily as you broke his arm," Wreckerly persisted. His voice was even and, to Tom, it seemed that there was speculation in Wreckerly's eyes. "I'm glad that you didn't. There hasn't been a killing in Climax since the Vigilantes were organized."

"I don't know," Tom replied. "I might have beat him with a gun. I'm not sure. This other way seemed like the best one."

Woods broke into the talk again. He had been looking at four steers that grazed close to the cabin. "I've never seen cattle take on weight the way these have. They're sure picked up from when I saw them first."

"They're doin' fine," Tom agreed, glad of the change of subject. "They'll be heavy by fall."

"You want to sell them, don't you?" Wreckerly asked. "Didn't you tell me that you'd planned to take a beef contract?"

"That was the idea," Tom agreed.

Wreckerly pursed his lips as though in meditation. "I'd like to buy these steers," he said suddenly. "I can use them. I run a commissary for the mine and I feed forty men. I could use this beef."

"They're for sale," Tom drawled.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Wreckerly said briskly. "I'll give you forty dollars apiece for the steers, right now. You can deliver them in Climax Canyon above the mine."

The steers had cost Tom thirty dollars a head. He could clear three hundred at this price. "Here's your chance, Harmes," Woods said. "You could bring in another bunch of steers. I can use some beef this winter, too."

Woods, Tom knew, operated a small mine outside of Climax and hauled his ore to Wreckerly's mill. "It's a quick profit," he drawled. "I ought to sell to you, Wreckerly, but I'd made my plans to summer here. I hate to change them."

"I'll change plans whenever I can make money," Wreckerly announced curtly. "You'd better sell, Harmes."

Tom hesitated, and then, sudden decision forming, nodded agreement. "You've bought the steers," he stated.

Wreckerly's eyes showed his satisfaction. "I'll pay you when you deliver in Climax Canyon," he announced. "When will that be?"

"Whenever you say."

There was a pause. "How about tomorrow?" Wreckerly asked.

Again a pause. Animas had stood by, silent, all through the business talk, and now he spoke a word. "I'll help you take them over, Tom."

"All right," Tom agreed. "Tomorrow evenin', late. I can do that with Animas helpin' me."

"Good." Wreckerly's satisfaction was plain. "I'll be there with your money."

"An' I'll be there with the steers."

"You two deal quick," Woods commented. "You'll be goin' out to bring in another bunch, Harmes?"

Why did Woods ask that? Why had he twice suggested that Tom Harmes go out of North Alder Park and bring back more steers?

"I don't know," Tom drawled. "I might."

The business done, the men visited for a time and then Wreckerly and Woods made their departure. When they were gone, Animas asked a question.

"You'll be leaving now?"

"Why did you ask that?" Tom queried.

Animas shrugged. "I merely wanted to know," he said. "Molly. . . ."

"What about Molly?"

"Nothing."

TOM bunched the steers that evening and early the next morning with Animas riding a blanket cinched on Tom's packhorse, they started with the cattle. Late in the evening, having accomplished some fifteen miles of mountain drive, the steers were delivered to Glen Wreck-

erly in the canyon above Climax. Wreckerly paid Tom Harmes twelve hundred dollars in gold.

A hard faced gentleman who said that he had at one time punched cows before he turned miner, took charge of the steers, and Tom and Animas accompanied Wreckerly down the canyon to the town. He left them there and Tom, glancing sidelong at Animas, said: "I think I'll go an' tell Molly that I've sold the steers."

"Go head," Animas directed. "I'll be in the Mint when you're ready to leave."

The assay office was closed and by inquiry Tom located Molly's cabin. He took Dusty up the footpath that led to the little log building and when he stopped Molly appeared at the door. Tom dismounted and the girl walked out to meet him.

"I sold my steers," Tom announced. "To Wreckerly. I delivered them today."

"I heard that you'd sold them." Molly was at his side. "Won't you come in?"

The cabin's one room was neat and clean and singularly feminine. Curtains covered the windows and the bed was separated from the rest of the room by a canvas screen. But oddly incongruous in the surroundings, a saddle hung in one corner of the cabin.

Tom sat down, feeling, somehow, apologetic, feeling as though he had done something of which to be ashamed instead of having made a good business deal.

"I suppose now that you'll be going," Molly said. "You've sold your steers and there's nothing to keep you in North Alder Park."

"That's right," Tom agreed. "There's nothing to keep me."

"I heard," the girl continued, "that you were going out to buy some more cattle and bring them back. Is that true?"

"I might."

"And I heard about the trouble that you had with Carl Borgsum."

Tom flushed a slow red. "I'm sorry that came up," he said.

"It wouldn't have happened if Mr. Wreckerly had been in the Mint," Molly stated positively. "He'd have stopped Borgsum."

"Borgsum," Tom said slowly, "is a

gunman, and bad. I doubt that Wreckerly could have stopped him."

"I believe he could." Molly was very sure.

"Ummm," Tom said doubtfully.

"I think that I'll sell the claim in North Alder," Molly announced suddenly, apparently changing the subject. "I've been offered two hundred dollars for it."

The double eagles weighed heavily in Tom's pocket. "Do you need the money?" he asked.

"I . . . I think so. I think I'll sell the claim and leave Climax."

Tom said, "Ummmm," again, no inflection in his voice. Then: "If you need money, I've got some that you can have."

Sudden color flooded the girl's cheeks. "Mr. Wreckerly offered to buy the claim," she announced.

Sudden, tight decision formed in Tom Harmes' mind. "Why don't you," he suggested, "hang onto it a while? If what Moran found was worth killin' him over, then that claim is worth hangin' on to, it seems to me. We'll find it some day, Animas an' me will."

The brown eyes that looked at him were large with surprise. "Aren't you going to leave?" Molly asked.

"No." One short, hard word. "Not unless you sell out to Wreckerly."

Molly's fingers toyed with a length of cloth on the table. She had been sewing when Tom rode up. Looking at the cloth he saw that Molly was making a dress. It's blue, he thought, would go with her brown eyes.

"Why?" The girl's question was soft and she did not look at Tom.

"Because," Tom answered, "I" He stopped. He did not know the reason why he had suddenly decided to stay in North Alder. The brown eyes looked up swiftly and then were hidden by long lowered lashes. There was a hint of a smile at the corners of the girl's mouth.

"Why, Tom?" she asked again.

Unease, a queer unrest, filled Tom Harmes. The lashes lay long against Molly's smooth cheeks, and the smile was growing at the corners of her mouth.

"Do you want me to leave?" Tom asked bluntly.

"Is there anything to keep you here?"

There *was* something to keep Tom Harmes in North Alder Park, close to Climax. There was a pair of brown eyes, there were sweetly curved lips, there was red-brown hair. Molly Sherman was reason enough for any man.

"There is," Tom said quietly.

"And that is. . . ." The brown eyes looked up again.

What had Tom Harmes to offer? Twelve hundred dollars in gold, the stake gained in ten years. No home, no stability. He had two horses and an outfit, the gold, and that was all. The thought silenced the words in the throat.

"You wouldn't know," Tom answered Molly, belying his former statement.

Somehow the answer pleased the girl for she smiled contentedly.

"If you're not going, I'll keep the claim in North Alder," she said. "I couldn't leave Animas there alone, not after what happened to Packrat."

Tom nodded. "Animas will find that strike some day," he prophesied. "When he does you won't be sorry that you didn't sell."

"I'm not sorry now," Molly said, and the little smile still lingered on her lips.

Tom got up abruptly. "Animas is waitin' for me," he announced. "I'd better go."

Molly, too, arose. "I'm coming out to visit you soon," she promised. "I've been wanting to."

"You'll be welcome."

"I'll come then. Good-bye, Tom."

"Good-bye, Molly."

WHEN Tom reached the Mint he did not see Animas. Shorty Grice, beckoning him over to the bar, asked: "Lookin' for the old man? If you are, he's in the back room."

"Why did you put him there?" Tom demanded.

The bartender bent a little closer. Woods and Wreckerly were at the bar, perhaps ten feet from Tom, and Grice lowered his voice so that they could not hear his words.

"The old man's been actin' crazy. He come in a while ago an' had one little drink. Then he set down over there"—Grice nodded toward a chair—"an' started to talk. First, he'd say, 'Are you shore,

Packrat?' an' then he'd say, 'That's where I found it. Gold, Animas, gleamin', glitterin' gold.' Wreckerly walked over an' spoke to him an' the old man snarled like a dog, an' swore at him. Tol' him to git to hell away. He wasn't supposed to talk to Wreckerly like that an' I got a bottle an' kinda coaxed him out to the back room. You'd better take him home, Tom."

"Thanks, Shorty. I will," Tom agreed.

Animas was sleeping when Tom walked into the Mint's back room. He lay flat on his back on the floor and his lips moved. The bottle, almost untouched, stood beside him. Bending over the old man, Tom shook Animas' shoulder.

"Animas!"

Animas Able roused. His eyes, unseeing at first, focused on Tom. "All right, Packrat," Animas said. "I know we'll find it now."

"Get up, Animas," Tom ordered gently, and helped the old man to his feet. Animas came like a child, with no resistance as Tom led him to the door. He was obedient and docile, mounting his horse, taking the reins, moving through it all like a sleepwalker.

"Gosh," exclaimed Shorty Grice, who had followed them out to the sidewalk. "He's . . . he's sure funny, Tom."

"He's in God's pocket," Tom Harmes said gently. "All right, Animas, let's go."

They rode off into the dusk, and Grice, scratching his head, went back inside. "Beats me," he announced to Woods who looked at him expectantly. "Here the old man was, on the prod at Mr. Wreckerly, an' he goes with Tom just like a lamb. Talkin' about gold, too. Huh!" To reinforce his wavering mentality, Shorty helped himself to a drink.

"I'll see you later, Len," Wreckerly announced, and left the bar room.

Animas and Tom, moving along the road toward North Alder, were silent. Tom did not want to disturb his companion, and besides, he was thinking about Molly. What a girl she was, what a woman! A man who had Molly Sherman. . . .

"Tom!"

"What is it, Animas?"

"I've been talking to Packrat."

"Have you, Animas?" Tom's voice was kind.

"He told me we were going to find the gold. He said that he would show us."

"That's fine, Animas," Tom humored the old man.

"Tomorrow, mebbe. We'll look tomorrow, Tom."

"All right, Animas."

The sound of the steadily traveling horses was all that broke the quiet. Molly Sherman, Tom thought. Her very name was beautiful, lovely as her eyes, as her red lips. Engrossed with his mental picture, he did not hear a rock roll on the hill above the trail.

"Tom," Animas broke into his reverie. "I been talkin' to Packrat again."

"Have you, Animas?"

"An' Packrat says there's danger. He says to watch, Tom. Get your gun out. Get it in your hand."

Tom laughed. "Now Animas . . ." he chided.

"Get it out, Tom! Packrat says to!"

Humoring the old man, Tom slid his gun out of its holster. "All right now?" he asked. "I've got it out."

"An' watch, Tom."

"I'll watch."

The rhythmic plopping sound of the horses' feet was unaccompanied now by words. Tom glanced at Animas. The old man was looking straight ahead. It would be fine, it would be wonderful, if old Animas *did* find the mine, old Animas who believed in ghosts and who read Latin. If he. . . .

Brush cracked beside the trail. A horse rider bolt upright, was directly in front of them. There were no words, nothing but swift, instantaneous action. The man ahead flung up his arm. Had Tom Harmes been riding unprepared, had he been engrossed in thinking or in talk, had he, of necessity, wasted that fractional second necessary to bring up his gun, he would have died there on the North Alder trail. But Tom's gun was in his hand because of a whim of Animas Able. The second was not wasted. Tom's arm swept up and flame ringed the muzzle of his weapon, even as the man on the trail ahead fired. A slug sang past Tom's ear, and Dusty, frightened by the shots and the sudden appearance, shied like a colt. An oath sounded shrill, loud, echoing the explosions of the guns and

then the trail ahead was empty and a threshing in the brush sounded to the right as Tom fought Dusty down.

"Missed him," Tom rasped. "Damn me!"

"Tom!" Animas was shouting, all the dreaminess gone from his voice. "Are you all right, Tom?"

Tom brought Dusty back along the trail. "I'm all right," he answered grimly. "Thanks to you an' Packrat Moran. How about you, Animas?"

"I don't know what hapened," Animas said, bewilderment in his voice. "I don't know how I come to be here, Tom."

"Never mind how you come to be here," Tom Harmes said. "Just be mighty grateful that you are."

V

ON the day following the delivery of the steers, and the swift, harsh action on the trail, Tom Harmes and Animas Able looked for Packrat Moran's strike. After what had happened, Tom could not doubt the old man, and Animas, sure that he had talked with Moran, was equally certain that they would find the strike. All that morning they searched and worked, and at noon had found nothing. Tom, his feet blistered and tired, sought surcease in riding.

"I'm goin' to cut a circle around the park, Animas," he announced when dinner was eaten. "I'll come back an' help you after a while. An' while I'm gone you might try talkin' to Packrat again. I don't doubt that you talked to him, after what happened; but it seems to me kind of like he ought to be more accurate in his directions." With this suggestion Tom walked over to his bunk and sat down, preparatory to putting on his spurs. He was humoring Animas but he was just a little in awe of Animas, too.

"I can try," Animas said simply, taking Tom's words at their face value. "Packrat's around all right, and I can try to talk with him, but maybe he won't respond."

Tom, having put on one spur, reached for its mate. The second spur was missing and, getting down, he looked under the bunk. No spur there. The spurs were silver mounted and had been given

to Tom by a Ranger captain and Tom valued them highly. He forgot about Animas and Packrat Moran, recalling another packrat.

"That damned John!" Tom swore. "He's got my spur."

Tom knew that Honest John had been harboring intentions toward those spurs for a long time. Twice the spurs had been carried clear from the bunk to the door, only to be retrieved. At this very inopportune moment John made his appearance in the doorway.

"Don't shoot!" Animas warned. "If you do, you'll never find your spur."

Tom lowered the gun he had conjured in his hand. Honest John had a reprieve.

"I ought to kill him," Tom growled. "I reckon you want him to steal the other spur, too."

"That's right," Animas agreed. "Take it off and put it by your bunk. We'll watch him and see where he takes it. He'll put it in his cache."

"An' leave a chunk of rock in place of it." Tom kicked a pebble across the cabin floor toward Animas. "Here's what he left for the last one."

Animas bent and picked up the little stone. "They always leave something," he said. "A rock or a . . . Tom!"

The startled surprise in the old man's voice wiped away Tom Harmes' anger. "What is it?" he demanded, striding across to Animas.

Animas was staring intently at the rock. "I knew it," he said slowly. "I knew it when I talked to Packrat last night. This is it, Tom."

"This is what?"

"A specimen from Packrat's strike!"

Tom reached out a hand for the pebble. It was oddly heavy for its size and there was a glint on one side when he turned it to the light.

"Gold!" Animas exclaimed. "Gold!"

"But where'd John get it?" Tom glanced from the pebble to the doorway where Honest John sat on his haunches, preening his whiskers with his forepaws.

"From his cache. He has hidden your spur in the mine that Packrat found and he brought back this specimen. Packrat's ghost is in him. I'm sure of it.

Moran always loved packrats and . . ."

Tom forestalled further comment. "How are we goin' to find it?" he demanded.

"Put your other spur beside your bunk," Animas advised. "Let John take it away. His cache is someplace outside the cabin. He'll take it there. We'll follow him."

"That sounds all right," Tom answered dubiously. "Maybe it will work. Damn it, I wish that packrat could talk."

"He did. He talked to me last night. I tell you . . ."

"All right. All right," Tom interrupted impatiently. "Moran talked to you and Moran is Honest John or John's his ghost. Have it your way; I don't care. But I want to find that mine, an' my spur, too. Here, I'll put the other spur beside the bunk an' let him get it."

That was all right. It was a very nice scheme; its only drawback being that Honest John would not cooperate. When Tom and Animas went outside, each taking a side of the cabin so that they could watch it, Honest John fled. Nor did he return. The minutes crawled past and Tom's patience wore thin and still the packrat put in no appearance. Animas counseled waiting, and perforce Tom waited. Finally Honest John came out from under the cabin, cleaned his whiskers, and ventured to the door.

He sat in the door a long time then scurried into the cabin. He stayed there a long time, too. When he did come out he had the spur but was making heavy weather of it. The spur was heavy and Honest John could not quite pull the freight. He started up Tom's side of the cabin, got part way to the aspens, then quit his job and disappeared.

"He's done quit," Tom reported. "He left the spur lyin' there."

"He'll be back," Animas stated optimistically. "He's headed for the aspens."

"An' we've been through there fifty times," Tom growled. "Every time we get water from the spring we go up that trail."

Animas had faith in Honest John. "Packrat's leadin' him," Animas stated definitely. "I know he is."

Honest John's return stopped the argu-

ment. He had brought help. Mrs. Honest John was with her husband. The two packrats looked the spur over thoroughly where it lay gleaming in the trail. Then they tackled the job. One worked for a time and then the other, and the spur was moved laboriously along. Animas kept his hand on Tom's arm, restraining the younger man, and Honest John and his wife disappeared in the aspens with their prize.

"Now!" said Animas, and leaving their concealment the two men followed the trail of the spur.

IT led up the path and straight to the spring. Here, where the hillside was steep, water dripped from a rock ledge down into a limpid pool. The two men had already used the cavern under the ledge for a spring house. Now, when they reached it, they found the pool clear and undisturbed, and the water trickling steadily from its opening in the rock.

"Fooled us!" Tom blurted. "He didn't come here with the spur. He went some place else."

"There's where he dragged it," Animas answered, pointing to the rowel marks in the sand beside the pool. "He's got to be here."

"But where?"

Honest John gave the answer himself. He appeared behind the pool, under the ledge where a short man would have to stoop and go forward on his hands and knees. Seeing his visitors, John chattered, and dropping the rock he carried, scurried away. Tom and Animas swooped down upon the rock, bumping their heads together. It was Tom who got the stone. Small and heavy it lay in his hand and this time there was no doubt of what it contained. The little lump of rotted quartz that Tom held was shot through and held together with wire gold.

"Behind the spring!" Tom gasped. "We been comin' here for water twice a day an' it was right there all the time."

Animas fished a stump of miner's candle from his pocket, lighted it and dropped to his hands and knees. Tom followed the example set him, and the two men crawled forward under the ledge.

There was a tunnel there, a natural opening in the rock with here and there

marks showing that it had been enlarged by pick work. They went back some ten feet, the damp tunnel confining them, and then the tunnel widened a trifle.

"What is it, Animas?" Tom demanded, for Animas had stopped.

"Come up here," the old man ordered, disbelief in his voice. Tom crawled forward and then recoiled, for Honest John and his wife, panic stricken by the invasion of their place of safety, were seeking to escape. One of the fleeing trade rats struck Tom's face, and the other scurried between his knees.

"Come up here," Animas ordered again.

Now Tom moved forward, crowding into the tunnel beside Animas, the shoulders of the two men filling the narrow opening so that presently Tom could go no further. But he had gone far enough. Animas held the candle up and from a vein perhaps eight inches wide, the wire gold glittered and sparkled in the candle light, and below the gold, in a mass of torn paper, debris, and rock, lay Tom's spur.

FOR a while the two men feasted their eyes in silence upon the discovery. Then Tom backed up, speaking as he moved, "Let's get out of here."

Wordlessly Animas followed him. They backed along the tunnel and reaching the spring cave, crawled out from beneath the ledge. There Tom straightened and looked down at Animas who was still on his knees.

"I never saw anythin' like that before," Tom said almost reverently. "Animas, I'm goin' to bring you my rifle an' all the shells I got. You stay right here an' shoot at anything that comes along except that packrat. I'm goin' to town an' get Molly out here, an' I'm goin' right now."

He brought Animas the .38-.55 and a pocketful of shells, cautioning the old man once more as he delivered the weapon. Then, out in the dusk of the meadow he caught and saddled Dusty and put a lead rope on his pack horse. Molly had a saddle, he remembered, and by taking the extra horse, he avoided advertising his arrival in Climax.

At eight o'clock he reached the town and avoiding the main street, skirted

along behind the buildings and up the hill. A light glowed at Molly's cabin and Molly's voice was cheerful and friendly as she called: "Who is it?" following Tom's knock.

"Tom. Open the door, Molly."

Light streamed out of the partially opened door and Tom, standing in the darkness, spoke swiftly. "We've found it. Moran's strike. You've got to come, Molly."

He heard the girl gasp and then after a pause: "I'll come."

"Pass out your saddle. I've brought an extra horse an' I'll saddle him while you get ready."

Molly did not answer, but Tom heard her steps across the cabin. Then the saddle was put down beside the door and before the door closed Tom said: "There's no use tellin' everybody what's happened, Molly. That's why I brought the horse."

They were beyond Climax, in the canyon, before Tom would let the girl talk. He answered her questions almost curtly.

"It was right there all the time," he said. "Right under our noses. We'd used the spring every day and never gone back under the ledge. We never saw the tunnel. It was the packrat that showed us. You're rich now, Molly. You can do what you want to do."

Molly laughed, a little peal of bell-like, tinkling, excited happiness. "Rich," she said. "I've handled hundreds of samples in the assay office. I never thought I'd strike it."

"You've struck it now."

"And you and Animas have, too," the girl declared. "We're partners, Tom."

To that Tom made no answer. He had no claim on the discovery, he felt. No claim at all. It belonged to this girl riding beside him. If she wanted to share her new found wealth with Animas, that was all right, but he, Tom Harnes, would have none of it.

"And that's why Packrat was killed," Molly said, soberly now. "He found the vein and someone learned of it and killed him. Tom . . ."

"Yeah?" Tom prompted as the girl hesitated.

"Tom, do you think . . .?"

"I think you've got a mine. I think you'll keep it."

Silence enveloped the girl now. She was lost in thought, and so, too, was Tom Harnes.

"Tom," Molly said suddenly.

"Yes, Molly?"

"You're thinking about Packrat, aren't you?"

"Yes, Molly."

"So was I."

VI

ANIMAS challenged them as they came up the trail. His voice was harsh and excited and the barrel of the Winchester clinked on rock as he moved it. Tom and Molly answered the challenge together, and came on, reaching the spring and the ledge. Animas lighted the miner's candle and relinquishing the Winchester to Tom, led the girl back under the rocks where Tom could hear their muffled voices, Molly's startled exclamations, and Animas' rumble as he talked. Then the two came crawling out again and joined Tom.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life," Molly exclaimed. "It's there, glittering and shining in the rock. Gold!"

"It's gold, sure enough," Tom agreed.

"And you and Animas found it. Think of it, Tom. Think what it means!"

"I'm thinkin' of what it means."

"Come back with me. I want to look at it again. Please, Tom."

"Why, yes. I'll go with you," Tom Harnes agreed.

Handing Animas the rifle, he took the candle and with Molly leading, went back under the ledge. Molly's shoulders were not as broad as Animas' and there was now room in the tunnel. Tom crawled along just behind the girl until they reached the end where the vein showed, rich and glittering in the candlelight. Molly took the candle and held it up, and there was room for Tom to push up beside her.

"Packrat's lode," Molly breathed. "He found it. We'll call the mine the Packrat Lode."

"We don't want to forget Honest John," Tom reminded. "Honest John an' my spurs. They had a lot to do with it."

As he spoke, he looked down to the litter of Honest John's nest. Something

glinted there, a piece of ore perhaps? Tom reached past Molly who was staring, fascinated, at the vein, and picked up that glittering object. His fingers felt it and his eyes were suddenly startled as he recognized the thing he held. Then, wordlessly, he slipped it into his pocket.

"It's ours," Molly said. "Ours. Let's go back to Animas, Tom. If only Packrat hadn't . . ." She did not complete the thought, and Tom began to back along the tunnel.

Out of the tunnel, sitting beside the spring under the ledge, with the trickling water making an accompaniment to her voice, Molly talked. They were partners, she said, the three of them. Animas croaked an objection and Tom kept still and Molly was very firm. This was as much their mine as hers, she said. It would take development and work. They must open the tunnel, perhaps drive a new stope in from the sidehill, and bring out the ore. The first ore could be hauled to Climax to Wreckerly's stamp mill, and the gold extracted there. And with the first proceeds, development work could be done. The girl planned excitedly and Tom and Animas listened, Animas occasionally interjecting a comment. Time wore along and still they talked, Animas and Molly, while Tom sat with the rifle across his knees, looking out from under the ledge at the procession of stars across the sky.

"You haven't said a word, Tom," Molly accused suddenly. "What are you thinking about?"

"What?" Tom was roused from his reverie. He had not been following the talk at all. Other and grimmer things occupied his mind.

"I asked you what you were thinking about."

"I'm thinkin'," Tom drawled, "that it's close to midnight an' that tomorrow is a big day an' that we'd better get some rest. You can have the cabin, Molly, an' Animas an' me will sleep outside."

"I'm too excited to sleep," Molly laughed. "And anyhow I won't leave the mine. I'm going to stay right here by the spring. But you and Animas must sleep."

"We'll be close by then." Tom got up stiffly and handed the rifle to Animas.

"I'll get some blankets from the cabin. It's gettin' cold."

Dusty and the pack horse were beside the cabin and Tom stripped off the saddles and hung them in the little shed. From his own and Animas' bunks he took blankets and went back up the trail. Reaching the ledge he passed the blankets around and said, his voice almost harsh: "You can stay here on the sand, Molly. It's soft. Animas an' me will move down the trail a ways. We'll talk again tomorrow when we've looked it over by daylight."

The girl agreed to the suggestion and the men moved out from under the ledge and, perhaps ten yards away on thickly growing grass, spread out their blankets. Tom could hear Molly moving in the cave, as he lay down. He would not, he thought, sleep a great deal. There was too much to think about for sleep to come to any of them; but they could at least rest.

He could look up at the stars now and watch their thin, faint light. He could hear Molly's stirring on her sand bed and Animas moving as he settled himself. No one said good night. No one thought that sleep would come. But after a time Animas began to snore rhythmically, and Tom, rising silently, walked back to the cave. He cupped a flaming match in his hands and in its flickering light saw that Molly's eyes were closed and that she breathed regularly. The match burned out and Tom went back to his blankets and lay down. He saw a star fall, a little spark that curved across the sky and then faded into space. He turned once and then his heavy eyelids lowered.

THE stars marched on, slowly, slowly. Down in the park Dusty raised his head from his grazing and stared off into the dark. The wind whispered in the spruce and pine and rustled the trembling leaves of the aspens. Then the peace was shattered by a roar, and flame shot up and the walls of the cabin buckled and fire licked at the pine logs and ran across the dried shakes of the fallen roof.

Steel spring muscles brought Tom up from his blankets, Colt out in his hand. He caught the tiny flicker of the beginning fire down below and then whirled and ran to

the spring. Molly was there, frightened, terrified at her sudden, violent awakening. There was no word spoken. Simply Tom reached the girl and caught her into the curve of his arm as he whirled to face down trail. And Molly, knowing that she was safe, feeling the safety of Tom's rock-hard arm and chest, threw her arms about his neck and pressed close against him.

For an instant they stood so, then, hastily, Tom moved, for there was a sound on the trail.

"Tom!" Animas' voice came up the trail out of the darkness, his shadow dancing before him as the flames of the cabin grew and leaped skyward.

"Come here!" Tom ordered. Animas, too, had thought first of Molly and had come to her. He came up now, joining the two under the ledge, Tom's Winchester in his hands.

"They dynamited the cabin," Animas said slowly, almost as though he did not comprehend. "It was dynamite."

"It was dynamite," Tom agreed soberly. "They thought that we were in it." Involuntarily he shuddered, thinking of what might have been. Save for her whim to sleep near the newly re-discovered strike, Molly Sherman would have been in the cabin. Molly, too, must have recalled how closely she had been passed by death.

"It's the same ones," Tom's voice was harsh and level. "The ones that killed Moran. They want us out of the way. We've cramped their style. They couldn't search the park while we were here." He stepped away from Molly and reaching into his pocket touched the object that he had picked up from Honest John's nest. Small and hard and cold he rolled it between his fingers.

"What will we do, Tom?" Molly asked.

"Stay here," Tom grated, "an' watch the cabin burn. We'll take no chances goin' down there in the light. You stick with Molly, Animas, while I scout."

Molly caught at his arm as he moved, but Tom shook off the grip. He stepped out of the cavern under the ledge, moved to his right and was lost among the aspens and the darkness. Molly's heart was in her throat, choking her, as she crouched beside Animas. She made a little whimpering sound.

"They won't come here," Animas com-

forted. "They'll think they got us in the cabin."

"It's not that," Molly answered. "It's Tom."

The fire had grown greater now and its light reached under the rock ledge, a ruddy reflection from the flames. Animas glanced sharply at the girl. "So that's it?" he said softly. "Tom, eh?"

Wordlessly Molly nodded. Animas felt for his plug, bit off a chew and worked on it a while. "He's a good man, Molly," he said finally. "I know him. He's a good man. An' when I talked to Packrat the other night, Packrat said so, too."

Tom came back, sliding up out of the night soundlessly. "I cut a circle around the cabin," he reported. "Didn't run into a thing. I think that they planted their dynamite, cut a long fuse an' left. They're gone. Maybe we can pull some stuff out of the cabin if we work fast. One end's caved in by the back end . . ."

"No!" Molly interrupted harshly. "Please don't, Tom. Please don't try." The hand that she laid on Tom's arm trembled.

"All right then," Tom made concession to the girl's fright. "We'll not try. We'll wait until daylight."

DAYLIGHT was a long time in coming. The stars grew pale and there was a fringe of gray all along the top of the hills that circled North Alder. The gray faded into pink, and then, swift and strong and heartening, the sun came up. Stiffly the two men and the girl left the shelter of the ledge and came down the trail to where the cabin still burned.

They watched its burning, Molly frightened, Animas with sultry angry eyes. Only Tom Harmes stood, face expressionless, and looked at the flames.

"Somebody," he drawled, "will come out an' find this cabin. Maybe the men that done it, maybe just somebody passin' through. We couldn't tell for sure. An' I don't think I'll wait. Animas, I want you to stay here with Molly. I'll leave you my rifle an' you stay in the cave. You'll have to go hungry until I come back."

"Where are you going, Tom?" Molly demanded.

"To Climax," Tom said curtly.

"To get help? You'll bring Mr. Wreck-

erly out and you'll tell him about what happened?"

"I'll tell him about what happened." There was a trace of grimness in Tom's voice.

"We'll go with you," Molly said suddenly. "The mine is hidden. No one will find it."

For an instant Tom considered, then: "No, Molly. I can't take you with me. You stay with Animas."

He did not wait for the girl's objections but turned and strode out across the park to where Dusty and the packhorse grazed. Molly watched him go, saw him catch Dusty and come leading the horse back. In her own brown eyes there was determination and stubbornness.

She did not join Tom while he brought his saddle from the little shed that had remained untouched by explosion and fire. Animas went down and stood beside Tom as he saddled, but the girl remained aloof. Busy with his horse Tom gave the old man brief directions as he worked.

"You stick here, Animas, an' look after Molly. I'll bring my pack horse in, an' her saddle's in the shed. If I'm not back by noon you saddle up an' take her out of here. Don't go to Climax. Don't go near there. Hit right straight for Basin City. Get hold of Bert Weatherford when you get there. He's a deputy U.S. Marshal an' he knows me. You can trust Bert, but don't talk to anybody else. Tell Bert what happened an' he'll know what to do. Will you do that, Animas?"

Animas nodded slowly. "You know who it was, Tom?" he asked. "Did you find something?"

"I *think* I know," Tom grated. "I'm pretty sure. Sure enough to take a chance. You'll get to Bert in Basin City if I don't come back, won't you? An' you'll look after Molly?"

"I'll do it," Animas promised. "I will, Tom."

Tom mounted Dusty and loped out into the park and caught the pack horse. He led the animal back and turned the lead rope over to Animas and spoke to Molly.

"You stick with Animas," he ordered. "Do what he says, Molly. He'll look after you."

Molly did not answer.

"Promise, Molly?"

"You're going to Climax," Molly said. "You're not going to get help. You're going because you think you know who dynamited the cabin and who killed Pack-rat. That's why you're going." Accusation was in her voice.

"I'm goin' to Climax," Tom agreed, and did not amplify.

"Tom, don't go."

Tom Harmes shook his head. "I've got to, Molly," he said gently. "I've got to go."

He waited for a moment but when the girl did not speak, Tom turned Dusty and picked up the big horse with his spurs. Dusty moved off, walking at first, breaking from walk to lope, sweeping out across the grass. Molly and Animas watched horse and rider until they reached the fringe of aspens at the border of the park and were lost among the trees. Then Molly let go a pent-up breath and, turning to Animas, reached out her hand.

"Give me the horse," she commanded. "I'm going to Climax."

Animas passed over the lead rope. "You'll have to go slow," he cautioned. "My burro don't travel very fast."

VII

TOM HARMES did not look back from the edge of the aspens. It was not his habit or in his nature to look over his shoulder. Living or dying lay ahead and not behind, and the trail back of a man led only to the trail ahead of him, its decisions and happenings determining future decisions and future action. Dusty found the rocky path that led up toward the ridge and followed it, his big, hard, black hoofs taking him and his rider up and up, through the slim white boles and the quivering, trembling greenery of the aspen growth, taking them both toward the town of Climax.

There was no change of expression on Tom Harmes' face, no scowl, no deepening of the already deep cut lines, nothing to tell of the thoughts that churned in his mind. For all his face showed, Tom might have been riding into Climax for a drink, or for tobacco, or for a friendly visit. But a man, looking into Tom's hard eyes might have read another tale. The eyes were blue and cold, with no depth in them, little

chips of blue flint that caught light and reflected it through narrowed lids.

There was a thing to do, Tom thought, an act to perform, a step to take. He had resolved on that step and was embarked upon it. Molly Sherman must be safe. She must be sure of living unmolested. She must be allowed to go ahead unhindered and unhampered. Tom was riding in to Climax to make living free and safe for Molly Sherman.

Climax sprawled on either side of the canyon, the weathered gray rock of the mine dump and the brown board sides of the mill blocking the end of its street. Up the slope a spiral of smoke went up and seeing this thinly ascending haze, Tom reined Dusty to the left and climbed a path, his errand momentarily delayed by his curiosity. He passed a shack that was deserted, and came then to the site of Molly Sherman's cabin. A little group of men looked up as he arrived. The cabin was in ruins. Where it had once stood was now a pit of smouldering logs beneath which the coals glowed a sinister red.

"What happened here?" Tom demanded, finding his voice, rasping the question out of a constricted throat.

"It burnt." The voice was familiar, and looking from the ruins to the speaker, Tom saw that Shorty Grice stood beside him.

"The fire started early this mornin'," Grice stated. "We couldn't put it out." Shorty spoke with repression, as though he choked and stifled some emotion that welled up in him. Hearing Shorty's voice, Tom felt that the man wanted to shout, to curse, to voice a furious vehemence, and that he could not. The curiously repressed voice went on while Shorty stared at Tom Harmes.

"We couldn't get her out. She's in there, somewhere, what's left of her."

"She?"

"Molly Sherman. She must of been sleepin' when the fire broke out. She must of been inside. I was one of the first ones here, Tom, an' the whole cabin was burnin'. We couldn't get into it. An' we can't find her. She just ain't here. She ain't in Climax."

Tom saw how it was. The alarm of fire had brought men from their beds, startled, fearful, and bewildered. Flame had driven them back when they tried to enter the

cabin. A search had failed to discover Molly. What else could they think, save that the girl was in the cabin, caught by the flames?

"It's awful, Tom." Emotion broke in Shorty Grice now, showed in his eyes, sounded in his voice. "That girl, caught inside an' not a chance . . ."

"How did it start?" Tom asked hoarsely.

"It was set." Shorty lowered his tone. "We know it was. Somebody started the fire. The whole cabin was burnin' at once."

"And so . . . ?" Tom drawled.

"So Wreckerly is holdin' a meetin' of the Vigilantes. We're goin' to get together down at the Mint. We're goin' to find the murderin' devil that done this an' when we do . . ." Shorty left the threat unfinished.

"When is the meetin'?" Tom asked.

"At nine o'clock. Word's been sent out. Everybody around Climax will be there. Everybody. You'll come, Tom?"

A momentary pause. Then Tom Harmes answered. "Why, yes, Shorty. I'll be there."

He had been looking down into Shorty's upturned face. Now he saw that there was a little crowd around him, five or six men, silent, watching him with questioning eyes.

"We need you, Tom," Shorty said. "You've had experience with things like this. I been tellin' the boys that we ought to have you here."

"Well, I'm here," Tom drawled. "Let's go on down, Shorty. It ain't long until nine o'clock." He turned Dusty and started down the trail.

Shorty Grice, walking beside Dusty, spoke again. "You'll help out, Tom."

"I'll try," Tom answered.

They reached the street and moved along it, past the blacksmith shop, past the stores, past the assay office, its door closed and locked. Men were grouped in front of the Mint Saloon, talking low voiced, examining this new addition to their numbers with curious eyes. Tom stopped Dusty and stepped down. A little lane opened and, with Grice still beside him, he went into the Mint.

THE Mint was not a saloon now but rather a courtroom. True, there were men lined along the bar, but they

were not drinking. Other men stood beside the wall, and at the far end of the room there was the poker table, pulled out from the wall and with chairs behind it. Len Woods occupied a chair, as did Logan the saloon keeper, and between those two sat Glen Wreckerly. He spoke as Tom came in.

"It's nine o'clock. This meeting will come to order." Wreckerly's gold hunting case watch lay on the table before him.

Silence filled the room and Wreckerly's eyes traveled over the men assembled there. His voice was deliberate as he continued.

"You know why we're here. Last night Molly Sherman's cabin was burned down. She was in it. Somebody murdered her. There's a murderer loose in Climax and we're here to find him. Carl, you discovered the fire. Tell what you know."

Tom looked to the right where Carl Borgsum, his arm in a sling, his face sullen, had taken a step forward. "I couldn't sleep," Borgsum growled. "My arm was hurtin' an' I was awake. I saw a light comin' through my window an' I got up to see what it was. I saw the cabin burnin' so I yelled an' run up there. It was all afire. There wasn't any chance of gettin' inside. Then Grice come, an' some more. They tried, too, an' they couldn't get in. Somebody said that Molly was inside an' some said that she wasn't, an' we started lookin' for her an' couldn't find her."

"Do you think the fire was set?" Wreckerly demanded as Borgsum stopped talking.

"It looked like it might of been. The whole cabin was burnin' when I first saw it."

"You know it was set," Grice snarled from beside Tom Harmes. "There ain't no doubt about it. You could tell it was, an' I could still smell coal oil when I got there."

"All right, Grice. Tell what you know." Wreckerly turned toward the Mint bartender and, for the first time, saw Tom Harmes. Just for an instant, surprise filled his eyes.

"I'll tell what I know, all right." Shorty pushed by Tom. "I heard Carl yell. I'd been workin' late in the saloon an' I'd

been home maybe fifteen minutes. I didn't see no fire when I come up the hill. When Carl yelled, I run out an' saw the flames. I went back in an' put on my pants an' boots an' run up there. It's like Carl says: We couldn't get into the place. You know what I think?" He paused and glared around him. "I think somebody slipped in an' knocked Molly in the head an' then set her cabin afire to hide what he'd done. She's dead an' . . ."

"No," Tom Harmes drawled. "She ain't dead. She's in North Alder Park an' she's safe enough."

Blank silence followed the announcement. Then into that pool of quiet, Shorty Grice dropped one sharp ejaculation. "The hell!"

"It's true enough." Tom spoke to Shorty, to them all, but his eyes never left the men at the poker table. "I've got to tell you about this. It'll take some time. Are you willin' to listen?"

A murmur went up from all about, from the men along the bar and the walls, no word spoken distinctly but all giving agreement. Wreckerly did not speak and Carl Borgsum stood stock still, near by the table, but Len Woods put the period to the sound in the room.

"Shut up! Let him tell it. Go ahead, Harmes!"

"There's a beginnin'," Tom drawled. "It starts with Packrat Moran bein' killed. You see, Moran had found a mine. He'd made a strike an' a rich one. Him an' Molly Sherman were pardners because she'd grubstaked him an' he told her that he'd found somethin'. Maybe she talked. Maybe it was him. But somethin' slipped out an' there was men went out to see Moran. They tried to get him to show 'em the strike. Maybe they tried to run him off from North Alder. Anyhow there was a fight an' Moran was killed, an' his body dumped in the old shaft. That was the beginnin'.

"I come along an' these two men that killed Moran was lookin' for his strike. I surprised 'em an' they shot at me an' run. I didn't see 'em. Then Moran's body was found. You all know about that."

Muttered assent ran through the crowd of men in the Mint bar room. Tom

Harmes took a deep breath. "I'm gettin' to it," he said. "Give me time. Animas Able come out an' we looked for Moran's strike an' didn't find it. But us bein' there kept these other fellows from lookin'. So they wanted us out of the way. I sold my steers but I didn't leave an' that was bad for 'em. They had to have us gone, do you see?"

For the first time he looked away from the men at the table to see men nodding their heads as they comprehended his point.

"One man had already been killed," Tom continued. "Moran. There was no reason that other men shouldn't be killed, too. Last night our cabin out there was dynamited. The only reason we weren't in it was because we'd found the gold. A packrat stole my spurs an' led us to the strike. It's rich an' I came into town an' got Molly. We didn't advertise. I brought an extra horse an' took her out to show her what she had. She stayed an' she was there in the mine when the cabin was blowed up. She's safe enough. You won't find her under them burnin' logs in her cabin."

Tom smiled suddenly and again glanced about, noting the relief that showed on the faces of the men.

"Then if Molly Sherman's safe . . ." Wreckerly began.

"That don't mean that there ain't a murderer loose," Tom rasped. "You can't dismiss yore meetin' yet."

"I had no idea of dismissing this meeting," Wreckerly announced stiffly. "It's the purpose of the Vigilante Committee to keep peace in Climax. We . . ."

"I've got somethin' more to say," Tom interrupted. "Let me say it."

"Go ahead, Tom," Shorty Grice growled. "You got the floor."

"I've got the floor an' I've got the murderer," Tom Harmes drawled. "The packrat showed us the mine an' he showed us somethin' else. You'll all agree that the men that killed Moran are the ones that burnt Molly's cabin an' that used the dynamite in North Alder Park?"

He did not look about him now, but watched the three at the table. Logan and Woods were nodding, but Wreckerly sat motionless. Beside Tom, Grice said: "That's right. Name him!"

"There was two," Tom drawled. "One of them was the boss. What time is it, Wreckerly?"

Automatically Glen Wreckerly glanced down at his watch on the table. "It's . . ." he began.

"Never mind," Tom drawled. His left hand moved and something glinted in the air and fell with a tiny thud on the green felt of the table top. It lay there, small and golden with a few broken links of chain attached. "The key to yore watch," Tom rasped. "The key that Packrat Moran broke off the day you killed him, an' that the packrat carried away an' hid in his cache. Yore time's run out, Wreckerly!"

NO one moved in the Mint Saloon, no one spoke or scarcely breathed. Then, slowly, Glen Wreckerly arose from behind the table, his eyes fixed on Tom Harmes, and beside Tom, Shorty Grice said, half in a whisper: "That's right. It's his watch key. I've seen it a hundred times."

Wreckerly was on his feet. Carl Borgsum shifted suddenly and, as though that was a signal Len Woods threw himself backward, chair and man clattering to the floor and Logan dived for safety under the table. Wreckerly's face, white and strained, became a snarling mask in which his eyes glittered and his hand whipped down to brush away the skirts of his coat and come up filled with a weapon. A man behind Tom Harmes squalled like a cat, and Shorty Grice cursed once, hoarsely; and then the shots crashed and reverberated in the Mint's barroom, setting the bottles dancing on the back bar and filling the place with sound.

In Tom Harmes' hand the walnut stocks of his gun were hard and firm and cool as the gun bounced up and fell level again; and behind the poker table Glen Wreckerly stood like a tree that, cut at the base, hesitates an instant before it falls. Then slowly, he toppled, bending forward, stately as any great pine, until, with the life gone out of him, his knees gave way and he went down. Tom Harmes took a step, peering through the smoke that hung in a little deadly cloud. Then Shorty Grice brushed past him and

Logan and Woods had scrambled up to seize and hold Carl Borgsum and wrench away the weapon that he held awkwardly in his left hand.

"We got enough to go on," Woods said. "We know it was Wreckerly an' Borgsum. But how did you know, Harmes?"

All around the room the occupants watched Tom Harmes. The fire was gone out of him now and his voice was low and dead as he answered Woods' question.

"The first time I saw Wreckerly he wound his watch. It was a gold watch but he wound it with a silver key an' that was wrong.

"Stayin' in the park the way I was, I blocked him so he turned Borgsum onto me. That didn't work an' he tried again to get me to go by buyin' my steers. He jumped Animas an' me on the way home that night. I can't prove this, but it must of been him. Animas had got me to pull my gun, otherwise Wreckerly would of made it. The way it was we both shot an' missed.

"An' then I found the key where the packrat had hit it in the cave, an' I knew." Tom stopped. There was no need of going on. No need of telling these men of the driving, impelling force that had brought him in to Climax, that had spoken there in the Mint Saloon. They would not understand.

"Get on with it, Woods," Tom ordered. "Ask yore questions. Borgsum can tell you."

As he spoke that name, men turned from Tom Harmes to Carl Borgsum. Shorty Grice still held the man and, giving him a final, savage shake, freed him.

"Talk up, Borgsum," Woods rasped, and a hard snarl of menace ran about the room. Carl Borgsum wet his dry lips with a nervous tongue and let his eyes flicker about the barroom of the Mint. What he saw there was enough. He swallowed once, convulsively, and then spoke, his voice brittle as a dried stick.

"It was Wreckerly. He planned it."

Borgsum's voice went on, telling of the plot, speaking of murder and arson and death dispassionately, opening the maze of his crooked, twisting mind, exposing the venomous wickedness of Glen Wreck-

erly, big man of Climax, head of the Vigilantes, masked and made safe by his position. With one part of his mind oddly detached, Tom Harmes followed the tale. With the other . . ."

"It was Wreckerly," Borgsum concluded. "He done it."

"Harmes," Len Woods turned from Borgsum to Tom. "You . . ."

Woods did not finish his sentence. There was a brief commotion at the door. Someone said: "He's here all right. I'll say he's here! You should of saw . . ."

Tom turned and as men moved aside he saw Animas Able standing on the threshold, Animas who should have been in North Alder Park guarding Molly Sherman and the Packrat Lode.

"Animas!" Tom snapped harshly. "What are you doing here?"

There was a pause before Animas answered. Then: "I came to town. I had to come with Molly. She . . ."

"Molly?" Tom strode toward the door. "Is she here? Did she . . .?" He reached the door and stopped. There beyond Animas who stepped aside, was Molly Sherman.

For a long moment Tom stood in the doorway of the Mint, looking at the girl, reading her brown eyes, delving down into their depths, and lost in them. Then with a sharply indrawn breath he stepped from the doorway toward the girl.

Six feet lay between them and two steps covered the distance. And in those two steps there was time to think, time for one sharp instant of reflection, time to remember the slope of North Alder Park and the steers grazing on the grass and the thought that here was the end of the trail for Tom Harmes, lawman. He had been wrong. He had deceived himself. The end of that trail did not lie in North Alder; it lay in no country that days of weary riding might find. But there was an end to the trail, a finish to one life and the beginning of another. The end of the trail lay in Molly Sherman's brown and gold flecked eyes and the red lips that were upraised as Tom Harmes reached out his arms to bring her to him.



SHARK OF PENANG

By Ted Roscoe

With smoldering lead and a maudlin song the Orient trap was baited. And Peter Scarlet, Shark of Penang, swallowed the deadly lure.



QUEER business was brewing down at Waterfront Willy's Starboard Light Rum Palace, in Penang.

Waterfront Willy, himself, proprietor and maestro behind the bar, wondered what was in the wind. There had been a commotion at the door, a sharp exchange of words. Then a trim little man,

boasting an enormous sun helmet and a monumental burst of white whiskers, had strolled into the drinking room, nodded curt greeting, and taken a table in the middle of the floor. Waterfront Willy leaned his pendulous belly against the bar; placidly bent to the shining of a wine glass and the frank study of this newcomer. The dive-keeper's Chinese, Egyptian, Scotch face suddenly beamed a smile of recognition.

"An' it's 'ello to you, Peter Scarlet. What you 'avin' this hevening? You ain't been on this island come long time. Long time since you was 'ere. Down to see some o' th' boys?"

The little American curio-hunter gave a brief nod. "I see you run the same rotten hole you always did, Waterfront. H'm. But the bobbies will get you yet, I reckon. As for me, bring me a bottle of the best wine in the place. Make it good. It's too hot for stiff drinks to-night."

Waterfront Willy moved his spindly legs among kegs and jugs and resurrected a bottle from behind the bar. The dive-keeper was puzzled. He knew this Peter Scarlet. The little American curio-hunter was a recognized figure from Port Said to Karafuto, the Kizil Kum to the Celebes Sea. But he was not a denizen of unsavory dope-halls such as Waterfront Willy knew his Starboard Light Rum Palace to be. The dive-keeper covertly watched his guest, wondering.

The drinking-room was not crowded, for the hour was early. A drunken stoker, with gin and coal-dust in his ears, snored at a corner table. A drunken Tommy spraddled in a chair near the bar, unconscious. They and Waterfront Willy and Peter Scarlet were the only occupants of the low-ceilinged, long room.

Sitting alone in the center of the floor, the little American curio-hunter looked strangely out of place among the speckled tables, the roach-spotted walls, the tawdry tapestries that hung the dancing platform. The dive-owner noted the fact that where Peter Scarlet sat he could watch both the door from the street and the screen-hung inner doors that led to opium dens and gambling corridors. When Waterfront Willy brought the ordered wine the bottle was left untouched.

Behind the bar once more, Waterfront Willy felt he was, himself, under his guest's survey. Shadowed by the broad brim of his sun helmet, Peter Scarlet's cobalt-blue eyes roved the room. Now they studied the brass lamp hanging over his head. Now they watched the door, the man behind the bar, the platform at the room's end. Now they concentrated on the red eye of the black cigar he had jabbed into his teeth. Smoke, purred steadily from the snowy beard, wreathed the peak of the helmet. The strong-fingered, brown hands that were noted for the fabulous fortunes they had held and the fabulous speed at drawing certain weapons, tapped calmly on the table-top.

After a long interval, disturbed by the fall of a *chipkilli* from a rafter and the entry and exit of a cat-footed Malay servant, Peter Scarlet looked over to the bar. He pointed a thumb at the screened doors leading to inner rooms.

"Many customers around tonight, Willy?"—tersely.

The Scotch-Chinese-Egyptian made a suave moon of his oily face. "There's a few in, friend. Business *has* been bleedin' slow. I lost me last piano player a while back. But I picked me up a new one off th' beach yesterday. That brings th' gang in. They likes a bit o' music with their glass, yer know. Good bright song an' a weepy one, maybe. This new guy I got can play an' sing fine. You'll see 'em mob in soon as th' music starts. Ones in 'ere now is mostly native. Later comes th' bullies from th' boats. We fills up with a good lively crowd o' buckos about eleven o'clock. You'll see 'em."

Peter-Scarlet settled back in his chair, lit another ebony cigar. Evidently he was going to stick around and see them. A little prickle chilled the ruffles at the nape of Waterfront Willy's damp, fat neck as he caught the glint of the curio-hunter's blue eyes. Stony as marble. Flinty. And something informed the dive-keeper that Peter Scarlet was not visiting the Starboard Light Rum Palace on a sight-seeing tour, either. There was a quaint bulge, an obvious protuberance beneath the breast of the little man's trim drill jacket that hinted at the presence of a waiting, ready gun.

BENDING his head ever so slightly, the stalwart man peered through a crack in the rattan screen. What he saw brought a smile of satisfaction that tightened his loose-lipped mouth to a sinister carmine line. His winky, porcine eyes—black buttons restive in little cups of blood-sparked hate. The slim smile, as he peered, altered to an ugly leer. His thick, wet, pulpy lower lip drooped to hang open his mouth and reveal a battery of crooked teeth. He moistened his upper lip with a quick tongue, like a boy would lick away a smear of chocolate. He wrinkled his spatulate nose and wrought a scowl on his jutting forehead. Not a pleasant visage with its knife-scar forking across the left cheek, its toss of damp, curly hair, its truculent unkempt chin with the deep, black dimple dotting the center. The twisty leer did not enhance its beauty.

"Yah!" whispered the unlovely mouth. "There he be! I knowed as he'd come. There he is. There he sets. I knowed he would. I knowed that letter would fetch 'im; an' he'd stay. He's that kind, th' bleedin', low-life hyena. Looks like he allus did, too. A bleedin' Sandy Claus." The mouth gave vent to a scurrious chuckle. "But it's me who's thinkin' a hour from now he won't be so bleedin' calm an' bleedin' cool. No he won't. Settin' an' waitin', eh? Brave, heh? I reckoned he'd be. Baby! He'll do some smart jumpin' an' hoppin' before this night's gone around!" The mouth panted angrily. "Bloody Judas! After all these years. An' th' time has come at last—"

The man brought his scabrous face away from the screen with a jerk; stood to his full height, lips split in a polluted grin, eyes flickering. Hands in pockets, he teetered back and forth on his heels. His massive shoulders under his ragged cloak shook with silent mirth. His twitching cheeks went the color of new-dug beets. Sweat crawled from the curls straggling down his forehead and rolled slowly down his bulbous nose.

"I got th' bloody little skunk, now," he whispered to himself. "An', baby, how I've got him!" The face mirrored purple hate once more. "Th' bleedin' little truck. Him as done for me a-plenty. Now its *my* turn. An' ain't I glad I

waited. All these years. All these long days an' hours. Me a-humpin' an' crawlin' along. An' now I get me hooks in him at last. I'm thinkin' he ain't never forgot me, nor he ain't never goin' to, neither. He's gonna remember a lot o' things tonight. *How!*"

Once more the cloaked figure stooped to peek through the rattan screen; then retreated down the narrow corridor. Like an evil shade in the dank twilight of the narrow passageway. A sinister, cloaked shadow that moved with a curious precision—as if it dragged a dead limb. Silently it moved an inner door and slid into a feebly lighted room that evidently served as living quarters.

There was a decrepit iron stove leaning in a corner cluttered with crockery and fly-hunted scraps of food. Heaps of ragged garments hung from wall-hooks. A tattered hammock was slung from corner to corner under the leaky ceiling. On a mat beneath the hammock crouched what might have been a boy.

A candle sat in a dish full of cigaret stubs at one of the bony elbows, a red bottle sat at the other. As the cloaked figure loomed in the doorway, the boy swung the bottle to his lips. His gaunt throat gurgled. Setting the bottle aside, he wiped a hand across the dripping lips. The lambent glow of the candle made his young face into an aged, hollow-eyed mask set atop a scrawny, unwashed neck. His mouth was old. His flat cheeks were gray, sunken, smudged with grime. His eyes were sullen beneath a thatch of curiously colored hair—that rare pink found in occasional corners of Saxony—that fell across his white forehead. One would have said he was ill, or addicted to drugs.

The cloaked figure, hands in pockets, stood framed in the door and grinned. "Yar! At th' wine again, heh? Well, no matter. Git up off th' mat, Kid. Come along wi' me. I got somethin' plenty nice to show yer." An elbow under the cloak beckoned. The black curls nodded. "Somethin' you been wantin' ter see."

THE boy stumbled up from the mat; clapped a frowsy hat on his head; crept from the room at the man's bidding. The man quietly led the way down

the unlighted corridor; motioned the boy to the rattan screen. The boy peeked through the crack, his face twisting.

His companion's crass voice whispered softly in his ear: "There he be, Kid. Settin' alone right there. There's th' yella mongoose who put a knife in yer daddy's back an' fired a bullet into yer sleepin' mother. I told you I'd get him around here fer you. An' there's yer meat, Kiddo. Him a-sittin' there by hisself. Middle o' th' room under th' lamp. With th' cheroot in his bleedin' whiskers. *Him as kilt yer folks.*"

A shudder rustled down the boy's unfed frame. A sudden fury of blood flushed his face as he withdrew it from the screen. He glared, panting; made a sudden lunge at his companion; grabbed at the cloak. "So that's *him*, is it? That's th' guy we been huntin' fer heh? Th' guy who knifed my dad from behind an' shot my mother. By Gawd! Gimme th' gun, you. Gimme that gun! I'll get him right now. I'll shoot off his bloody head fer him. Where's yer gun—" Tears of rage wiggled down the writhing face. "Gimme that gun, I tell you—"

"Fer th' sake o' Bleedin' Judas!" oathed the man in the cloak, poking an elbow into the boy's mouth and tramping a heavy heel across the lad's broken shoe. "Cut th' noise! Wait, you bloody little fool! Don't mouth it so loud. Not so loud. Wanta gum everything I been tryin' so long to fix fer yuh? Wanta spoil yer chance? Hush quiet, an' do as I tells. Do as we been plannin'. Now do as I says. Rummage in me left pocket an' git out me automatic. Left hand pocket, see? Got it? Good. Now ram it into yer pants, an' keep it there as I says. Now lissen, you. When you shoots this ole buzzard you gotta do it quick an' neat an' plenty, see? I got th' gat all loaded fer yuh. Th' ole skunk won't be armed, but yuh gotta catch him quick, see? First three shots. You gettin' me? Now yer gonna do it as I says, ain't you? Like we planned?"

"I'd like to pop him now," the boy snarled thickly, juggling the automatic he had dug from his companion's cloak. "I'd like to shoot his blood-slopped mug off him right where he sets! Th' lousy

hound! Murdered my folks, did he? I'd like to walk right out there an' blow away his eyes! I—"

"Can it!" snapped the other. "Don't be a bloody jackass. We been waitin' too long fer this chance t' have it spoilt by no fool moves. I'd shoot him from behind this screen, myself, only you knows I can't nowadays handle a small gun. I'd git him with my shotgun, only you wants him fer yerself, don't yuh? Yar! Then do as I says. What yuh think I got ya this job an' all fer? What yuh think I cooked up this plant fer? So's yuh could git th' hound an' git him right. An' not have th' police stringin' yuh up by yer throat. Now you listen to me!"

HE put his pulpy lips close to the boy's ear. "When Waterfront Willy comes t' yer room an' asks yuh to come out an' do yer piano playin', you walks out to that stage an' goes to th' piano, see? Like yuh usually does. Play as allus. A bleedin' tune er two. While y're up there git that guy located in your mind, see? Have your gun hand ready t' dive, an' spot him where he's settin'. You know right where he sets from where you set, so's yuh can swing on yer stool an' plant lead in his guts an' head. He ain't far from yuh, an' with my automatic yuh can't never miss, see? Now y're playin' yer piana an' singin'. Have th' top o' th' piana lifted. *I'm hidin back here with me shotgun.*

"You plays a bit, then wallers into yer sad-eyed song like Waterfront Willy asks fer this aft. Sing th' piece yuh was doin' up in Jonsey's place in Algiers. Sing that there *Jest a Song At Twilight*. That has the bloody customers weepin', see? That's my signal, see? Th' last note o' that song. When y're on th' last note, I lets fly an' pops out th' lamp. Second my gun whams, you whips around, fires fast an' empties yer gat into this white-whiskered bloke who's done yuh dirt. Then, quicker'n wink, yuh drops yer cannon into th' piana, see? Room's dark an' everybody's hollerin' an' flounderin'. Time they get a light on, you're outa there. Nobody guesses nor sees it was you. You ain't got no gun. You beats it outa there in a jiffy, an' they ain't a thing against yuh. It goes off slick as

soap." The man grinned wryly. "O' course, I could git him. I could bop off his nut, myself, easy as pie. But I reckoned *you'd* want t' do it yerself—"

"He's *mine!*" the boy raged out through clenched teeth. *I'm* gonna kill him. This yella skunk is fer me, see? It was my folks he done in, an' I'm gonna do him. I'll work it like you planned. Maybe yer idea is best. But let me put th' bullets inta him. Don't you dare go an' plug him! I wanna croak him, myself. Shoot out th' light fer me, but if—"

"All right. All right," the man soothed through his leer. "He's yours to croak. He ain't nothing to me. All I been doin' is just helpin' you locate him an' get him planted, tha's all. I knowed yer folks, an' yer ma was a friend o' mine. I knowed 'em well, yer ma an' yer dad." He smiled thinly. "Like I been tellin' you, right along. Now it's up to you."

Again the boy bent to peer through the rattan screen. "He's still settin' there, th' little rat. I'll croak him, all right. Don't worry none about me missin'. I'll plug his eyes—"

"Sure, you will," snarled the man. "Cos he done in yer folks. Now *beat* it! An' don't forget! Sing five or six songs. Then yer weepy number, see? Then as you ends it I smashes th' light. Then quick as scat you turns an' shoots. Drop yer gun in th' piana—scoot. Got me? Now git outa here an' wait!"

Muttering oaths, the boy scurried up the corridor. The cloaked man watched him go; wet his lips with his tongue; grinned like a skull. Then he pushed his face against the screen, beady eyes to the crack, and whispered to himself:

"So it's comin' to yer at last, me fine bully. Few minutes, now. An' then ain't you gonna suffer? *How!* How y're gonna suffer! Baby! Guess I didn't crack th' ole nozzle figgerin' all these years fer nothin'. You done me plenty, little skunk, an' now it's comin' back to yuh. All I hafta do is pop that lantern, an' git it in th' right spot. An' th' last note is what does it. That's what does fer *you!* I goes now an' gits me shotgun. An' th' *last note* is what fixes you!"

He glared balefully through the rattan screen.

THE Hindu chattered, and Wilhelm Schneider, the beery Dutch artist from Islamahad chattered. The Hindu waved his skinny hands like crazy little bats under the expatriate Dutchman's numerous chins. Wilhelm Schneider brought a score of goodly Rhineland oaths up from his several stomachs, trapped the Hindu's skinny wrists, and panted into the spouting native face. Finally, the overwrought gentleman from India ended his wild speech, and the fat artist from Islamahad began to run.

Wilhelm Schneider ran; which was unusual for one so fat. His heels pounded the dust to smoke. Sweat poured in rivulets from the band of his sun-helmet. His linen suiting flapped like a distress signal on his corpulent frame as he panted down the palm-bordered lane, up the broad avenue where rickshaws and motors flickered through the warm night. Across a square and up a street and across a lawn to a hotel veranda. Like an elephant stampeding from a legion of mice. The Malay gardener watched the fat figure race by, and wondered. The artist *tuan* and his friend of the great white beard and his friend of the long shanks stayed often at the hotel; but never had the gardener seen the fat one run so. Evil spirits must be afoot!

Holmes Bradshaw, the gaunt Kelantan naturalist, had much the same idea as he saw his fat friend charging up the veranda steps. He swung out of his chair, and rapped the ashes from his pipe as the Dutchman loomed, gasping, across the porch.

"What ho, old top?" the naturalist greeted. "I say, why the race, and from whom? You look as if you'd been trying out for the Olympic Ga—"

"*Gott im Himmel!*" panted the artist, mopping water from his three chins. "This iss no time for the jest, Bradshaw! *Nein!* What do you t'ink! *Ja!* Trouble! I am one monkey if there iss not trouble for us tonight. So! Listen! Just now by our club I meet Peter Scarlet's boy, Kundoo. He is upset! That Hindu is one excited boy. He is so! And with a good reason! Do you guess what he told me? He runs up to me squeaking like mice. He tells me there is something in the air wrong with

Peter. His gods and his eyes tell him it. He said he had met Peter Scarlet two hours before going into this Waterfront Willy's place. You know Waterfront Willy's place? That dive by the wharfs! *Ja!* That hole that would turn your soul into Swiss cheese. That is the place.

"And Kundoo saw Peter go in there. Kundoo wass coming out. He tries to argue with Peter about going in, but the curio-hunter does not listen. Kundoo says Peter looks very excited. Peter will not listen, and he gets mad and cuffs the Hindu and tells him to clear away! Perhaps, thinks Kundoo, Peter Scarlet only goes in for a drink. The Hindu waits by the door. He iss a good boy, that Hindu. He waits one hour. He waits two. Our friend does not come out. Then Kundoo iss scared. He runs over to the club to tell somebody. He finds me and I run back here to the hotel to get my gun and find you. *Ja!* Shades of Friedrich Wilhelm! I believe there iss something wrong with Peter Scarlet. I am going to this Starboard Light of a Rum Palace. We cannot—"

"You bet we can't!" snapped the naturalist. "Wonder what old Peter is doing in a cut-throat joint like that?" He fingered his long chin reflectively. "Come to think of it, I saw the old boy as he was leaving the hotel. He seemed a bit bothered and in a hurry. Queer. We can't let him hang around a dump like that alone. That Waterfront Willy's is the lousiest dive in th' China Coast or anywhere. I'll just grab my gat and mosey down there with you. If there's anything happened to Peter we'll shoot the place full of holes an' tell the police afterwards. But I don't think we need worry much," he amended. "The curio-hunter is a master hand at taking care of himself. And you know what he is with a gat—"

BUT the gaunt Kelatan naturalist was worried. So was Wilhelm Schneider. Why was the curio-hunter spending an evening in an unsavory dope den like the Starboard Light Rum Palace? They knew—though Peter Scarlet was ever reticent about such matters—that the little curio-hunter owned several enemies

who would have been only too glad to drive knives into his spine. Bradshaw mentioned this as he hustled to his room. The Dutchman cursed and mopped his face, bustling off to get an automatic.

With guns in snug holsters under their jackets, the two then hailed a rickshaw and rolled speedily down to the native quarter. On foot they hurried down the square bordered by the little houses where the lights were dim, down through the shadowy Chinese Quarter alive with flickery lamps and the nauseous squealing of pigs in the slaughter pens, to the waterfront. Here they wove their way down long wharfs where fences of masts and foreign funnels spiked against a tropic sky flashing with low, hot stars.

From the distance they could see the pernicious green glow of the ship's lantern marking the entry of the Starboard Light Rum Palace. The one-story ranshackle edifice rambled along the edge of a rotting wharf. The slop of green water seeped up through the decaying planks under foot. Schneider and Bradshaw picked their way over coiled hawsers and shore-lines, cursing. As they neared the glow of the green ship's lantern that so aptly reflected the poisonous locale, they were treated to a burst of noise. A roaring, drunken chant of the sea.

The rusty, tin-walled warehouses crouching on either side of Waterfront Willy's echoed to the clash of the ribald music drifting through the green-hazed door. Hands were hammering a tinny, outcast piano. Thick red throats were bellowing the words of the ditty. Heavy boots tramped; mugs thumped to beat cadent time.

While I'm floatin' down Sout' Street one day
I did spy—
A sweet littul ladeee as to-ook my eye—

"*Ach, der lieber Gott!*" snorted Wilhelm Schneider, his face a red moon peering over the raucous threshold into the smoke-fogged, roaring chamber within. "Here iss one *verdamm't* scorpion's nest or I am a Spaniard. To go in here—it is, Bradshaw, like strolling into hell, eh?" Then his pudgy fingers caught the naturalist's sleeve. "*Himmel!* Look! There iss Peter! In the very center of the room. He iss alone at a table. For

why? Look at him! Come—we go and sit with him!”

“Good Lord!” exclaimed Bradshaw, staring. “What the devil is he doing here, anyhow? Look at the gang of cut-throats packing this hole. That rotten bunch of Greek sailors over there. That mob of stewed Limy stokers. Half-breeds. Dope hounds. Never saw a worse crew in my life. I’m after you, Schneider. We can’t let Peter fool around alone in a sink like this. Lead away to his table. I’m with you.”

PANTING, elbowing officiously, the beery Dutchman shoved through the crowd blocked about the bar. Whisky-reddened eyes leered. Bearded mouths spat insults. But the Dutchman shoved away, pushed a path through the clutter of chairs and tables, stepped over spraddling legs, kicked a Malay waiter to one side, tramped on a lady’s boot, and brought up at Peter Scarlet’s chair. The little American curio-hunter looked up with an oath of surprise; half rose from his seat.

“I say! It’s Schneider and Bradshaw. Now, what the devil!” His blue eyes frowned. “You two! Who—So that rascally boy of mine told you I was down here, didn’t he? Told on me, eh? I’ll give it to Kundoo for this! I didn’t want anybody around. You—I can’t have you here, old chaps. You birds will have to clear out. I want to be alone, and—”

Nodding, Holmes Bradshaw slipped into a chair, calmly crossed his knees. The Dutchman from the Islamahad dropped into the remaining chair, leaned elbows on the table, shook his head. “You see, we don’t stir,” chuckled the naturalist.

“We don’t move an inch!” agreed the Dutchman stubbornly. “No, sir. We ain’t going to leave our friend sitting in this dope hell by himself, alone. What are you doing, Peter? Why iss this? There iss some bad trouble, I think.”

Schneider wrinkled his forehead with a frown, lowered his voice and nudged the curio-hunter’s arm. “You are carrying your gun, too,” he accused; with no danger of being overheard, for the room was still squalling out the dubious virtues of Miss O’Pimple. “You

carry your automatic. For what, Peter? *Gott!* You can’t stay in this place by yourself. We cannot let you. Tell us about it. Your two best friends. We will not go away. *Nein!* Not until we learn why you are here.”

The little curio-hunter glared at the men across the table from him, then a smile brightened his blue eyes and brought crimson patches to his cheeks. Darting a piercing glance around the room, another at his wrist-dial, he leaned across the table.

“All right,” he said quietly. “It was white of you to come down. I might tell you that if you stay there may be grave danger for both of you. You’ll stay, will you? Then,” he said abruptly, “I’ll tell you what’s up. As much as I can, anyway—” He glanced quickly about him again. The room was turbid with blue smoke; vibrating with noise. “Rotten racket, eh? Rotten place for a *rendezvous?*”

Bradshaw cursed saliently. “Rendezvous! With who? Peter, what’s up? You *are* packing your gun. I can see it plain as anything—”

The curio-hunter smiled sternly, stabbed his whiskers with a fresh cigar. “You chaps have known me for years. Yet, you haven’t. I reckon you been wondering why I’ve been traipsing over the Orient. Always on the go. I never told you, but I guess you’ve known I wasn’t really hunting trinkets. Now I’ll tell you a story. I’ll make it short because it’s mighty ugly. But I think you lads might as well know it, after all.”

Naturalist and Dutch artist sat up; looked at one another. Their friend’s voice had come like a knife-blade. They had never heard him talk like that before. They leaned forward. Ropes of smoke reeled about Scarlet’s head. His eyes had become icy blue china. His voice cut just loud enough for them to hear above the song roared out by the room.

“Oh, I sailed th’ seas fer thirty years,
Fer thirty years or more!
But I never seen a cabbage head
With ears on it before!”

The room was bellowing. The boy at the derelict piano—a derelict himself—

was pounding furiously, shoulders haunched, fingers beating venomously on the keys, feet jamming the pedals, hat rammed over his ears. The room shook with sound. But Holmes Bradshaw and Wilhelm Schneider could only hear Peter Scarlet's steel voice.

"I CAME East when I was twenty. I Went home at forty and married and brought my wife back to Hongkong with me. Shipping business, in those days. Export." A short sigh blew smoke from his white beard. "I'll cut it short, it's so rotten. I can see you're going to tell me I needn't tell it if it's painful. It is. But I want you to know. I've got a queer hunch that maybe tonight—

"Any way, my wife's son was born the day we got to Hongkong. A year later my wife and the baby were kidnaped. Stolen by a renegade. A half-Spanish, half-English adventurer. Castor was his name. An utter buzzard. Police called him Claws Castor. You see, he—he didn't have any hands. Just a steel hook for each hand."

Peter Scarlet's voice shook. He brushed mist from his forehead. "This monster asked forty thousand pounds for the return of the wife and baby. Said he'd shoot 'em both and send 'em back to me in a week if I didn't send the money he demanded. I hadn't an available penny. I didn't put it past him killing the girl and the baby, and I tried like hell to raise it. Couldn't get it." Scarlet coughed. "My wife and baby were shot. He sent them to me by a rickshaw man who thought they were bundles of laundry—"

"*Got im himmel!*" sobbed the Dutchman. Bradshaw's angular face was of chalk.

The curio-hunter went on: "I got up a gang. I hounded that devil. Hounded him! And I trailed and caught him way up on the Lena River after a terrible, terrible chase. I was frenzied; almost mad. We trapped him alone in a deserted hut, abandoned by his gang. Left to starve and freeze. But he wasn't by any means dead, the rotten murderer. He put up a stiff fight. Good with a shotgun. I ordered my men back, and I went into that hut after him with a

revolver in one hand and an axe in the other. Heaven couldn't have stopped me. I was insane. You see, he'd been so cold-blooded about my wife and—"

"*Lieber Gott!*" Schneider, the beery artist mopped his chins desperately. "This iss one *verdammt* awful story, Peter. I hope you fixed that *hund!*"

"I chopped off his right leg," growled the curio-hunter. "And left him alone to die. It seems he didn't. Three years later I got a letter signed Claws—typed. It said, 'I am still alive. So is your kid. Keep an eye out for us. Claws.' He had, by his claim, sent me someone else's baby. My boy lived. I hunted. I've been hunting. Five years later came the same note, again. On Christmas Day. Another six years ago. They may have been fakes. About my boy, anyway. God, how I've hoped they were. But still I went on searching. No trace."

Now Peter Scarlet's voice was granite and edged with steel that carved through the uproar. "But this afternoon came a note. It said: 'Be in Waterfront Willy's tonight from eight until one o'clock. Sit in the middle of the room. You will see something that is very, very sure to interest you.' That was all. No signature." Peter Scarlet's eyes narrowed. "But it was typed." A mirthless chuckle escaped his beard. His fingers inched over the bulge on his breast. "I'm here. It's half past eleven."

Wilhelm Schneider gulped. Bradshaw said nothing. The naturalist was pale, and warm sweat glistened on his cheeks. Peter Scarlet leaned back in his chair, studying the eye of his cigar. The room had quieted. Hoarse voices had choked out, and the trio at the center table became aware that the creature at the piano on the stage—a wretched beach boy from all appearances—was playing and singing a solo.

He sang with his eyes shifting at the crowd, his raw voice sawing out the melody. Waterfront Willy's Starboard Light Rum Palace had hedged into a maudlin mood, green as the lamp over its entry. A woman at a corner table with a floppy hat wearing a peacock had a lace kerchief to her jaded nose. A bull-necked Irishman at the bar sniffed aud-

ibly. The scrawny youth at the piano sang huskily.

"*Jest a song at Tuh-wi-light—*"

HE caught off his hat with a theatrical gesture as he lingered on the note. The trowsled sheaf of pink hair fell across his forehead, and his face was wet.

"*Still to us at tuh-wi-light—*" (And now Peter Scarlet, the little American curio-hunter, was half out of his chair; fingers gripping the rim of the table.) "*Comes love's ole songgg—*" sang the wretched pianist. (And Peter Scarlet was on his feet, glaring, face the color of snow.) The soloist finished his number slowly: "*Comes—luhw's—suhweet sawng—*"

Wham! A fierce, blatant gunshot that seemed to come from one of the screened doors leading to an inner room. The drinking den clattered with crashing echo. The lamp hanging from the center of the ceiling rocked to and fro, flickered, dimmed. But it *did not go out.*

At the instant of the shot, the boy at the piano had whirled on his tool, opened fire with an automatic in his fist.

Wham! Wham!

Jets of vermilion flame streaked from the muzzle of his gun. Straight at the face of Peter Scarlet who stood in the center of the floor. The room shrieked, tables went over, heads ducked. Bradshaw bounced to his feet, automatic in fist. Wilhelm Schneider bobbed up with a furious oath.

The naturalist's gun exploded. But the bullet did not speed at the boy. With a sudden punch, Peter Scarlet had turned Bradshaw's gun aside, and the bullet streaked into the ceiling. The Dutchman's weapon bellowed. But Peter Scarlet's had fired at the same instant. The little curio-hunter's bullet struck Schneider's gun. The Dutchman's automatic sailed from his hand, its bullet whizzing across the room and plucking feathers from the peacock in the woman's hat.

The boy on the stage was cursing wildly, shooting with loud cries. He sped his fourth shot straight at the curio-hunter. His fifth shot. Peter Scarlet was pouncing at him. His sixth shot, almost

into the curio-hunter's beard. Peter Scarlet did not fall. Bounding to the platform, the curio-hunter brought his gun butt down with a furious tap across the boy's jaw. The boy fell across his stool like a sack of wet grain. Peter Scarlet stumbled to his knees.

"Kid. Kid—"

"**H**ERR GOTT!" exploded Schneider. "It iss, Peter, one miracle you are alive. He fired right into your face. My! How did he miss? And why did you shot the gun from my fingers so? Shades of Von Bismarck!"

The curio-hunter laid down his limp burden, picked up the boy's automatic and ejected a shell. "He didn't miss," said Scarlet in a low tone. "His gun was loaded with blanks. See? And—and I didn't want to shoot him. I—I recognized him when he took his hat off. It's *him*. I—he's got *her* hair! Just like hers, and I knew it when—"

A commotion at the door under the green light. Malay boy bustling forward with a message for a Peter Scarlet. The curio-hunter took the neatly folded note. It was carefully typed, and read:

DEAR PETER SCARLET:

The dopy brat you have just shot to death is your own son. I framed him with blanks in his gun, framed him about the light, so's he'd turn and pot at you. And, of course, you being such a lightning shot and all, yes? But he is your own brat, and you killed him. He's got a birthmark under his arm that proves it; the other baby was faked. Too bad to kill your own boy. Sorry. Of course, I loved the brat. As for you, I love you, too. I could have dropped you tonight, myself, but I'm saving you for something better than an easy bullet. Hope you enjoy the funeral, Mister Fast Shot. Planning to see you soon. Have a good funeral for your boy.

Yours affectionately,
CLAWS CASTOR.

Clutching the unconscious wasted frame of the boy in his arms, Peter Scarlet let a savage laugh burst from his beard. "Framed us, eh? Thought I'd shot my own son. But I recognized him too soon. He didn't remember the boy's hair was like his mother's. Funeral, eh? Funeral! The only funeral I'll be seeing soon is one for Claws Castor."

He gazed warmly down on the bloodless, thin face framed by the swollen jaw and the toss of pink hair.

"My son and I will attend it together!"

HELL'S RANCHO

By John Starr

Clay Webb came back to a range of riddles. Men vanished from the White Horse without trace. . . . Boothill boomed—and the double-cross secret was bullet-guarded at sinister Hell's Rancho.

WHERE the rim cracked open to let the Steptoe Trail pitch its dusty way down, Clay Webb reined in his sorrel mount. He twisted, licked and lighted a smoke without once pulling his eyes from the outflung vastness before him.

The monotony of sage and juniper stretched across the Crowder Sink, smoke-gray and the more sombre for the streaks of sun-withered yarrow that marked it. In a few twisting bottoms, the shimmering yellow of aspens flagged the promise of water. Beyond, where the haze of distance blued the gray, the floor of the sink broke away into the tangled purple of the Mustang Hills which reached and subsided at last against the mighty base of Hatchet Mountain.

"Wars and men gone ain't marked or mattered here," the man mused, "and the wheel of seasons ain't waited on our return. Maybe next time we could hold our row right here inside this set of horizons; there's room and the world could sit around the rims to watch."

His eyes drew back from the distance to focus on the forty-odd unpainted boxes squatting on the treeless plain where they made up the town of Wagon Springs.

"Now ain't that a hell of a place to sprout a town?" Webb rubbed out the fire of his smoke and went on down.

The pony's feet punched at a steady jog along the single street. Powder-fine dust squirted from before the hoofs to rise and hang dejectedly in the draftless air.

Clay Webb held a full seat in the saddle: lean body slightly back, legs falling straight down from the hips and bent a little at the knee, as is the manner of men who ride often and far. His lean weather-dark face was flatly emotionless but no detail escaped the appraisal of his wary blue eyes.

A half dozen strangers along the street watched him go by. They gave no sign of greeting, simply watched him with hard, hostile eyes.

Clay Webb met their gaze briefly, impersonally, marked their faces and their outlines as he knew they marked his. Within him, though, there was some faint and ominous stirring; these were no part of the men who had been here when last he rode this way. All across the White Horse country it was the same, old familiar faces were gone and in their stead were these hard-faced strangers with their air of watchful friendlessness.

At the Ingot Saloon Webb swung down and hitched his horse.

A ponderous man of fifty ceased his puttering at the drygoods counter and crossed over to the bar as Webb came in. He was the only occupant of the place and his face showed an unlikely gray by the light that came through the streaked windows.

Webb slid his elbows on the bar and said: "Howdy, Joe."

The big man dropped the cloth he held in his hand and then with a movement incongruously deft for his bulk, he caught it again in the air. It took him a full three seconds to get his mouth closed and to drive the sudden look of panic from his eyes.

"Oh, he said. "Howdy."

"The name," Clay said dryly, "is Webb. I'll drink whisky to welcome myself back."

The man shoved a bottle and a glass across the bar. His great colorless face spread in a smile that his eyes did not join. "Sure," he said. "Sure, I recognized you." His voice ended on a rising intonation, its only purpose seeming to be impersonally vague.

"Wipe a glass and join in the riot of welcome," Clay Webb said, and the edge



to his tone cut the smile from the other's face.

"I thank you. I don't use it."

"Then I guess it'll never come winter again," Clay said. "Folks used to say it around that if Joe Avery ever got another customer as regular as himself, he'd wax rich."

There was silence as Clay took another drink.

JOE AVERY drew in the money and put the bottle away. Webb followed him with his eyes and said:

"It would seem that the welcoming ceremony was over."

"It's over," Avery said. "It's over because I don't want you drinking in here. I don't want your money or any part of you."

"Now I know it'll never come winter again," Clay said drily. "I never yet heard the day that you didn't want any kind of money."

"Listen," Avery said, "I don't mean that as bad as it sounds. It's just that there's been a lot of changes around here, and you coming back can't mean one damn thing but trouble. . . . And I don't want no trouble!"

"Changes?" Clay said. "There's been changes?"

"You know that," the saloon man said. "You know that, and what the hell did you come back here for?"

"That's a loose question," Clay said, "and I'll answer it with another. Have you seen a friend of mine hereabouts?"

Avery left off polishing the bar to wipe his forehead. "You know you got no friends here," he said bluntly. "You know that."

"You know who I mean," Clay persisted. "Over Steptoe way, they told me I might come up with him in Wagon Springs."

"Well"—Avery looked at the door—"Jerry Dunn came up this way all right."

"There now," Clay said softly, "that's better. He's still here, is he?"

"Yes. Dunn is still here."

"Well?"

"You go down the street"—Avery wiped his brow—"you go down the street beyond the eating house on the left."

"If you mean a jail," Clay said, "how

long have they had him locked up there?"

"You'll find him beyond the eating house, on the left," Avery repeated. "You'll find Jerry Dunn there. After you find him, you'd better get going again—get going to wherever you've got to go."

"Jerry and me will have a talk," Clay said. "It'll be good to see the old hell-bender again. I'm obliged to you."

He went out of the emporium, got his horse and rode out along the street. But beyond the eating house on the left there were no other buildings; only a low fence, behind which the dust of the street lay heavy on the forlorn yellow of the fall-dead yarrow weeds.

Clay Webb swung down and stood for a long time at the fence. And as he stood, something died within him. The last ounce of his youthfulness seemed to go out of his heart and leave him only the unsmiling purpose of a man suddenly seasoned and grown.

For beyond the fence, where the weeds were trampled down, was a mound of broken earth and a plain wooden head-board. On it was etched the name of Jerry Dunn. Just his name and a recent date-line. . . .

FOR a time the lettered plank, with its deadening finality, pulled the present from between the past and future. Let them tangle together in the labyrinth trails of Clay's brain. Shoulder to shoulder, Clay Webb and the reckless, hardbitten Jerry Dunn had fought and labored to forge a prosperity within the rims of the Horse Basin. And now—

Webb straightened and pulled back to the present with a jerk. "So that's it. That's why you're in Wagon Springs, Jerry. And they knew it all the time—every damn one of them that watched me ride this way!"

From his pocket, he took and re-read a letter from Dunn that had reached him in Tampa. He tried to find in its words some answer other than the one he found here, sought to piece together the shattered glass of suspicion and half-guessed facts that made up his mind.

Written in pencil on the most common of paper, the letter was strikingly like the man himself. A small, compact hand as

was Jerry, but with something bold and unafraid about it, too. It had been written in Steptoe on August twenty-sixth.

Dear Clay:

I hear it said that the Rough Riders will be mustered out on the fifteenth of next month. So I guess you'll be coming along home pretty soon now. I hope so, because hell is due to break here right sudden.

There was two killings here about six weeks ago that was a whole lot bigger than they looked at the time. When the lid blows off, I wouldn't be surprised to see it splash clear across the White Horse.

As usual, Steve Yeager is rattled and running around circles. Why the hell do they have to get sheriffs without brains enough to beat sand in a rat hole?

I told you in my last letter about good old Frank Morgan being dragged to death by his horse. We all thought he'd leave the Box M to his sister's little girl that come to live with him, but I guess Frank thought it would be more than she could handle. Anyway, it all went to a brother that's been a long time in Texas. They tell me he got here a little while ago and took over the ranch. I'll have to ride over and say howdy, I guess.

When you come home, come in by the way of Steptoe. If I ain't at the China House, go on up to Wagon Springs and I'll meet you there. But be sure to come in this way and meet me.

Your partner,

JERRY.

P.S. Old Finnegan has gone off up north with his dog and I've got a couple of Modocs looking to things at the ranch while I ride around trying to make sense out of nothing.

With the re-reading of the letter, the first deadening shock gave way to an overwhelming bitterness within Clay Webb. A bitterness and a certainty that in this changed land of hostile strangers there was but a single person to whom he could turn and learn the facts which had led up to the desolate grave among the dusty weeds.

With a muttered oath, Clay swung back toward his horse. In the singleness of his thought, he did not see the girl who was passing behind him. He crashed full into her.

The impact sent her reeling back. The armful of goldenrod that she carried was scattered into the dust, and her wide hat was knocked back to hang by its chin-cord.

That she was young, dark-eyed and lovely, Clay did not see. Still deadened by the shock of Jerry's grave, he saw only that he had stumbled into a girl and that she had dropped her flowers.

"Excuse me," he said thickly and

stooped to gather up the goldenrod.

Sudden fury flashed in her eyes and she cried: "Leave it there! I don't want it after you've trampled it in the dust!"

Forgetting that his drawn, haggard face and thick, impassioned voice made him appear a drunken man, he scooped up the flowers and shook them free of dust.

"I excused myself, ma'am. If you'll look, you'll see that I never tramped 'em in the dirt." His voice rang with anger.

"Oh—" the girl said. "Oh, I thought you—" She paused with embarrassment and Clay missed the sudden change in her eyes.

"Without a doubt," he said harshly, "without a doubt you did, ma'am."

Before she could say another word, he had stepped by her, swung into the saddle and ridden off down the street. He went along until he came to a little Chinese restaurant near the center of town. He hitched his horse there and went in.

HIS sudden flare of anger at the girl had steadied him, brought him to face facts. Although he had no desire for food, he ordered and set about eating a full meal. A lifetime of self-dependence had taught Clay Webb to arm his strength with food while he could, even as he would re-load his guns with powder and lead during a lull in a fight.

The sagging screen door flapped open and two men tramped in.

They gave no slight attention to Clay but crossed and seated themselves at a table near the back of the room. Their hard faces were the faces of any of a thousand men who might, in the course of years, come to ride across the White Horse country. Their bleached and sweat-stained garb was the garb of the day and the land, but the big roll-spurs buckled to their mule-ear boots marked them apart from working cattlemen. In the tangled brush of the rims and benches working riders wear only the small straight spurs.

Clay Webb ate steadily on but his eyes had become colder, more wary.

Again the screen door squeaked open to admit two men. The first pair, who were faced away from the door, did not look around.

Clay felt his muscles set tight as he pushed away his plate and moved a wedge

of pie into position before him. In his mind was a certainty that events were gathering here. Gathering fast. The showdown was coming.

But when the door opened a third time to admit a single man, he saw all four of the other men shoot a quick look in that direction and so knew that this last arrival had not been counted into the play. He recognized this fifth man as Larry Hope, deputy to sheriff Steve Yeager.

The deputy came straight across to Clay. "Webb," he said bluntly, "I want to talk to you."

Clay looked up at him without expression. "That is the first sociable thing I've heard since I hit the bench country. Sit down and I'll call you up a slab of this pie."

"I won't set," Hope said shortly. "There's nothing personal in this, but we've got to tell you to keep going. Get out of the White Horse!"

For a moment there was dead silence in the room. Clay did not move his half-contemptuous eyes from Larry Hope's face.

"There goes my sociability," he said gravely. "And now that it's gone, you might just as well go ahead and cite cases."

"I've cited the case," Hope said, the resentment of a slow-witted man in his tone. "You came back for trouble and we don't figure to let you stay long enough to start any."

"This word, 'we'—" Clay said. "That's the second time you've dropped it out like it ought to mean something. Who the hell is 'we'?"

"Me and the sheriff," Hope said angrily. "You know damn well who I mean. And you might as well know there's law here now! You can't go hell-bending around packing your own the way you and Dunn did in the past!"

Sudden blue ice showed in Clay Webb's eyes. "We're talking about me, Hope. Don't forget and stray off where you don't belong. We'll leave Jerry Dunn out of this."

The deputy flushed. "All right," he said gruffly, "but you be out of the White Horse by this time tomorrow."

Webb looked at him for a long time in silence before he said, "Neither you nor

the sheriff is large enough damn fool to think I can be drove, so what's the use of this meeting?"

"Listen," Hope said harshly, "there's nothing here for you. Get out!"

"Nothing here?" Clay's voice was dry. "Since when has a good cow outfit been graded as nothing? Put in the same class as wearing a tin badge?"

The color flooded to Hope's face again. "Cow outfit? You got no outfit and you know it! You don't control a foot of ground in the state!"

Clay Webb straightened in his chair. "Just what you trying to get said?"

"I'm saying that you don't stand a chance to break the deed," the deputy told him, "and we ain't letting you stay long enough to stir up a fight. That deal was put through legal before Dunn got himself shot, and the law is here to see that it sticks!"

"This deed"—Clay said—"this deed you mention. . . . Get down to cases."

"You know damn well that Dunn sold the Horse Basin to Morgan," Hope said. "You know it and it's going to stand."

Webb sat for a time in silence. His face was blankly emotionless and his two hands were spread flat on the table before him.

"So you're telling me," he said at last, "that Jerry Dunn sold the Horse Basin while I was gone?"

"You knew that," Hope said, "you knew that well enough!"

"No," Clay said softly, "I didn't know it. I don't know it now."

"Listen," the deputy said, and his voice was gaining courage, "I don't care if you knew it or not! You clear out of the White Horse country. If Dunn waited until you were gone and double-crossed you, that don't mean you can come back here an' raise hell!"

Clay got slowly to his feet and went around the table. His face was deadly white and the cold of his eyes was unpleasant to see.

"I told you to keep talking about me—to leave Dunn out of this—"

With an open hand that was hard as a horseshoe, he struck the deputy across the face. When the man reeled back he struck twice more, the blows sounding like pistol shots in the still of the room.

Hope went for his gun, and Clay Webb struck the weapon from his hand. Moving cat-quick, he slid in to grasp the deputy by the front of his shirt and coat. With his free hand he smashed the man again and again. Struck him until the skin broke and bled, struck him until his head flopped helplessly before the blows. Then as a dummy might be thrown down, he flung the deputy to the floor.

With ice-cold eyes he turned to survey the other four men who sat in silence at their tables.

"You can ride out now," he said. "You can ride out now and tell it hither and yon, that Webb is back! You can say, too, that he has come to stay, and that it won't be twenty hours before he's found out what the hell has been going on around here!"

He threw a dollar down to pay for his meal and stalked into the street.

THE sun had gone down, and in the coldly clear twilight Clay Webb headed out of town to the west. He rode at a steady rocking lope that laid the dusty miles swiftly behind.

When full darkness had come, and the stars had winked on overhead, he shifted his course to the south and so came, after a time, under the shelter of the rimrock that bit into the dome of the sky.

Clay followed along the base until a gap opened before him. Here he pulled to a walk and headed his horse into the thicker darkness between the walls. The going was slow, but a half hour later he came out on the shoulder of the rim.

He dismounted there and sat for a long time listening and straining his eyes into the shadows that lay below. When he was satisfied that nothing was moving there, he mounted and rode across the bench into the tangled mystery of the lava brakes.

In the soft darkness every trail seemed the same, but Clay kept steadily on. In the next hour his trail weaved and twisted but he held mainly south; and when he came to the country where the junipers grew again, there was a spring. He unsaddled here and flung down to rest for the remainder of the night.

The picketed horse grazed for a time when he had finished his oats. Then he,

too, became still and there were no sounds that did not belong to the night. . . .

As the hours grew on it was steadily colder. Clay awoke at last from the chill and took his time from the stars, shifted stiffly in his bed. Then for a time he dozed again. The next time he pulled back to consciousness he was sharply aware that some strange sound had waked him.

He wasted no time in waiting for it to repeat itself, but rolled swiftly from his blanket. From the saddle boot he snaked his rifle. In the dark he crouched, alert and waiting. But there was no sound—no slightest movement.

Clay went up into the junipers above the spring. The pale moon had climbed atop the rims now, and in the ghostly light his surroundings took strange forms. But as his eyes grew accustomed he could make out the darker smudge of his horse and the thin line of the trail winding up through the thick of an aspen clump.

A timeless space went by. There was no repetition of the sound that had pulled him from his sleep, but he knew that his horse was listening, head pointed down the draw.

Then after a time, he felt rather than heard, the soft punching of hoofs coming up the trail. He sat on his heels, rifle ready. . . . There was a rider coming up to the spring. Coming slowly but steadily, picking his way. The sound of hoofs was plain now among the aspens.

Clay's horse shifted restlessly.

Then a querulous voice broke the still: "Get the hell back here, Sailears, you old fool! What you trying to do? Get the hell blown out of you before that young idiot can get the sleep out of his eyes? And any minute now, I s'pose you'll be belling it all over the White Horse that you smelt him out!"

THE breath exploded from Clay Webb's lungs. He got up and stepped forward as the speaker rode from the aspens.

A big lumbering hound rushed up with a "yoooooooo—p" of joy and flung up his paws in welcome. With an all but hairless tail he beat a lava slab, and rent the air with a deep-throated peal of welcome.

An old man on a mule took shape, drawing closer. Clay sat for a moment looking down, then said complainingly to the dog: "Well, you blamed fool, now that you've got all the echoes stirred up, maybe you might pipe down and let somebody else say a word."

The dog pulled off and Clay said:

"I'd ought to have known. I'd ought to have known the second I heard you sneaking up the draw like an extra-quiet herd of deers, that it couldn't be anybody but old Finnegan chasing the shadows into the darkness."

"If I'd come quiet," Finnegan grumbled, "you'd heard me first when I was about three foot off and I'd had to shoot you to save the dog." He got down and stamped his feet against the chill. "You would pick the coldest gulch in the whole damn country to bed down in. I betcha I get rheumatism in my joints."

"But for circumstances," Clay said, "I'd have a fire."

"But for circumstances, I wouldn't be here to give a damn if you had a fire or not," Finnegan growled. "You're a day ahead of what I thought you'd be. I got into Wagon Springs a couple of hours after you left—picked up your trail where you crossed the bench."

"How did you know I'd swing back?" Clay demanded.

Finnegan spat with disgust and hunkered down by the hole of a juniper tree.

"Where the hell would you go, other than to my diggin's on Furnace Creek? If I happened to be gone, you'd figure to find Lame John or Pete—somebody, leastways, that could tell you what'd been going on around here. You was in the position of the feller that didn't know nothing about nothing and had to find out something to find out about."

"All right," Clay said, "but you'd have saved a lot of complaining, if you'd just gone straight along home and waited my coming."

"Who the hell is doing this complaining?" the old man snapped. "Can't you leave me have such small pleasure as I can wring out of a miserable world? Anyway, I got reasons for not wanting you to go over to Furnace Creek right now, and Lame John and Pete ain't there either." He pursed his lips.

There was silence for a bit as Clay waited.

Finnegan spat and shifted on his heels. The whine was gone from his voice when he spoke, but the gruffness he forced into it fooled neither of them.

"There ain't either of them two damn worthless Indians been seen since the day they buried Jerry."

FOR a moment again there was silence; then Clay said: "I guess I'll have to hear about it, Finn."

The old hunter nodded. "Why, yes, son, I reckon you will. I'll give you all I know and we can guess at the rest together. I was away up north at the time and didn't get back until about a week after the murder."

"It was that way, then," Clay said softly. "Murder—not a fight?"

"Somebody hid in a doorway," Finnegan said. "Hid in a doorway and got him in the back as he went by. He never even got his gun out."

"Well . . . I'm waiting, Finn?"

"You don't reckon I'd have waited on you coming if I knew who it was, do you?" Finnegan said. "You know better than that."

"Excuse me," Clay said. "What else?"

"Not much. Lame John and Pete were the first to get to him, and I reckon they were trying too hard to help him to go for the killer. The next morning, early, they dug a grave and buried him. Then before the sheriff got there, they cleared out. They ain't been seen since."

"I guess I'm a little slow," Clay said, "but I don't see all the angles. What's happened here?"

"I ain't got the answer," Finnegan admitted, "but I can anyway tell you how things have been made to look. It sums up to this: About three months ago Frank Morgan was dragged to death by his horse, and the Box-M went to a brother in Texas. Leo Woodfinn, from the Broken String, was executor of the will, having been a close friend of Frank's. He took care of the place and the little girl until this Tex Morgan got here to take over. Shortly after he hit the country, this same Tex Morgan bought the Horse Basin from Jerry Dunn and gave him twenty-five thousand dollars in

cash. The deed was filed in Steptoe three days before Jerry was killed."

Clay stiffened.

The old man said soothingly: "Easy now, son—I'm just telling you how things are *stacked* to look. We both know that Jerry never sold you out. We know that as well as we know that Steve Yeager is crazy when he says that Lame John and Pete killed Jerry for the twenty-five thousand. It ain't what we know that bothers us, it's what we don't know and have got to find out!"

"I got a letter from Jerry," Clay said. "Got it in Tampa. He wrote it on the twenty-sixth of August in Steptoe and he was all stewed up. He knew that hell was due to break."

"I knew he was worried over something before I went north," the old hunter nodded, "but he was tight mouthed and I didn't know what it was."

"He mentioned two killings," Clay suggested. "Two killings along about the time Frank was killed. Where do *they* tie into this thing?"

Finnegan shook his head. "I don't know that they do. From the looks, it was just a case of two punchers getting drunk and shooting each other."

"Who were they?"

"Didn't know 'em," Finnegan said. "Their names were Allison and Striker. But we got better things to do than mess over them. Take right now and my reason for coming up these damn drafty canyons in the dead of the night when it's colder than a stepmother's heart: I come to give you the benefit of knowing that Larry Hope is dead!"

"Dead!" Clay jerked upright. "I never struck him a killing blow!"

"No," Finnegan grunted, "but somebody shot the hell out of him later."

"Where?"

"It happened about a mile out on the trail you took to the west of town."

"Which means," Webb said grimly, "that they never let the sun go around before they made a murder to hang on me."

OLD Finnegan shrugged. "If you'll look beyond what it's supposed to mean," he pointed out, "you'll see that it really means that although the sheriff and

his bunch may be damn fools, they ain't in on the crooked part. They'd not be gunning their own men to frame you if they were."

Clay nodded. "There was four men come into the chink's. I figured they was sent by somebody to gun for me, but when they seen the rumpus rise with Hope they seen a better way. Now if we can find whose pay they're drawing—"

"Sure," Finnegan agreed, "but let's not rush things up. Let's remember that the end most always comes along toward the last. I'll admit that everything points to this Tex Morgan, but just Morgan leaves too many things without any answer."

"What things?"

"Little things. Little things that don't look like a lot but that have got to fit in somewhere and have got to be important."

"Such as—"

"Well," the old man said slowly, "there's them two Indians now—what about them? Where did they go and why? You can damn well bet that that will later bloom out to be one of the biggest things in this case."

"How about Morgan and the Horse Basin?" Clay said stubbornly. "Jerry never sold him that."

"I know that as well as you do," Finnegan admitted. "But don't overlook the fact that Morgan was new to the country and there's a offside chance that he thinks he bought it from Jerry. There's a chance that he never saw Jerry Dunn. Don't go rushing things, son; we'll go fishing all right, but there's bait to be cut first. Right now it's coming daylight, and I think we can risk a small fire for some coffee."

In the shelter of lava slabs Clay built a tiny blaze, and made out a breakfast of flapjacks and bacon with coffee to fight the bone-chilling cold that set in with the dawn.

They ate in silence, each man giving time to his own thoughts.

Sailears gulped the cakes that were cooked for him and watched reproachfully as the pan was wiped and put away.

"I reckon there'll be a hue and a cry for me," Clay suggested at last. "A case against somebody is what Steve Yeager seems to have been most in need of."

"That was the where-for of my seeking you out," Finnegan explained. "He's apt

to think of my place on Furnace Creek and go there for you. He's some put out with me, too. I wouldn't take the dog and go hunt those Indians in his company."

Clay Webb stood up. Tall and lean, every line of him showed hard and competent in the early morning light. He fitted and seemed part of this unyielding country that had bred him and to which he had returned.

"I aim to move quick and sudden," he said flatly. "I'll cover a lot of ground before it's general news that I'm back."

"I can see that you've made up your mind," Finnegan said. "Now what?"

Clay threw his saddle on and started to draw the cinch. "The first thing I'll do," he said, "is to ride over to Morgan's Box-M and have me a look-see at the lay of the land. Yeager won't be looking for me over there, and by the time he thinks of it I'll be long gone. If this Morgan is square and somebody run a shindy on him, I want to know it."

"And if he ain't square," Finnegan pointed out, "you stand a swell chance of being dry-gulched before the sun gets down. There ain't any of the old hands left at the Box-M that I know of."

Clay's eyes flashed. "If he's wrong and sucker enough to crowd his hand, that's all right, too!"

"All right," the old hunter agreed, "you've had your eye-teeth cut. Where will you go when you've had your see there?"

"It'll mostly depend on what I find there. . . . I might ride over to Leo Woodfinn's Broken String."

"All right," Finnegan said, "go have your look. When you're done come up to Lizzard Springs, and Sailears and I will meet you there. We can hold us a war meeting and share what dirt we dug up."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime," Finnegan said shortly, "I aim to work around and see if I can find out something worth knowing. If either of them two damn Indians has put a foot down on the bench over toward Shaniko Flats, Sailears will smell 'em out. I've got one each of their old boots to get him started on."

"Lizzard Springs, then," Clay said and swung into the saddle.

MORGAN'S Box-M lay to the north of Wagon Springs in the first swell of the Mustang Hills.

Clay swung north through the lava brakes, keeping to the higher benches so that when he swung east he might have the shelter of the hills. It was long past noon before he shifted his course, crossing the rim and a mile of open desert which brought him into the Mustang Hills. In spite of the cold at night, the days were blistering hot and he had swung his loop a little far north to pass a spring and water his sunken-flanked horse.

He crossed a low ridge and wound down toward the brilliant yellow of an aspen clump that hid the water. Then suddenly he set his horse back and into the shelter of the junipers.

A rider had come up the draw to the spring, dismounted and was disappearing into the aspens.

Clay's eyes grew hard and bleak as he watched. "Mister," he said softly, "if you're watching the springs on me, you'll get a belly full." He took his rifle from the boot and waited with it across his lap. If this man were only a working rider, he soon would move on.

The long moments dragged by. Then there was a muffled cry from down among the aspens. Clay stiffened and waited.

There was another cry, and two figures came reeling and spinning out of the trees. One was a girl, and Clay could see her arm rise and fall as she struck again and again at the man who held her.

The breath hissed through Clay's nostrils. He jammed his rifle back into its boot and shot his horse forward with a rake of spurs.

The man by the trees let go his grip and swung around at the sudden thunder of hoofs. His face was inflamed with passion as he ripped out his gun and opened fire. In his haste, though, his first three shots were wide. Before he could try again Clay's horse was slamming by him, and Clay Webb's body crashed down upon him like an avalanche. The impact of Clay's flying lunge carried both men a dozen feet, half buried them in dust and dirt.

Clay shook off the deadening shock of the impact and got to his feet. A man of about his own size and build was stagger-

ing up, and the eyes that gleamed from his bearded face held the single purpose of killing.

Clay dropped his hand for his gun and found that it was gone. Lost in the first smashing attack. The other man, too, had lost his gun, and he rushed headlong upon Clay, swinging as he came.

Webb felt a sledge-hammer blow on his jaw but it served to clear his head, and he met the next rush with a driving right and left that set the other man back on his heels. In Clay Webb's brain there was a sudden vicious joy. Here was a thing he could see and fight. Here was an open enemy! He moved into the hail of blows with a murderous lust for battle.

With smashing, bone-wrenching blows he drove the man back and down.

When the bearded man rose, Clay was upon him again, slashing him until the sheer weight of the attack carried him down once more. This time the man did not rise, and Clay picked up his quirt that lay in the leaves and lashed him. Lashed him until he got to his feet and tried to stagger away. Then he kicked the wobbling legs from under him and lashed him again. Beat him until he was still.

He felt the girl's hand on his arm and heard her say as though from a great distance: "Don't kill him. You came in time—he hadn't harmed me."

Clay flung down his whip and jerked the man to his feet. He thrust him toward his horse, and taking the rifle from the boot, flung him into the saddle.

"Ride now," he said. "Ride and don't stop till you've crossed the last of the bench country. I'll kill you if we meet again!"

Hanging drunkenly to the saddle, the man pulled about and headed down the draw at a run. Clay watched him until he was gone from view and then turned. For the first time his clearing vision let him really see the girl for whom he had fought.

SHE stood twenty feet away and the terror was still plain in her wide dark eyes. The rich warmth of her hair fell down across a half-bare shoulder and the full round of her young breasts rose and fell sharply with her breathing.

"I ought to be able to say something to thank you," she said, "but I—I—"

Somehow, Clay felt no surprise that this was the girl of the goldenrod and the cemetery.

"Ma'am," he said, "I'd have whipped him to death but for that you said he hadn't harmed you. That's all of it then, and the less said the sooner it'll be forgot."

He saw the fear fade from her eyes. She straightened the blouse across her shoulder and tossed her head to take the hair back. Clay could see the pulse pounding in the velvet soft of her throat.

"To say thank you is so little," she said gravely. "So very little when I am so very grateful. I had bathed in the spring and he came just as I finished dressing. He's vile—every bit as bad as they said he was!"

"It's over now," Clay said. "Forget it—throw it out of your memory."

"I will," she said. "I will—only I didn't know anyone could be so awful! That—that animal said my uncle had cheated him and that he was going to—to take me to get even!"

"Stop it now!" Clay said sharply. "Don't go building that thing again. When you are ready to ride I'll go along to see you home."

He saw the warm flood of gratitude in her eyes. "You are very kind," she said. "I'm sorry about the way I acted at the cemetery. I thought that you—"

She paused and Clay said, "I guess you thought I was drunk, ma'am, and I must have looked pretty wild. I'd just had the world kicked out from under me. Let's start again from right now."

There was quick, understanding friendliness in her smile. She stepped forward to hold out a slim brown hand.

"Let's. I was upset, too. I was taking the flowers to—to a grave there. I'm Box-M."

In spite of himself, Clay stiffened as he took her hand. Instead of giving his own name, he asked, "Who was that skunk I whipped, ma'am?"

He saw a quick change in her eyes and her voice was charged with loathing: "That beast—that beast was Clay Webb!"

For a moment the girl's words held Clay still. When he could trust his voice,

he said, "I'm sorry I brought that up again. If you're ready, we'll go now."

He went into the trees where he watered his own horse and got hers. When he returned, she had retrieved his gun from the leaves and was ready to go, but somehow the mention of his name had smothered the quick comradeship that flashed for a moment between them.

They mounted and struck out for the Box-M. For a long time they rode in silence, and when they came out of the hills and the ranch buildings lay a mile away across the open plain Jean Morgan pulled up.

"The Silver Creek trail into Steptoe is here," she said. "If you are in a hurry, I can go on alone now."

Clay thought he saw something of troubled reluctance in her eyes. "I was headed for the Box-M," he said, "but if it'd be better for you to ride in alone, I can fix that."

He saw the quick color rise in her cheeks but she met his look steadily. After a moment's hesitation she nodded. "It's a terrible thing to ask, after what you've done for me—but they seem to watch me so there—to worry about me all the time."

"Sure," Clay said, "that's all right. Anyway, I'm the one that's about to ask something out of the line. You can say no if you want."

"I won't say no if I can do it," she promised quickly.

"Then if you'll just make no mention of what happened out at the spring. Don't mention this man—this Clay Webb."

"If you wish," she told him simply, "I won't mention it."

"Thanks," Webb said. "I'll swing a loop and come into the ranch from the Steptoe trail. I'll be a stranger complete when you see me, and you can look right through me." Then he added, as a smile lighted up his face: "But I don't want you looking at me that way when there's no one around!"

The horses were close together. She held out her hand to him.

"I won't."

Again her voice was eager and its friendliness matched the warmth in her eyes. Clay knew an impulse to reassure her, for beyond her eagerness he saw

that she was somehow baffled and lonesome, too. Then he remembered the business in hand and straightened in his saddle.

"Ride on, then, and I'll drift in after a spell."

"You will come?"

The huskiness was in her voice again and he smiled. "You bet I'll come."

CLAY WEBB followed the Silver Creek trail for some two miles before swinging off up a draw to a remembered spring. Here he tethered his horse, gave it the last of the oats, and laid himself down to make up the lost sleep of the night before.

The sun was slanting down behind the distant rimrocks when he awoke. He made himself a cold meal, and it was twilight again when he left the spring. As he came into the open country near the ranch it was full dark.

He rode boldly into the barnyard and hitched his horse to the corral fence, secure in knowing that if he were seen he would be taken for some late returning hand.

From the corral he went up the hill to the lighted bunkhouse, and around by the side window, where he paused to peer in. It was no part of his plan to stumble in where he would be recognized. He saw some ten men in the long, smoke-filled room. They were the same hard type that he had spotted all across the White Horse, but a moment was enough to convince him that he had seen none of them before.

He went on around the bunkhouse and over to the mess hall. There was no one there but a cook who was clearing away the supper things, so Clay went back down and got his horse. After which he rode boldly up to the main house and knocked on the door.

To the man who came in answer, Clay said: "I'm looking for the boss of this layout."

"I'm Morgan," the man said. He was small and thinly built. The top of his head was bald, and the lamplight from behind gleamed across it. He had a thin severe face, almost the face of a Puritan, and the eyes that were fixed upon Clay Webb were stern, emotionless.

"I'm riding the line," Clay said. "You need a hand?"

He felt the other's eyes go up and down the length of him, pause for a second on the big gun that was strapped to his thigh.

"Go over to the mess hall and tell the cook to lay you out something," Morgan said. "We'll talk job in the morning."

"I've eaten," Clay told him. "I always eat early when I'm on the move."

"The bunkhouse is full," Morgan said without seeming interest, "but you can sleep in the saddle-house if you want." He turned back into the hall and called: "Oh, Ed—" To the man who came he said: "See that this man has blankets. He'll sleep in the saddle-house."

He went back into the house and closed the door.

"Throw your bronc in the corral," the other man directed, "I'll bring you the blankets."

Clay nodded and took his animal back down the hill. He unsaddled him, turned him loose, and then went around to the saddle-house. Ed was waiting with the blankets.

"Make yourself a bed," he said. "If you want, there'll most likely be a stud game with the boys."

"Thanks," Clay nodded. "I've come a long way. I'll turn in early."

"Suit yourself," the man said and went back up the hill.

CLAY'S nerves were sharply on edge. One look through the bunkhouse window had been enough to tell him that things were at a pressure here. These men gathered here were fighting men, not cattlemen.

Why? Why did this pious-looking little man, who looked more a country parson than a rancher, employ a dozen gunmen and hire more? Was Finnegan's hint that Morgan had never seen Jerry Dunn correct? Had Morgan been imposed upon and swindled, and now knowing it—and knowing that Jerry was dead—armed himself to war against those who had tricked him? What was the secret of this ranch of riddles?

These questions beset Clay. Pulled and twisted at his mind. He decided against the stud game and what he might learn there because of the slight chance that he

might be recognized. In the morning he could see what Morgan himself had to say.

And as he puzzled, Clay's mind came back again and again to the girl Jean. What was her position here? What did she know of what had been going on? At least one thing was clear: somebody had taught her to fear and loathe the name of Clay Webb.

And who had planned this vicious attack to be perpetrated in his name? Plainly the same man who had planned the killing of Larry Hope to point that way, had done this so that this girl might return ruined, and forever damn the name of Webb. But who—?

And as he sat there puzzling, it was suddenly borne in on Clay Webb that he had a new and compelling reason for staying and seeing this thing through. Stamped in his memory for all time was the girl's terror-animated beauty when he had first turned to her by the spring. It came sharply in upon him, that though this slim, vital girl was still a stranger, she could never again be far from his thoughts.

He had kept his name from her for two reasons: first, because he feared it might put her under additional strain if she knew his identity; and second, that he might more readily learn who it was that had taught her to fear him.

IT was jet black in the saddle-house and Clay was blinded for a second when he struck a match to light a smoke. Then his eyes accustomed to the sudden light and fell upon two dusty saddlebags slung over a rack.

At some time, long ago, someone had inked a name upon them, and as Clay made out the letters the hair tingled along the back of his neck. The sudden icy hand of suspicion chilled his blood.

The faded letters on the bags spelled the name Striker!

Here, then, was what Jerry Dunn had known but not said in his letter. Striker—and likely Allison, too—had at one time been hands at the Box-M. They had died at almost the same time that Morgan had died. . . . Why?

The finger pointed but a single way: What could have been more natural than

if Frank Morgan, upon making a will, had called in two of his hands to witness it? Any two hands that happened to be at the ranch at that time.

And that left but one answer—and at the same time wiped out the last chance for the help of men and guns in a fight. It meant that Leo Woodfinn, as executor and holder of the will, had destroyed it and made away with these two witnesses so that he might make a new one! It meant that Woodfinn and this man who called himself Morgan were hand-in-glove in a well-planned game, and that the only help to be called upon was from a blinded and stupid sheriff who was even now hunting the hills for Clay Webb.

And Webb saw one way open for him.

The girl must be gotten away to safety. Whether she had been kept this long to be used in blackening the name of Webb, or whether that had been incidental and far worse things awaited her, Clay did not stop to consider. Somehow he must find her and take her away. Later he could return to finish his own business here.

Swiftly he went down to the corral and saddled his horse. He found the pinto the girl had ridden that day to the spring and saddled him too. Then he took them both through the gate and around to the upper end of the paddock, keeping close to the fence so that any chance observers would not notice that they were on the outside.

Without the slightest idea how he was to find the girl, he went up the hill toward the ranchhouse.

By the patio wall he stopped to listen, and dropped to his hands and knees at a sudden sound. There was a horseman coming across the flats toward the ranch and he was coming at a gallop.

Clay's hand sought his gun as the rider came in among the buildings and up the hill to the house. He waited, hunkered there, while the rider swung down and passed close by. So close that Clay could have reached out and touched him. It was not until the newcomer was framed in the lighted doorway, though, that Clay knew his identity. The breath hissed through his lips in a shrill, soundless whistle.

The night rider was Joe Avery, the saloon man from Wagon Springs. . . .

Webb waited a moment to be sure the

door was closed, then went cat-like around to the back of the house. Two windows showed light. Through the first of these Clay could see across a hallway and into the room from which the light came. Joe Avery and Morgan were there, but only the low and indistinct murmur of voices could be heard.

The other window looked into kitchen, Clay knew, but it was dark there and he tried the door. When he found it open, he pulled off his boots and laid them by the steps.

He went straight across the kitchen and through a door into the hall. Inch by inch he made his way along. There was still no real plan in his mind for finding the girl; he only hoped that he might hear her moving in one of the two rooms he had decided would be her quarters.

A crack of light showed to his left. He paused to listen and Morgan's strident voice reached him:

"DAMN it, Joe, I've told him a dozen times I'm going to have the girl! By hell a man can't live under the same roof with a thing like that and not make up his mind to have it."

"You better hurry then," Joe Avery's thick voice said. "You'd better hurry or you won't get much. Leo is getting jumpy about her and about this Webb being back. He thought he'd kill both birds with one stone and he sicked one of his roughnecks onto her today."

Clay heard Morgan spring up and snarl an oath. "By God, did he—"

"Sit down," Avery said. "Sit down and keep your hair on. The damn fool waited for her to ride out all right and went for her by some spring. And the damn fool come near getting killed. He come home looking like an avalanche had hit him."

"You mean she—?"

"Hell, no! All this laddy-buck did was to run into the gent he was pretending to be!"

"You mean Webb?"

"That's right. He started out thinking he had the swellest job ever handed a man, and he come home looking like beefsteak!"

There was a long silence.

"What does this Webb look like?" Mor-

gan said at length in a curiously strained voice.

"He's about six foot and some," Avery said. "About three foot across the shoulders and maybe twice as tough as he looks. Which is plenty."

"What kind of a horse does he ride?"

"I seen him yesterday," Avery said. "I seen him yesterday and he was riding a big sorrel gelding. Why?"

Morgan said thickly: "Nothing. Nothing much, only this Clay Webb is here. Sleeping down in the saddle-house!"

"Here?" There was sudden terror in Joe Avery's voice. "My God, we've got to—we—"

"What the hell," Morgan said. "What the hell's the matter? He's alone."

"Listen," Avery gasped thickly. "You don't know that hell-cat. You don't *know* him! He ain't afraid of nothing that moves, and him and Jerry Dunn . . . God! If he knew that it was me that—"

"I'll get all the boys around the saddle-house," Morgan said harshly, "and we'll dump enough lead into him to sink him with cork pants on. And then I'll show that cat of a girl how to double-cross. She must have been with him out there in the hills!"

Clay heard footsteps then. He sprang down the hall and out the kitchen door. Swiftly he pulled on his boots. In the madhouse that was about to break silence would go for nothing, and he could find the girl swiftly with the men out of the house.

Then the door flung open and a flying body smashed into him. Silently he flung his powerful arms around it to hurl it down. But his hands became suddenly gentle, for it was the softly yielding body of the girl that he held.

She fought desperately for a moment, sobbing softly as she struggled.

He drew her head close to his and whispered fiercely, "Jean! Jean!"

The next moment she was still in his grip. He half supported her, and he could feel her heart pounding against his hand.

"I was going to you—" she said breathlessly. "To warn you. They know who you are. I see now why you asked me to say nothing about the spring."

"Easy now," Clay soothed. "I've got

two horses saddled by the upper end of the corral. We'll be long gone before they miss us."

"You go," she said quickly. "I'll be safe here for a day or so, if they don't know I heard them. You can bring help."

"You'll ride with me," Clay said shortly.

"I'm in a dressing gown," she said desperately. "I was ready for bed and happened to be in the hall—"

"Then dress," Clay ordered. He pushed her toward the door. "We've got time for that, I reckon."

He followed her across the kitchen and down a darkened hallway. Beyond the last door she turned to whisper: "You watch from the window while I get ready. Then we can go out that way and across the yard without coming in view of the bunkhouse."

Her voice was steady and showed none of the excitement of a moment before. The hand she laid on his was cool and firm, and Clay wondered at the courage of this girl in the desperate whirl of danger.

He went across to the starlit window and stood watching intently. Behind him he could hear the girl moving and a rustle of clothes in the darkness.

Then she was by his side, dressed and ready. The window was open and Clay went down first. He held up his arms to swing the girl down, and the next moment they were running silently across the yard.

The horses tramped restlessly at their approach but Clay steadied them and helped Jean into her saddle.

"I'll be riding right behind you," he said tensely. "Go at a walk and don't break for speed unless they spot us. If anything happens to me, head for Lizzard Springs. Old Finnegan is there with his dog—you can trust him."

Clay liked the way that the girl said no word—simply started down along the corral fence, walking her horse.

THE buildings and corrals made it necessary to pass directly below the bunkhouse. They could hear the low murmur of voices, and the sound of men moving on the rise above them. The seconds seemed like hours.

They were nearly by when a hoarse shout broke the still: "Hey—what the hell?"

Joe Avery's voice!

Clay leaned forward to lash Jean's horse to a run. A gun crashed in the night, and Clay Webb wheeled his horse about toward the sound of Avery's bellow and raked home the spurs.

A volley of shots were stabbing the night as Clay ripped the darkness with a wild, blood-curdling scream—the old battle cry of Clay Webb and Jerry Dunn when their horns were short—the tocsin of hell-bent trouble. The next second he heard Avery's cry of terror as the saloon-keeper broke and ran, shooting as he went. His panic cut him out from the rest of the men before the bunkhouse, and Clay Webb hammered down upon him.

"That's for Jerry Dunn!"

And the crash of his gun cut the cry short as Joe Avery reeled and pitched down on his face.

Clay swung his horse away then, and out on the trail of the fleeing girl. Lead sang about him but his charge had scattered the men and the darkness hid him from their aim. He heard Jean's horse racing ahead of him, and his bigger animal gained steadily. After a time they were riding side by side, the night wind rushing in their faces.

In Clay's belief, it would take the excited men at the Box-M a full ten minutes to saddle and take the trail. So, two miles out, he swung the course to the east; and after another mile swung it again back to the north.

When they crossed the Silver Creek trail and came into the first of the hills, the two paused for a time to listen and rest their horses.

"We've shook them for now," Clay said, "but we've still got to ride hard and steady. Our single chance to get out of the country is to get across by the Lost Buttes, and Finnegan is the only white man alive that can find water there in the fall."

He thought a moment and continued:

"They'll likely figure that we'll try to get out through the Modoc Pass at the north end of the lava burn. On that guess, they'll send word to Woodfinn to ride in and cut us off. We've got to ride pretty close to the trail they'll take to get to Lizzard Springs, but they'll keep in the open under the rims to make speed and they

won't be looking for us to swing back east."

"I won't hold you back," the girl said. "Let's ride."

So they set off again through the hills, trotting and walking for the most part but swinging into a lope once and a while where the going would permit.

Daylight found them crossing the last mile of open ground before Lizzard Springs, and in the coldly thin air before the sunrise they came to that dreary camping place of cattlemen and pulled to a halt. And what they saw made the girl gasp—made Clay Webb curse deep in his throat. For a long deadly moment they were still, staring with fatigue-dulled eyes at the thing that lay before them.

Lying in a grotesque heap on the ground, a hundred feet from the water, was Finnegan's mule. Dead and stiffened with the cold.

CLAY swung down and went stiffly over the ground. There were tracks there of more than one man, but of the old hunter or his dog there was no sign.

Jean had gotten down and was sitting with her head across her knees.

Clay went to her and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. After a moment she looked up and met his eyes steadily.

"Is that—Finnegan's mule?"

"Yes," Clay nodded wearily, "that's Finn's jack all right. No mistaking him."

"Then," she said dully, "this is the end, isn't it? We can't get across the desert without him, and they've got us bottled in from behind and ahead."

She shook her head. "Think," she said. "Think hard. There must be some other chance."

"You can't call it a chance," Clay said bitterly. "It ain't really a chance at all. We might make a dash for it straight west across the lava burn to Bole's Pass. The only thing good about that is they won't be looking for us to come out of the hills right here. But they'd see us the second we hit the open, and then it'd be a race for it."

"Then let's go," the girl said promptly.

"Listen—" Clay said again. "You don't realize what you're up against. Even if we got up onto the rim and away, there'd be two hundred miles of the roughest go-

ing in the world with no turning back. You'd be traveling for ten hard days where you'd never see a living soul. You'd be to hell and gone from anywhere with a man you never saw until day before yesterday. Alone, eating, living and camping with a man that's known as hard even in the White Horse country!"

Her lips parted just a little in a smile as she looked up into his face. "Do you think I'm afraid of that?" she asked.

"You ought to be," Clay said harshly. He took her by the shoulders. "You ought to be plenty afraid! You're lovely as hell and I'm just a big, dumb, thick-headed cowboy!" He jerked her roughly to him and kissed her hard on the mouth.

She waited until he put her from him, and the smile came to her lips again and her eyes misted with tears. "You're trying to bluff me into what you think is the safest way," she said gravely. "I'd never be afraid of you anywhere."

"If you think—" Clay started—but the look in her eyes stopped him.

"I could never be afraid," she said, "because I love you. And I know you must love me or you wouldn't be trying to give your life to save me. So I'm not afraid."

"All right," Clay said bleakly. "If that's the way it is, there ain't but the one trail to take."

A NARROW pass opened between two low hills. They crossed there and followed the winding draw down to where it opened out on the lava burn. There Clay gave Jean his horse to hold and went ahead on foot.

Three shelterless miles away, across the burn, was the rimrock and the gash that was Bole's Pass. The only way up within ten miles. To the south, and some half-mile nearer the pass, was Lava Springs. From the Springs Clay saw a thin spiral of blue smoke rising into the draftless air. He cursed softly to himself, for this would be the breakfast fire of Woodfinn's men.

Some two miles to the northward along the burn, a dust banner rose to mark a body of horsemen closing in on the Modoc Pass.

There was no turning back now, and Clay Webb went grimly back to the girl and the horses. A race across the burn

was the single chance they had. If they could somehow make up the half-mile lead that the men who guarded the pass from Lava Springs held over them, their fresh horses would get them up onto the benches and to safety.

He went directly to the girl who stood waiting. "We'll go out fast," he said. "They won't see us any quicker if we go that way, and we may get the jump on 'em."

She took a step toward him and he laid his hands on her shoulders.

"It's going to be all right," he said. "It's going to be all right for us." He kissed her soberly and helped her to mount.

At a high gallop, they swung out of the hills onto the open burn.

Clay had picked a spot in his mind that they must pass before they were seen to have an even chance. But they were still short of it when a string of riders raced out from the spring, moving like flying wraiths in a cloud of dust.

Clay saw the girl go white, saw her jaw set. There were five men coming out from the spring, and he knew that she had sighted them.

"Steady!" he shouted, and held the course straight for the pass. He noted grimly that the other horsemen had swung off toward them instead of making a straight run to cut them off at the pass, and with his quirt he urged both the horses to a final burst of speed. If the other party kept that up long enough, they would lose the advantage of their lead.

Two-thirds of the way across the horses began to labor with the pace, and the party from the springs came within long shooting distance. Wild bullets kicked up little jets of dirt that seemed oddly disconnected with the sound of the guns that followed.

Clay held his fire and a fierce surge of joy passed over him as he saw that they had overcome the lead and were coming ahead into the pass. He flung a look back but there was still no sign of the pursuers from the Box-M.

Close to the rim the ground rose a little, and the fugitives rushed up the slope. Clay saw one of the riders slide to a halt and spring from the saddle. The next second there was a puff of rifle smoke and Jean's horse went spinning, crashing down.

The girl struck the dirt, but even before

she stopped rolling, was struggling to rise.

In the seconds that it took Clay to haul up and pull her to his saddle, half their lead was lost. And when they slammed into the pass, the bullets were singing close.

Then Clay's horse stopped, shuddered and sprawled down.

As they hit the dirt, the man all but threw the girl to the shelter of a lava slab and went into action with his Winchester.

Leo Woodfinn, his face impassioned for the kill, thundered up in the front, his gun booming. From the ground Clay took careful aim and brought him smashing down in the dust. The other riders swung wide as their leader went down, and Clay took advantage of the moment to spring back to the girl.

"Up in the pass a piece—" he said, breathing quickly. "A spot where we can hole up and hold 'em off. That northern outfit will be slamming in real sudden now, and I see a dust off yonder that's got to mean the Box-M outfit."

AFTER the first incline, the pass leveled off for three hundred yards of narrow boulder-strewn flat between sheer walls of two hundred feet. Clay took the girl's hand and forced her to run with him down this flat. Just as they gained the shelter of the rocks at the end, the first of the pursuing riders came over the rise and opened fire.

Clay sent a volley of slugs smashing back to force a retreat, and for a time there was quiet between the bluffs.

"Will they rush us?" the girl asked.

"I reckon," Clay said dryly. "They got courage to spare when there's lots of 'em."

"You can't hold off that many, can you, Clay?"

"I can raise hell trying," he said and grinned owlishly. "I'm a fair to middling shot off the ground."

After a long time she said: "But if you can't hold them—will you—"

He nodded.

"Sure," Clay said soberly. "They won't take you, honey. But say, we ain't even begun to fight yet!"

The next second, fourteen men had risen over the brow of the gap and were thundering toward them. . . .

Cold and deadly calm, Clay Webb set to work with his rifle. His first shot

emptied a saddle, and his second brought a horse crashing down.

Then, with the riders but two hundred yards away and beginning to thunder lead about him, his aim for his third shot was spoiled by blank astonishment. Three men suddenly pitched from their saddles and a fourth crashed into the dirt as his horse went down.

There was a cry of dismay from the horsemen as a steady hammering fire broke out from the rimrock above and saddle after saddle was emptied. With eight men down, the others broke and headed back to cover; and their swing-about left Tex Morgan riding on alone, astride a horse that was crazy with fear.

Straight on toward Clay Webb he rode, fighting desperately to gain control. Then, when he was full over the rocks that sheltered Clay, the animal collapsed before the hail of lead from above.

Webb's eyes went down the pass to where the last of the routed party were racing from view. Three unhorsed men stood at various points along the flat with their hands up in surrender. High up on the rimrock Old Finnegan's grizzled white head appeared and his wild war-whoop floated down.

CLAY, rifle at ready, went to turn over the man that lay in the rocks before him.

"What become of Tex Morgan?" Clay's tone was compelling.

"Dead in Texas," the man said thickly. "Close to two year."

"And who are you?"

"Who I am, don't make any difference," the man said harshly. "I ain't Morgan."

"Allison and Striker were done away with to make a new will possible," Clay suggested grimly. "And Woodfinn murdered Frank Morgan?"

"Sure," the man said thickly. "You seem to know a lot—but you don't know who I am. . . . I was somebody once—before I came to this country. I was—" His voice trailed off, stilled in death.

Finnegan's bellow came booming down from above to the men who had surrendered: "Throw down your guns and take care of such of the others as still live. When you're done, get going and keep going! Ride till you're to hell-and-gone!"

"We'll go," one of the men shouted back. "But for God's sake don't gun us down like rats in a trap."

When they came out on the rim, they found Finnegan hunkered down waiting. There was an owlsh grin on his leathered face. "Howdy, ma'am," he said to the girl; and to Clay: "Allus gittin' in trouble, ain't you?"

"From the look of your mule back yonder," Clay said laconically, "you seem to have got bogged down in it yourself. Where's the rest of your shooting gallery?"

"They're over yonder with the horses," the old hunter said. "If the lady's ready we'll go over and pay 'em a call. As fer that mule, don't get uppity, young feller."

"I got a right to be uppity," Clay said, "what with a gent like you that sits around on the rims and waits for the birds to fly to you. How the devil did you know I'd head this way?"

"Because," the old man grumbled, "you didn't have no other place to go. You see, when I rode into the springs last night and smelled smoke, I thought it was you. . . . Well, the jape that was there opened up and killed my mule. I had to misuse him some about it, and somehow before he died he told how you'd lit out from the ranch with the girl; and how, when Woodfinn heard of it, he sent him to cover Lizzard Springs even though they thought you'd head through to the north. When I was done with him I hid all that was earthly and took his horse. I knew that if I was going to get through and get help, I'd have to cross the burn before daylight. I figured that you'd be planning for me to take you across the Lost Butte desert, but when you seen my mule there you'd head this way."

"About this help you went for—" Clay said. "Let's have a look at 'em."

"Right here," Finnegan said dryly as they came around a jut of rock.

FOR a moment the world spun before Clay's eyes. Lame John and Pete stood with their flat Indian faces broken in wide smiles; and between them, sitting on a rock and carelessly rolling a smoke, was a banty-legged, hard-fisted little man

whose weathered and seamy face showed the signs of a recent illness.

"Jerry," Clay said, and his own voice sounded far off. "Jerry Dunn!"

The little man on the rock pulled his face into harsh lines to hide his emotion. "How did the war come off, Clay?" he said. "Did you have a good time?"

The muscles jerked in Clay's jaw. "It warn't much of a war," he said, "but I had a nice time. . . . I thought they had you planted in Wagon Springs."

"The boys here"—Jerry Dunn jerked his head toward the two Modocs—"they done that. Planted me in effigy as it were—some rocks and blankets, I think they said it was. You see, they thought I might have a better chance to pull through if folks thought I was dead. We had Pete's brother watching for you in Steptoe but he must have missed you."

"Well," Clay said, "Joe Avery is the lad that ventilated Jerry, and I fixed his clock for him last night. I guess, too, that I run onto about all the rest of the story that you started to tell in your letter. Those two killings you mentioned were the witnesses to the true will that Frank Morgan made. The whole thing was Woodfinn's idea and Avery helped him."

"That's about it," Jerry Dunn said. "I suspected something like that but I didn't have Woodfinn figured in. They must have got hep to me and seen a way to get the Horse Basin at the same time."

"Well," Finnegan said gruffly, "that don't leave much to do but set a damn-fool sheriff straight. What's left of this crew don't amount to much now that the lads that gave the pay are scattered."

"We can get rid of Steve Yeager by having him come out here to see the sights," Jerry Dunn said. He hesitated. "But from the look of what I seen down below, just before the shooting started, I don't think we can say everything is cleared up. Not rightly, leastways, until there's been a wedding or something."

"Jerry," Clay Webb said, "like always, you speak out of turn. But this time, I guess you're right."

He turned to the girl who stood close beside him, and his eyes asked a wordless question. She came to him, smiling, into the tight shelter of his arms.

THE COFFIN SHIP

By LOMBARD ELDREDGE

Southward she scudded before the hurricane—a storm-battered, sail-shredded hulk manned by twenty moon-blind madmen.

THE orgy was finished. The last sea-song had resounded over the smooth waters of the bay; the last drunken shout, oath, and challenge were voiced; the last fight ended in helplessness and maudlin amity, and the red-shirted men were sprawled around on the moonlit deck, snoring. Though the barrel of rum broached on the main-hatch was but slightly lowered, their sleep was heavy—scurvy-tainted men at the end of a Cape Horn passage may not drink long or deeply.

Some lay as they fell—face upward; others on their sides for a while, then to roll over on their backs. And as they slept through the tropic night the full moon in the east rose higher and higher, passed overhead and disappeared behind a thickening haze in the western sky; but before it had crossed the meridian its cold rays had worked disastrously on the eyes of the sleeping men.

Captain Swarth, prone upon the poop-deck, was the first to waken. There was pain in his head, pain in his eyes, which were swollen, and a whistling tumult of sound in his ears, coming from the Plutonian darkness surrounding him, while a jarring vibration of the deck beneath him apprised his awakening brain that the anchor was dragging. As he staggered to his feet a violent pressure of wind hurled him against the wheel, to which he clung, staring into the blackness to windward.

"All hands, there!" he roared. "Up with you all! Go forward and pay out on the chain!"

Shouts, oaths and growls answered him, and he heard the nasal voice of his mate repeating his order. "Angel," he called, "get the other anchor over and give her all of both chains."

"Aye, aye, sir," answered the mate. "Send a lantern forrard, Bill. Can't see our noses."

"Steward," yelled the captain, "where

are you? Light up deck-lantern and the binnacle. Bear a hand."

He heard the steward's voice close to him, and the sound of the binnacle lights being removed from their places, then the opening and closing of the cabin companionway. He could see nothing, but knew that the steward had gone below to his storeroom. In a minute more a shriek came from the cabin. It rang out again and again, and soon sounded from the companionway: "I'm blind, I'm blind, Capt'n. I can't see. I lit the lantern and burned my fingers, but I can't see the light. I'm blind." The steward's voice ended in a howl.

"Shut up, you blasted fool," answered Captain Swarth; "get down there and light up."

"Where's that light?" came the mate's voice in a yell from amidships. "Shank-painter's jammed, Bill. Can't do a thing without a light."

"Come aft here and get it. Steward's drunk."

The doors in the forward part of the cabin slammed, and the mate's profanity mingled with the protest of the steward in the cabin. Then shouts came from forward, borne on the gale, and soon followed by the shuffling of feet as the men groped their way aft and climbed the poop steps.

"We're stone-blind, Cappen," they wailed. "We lit the fo'c'sle lamp, an' it don't show up. We can't see it. Nobody can see it. We're all blind."

"Come down here, Bill," called the mate from below.

As Captain Swarth felt his way down the stairs a sudden shock stilled the vibrations caused by the dragging anchor, and he knew that the chain had parted.

"Stand by on deck, Angel; we're adrift," he said. "It's darker than ten thousand black cats. What's the matter with you?"

"Can you see the light, Bill? I can't.



A great ghostly shape loomed out of the night. "Hard a-lee, you fools!" boomed a voice from the storm.

I'm blind as the steward, or I'm drunker."

"No. Is it lit? Where? The men say they're blind, too."

"Here, forrard end o' the table."

The captain reached this end, searched with his hands, and burned them on the hot glass of a lantern. He removed the bowl and singed the hair on his wrists. The smell came to his nostrils.

"I'm blind, too," he groaned. "Angel, it's the moon. We're moonstruck—moonblind. And we're adrift in a squall."

WHEN he reached the deck he called to the men, growling, cursing and complaining on the poop. "Down below with you all!" he ordered. "Pass through and out the forrard door. If any man sees the light on the cabin table, let that man sing out."

They obeyed him. Twenty men passed through the cabin and again climbed the poop stairs. But not one had seen the lantern. Some said that they could not open their eyes at all; some complained that their faces were swollen; others that their mouths were twisted up to where their ears should be; and one man averred that he could not breathe through his nose.

"It'll only last a few days, boys," said the captain bravely; "we shouldn't have slept in the moonlight in these latitudes. Drop the lead over, one of you—weather side. The devil knows where we're drifting, and the small anchor won't hold now; we'll save it." Captain Swarth was himself again.

But not so his men. They had become children, with children's fear of the dark. Even the doughty Angel Todd was oppressed by the first horror of the situation, speaking only when spoken to. One man, more self-possessed than the rest, had dropped the lead over the side. An able seaman needs no eyes to heave the lead.

"A quarter six," he sang out, and then, plaintively, "We'll fetch up on the Barrier, Capt'n. S'pose we try an' get the other hook over."

"Yes, yes," chorused some of the braver spirits. "It may hold. We don't want to drown on the reef. Let's get it over. Chain's overhauled."

"Let the anchor alone," roared the captain. "No anchor-chain'll hold in this. Keep that lead a-going, Tom Plate, if it's

you. What kind of bottom do you find?"

"Quarter less six," called the leadsman. "Soft bottom. We're shoaling."

"Angel," said the captain to his mate, who stood close to him, "we're blowing out the south channel. We've been drifting long enough to fetch up on the reef if it was in our way. There's hard bottom in the north channel, and the twenty-fathom lead wouldn't reach it half a length from the rocks."

The mate had nothing to say.

"And the south channel lay due south-east from our moorings," continued the captain. "Wind's nor'west, I should say, right down from the hilltops; and I've known these blasted West India squalls to last three days, blowing straight and hard. This has the smell of a gale already. Keep that lead a-going, there."

"No bottom," answered the leadsman.

"Good enough," said the captain, cheerfully.

"No bottom," was called repeatedly, until the captain sang out: "That'll do the lead." Then the leadsman coiled up the line, and they heard his rasping, unpleasant voice, cursing softly but fiercely to himself. Captain Swarth descended the stairs, silenced the steward with a blow, felt of the clock hands, secured his pistols, and returned to the deck.

"We're at sea," he said. "Two hands to the wheel. Loose and set the foretopmast-staysails and the foretopsail. Staysail first. Let a man stay in the slings to square the yard by the feel as it goes up."

"What for?" they answered, complainingly. "What ye goin' to do? We can't see. Why didn't you bring to when you had bottom under you?"

"No arguments!" yelled Swarth. "Forward with you. What are you doing on the poop, anyway? If you can't see, you can feel, and what more do you want? Jump now. Set that head-sail and get her 'fore the wind—quick, or I'll drop some of you."

They knew their captain, and they knew the ropes—on the blackest of dark nights. Blind men climbed aloft, and felt for footropes and gaskets. Blind men on deck felt for sheets, halyards, and braces, and in ten minutes the sails were set, and the brig was charging wildly along before the gale, with two blind men at the wheel endeavoring to keep her straight by the right and left

pressure of the wind on their faces.

"Keep the wind as much on the port quarter as you can without broaching to," yelled the captain in their ears, and they answered and did their best. She was a clean-lined craft and steered easily; yet the off-shore sea which was rising often threw her around nearly in the trough. The captain remained by them, advising and encouraging.

"Where're ye goin', Bill?" asked the mate, weakly, as he scrambled up to him.

"Right out to sea, and, unless we get our eyes back soon, right across to the Bight of Benin, three thousand miles from here. We've no business on this coast in this condition. What ails you, Angel? Lost your nerve?"

"Mebbe, Bill." The mate's voice was hoarse and strained. "This is new to me, I'm falling—falling—all the time."

"So am I. Brace up. We'll get used to it. Get a couple of hands aft and heave the log. We take our departure from Kit-tredge Point, Barbados Island, at six o'clock this morning of the 10th October. We'll keep a Geordie's logbook—with a jack-knife and a stick."

THEY hove the log for him. It was marked for a now useless 28-second sand-glass, which Captain Swarth replaced by a spare chronometer, held to his ear in the companionway. It ticked even seconds, and when twenty-eight of them had passed he called, "Stop." The markings on the line that had slipped through the mate's fingers indicated an eight-knot speed.

"Seven, allowing for wild steering," said the captain when he had stowed away his chronometer and returned to the deck. "Angel, we know we're going about sou' east by east, seven knots. There's practically no variation o' the compass in these seas, and that course'll take us clear of Cape St. Roque. Just as fast as the men can stand it at the wheel, we'll pile on canvas and get all we can out o' this good wind. If it takes us into the southeast trades, well and good. We can feel our way across on the trade-wind—unless we hit something of course. You see, it blows almost out of the east on this side, and'll haul more to the sou-east and south-ard as we get over. By the wind first, then we'll square away as we need to. We'll

know the smell o' the trades—nothing like it on earth—and the smell o' the Gold Coast, Ivory Coast, Slave Coast, and the Kameruns. And I'll lay odds we can feel the heat o' the sun in the east and west enough to make a fair guess at the course. But it won't come to that. Some of us'll be able to see pretty soon."

The negro cook felt his way through the preparing of meals and served them on time. The watches were set, and sail was put on the brig as fast as the men became accustomed to the new way of steering, those relieved always imparting what they had learned to their successors. Before nightfall on that first day they were scudding under foresail, topsail and top-gallantsail and maintopsail, with the spanker furled as useless, and the jib adding its aid to the foretopmast-staysail in keeping the brig before the quartering seas which occasionally climbed aboard. The bowsprit light was rigged nightly; they hove the log every two hours; and Captain Swarth made scratches and notches on the sliding-hood of the companionway, while careful to wind his chronometer daily.

But, in spite of the cheer of his indomitable courage and confidence, his men, with the exception of a few, dropped into a querulous, whining discontent. Mr. Todd, spurred by his responsibility, gradually came around to something like his old arbitrary self. Yank Tate, the carpenter, maintained through it all a patient faith in the captain, and, in so far as his influence could be felt, acted as a foil to the irascible, fault-finding Tom Plate, the fore-castle lawyer, the man who had been at the lead-line at Barbados. But the rest of them were dazed and nerveless, too shaken in brain and body to consider seriously Tom's proposition to toss the afterguard overboard and beach the brig on the South American coast, where they could get fresh liver of shark, goat, sheep, or bullock, which even a "nigger" knew was the only cure for moon-blindness.

THEY had not yet recovered from the unaccustomed debauch; their clouded brains seemed too large for their skulls, and their eyeballs ached in their sockets, while they groped tremblingly from rope to rope at the behest of the captain or mate.

So Tom marked himself for future attention by insolent and disapproving comments on the orders of his superiors, and a habit of moving swiftly to another part of the deck directly he had spoken, which prevented the blind and angry captain from finding him in the crowd.

And so they existed and suffered through a three days' damp gale and a fourth days' dead calm, when the brig rolled scuppers under with all sail set, ready for the next breeze. It came, cool, dry, and faint at first, then brisker—the unmistakable trade-wind.

THEY boxed the brig about and braced sharp on the starboard tack, steering again by the feel of the wind and the rattling of shaking leeches aloft. The removal of bandages to ascertain the sun's position by sense of light or increase of pain brought agonized howls from the experimenters, and this deterred the rest.

They took occasional deep-sea soundings with the brig shaking in the wind, but found no bottom, and at the end of fifteen days a longer heave to the ground-swell was evidence to Captain Swarth's mind that he was passing Cape St. Roque, and the soundings were discontinued.

"No use bothering about St. Paul Rocks or the Rocas, Angel," said he. "They rise out o' the deep sea, and if we're to hit, soundings won't warn us in time. I take it we'll pass between them and well north of Ascension." So he checked in the yards a little and brought the wind more abeam.

One day Yank Tate appeared at the captain's elbow, and suggested, in a low voice, that he examine the treasure-chests in the 'tween-deck. "I was down stowing away some oakum," he said, "an' I was sure I heard the lid close; but nobody answered me, an' I couldn't feel anybody."

Captain Swarth descended to his cabin and found his keys missing; then he and the carpenter visited the chests. They were locked tight, and as heavy as ever.

"Someone has the keys, Yank, and has very likely raided the diamonds. He can't get away. Keep still about it."

The air became cooler as they sailed on; and judging that the trade-wind was blowing more from the south than he had allowed for, the captain brought the wind squarely abeam and the brig sailed faster.

Still, it was too cool for the latitude, and it puzzled him, until a man came aft and groaned that he had lifted his bandage to bathe his eyes and had unmistakably seen the sun four points off the port quarter; but his eyes were worse now, and he could not do it again.

"Four points off!" exclaimed Swarth. "Four o'clock in the afternoon. That's just about where the sun ought to be heading due east, and far enough south o' the line to bring this cool weather. We're not far from Ascension. Never knew the sou'-east trade to act like this before. Must ha' been blowing out o' the sou'west half the time."

A week later they were hove to on the port tack under double-reefed topsails, with a cold gale of wind screaming through the rigging and cold green seas boarding their weather bow. It was the first break in the friendly trade-wind, and Swarth confessed to himself—though not to his men—that he was out of his reckoning; but one thing he was sure of—that this was a cyclone with a dangerous center.

The brig labored heavily during the lulls as the seas rose, and when the squalls came, flattening them to a level, she would lie down like a tired animal, while the æolian song aloft prevented orders being heard unless shouted near by. Captain Swarth went below and smashed the glass of an aneroid barometer in which he had not much confidence, but which might tell him roughly of the air-density. Feeling the indicator, and judging by the angle it made with the center—marked by a ring at the top—he found a measurement which startled him. Setting the adjustable hand over the indicator for future reference, he returned to the deck, ill at ease, and ordered the topsails goose-winged. By the time the drenched and despairing blind men had accomplished this, a further lowering of the barometer induced him to furl topsails and foretopmast-staysails, and allowed the brig to ride under a storm-spanker. Then the increasing wind required that this also should be taken in, and its place filled by a tarpaulin lashed to the weather main-rigging.

"Angel," said the captain, shouting into the mate's ear, "there's only one thing to account for this. We're on the right tack for the Southern Ocean; but the storm-

center is overtaking us faster than we can drift away from it. We must scud out of its way."

So they took in the tarpaulin and set the foretopmast-staysail again, and, with the best two helmsmen at the wheel, they sped before the tempest for four hours, during which there was no increase of the wind and no change in the barometer; it still remained at its lowest reading.

"Keep the wind as much on the port quarter as you dare," ordered Swarth. "We're simply sailing around the center, and perhaps in with the vortex."

They obeyed him as they could, and in a few hours more there was less fury in the blast and a slight rise in the barometer.

"I was right," said the captain. "The center will pass us now. We're out of its way."

They brought the brig around amid a crashing of seas over the port rail, and stowing the staysail, pinned her again on the port tack with the tarpaulin. But a few hours of it brought an increase of wind and a fall of the barometer.

"What in damnation does it mean, Angel?" cried the captain, desperately. "By all laws of storms we ought to drift away from the center."

The mate could not tell; but a voice out of the night, barely distinguishable above the shrieking wind, answered him.

"You — all-fired — fool — don't — you — know — any — more — than — to — heave — to — in — the — Gulf — Stream?"

Then there was the faintest disturbance in the sounds of the sea, indicating the rushing by of a large craft.

"What!" roared Swarth. "The Gulf Stream? I've lost my reckoning. Where am I? Ship ahoy! Where am I?"

THERE was no answer, and he stumbled down to the main-deck among his men, followed by the mate.

"Draw a bucket of water, one of you," he ordered.

This was done, and he immersed his hand. The water was warm.

"Gulf Stream," he yelled frantically, "Gulf Stream—how in hell did we get up here? We ought to be down near St. Helena. Angel, come here. Let's think. We

sailed by the wind on the southeast trade for—no, we didn't. It was the northeast trade. We caught the northeast trade, and we've circled all over the Western Ocean."

"You're a bully, full-rigged navigator, you are," came the sneering, rasping voice of Tom Plate from the crowd. "Why didn't you drop your hook at Barbados, and give us a chance for our eyes?"

The captain lunged toward him on the reeling deck; but Tom moved on.

"Your time is coming, Tom Plate," he shouted insanely; then he climbed to the poop, and when he had studied the situation a while, called his bewildered mate up to him.

They put the brig on the starboard tack, and took hourly soundings with the deep-sea lead. As they hauled it in for the fourth time, the men called that the water was cold; and on the next sounding the lead reached the bottom at ninety fathoms.

"We're inside the Stream and the hundred-fathom curve, Angel. The barometer's rising now. The storm-center's leaving us, and we're drifting ashore," said the captain. "I know pretty well where I am. The storms follow an invariable track, and I judge the center is to the east of us, moving north. That's why we didn't run into it when we thought we were dodging it. We'll square away with the wind on the starboard quarter now, and if we pick up the Stream and the glass don't rise, I'll be satisfied to turn in. I'm about fagged out."

"It's too much for me, Bill," answered Mr. Todd wearily. "I can navigate; but this ain't navigation. This is blindman's-buff."

But he set the head-sail for his captain, and again the brig fled before the wind. Only once did they round to for soundings, and this time found no bottom; so they squared away, and when, a few hours later, the seas came aboard warm, Swarth was confident enough of his position to allow his mind to dwell on pettier details of his business.

It was nearly breakfast-time now, and the men would soon be eating. With his pistols in his coat pocket he stationed himself beside the scuttle of the fore-hatch, the entrance to the fore-castle, and waited long and patiently, listening to occasional comments on his folly and bad seamanship

which ascended from below, until the harsh voice of Tom Plate on the stairs indicated his coming up. He reached toward Tom with one hand, holding a cocked pistol with the other; but Tom slid easily out of his wavering grasp and fled along the deck. He followed his footsteps until he lost them, and picked up instead the angry plaint of the negro cook in the galley amidships.

"I do' know who you are, but you want to git right out o' my galley, now. You heah me? I'se had enough o' dis comin' inter my galley. Gwan, now! Is you the man dat's all time stealin' my coffee? I'll gib you coffee, you trash! Take dat!"

Captain Swarth reached the galley door in time to receive on the left side of his face a generous share of a pot of scalding coffee. It brought an involuntary shriek of agony from him; then he clung to the galley-lashings and spoke his mind. Still in torment, he felt his way through the galley; but the cook and the intruder had escaped by the other door and made no sound.

ALL that day and night following he chose to lie in his darkened stateroom, with his face bandaged in oily cloths, while Yank Tate stood his watch. In the morning he removed the bandages and took in the sight of his stateroom fittings: the bulkheads, his desk, chronometer, and clothing hanging on the hooks. It was a joyous sight, and he shouted in gladness. He could not see with his right eye and but dimly with his left, but a scrutiny of his face in a mirror disclosed deep lines that had not been there, distorted eyelids, and the left side where the coffee had scalded puffed to a large, angry blister. He tied up his face, leaving his left eye free, and went on deck.

The wind had moderated, but on all sides was a wild gray waste of heaving, white-crested combers, before which the brig was still scudding under the staysails. He looked at the compass. The brig was heading about southeast, and his judgment was confirmed. Two haggard-faced men with bandaged eyes were grinding the wheel to starboard and port, and keeping the brig's yaws within two points each way—good work for blind men. Angel Todd stood near, his chin resting in his hand

and his elbows on the companionway. Forward the watch sat about in coils of rope and sheltered nooks or walked the deck unsteadily, and a glance aloft showed the captain his rigging hanging in bights and yards every way. She was unkempt as a wreck.

The same glance apprised him of an English ensign, union down, tattered and frayed to half its size, at the standing spanker-gaff, with the halyards made fast high on the royal-backstay, above the reach of bungling blind fingers. Tom Plate was coming aft with none of the hesitancy of the blind, and squinting aloft at the damaged distress-signal. He secured another ensign—American—from the flag-locker in the booby-hatch, mounted the rail, and hoisted it, union down, in place of the other. Then he dropped to the deck and looked into the glaring left eye and pistol of Captain Swarth, who had descended on him.

"Hands up, Tom Plate, over your head—quick, or I'll blow your brains out!"

White in the face and open-mouthed, Tom obeyed.

"Mr. Todd," called the captain, "come down here—port main-rigging."

The mate came quickly, as he always did when he heard the prefix to his name. It was used only in emergencies.

"What soundings did you get at the lead when we were blowing out?" asked the captain. "What water did you have when you sang out 'a quarter six' and 'a quarter less six'?"

"N-n-one, Capt'n. There warn't any bottom. I jess wanted to get you to drop the other anchor and hold her off the reef."

"Got him tight, Cappen?" asked the mate. "Shall I help you hold 'im?"

"I've got my sight back. I've got Tom Plate under my gun. How long have you been flying signals of distress, Tom Plate?"

"Ever since I could see, Capt'n," answered the trembling sailor.

"How long is that?"

"Second day out, sir."

"What's your idea in keeping still about it? What could you gain by being taken aboard another ship?"

"I didn't want to have all the work piled on me jess 'cause I could see, Capt'n. I never thought anybody could see again."

"You sneaked into my room, got my keys, and raided the treasure-chests. You know what the rules say about that? Death without trial."

"No, I didn't, Capt'n; I didn't."

"Search him, Mr. Todd."

The search brought to light a tobacco-pouch in which were about fifty unset diamonds and a few well-jeweled solid-gold ornaments, which the captain pocketed.

"Not much of a haul, considering what you left behind," he said, calmly. "I suppose you only took what you could safely hide and swim with."

"I only took my share, sir; I did no harm; I didn't want to be driftin' round wi' blind men. How'd I know anybody could ever see any more?"

"Sad mistake, Tom. All we wanted, it seems, was a good scalding with hot coffee." He mused a few moments, then continued: "There must be some medical virtue in hot coffee which the doctors haven't learned, and—well—Tom you've earned your finish."

"You won't do it, Capt'n; you can't do it. The men won't have it; they're with me," stuttered the man.

"Possibly they are. I heard you all growling down the hatch yesterday morning. You're a pack of small-minded curs. I'll get another crew. Mr. Todd," he said to the listening mate, "steward told me he was out of coffee, so we'll break a bag out o' the lazarette. It's a heavy lift—two hundred pounds and over—'bout the weight of a man; so we'll hoist it up. Let Tom, here, rig a whip to the spanker-gaff. He can see."

"Is it all right, Capt'n?" asked Tom, lowering his hands with a deep sigh of relief. "I did what seemed right, you know."

"Rig that whip," said Swarth, turning his back and ascending the poop.

TOM secured the gear, and climbing aloft and out the gaff, fastened the block directly over the lazarette-hatch, just forward of the binnacle. Then he overhauled the rope until it reached the deck.

"Come up here on the poop," called the captain; and he came.

"Shall I go down and hook on, sir?" he asked zealously.

"Make a hangman's noose in the end of the rope," said Swarth.

"Eh—what—a runnin' bowline—a timber-hitch? No, no," he yelled, as he read the captain's face. "You can't do it. The men—"

"Make a hangman's knot in the end of the rope," thundered the captain, his pistol at Tom's ear.

With a face like that of a death's-head he tied the knot.

"Pass it around your neck and draw it tight."

Hoarse, inarticulate screams burst from the throat of the man, ended by a blow on the side of his face by the captain's iron-hard fist. He fell, and lay quiet, while Swarth himself adjusted the noose and bound the hands with his own handkerchief. The men at the wheel strained their necks this way and that, with tense waves of conflicting expressions flitting across their weary faces, and the men forward, aroused by the screams, stood about in anxious expectancy until they heard Swarth's roar: "Lay aft here, the watch!"

They came, feeling their way along by rail and hatch.

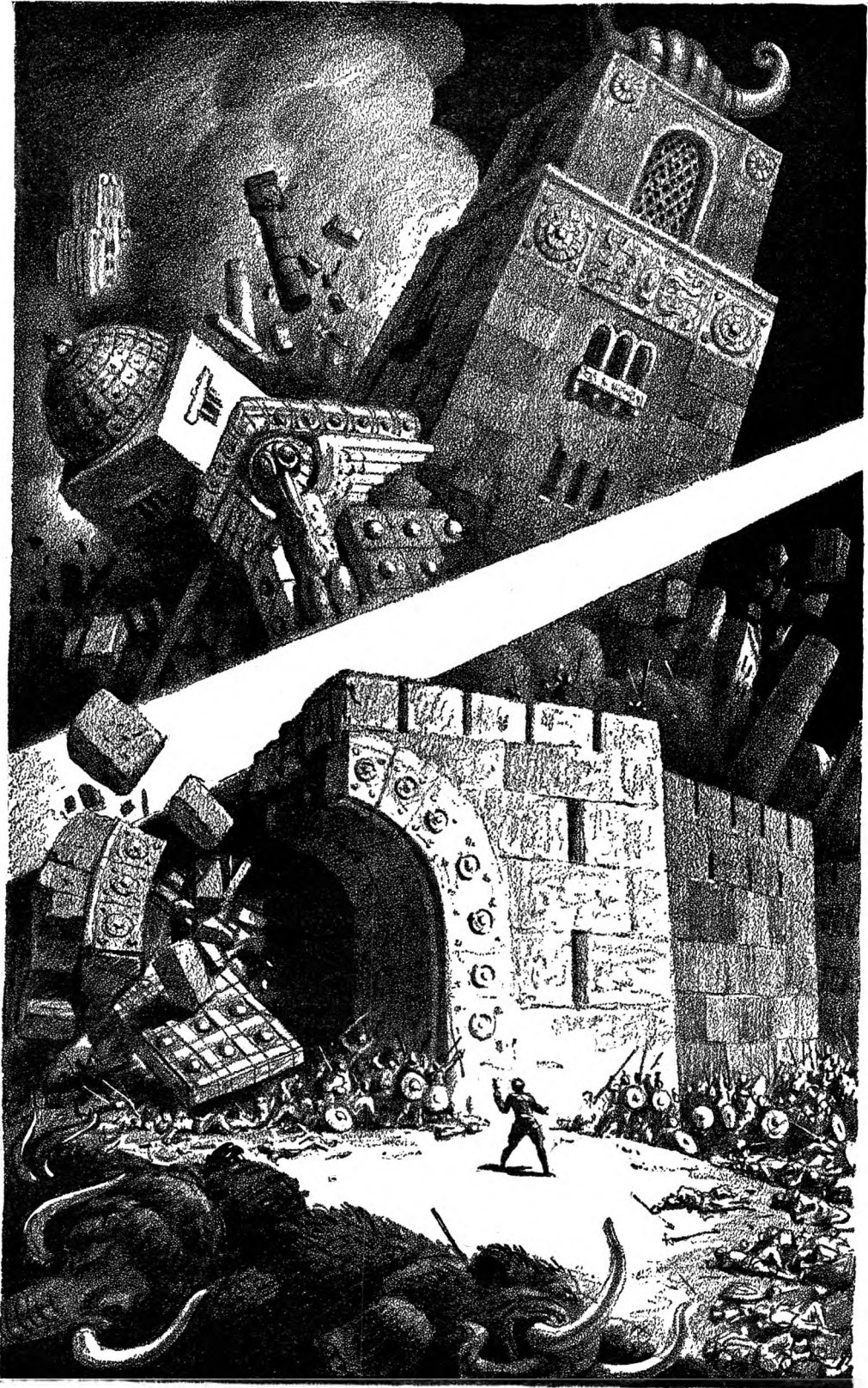
"Clap onto that gant-line at the main fife-rail, and lift this bag of coffee out o' the lazarette," sang out the captain.

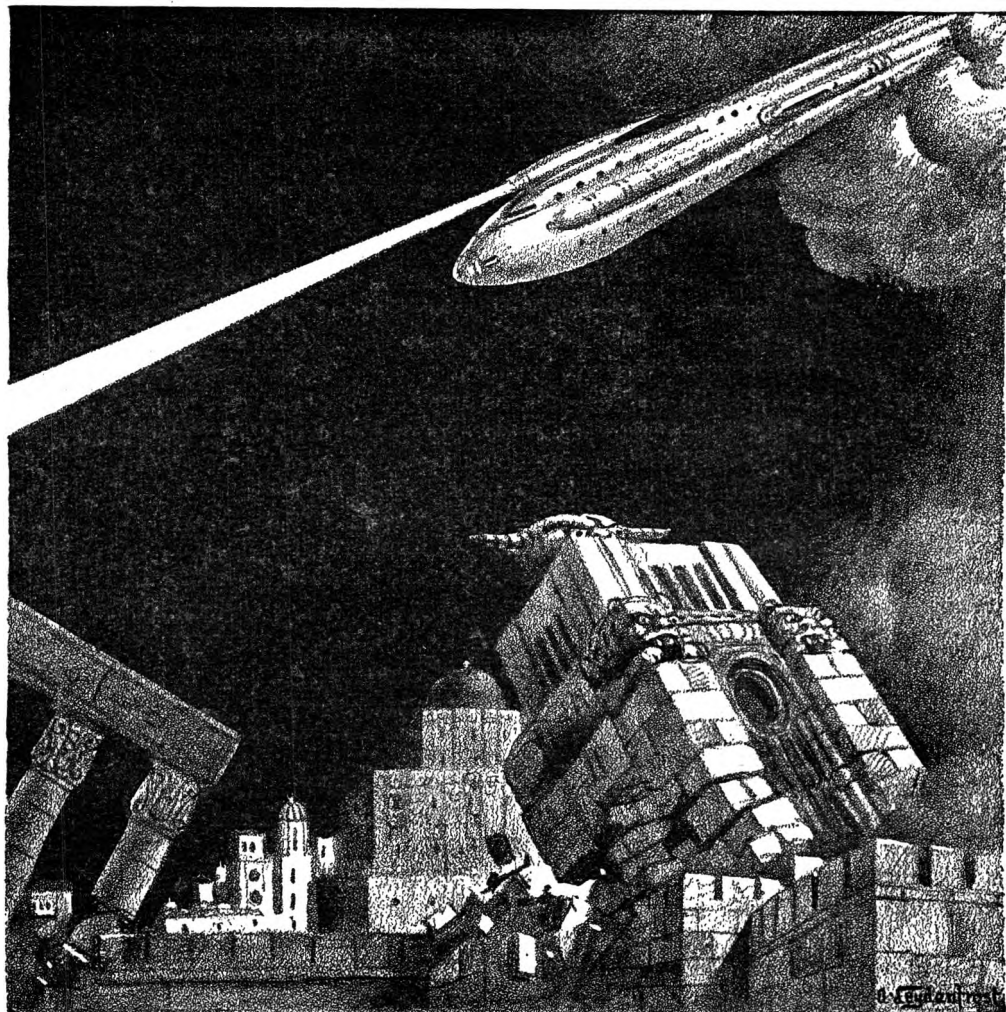
They found the loose rope, tautened it, hooked the bight into an open sheave in the stanchion, and listlessly walked forward with it. When they had hoisted the unconscious Tom to the gaff, Swarth ordered: "Belay, coil up the fall, and go forrard."

They obeyed, listlessly as ever, with no voice raised to inquire why they had not lowered the coffee they had hoisted.

Forty-eight hours later, when the last wakening vision among the twenty men had taken cognizance of the grisly object aloft, the gaff was guyed outboard, the rope cut at the fife-rail, and the body of Tom Plate dropped, feet first, to the sea.

Then, when Captain Swarth's eyes permitted, he took an observation or two and, after a short lecture to his crew on the danger of sleeping in tropic moonlight, shaped his course for Barbados Island, to take up the burden of his battle with fate where the blindness had forced him to lay it down.





WAR LORD OF THE DARK PLANET

By William Willis

A man-god ruled veiled Venus. . . . A half-legendary figure of cruelty and lust known only as Brother Death. It was sheer folly for the Earthian Fenton and the green-eyed Venusian princess to pit their lone efforts against the legions of that evil war-lord.

A BLONDE girl watched him enter. Her eyes were wide and still. There wasn't much understanding in them; only unreasoning terror. "I won't hurt you." John Fenton assured her softly in the pidgin Venusian he had learned from the Neanderthals of the

morass. "Nothing will happen to you if you keep quiet."

He closed the door carefully and bolted it behind him. He could still hear the green soldiers hunting for him. There was a serving-maid, seated by a sort of dressing table sewing. The Earthian cast

a single glance at her. He could see she was a sleeper; one of those zombie-like creatures whose brains had been atrophied by the action of the terrible Khandare drug. He had nothing to fear from her. She was utterly incapable of independent action.

He saw the blonde girl's throat quiver as though she were about to scream. He clapped his hand over her mouth. His touch seemed to madden her. She leaped and writhed with unexpected strength, her face contorted blindly. He countered her efforts as gently as he could but she was frantic as a captured bird in his hands. He was afraid she would injure herself.

All the while those green devils were hunting him, nosing through the god-king's castle like questing hounds. He heard a dozen squads go by the door. It seemed years, it seemed forever, he was struggling to silence the girl.

Then a pounding on the door and a eunuch's mincing voice as though raised in protest. "Go away soldier! You must not come here." Then in a sort of wail. "How dared you! Right in the harem. He'll be so angry! I just know it!"

Then the soldier's voice, grimly. "He'll be worse than that, Eunuch; if that magician gets away. He'll hang the lot of us."

A scuffling sound and the eunuch's voice still dithering, "This is terrible, just terrible!" Its high falsetto broke into a squeak. "Oh how can you! Our new concubine! You cannot go in there. I say you cannot! No man must see her. The king himself has not seen her yet."

The soldier's voice shouting on the other side of the door, "Shut up you old fool!" he roared. Then as though to his men, "Get him out of here." More scuffling, then pounding on the door again. "Open the door! You, inside there . . . girl! Open the door!"

The Earthian's hand crept inside his coat to the shoulder holster that held his U-blast. His fingers curled around the heavy butt. The girl was still now except for the sobbing of her breath and the swift rise and fall of her breasts.

Then a sudden hope, a conspiratorial glance. She laid a finger over her lips and gestured toward a large chest inlaid with gold and carved mammoth ivory. He fol-

lowed her soundlessly across the room as she raised the lid and pointed into the empty interior.

He stepped inside and crouched below its edge, not knowing why she was doing it yet trusting her instinctively, feeling a swift strange faith in her. He felt her dropping soft feminine garments on top of him, covering him completely, smelling of jasmine and sensuous exciting carnivarbre fragrance. She left the lid of the chest open innocently so that it appeared full of clothes.

Then she shot back the bolt of the door. Heavy booted soldiers entered and searched for him. He heard them questioning the girl, heard her denying that she had seen him. One thrust a lance through her clothes that covered him. The razor-edged head of hard bronze slid along his flank, inflicting a stinging graze. He lay motionless, hardly daring to breathe. It was withdrawn again unsuspectingly. In the end the soldiers went away.

THE girl lifted the garments that hid him. He rose slowly, wondering at the miracle of his escape. She was smiling faintly with relief. She lifted her eyes slightly and sighed limply with a little out-flung gesture of her hands as though at the narrowness of his escape.

"Why did you risk yourself to save me, a stranger?"

He saw the frown he was beginning to know, gathering again on her forehead. It was as though she herself did not understand. She shook her head slowly. "I . . . I don't know. I just had to. I . . ." There was a little silence. She seemed to have grown suddenly shy. There was a faint flush over her exquisite cheekbones.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I'm Princess Lorelaev," she said with a quaint naive dignity. Then after a pause, "You are one of THEM . . . a magician from beyond the mists. The eunuchs and dancing girls spoke of your coming, but I . . . I did not believe." Her eyes grew round and questioning; a sort of curiosity, a sort of awe. "Are you truly as they say, a god-man?"

He smiled at her as one might at an over-credulous child. "I am but a man as you are a woman," he told her.

She did not believe him. "You are a god," she said simply as though stating a mere fact.

He smiled. "And that's why you're afraid of me."

She frowned again thoughtfully. "No," she said at last. "I've no fear any more. I . . . I do not understand. It's very strange. I would not fight you like that now." She blushed and looked away.

Through it all the zombied serving-maid had gone on with her sewing; unfeeling, unaware as a machine: almost terrifying in the blank relentless precision of her stitches. Far below them, someone still beat out the alarm on the Drum of Slaughter. It seemed to the Earthian that it was like some huge heart pumping heavy with blood.

HE knew it was no longer a question of rescuing his brother Peter and Captain Glauser of the derelict *Polaris* or saving the captive crew. He would be lucky if he escaped himself now, if he were not flung into the slave-pits with them. He knew the almost fanatical devotion of the soldiers to the god-king they called Brother Death. They would fling themselves upon him wherever they found him regardless of whatever fate awaited them, not caring how many he killed or how high their corpses piled, until in the end they overwhelmed him.

"I must go now," he told the girl, "While I can." He smiled on her, feeling a swift poignant affection because of her beauty and the generous quick-witted courage that had saved him. "Thank you for my life!" he added. Then on an impulse, he pulled a ring of precious Saturnian Bhirconite set with diamond from his finger and pressed it into the palm of her hand.

He heard her cry out as a child might when he reached the door. "Don't leave me, Magician! Take me with you!" Her voice sudden and sharp; quivering with some new fear or loss.

He shook his head. He tried to explain the danger of the life he led. But as he spoke the calm green eyes regarded him pleadingly, questioningly. They made him feel strangely confused, ungrateful. They made his words sound melodramatic and exag-

gerated. "I live a hunted life," he said. "I must crouch with the lizard of the bog and the sabretooth tigers. You belong here, protected . . . safe."

But she clung to his arm. "Take me!" she begged, "I don't belong here." Then sadly, "I belong far away in the mountains, in Arrachar. They stole me from my father's garden and brought me here. I, a princess. They sold me to the green ones; to be their master's concubine.

"Take me away!" she begged again, "save me from this fate. I'm not afraid to die."

Before he could answer or refuse again, the decision was suddenly taken out of his hands. The door was flung open abruptly. A captain of the green soldiers leered at them from the doorway. "So!" he said sardonically, "you didn't know where he was, hey?" Then with heavy sarcasm, "I suppose this. . . ." He indicated the Earthian with a jab of his thumb, "I suppose this is a new eunuch." He laughed at his own humor. "He's in here!" he shouted to the searchers down the hall. "Come and get him."

There was an eager rush toward them of bronze sandals, down the hall. Fenton's hand closed about the butt of his U-blast under his coat. The blast crackled, leaping and recoiling in his hand as he drew and rayed in one continuous motion. His last shot had been to ray down a water-pterodactyle on the wing for food. The ray-pattern control was still set at full spread so that the high intensity U-rays covered the whole of the officer's face, interrupting him in the middle of his laughter.

The flesh disintegrated instantly, vanishing as though it were wet clay, wiped from the bones by some invisible sponge. For a split second, the more durable calcium of the skull remained grinning at him. Then it too vanished. The headless body swayed and went over as though sitting on a chair that wasn't there.

The next thing he knew, he was blasting his way through green hordes. Lorelaev gripped his free hand tightly in both of hers. He could feel the fallen fragments of green bodies rubbering under his feet as he fought a path through the Hall of a Hundred Doors and out into the courtyard where the sun-light poured through the

pale eternal mists of veiled Venus.

Their adversaries held them there by sheer weight of numbers, charging them from all sides. The green soldiers did not seem human. They were like some new species of fierce wingless birds bounding upon him. He swung his blast in wide circles to meet them and they disappeared through the curtain of U-rays as though they had run through some open door of oblivion.

He held them off while he backed to a nearby doorway, pulling the girl with him. He set his shoulders against the massive hand-hewn timbers, feeling them give under his weight and swing ajar as though they hadn't been properly fastened. He slipped through with the girl and slammed them to behind him, locking them with the bar.

Then he turned to see what sort of place it was they had entered.

A LONG stone chamber met his eyes, filled with shackled, semi-domesticated mammoths that the green soldiers used as beasts of burden and as mounts for their cavalry. The great prehistoric pachyderms were sleeping peacefully at their pickets or picking idly with their trunks for loose wisps of hay in the stone mangers. They looked curiously like animated hay-stacks with their long hairy coats. Only their white up-curved tusks gleamed pale and deadily in the dim light.

With the sight of them, the knowledge came to him that all was not over yet. There was still a chance of escape. He walked down the line, killing them as he went, blasting out their brains painlessly with his U-blast. His heart smote him; a sort of pity for those great beasts dying helplessly under his terrible weapon. But his mouth was grim. He hardened himself to the necessity.

In the end only one was left alive. He could hear the ringing of steel from outside as the green soldiers brought axes against the door and hacked their way through. He walked boldly to where the remaining mammoth was shifting uneasily and unfastened its pickets. "Down!" he commanded it in Venusian, "Kneel down!" The brute eyed him uneasily out of twinkling, almost human eyes that looked so ludicrously small for its huge hairy head.

It was as though it were ruminating in its mind whether it must obey the command of this strange being it had never seen before. A tightness of suspense gripped Fenton's belly, a sort of helplessness toward that hulk of living flesh.

The ring of axes grew louder as their keen blades began to bite through. "Down, fellow, down!" Fenton repeated, keeping his voice calm and authoritative. He struck the hairy knee with the butt of his blast. The knowing eye twinkled at him as the last of the timbers were splintering before the axes. Then with a sort of tolerance and good humored acquiescence, the beast thundered onto its knees. The Earthian and the girl clambered up over the fore-legs, bestriding the hairy neck behind the huge ears.

"Up!" he cried, striking it on the top of the head with his palm and it rose under them like an earthquake. They charged through the shattered door and once again the green figures scattered before them. All except one; only the guard at the outer gate stood his ground. He slipped under the up-raised trunk, hacking at the knees of their mount with a battle-axe. The pachyderm faltered, trumpeting with pain.

Fenton rose from his seat, gripping the neck with his knees and blasting downward with the ray at full-choke. It caught the guard at the collar-bone with the concentrated intensity of a radium bullet, blasting his chest cavity from the inside. He did not move for a second. Then his breast labored frantically. He clutched himself with both hands, dropping his ax and trying to scream, but he no longer had any lungs to scream with. His lips contorted in strange, dumb amazement. He lived for nearly a minute, then he died.

The Earthian sent the mammoth forward, shattering the heavy gate like matchwood and thundering down the trail through the morass until the green forest of giant ferns hid them from view. The soldiers were unable to follow until they had sent for fresh mammoths to replace those that he had killed in the stable.

He turned almost instinctively back to the valley where he had left the derelict *Polaris*, already overgrown with moss and half-hidden in the trailing creepers. A wild plan had begun to formulate in his brain. He had seen the devastating effect

that even his tiny hand-blast had upon those primitive soldiers. What could he not do with the great blast-cannon of the rocket itself with their six and eight inch bores!

He could load them upon the mammoth and carry them and set them up on the plain before the temple. With them he could lay down a barrage through which no living thing could pass. He could blast down the ramparts and annihilate the soldiers as they poured out to fight. He alone with only the girl to help him, might even succeed in forcing the cruel votaries of that pagan citadel to surrender.

But when he reached the valley, the derelict was no longer there. For an instant, he stood gazing stupidly, unable to believe his eyes. He could see the hollow where her great hull had lain, the shape of her pressed into the soft earth and the dead vines like long shrivelled tentacles strewn over the ground where they had been hacked away from her with axes. All about there were trampled foot-prints where men had worked; not bare-foot prints of neanderthals nor the bronze-shod boots of the green-soldiers, but the plastic soles and heels of Earthians. He dismounted and examined them.

His lips moved. "They came back when I was gone," he heard himself say flatly as though it were someone else speaking. "They weren't prisoners at all. They came back and found me gone. They must have thought I was dead." He moistened his lips with his tongue. His eyes were pits of despair. He had to clench his fists to fight off the black wave of it that threatened to engulf him. "I'm left behind," he said loudly, "they've gone back and left me!"

Lorelaev followed him slowly a little shyly as though afraid to intrude, knowing by the sound of his voice and the bleakness of his face, that something was wrong. She waited a long time without saying anything. He felt her presence behind him in a vague sort of way, dumbly waiting. At last she reached out a hand gently so that the slender fingers just touched his arm. "A terrible thing must have happened surely, Magician," she said at last in a small voice.

He nodded his head, noting mechanically how the rocket's mighty power tubes had

blasted and seared great fern trees by their intense heat as they had flung her upwards into the void. "My friends have abandoned me," he told her in Venusian, "it is the end of everything."

After a while he told her about it, all that had happened from the beginning when the *Polaris*, driven off her course to Jupiter by varying gravity currents and comet-wakes had made her forced landing in the Greater Venusian Morass. It seemed to help him to talk about it. He told her how his brother Peter had left him in charge of the ship while he took Captain Glauser and all the rest of the rocket's company in a search for the gold they must have to refuel her atomic force power-tubes. They had never returned. After three months, he had set out in despair to look for them. The unhappy, out-cast tribes of neanderthals, harried alike by the green soldiers of the temple and the leather clad soldiers of the cities had been his only friends. They had told him his friends were prisoners in the temple of Brother Death. He had ventured into it single-handed in a wild attempt to rescue him.

"You have other friends now!" she told him when he had finished, "more than you know. My father's city is rich and powerful. Everything will be different now.

"We'll go to Arrachar. I will say, 'My father, this is the magician Jon-Fen-Ton. He saved me by great magic from the harem of Brother Death. Now he needs help!' Oh you'll see! You'll have friends. Whatever you want they will do for you." She looked at him with a queer starry look of adoration, a sort of eagerness at being able to help him.

II

BROTHER DEATH did not intend to let Fenton and Lorelaev escape without opposition. The Earthian had to fight his way from hour to hour through companies of green soldiers sent out to search for them. They flung themselves upon him with reckless disregard for their deaths. He knew it wasn't just because he had stolen the girl. There was some other mystery about it that he couldn't understand.

For the time being, as long as he maintained his vigilance, his blast would protect them. But its radioactive generator wouldn't last forever, and he had no refills. It would gradually grow weaker until it became a mere weight of useless metal. Then they would be defenseless.

Lorelaev told him how she had come to be a captive in the god-king's harem. "It was Lizard Hunters," she said, "they came in the evening to my father's garden. They carried me away by the secret door, muffled in their rags.

"I remember there was argument among them when they had brought me to their fires. Some said I must be killed. But most of them wanted to sell me. They said the green ones were paying high prices for virgins to amuse their new god.

"How would they get in?" Claybourne asked. "They must have had friends in Arrachar. Some one must have shown them the way through the secret door."

She shook her head. "Nay, that I've often asked myself. I don't know any one who would do such a thing."

"Had you no enemies?"

"No, why should they hate me? I think I didn't do evil to any. I know I didn't wish to."

"Will you be queen when your father dies?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Yes, I will be queen. Such is our custom."

"Who else would inherit the throne after you were removed?"

She gazed at him with slowly widening eyes, a sort of horror. "You mean . . . ? Oh. Oh no. He wouldn't! He's my little brother. I cared for him always since our mother died. He . . . he loves me. He wouldn't."

There was danger all about them; death cloaked in beauty. He could see forests of Carnivarbe trees filling the air with their fragrance; looking like leafless weeping willows or brilliant Earthian sea-anemones multiplied a thousand sizes and transplanted to the land. He knew that if he were to brush against one of those jewel-like branches, he would find himself enmeshed by half a hundred tentacles that would never relax until they had deposited him in the creature's stomach.

They came upon a luckless Neanderthal caught just that way. He was crying out

in pain with hoarse raucous screams as the branches closed about him with a sort of reptilian cruelty; kicking his feet and twisting wildly. He looked ludicrously like some toy caught in a tangle of string.

FENTON'S blood contracted at the sight of it, a sort of pitiful horror; the unbearable screaming and the knowledge that a tree was killing a man, about to devour him. The Earthian brought his hairy pachyderm to a halt and drew his U-blast. But when he would have blasted into that fleshy trunk of the monstrosity, he found that the twitching and lashing of the tentacles kept swinging the helpless brute across his sights.

He brought the mammoth to its knees and slid down, circling the tree for a clear shot. He never knew exactly how it happened. It seemed to him that his feet slipped on the wet clay. He found himself flung into those deadly branches, felt them whipping about him, constricting his ankles and chest and thighs. They were cold and repulsive as snakes. He fought them off with a sort of anger and unreasoning outrage, feeling the skin tearing on his arms and legs as they slipped on the sweat-drenched flesh. He heard Lorelaev screaming as though she were far away.

He blasted into it again and again until it was all but torn from its roots. Quivers ran through its fleshy substance. Its grip was suddenly slack and harmless and the branches writhed and whipped as though it were in pain. He saw the dark mass of the Neanderthal hurtle over him in a wide arc and land in the soft mud.

The big brute was unconscious. His shaggy body was criss-crossed with livid welts as though he had been beaten with raw-hide whips, and there was a stream of blood trickling from one nostril. Fenton opened his first-aid kit and shot a hypo of stimulant into the mighty breast.

After a minute or two the eyes flickered open upon him, rich and dark and strangely beautiful with a sad, clear look often found among dogs and the higher anthropoid apes; not quite human yet not of the animal either. He was a magnificent specimen, fully eight feet tall with mighty casings of muscle-like armour on his limbs and torso.

"Do not fear," Fenton reassured him, "we're friends." Then, "Rest. You have been hurt." The shaggy giant did not

answer, merely watched him with dumb, unblinking eyes as though he could not understand. In all his hunted, unhappy life, he had never before experienced mercy or kindness.

THE carnivore lay drooping to the earth, its tentacles curling like some giant wilted flower and its strange sweet perfume still lingering on the air, as they turned back to their mammoth. The calm sad eyes followed them dumbly. Fenton did not think the Neanderthal would live. He wondered if it would not be more merciful to end his sufferings swiftly, but could not bring himself to kill another in cold blood, not even a semi-brute giant.

He himself was in considerable pain. A curious feeling of foreboding hung over him as though he could already feel some new disaster impending. Their mammoth was behaving strangely, fidgeting on its feet, sending out peal after peal of trumpeted terror. It turned and bolted back along the trail.

A sharp explosive sound of great magnitude rang out in the near-by bog. A gargantuan creature some thirty feet high thrust its head up suddenly from the mud. In appearance it resembled the diminutive horned toad of Earthian deserts. "Batrachisaurus," the Earthian murmured, "greater batrachisaurus," as though it were some interesting harmless specimen he was examining and not the most terrible of all reptilian life. His arm crept under his arm-pit to the butt of the U-blast. He could see the goggling, gold-colored eyes gleaming like jewels above the ludicrously grinning mouth and the horny projections of its back and sides streaming with slime like long green hair and crawling with parasitic crustacea.

The thick shaft of its tongue flung out at him like a huge steel spring uncoiling and coiling again faster than the eye could follow. He was flicked through the air into the batrachian's mouth; caught firmly in the sticky excretions on the tip of it.

A hot, foul sea of saliva engulfed him, washing him free of it again; entering his eyes and ears and nostrils and almost drowning him as he lay half-stunned. He was lifted toward the cavernous gullet that led like a living chute to the all-obliterating acid of the creature's stomach.

An intense will to survive aroused him, almost like an instinct or a reflex against the discomfort. The hand that held the U-blast came up spitting through the darkness as he swung it in wide arcs attempting to locate the brain center. It blasted holes and streaks like fret-work through the roof of the mouth and light and air came in. The batrachian reacted violently. It did a sort of dance of agony on its hind legs while it clawed at its mouth with its fore-hands, hissing and trying to spew him out.

In the end he was poured out on the stream of blood and mucous, but not before his rays had contacted the reptilian brain. It was blasted out; cerebrum, cerebellum, optic lobes, everything in fact except the medulla oblongata. The monster leaped over him in a huge arc and went careening away over the bog-land, unable to think or feel, robbed of all but the most primitive reflexes of leaping and breathing. It would continue its grotesque progress over the desolate waste for weeks and even months; animate matter that would leap and sprawl and struggle until its tissues slowly starved to death.

The Earthian lay where he fell, fighting only briefly until he had clawed the clogging film from his mouth and nostrils. He lay, letting the sweet air gulp into his lungs.

He was aware of Lorelaev's hands on him, scraping it away, cleansing him of it. But he was content just to sprawl and breathe. Her hands stopped half-way in their task. She fumbled swiftly for the U-blast that had fallen from his limp grasp. He heard her voice crying out at something or someone, a little tremulously as though she were afraid; yet defiantly too. "Go away!" she said, "Leave us or I will kill you." She held the blast awkwardly, not knowing how to use it. Her hand trembled,

HE came back to life slowly, fighting his way as though from some dark borderland. He saw the hulking shape looming toward them swaying, faltering on its feet. It was the Neanderthal he had saved.

The shaggy giant was embarrassed. Even he himself did not know what he wanted to do. This strange being had

brought something new into his savage heart. He did not know that the vague poignance of those yearnings, groping in his half-formed soul, was gratitude and new born devotion. He had never in his unloved, unloving life, had such an experience before.

He only knew that the Earthian who had saved him and who had driven off even the terrible horned frog must be a god. He was filled with humility in his presence and a kind of exaltation. Yet when his god arose and confronted him he was suddenly baffled and inarticulate. He did not know any words for love or gratitude or kindness, only those that pertained to death and hunger and sex. He had never before known any other need.

For a long time he swayed on his feet, anguished in his wordlessness. His newly found god and his god's woman eyed him suspiciously and menaced him with some dreadful weapon. A sudden inspiration came to him. He remembered the huge shaggy hounds the Venusians used to hunt dinosaur and sabre-tooth. "I am Agor," he said coaxingly, "I want to be your hound. I will kill your enemies."

III

FOR three weeks, Fenton slipped through the meshes of the great drag-net Brother Death seemed to have cast over the whole of Venus, sometimes fighting but more often avoiding the green soldiers. In the end, he emerged from the green bog-lands with the princess at his side and the hairy giant shambling at his heels. He saw Arrachar like the city of an Earthian fairy tale with milk-white battlements and towers nestling in the pleasant valley between the Barrier Mountains and the green sea of the morass. A wide dark river washed its walls and spread out to lose itself in that sea.

The guard at the gate gazed straight at the princess without recognizing her. Dressed in ragged furs, Lorelaev and the Earthian were not much different from Agor. They were all unkempt and dirty. They were Neanderthals to the soldier or at most, half-castes resulting from those terrible matings that took place in caves or jungle camps when Venusian women were carried off by the hairy giants.

He dropped the point of his spear until it was level with Fenton's heart. "What are you doing here, Lizard Hunters?" he demanded gruffly.

"Lizard Hunters!" somebody shouted inside the wall. "Bring the hounds! Quick, before they get away!" There was a clamour of voices and weapons and the baying roar of the great dogs, as though they had been suddenly unchained.

Agor leaped forward, swinging his huge bludgeon and growling with rage at the menace to his beloved master. But Lorelaev was before him. She stepped under the club and thrust down the spear. "Don't you know me, Dicuil?" she asked the guard. Her lips smiled at him a little reproachfully.

He gazed at her, wide-eyed, astonished at the aristocratic purity of her voice. His jaw dropped, then recognition and welcome came swiftly. He swept off his helmet, letting his spear clatter on the stones. "Princ . . . Princess Lorelaev! The gods save you, princess. They said the Lizard Hunters . . . We thought you were dead or worse."

A hastily summoned guard conducted them through the town to the palace. But word of her return seemed to sweep ahead of them. From the shops of the market place and the narrow winding streets the crowds poured out, asking questions and shouting, "Long live Princess Lorelaev! The princess is back. Where was she? What has happened? Who did it?" Then as rumors spread and grew grim! "Lizard hunters! They say its Lizard Hunters! Lizard Hunters did it. They carried off the princess. They've caught them. They've got the ones that did it. Kill them! Death for the Lizard Hunters!" The whole roaring crowd took it up shouting in unison like a chant, "Kill them! Kill them!"

The escort Dicuil had sent with them was hard pressed to protect them. They formed a fence with their shields as the crowd grew menacing. Agor began rumbling in his chest and twisting his club in his hands. His eyes glinted angrily. "I can kill too," he said, "I can kill." The Earthian had trouble restraining him, pressing his hand on the mighty arm and tangling his fingers in its shaggy hair.

He himself moved as one unable to be-

lieve his eyes. The anachronism of the fairy tale town was like a spell over him, the houses and the market place and the leather jerkined men and buxom girls with yellow hair and white linen. He could see Lorelaev's eyes turning about her as though from one well-remembered thing to another. She seemed to have grown very beautiful. There was a flush on her cheeks and a mist of tears over her eyes. It hurt him to look at her. He did not like to think of how she must have felt while she was waiting to die in the temple of Brother Death.

THE king met them on the palace steps, an old man, gaunt and aquiline with deep-set eyes and a straight mouth that looked as though it had been carved with a knife. There was an expression of pride about him and yet of humanity too, a sort of kindness. He was straight as a lance.

He came down to them swiftly but he did not say anything. His eyes were on his daughter, a sort of paternal hunger; a sort of yearning. His lips trembled.

With him were a pair of huge Venusian hounds. They bounded about the girl, waving their tails frantically and fawning upon her, licking her ankles and knees and wrists and all the while uttering grievous little cries as though their hearts were breaking, as though they were remembering all at once a great anguish they had felt all the time she had been away.

They were huge beasts, each almost as large as an Earthian tiger, with terrifying jaws and great bone-crushing teeth. Yet their yellow eyes were soft and gentle as they mouthed her; careful not to mark even her tender skin.

"Get down Grania!" she chided them, "Gently Sgeolan! You'll eat me up." A breathless laugh started to break from her lips but something went wrong with it. It seemed to choke half way. The sound of their crying, their joy at seeing her had touched off the emotions she had been holding back so hard. The tears streamed down her cheeks.

She fought for control. "We have a guest, my father," she said after some seconds.

The deep-set eyes turned upon Fenton

as though seeing him for the first time, ignoring his dirt and ragged furs. "Strangers come from the gods," the king said. Then, "You are very welcome Sir." He indicated the doors of the palace, with a sweep of his hand. "Will you enter my poor house?"

He conducted them through the heavy portals hewn from timbers and bound by bronze bars into a sort of throne room carpeted with the skins of tiger and wild ox and furnished with intricately carved chairs of mammoth ivory and jewel-studded chests. The narrow window-holes were unglazed. Agor lumbered in the rear, twirling his club and grumbling to himself, casting suspicious glances at everyone near the Earthian.

"My father's name is Caolte," Lorelaev said to Fenton. Then to her father, "This man is a great magician I think. He is called Jon-Fen-Ton. He killed many wizards in the temple of Brother Death where I was kept. His friends have left him and gone away to some wizard land beyond the mists. He should stay here I think." She told everything that had happened since she saw him in the temple.

Caolte nodded when she had finished. "We had word of that. Brother Death has sent runners to all the cities in the league. He wants your friend very much I think. He has offered much gold and jewels to the man who will kill him and bring his head to the temple. They will send the green soldiers if they find that he is here."

"That settles it," Fenton said suddenly. "I can't stay here then."

The old king regarded him from under bushy eye-brows. "And why not, Sir?" he asked. His voice was ominous.

"They'd be bound to find out I'm here," the Earthian said. "You couldn't keep a thing like that hidden. I couldn't let you take the risk. They'd take it out on your Arrachar for hiding me. I won't let you suffer on my account. This is strictly between them and me. There's no reason for you to mix in."

"No reason!" Caolte demanded. "No reason! Do you know why they're hunting you now? Because you saved my daughter." The old eyes flashed. "And now you say I must not help you." His

voice grew thunderous. "Old Caolte must crawl away and forget honour and gratitude while his friends crouch with the tigers, while they hunt them like lizards!

"Young man, you may be, as they say, a desecrator of temples. You may even be a magician, I do not know. When a man gets as old as I, he doubts much of magic and priestcraft. But even if you are a devil out of hell, Caolte of Arrachar will still be your friend, for the great debt he owes you." He laid his arm about his daughter's shoulder. "When Brother Death has taken you . . . on that day, there will remain of Arrachar not one stone left standing upon another or one soldier that is not a corpse."

FENTON felt a sudden warmth for the old man surging within him; a sort of reaction toward his manhood an acknowledgment of inherent nobility. A wordlessness seized him, born of emotion and vague embarrassment. "I will remember that Caolte," he said at last simply. "But between friends there can be no debt."

It was in his mind that he could not bring such trouble to the gallant old man, a determination to slip away in the night after a few days before the inevitable must happen and some traitor carry information of his presence there to the temple. "Who is he, this Brother Death?" he asked after a pause to cover up his embarrassed silence.

He saw a troubled look enter the hollow eyes—a vague uncertainty. "I don't know," Caolte said slowly. "There was a long time I doubted if he was anything but another lie of the priests. But lately there has been strange talk . . . even truthful men have said they saw him," he shook his head doubtfully.

"What did they say he looked like?"

"Why, like a man, I think. A magician, maybe, like yourself; only cruel, cruel to the death. They said he came to them out of the mists as one who has slept a long sleep in the drowned lands, like a god returning to his people."

The words, "out of the mists," seemed to cling to the Earthian's mind. It seemed to suggest some extra-planetary human; a Jupitran perhaps or a Martian. He remembered the proverbial cruelty of the

Martians, their exaggerated egos and inordinate vanity. It would be like one of them to pose as a god before the simple Venusians.

But before he could continue the conversation, he saw the arras over the door move and a woman entered. He felt his heart leap within him as he looked at her. He had never before seen a woman so completely and seductively sexual. She was almost as lovely as Lorelaev, but in a different way, a sort of burning intensity, of desire beyond desire. She made him think of the dark fragrance of carnivarbes that lured men and animals to their death. Her eyes were dark violet in a pale face and she had dyed her hair a shimmering green. She was dressed in mesh-like cloth of gold with her flesh shimmering through. He thought at first she must be some kind of royal courtesan or prostitute.

A man entered with her. Fenton had to look twice at the weak mouth and large melting eyes to assure himself that it was not actually another woman dressed in man's clothes. Lorelaev introduced them, "My brother Firlon and his consort Alor-Nan."

A sudden constraint seemed to have fallen on everyone. Firlon kept his eyes on his sister in a sort of apology and apprehension. It was Alor-Nan who spoke for the two of them. "Word came to us of your miraculous deliverance," she said. "We came to find if it was true and to rejoice with you." There was no warmth in her voice. It was as though she were repeating meticulously some message she had learned by heart. Her eyes probed Caolte's as though seeking to discover something.

A huge tame Neanderthal had followed her husband into the room and now he came up behind her. He looked very much like Agor except that he had a high forehead, a very unusual feature among the shaggy giants.

"It is good to be home," Lorelaev said simply. She looked only into the great melting eyes of her brother, ignoring her sister-in-law.

Alor-Nan's gaze roved to the Earthian as though sizing him up as a man, knowing intuitively that he possessed a potency and deadliness far beyond ordinary Venusians. "It was Lizard Hunters?" she

asked Lorelaev. "It was Lizard Hunters who were responsible for the outrage?" It seemed to Fenton that there was the slightest edge of anxiety in her voice; a probing.

"I was carried off by Lizard Hunters," Lorelaev agreed. She did not mention anything about her imprisonment in the harem of Brother Death, nor did Caolte. Agor kept eyeing Alor-Nan's Neanderthal. There was no subtlety about him. He recognized that the other giant was his enemy simply because they breathed the same air. He kept twisting his bludgeon and eyeing him belligerently. "I can kill him," he muttered softly, "I can kill him."

IV

FENTON was to discover that Alor-Nan was somewhat of a mystery. No one knew whence she came. Many of the superstitious nobles of Arrachar believed that she was fey. They said that Firlon had met her as she wandered one day on the river bank with her shaggy Neanderthal and that she had cast a spell over the luckless prince. Wherever she went she was followed by that big cave-man. No one had ever heard the great brute speak or utter a sound. They said that he was unable to because he had no tongue.

More and more often in the days that followed, Fenton began to find himself in Alor-Nan's presence, yet he never knew exactly how it happened. He would suddenly find that he was alone with her in her wing of the palace.

She was well versed in the secrets of love, knowing all its arts and delights. It was the mystery and urge of her attraction for him, the red moist bloom of her smiling lips, the hot promise of her eyes. Always she had some new wine to taste that the caravans had brought from some distant vinyard or a new song she wanted him to hear. She would sing it herself to the lute with her husky torch-song voice. It was always a love song with goading suggestive words.

"So the great magician finds time to visit with little Alor-Nan?" she would say. "I am flattered."

She patted the divan beside her with a rosy hand as she sat by the window in a

watery fire of sunlight. "I am praying to the sun," she said. "Come and sit beside me."

He smiled in return, feeling her female hypnotism reach out to him like hands. "If you are praying that it will make you beautiful," he answered a little hoarsely, "your prayers are already answered." It did not sound like his voice. It did not sound like anything he would say.

She laughed again, a voluptuous, feminine laugh. "I prayed that you would like me, Magician," she said. Then smiling through half-veiled eyes, "Is that prayer answered too?"

"You're too beautiful!" he heard himself saying. "It isn't good for a woman to be so lovely." Her face moved closer and her arms slid silkily about his shoulders, the thick lashes lying against her cheek, her lips parted from the pearly teeth. "Alor!" he said thickly, "Alor-Nan!"

She stirred in his arms, nestling against him, smiling a little. "It is my mind, Jon-Fen-Ton, that there is perhaps little difference between magicians and ordinary men when it comes to matters of love," she murmured against his cheek.

"I am not a magician," he started to say almost mechanically, but the woman put a rosy finger over his lips.

"Nay, don't try to fool Alor-Nan," she chided. "She knows better. Only a magician could have slain those soldiers as you did. And this so terrible lightning that swallows a man from afar off," she touched the bulge of his coat over the shoulder holster simulating a little shudder. "It terrifies me just to think of it."

A WARNING like a danger signal flashed across Fenton's mind. He recoiled from her involuntarily, and pushed her hands down from his neck. His mind raced, leaping to conclusions with a kind of shock. "How did you know that?" he demanded. "How did you know I had killed soldiers?"

For just a second, he saw confusion leap in her eyes. "I . . . why everyone says so . . ." then with an apologetic gesture, "Is it not so? Didn't you kill them?"

"Yes, I killed them all right," he said dryly, "but that's not the point. I killed them to save Lorelaev. The point is that

it isn't known that it was soldiers I killed . . . with my so terrible lightning." His voice mimicked hers momentarily. "The point is that everyone believes it was Lizard Hunters. The only person who knows the truth is the one who betrayed the princess to them, the one who brought Lizard Hunters into the garden to carry her off in the night."

"And you think it was I!" Her eyes clung to his, hurt, a sort of injured innocence.

Suddenly he was remembering what Lorelaev had said the night he rescued her in the temple, "He wouldn't . . . he wouldn't do that. He was my brother." . . . Alor-Nan was her brother's wife. With Lorelaev out of the way, Firlon would inherit his father's throne. Alor-Nan would be queen.

"You . . . you think it was I?" the seductress asked again.

He turned to leave. "Frankly, I do," he told her.

He seemed to come face to face suddenly with her tame Neanderthal. Black eyes bored into his from under the shaggy brows. A giant hairy hand was closed over the haft of a scabbarded razor-sword.

One glance at the big brute sent his own hand under his shoulder where his coat bulged ever so slightly. It seemed to him that Alor-Nan and her Neanderthal exchanged glances and that the woman shook her head almost imperceptibly. The giant seemed to relax. His hand dropped away from his sword. But the Earthian was left with the impression that the Neanderthal was not what he seemed, that the brain behind those narrowed eyes was no cave-man's. He was suddenly aware of a deadly keen intelligence that could match his own. The knowledge was like a warning to him.

Alor-Nan changed her tactics. Her clear beautiful eyes looked squarely into his. She restrained him with a hand on his arm. "And if it were?" she asked. "If I did . . . have her removed. What of it? What is she to you. She's but a pretty child. She'd only be a plaything. No mate for a magician like you.

"I can do so much for you. King of the world! You and I could rule the world, Magician. What is she? What can that child do for you?"

But he turned away abruptly and went out. He heard her voice following him, suddenly ominous, warning. "You're too late! You can't do anything for her now. You can't save her this time. You'll die with her." Then as though exasperated and angry, "Fool! I would have saved you! I would have made you king. Fool! Fool!"

His own Neanderthal, Agor, was waiting for him, squatted on his heels on the other side of the door, polishing his razor-sword. Ever since Fenton had procured the weapon for him to replace his clumsy bludgeon, the big brute had lavished infinite pains to keep it bright and hair-splittingly keen. He had never before owned such a treasure. To him it was but another proof of the unbelievable goodness of his god. Whenever they saw a stranger he would ask hopefully, almost wistfully, "Would this be an enemy, Master, do you think?"

He came to his feet swiftly as Fenton came out, hearing Alor-Nan's voice, looking eagerly into the eyes of her giant. "Shall I kill them, Master?" he asked hopefully.

"No!" Fenton snapped and the Neanderthal sighed lugubriously and lumbered away after him.

THE Earthian looked for Caolte, wanting to warn him. He knew that some great danger impended for Lorelaev. Alor-Nan must have been very sure of herself to speak as she did. His search was unsuccessful.

He approached Lorelaev under the prehistoric roses of the castle garden. He wanted to ask her where her father was. She did not answer his smile as he came up, but turned and walked away under the gnarled rose trees as large as Earthian apple trees. He was surprised by the change in her face. It was pale and set. Her eyes were shadowed with some hurt.

"Lorelaev!" he called, but she only walked faster. He followed, calling her name. In the end he was almost running before he caught up with her by the fish-pool. "What's wrong?" he demanded. "Why did you run away?"

She sank with a sort of resignation, a sort of helplessness at the stone rim of the pool. "I didn't run away," she told

him. "I . . . I didn't hear you." But she wouldn't meet his eyes. She seemed to find something very interesting in her reflection in the mirror dark of the pool. "Is anything wrong?" he asked again. She shook her head without looking up. The brilliant prehistoric char, transparent as Earthian minnows flashed in shoals of living rubies and emeralds.

"Lorelaev, look at me!" He put a hand under her chin, twisting her face around with a sort of gentle concern. "Now what's wrong?"

She started to shake her head again, then changed her mind. A new look came into her eyes, determined and a little daring. "Is she so much more beautiful than I . . . the Lady Alor-Nan?" she asked suddenly.

He looked at her, startled. He had not expected that. He had thought of her always as a little girl. She went on swiftly, "What has she got . . . what can she give you that I can't?" A sort of anger and bitterness. "She's a . . . a harlot! I'm a virgin and a princess. They say I'm beautiful. Other men have said so. Why do you love her?" She was clinging to him, her slender hands twisting his sleeves, her eyes on his, unhappy, troubled as though searching for something. "I would do anything for you."

It made him uneasy. "Why, Lorelaev," he said, "I believe you're jealous!"

She wrinkled her forehead at him and asked, "What does that mean . . . jealous?"

"You are angry because of her," he explained.

"No! Oh, no!" she said quickly as though shocked. "How should I be angry, who owe you so much. Whatever you do will be good to me." She kept looking at him; wide-eyed and unhappy, her hands twisting the cloth of his coat. Then, "Jon-Fen-Ton, it isn't because I'm, how do you say it . . . jealous. It isn't! I wouldn't be so wicked. But Alor-Nan will make you unhappy. You don't know! She is bad! She has made many men unhappy. There was a young lord, Aoltur: he killed himself for her and Kurl who did a great wrong for love of her. They drove him out into the forest."

The Earthian shook his head, feeling a curious mixture of paternal protective-

ness and yearning reverence for her innocence. He had to keep reminding himself of her youth. "You wouldn't understand," he told her gently, "Alor-Nan is nothing. It's not what you think." He seemed to grow strangely confused under the innocent emerald sincerity of her gaze. "Child, it's just because you are a . . . It's just because you are so sweet."

She rose abruptly to her feet. "I'm not a child!" She stamped her foot. "I'm not! I'm the princess Lorelaev." Then in a small voice, "I want to be alone now, please!" She walked away; troubled and unhappy under the fragrant trees. He sat gazing after her, perplexed. There was something in his heart that made him feel uncomfortable and ashamed.

Before he could reply, a clangor of bells rang out over the town. He heard men's voices shouting through the streets outside the palace and the sound of running feet. He stood listening, startled. The guard, Dicuil, ran through the garden looking for the king. "The green soldiers are coming!" he shouted to the Earthian. "It's war!"

"I haven't time to talk now," Fenton said quickly to the girl, "but you're in danger, great danger. I'll leave Agor with you. Stay with him always. Do not leave his side until I get back. I'll tell you about it then."

"Can I kill them if they come here?" Agor asked eagerly. "Will they be enemies?"

"You can do what you want with them," the Earthian told him grimly. A smile of delight, a sort of blissful hope lighted the giant's face. The girl watched Fenton with a rapt look as he hurried off. He had thought to protect her first. He really cared. Her lips curved a little. Her eyes were starry with adoration and a hint of tears.

WHEN the Earthian reached the outer gate of the town, he saw the host of green clad mammoth-cavalry plodding toward them on the white ribbon of road that wound away across the morass. They rode their pachyderms four abreast; each man bestride the neck of a beast. The bronze points of their slender lances twinkled like sparkles of fire through the mist. The air vibrated to the multitudinous

muttering of thousands of pounding mammoth feet.

A few hundred Arrachian archers crept out through the green jungle beside the trail, sending clouds of arrows among the green horde, but the mammoth riders paid them little more attention than they did the mosquitoes. A few hundred riders killed were but a drop in the bucket to that host. From time to time small bodies of out-riders sent their mammoths crashing through the green tangle after the snipers, reappearing again with their lances and the tusks of their mounts dripping red. But the main march went forward unchecked. In the short period of his terrible reign Brother Death had amassed an unbelievable army.

The men who waited beside the Earthian at the gate, watched grimly. Remarks passed between them from time to time, low and sullen like the growling of animals at bay. They saw their enemies gather on the firm ground and charge company after company, thundering down upon the gate.

The air was filled with the whicker of defending arrows. The huge beasts trumpeted with rage and pain, beating soft dust into clouds and fallen riders into red mud. The Earthian blasted the foremost beast in the forehead. It came down like an avalanche, its brains burned out of the shell of its skull. His second blast sent the next crashing on its back in a huge cart-wheel. His third dissolved the fore-leg of another. It went blundering in circles, bringing down others with it each time it fell, and goring still more with its tusks.

After that he aimed to cripple. He filled the whole plain with living mountains that rose and fell and screamed. A lot of the enemy attacks were broken up by them. His soul sickened within him but he fought on like an automaton. The fighting grew hopeless. The green hordes were limitless. They brought up archers when their mammoth charges failed. The defenders melted like snow in the sun.

A high pitched screaming sound filled the air. It came out of the mist far above them. The Earthian recognized it, the sound-wake of a power rocket. There is nothing else in the universe just like it. For an instant he couldn't believe his ears.

It was like a dream, like a bad television play in which some armed rocket screamed up at the last minute to save the hero from impossible situations.

He thought it must be an hallucination, born of his weariness and the excitement of battle. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes and looked up. He saw her glowing through the mist like a faint ruby streak, her platinum-iridium skin red hot from air-friction. It was the *Polaris*. She was the only ship that had that quiggly pattern to her wake. It came from faulty firing of her fin-tubes. He knew because of the days and weeks spent in the work-dromes trying in vain to correct them.

The dream-like sensation increased as he saw the big ship hurtling down in a power-dive above them, its cannon blasting not at the green horde, not at the enemy, but at the city itself, as though it were fighting for Brother Death.

The high-calibre rays sheared away the eastern wing of the palace as though it had never been. It blasted out the battlements so that the green hordes poured in, taking the defenders from the rear, sweeping over them from all sides.

In the end, the little group, fighting in the protection of the Earthian's U-blast by the gate were the only remaining resistance. The *Polaris* came gliding down, silent as a tired pterodactyle, her power tubes shut down. She lighted in a little patch of marshy ground a couple of hundred yards away and a cloud of hissing steam arose from her red-hot hull.

IN that strange atmosphere of unreality, Fenton watched the hatch clank back and his brother step out into the field of slaughter. He was followed by Even Olandson and the rest of the space-ship's company. Only the captain, Glauser, was missing. John Fenton's face was aghast. "Zombies!" he muttered. A black wave of weariness and despair. He didn't care any more whether he fought or not.

They moved like sleep-walkers. Their eyes were vague and unseeing and there was a calm, corpse-like pallor in their faces, a sort of peace of death. Their hair was bleached white and their eyes were colorless. The zombie-producing Khandare drug invariably killed the pigmentary glands.

They surrounded him wordlessly, their U-blasts in their hands. The green soldiers gave place to them with a sort of fear, a sort of awe. His Arrachian friends had run out of arrows and he himself had ceased blasting because he could not fire upon his own brother or the unfortunate crew of the *Polaris*. All fighting ceased, a sort of stillness broken here and there by the laughter of looting soldiers and the crash of breaking doors and the screams of ravished women.

"Throw down your blast," Peter Fenton ordered. "You are our prisoner. You can't fight any more. Throw it down or we'll kill you." His voice was flat and robot-like; there was no recognition or understanding in his face. All the time the zombie crew closed in slowly, silently on their former friend.

"Peter!" John Fenton said, "don't you know me?"

"That is my name," his brother said, as though with a great effort. "I'm Peter."

"Don't you remember me, Peter? I'm your brother."

"I know only Brother Death. I remember only his commands," Peter said, then, "He said to take you prisoner. Throw down your blast!"

Yet it seemed to John Fenton that the sight of him and the sound of his voice had roused some slight change in his brother. It was as though some part of his brain might still be unimpaired, dazed only by the terrible drug, as though it were struggling against a dead weight of paralysis.

He threw down his U-blast, realizing the hopelessness of further resistance. Sven picked it up and carried it over to Peter. The others closed in around him, their colorless eyes expressionless as the facet eyes of insects. Fenton saw his Arrachian allies marched off ignominiously by green soldiers.

He himself was marched by his former crew mates over to the *Polaris*. He looked back once at ruined Arrachar. An Arrachian girl, her clothes stripped from her, was struggling piteously in a group of laughing green-clad soldiers. Nearby, Prince Firlon was riding through the gate with a group of green officers.

His effeminate figure seemed to be shrinking as he passed the party about the

girl; as though his conscience stabbed him. In the next instant the *Polaris* shot into the mist over the morass and the Earthian saw no more.

V

"I HAVE kept my part of the bargain," Firlon told the green captain, "I have led you to my city. You've destroyed it. You've taken the magician as I promised your master. I'm going now to my wife in the palace." There was a tragic dignity about him. He was as one caught in a net of circumstance beyond his power.

The green officers watched him distantly as though looking down from some height, pitying and contemptuous and curious as though he were a strange inhuman creature. Cruel and evil as they were, there was not one who would have committed Firlon's crime. There was an embarrassed silence. It was as though he made them ashamed for their own manhood or had a contagious disease. The captain would not meet his eyes. He nodded tersely. "Go then," he said blankly.

Firlon hurried through the streets to the palace and his wife. He passed his father in chains, saw astonishment and dawning knowledge in the old man's face as their eyes met. He looked away.

Alor-Nan was with her Neanderthal where Fenton had left them. Firlon went forward swiftly. He wanted to bury himself in her arms as though he could there shut out the things he had seen.

She evaded him. "No. Your message first," she said. His tortured eyes reproached her. "Have they taken the magician?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes," Firlon said softly. "They've taken him. The fighting's over."

"Will Brother Death be pleased?"

The traitor nodded. "He seemed as if he would. He said he'd make me king instead of my father." Firlon winced at his own words. Then pleadingly, "Does that make you happy? Are you pleased with me now?"

She let him have his way with her, submitting to his kisses, her body limp and passive in his arms. She was smiling a little, a sort of triumph. "Then I'll be queen," she said slowly, dwelling on the

last word lingeringly. "I, the Lizard-Hunter's child out of the wild caves, queen of Arrachar."

She felt him recoil a little in her arms, his eyes on her, startled. "You did not know that, my Firlon," she said. "Your weird woman, your fairy's child that you met by the river. I waited by that place day after day. I waited for you to pass by. It was part of the plan. Why did you think I dyed my hair? Because I was fey? To make myself desirable?" She shook her head. "Because it's red, that's why; red as a Lizard-Hunter's."

"My mother was Saba. Your father drove her from Arrachar to die in the bogs. She didn't die. The Lizard Hunters were kinder than her own people. They saved her from the tigers. They shared her in their caves. I don't even know which one was my father."

Her smile twisted a little to one side, half-mocking. "Yes, it's hard to believe," she said to his incredulous fearful eyes, "isn't it? I'm so fair and smooth and soft. Like a city woman on the outside. But I'm not. My heart's fire and jungle. They'll learn that, these people of yours . . . what's left of them, when I'm queen. They'll know what jungle vengeance is."

His eyes were a nightmare, a sort of trance as though he were helpless in her hands, enmeshed by the carnivarbre of her loveliness. All the time they could hear the shouting in the distance and the noise of the tortured city. "I betrayed my father for you," he said in that soft dead voice, "and my sister and my people."

He made a twisting motion with his shoulders as though he would throw off some weight, escape from something. "It doesn't matter. It's over now. I have you, haven't I?" Then with a sort of terrible intensity, "I did it for you. I'd do it all over again. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you!" He pulled her to him, clutching at her soft flesh with slender fingers, burying his face in the sweet hollow of her throat. Her big Neanderthal watched them, his black eyes stolid under shaggy brows.

Alor-Nan's lips moved. "Brother Death," she whispered silently. Her eyes were far away. "What's Brother Death like?" she asked her husband, after a pause.

"I think he is as they say, a god."

"No! What does he look like?"

"Like a man," Firlon said, "or a magician."

"Like Jon-Fen-Ton?"

"Yes, like him."

She gave a little voluptuous sigh, turning her face up smiling a little. "I've never loved a god," she said dreamily as though she were speaking her thoughts aloud.

He flung away from her, a sort of jealousy, a sort of rage at her words. "What are you thinking about?" he demanded. "What are you planning now?"

She didn't answer him, but looked through him as though he were a shadow. "You will not!" he cried sharply, reading his answer in her eyes. "Not that. Not again!"

A frown of annoyance gathered over her eyes.

"You wouldn't," his voice broke, "you wouldn't do that to me now!" Then a sort of desperation, "You won't make me jealous again!" he shook her angrily. "Promise!" he demanded, "promise you'll never again!"

Her eyes were thoughtful. She seemed as though she were trying to make up her mind about something. She sighed and smiled at him almost tenderly. Then she looked over his shoulder at her Neanderthal, a long glance full of meaning. "No, Firlon," she said gently, "you'll never be jealous again."

Her Neanderthal stepped noiselessly behind the prince, swinging his razor-sword. Alor-Nan stepped back and turned away her head. Blood spurted from severed arteries as Firlon's body crumpled. His head rolled across the floor. His tortured brain found peace at last.

ALOR-NAN looked across at the cave-man over the spouting body. "That was a good stroke, my brother," she said evenly. The cave-man wiped his sword upon some priceless tapestry of cloth-of-gold hanging from the wall. He looked squarely into her eyes. For the first time since he had entered Arrachar, he was heard to speak. "It was more than time, little sister." His voice was hard and guttural and booming. "I've had a bellyful of him this long what with his minc-

ing ways. It wasn't for the likes of him I saved you from Gutan and Gurtz in the caves of our people. He'd played his part in our mother's plan. We don't need him any more. Now you go on to Brother Death."

She looked up at him earnestly, doubtfully. "Can I, do you think? Can I make even Brother Death love me? Even he . . . even a god?"

The great brute laughed, his face splitting into a grotesque mask of mirth; huge thick-lipped mouth and dog-teeth under the flat nose. "Love you?" he said. "Sister mine, there are times when even I almost love you and I dwelt in the same cave with you and shared the same skins as a child. I know you as I know the tiger . . . to the depths of her black heart."

There was a soft knocking at the door. The Neanderthal threw a rug over the body as Alor-Nan opened it. It was a guard from the palace gate. There were a company of green soldiers and a young officer with him. It was the officer who spoke, "Our captain's compliments, Lady, we seek Prince Firlon."

"He is not here," she said. "He's gone away. He won't return." Then after a second or two, "I am his wife, Alor-Nan."

The officer considered her a moment. "Yes, he spoke of you. I am sent to protect you. You aren't safe here. Our soldiers are looting and out of hand. My men will conduct you to our headquarters."

Alor-Nan accepted. She and her giant brother passed out of the palace with the green clad guard. As they crossed through the garden, they came in sight of Lorelaev and Agor. The princess' face was pale and her eyes frightened. She knew the city had fallen. She could see the flames and hear the screaming but she would not move from the place her Earthian had left her. He had told her to wait for him. She would endure any fate rather than have him return and find her gone.

The young officer halted. "Who is she?" he asked.

Alor-Nan answered eagerly, "Your master's concubine! She's the girl the magician stole from your master." A sort of female viciousness and hatred because the princess was more beautiful, be-

cause the Earthian had preferred her.

"Take her along!" the officer's voice was crisp. His men spread out about Agor and Lorelaev.

Agor looked up. His eyes flamed. Enemies at last. His master had given permission before he left. He leaped forward and his razor sword hissed as he swung it.

Alor-Nan was directly in his path but her shaggy brother stepped between. The green soldiers dropped their lance-points, but he waved them away. "No!" he said, "Back! leave him to me. He's mine." Strangely enough, the soldiers obeyed, held in check almost automatically by the peremptory tone of his voice.

He smiled. "This is between us two. That's what you want, isn't it, my poor Agor. It's what we've both wanted, eh? A duel to the death."

Agor grunted as their swords rang together. "Fight!" he said. "No talk! Fight!" They were pretty evenly matched. Alor-Nan's brother was softer from his life in the ease of the city but he had the advantage of a keen intelligence inherited from his mother's race. Lorelaev's hounds, Grania and Sgeolan, saw the fighting from their kennels under the castle wall, and howled with helpless fury. Their chains rattled frenziedly as they leaped and slavered.

VI

THE *Polaris* slid with a silken smoothness that a rocket achieves only at speeds between a thousand and two thousand miles an hour. Within ten minutes they would be over the city of Brother Death. John Fenton waited in the after cabin with his brother Peter, who up until a few months ago, had been his constant companion. He looked into the muzzle of his own U-blast held in that well loved hand.

He thought of Lorelaev, her loveliness and innocence, waiting for him in the garden, trusting him and then of that unfortunate girl in the hands of the green soldiers at the gate.

It was only by the greatest of efforts that he was able to control himself. He would not let himself think of what might have happened behind them. He must

keep his mind cool and unclouded. Therein lay the only hope of saving her.

He concentrated on the blank colorless eyes before him. He could still see a struggle in them, a vague effort to remember, evoked by the sight of him; a dead mind groping blindly through labyrinthian subconsciousness.

He concentrated his whole effort into a single sentence, "It is your brother John whom you remember!" Patiently, with agonized intensity he hung upon his brother's face. His heart gave a leap as he saw the dead lips move woodenly.

"It is my brother John whom I remember!"

A grimace as though of pain twisted the blank face before him. He could see his brother's fingers clutch at the U-blast. He wondered if they were going to set it off unconsciously, an involuntary shrinking in his stomach where the rays would strike him. Like a flicker he saw the light of intelligence flash into Peter's eyes. It was as though a shutter had clicked open in the brain behind them.

Peter said, "Hello, John," as though faintly surprised.

"Hello, Peter," John answered huskily. He hardly dared breathe. He knew how tenuous was the other's hold on sanity. The slightest mistake, a single false word would send him back into the abyss. There was a silence. He waited tensely, feeling as one straining to close his hand upon some object of exquisite fragility.

"I feel funny," Peter said in a tired voice. "I can't remember what's happened." John dared not say anything.

"I must have dreamed. I . . . I . . . It's so funny! It's like a dream. I thought some one wanted you . . . wanted to kill you. He made me help him. I dreamed he made me take the *Polaris* out and catch you in a strange burning town. I had to do it. I had to do whatever he said." A sickly smile curved the afflicted youth's lips, "Crazy, isn't it?" he said.

The answering smile on John Fenton's face was one-sided and a little rueful. "Most ridiculous," he said dryly. He reached over slowly and took his U-blast from his brother's nerveless fingers, sliding it into the empty holster under his coat.

He saw Peter's eyes grow wide with

astonishment. "Then it's true! It wasn't a dream." Then piteously, "John, what's happened to me? What have I done?"

But John Fenton countered with a question of his own. "Who's Brother Death?" he asked before he thought. As soon as he said it he realized he had made a mistake. It was as though the name was a watch word, as though its very sound were enough to send the youth back to his zombied twilight. The robot pattern of months re-asserted itself dropping a curtain over those colorless eyes.

"Brother Death is the master," the zombie that had been Peter Fenton replied woodenly. "We must go to him; he wants you."

JOHN FENTON cursed his stupidity. He could not call that darkened mind back to sanity a second time. He could not undo his mistake. The empty eyes looked at him with blank watchfulness. To all his efforts, the zombied youth replied with the same words. "Brother Death is the master. You must go to him." The remaining minutes dragged slowly like dying years.

Then they were over the city of Brother Death. The *Polaris* slid down silently in a wide spiral and they alighted in the outer court-yard. The zombied crew hurried their former companion toward the presence of their master.

Brother Death was waiting in the Hall of a Hundred Doors; a solitary black-cowled figure upon a throne. Flanking him on either side were two huge glass retorts, each as tall as a man, filled with colored liquid. The one on the right was amber colored, the other a dark garnet. They seemed to glitter evilly, breaking up the torch-light, casting sinister beams upon the hooded figure.

It raised its head as they approached. John Fenton gasped. "Glauser! You!"

The hooded figure nodded. A whimsical smile hovered upon the cadaverous face. "Yes, it is I," he said.

"You . . . You are . . ."

"I am Brother Death." The hollow eyes gleamed, a sort of satisfaction or pleasure like the look of an earthian cat as it toys with some dazed mouse it has captured and intends to eat when it has tired of playing.

"You are surprised hey?" Glauser repeated when he did not answer. "You didn't expect this. Nothing turned out as you expected did it?" A look of cunning entered the face under the hood, sullen, resentful. "Oh I know what you thought, all of you. I saw you whispering together when you thought I wasn't looking. 'Old Glauser's done.' That's what you said. 'He can't even navigate a simple course to Mars any more, he can't even calculate gravity currents.' That's what you thought isn't it? You'd have told them that back on Earth wouldn't you? You wanted me to lose my navigator's ticket; you wanted me disgraced." The hollow eyes took on the brooding look of one who contemplates imaginary wrongs.

"But I fooled you. Old Glauser was too smart. Oh, it was easy. We came looking for gold and they thought we were gods. They said I was Brother Death. I said to that dumb brother of yours, I said 'O.K. play up to them. Make them think I AM this Brother Death.'"

The black-cowled figure laughed suddenly; a cackling breathless laugh that rang out strangely through the hall. "It was so simple! He didn't suspect anything. I'd heard of this, do you see," he pointed to the huge retort of garnet liquid. "They call it the drink of forgetfulness." He cackled again, "I gave it to them. I put it in their food when they weren't looking. Now they don't want to remember."

Fenton's gaze strayed over to the amber colored retort. Glauser watched him, his lips curved in a cruel secret smile as he leaned forward to observe him better. "Yes my Fenton, that is an antidote." Then with another cackle, "Oh I know what you're thinking. But it won't do any good. It won't help you, see. Once you've drunk this," he held up a little glass goblet that gleamed like a ruby in the torchlight, "Once you've drunk this, you won't want to be cured. You won't know enough to want anything. You'll do as you're told till you die."

FENTON gazed unwaveringly at the man who had indeed become Brother Death, probing the black terrible eyes. He knew there was no use trying to reason

with that twisted mind. There was only one thing he could do. His right hand crept up under his arm-pit. It closed about the butt of the U-boat he had taken from his brother's fingers during Peter's brief period of sanity on their journey from Arrachar.

Brother Death picked up the ruby goblet and held it out to him. "Drink it!" he ordered.

Fenton did not move. "If you don't, I can make you," the cruel lips said. "I'll have them hold you and pour it down your throat. You're in my power."

Fenton stepped back. His hand holding the U-blast flashed out. "It looks as though Brother Death slipped up this time," he said.

Glauser stared dumbly, a sort of amazement, his jaw still hanging open from his last word. He could not understand how Fenton came to be armed when he had given orders to the zombies to disarm him before they brought him in. The shock held him speechless for several seconds.

Then all at once, Fenton saw a flicker shoot swift as a striking snake across the cruel face. Glauser's bony fingers clawed among his black robes for his own weapon.

Fenton's blast crackled first, leaping under the recoil. Glauser's elbow melted into nothing. His forearm flopped down tumbling over the steps and spilling Glauser's blast across the floor. The pseudo god opened his mouth to shout an order to the zombie crew but Fenton was too quick for him. Before it could be articulated he had brought the butt of his blast down with stunning force on the black-cowled head. Glauser slumped gurgling.

Fenton picked up a goblet from a stand nearby and crossed to the amber-colored retort. He went to work swiftly on the zombied crew. They waited with the inhuman patience of idling machines. They swallowed reflexively as he forced open their unresisting jaws and poured the bright drops like jewels into their mouths. One by one he saw knowledge flowing back into the blank convex mirrors that had been their glassy eyes. They were like men awakened from sleep, mildly wondering at first and surprised and remembering dimly like dreams the things they had done in their zombied state.

He told them briefly what had happened as he hurried them out to the *Polaris* and got the big ship under way. He told them about Caolte and Lorelaev and the gallant city of Arracher broken by the green hordes. They drove the rocket at full speed back across the morass, increasing her momentum until she blazed like a shooting star from the friction. They reached the fallen city in an incredibly short time.

It was only as he stood in the palace garden on the spot where he had last seen her, that it dawned on Fenton how much he had loved Lorelaev, and he felt grief and terror. The garden itself lay bleak and desolate as a ravished paradise.

Alor-Nan's brother lay dead upon his belly, still clutching a broken sword and there was a heap of green-clad corpses with Agor's treasured razor-sword piercing several of their bodies from below. Agor himself lay at the bottom. He was still living when the Earthian dragged them clear of him.

The dark melancholy eyes looked up at him poignantly under their shaggy brows, a sort of longing and apology. "Master!" he said slowly, "Master I . . . tried. They . . . were . . . too many." For a few seconds the big brute seemed to strain inarticulately, trying to find words a sort of searching and pleading as though for forgiveness at having failed. Then the blood gushed from his mouth and he died.

All the time the hounds were baying from their kennels under the wall. "Un-loose the hounds." Fenton heard himself saying, "They saw it all. They'll lead us to her."

His brother Peter crossed to them swiftly and slipped their collars. They sprang away, crying savagely in a kind of frenzied rage, casting about with their noses to the ground, howling down the narrow streets.

They led the Earthians out through the gates to the officer's camp upon the plain near where the river poured out into the morass. Alor-Nan heard them coming and saw the Earthians running far behind. She had seen the *Polaris* return. She knew that something must have gone very wrong.

She ran to the river bank. A shallop

lay moored there, its sails fluttering in the breeze. She cast off. The wind caught the sails and she flitted away over the dark, still water, steering for the great fern trees and the moss-dark bogs from whence she had come. She thought she was going to get clean away. Already she had passed beyond the uttermost range of the Earthian's hand-blasts, almost reaching for her native jungles.

An explosive plopping sound rang out from the mud of a nearby sand-bank. A batrachesaurus reared its huge grinning snout. It did not hurry. It was as though it realized its prey could not escape. Alor-Nan's screams rang out shrill and piercing for several seconds. Then there was silence again and the empty shallop drifted away before the breeze. The horrible brute settled down again in its muddy bank, contentedly as a toad might after it had speared a particularly satisfying fly with its tongue.

LORELAEV did not seem surprised when Fenton reached her side. She looked up at him with a little smile as though she had been expecting him to come for her that way. Through it all her faith had never wavered that he would appear in the end and to claim her.

He cut the ropes away from her wrists, feeling his relief like a pain, like a weakness in the pit of his stomach and a loosening of his knees. He gazed at her as though he could not get enough of her, the innocent loveliness of her body, the sweet emerald of her eyes. He knew he loved her as he would never again love anything in this universe.

He did not say anything. He could not even wait to kiss her. There was still much to be done.

The captive army of Arracher rallied suddenly, heartened by the sight of their magician with many companions fighting their foe with terrible weapons. They seized spears and swords of their dead guards and joined the fight again. The green soldiers could not endure the awful havoc of the U-blasts, and started a mad flight out of the fallen city.

By the time the pale sun set, they were scattered in all directions over the green morass, some of them many miles away. The batrachesauri and triceratop and the

sabre-tooth tigers feasted well that night. Even the wounded were infected with that panic, crawling away in their terror like slugs through the mud until they drowned or were torn to pieces by carrion-eating pterodactyles.

John Fenton saw the last of it from the steps of the battered palace. Caolte was at his side with severed chains still dangling from his wrists and the remnant of Arrachian nobles; wounded, saddened by their losses but with heads still high with courage, ready to go on. The mad mouthings of the insane Glauser reached them faintly from the chain room of the *Polaris* where the Earthians had locked him.

Fenton's arm rested lightly about Lorelaev's waist. There was a faraway look in his eyes as though he were not seeing any of it. His mind was turned upon another planet that rolled far away, serene and beautiful through the terrible crystal of space. He was remembering the Earthian way of life; Paris in the spring or New York or the gay resorts of Baffin Land under a midnight sun.

There was an ache in his throat, an unbearable nostalgia. "Now I can go home!" he said.

His words brought a swift fear to Lorelaev's face. "You would leave me?" she asked, with a child-like despair, "You want to go away?" One hand pressed over her heart in an unconscious gesture as though to still some pain there.

He looked down at her with a grin. "Leave you!" he said. "What a chance! I'll never let you out of my sight again. You're coming with me."

He saw the light come back into her eyes; a quick eager smile. "I will go too!" she cried.

In the next instant she was in his arms. "I love you too," she said. "Even at the first, even when I was afraid, I loved you."

He kissed her, feeling the warm fragrance of her lips yielding, the swift beat of her heart against him. In the end she broke away with a breathless little laugh. "Now I know you're a magician Jon-Fenton," she said. "Only magic could make a girl feel like this!"

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BUSHWACK FANGS

By JOHN G. PEARSON

It was Deputy Jim Cord's job to kill the two-legged rattler who was poisoning Desperation Basin.

"DEAD MAN!" Young Jimmy Cord, deputy sheriff, called the two words over his shoulder, rose from the front step of the sheriff's office, and strode hurriedly down the street.

At the other end of town, two broncs came slowly into Sun Dog. The rider on the first mount led another behind him, upon which the body of a man was tied. He stopped the broncs and dismounted in front of a shack that had "Doctor Martin" over the door.

Jimmy Cord came up as the other commenced unlashng the body from the bronc's back. The dead man's face was bloated and discolored horribly. Cord's eyes widened as he looked.

"My Lord," he breathed softly. "It's Bill Jammison, ain't it?"

The other nodded and Cord stepped forward to help in unlashng the body. Sheriff Starr, a big, rangy man, a badge shining on his vest front, pushed through the gathering crowd.

"What's this?" he asked Cord.

"Jammison," Cord said, "Akins brought him in. Been bit by a rattlesnake, looks like."

Bub Akins nodded, wrinkled his lean face into a distasteful frown.

A half dozen men followed Cord, Sheriff Starr, and Bub Akins as they carried the dead Jammison into the Doc's office. One of them, tall, lean, dressed in whipcord riding breeches, flat heeled riding boots, and cream-colored Stetson, seemed out of place. His pale blue eyes, as he pushed forward, peered queerly out from under his bushy, black brows. And the jet black of his hair contrasted oddly to the pale of his eyes and the heavy lines in his face.

"Maybe," he suggested softly, as the doctor rose from his examination, "maybe he got excited when the snake bit him,

and didn't think either to kill it or to tie anything around his arm."

DOC MARTIN shook his head. "I think I have it," he said. "Jammison has an abrasion on the back of his head that shows he was hit hard enough to knock him unconscious. Maybe when he got off his horse to get something from the ground, the snake bit him. Then his bronc jerked him back and he hit his head on a rock. I think that's as good a solution as you'll find, Mister Lombardo."

Someone laughed softly. "Yeah," he said in an undertone. "Or mebbly one of his three sidekicks stuck a snake in his pocket."

Slowly Lombardo turned, fixed the speaker with his pale eyes. Then he turned to Sheriff Starr.

"What does he mean?" he asked.

Starr frowned at the crowd. "Hump," he grunted. "Nothin'. Jammison's got three pardners. About ten years ago they come here an' bought four ranches. Then they had wills made so that if one of 'em died the property goes to the one or ones that's left." He shook his head. "There's nothin' to it," he added, "such things oughtn't to be said aloud."

Lombardo exhaled his breath.

"Well," he sighed, "stranger things than that have happened. You never can tell."

Blankly, Starr watched Lombardo saunter out the door. Then he turned to Cord.

"HMMMM," he voiced, ironically.

Cord smiled, watched the door through which Lombardo had gone.

"Well," he finally said, "he's right, at that. Yuh never can tell."

Starr took Cord's arm, led him from the office. Up the street, they climbed the steps to the sheriff's office.



"It don't jibe," Cord said. "I can't swallow the idea o' Jammison bein' bit with a snake—accidental."

Starr snorted. "Accidental," he said. "I can't see how anybody could git bit any other way."

Lombardo, on a big black mare, rode past as Cord and Starr entered the office door. His pale eyes watched them, and he smiled queerly at their back as they entered. At the door, Cord turned. He watched Lombardo ride down the street. Frowning, he muttered to himself.

"Twelve years," he muttered. "Twelve years since I seen a pair of eyes like yores. I wonder could I be right."

SPURS clinking in unison as they stomped heavily on the board steps and across the porch, eyes glinting angrily, three men entered the door of the sheriff's office. Boring Starr and Cord with an icy stare, they ranged themselves to one side of the door. One, the tallest, lean and dark faced, raised a clenched fist and thumped himself gently on the chest.

"Me," he said gratingly. "I'm Jessell, Jake Jessell." He flicked a thumb toward the two beside him. "Him," he said, pointing to the one nearest himself. "That's Dirk Dakin. The other's Williams. We're pardners o' Jammison's. We just got in town an' heard o' Bill bein' stung with a diamond-back. An' we heard o' yore bright cracks about mebbly one o' us was somehow connected with it."

Jessell teetered on his scarred boot heels. His steel-gray eyes hardened in his dark-lined face.

"An' law or no law," he went on harshly, "we've come to tell yuh you're both cockeyed liars. An' if there's any more talk like that, there'll be more than talk. There'll be shootin'. *Sabe* that?"

Eyes squinted. Starr smiled faintly. Cord let his own gray eyes travel the length of Jessell's lank frame. He switched his gaze to the stocky, hard faced, cold eyed Dakin, with his lips turned down sneeringly. Calculatingly, he looked at the slender-framed Williams. Then slowly, he took his boots from the table top. On his feet, lips tight, eyes lidded, he reached slowly up

and unpinned his deputy's badge from his shirt front.

"All right," he said coldly. "Now listen to *me* warble. You four jaspers come to Desperation County. You buy up some good ranches. You hole up like four hermits. An' when you do come to town yuh act like we all got the plague. Yuhall make crazy wills, an' now one o' yuh passes in his checks accidental, mebbly an' mebbly not. But me nor nobody else pays no attention to it till yuh get all wild-eyed about it."

Cord swayed on the balls of his feet. "Now," he went on, voice soft, "since there's so much shootin' talk, mebbly the shoe fits. Since yuh made yore brag I'll give yuh yore chance. I think one of yuh *did* work a ranikaboo on Jammison. My badge is off. I'm not a deputy now. Go ahead. Do your fancy gun slingin'!"

Jessell's face went white. Dakin, right hand raising slowly, pulled nervously at the gray neckerchief about his swelling throat. Starr, breathing heavily, stepped between Cord and the other three. His back toward Cord, he raised his left hand in a peaceful gesture.

"Ca'm down," Starr said softly, "ca'm down. Nobody said a dam' word about you gents. Cord told it all. Your own selves is the only ones that's gettin' excited. Yuh better turn yore backs on trouble an' get outa here."

"Let the gun slingin' hermits show their stuff," Cord shot tauntingly.

"You shut up, Cord," Starr advised.

He pushed gently on Jessell's shoulder. Dakin turned. Williams shrugged and started out.

"An ax that flies off the handle," Starr advised the three as he urged them to the street, "usually lands in a mud puddle an' gets all smeared up."

"Or lands on somebody's head an' raises a bump," Jessell snapped back hotly from the street.

Cursing exasperatedly, Starr slammed the door.

"Of all the fools," he railed at Cord. "What's the idea of pickin' gun fights with our citizens?"

Cord smiled thinly. Eyes on his vest front he slowly and painstakingly repinned the badge.

"We didn't have a fight," he asked, "did we?"

"It wasn't yore fault yuh didn't."

"Well, just the same," Cord stated flatly, "a gent that makes a brag as big as this Jessell fella, an' then don't make it good, is just about the caliber to work a underhand stunt of some kind. And I know dam' well that Bill Jammison didn't get bit accidental with a rattlesnake!"

Starr leaned forward. "You know?"

Cord nodded. "I know," he said flatly. "I know that there were *two* bumps on Jammison's head, one on each side. If he got bumped by a rock, then somebody turned him over after he hit the first time, an' dropped the other side of his head on a rock. Somebody *hit* Jammison twice."

Frowning, Starr stared hard at Cord.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said.

ON the trail out of Desperation, riding lax, Jimmy Cord suddenly whirled his bronc. Leaning forward in the saddle, he sank spurs into the bronc's sides. Like a catapult, the bronc leaped forward. Three vicious rifle cracks followed Cord as he urged the mount toward a rock shelter at the side of the draw. Cord flinched as lead burned his hide. Sliding his bronc to a halt, Cord leaped to the rock shelter, slugs zipping past his head as he dove to shelter.

Behind the granite slab, Cord leaned forward. He tried to reach the rifle under the skirt of his saddle.

"Smack!"

Searing his bronc's rump on the way, a bullet smacked the rock.

The pony reared, galloped erratically away. Cord cursed feelingly, and got sand in his eyes as he peered from the other side of his shelter.

He threw a futile shot at the glitter of a rifle barrel at the top of the rise.

"Dang yore bushwhackin' hide," he muttered to himself. "I'll always be glad that the sun shines on gun barrels. If I hadn't spotted that in the first place, I'd be coyote bait right now."

Jim Cord was cornered. But the bushwhacker made no advance. Cord got three holes in his hat, rock splinters in his face. Shaking his fist in desperation

in the direction of his assailant, he sat wearily on the sand behind the rock and waited. Then his eyes widened as he looked to his left. Down on his belly, he started inching stealthily toward a line of mesquite running to the edge of a wash. Inch by inch, hugging the earth, he finally made it. Sighing gratefully, he sank to the safety of the wash. He made his way along it. At its end he rose to his feet, gun in hand. His eyes swept the rear of the rise behind which the bushwhacker had hidden.

Now it was bare. Eyes flitting to the hills to the east, Cord spotted a moving speck in the distance. A horseman, moving fast. Cord cursed.

"Damnation," he said. "While I'm gettin' here, he's gettin' away." He shrugged.

Starting back toward his bronc, at the middle of the fall behind the rise, he stopped again. Eyes hardening, he stared at a form laying on the ground. Sprawled in the middle of the trail it was. The legs moved feebly, but with twitching motions. Cursing softly, Cord sprang forward, turned the face upward. It was Williams, one of the men who had called on Cord in the sheriff's office, after the death of Jammison. One of the men who had a will made in favor of his pardners.

WILLIAMS' breath had stopped. His eyes were glazing. His skin, discolored and dark, was bloating horribly. And the skin of his swollen forearm showed the three distinct punctures of the fangs of a rattlesnake.

Cord looked about him. This was unbelievable. What was taking place on Desperation range?

Then he smiled thinly. There it was. A snake. Dead. This one, the killer was making more realistic. For Cord was now sure that whoever had stopped him on the trail with rifle fire was responsible for these two deaths.

Who was it? Was it Dakin, the stocky, red-faced pardner of the dead man? Or was it Jessell, the hard-faced, the bluffer who had threatened Cord in the sheriff's office?

Cord stepped to the side of the snake, dead in the trail. Its head was smashed.

It had been shot. Cord stepped back again and smiled jaggedly as he saw the gun apparently fallen from the hand of the dead man. The gun had been fired.

Stepping back to the dead snake, Cord stirred the reptile with the end of his pistol barrel. Under it, flattened against a rock, was a rounded piece of lead. It adhered to the skin of the snake and Cord picked it away with his gun sight. Holding the piece of lead in his hand, he squinted thoughtfully at it.

"A little mite," he mused, and glanced at the huge .45 on the hip of the dead man.

Certain in his mind that someone connected with the four mystery men of Desperation County was instrumental in these horrible killings, young Cord started after his bronc afoot.

Two now, of these four were alive—Dakin and Jessell. Was it one of them? Or was it someone, the memory of whom haunted Cord's mind? Someone with jet black hair, pale blue eyes? Cord couldn't place that jasper.

Puzzled, wondering, Cord caught his bronc. Why did that haunting memory persist? Could the black-eyed Lombardo be connected with the four—two of whom now were dead? Surely not.

JIMMY CORD rode into Sun Dog. Up in front of Doc Martin's he stopped his bronc with its bloated burden. A crowd commenced to gather. Watching the men who came to see, Cord heard Sheriff Starr instruct two men to carry the dead Williams into Doc Martin's office. Then he stiffened. There they were. Dakin and Jessell. What did they know?

Cold eyed, Cord watched them swing down the street, stalking stiff legged, guns slapping their thighs. They looked hard. Looked like jaspers who would murder a pal. But how could they kill each other off with rattlesnake bite? It puzzled Cord.

Dakin and Jessell pushed forward through the crowd. One look at the bloated form of Williams and they both cursed feelingly. Jessell turned, looked hard at Dakin.

"What the hell, Dirk?" he asked. There was a tinge of suspicion in his eyes.

"Now two men own four ranches," spoke up someone in back of the crowd.

Jessell, like a slim bodied snake, stuck his head forward. Dakin drew his lips down at the corners. The crowd hushed. Sheriff Starr pushed his way through. Jessell's lean fingered hand caressed his gun butt.

"Who said that?" he asked softly, while his eyes flayed the crowd.

No answer.

"That'll be enough o' that," said Starr, looking first at Jessell and Dakin, then at the crowd.

Doc Martin lit a lamp in the office room. Jessell's face, in the yellow light, looked satanic.

"Yeah?" he asked Starr.

"Yeah," Starr said flatly.

Pushing through the crowd at the office entrance, his dark lined face passive, but with a light back in the depths of his pale blue eyes, Lombardo sauntered into the room.

In surprise, he raised his bushy eyebrows as he looked at Williams on the cot.

"Another one?" he asked.

Somebody snickered back in the crowd again. Lombardo smiled queerly as he looked at Jessell and Dakin.

"Too bad," he purred, "isn't it?" There was no sympathy in his tone. There was mockery in it.

His eyes fastened on Lombardo, Dakin nodded. Nobody said anything. Both Dakin and Jessell stared at the lights in Lombardo's pale eyes. Dakin suddenly gasped. His gunhand streaked backward.

"Jessell," he cried, high voiced. "That's—"

Dakin's gun was clearing leather. A puff of smoke spurted through the cloth over Lombardo's coat pocket. A sharp report cut Dakin's words short. Sticky red pulsing from its center, a neat, blue rimmed hole spotted itself in Dakin's forehead. Gasping, blood running down over his twisted face, he fell heavily forward.

Sheriff Starr leaped forward, grasped Jessell's arms. The wiry man struggled, cursed feelingly.

"Lemme go," he yelled, "he killed Dakin."

Still smiling coldly, right hand in his

coat pocket, Lombardo leaned slightly toward Jessell.

"Uh-huh," he breathed through slightly parted lips. "I killed Dakin—if that's his name—but Dakin was trying to kill me. Do you know what for?"

Flickering in Lombardo's eyes, the tiny lights seemed to dance—eagerly.

"Do *you* know?" he asked Jessell again. There seemed to be a dare in his voice.

Jessell sighed, relaxed. Searchingly, he looked at Lombardo. His eyes were puzzled.

"No," he said finally. "I'll be damned if I know why. But I guess you're right. He was tryin' to gun yuh."

Starr shrugged. "Yo're in the clear," he told Lombardo. He waved his arms, shooed the crowd away. "Git outa here," he said. "Clear out, everybody."

UNSPEAKING, watching the sauntering Lombardo, the swaggering Jessell, and the others leave the room, Cord rubbed his hand over his vest pocket.

"Doc," he said, as the last of them left, "I'm goin' down street a minute. Dig the slug outa Dakin, will yuh. I want it right now."

It was dark when Cord strode outside. Down the street he entered a door over which hung a sign that read, "Assayist."

At the far side of the room a young fellow worked at a set of weighing scales. Cord took a flattened piece of lead from his pocket, tossed it on the table beside the scales.

"Lo, Bill," he said. "Weigh that for me will yuh? I'd like to know what caliber it is."

The assayist scraped his scales clear. Tossing the flattened lead on the brass plate he adjusted the weight.

"One hundred and twenty-nine grains," he said.

"Now this one," Cord said, tossing another leaden hunk on the table.

The assayist picked it up, tossed it on the scales.

"Same as the other," he said. "One twenty-nine. Forty-one derringer bullets. They come out of a man?"

"Two snakes, I think," said Cord. "Thanks, Bill."

He turned and went out. Up the street he saw Starr entering the lighted door of the sheriff's office. Cord went in behind him. Brow corrugated, he seated himself, gazed unseeingly at the wall.

"Lombardo," he mused to Starr. "He slings a wicked pocket gun—for a dude."

Starr nodded. "Plumb slick," he said.

Cord watched the wall some more. "The same kinda gun that killed Dakin killed the snake that was layin' shot in front o' Williams."

Starr looked closely at Cord. "Most everybody," he said, "carries .45's."

".45's weigh two hundred an' fifty-five grain," said Cord, "an' these weigh a hundred and twenty-nine. Bill Steever weighed 'em. .41's."

Starr squinted, rose from his chair. "Mebby I got a job to do," he said.

Cord got up. "Me," he said. "I got a job to do, Starr. I think it dates back a long time."

Starr stopped, watched Cord step to the door. "Well," he sighed, "mine ain't so rushin'. Mebby it kin wait."

"Mine can't," Cord said. "I think it's twelve years old."

WHAT could be Lombardo's motive? Cord mused as he rode out of Sun Dog in the pale moonlight. How did he work his vicious kills? And why? He'd see Lombardo, throw it in his face, this fact that the same gun killed the snake and Williams. Maybe then that haunting memory would come back to Cord. That memory that went back twelve years when a bank robbery happened in Parson's Bluff.

Cord saw it anew. The five men riding down the street. They entered the bank. They came out again, guns blazing, shooting their way through the crowd that gathered. Then the last one in the line turning—turning deliberately, laughing cruelly, firing backward at old man Cord, Jimmy's father, cashier of the bank. That shot killed old man Cord. A killing that was wanton, unnecessary, cruel. And then, twelve years ago, Jimmy Cord had left Parson's Bluff. Left it with hate in his heart for a yellow-haired, snaggle-toothed, pale-eyed killer who shot and killed so wantonly.

Lombardo's pale eyes—they haunted Jimmy Cord. Maybe . . .

Mounting a rise, Cord looked down on the single yellow light glowing in Lombardo's foothills home. Dismounting, he tied his bronc to a manzanita clump well away from the cabin. He grinned wryly as he did it. No more, if he could help it, would Cord be horseless with Lombardo about, if, in reality, it had been Lombardo who had bushwhacked him on the trail.

Creeping silently to the window, he peered inside. He saw no one, though the entire room was not visible from the window. Cautiously, he stepped to the door, pushed gently on it. Squeaking slightly, it eased open. Cord, gun in hand, stepped inside. The room seemed bare. He took another step. Where was Lombardo?

"Up high, tin star!" And a cold, hard, round something was pressed against Cord's neck.

From behind the door, his derringer in his hand, Jessell beside him, Lombardo stepped. He grinned mockingly at Cord.

"From the window," he said, while his pale eyes glowed. "I saw you get off your bronc."

Jessell eyed Lombardo with fear in his eyes. Lombardo smiled mockingly at Jessell, too. Cord noticed that the gun was missing from Jessell's holster. Lombardo peered more steadily at Cord. His eyes burned in the depths of the pale blue with a strange fire.

Cord was cold as he stared at Lombardo. Pale eyes—a dead man in front of a bank. Cord's lips commenced to turn down at the corners.

Lombardo waved Jessell farther away with his left hand. Then Lombardo came closer to Cord. He reached out, plucked the young deputy's gun from its holster. Smiling cruelly, he backed toward the wall, dropped the gun out an open window at the far side of the room. Cord heard it clatter on the stones as it bounded down a cliff, upon the edge of which Lombardo's cabin sat.

"With Mister Jessell's," Lombardo said, his voice rich with mockery. "Neither of you will ever need a gun again."

Then suddenly, Lombardo's eyes flamed.

His short-barreled derringer steadied. Leaning forward, his slender body tensed.

"Turn around!" he snapped to Cord.

COLD, wondering if a .41 would slap him in the back, Cord turned slowly, hands still raised. Lombardo stepped forward. His left hand shot into his coat pocket. His hand came out with a leather bound blackjack in it—raised over Cord's head. *Down!*

Cord reeled. Lights danced crazily in front of his eyes. Like a swaying tree, he fell forward on his face.

A voice—Lombardo's voice—was Cord's next realization. He was sick. His head spun. And Lombardo's voice came dimly, sounded far away and buzzingly to Cord.

"So that, Jessell, is that," the voice of Lombardo said, with a world of mockery in it. "You, and Dakin and Williams and Jammison run away and leave me when my bronc goes lame after the bank stickup at Parson's Bluff twelve years ago. You take all the money with you. You cheated—like snakes. For a long time I hunted you. From Mexico to Colorado, Jessell, I was on your trail. Then, finally, I heard of you here. I knew you'd spot me, so I dyed my hair. I dyed my eyebrows. I had my snaggle teeth pulled and got a set of false ones. A lot of trouble? No, no, Jessell. Not much. Because I heard of the wills you all had made. I could kill all but one of you, and the last one would have *all* the money, part of which was mine."

Cord heard steps pacing back and forth across the room. There was no spur clink. He assumed it was Lombardo. But he couldn't open his heavy eyes to see. The pacing ceased, and the voice went on and on again—droning.

"And now it's done. They're all dead but you, and I have your bill of sale for the ranch. I have your letter saying that you're afraid there's a plot to kill off all of you, since the mysterious deaths of your pardners, and that you're leaving the country, selling out to me. And how easy it all was, Jessell. A tap on the head and Jammison went down. Three jabs with the hypodermic syringe and he had enough rattlesnake poison in his system to kill an army mule. His heart pumped it through him while he was

unconscious. No hope. No clue. A rattlesnake bit him. That's all."

Cord heard a chuckle.

"But I'm sorry I had to shoot Dakin. Since I've been using this little hypodermic, Jessell, I've come to like it. I like to see them squirm and twitch and swell. It's fine. It's what you all deserve. It's what you'll get. You and Mister Cord. I'll fix him after I get back from 'biting' you."

Cord's hearing dimmed. Trying, trying his system to kill any army mule. His heart pumped it through him while he was unconscious. No hope. No clue.

CORD opened his eyes. His head still buzzed. He swayed as he rose to his feet and looked about the empty room. Jessell and Lombardo were gone. Cord's hand brushed his empty holster. He staggered toward the door. Two shots, faint, sounding like the fire of a small calibered gun, came to him. Was Lombardo shooting Jessell, or killing another snake to plant as evidence to cover his own crime?

Out into the pale, moonlit night Cord staggered. He gazed about with blurred vision. There was no one in sight. Climbing the rise, he found his bronc gone from behind the manzanita clump. Lombardo again! Faint, far away, coming from a distance, a call, reached Cord. Still dazed, he staggered forward, dimly conscious of the calls coming to his ears.

Then he stopped again. The calls were nearer. Cord turned off the trail, stopped again as he saw a form in the sand ahead of him. Cautiously, he stepped near. It was Jessell. And his arm and side were swollen, discolored. His breath came gaspingly through his wide open mouth. But his eyes were closed. He was unconscious from a blow, undoubtedly from Lombardo's blackjack. Cord gritted his teeth.

Even as he gazed in horror at the prone form of Jessell, the dark man twitched suddenly. His breath stopped. The poison had reached his heart.

But the calls Cord heard, they still persisted. They came from father off the trail. Still giddy, Cord made his way toward them. Then he stopped again. The yells were just in front of

him. They came from a deep wash that broke the sandy terrain into a deep gash. Cord peered over the edge of the gully. Aghast, he drew back.

Upon a tiny shelf, half way up the side of the wash, Lombardo was perched. In the silver light, his pale eyes glowed with a wild fear. His mouth, slack, hanging open, dripped slobbers. He clutched at the grass roots above his insecure seat, in a grip of desperation. While below him, their tails buzzing angrily, five diamond-backed rattlers watched their prey with beady eyes.

"I'm bit! I'm bit," shrieked Lombardo, as he sighted Cord's head against the sky. "Save me. Pull me out. I'll die! Get a rope quick!" Hand shaking with fear, Lombardo raised his left hand and gazed at it with horror. It was swollen.

"Hurry," he gasped frenziedly. "I'm bit twice. I fell in here. Get a rope!"

The wild pounding of blood in Cord's brain subsided.

"My rope's on my saddle. You chased my bronc away. I can't get a rope, Lombardo."

Lombardo's gasps were shrill, awful. He cried whimperingly.

"A gun," he called suddenly. "Shoot. shoot *me*. I—I can't die this way. Shoot me!"

Cord shook his head again. There was a cold fire in his eyes now.

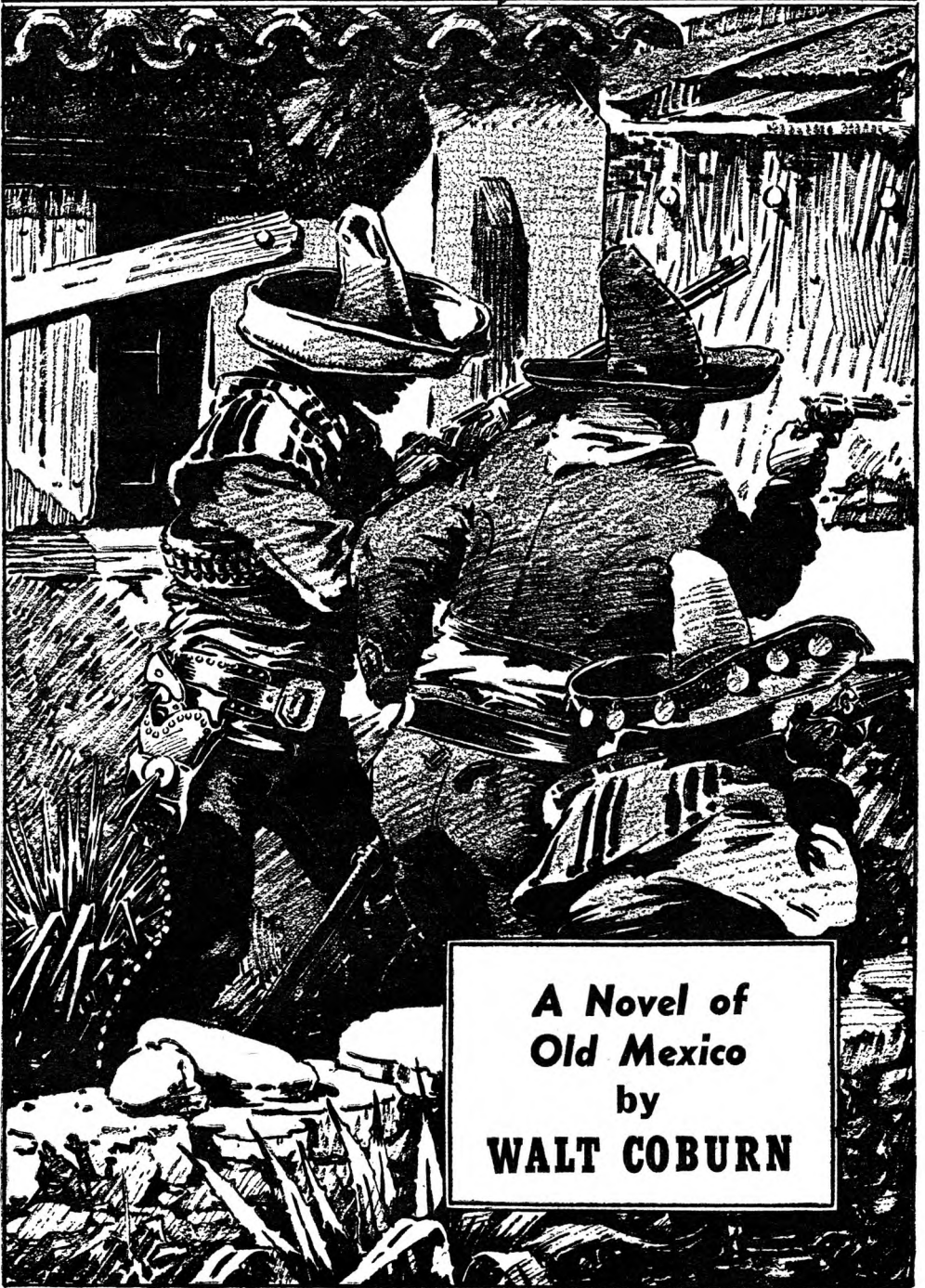
"My gun," he said. "You threw it out the window. It went over the cliff. I can't do any shootin'."

Like a man insane, Lombardo babbled. His voice rose to a shriek, then sank to muttered gibberings. Cord started away. His shoulders straightened. The hole was deep. There was no way to get Lombardo out. He had no gun. Cord didn't stagger as he strode toward Sun Dog. His lips smiled queerly as Lombardo's shrieks came more and more faintly.

Twelve years ago, didn't Lombardo kill Jimmy Cord's father in Parson's Bluff? Didn't he turn around in his saddle and shoot an unarmed man unnecessarily? And didn't he tell Jessell that he *liked* this snake poison stuff? Didn't he say he liked to see 'em squirm? Well, wasn't Lombardo gettin' what he liked? A gent shouldn't kick about that, should he?



THE GUN-BRAND GRINGO



*A Novel of
Old Mexico*
by
WALT COBURN



There, a sword in his left hand, a flaming pistol in his right, stood Don Riley Rodriguez.

Somewhere in San Angelo was buried treasure, and the gun-brand gringo known as Senor Satan. But neither gold nor man-hunt drew lawman Jim Driscoll into the devil's game that brewed there beyond the parched Sangre de Cristo.

“GOLD?” cackled the crazy hermit of the Sangre de Cristo, pointing with a skinny finger toward the notched skyline beyond the strip of desert. “Aye, gold a-plenty there.

“But I tell you, young feller, as I’ve told other fools that’s stopped here at my cabin, it’s gold that belongs to the dead. There’s blood on that buried gold, and the way to it is marked by the white bones of fools that’s gone across that desert in the hopes of fetchin’ it back.

“Aye, I’ve warned ’em. But they laugh in my face and tell me I’m cracked.

Which I am, but so would you be if you’d bin where I bin and back. To hell and back; no less.”

“You’ve bin across the desert and back, old man?” asked Jim Driscoll, cautiously leading up to that dread question he feared to ask because he already guessed the answer that would come from this cackling, crazy-brained old hermit.

“Aye across ’er and back. Leavin’ the best part of me there where the damn’ gold shines in the sun till it fair blinds a man. Leavin’ my strength and my guts and my brain there where the skeleton

hands of dead men are filled with raw gold. Fools! Fools!

"Man! Wasn't I one of 'em? Straight and strong and handsome as yourself, lad. With a taste for adventure and the gold fever a-drivin' me on. Laughin' at God, darin' the devil. Aye, and a-crawlin' back on my hands and knees, with a broken body and a cracked mind and my tongue swollen and black from thirst."

The voice of the old hermit broke into a thin wail, died into silence. He stood there in front of his cabin, staring with unwinking, glittering eyes across the miles of waterless wasteland that separated the Sangre de Cristo peaks from the San Angelo Mountains.

Jim Driscoll watched the white bearded, white maned, ragged old wreck of a man. In spite of the twisted spine and the bent legs, there was a terrible sort of strength in that broken body. A crazy, desperate sort of strength. His gnarled hands were strong as steel claws; and those long, sinewy arms—Jim Driscoll had seen them lift great rocks in the building of a wall around his hut that was made of granite boulders.

For half an hour the hermit stood there, staring with terrible eyes across the desert, which was shadowed now in the coming dusk. What horrible visions the old man was conjuring up, only his cracked mind could know.

"You spoke of other men who have tried to cross the desert." Jim Driscoll then gave voice to that dread question that he had been waiting long hours to ask, "Has there been any man in the past six months who set out for the San Angelo Mountains?"

"Aye, one man. He's dead."

"Dead? How do you know, old man?"

"They're all dead, all the fools who would not listen to me. No man can live out there. Nothing is alive there."

Now he whirled, eyes glittering strangely, staring with maniac suspicion at the younger man.

"Why do you ask about a man who passed this way? What was that man to you?"

For a long moment, Jim Driscoll thought the twisted, crouching old hermit was going to leap on him. One of those gnarled, black-nailed hands had slid inside

the greasy flannel shirt and Jim saw the tip of a wooden handle of a butcher knife. Then the knife slid back into its makeshift scabbard under the shirt. And the hermit's bearded lips twisted into a cackling laugh.

"Skeered yuh, did I? Aye." He tapped his forehead with a grimy forefinger. "Cracked. Queer notions git into my head. And if you'd bin into hell and back, you'd git notions, too. . . . There's them as thinks I've got gold cached here. There's some as 'ud kill fer gold."

JIM DRISCOLL'S hand came away from his six-shooter. He wondered if it wasn't the big Colt .45 that had checked the hermit's impulse to use the butcher knife. What a sweet companion this old devil would be in case a man was forced to stay over night. And why had he so quickly flared into a killing mood at Jim's question?

Behind the hermit's erratic actions lay a shrewdness that made Jim Driscoll do some thinking. How much of this babbling about dead men's gold was real? How much was clever acting?

Back in Jim's mind was the warning given him by a Mexican goat herder back across the slopes of the Sangre de Cristo: "Beware, señor, of that old hombre. He alone guards the secret of the Sangre de Cristo. Never turn your back to him."

No amount of money would tempt a Mexican or Indian to cross over the divide to the southern slope of the mountains where the hermit dwelt alone. Yet some of those Mexicans were brave men and the Yaquis who lived in the hills were said to be fierce warriors, unafraid of death. And what was the secret of the Sangre de Cristo? Gold? Hidden treasure?

In the early morning, before the heat waves distorted vision, a man could stand on this peak where the hermit dwelt and without binoculars see the white sand of the beach where the blue sea lapped. And musty tradition had it that this cove had, in days gone by, sheltered the booty laden pirate ships that cruised the southern seas.

Later it had been used by whalers. Sailorfolk claimed that it was here that the old whales came to die. The beach, for two miles, was covered with the huge

bleached bones of whales. Back behind the dunes was water fit to drink.

And down there in Mexico were any number of strange tales of buried treasure. In around the little seaport towns crafty rascals netted a living from the fake maps they sold to adventurers lured there by yarns dealing with pirate gold. More than a few of those unfortunate adventurers had died in their vain search. Others had managed to get back to the villages, forever cured of treasure hunting.

But always there were some who would come to be taken in by the map makers. For until the end of time that bait of buried treasure will lure men into danger and hardships and more than sometimes death.

BUT it was no pirate gold that took Jim Driscoll across mountains and desert to the Sangre de Cristo. He wondered how much this old hermit suspected, how much he guessed at the presence of a man in cowpuncher garb, riding a stout horse and leading a second horse with a light pack of grub. No cattle grazed on the south slope of the mountains, where there was little water and scant feed. Nothing to tempt the cowpuncher.

What decent excuse could a cowboy give for being here, for wanting to cross that strip of desert to the San Angelo Mountains beyond? The San Angelos, where only a handful of Indians and Mexicans and a scattering of white skinned renegades hid out between raids.

As the crow flies, the San Angelo Mountains were about two hundred miles below the International border between the United States and Mexico. There was a circuitous trail there that followed around the end of the Sangre de Cristo peaks and avoided the desert save for a fifteen mile strip easily crossed on a stout horse. It lengthened the distance by perhaps seventy-five miles, but its way was not barren and there were water holes within an easy day's ride of one another.

Now and then the Mexican rebel troops, hard pressed by the Federals, took that trail to the San Angelo Mountains. They could hide there or escape by boat to a safer port. For this Mexico in the years following the war was a

place of unrest, and numerous petty uprisings.

The port of San Angelo, thirty miles down coast from the Whalebone Cove of pirate legend, was notorious as a tough town. Renegades of all description lived there—Mexican bandits, American smugglers and outlaws, aliens deported from the United States seeking to return via the smuggling route, handlers of opium and other drugs bartering there with the smuggling gangs.

There were ugly ruffian hangouts, opium dives, squalid saloons. Blatant music, stabbings, plots and counter plots. Burros and parakeets and fleas and white dust. Naked children and razor-backed hogs. Gold money changing hands. Gay serapes and women all in black. Wrinkled old men sitting in the shade, waiting to die.

Life was priced cheaply there. Men defied the laws of nations and sneered at God's commandments. Such was the port of San Angelo, just below the old Whalebone Cove.

And between the San Angelo Mountains and the Sangre de Cristo peaks there stretched that grim desert with its heat and thirst and bleached skeletons, its hundred and one weird tales of buried gold and violence. There the terrible sandstorms buried and uncovered both men and the gold they sought. The wind dug pits and built mountains of sand, sometimes laying bare the hidden secrets of its grim vastness.

FEW men had ever found out the treasures so ruthlessly guarded by the desert. The Mexicans and Yaquis told vague tales of strange happenings—murders, robberies. And it was their belief that the old hermit of the Sangre de Cristo held the secret of the hills and desert in his cracked brain.

"What secret?" Jim Driscoll had asked many times as his trail led southward toward the Sangre de Cristo? "What secret does the old man hide?"

"*Quien sabe, señor?* Who knows? It is the secret that concerns the men who started across the desert to find gold. They never return. Nor do they ever get to the port of San Angelo. They die."

"It is a long journey," Jim Driscoll

would say. "The heat is terrible. There is no water. They die of thirst. There is no secret to that."

"You do not understand, señor. It is not always the thirst and heat that causes them to die."

"What, then, kills them?" Jim Driscoll had inquired, a little impatient with these superstitious peons.

"*Dios* knows, señor. Ask no more questions. You will bring down the curse of the Sangre de Cristo upon us. It is bad luck to speak of such things. We know of men who spoke too loosely. Where are those men now? They are dead, señor.

"Seek your knowledge at the rock hut of the hermit of the Sangre de Cristo. There you may learn that which you seek to know. But, *por Dios*, it will mean your death. Turn back from your journey before it is too late."

"I am not searching for gold, hombres. I seek a man. A tall, blond-haired man with a scar across his forehead. He came this way within the past six months. You say he passed along this trail. He went on toward the Sangre de Cristo. I am not after gold, *amigos*. I seek a man."

"That man must be a great friend or a bitter enemy, señor, that you would attempt to follow him to the Sangre de Cristo."

"A great friend, *si*, señores. Perhaps a bitter enemy. That is something that I shall be able to learn when I find the man. It is that answer to the question in my heart that I hope to learn from that man."

"That man went on, señor, to the Sangre de Cristo. By now, he will be dead. Turn back, señor, before it is too late. That which you wish to know lies hidden in the same grave that holds that man."

"He would be a hard man to kill," Jim Driscoll had persisted. "He is big and strong and can crack a man's bones with his two hands. He travels well armed and well mounted. He fears nothing on earth or in hell. Something tells me that he is alive."

"He is dead, señor." The Mexicans spoke with a discouraging finality. "This man who is your friend or your enemy

is dead. Turn back, señor, in the name of God."

But Jim Driscoll was not of the breed that turns back. He had kept on. On across the slopes of the Sangre de Cristo peaks and on to the stone cabin of the old hermit.

NOW the hermit of the Sangre de Cristo leered crazily at Jim Driscoll and ran his long, black-nailed fingers through his tangled mat of greasy white beard.

"The man you ask about is dead. As dead as you'll be, young fool, if you pick up his trail."

"You can't scare me, old man, with your crazy tales. And you can't make me think that the man I am hunting is dead. I'm starting across the desert now. It'll be cool all night. My horses are stout. I've cut down my grub supply and loaded on enough cans of water to take me and my horses across your desert. There'll be a full moon and I've got my bearings before I start.

"I've got a six-gun and a carbine and plenty of shells. And before I set out, I'll slip you this hunk of news. I'll kill any man that skylights himself. That goes for you and it goes for your damned friends. You're not half as loco as you let on. Any more than I'm the drifting cowpuncher that I might seem to the peons. I reckon you git my drift."

The hermit's face twisted with fury. Again his hand slid inside the bosom of the greasy blue flannel shirt.

"Better not try it, old man. Because it wouldn't bother my conscience a bit to kill you."

Jim Driscoll's six-shooter was in his hand now. And his strong white teeth showed in a grin that held no humor.

"Ye'll die for this, ye fool!" screamed the old hermit in his rusty, cracked voice, "Aye, ye'll die slow and in the agonies o' hell. Staked out naked in the sun with yore tongue as black as a crow's wing, beggin' fer the water that'll be within' sight.

"Aye, by the mark o' J. Judas, ye'll die. With clear water within the sight o' yer eyes, and with gold a-shinin' there in the sun. Gold that's had its washin' in the blood o' fools that went mad and killed

one another for the yellow coins stacked there in chests. Gold, by the devil that spawned them as come there, gold enough to buy the souls o' honest men and women. Gold enough to break the back of men as tried to carry it away."

Jim Driscoll's blood chilled at the sight of this croaking old man whose eyes glittered from under bushy white brows. Half sane, half mad, with the eyes and hands of a murderer, the hermit of the Sangre de Cristo fouled the air with his cursing and raving.

Jim Driscoll listened, forcing a derisive grin. Perhaps, so he thought, if the old hermit reached the point where his maniacal anger got the better of his discretion, the old hermit would blurt out something of the black secret he guarded. But Jim Driscoll was doomed to disappointment, because with a final outburst of profane insults the old man whirled and ran crabwise on his misshapen legs, back into the stone hut.

Jim Driscoll leaped for the shelter of some rocks. And just in time, for a shower of buckshot rattled against the granite boulders. Again and again the hermit from a small porthole fashioned in the wall of the hut blazed away with a shotgun.

"Anyhow," decided Jim Driscoll, "I've got the old hellion's number, and it don't take much imagination to guess what's become of more than one of the gents that landed here."

Jim Driscoll slipped away through the boulders and brush to a little canyon where he had left his horses. It was getting dusk when he swung into the saddle and, leading his pack horse, rode down the trail and toward the first level of the desert that lay ahead of him. From up on the slope came the boom of the hermit's shotgun. The old devil was still spattering the bare rocks with buckshot.

II

JIM rode until night dropped its black shroud across the desert. Then he pulled up and unslung a pair of night glasses. For almost an hour he scanned the black slopes of the Sangre de Cristo. And finally his vigil was rewarded by

the crimson-yellow stab of a signal fire against the blackness.

"That," he told his horse, "spells what we want to know. And we know that somewhere ahead somebody is a-watchin' that signal. There, it's gone. The relay station has picked it up. And we'll be on the lap of the gods until further orders. On the lap of . . ."

Jim Driscoll broke off in his voiced musing. His ears had caught the sound of horses coming. Horses carrying riders that jabbered in the Mexican tongue. And through the jargon of peon Spanish words, there cut another voice, speaking English.

". . . and that goes, Hamlin, just as it lays. You'll double the pay or we quit. And if I say the word right now, you'll never see the States again. Get the slant?"

"You've got me over a barrel, Quick, and you know it. But don't get the idea that you're pulling something smart. Because you're not. In fact, Quick, you're putting across the dumb play I've been betting myself you'd try. What I'm getting at brother Quick, is this . . ."

The muffled crack of a gun. A man's stifled curse that ended in a moan. Then the voice of the Hamlin man.

"Just leave his damned carcass there where the buzzards can get to it, Panchito. And learn a little lesson from the passing of the late Raymond Quick. What I'm getting at, Panchito, is the simple fact that it takes a hell of a smart hombre to slip anything over on the Señor Harley Hamlin. Do you follow me, Panchito?"

"Weeth perfect pleasure, Señor Hamlin," came the low-toned, musical voice of Panchito.

"Want to say a little prayer, Panchito, over the late lamented Raymond Quick?"

"No prayer, señor. My prayers go to bless the fortunes of Panchito Gomez."

"You'll need 'em, my *amigo*, when you kick off. And ride ahead of me, my dear Panchito, not alongside. I'd love to trust you, *compadre*, but it seems that the milk of human kindness and tolerance and so on is about dried up in the good old system, if you get me. . . . I said ride ahead, you mongrel, cross bred son of . . . Then take it where it'll do you the most good, you half breed rat!"

Again that flat spat of a gun pumping

hot lead. Followed by the dull crash of a body hitting the ground. Hamlin's voice rasped into the snarl as his gun ripped apart the silence.

"And now, you dirty greaser, you'll know who's boss!"

Suddenly it was like bedlam breaking loose. Pack mules and saddle horses tearing past. Bullets crashing. Groans and curses. The rasping laugh of this Harley Hamlin as he gauged the Mexicans.

"Come and get it, you yellow bellied sons! I have enough hot lead to go around."

"**W**HETHER," grieved Jim Driscoll, gripping his Winchester, "and whatever you might be, Mr. Hamlin, you sure ain't a coward. One against a dozen. Well, here's lessening the odds by one."

With a wild cowboy yell, Jim Driscoll jumped his horse into the open. His gun threw spurts of flame as he rode up alongside the tall white man who, a six-shooter in each hand, was charging here and there among the confused Mexicans whose guns cracked with wild disorder.

Side by side, Hamlin and Jim Driscoll charged the disconcerted Mexicans.

"Many thanks, old lad," cried Hamlin. "You got here in the nick of time. Damned decent thing to do."

"Keep the change," Jim Driscoll flung back as he rode down a pair of murderous looking Mexicans who yelled for mercy.

A few minutes of fast, desperate fighting. Then Hamlin's voice, calm, deadly cold, dangerous, called to the Mexicans to lay down their guns.

Jim Driscoll had time now to size up this white man. There was that about his manner of speech that hinted of England, rather than the United States.

Jim saw a tall, finely proportioned man in worn but well-cut cavalry breeches and boots, a white shirt stained with blood at the shoulder. A high-crowned Stetson at a rakish slant on a head of close-cropped sand-colored hair. A clipped mustache that gave a dignity to the clean-cut bronzed face. Strong white teeth flashed Jim Driscoll a quick smile.

Then he went on with the brisk business of disarming the Mexicans and sending them to round up the frightened

pack mules. When this was attended to, he turned to Jim Driscoll.

"You know, old man, you probably saved my life. The name is Harley Hamlin. Yours?"

"Driscoll, Jim Driscoll."

"It is a pleasure, Jim Driscoll, to meet a gentleman of such generosity and courage. You're alone?"

"Yes. Alone."

"Traveling toward San Angelo Mountains, perhaps, or Whalebone Cove? I'm asking the impertinent question in the hope of returning the recent favor. Because, if you don't already know, it's a damned dangerous trek. Fact is, I know of no surer way of committing suicide.

"If you met the genial hermit of the Sangre de Cristo, you may have some intimation of the dangers that lie along your trail ahead. And since you've put me so in your debt it's my duty, as a former gentleman of honor, to dissuade you from your purpose."

"But I won't be dissuaded," grinned Jim Driscoll. "I'm goin' on."

"Madness, old man, sheer madness. It's a two plus two make four proposition. Cut and dried, y'understand. The beggars will snuff out your bally old light. You'll be snuffed out, Driscoll."

"Better that, Hamlin, than to be a damned coward."

"I don't quite take in the idea, of course, but this matter of a man's courage or cowardice is a bit overdrawn. It's plain suicide. There's a bit of difference, y' know, between courage and foolhardiness."

JIM DRISCOLL grinned.

"It wasn't so many minutes ago that you took a mighty long chance, yourself."

The tall Englishman shrugged his wide shoulders.

"A forced issue, Driscoll. My recent business associate, the late Raymond Quick, had arranged with his old chum Panchito Gomez to put me out of the way. I anticipated their moment for the dark deed and rather took them by surprise, y' might say. It was a sportin' proposition from the start. High stakes and winner take all. The loser's end is death.

"I should have informed you, perhaps, that the business with which I am connected is not exactly legal nor quite honorable. And among such chaps as Brother Quick and the suave but sinister Panchito, one finds but little honor.

"The result is, old man, that I'm now alone in the game, with an unsavory following of tanned-hided blighters who would slit their own grandmother's throat for the price of a jug of pulque. I don't even speak their silly language. If I weren't afraid of insulting you, Driscoll, I'd offer you a partnership in the business."

"Is it that bad, Hamlin?" grinned Jim Driscoll.

"Quite. But there's the good old tang of danger in it. And it's remunerative. Though I like to give the beastly business a sort of dignity by calling it import and export trade. Frankly speaking, I deal in gun running and whisky smuggling. Importing guns for the silly rebels, exporting liquor for the thirsty Americans.

"Disgraceful sort of thing and all that, but I'm too stupid to hold down a decent job and I can't possibly get along on the few pounds that come quarterly from home. And I chucked the only decent chance I had to marry money.

"I'm chatting quite openly, old man, what?"

There was a naive and disarming frankness about the big Britisher. And this tall hombre was not the only Yankee who found whisky-running a profitable business in those years before the repeal of Prohibition. It was no disgrace. Jim Driscoll chuckled.

"You're heading for the Sangre de Cristo peaks?" he asked Hamlin.

"Should be at the spot by daylight if these bally idiots don't mutiny. Then I'll trek back to Whalebone Cove for another supply."

"But you told me it meant sure and sudden death to cross the desert?" said Jim Driscoll.

"For you alone, yes. I pay toll to the beggars at both ends. To the odorous and untrimmed hermit of the Sangre de Cristo, and to the more frequently bathed and barbered Peter Tovitch at San Angelo port.

"I am one of the accepted backlegs, y' know. Dyed with the same stinkin' tar brush and so on. Lolling in the same mucky hog sty with the entertaining hermit, the genial Tovitch, the lately departed Raymond Quick, and a score of other blackguards of evil tastes and putrid pasts. One of their damned fraternity. A sordid mucker, Driscoll."

"IF I throw in with you, Hamlin, then I'd be able to go with you, under protection, to Whalebone Cove and Port San Angelo?"

"You'd have protection, such as it is, to be sure. But if it's gold at Whalebone or San Angelo that you're after, I'll frankly discourage you, old chap."

"I'm not after gold. I'm looking for a man."

"Ah! Jove, that complicates things. Rather. The men who dwell in these parts are not apt to extend the dear old welcome in the manner of famed Western hospitality. I can't call to mind any of the inner circle, the chosen ones of the blackleg lodge, as it were, who would appreciate guests. I'm a bit inclined to share their attitude.

"If you could do so, friend Driscoll, it might simplify matters if you'd further enlighten me as to the nature of this seeking of a chap who dwells among us derelicts tossed by the tide of decency upon the forgotten sands of Whalebone Cove. In fact, old man, if we're to become at all friendly, I'd have to insist upon something of the sort.

"I've numerous enemies here in this earthly purgatory of the damned, but there are, among the flotsam and jetsam, a few good old chaps who would go through hell to do me a favor. I feel much the same toward them. And should it so be that you are searching for one of them and your motives are not of the chummy nature, then I'll have to let you go alone along your jolly old path to oblivion. Perhaps you follow me?"

"Sure. I get your idea, Hamlin. We'll each go our own way. I'll take my chances on getting across the desert, the same as you'll take your chances getting along with these Mexicans. Ships that pass in the night, Hamlin. No hard feelin's. I'll even plant your friend Quick

and his pardner, Panchito Gomez. By the way, if it ain't askin' a personal question, is this feller Quick the same gent that once run a gamblin' house at Juarez?"

"Right." Hamlin's tone was crisp.

"And Panchito Gomez, mebbysso, is the same Panchito Gomez who once double crossed Pancho Villa?"

"Same chap, Driscoll."

"Then I'll take the great pleasure of plantin' those two hombres under the sand. And before we part, Hamlin, let me congratulate you. You beat a tough combination when you out-foxed them two *hombrecitos*."

In rapid Spanish Jim Driscoll asked the sullen Mexicans some questions. They gave reply in a sort of pathetic eagerness. One of them produced a shovel and handed it to the American. Hamlin took this all in with a sort of astounded attitude of silence.

"These chaps show you a devil of a lot of respect, Driscoll."

"I was raised among their kind, Hamlin. My daddy was an old Texas cowman. We run cattle in the old Palomas country, down in Chihuahua."

"But you don't speak at all like a cowboy."

"Ever hear of Stanford University, Hamlin? Well, till the cattle market dropped into the bog hole, I attended that university. Three years, Hamlin, and a few months in my senior year."

"I see, Driscoll."

Jim Driscoll shoved out his hand. "So long, Hamlin! Good luck. Better watch your step with these boys, because from the way I see things, they thought more of Panchito Gomez than they think of you."

Hamlin smiled grimly. He took Jim Driscoll's proffered hand. Their hands gripped, came apart.

"So long, Hamlin!" Driscoll's left hand gripped the shovel that a Mexican hand handed him.

"Good luck, Driscoll."

They parted there. Hamlin, with a gun in his hand, herding his band of sullen Mexicans. Jim Driscoll to perform the grisly burial rites.

The night separated them. The round white moon pushed its way across the star-filled sky. Ships that pass in the

night. Trails that meet and pass their opposite ways.

Jim Driscoll found the dead body of Raymond Quick, smuggler and renegade, outlawed from the country of his birth. Quick lay there in the moonlight, a bullet hole through his heart.

"SEÑOR!" called a hushed voice, "Por Dios, señor, water! I am dying."

Jim Driscoll, his six-shooter ready, followed the sound of the pain-racked voice. To find a tight-lipped, blood-stained man hidden in the mesquite brush. He bent over the dying Mexican, holding a filled canteen to the stiffening lips of Panchito Gomez, who was about to bid farewell to his life of many crimes.

"The Señor Driscoll," breathed the dying Mexican. "I remember, Tejano. I have stolen many of your cattle. Yet, when I am suffering, you share with the miserable Panchito your canteen. . . . Let me warn you against that Señor Harley Hamlin. He is a very damn' dangerous man. Almost as dangerous, my friend, as that man whose trail you follow."

"You know why I'm here, Panchito?"

"There is even now, in my pocket, money paid into my hand. The right hand that was to put a knife or a bullet in your back. Do you not remember, Señor Driscoll, that I worked for that big blue-eyed son of sin there on his Hachita Rancho. I saw him no later than last week. His spies had brought news of your coming."

"He has friends here. Harley Hamlin is, perhaps, one of them. I cannot be sure of that because Hamlin makes but few friends. More water, señor, in God's name . . . *Gracias, amigo*."

"Where is that man I am trailing?" asked Jim Driscoll. "Where will I find him?"

"At the port of San Angelo, perhaps, or Whalebone Cove. Perhaps somewhere in the peaks of the Sangre de Cristo. *Quien sabe?* He stays never longer than a day or a night in one place. He knows that death follows him close. He has made enemies, that hombre."

"I have even heard him say that he would rather have many enemies than

many friends. That there was no real friend to any man. A wicked man, that one."

"What is he doing here?" Jim Driscoll pressed his questions ruthlessly.

"He is the dictator of San Angelo. To him Peter Tovich and all the smugglers, such as Quick and Hamlin, pay money. When he sends out an order, it is obeyed. He is king here. When a man refuses to obey him that big son of sin will break him with his hands. He has cracked more than one spine. His pistols have shot down many who stood against the 'dobe wall. He is dictator, that big one."

"What name does he use down here?"

"He is called Don Diablo and Señor Satan. He claims to have been born there at Whalebone Cove. It is his boast that his father was a British pirate and slave dealer who sailed the Mexican waters. That his mother was a woman of title in Spain whom that pirate captured and forced into marriage. That he was born at Whalebone Cove when the pirates came ashore to bury their gold. He knows the sea well, that Don Diablo.

"If ever you live to see Whalebone Cove you will find there a grave marked by a beautiful monument of Italian marble. Don Diablo put in there to mark his mother's grave, so it is said. And not a stone's throw from there stands an old gallows where the pirate and his crew were hung by the British. Or perhaps it was the Spanish. I was always too drunk to remember when Don Diablo told me the yarn."

Jim Driscoll had bathed the blood from the bullet hole in Panchito's side. The bullet, fired at close range, had gone clean through the Mexican's abdomen. Panchito moaned a little and tried to recall a prayer.

JIM DRISCOLL fetched a flask of brandy. But even as he held the bottle to Panchito's lips, the wounded man quivered, lay quiet, the faint rattle of death in his throat.

Jim Driscoll closed the staring eyes and dug a single grave to hold both Quick and Panchito Gomez. Before he buried them, he searched their pockets, seeking some clue that would aid him in

his dangerous hunt for the man who called himself Don Diablo. Quick's pockets revealed little.

Save for some crumpled greenbacks, nothing of value came from Panchito's overalls. But as Jim Driscoll was laying the Mexican in the grave, he discovered a trinket that he at first took to be a religious medal. It was a gold disc fastened by a buckskin thong about the fellow's throat.

Jim Driscoll lighted a match. For a long moment he studied the gold slug. It bore the coat of arms of Spain and the date 1750. Panchito, or some man before Panchito, had drilled a tiny hole in the old coin and run a buckskin string through it, to wear it around his neck as a luck piece.

"Well, it didn't bring Panchito much luck, and I'm some superstitious myself concernin' charms and such, but it ain't every day in the week a man runs onto pieces of eight or doubloons or whatever the old boys called their dough. And so I'll just separate yuh from it, *amigo*.

"There may be somethin' to that story of pirate gold. And this story of Don Diablo, who used to be named Captain Wylie Hackett when he owned the Hachita Rancho, this story of his bein' a pirate's son: may be somethin' in that. I've heard tell of ships that cruised the Mexican coast long after the Civil War, raiding the little towns, stealing girls and gold that the Indians dug for the padres. Smuggling stuff into the U. S. ports along Texas and Louisiana coast.

"No doubt there could be truth in Hackett's yarn. *Dios* knows he had gold from somewhere. Said it was from Panchito Villa's big cache. Mebbysso. Most mebbys, not so. Now I wonder did Wylie Hackett, alias Don Diablo of San Angelo port, really pay Panchito any real money to get me?

"Somehow, I sorta think Panchito was lyin', though a dyin' man is supposed to always kick clean with the straight and honest. So if he lied, he had reason to lie. Keep a-thinkin' along that line, Jimmy old boy, and you may stumble onto somethin'. You might just be lucky enough to stumble. . . ."

Jim Driscoll broke off in his musing. He shoved the gold piece in his pocket.

And with a swift, smooth motion, whirled, his six-shooter in his hand.

III

A LOW pitched musical laugh came from the far side of a clump of brush. The strumming of a guitar. A hauntingly plaintive tenor voice singing:

*"Ees a long, long trail a-windeeng,
Eento thees land from my dreams
Where thees nighteengale ees singeeng. . . ."*

"Riley!" called Jim Driscoll, "Riley Rodriguez! You old son of a gun!"

"Son of the gon, right back at you, Señor Jeem Driscoll."

And still strumming the guitar, a small, beautifully garbed Mexican *caballero* in black suede leather jacket and trousers trimmed with silver braid, huge silver spurs chiming, white teeth gleaming in the shadow of an enormous silver crusted sombrero, there swaggered Riley Rodriguez, self-labelled the best dressed *caballero* in Mexico. With him came the strong odor of perfume.

"You 'ave the most damn' remarkable ears to hear me where I am hide, Jeem. Santa Maria, I 'ave tie the spurs een flannel cloth. I made not the sound of a creeping mouse. Yet, son of a gon, you hear me."

"Heard, hell. I smelled yuh, you darned fashion plate of what the well dressed *vaquero* wears when he goes a-courtin'."

"Hah!" smiled Don Riley Rodriguez, as he embraced the grinning American. "You like thees new perfume, no? I get you a quart."

"Not if I see yuh comin' with it, *caballero*. Lordy but you're a plumb welcome sight for tired eyes, Riley. If ever a man was in need of a guiding word of wisdom, it's your friend Jim Driscoll."

Don Riley Rodriguez smiled and indicated the two dead men.

"I come too late to see thees fight. I hear the shots and come *muy pronto*. I find, instead of per'aps the Señor Hamlin, you, my friend, weeth two dead steefs who I recognize as one *muy malo* hombre of a gringo name' Raymond Queeck. And also, very moch dead, that evil one, Panchito Gomez.

"But the Señor Hamlin ees gone on,

no? Weeth hees pack train loaded weeth gons and bullets. And you, my friend, here alone. You are not hurt some place?"

"Not yet, Riley."

"**CARAMBA!** So queeck as I learn that no other than my old *compadre* of the beeg war, my old *amigo*, the Sergeant Jeem Driscoll, ees coming thees way, I start for the Sangre de Cristo. I step up on the best damn' horse in Mexico.

"I say to my men, 'Hombrecitos, thees revolution of which we are belong against, thees monkey business of the high-jack stuff, weel have to wait. My *amigo*, my brother een the arms of the war weeth the gringos and the Heines, he ees a damn' fool and the fighting son of the sea cookies, and if I don't bust the old galluses to get there, somebody ees going to get into the 'ell of a sweet ruckus and my ol' boddy of the beeg war ees going to per'aps keel off thees smogglor Don Diablo. And then what the 'ell we do for gons and bullets that we high-jack.

"Anyhow, besides, thees Señor Jeem Driscoll weel get himself killed so dead as a last month's corpse eef I don't get there to take heem into my hands. So, *hombrecitos*, you sit tight een the saddle. Wait for me unteel I return back weeth you.

"And een the case that I do not come back, ride after that *muy maldito*, thrice cursed son of a peeg Hamlin and keel heem slow and weeth moch pain. Because you weel know that he has bomp' off your magnificent Don Riley Rodriguez, who oncle ees the war department of Mexico besides being the beeg cheese een the United States of George Washington and Teddy Roosevelt. Salute, *hombrecitos*, the memory of those *presidentes* and soldiers.

"And do not forget the viva for Don Diego Vicente y Buenaventura Maria de le Vaca. And a couple of cheers and a snappy salute now for your own very magnificent Don Riley Rodriguez, who was weeth the Americanos een the bigges' damn' war that ever was pull' off een any place.

"Powder Reeve! The mile wide and the foots deep! Let 'er bock! *Adios*, so long! And do not forget to cut off the ears of that Don Diablo and send them,

or per'aps the whole damn' 'ead, to my beloved and *muy grande* oncle."

Jim Driscoll, smiling widely, watched Riley Rodriguez go through his grand gestures. The salutes, the gestures of magnificence, the cheers. Don Riley left nothing undone in the manner of acting out his touching farewell to his troop of ragged followers somewhere back in the hills. Don Riley again embraced his friend.

"And now, Jeem, we had better shake the old foots. Not so damn' far be'ind me are come' that miserable Tovich, whose nose I shall some day cut off from his face and shove down his neck. I would have brought weeth me my army, but some slick son of the gon steals half the 'orses. And some of the gons.

"And my new boots made in the City of Mexico by the bootmaker who 'as made my boots since I am a small boy."

"**Y**OU were saying somethin' about bein' followed," Jim Driscoll got him off the subject of the bootmaker.

"Santa Maria, *si*. I get so warm' up about the meeting you, my friend of the beeg war that makes the last revolution down here look like notheeng less than the sauce off the apples. We go! Say, how do you like thees suit?"

"It smells like the swellest one I ever caught yuh wearin', kid."

Jim began shoveling dirt into the wide grave. Don Riley rolled and lit a husk cigaret and watched the quick burial.

As they mounted and rode away together, Don Riley Rodriguez played softly on his guitar. He had brought it along, so he took pains to explain, on the chance that he might get time on the way back to stop at some *hacienda* where dwelt a most beautiful girl. It was the intention of Don Riley to stand beneath her window and sing some love songs.

"You haven't asked me what fetched me down here, Riley."

"No. That ees your own very much personal affair. What I know ees that orders 'ave gone out to breeng you, alive eef possible, or eef not possible, to breeng you dead, to Don Diablo at thees place he calls hees home near to Port San Angelo.

"Thees place ees a small island, ten

miles from the shore. All rock, and thees house where he leeve ees like the castle. Machine gons and a tough crew to handle the gons are guard there always. There ees only one small cove where a skiff can land, and only when the tide ees just so."

"So I've heard. And I'm goin' to see the inside of that castle of his or die a-tryin'. And I'm goin' to break up this smugglin' racket. I've done taken it up with the officials at Mexico City."

From his pocket, Jim Driscoll took a gold badge. For a moment it lay in the palm of his open hand.

Don Riley Rodriguez smiled, but something of the gay comradeship was gone from his black eyes as he said softly, "Eees a 'ell of a swell magnificent badge, my frien'."

"I've bin in the government service since I got back from France, Riley. Almost had this gent that calls himself Don Diablo, two or three times. But he always slipped through the trap.

"There's bin three of my men killed by him or his gang. Two other boys I've let come down here, have disappeared. Another one, so I've got good reason to think, sold out to this Don Diablo who, durin' the war, was listed as Captain Wylie Hackett; his war record was one that any man could be proud to claim. I'm to get assistance from the government of Mexico while I'm here. I talked with the officials there at the City of Mexico."

"**P**ER'APS you meet thees *muy grande* oncle of mine?" asked Don Riley. "He ees some kind of the war department. A general. General Diego Vicente y Buenaventura Maria de la Vaca."

"He was gone on some military business."

Don Riley Rodriguez smiled. His nimble fingers picked his guitar.

"He ees a *muy* magnificent general. A snorter with big moustachios and the fat belly."

"If I'd known he was your uncle, Riley, I'd have put in a request that he have you detailed to help me."

"And what the 'ell of a swell joke that would turn out to become. Not later than last week, there at San Angelo,

do I not see a placard posted offering the reward for my head and weeth the signature of my very fat 'eaded oncle wrote on the end of the paper?

"Only that he ees the brother of my dead mother, and that he ees old, I would get on the best damn' horse een Mexico, which you see me now riding, and ride into his office and pull his moustachio until he howled like the wolf. And all because I do not agree weeth that oncle on some verree small political questions."

"But it don't seem reasonable, Riley, that he'd git so violent about it and want you killed."

"You do not know the old roaring bulldog, my frien'. He start to tell me something about the military. What the 'ell he know about thees military theeng? I show heem the medal I breeng home. Thees Croix de Guerre weeth two palm leaf, the Victoria Cross, the Italian and the Belgium Cross.

"Likewise thees Iron Cross of the Sauerkrauts.

"I am all dress up in the new uniform I get made. I pin on the medals, but I say no word to nobody how I buy them out of the New York three ball hock shop. I buckle on the sword which I buy off a member of a swell elegant lodge een Los Angeles. I click the heels to attention, I pull out the sword and salute that oncle. I show heem thees medal. And I say to that old goat, 'Behold, Señor General, a true magnificent example of the military.'"

DON RILEY smiled and shrugged his trim shoulders.

"How the 'ell am I to know that thees old billygoat ees just get the news from Guadalajara that I shoot his favorite commandante of the military at Vera Cruz because that peeg of a peeg makes the insulting crack about the perfume on me."

"But you're his own nephew. He wouldn't have shot you for that."

"Ees a verree harsh man, that oncle," sighed Riley.

"About the matter of moneys. He ees likewise at the same time angry because I lose some money on a rooster fight and thees miserable hombre who

takes my you-owe-me for thees money, takes the paper to thees angry oncle.

"And when thees oncle ees geeve me the beeg bawl out, and thees silly Captain Lopez who ees the grand military aide snickers behind hees hand, then I, Don Riley Rodriguez, lose my temper. I flash out the magnificent lodge sword and stick it through the legs of that snickering fool.

"Believe it from me, my frien', only that he ees hide behin' the chair, I should have push thees grand lodge sword through his belly. But only hees legs show and get it directly straight from me, Jeem, I puncture both legs. He squeals like the peeg. Everybody ron to see what the 'ell, Bill. And my oncle ees bellow like ten bullocks.

"I leave the place verree angry. I swing the leg across the silver saddle that rests on the back of the best damn' horse een all Mexico, which I now ride, and I ride out of that confusion. So I resign from my rank as lieutenant of cavalry. And when I get to Port San Angelo, I get the word back to my *hombrecitos* who likewise resign that night and ride to join their magnificent Don Riley.

"So here I am, Jeem. And you can believe it direct from me, my frien', before long I will lead the best damn' army in Mexico.

"And at the head of them I shall ride straight down the street to the palace of Chapultapac and offer my sword to El Presidente.

"Hah! Can you not see the balconies filled with the most beautiful señoritas, tossing roses which I will catch in my sombrero, thus! I 'ave already make the arrangement to hire the music. The band weel . . . *Valgame Dios!*"

Don Riley's voice dropped to a whisper. He pointed ahead. There, coming over the rim of a tall sand dune, rode a troop of horsemen. Coming at a jog trot, deployed formation.

"Tovich!" hissed Don Riley. "Tovich, the black butcher with his gringo murderers! Shake the foots, Jeem. Follow me!"

Don Riley, Jim Driscoll riding close behind and leading his pack horse, quit the main trail and rode off at an angle. But the noise of their movements was

picked up by one of the enemy, who fired off his gun.

"Straight at the peegs!" snarled Don Riley.

He flung aside his beloved guitar and jerked the two Luger pistols he carried.

IV

"POWDER REEVER!" cried Don Riley, standing in his stirrups. "Let 'er buck! Charge!"

"Let 'er buck!" cheered Jim Driscoll, his six-shooter ripping slits of fire in the moonlight.

The line of horsemen up ahead jumbled in confusion as the two men rode straight for them. It was unheard of for two men to so boldly charge twenty or thirty armed fighters.

"It's a trap!" called a voice. "Look out, you boys. There's more of 'em!"

Don Riley was yelling swift commands in Spanish to an imaginary following. Jim Driscoll grinned as the line of horsemen scattered to the brush. Bullets whistled and droned. Jim and Don Riley were riding at breakneck speed down the other slope of the sand dune. Through the broken, confused line, luck was with them. On into the shelter of the mesquite thickets beyond.

Jim Driscoll had caught a glimpse of a squatty, black bearded man on a huge black horse. This man was swearing in a broken jargon of English, Mexican and some foreign tongue that was Polish or Russian. The black bearded man was rallying the men who had scattered in panic. Now, with his men following, the black bearded rider was giving chase.

Plainly, Don Riley's beautiful mount could out-run the pursuers with ridiculous ease. But Jim's two horses were hard put to keep any sort of lead. A hard mile of this desperate race.

"They're gainin', Riley. You push on. I'll slide off and into the brush and take my chances."

"What you try to pull off, Jeem?" smiled Don Riley, "the bed time stories? We are not lick' yet. Not by the long shot, boddy. I 'ave, what you call heem, the joker up the coat sleeve. That hombre that you hear say to them others that eet ees the trap? The hombre that says to

those bums that there ees more of us? Well, that hombre ees my frien'.

"And when he learn that Tovich ees make the march thees way to follow Hamlin and Raymond Queeck and per'aps kill off the Señor Jeem Driscoll of the U. S. government patrols, then that friend gets the word to the Mexican soldiers at the *cuartel* and they follow behind thees Tovich bunch of bums. Almost any time now, Jeem, we meet them Federal cavalry. Sent from the City of Mexico to work weeth you. Hah!"

"QUIEN es?" barked a sharp command.

"Amigos!" called Don Riley. "Pass the Señor Jeem Driscoll of the United States and Texas to boot. And get ready to shoot, because behin' us comes Peter Tovich and hees gringos. And snap up the slick salute, hombre, to Don Riley Rodriguez, the most magnificent!"

"Hah! Captain Lopez! How are the legs, Señor Captain. And do not get gay. Señor Captain. Bccause, if I become once more angry, I weel shoot you een the belly and every *soldado* under your command will follow their magnificent Don Riley into the hills. *Hombrecitos! Soldados!* Vivas for your own Don Riley Rodriguez!"

"Viva! Viva! Viva Don Riley!"

"Now, Señor Captain Lopez," smiled Don Riley, "pull in the ears or I shall cut them off and make you eat them without the salt. You get me into the 'ell of a sour place in the affections of my oncle. But, what does that old bullock do but send you out to San Angelo! He ees like the little joke, that general. And so do not snicker no more, Captain. Because the chair of my oncle is not handy no more to hide behin'.

"*Por Dios*, here comes that bunch of bums! Señor Captain Lopez, this ees my good frien', Señor Jeem Driscoll. Let anything happen and I weel bite off your nose and feed the nose to the peegs. We shall meet again, Señor Captain, and I weel ask you to once more snicker behind the hand."

Don Riley held out his hand to Jim Driscoll.

"I must go, my frien'. I return to get that guitar I leave behin'. Then to join my men. Thees Captain Lopez ees, for

all hees snickers, the 'ell of a brave man. Stay weeth heem. Soon we meet again. Always I weel see that no harm comes to you. Captain Lopez weel tell you, eef you 'ave not already guess, why I mus' go now. *Adios*, my boddy. Go weeth God!"

Their hands gripped. Don Riley whirled his magnificent horse and was gone in the night. Just then the renegades under Tovich clashed with the Federal cavalry. Already Captain Lopez was among his men, riding here and there in the hail of bullets, an upright, gamecock tailored officer. Urging his fighting men to greater recklessness, and his sword flashing, his voice challenging Tovich to personal combat.

Jim Driscoll found himself caught in this whirlpool of desperate hand-to-hand fighting, there in the moonlight. Now Tovich, finding the odds against him, was calling to his men to retreat. And they were losing no time in obeying.

For these military police under Lopez were of that tough fiber that had once made the Mexican Rurales as fine a mounted police organization as ever rode in the tracks of crime. They took no prisoners. And because they knew they could expect no quarter, they fought with a desperate fury that was putting to rout the mongrel crew of white renegades under the butcher, Tovich.

Some of those renegades were dying hard. Their gritted taunts could be heard among the spatter of carbines.

JIM DRISCOLL was trying to fight his way through the melee to where the black-bearded Tovich, surrounded by a knot of unshaven, hard bitten followers, was trying to organize a retreat. But ahead of Jim Driscoll rode the dapper Captain Lopez, a handful of his men behind him.

Now a burly, leering, cursing white renegade came at Jim Driscoll. Jim's gun hammer fell on an empty shell. He charged at the man with his carbine as a club. A bullet ripped through Jim's hat. Then the carbine knocked the burly outlaw from his saddle, just as a diminutive Mexican soldier shot the fellow through the head.

A clubbed rifle now grazed Jim's shoulder. A gun blazed behind him. He rode

at a man whose face showed whitely in the moonlight. And as Jim Driscoll fought to get to that man, he called out a name.

"Schwartz! Dutch Schwartz! Stand and fight, you damned skunk! Fight, you traitor!"

But the melee was too thick to let Jim through. He caught a last glimpse of the man who had once been one of his border patrol and now was a smuggler under Tovich and Don Diablo. Dutch Schwartz's round face, white as chalk, his blue eyes shining in the blaze of guns and the white moonlight that made it almost daylight. A last, tense grimace and Dutch Schwartz turned tail.

Now a fierce melee was going on, up ahead. Captain Lopez had fought his way to where Tovich and his men were making a last desperate stand. Lopez and the black bearded Tovich were within arm's reach of one another, slashing at each other with cavalry sabers. Then the Mexican's horse went down.

Jim Driscoll shoved a cartridge into his carbine. Took quick aim. Tovich was half hidden by his men, his arm lifted as the saber in his hand swung upward. His white teeth were snarling behind his curly black beard.

Jim Driscoll pulled the trigger. The bullet, missing by the fraction of an inch, furrowed the black-bearded jaw. Tovich shook his head like a wounded shaggy bear.

NOW a horse leaped into that crowd. There was the gleam of silver, black and scarlet and silver. A knife, like a shaft of light, slithered through the air. It's thin, gleaming blade struck Tovich in the arm, just below the shoulder. With a howling curse, he let go the red bladed saber.

And before he had hardly been seen that dashing figure in black and scarlet and silver was gone as swiftly as he had come. Only his knife, buried to the hilt in the thick arm of Peter Tovich, was there to mark his sudden visitation. Now, as Jim Driscoll crowded his way through to the fallen Captain Lopez, Tovich and his men fled in a wedge that plowed through to freedom.

Jim Driscoll lifted Captain Lopez up behind him. The Mexican officer was

cursing hotly at the fate that had denied him the life of the black bearded renegade.

"But thanks to you, Señor Driscoll, my life, at least, is spared me for another attempt. You acted swiftly, señor.

"It wasn't me that put Tovich out of the running."

"Who then?" asked Captain Lopez as they rode about, gathering the Mexican troopers into shape and attending to the wounded.

"It was Don Riley Rodriguez. He came like a streak. His knife looked almost like a flash of white lightning. Then he was gone again. Listen!"

From somewhere out there on the desert, like the tinkle of a silver bell, came the song of a rider who spurred for the safety of his hills and the comradeship of his faithful followers.

A Mexican love song, the song of a *vaquero* who rides to meet love under the stars. So Don Riley Rodriguez rode away into the dawn. Alone, singing his *vaquero's* song to the vanishing stars.

"Some day," said Captain Lopez, a little sadly, "Don Riley will die with his back to the adobe wall. It may be my duty, señor, to give the command of fire to the squad of soldiers. And so Mexico will lose a brave soldier and a gallant *caballero*."

V

PORT SAN ANGELO'S lights blinked like opening eyes in the purple night. Evil eyes they were, perhaps, like the glittering eyes of beasts of prey, but nevertheless beautiful in a sinister, deadly sort of beauty. Lights that beckoned with siren glance at the rough sailormen coming into port with contraband. Promising the fulfilment of every lust known to mankind.

They winked yellowly as the skiffs grounded on a white beach were lapped by a sea that left a strip of phosphorous with each wave that fingered across the smooth wet sand. Seagoing craft of every description rode at anchor. The bay mirrored the riding lights of boats that came and went on secret missions.

Out there, among the dingier tubs, poised a greyhound-looking yacht dressed in white. Red and green lights aglow.

A single lighted porthole. A dim light on the bridge.

Shadowy forms paced the deck which was holystoned to spotless perfection. Waterproof tarpaulins covered the mounted guns that might tell-tale the fact that this trim, slender-lined yacht was not pleasure bent.

"Blind yourself to the rotten, squalid stuff back up town, Driscoll," said Harley Hamlin: "use the jolly old imagination a bit, y'know, and out there in the bay, is beauty."

They stood, with Captain Lopez, on a small wharf. Driscoll, Hamlin, and the army officer were side by side. Behind them stood a half dozen soldiers, alert, vigilant.

"Who owns the yacht?" asked Jim Driscoll.

Hamlin knocked the ashes from his brier pipe into the water below.

"And I thought the Irish were romantic. I point out the beauty of the water and the lights and what not, bracing myself, y' know, for a poetical outburst, and you pop a prosaic question. Tell him the answer, Captain Lopez. He's taken the dreamy old wind out of me."

"The yacht belongs to Don Diablo, otherwise known as Captain Wylie Hackett. Fastest thing afloat in the Mexican waters, Señor Driscoll."

"Do you reckon Hackett would be aboard?" asked Jim Driscoll.

"If he should be aboard, old man," said Hamlin, "it would do us no good to try to board her. Before we got half way out there, we'd meet up with a bit of bad luck. Some fast motorboat would ram us. Our engine would go dead. Or, if we used a skiff, the ruddy oarsmen would somehow capsize us. Just an accident. And we'd never reach shore. Report would be that the sharks gobbled us. Do you follow me, old chap?"

Jim Driscoll nodded. "I'm just beginning, Hamlin, to see what a tough layout I'm up against. It's a mighty well organized game down here."

"Even better organized, Driscoll, than you imagine. Ain't that right, Captain Lopez?"

"So well organized," came from the trim captain, in his precise English, "that I would suggest we go back up town where

the lights are brighter. It is not exactly safe here in the dim light, even with the soldiers."

"Right," agreed the Britisher grimly, "I've been hanging onto two automatics until my fingers are jolly well numb."

"**Y**EAH, we better sift back among the light," grinned Jim Driscoll. "Hamlin, you're worth the price of admission. Hangin' onto your guns and askin' me to see the beauty of San Angelo bay."

"Why not? As well think of the ruddy old moon and the jolly little stars, what? Shuffling off the . . . damn it, the line of poetry has quite slipped from me. Recall it, Captain? No? It's from Thanatopsis or Saul's jolly old funeral march or from somewhere, no doubt."

Behind the careless flippancy of Harley Hamlin lay a grimness that to Jim Driscoll, was a thing that made a man wonder. Harley Hamlin, that morning, had come riding into the federal barracks at San Angelo with a letter from Don Riley Rodriguez.

"My compliments, Driscoll. I have just been through bankruptcy in the game I was playing. I think I know your dreary old racket and I'm lending you the support of the old right arm, y' know. One for all and all for one, what? Providing, Driscoll, that you are accepting recruits of baser metal.

"In words of simplicity, old man, I'm here to join your lovely crusade against crime. I've been blackballed by the select fraternity of blacklegs. I ask no salary. I ask, in fact, nothing. All I can offer in the way of value is that I can lead you to a decent drink, a well cooked meal, and comfortable quarters, such as they are, and my support in whatever you have in mind.

"I own the one and only shower bath in San Angelo. And a phonograph with a select stack of records. When sober, my Chinaman serves a palatable meal. I've a spare bedroom that you're welcome to. And all I ask, when all's said and finished, is a decent burial and a letter mailed back home breaking the news that Harley Hamlin, Importer and Exporter, actively retired, has passed on."

Captain Lopez later told Jim Driscoll that Hamlin was marked for death. In

killing Raymond Quick and Panchito Gomez, the tall Englishman had signed his own death warrant. That it was merely a matter of time until Hamlin would be killed.

Jim Driscoll had taken up quarters at Hamlin's humble adobe house. The Chinese cook was excellent. Jim had been somewhat astonished when, that evening for supper, Hamlin had appeared in formal dinner clothes. Captain Lopez, however, had taken the Britisher's formality with a grace that was typical of his people. The three, after excellent cocktails, a well-cooked dinner, and cigars, had strolled down to the wharf.

NOW, as they strolled back up town, Harley Hamlin guided them to a really decent looking cantina. From a dimly lighted patio came the soft strains of a stringed orchestra. And a woman's voice, worthy of a far better setting, singing that haunting Mexican song that, translated, means, "To Die Dreaming."

The three men entered through the bar-room. It was filled with a motley crowd. Hamlin spoke to the suave-mannered Mexican proprietor, who bowed a trifle mockingly, so Driscoll thought, as he escorted the three customers back through a short hallway to a heavy oak door. At a signal, the door swung open.

Jim Driscoll, Captain Lopez and Harley Hamlin stepped into the patio, a thing of rare old beauty. Tropical fruit trees, the strong, haunting odor of gardenias; tables, an orchestra back in the shadows, a fountain of old tile. A beautiful woman in white with a scarlet rose in her jet hair, stood alone, singing.

Two of the tables were occupied by groups. At a corner table, sitting alone, was a tall, bronzed, clean-featured man in white flannels. The man, at the entrance of the three newcomers, rubbed out the coal of his cigaret and rose. A tall, heavy-shouldered man with ash blond hair. His teeth flashed in a smile, but his blue eyes were as hard and cold as ice.

"Ah, Hamlin. And Captain Lopez. And do my eyes see rightly, none other than Jim Driscoll."

"Thought we'd find you here, Captain," came Hamlin's cool reply. "Driscoll, you've met Captain Wylie Hackett?"

For a tense moment Jim Driscoll and Captain Wylie Hackett stared into each other's eyes. Under his immaculate flannel jacket, Hackett's powerful shoulders flexed and bunched. Driscoll's fists were knotted and his face was a shade pale under its sun bronze.

"Yes," said Jim Driscoll, "I've met Hackett. Don Diablo's the present title, they tell me."

"Don Diablo," sneered the tall Captain Hackett, "is a name I spread among the peons. They're fond of color. I suppose, mister Uncle Sam's spy, that I should be flattered by your interest in me. And after a fashion, it does tickle my vanity and amuse me.

"But get this right now, brother Driscoll—this is Mexico. And Port San Angelo is my particular part of Mexico. I was born near here and this is my country. What I say here, goes. Don't stay so long that you'll wear out your welcome, Driscoll. Don't linger around until what is now so amusing to me begins to bore me and then annoy me. I don't like to be annoyed."

"So far as I'm concerned," drawled Jim Driscoll, getting his temper under quick control, "you kin start in gettin' annoyed whenever it pleases you."

"This is not the place," smiled Lopez, "and this evening is hardly the moment for quarreling. The young lady's song is being rudely interrupted.

"You're not trying to threaten me are you, Señor Captain Lopez?" sneered Hackett.

"I am merely attempting, Señor Captain Hackett, to remind you of the fact that you are a gentleman and there are ladies present."

"You flatter me, Lopez. I've never claimed that so badly misused title of gentleman. And I am unaware of the fact that there were any ladies in San Angelo port."

Captain Lopez stiffened. His hand dropped to his gun.

The calm, unruffled voice of Harley Hamlin was like a deluge of ice water on fire:

"Don't let the skipper get your ruddy old goat, Lopez. Seems to me this is all a bit silly. Might we not all sit down and, while the jolly old weight is off our feet,

partake of a bit of liquid? Driscoll, old top, the young lady with the charming voice wishes to speak to you. May we sit at your table, Hackett?"

"Ain't you afraid I might slip a bit of poison in your drink, Hamlin?" Captain Hackett grinned crookedly as he waved an invitation to the three men to join him.

"I fancy you'd rather shoot me, Hackett. Poison is a rather insipid form of retribution, what?"

"You're a cool-nerved sort of chump, Hamlin. Sometimes I'm damn close to liking you. Sit down, gentlemen."

JIM DRISCOLL, hat in hand, had stepped across the patio, hand outstretched to greet the black-haired señorita in the exquisite white mantilla.

"Ah, Señor Driscoll!" She smiled, her dark eyes alight. "Thees ees the great pleasure to once more see you, no? In other words of good, plain old United States, Jim, how goes it?"

"Can't kick a bit, Kit. Still doing the Mexican fandangoes and La Paloma, eh?"

"That's my line, Jim and I'll stick to it. Where was it we met last? Tia Juana, Nogales, Juarez?"

"In jail in El Paso—" Jim grinned—"where you'd gone to spring some fuzzy blonde percentage girl from a thirty-day trick for rolling a dude in a Juarez joint." Jim Driscoll lifted an eyebrow. "You were with some high powered playboy son of a millionaire Boston family. He was tight as a tick. And you were going to marry him that night."

Katherine O'Rafferty laughed.

"I got cold feet, Jim. He was a decent kind of kid, even if he was the world's best rum hound. He'd showed me pictures of his family and used to read me letters from his kid sister who thought he was just about the greatest one guy that ever swung a polo stick. And imagine a boy like that dragging home a dance hall quim whose line is Mexican stuff? Nope, Jimmy, I just couldn't see it for dust.

"So the same night that you got Flossie out of jail for me, we poured Gerald into his hotel, packed up, and came as far as our jack would take us away from El Paso. I never did get a chance to thank you, Jim, for what you did for me and the Flossie kid that night.

"She was innocent, Jim. What I mean she needed that bimbo's roll worse than he did. She'd been to the doctor's that day and he'd given her the verdict. Spots on both lungs and six months to live if she didn't quit the racket. She needed rest and sunshine and milk and no worry. Try and get all that hustlin' drinks in a border town.

"So we see this name of San Angelo on the map. Angelo sounds like angel. Kinda holy, see. So here we landed, flat broke, no friends, no jobs. And such towns as Juarez or Nogales look like Mormon church towns compared to this awful dump.

"And Lord knows, Jim, what we'd have done if a regular little guy named Don Riley Rodriguez hadn't pulled the big brother act. He landed me a job here while he gets Flossie and me a place to board with some poor but respectable Mexicans.

"So here we are. And gee, Jimmy if it ain't askin' too much of you, drop around to the house and give the Flossie kid a chance to thank you. The darned little kid's been prayin' for you, Jimmy. Honest. She learns some prayers and gets down on her knees, Jimmy, night and mornin'. And her that never gives religion a tumble in all her days as a chorine and sister act on cheap vaudeville. And the funny angle is that she believes it all.

"Sure, Kit. Of course, I'll be glad to see her. And whatever I kin do. . . .

"That's the ticket, Jimmy. Now go on back to your party. I'll sing you some songs. You're a hell of a regular guy, Jim Driscoll. And bless your darned hide, I'll tell you, some day, perhaps, why I didn't marry that Gerald kid from Boston. . . .

"Now trot back to your party. But watch that big shot they call Don Diablo. He's one hard customer. Hamlin's better, but not so good. I don't know the dolled-up Mex officer. Watch your step, Jimmy. I don't know your racket. Never did. But you're among thieves and what I mean, honey, they're some tough gang. I'm off at midnight."

Kit gave his hand a squeeze and slipped back into the palms and pomegranate trees. As Jim Driscoll went back to the table where Hamlin, Lopez and Hackett

sat, he heard Kit's voice, rattling off fluent Spanish. He caught the lilt of her laughter.

VII

CAPTAIN Wylie Hackett waved Jim to a seat.

"How about an armistice, Driscoll, for the evening? Hamlin and Lopez favor the idea. And God knows I'd welcome an evening of decent companionship for a change. Enemies tomorrow, maybe, but tonight let me be your host. How does the idea strike you, Driscoll?"

Jim Driscoll's glance flitted across the three faces of his companions. Had they hatched some plot?

Harley Hamlin's eyes were inscrutable. Lopez was watching the palms that hid Kit O'Rafferty. There was, in the blue eyes of Captain Wylie Hackett, a disarming frankness, a sort of boyish appeal.

"Once, Wylie," said Jim Driscoll, "you and I were good friends. It wasn't me that broke that friendship."

"That's right, Jim." Captain Wylie Hackett got to his feet. "I had a hell of a nerve to ask it of you. The best thing I can do is bow myself out of the picture. Gentlemen, good night."

"Hold on, Hackett," said Jim. "Don't go off half-cocked. I'm lakin' you up on that. I'll be glad to declare a night's armistice.

"God knows the relaxation will be welcome."

"Okay, Jim. Harley, you get better results from these stupid-headed waiters than I do. Order some real wine. And we'll forget what we are for a few hours. The señorita is going to sing again. Who is she, Jim? Or is that an off-side question?"

"That's for the señorita to say, Wylie. But she can sing and dance."

"Rather," smiled Harley Hamlin, beckoning to a waiter. "And with the face of a madonna. I'd wager she's as straight as a die, if I were the kind of mucker that lays bets on the morality of women."

"I wouldn't call the bet, Harley," laughed Hackett. "I've tried. She's straight as a die."

"Just a minute, boys," said Jim Driscoll, and his voice was hard and taut. "If this

is to be a friendly pow-wow, just drop that talk. Because I don't like it."

"Right," came Hamlin's crisp apology. "Eh, Captain Hackett?" And the Britisher's eyes were like ice.

"Right," shrugged Hackett. "Forget it. There's the song. Here comes the wine. And we'll drink to the dead pirates of Whalebone Cove. And the gold buried there by Bloody Jack Hackett, skipper of the blackest ship that ever dropped her mud hook in Port San Angelo. To the days of wooden ships and iron men. To the days when the unlucky loser walked the plank.

"We're drinking wine that was old before we were born. From the cellars of a monastery in Spain. Brought to Port San Angelo by the lawless son of a pirate sire. A drinking, fighting, lawless son doomed to hear the creak of a gallows tree. Drink, men!"

VIII

CAPTAIN Wylie Hackett, known among the Mexicans as Don Diablo, was drunk. He was roaring, pounding on the table, singing lusty sea songs. His was all the swaggering, rough-voiced, hard-fisted manner of some oldenday pirate.

He bragged of men he had sent to their death. He spoke of a submarine he had commanded, of the yacht that had turned raider with her sides painted black and a Jolly Roger flying at the mast-head. Of captured enemies made to walk the plank. Of hand-to-hand fights against big odds.

He taunted Jim Driscoll with open confessions of his smuggling trade. He baited poor Captain Lopez until that hot-tempered little officer was white lipped with futile fury. He insulted the imperturbable Harley Hamlin again and again, calling him a blackleg son of British decency. He ripped off his coat and shirt and undershirt, baring a sun-tanned torso that was a sculptured perfection of knotted muscle.

Stripped to the waist, Captain Wylie Hackett drank raw rum like water. His bellowing voice challenged any man alive to meet him in combat of any kind. And across the bronzed chest ran ugly scars made by the ripping knives of men who

had fought him. Perhaps Captain Wylie Hackett was not quite sane.

Jim Driscoll was taking his cue from Hamlin. The Britisher sat there, sipping watered rum, pulling on his pipe, unruffled, wary, his hand never far from the gun that snuggled under his immaculate dinner jacket. Lopez, unused to so much liquor, was tipsy.

To Jim Driscoll, Hamlin's glance had telegraphed a message that, put into words would have said, "Sit tight. Listen. And you will learn something of what you came here to learn. Sit tight."

So Jim Driscoll sat tight. He drank sparingly, but what little he had been forced to drink had fired his blood and dizzied his brain a little. The rum they drank was old and powerful.

Jim wondered how long this party would last until it ended in a terrific fight. Back there in the shadows lurked men who were under Hackett's command. Tough men, heavily armed, ready to kill at the command of the roaring, swashbuckling buccaneer they served.

EVEN as Jim was thinking about this, there came the staccato burst of rifle fire from the street. Horses tore past. Men were shouting confusedly. A woman screamed.

"Viva Herrera! Viva Herrera! Viva la revolution!"

And then another voice, rising above the other sounds. A voice that snapped Jim Driscoll back from the confusion of the moment.

"Powder Reeve! Let 'er bock! Andale, *hombrecitos!* On your feet. Let's go!"

The soldiers barring the patio gate were pushed aside. There, a sword in his left hand, a Luger pistol in his right, stood Don Riley Rodriguez.

"Andale, *hombrecitos!* Hamlin! Lopez! Suelta! Caramba! The war she's on! Andale, señors! Por Dios and por Mexico, let's go!"

"Herrera!" gasped Captain Lopez, "*Valgame de Dios!* Revolution!"

He leaped for the door. The night was filled with the crack of rifles. Confusion everywhere now. Forgetting the drunken Hackett, Jim Driscoll stared at the crimson stain on Don Riley's white

silk shirt. A raw wound marred Don Riley's face.

"Let 'er buck!" yelled Jim, and ran toward Don Riley. Hamlin, swinging his two big automatics, was at Jim's heels as they piled out of the patio with the soldiers and Lopez.

Out there in the dusty street the fighting was a confusing mêlée. In the dim lights shed by lamps in windows, they fought.

"Riley! Don Riley!" called Jim Driscoll.

But no reply came. For Don Riley was charging down the street with his ragged troops, down against the superior forces under General Herrera.

"This way, Driscoll. And hurry, man!"

Harley Hamlin dragged Jim Driscoll into a doorway, through a house that was filled with frightened women and squealing children. Into an alleyway, then up a side street. There some saddle horses stood, their horsehair hackamore ropes held by a badly frightened Mexican.

"The old emergency mounts," explained Hamlin. "Always keep 'em handy. . . . Had a rummy sort of hunch we'd need a saddle tonight. Up we go, old man, and down this street to flank the rebels. Herrera's a bad un' if he gets the upper hand. Don Riley'll be in the next street. With the Lopez chap by his side. Friends today, tomorrow enemies. A kiss on the rosy cheek or a knife in the jolly old back. Look out!"

They were almost run down by a compact gang that rode pell-mell from an alleyway. Jim and Hamlin swung aside just in time. Ten or twelve riders rode by, bunched to form a wedge.

"That," smiled Tamlin thinly, "is none other than Captain Wylie Hackett being taken to the safety of his yacht. Let's go, eh?"

THERE was a carbine in the saddle boot. A double-rowed cartridge belt, every loop filled, hung across the saddle horn. Stirrup to stirrup, Hamlin and Jim Driscoll charged the end of the street where the rebels under Herrera had halted. And in behind Hamlin and Jim there rode a yelling, taunting troop of riders.

"Some of the local chaps," grinned

Hamlin, "that work for me. They're a rough lot, but hardy. They're comin' along just for the ruddy old buggy ride, y'know. At 'em, men! Hit 'em hard."

The next moment Jim Driscoll was in the thick of it, swallowed in the mêlée of fighting. Then something struck him from behind and he slid from the saddle unconscious. Harley Hamlin grabbed his limp form and dropped it across his saddle. Harley Hamlin's right hand swung to the left, its big automatic spitting. One of his men reeled drunkenly in the saddle and pitched sideways to the ground.

"Had my eyes on you for some time, you dirty blighter!" he gritted. "One of Hackett's bright lads, eh? Well, you're paid off."

Hamlin, riding hard down the street, turned to the man who rode beside him. They pulled rein.

"Take Driscoll to my house, Joe. That rat of a Jones rapped him with a rifle barrel from behind. I got Jones. See that Driscoll get's a doctor's care. Sorry to deprive you of the old ruckus going on down town, Joe."

"That's okay wit' me boss. Dere'll come other chances ta do battle wit' dese boids."

IX

THE street fighting was growing more furious each minute. Herrera's men were well armed and well mounted. Far better equipped than the ragged warriors under Don Riley. But Herrera's men lacked that loyalty to their leader that now carried Don Riley's men into battle.

Harley Hamlin and a handful of rough looking men engaged in the nefarious trade of gun running and whisky running, now took a stand behind a crude barricade hastily thrown up. They were equipped with a Lewis gun and Winchesters. A profane, flippant, hard-bitten crew. Motley of garb and race. Hamlin in his now-soiled dinner jacket and white linen made an odd looking leader for his derelict crew.

"Hold everything, lads, till we can pick the enemy from the jolly old chums. There goes Lopez on a trot with his

'dobe soldiers. Give the old constabulary a cheer, mates. And don't open up the fireworks until Tovich and his rats show up. Dutch Schwartz works for me as a sort of spy in that outfit, and will give us the tip-off."

The shrill blast of Don Riley's whistle. The rattle of rifle fire. The ribald cheering of Hamlin's ruffians. Horses carrying grim-lipped riders. It looked like Don Riley's men had Herrera's forces on the run. Herrera, who had planned a surprise attack, and been checked by the sudden appearance of Don Riley's rag-tag army. Now the wily General Herrera was retreating.

Now came another armed force of mounted men. Tovich, his shoulder tightly bandaged, half drunk on vodka, riding like a madman, voicing his barbaric Cossack yell!

Now a lone man on horseback raced along the side street. His face was a smear of blood and he swayed drunkenly in the saddle.

"Schwartz!" called Hamlin. "This way, old lad! Someone lend Dutch a hand, he's hurt."

"Tovich. . . ." Schwartz's voice came thickly through bloody froth. "The black-muzzled son got me, Hamlin . . . because I'd slipped word to Don Riley about this attack. Tovich and Herrera double-crossin' Hackett. I ran into Don Riley alone.

"I told him Tovich was after Driscoll and the dame that dances at Las Palmas Cantina. So he gathered his men and came on. Tovich tricked me. Shot me in the back. Just . . . playin' . . . my . . . hand . . . out."

Harley Hamlin laid Dutch Schwartz gently down behind the barricade.

"A brave lad just died, boys. One of the bravest. He wanted to get Tovich. But the poor old chap was out-foxed. So it's up to us to carry on. Here comes the-black-bearded son of sin now. Hold it lads. Hold it till. . . . Slip 'em the news, lads!"

THE Lewis gun stuttered. The bullets flew high, too high to do much damage. The man behind the spitting gun swore softly. He'd get the Tovich mob this time or. . . . Hell! Jammed

gun. . . . Okay now. But too late. Tovich and his men had swept up a side street.

"Come back and fight, ye scum!" roared the gunner.

Now Don Riley's men cut off the Tovich gang. There was a furious few minutes of hand-to-hand fighting. Then Tovich whirled and ran, his men with him, to that end of the main street where Herrera was rallying his confused troops.

Tovich threw his men into the doorways along the street. He barked some short commands to them. He called something to Herrera; then rode on through the confusion, five picked men behind him.

Don Riley jumped his horse over a low wall and into an alleyway.

"Powder Reeve!" he yelled. "Let 'er bock! These time, Tovich, I shall take the 'ell of a pleasure een. . . ."

"Riley!" called a man who staggered from an open doorway. "Hey you bone-head, chili garglin' son!"

"Jeem! You are hurt?"

"Hell, no. Dizzy. Which way?"

"Jomp up behin'!"

Don Riley pulled Jim up behind him. Joe the Gun came running from the house Jim had just left.

"Hey, ya big stiff, come back. Youse is hoit. Come back!"

"See yuh later, New Joisy!" called Jim. "Where we bound for, Riley?"

Don Riley's horse, carrying its double burden, raced for a squat adobe at the far end of the dark street. A yellow light showed in the window.

"Thees horse, Jeem, ees one I borrow. My best horse ees hid. I borrow thees one from somebody. Ees not so fast, but not so damn' slow neither. Here we are! *Andale!* Tovich ees not yet get here. *Bueno.*"

QUITTING the horse, they rapped on the door.

From within came a faint, "Who is it?"

"Don Riley!"

A bolt slid back. The door opened. Jim and Don Riley saw a slim, pale, sick looking girl in a faded pink kimono, an automatic in her hand. Her gray eyes lighted with joy.

"Gee, I'm glad you came. Don Riley. I heard all the shootin' and I been worried about Kit. And when she didn't

show up I got scared. The Kitten's all right, ain't she?"

"You mean she's not here?" asked Jim. "She didn't come home about two hours ago?"

"No. A guy that works on Hackett's boat come by about an hour ago to tell me Kit's gonna be workin' late. The guy says Hackett's throwin' a party and is payin' Kit big dough to sing."

"Thees guy who say that," said Don Riley tensely, "ees he a red haired one weeth a red mustache an' the one eye?"

"That's the bozo. Listen, nothin's happened to Kit, has they?"

"Ees like I am so damn' afraid," groaned Don Riley. "That Captain Hackett has that red one steal her. She ees by now on that yacht. Per'aps already on the way to that island. Santa Maria. May the mother of God keep her safe until. . . . Come, Jeem! *Andale! Por Dios*, let us be een time, my frien'."

A Mexican woman had paddled into the room on sandaled feet. To her Don Riley spoke in rapid Spanish.

"And do not worry, Señorita Flossie. Jeem Driscoll ees the best damn' soldier from the gringo war. We shall make the gran' rescue. Do not worry. *Adios!*"

"You're Jim Driscoll?"

The sick girl took one of his hands in her two frail ones. Before he could stop her, she was kissing his grimy, blood-smearred hand.

"Here, little lady, don't do that. You just keep the old light burning and we'll have Kit back here safe."

From an adjoining room came a high-pitched voice reciting the Lord's prayer.

". . . Amen. . . . Handy Hands and the bos'un's mate! And steer a straight course fer the masthead atop the shiprock. Ten paces east by nor'east. To the white rock. . . . Pipe down, ye sons o' dogs!"

"Madre!" gasped Don Riley. "Where you get thees parrot bird?"

"Why do you care, Riley?" asked Jim.

"I tell you later Jeem," Don Riley replied. "It once belong to the so mad Hermit of Sangre de Cristo, and knows where the pirate gold ees buried.

"Guard well thees bird. Cover the cage so he cannot make the talk. *Valgame Dios*, hide thees parrot bird till we come back once more. *Adios*. We go. . . .

Here comes Tovich! She's the fight, Jeem!"

Jim and Don Riley leaped outside, slamming the door behind them.

"Lock it, girl!" snapped Jim, jerking his six-shooter.

As the door bolt clicked, the two partners crouched in the outer darkness. Tovich and his men came with a rush. Don Riley's gun roared and a man tumbled out of his saddle. Jim Driscoll was shooting now. But the light was too dim to make for accuracy.

Two, then another of the men were knocked from their saddles by the bullets of Jim and Don Riley. The remaining riders whirled and raced for safety.

"Cowards!" yelled Don Riley, grabbing a horse by the dangling bridle reins. "Coyotes! *Andale*, Jeem! Le's go!"

JIM vaulted into an empty saddle. Together they spurred for the wharf, Tovich had gotten away. They saw his fleeing horse some distance ahead. Tovich and his two remaining men were heading for the bay.

Even as Don Riley and Jim pulled up their sweating horses, the chug-chug of a speedboat mocked them from out on the water that was spotted with the riding lights of boats at anchor there.

"Queek, *por Dios!*" panted Don Riley, leaping like a cat from the wharf into a motorboat that was just leaving the float.

Jim was right behind Don Riley. The two men in the boat jerked guns, then decided better of the notion as the guns of Jim and Don Riley were pointed at their bellies.

"Take us out to the yacht of Captain Hackett," gritted Don Riley, "or you weel be two corpse' een one damn' second. *Pronto!*"

"And no tricks," added Jim.

The boat sped across the smooth surface of the bay. It was almost in the frothy wake of the speedboat carrying Tovich.

"What the hell you guys celebratin', anyhow?" growled the man at the wheel. "First One-Eyed Red shows up with a dame. Then comes Hackett, then that lousy Tovich. Now you show up, Rodriguez, with a cowboy that was pointed

out to us guys as a gover'ment dick. What the hell's goin' on?"

"For many weeks, greasy face," said Don Riley softly, "I 'ave resist the temptation to bomp you off. One more damn' leetle question out of you and pop goes the weasels. Tell thees hombre een English-American Jeem, w'at I'm try' to put over against heem."

"I don't need no interpreter, Don Riley. You got the bulge. It's your party. And if it turns out to be your funeral, I'll send posies. Hard over there, you blasted, lousy bums!" The man cursed the lightless craft that brazed the side of their speedboat.

"The old blockade see," gritted the hard-faced pilot of the speeding commandeered motorboat. "One of Hackett's dummies. Dead eyes, me and Bill calls 'em. If this is a high-jackin' graft, count me and Bill in, Don Riley. Business is lousy, see. Hackett's put the old boycott on us. Me'n Bill is always in the humor ta pick up an odd piece of change. We'll go through, Rodriguez, for a hundred American dollars apiece."

"I'll make eet five hondred apiece," purred Don Riley, "eef you stay wit' me and my friend Jeem. We are out to get Hackett and thees One-Eye Red and thees Tovich. Five hondred apiece, greasy 'ands."

"You ain't took over much of a contract, have ya, mister? You think we kin take anything above a plugged nickle off that yacht?"

He shrugged doubtfully.

"Then gimme that wheel," snapped Jim, "and jump overboard. You either go the limit or walk back from here, get me? *Pronto* quick, buddy, want the game or don't yuh?"

"Wit' a gun lookin' me over, brother, where's my choice? Me and Bill goes on through from here. Suicide club. Watch the boat ta sta'board, there. She's . . . Cripes!"

A SMALL boat without lights had cut lose with a couple of guns. Jim and Don Riley returned the fire. Just as the man at the wheel, with a gritted curse, rammed the lighter craft, upsetting it.

"The rats needed bathin', eh, Bill?"

THEY overhauled the other boat. Tovich was frothing with rage as the boats scraped sides. Jim Driscoll had found a coil of rope in the boat. Fashioning a loop as they came up on the other boat, Jim neatly roped Tovich.

"Pull hard to the left, Greasy. I done ketched us a maverick!"

The next moment Tovich, on the end of the makeshift lariat, was sputtering and floundering in the water. Jim and Bill hauled him over the side.

"You seemed like you wanted tuh get aboard Hackett's yacht, Tovich. We'll ferry yuh out there. No charge."

Jim's gun poked the Russian's ribs. Don Riley disarmed the sputtering, half-drowned Tovich.

Bill, with a phlegmatic calm, was sending bullets at the other boat that now turned tail and raced back for shore. Tovich was cursing in broken English. Don Riley's knife tickled his throat.

"Now, peeg, hush the mouth. No noise. Because we mus' behave een the presence of the United States law."

"Relax, Tovich," grinned Jim. "You'll get high blood pressure. I want you alive for the hangin' party."

Tovich nursed his wounded shoulder and swore into his tangled black beard.

"Sometheeng," said Don Riley, speaking into Jim's ear in a barely audible undertone, "ees tell me that troubles ees come' at Hackett Island."

"I didn't reckon we was goin' to a Sunday school picnic, Riley."

"I do not mean about us. Thees parrot bird shows up. That ees very fonny. After fifty years, thees bird that belong to 'Andy 'Ands ees get found. Tovich and Herrera ees double-cross Hackett. Thees One-Eye Red ees hate Hackett. I would not be surpris', Jeem, eef One-Eye Red and thees Tovich make the mutiny amongst thees yacht gang. But Captain Hackett has always got them scare' too bad. He ees keel them."

"What the devil has a parrot got to do with mutiny, Riley?"

"Thees parrot bird ees belong to 'Andy 'Ands, the 'ermit of the Sangre de Cristo. Captain Bloody Jack Hackett, the pirate, ees take thees bird when he leave 'Andy 'Ands to die at Whalebones the pirate, ees take thees gird when he

tell thees parrot how to find heem. He teach thees bird to learn what he say.

"You hear that parrot bird back at Keet's house say about the masthead on the shiprock, no? Ten paces east by nor'-east to the white rock. That parrot bird ees know. But eef the bird 'as talk to somebody, then that somebody go there an' fin' the gol'."

"You think there's buried treasure around here, then?"

Don Riley nodded and smiled. "Some day I tell you about thees 'Andy 'Ands. About the gol' at Whalebones Cove. Some day, Jeem, eef we do not die before then. *Caramba*, the waves they get beeg, no?"

X

NO further time for talk. The sea tossed the light craft like a cork. The fog poured down until all about them was black. But Greasy held the motorboat to a steady course. Jim felt a little sick and Tovich looked greenish in the light of the ship's lantern Bill had lit.

"She's a boat," said Bill proudly. "What I mean, mates, she's a boat. I built 'er. Lissen to that engine. Gimme the wheel, Greasy."

"Bill's a skipper," grinned Greasy. "And how! This ain't his first trip outa San Angelo bay in this boat."

"Not by fifty times," said Bill, munching on a huge wad of tobacco. "And on some of the dirtiest nights ever made."

"This one's dirty enough for me," Jim forced a grin. "I hope to gosh I ain't gettin' seasick."

Don Riley chuckled. Tovich was moaning a little, there at the aft end of the tossing boat. Above his jet beard the man's skin looked green. Don Riley crouched beside Bill, eyes on the compass. Greasy lit a foul-smelling pipe. From a locker they'd dragged oilskins and tarpaulin jackets. In the same locker were stowed half a dozen rifles and boxes of ammunition.

On through the black fog. Somewhere boomed a fog horn. Its sound was soon lost in the distance. Then the muffled clang of a bell buoy.

Bill swung the little boat hard to port and grunted something into Don Riley's

ear. Don Riley doused the ship's lantern. Save for the hidden lights above the compass, the little motorboat showed no light. The boom of a nearby surf drowned the noise of the motor.

Now, against the white fog, loomed the black bulk of Hackett's yacht. A black hulk spotted with round yellow lights, where the lighted portholes showed. With a swift motion, Bill cut off the motor. In silence they drifted into that eerie curtain of white between the yacht and the pounding surf to starboard.

"Sweet work," whispered Greasy. "Bill's a pilot, and how."

"Shut up," gritted Jim.

FROM aboard the yacht came a jumble of sounds. Drunken singing, a chorus of bellowing voices. Cursing. A pistol shot that silenced the chorused song.

"Pipe down, you buckos. There'll be heads cracked in a holy second. We ain't got a month to get this over. Drop the yawl over side and we'll go ashore fer the stuff. Easy on that line, ya swab! Dago, send up a rocket so's the boys'll know."

"Ees like I say, Jeem," whispered Don Riley, his knife point against the thick throat of Tovich. "Ees mutiny, Let the yawl go ashore. Then we board the yacht. And eef you know the prayers, Jeem, say them. Ees look damn' bad, I tell you. Tovich, you lousy bom, one sound from you and the neck gets cut open. *Sabe?*"

The motorboat drifted close to the side of the yacht. Bill, at the wheel, whispered into Don Riley's ear. Don Riley nodded. Jim took advantage of the moment to stuff a gag in the mouth of Tovich and bind the Russian hand and foot. The rude gag, donated by Greasy, was a wad of oily waste.

Davits creaked, and oars in the oarlocks. A rocket flared, red against the black sky. The splash of oars sounded. The yawl was pulling shoreward in the fog-filled silence.

Then the motorboat softly bumped the side of the yacht and Greasy was hanging grimly to a lowered rope ladder that hung down from the deck. Luck. Pure luck, that ladder hanging there where the drunken crew had neglected to haul it back up after the cursing One-Eyed Red had

gone down it into the pitching yawl.

Jim Driscoll was climbing the ladder even as the nimble Greasy tied the boat's painter fast to the dangling rope of a davit.

Behind Jim came Don Riley. They were on deck now. A man lurched up out of a lighted hatchway. Don Riley's gun barrel silenced the cry about to burst from his open mouth. Then, from the forward end of the yacht came a woman's sobbing. A man's voice, strained and husky and choked with anger.

"No use weepin', girl. Your friend Driscoll messed up the deal, that's all. Take the bad with the good breaks."

JIM DRISCOLL ran forward, Don Riley at his heels. Two men loomed out of the darkness. Don Riley's knife slithered across a ten-foot distance and Jim's gun barked once. The next moment they burst into the lighted cabin where Kit and Captain Hackett lay bound hand and foot on bunks.

"Speak of the devil," grinned Hackett, "and here he pops up. Cut us loose, Driscoll. And lend a hand. My God, man, I'll give you all the damned gold, all. . . . Thanks, Driscoll."

Jim's jackknife had freed Hackett's ropes. The big captain, battered and half naked, blood spattered, flexed his cramped muscles.

Kit was sobbing in Don Riley's arms. Laughing and sobbing brokenly.

"Driscoll, I never broke my given word to any man. If you have any way of getting me to the island, and if I'm alive when I get done with the job there ahead of me, I'll give myself up to your law and hang from your damned gallows. I'll give you gold. Gold enough to make us all millionaires. Only get me to the island before it's too late."

"I don't want your gold, Hackett. All I want is the chance to kill you as you killed Dave King and Tex Edwards and Bud Fallen, the boys I sent down here to get a line on your opium trade. That's where your dirty gold comes from, Hackett. From the hop dealers. From the poor devils that would sell their souls for a pipe of opium, or a sniff of your damned cocaine. All your big talk of pirate gold was to cover your drug traffic.

"What's on your island that needs your

immediate presence? What reason can you give me for not killing you here and now?"

"Take me there to the island, Driscoll, and I'll show you. King and Tex Edwards and Bud Fallen were killed at port San Angelo, as far as I know. I never saw 'em. Panchito Gomez or Ray Quick would know what happened to 'em, perhaps.

"They came by the way of the Sangre de Cristo. They were warned by the old hermit to turn back. He's there to scare away travelers. They cross the desert at their own risk. . . . Look out behind you, Driscoll!"

JIM DRISCOLL whirled. At that instant Hackett's big fist crashed against his jaw. Before Jim or Don Riley could move, Hackett had leaped out the door and was gone. A faint splash as he dove over the rail. Then the black fog hid him as he swam with powerful strokes, for the island.

Hackett's blow had floored Jim. He got up, grinning crookedly, rubbing his jaw.

"Well, Riley, the big son sure put over a fast 'un. If his sharks don't get him, he'll make the island."

"And when he make' hees island, then he most fight plenty more weeth that One Eye Red and thees other hombres. Jeem, you stay here on thees yacht, you and the señorita. I, Don Riley Rodriguez, go to fight side by side weeth that beeg son of a gon. He ees one against so many. He does not even have the knife. Ees game, that Captain Wylie Hackett."

"What's he want there on his island, Riley?"

"That, my frien', ees sometheeng I do not know. Only eet ees not the gol' he goes for. I go now."

"Not alone, you don't," said Kit. "Jim, just when I fall for this darned Don Quixote, he takes a powder on me and fades out. Where you go, Riley, there also goes Kathleen Mavourneen O'Rafferty. And we stick together until further orders.

"Jim, you got some wrong notions about Hackett. Give the guy a chance. You know why he's swimmin' for land right now? No, you don't. And Riley don't. But I do. Because I'm a woman and I know that only love can make a guy do

what that big bimbo is doin' right now.

"There's a dame on that island and Hackett's goin' to fight for her. And whenever you think he's in the hop runnin' racket, you're wetter than his pants are this minute, Jimmy boy. Give the guy a break. He's white. Look at this." Kit showed Jim and Don Riley a tiny vial filled with colorless liquid.

"He slips me this when he thinks its curtains for him and me. When this one eyed, red-headed egg is makin' his big noise. It's his last little bet, see. His hole card. And he slips it to me. And he does it knowin' that this one eyed yegg is goin' to torture him slow till he croaks.

"Listen, Jimmy, that big boy does things in a big way. He's a loud mouthed, rum guzzlin' ten minute egg, but somewhere inside him he's got a heart. A soft spot, see. It wasn't him that pulled this shanghai gag on me. It was that one eyed guy. Say, he's been white to me and to Flossie. A gentleman.

"Gee, I can't waste time tellin' you boys that Hackett's regular. He's there in the water, swimmin' for shore to fight them other highbinders with nothin' but his bare hands. Give him a break, Jimmy. Let's go!"

"Let's go, then." Jim grinned widely. "And I hope you're right, Kit."

TOGETHER the two men and Kit scrambled down the ladder and into the boat where Greasy and Bill were waiting.

"Got that five hundred on ya, chief?" asked Greasy.

"I'll have it when we get back from the island. You and Bill get this engine started, then pile up the ladder onto the yacht. Don't let anybody on board. And while you're waitin' for us to come back, take a look around. Disarm any men you find and lock 'em up. Start the motor, Bill."

"Listen, guy, you can't ever land wit'-out crackin' up on the rocks," protested Greasy.

"Then that's where we all lose," said Jim grimly. "Get this thing in gear."

"Your funeral, feller," sighed Bill.

The motor came alive with a snort. Bill and Greasy swarmed up the rope ladder. Jim spun the wheel and the boat slid across the black water.

"We're on the lap of the gods now," he gritted.

"A point to the right, Jeem. I 'ave a knowledge of thees island. Always there ees the light at the white cove. Hah! There, straight ahead! There shows the light. Hold up, Jeem. Reverse the . . . *Bueno!*"

Don Riley threw a rope to the swimming Hackett whose head showed like a black ball on the water. They had almost run him down.

"Grab it, Hackett. God knows why, but we're for yuh!" called Jim softly.

Hackett, dripping wet, pulled himself over the side of the motorboat.

"Sorry about that lousy trick, Driscoll. But I had to get ashore. . . . Two women there at the house. My mother, Driscoll, and my wife. Now, dammit, do you savvy?"

"Your mother . . . your wife?"

"You heard me."

Hackett pushed Jim aside and took the wheel. He swung hard to port and barely grazed a big rock.

"Phoney light," he explained. "Have to smell your way in. The light's there to throw these wise pilots onto the rocks."

A few moments later Hackett grounded the motorboat on smooth sand. The yawl from the yacht was beached almost within arm's reach of where they landed. It was empty of men. No guard there to watch it.

Jim jerked open the locker and handed out guns to Hackett and Don Riley.

"Better hide somewheres, Kit."

"You boys go ahead. Kit will look after herself. Good luck. And hurry!"

THE three men were now running up a steep pathway toward the big black shadow of a house, built after the fashion of old feudal castles. Turrets nosing bluntly into the black sky.

A shot ripped the night. The next moment the three men were into a courtyard, shooting at moving forms that ran confusedly about. An open doorway, lighted inside. A hallway that was hung with rare old tapestries. Into a room where a dozen evil looking ruffians were pounding at a large steel safe with crowbars, axes, and sledge-hammers.

The next instant Hackett leaped forward. His rifle thrown aside, his big

hands gripped the throat of a villainous looking one-eyed man with a mop of fiery red hair.

The one eyed mate of the mutinous crew was no mean antagonist. Snarling, biting, gouging, he closed with Hackett. Almost a match in weight and height, the red haired mate with a curved bladed dirk, Hackett with his bare hands, they fought like two beasts. The drunken crew backed away under the guns of Jim Driscoll and Don Riley.

The scuffle of feet as the two men fought. Their sobbing and labored breathing.

The one eyed mate was trying to twist the curved dirk into Hackett's back. While Hackett, his lips pulled apart in a ghastly grin, gripped the one eyed mate's thick wrist.

"The tough bucko mate, eh?" he jeered brokenly.

Hackett crouched, threw his weight to one side. A sickening crack of breaking bone. And as the one eyed mate screamed in agony, Hackett's fist crashed against the man's face. One Eyed Red slumped to the floor, his head twisted grotesquely sideways.

Before Don Riley or Jim could move, that big skipper of the mysterious yacht was among his crew, smashing right and left. The crunch of his huge fists was horrible. His booming roar filled the room. The cowed men, a rough looking lot of sailormen, fell like tenpins under the terrific onslaught.

"*Madre de Dios*, look!"

Don Riley pointed to the sun-baked torso of the berserk Hackett. There, plunged hilt deep in the blond giant's back, was the dirk. Hackett's back streamed blood. But still he fought on alone, smashing into the sullen crew that gave way before him.

Roaring, smashing, cracking heads, Hackett beat his mutinous crew into submission. Until they howled for mercy.

Dawn, fog-drenched, gray as death itself, paled the night. There came the booming fall of the surf on black cliffs. And here in the main room of this big old castle, Captain Wylie Hackett, son of Bloody Jack Hackett, buccaneer, fought down his faithless crew with fists that

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were broken and stained red with blood.

And when he could no longer stand, he dropped on sagging knees to the floor, crawling toward the dead body of the one eyed mate. Even as his big hands gripped the mate's broken neck, the last bit of consciousness left Hackett. His hands viselike about the dead man's throat, he slipped into oblivion.

DON RILEY held the crew under his gun muzzle. Jim bent over Hackett. He pulled the dirk from the big man's back. Hackett's eyes, blood-shot, glazing approaching death, blinked open. His bruised mouth smiled twistedly.

"In my pocket, Driscoll, is the key to the tower room. There you will find the woman I stole from you. Forced her to marry me. But as God is my judge, a wife in name only. . . . Because, you see, Driscoll, I loved her. I thought in time she'd love me. But it was always you, understand, that she loved.

"God, how I hated you. I still hate you because the only woman I ever loved will belong to you, now. The only woman that I ever treated decently. Except that Kit girl. She never gave me a chance to. . . . Get me a drink of rum, Driscoll. I'm about to pull out for a new land. I'm shovin' off. And I'll clear port without any papers. Rum, damn your eyes!"

Jim brought a bottle of rum and a glass. Hackett smashed the glass and drank deeply from the bottle.

"You think you're a man, Driscoll. But you was never the man that Captain Wylie Hackett was. With a woman in every port from Shanghai to Cape Town and from Bombay to Galveston. I've made better men that you walk the plank off that yacht anchored out yonder.

"I don't know why I didn't kill you long before this, Driscoll. The same as I killed that red headed swab just now. I could kill ten like you. But I let you live. I fought your way and let you beat me. And I'm damned if I know why.

"But when you unlock the door to that tower room, you'll find two women. One is the woman you'll marry. The other is my old mother. And Driscoll, if you harm that old lady. I'll come back from hell to get you. Back . . . from hell!"

Captain Wylie Hackett's voice rattled into silence. Jim Driscoll got to his feet. "He's dead, Riley. Keep an eye on this gang."

He held a large key in his hand.

"A Yaqui gave me this key at El Paso, Riley. And with it he gave me a message from the girl I had hoped to marry until she ran off with Wylie Hackett, owner of the Hachita Rancho. The Yaqui told me she was a prisoner here. So I came, buddy, to kill Hackett and take her back.

"Wylie Hackett is dead. I'm goin' now to unlock that door."

"May you find love and happiness, my frien', when the key turns een the lock."

XI

THE huge key grated in the lock. Jim Driscoll pushed open the massive brass-studded oak door. There, inside a long, magnificently furnished room, stood a tall, copper-haired girl in black. In her hand was a jeweled dagger.

With a gasping, soundless little cry, she dropped the dagger. Pale as old ivory, magnificent, the firelight from the huge old Spanish fireplace making her hair into bronze, stood the girl.

"Jim. . . . You came, didn't you, Jim? I was just going to do something terrible. You see, Jim, the only friend I had, the only consoling voice in my world has just died. Wylie Hackett's mother, Jim. A saintly woman whose burdens were many. Her poor little mind gone, she lived on in a dream world.

"Victim of a foolish love, wife of a pirate and mother of Wylie Hackett, she paid her price of suffering. But it was that poor dear old lady, Jim, who kept me from killing myself. Her prayers, her companionship, her sweetness kept courage and hope in me. Her prayers and mine, Jim, are answered."

There was something in the quietness of the girl's voice that told Jim Driscoll more than any words could tell him, the story of her terrible suffering. When he had held her a long time in his arms, she took his hand and led him to the old canopied bed where the little old lady who was Wylie Hackett's mother lay asleep in death. A kindly smile, that might have

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belonged to some saint, had smoothed the gentle lips.

"I don't think she ever suspected, Jim, that her son was not a good man. With her he was as kindly and gentle and thoughtful as ever a man could be. Wylie Hackett worshiped her as few men ever adored a mother.

"When he kidnaped me and brought me here, I saw nothing ahead but horror. But when that old lady took me as a daughter, Wylie dared not touch me. And so I've lived here in this room, companion to her, all these many months."

"Barbara," said Jim gently, "Wylie Hackett is dead. We're going to leave here now. Later, when you've rested some and things shape up all right, we'll bury the little old lady. We'd better go now."

As Jim led her from the room, Kit stood waiting in the hallway.

"I thought I'd better sort of trail along, Jimmy. And while you and Riley are mopping up and so on, us gentler sex will powder our noses and get acquainted.

"Riley slipped me the news and while I don't know your name right now, miss, it ain't hard for even a dumb cluck like me to know that I'm just about to kiss the future Mrs. Jim Driscoll. And take it from Kit O'Rafferty, you're both gettin' a great break. Honey, let's go into some nice quiet room and weep. I'm just dyin' for a grand weep. Jim, Riley wants you."

JIM grinned and left them there, their arms about one another's shoulders. He found Don Riley sitting in an old Spanish chair strumming a guitar, singing some Mexican song. The crew of the erstwhile pirate yacht stood with their faces to the wall, hands lifted.

"The first one that moves," explained Don Riley, nodding toward an array of evil-looking knives that had once been wall decorations, "gets the knife een the back. By the way, Jeem, I am afraid that *muy maldito* Tovich has escape'. He got loose from the ropes and he ron away."

"Where did he run to, Riley?"

"Always that Tovich ees the damn' fool. He ron away een the boat. The boat she hit the rocks and lost all to 'ell. The sharks weel get the bellyache tonight. Listen, my frien', to thees song which I am make op

to seeng to my Katrina. Ees a swell song, I tell you."

"Save it, Riley. How do you know Tovich made that break?"

"My Katrina—how you call heem?—Keet, she ees watch. Ees smart, that señorita who ees to be the Señorita Rodriguez. She see the whole theeng. Now we mus' pay that Greasy an' that Beel for the boat, no? And w'at the 'ell we use por money? I jus' open the safe and w'at you theenk, she's empty.

"And instead of the money ees the note from that Captain Hackett. The note say that many years ago he have the parrot bird and the parrot bird talk about the buried treasure. Thees gol' ees een a cave where nobody can go excep' when the tide she's most low.

"And me, I now theenk them pirates ees not so smart, because thees letter of Captain Hackett ees say that the tides ees carry away the chests of gol'. Only a small amount ees left. And that ees already spent. And the rest ees there where the shark fishes sweem."

"WELL," said Jim, "I reckon we can scrape up enough to pay off Greasy and Bill. Raymond Quick, Pan-chito Gomez, Tovich, and Hackett have passed on. Two governments will be grateful for their passing to the tune of a tidy fortune."

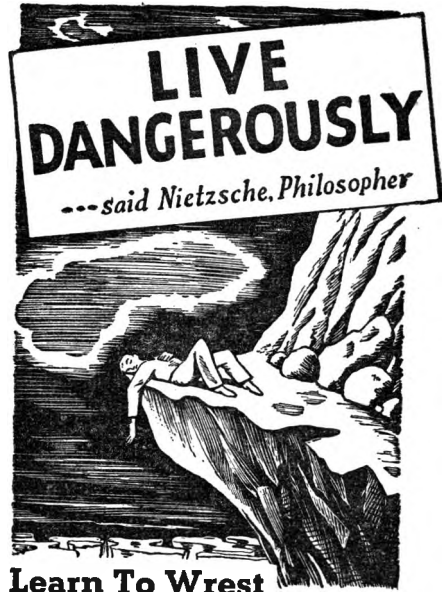
"Si, my frien'. There ees also the reward on Harley Hamlin and Riley Rodriguez. Then you 'ave clean up the whole damn' works, Jeem. There weel be enough to pay off thees Greasy and Beel. Also enough to buy for Jeem Driscoll the wed-ding suit, no?"

"Hamlin's played fair with me, Riley. And as for you, I'd quit rather than connect you with this smuggling racket."

"Thank you, my frien'. But I do not deny the fac' that Don Riley Rodriguez ees the bes' damn high-jack' een Mexico. But not *por* thees opium. I high-jack the gons and bullets off these other hombres. I geeve thees gons and bullets to my *hombrecitos*. I lead them eento the fight.

"And then, when I mus' leave the fight to come to the Hackett Island, the Señor Harley Hamlin ees carry on.

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And *mañana* thees grand oncle of mine ees make me the colonel. I shall ride down the street to the palace of Chapultepec. Behin' me comes my gran' army, encludin' the soldiers of Captain Lopez.

"Ees not such a bad guy, that Lopez. Only ees get the high hats and now he weel be the lieutenant colonel under Don Riley.

"And I weel speak to these oncle of mine about my frien' Harley Hamlin, who weel make the 'ell of a swell army officer *por* Mexico. W'at you going to do, Jeem?"

"I'm goin' back to ranchin', Riley. I took this job for the excitement there was in it. And now my work here is done. I'm all washed up and ready tuh go home."

"Now that I 'ave got back to be good frien' weeth my oncle," said Don Riley, "that ees mean that I also and likewise get back the Rodriguez Rancho. Ees damn' good rancho. One hondred thousand acres. Planty cattle, planty horses, planty grass and water. Me, I am a soldier and too busy to look after thees rancho. I make you my half partner. Do not make no arguments about thees, Jeem."

"I'll buy in with yuh, Riley, and be glad to."

"Buy een? Your money ees no good here. You are my frien'. *Bueno*. Ees all settle'. But before we go to the City of Mexico, there ees one more theeng to do. I 'ave one more promise to keep. And you, my frien', you shall also come weeth me. We got to take thees parrot bird to 'Andy 'Ands, the 'ermit of the Sangre de Cristo."

"I don't quite get the idea, Riley, but I'll . . . God!"

A low rumble. A sickening rolling of the floor under them.

"**E**ARTHQUAKE!" cried Jim.

They ran for the room where Kit and Barbara had gone. Even as the rock walls crashed around them, they dragged the women to safety. Hackett's crew were already running to the shore of the island.

Jim and Don Riley lifted the girls into the boat. Jim worked in frantic haste over the motor. The sea was running in huge oily swells now and behind them the

(Continued on page 126)



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crash of the stone castle was like a cannonade. Now the motor broke into life. The little boat was tossed about madly.

A sullen rumble. A wave that tossed the motorboat like a cork. Then a deadly, ominous calm broken by a guttural rumble.

"Look!" gasped Jim. "Look back! The island! It's gone!"

An awed silence gripped the four. There in the gray light of dawn, fog drenched, eerie, there remained nothing of the tiny island. It had gone, taking down into the sea its pirate lore, its dead mistress, its half-mad owner's dead body.

In silence, they made the yacht. Greasy and Bill, badly frightened, helped them aboard. And though they waited for two hours, searching the deep green surface of the morning sea, they found no trace of the yawl or its crew.

MEN still hunt for treasure at Whalebone Cove. Prospectors and travelers still stop at the deserted rock hut at the Sangre de Cristo. And those who have the temerity to look around will find the grave of the hermit who once dwelt there.

Near the city of Mexico is a ranch. There live Jim Driscoll and his wife. You'll find Harley Hamlin, grave, courteous, white of hair, at a modest home in the City, with his pipe and his spot of Scotch and his books. Whenever Colonel Riley Rodriguez can spare the time, he and Hamlin ride out to the Rodriguez Rancho.

And when the ladies have retired and the three men sit there in the candle light, while Billy Bones chants off the location of pirate gold, the men talk on into the night of treasure hunts. And always, before they finish their last glass of wine, Don Riley will sing to the soft strumming of his guitar.

His song is as old as Mexico. It tells of the love of a man for a maid. And when three glasses are lifted in a good-night toast, it is to love, not gold, that they drink.

"To love of a woman. To dreams of adventures. To the comradeship of friends by a fireside. *Señors, Salud!*"

DO THE DEAD RETURN ?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."

The young Englishman was amazed as he looked around the temple where he was believed to have lived and died. It seemed uncannily familiar, he appeared to know every nook and corner of it, yet—at least in this lifetime—he had never been there before. And mysterious was the set of circumstances that had brought him. Could it be a case of reincarnation, that strange belief of the East that souls return to earth again and again, living many lifetimes?

Because of their belief that he had formerly been a lama in the temple, the lamas welcomed the young man with open arms and taught him rare mysteries and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which have enabled many to perform amazing feats. He says that the system often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, can be used to achieve brilliant business and professional success as well as great happiness. The young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps



and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

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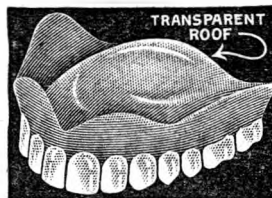


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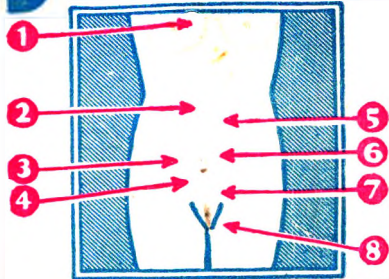
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