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Novelet

HULBERT FOOTNER

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ARGOSY

SEPT. 18

WEEKLY



The Return of Smooth and Gilda in
BLUE-WHITE and PERFECT
by Borden Chase

A Money-Making Opportunity for Men of Character

EXCLUSIVE FRANCHISE FOR AN INVENTION EXPECTED TO REPLACE A MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR INDUSTRY

Costly Work Formerly
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Now Done by Themselves
at a Fraction of the Expense

This is a call for men everywhere to handle exclusive agency for one of the most unique business inventions of the day.

Forty years ago the horse and buggy business was supreme—today almost extinct. Twenty years ago the phonograph industry ran into many millions—today practically a relic. Only a comparatively few foresighted men saw the fortunes ahead in the automobile and the radio. Yet irresistible waves of public buying swept these men to fortune, and sent the buggy and the phonograph into the discard. So are great successes made by men able to detect the shift in public favor from one industry to another.

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a revolutionary, simple invention which does the work better—more reliably—AND AT A COST OPEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

Not a "Gadget"—
Not a "Knick-Knack"—

but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

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Some of the Savings
You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for \$11 which formerly could have cost them over \$200. A building supply corporation pays our man \$70, whereas the bill could have been for \$1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative \$15, whereas the expense could have been over \$1,000. A department store has expense of \$88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over \$2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of
the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a \$7.50 order, \$5.83 can be your share. On \$1,500 worth of business, your share can be \$1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth \$6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth \$67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has
Nothing to Do With
House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A Connecticut man writes he has made \$55.00 in a single day's time. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

No Money Need Be Risked

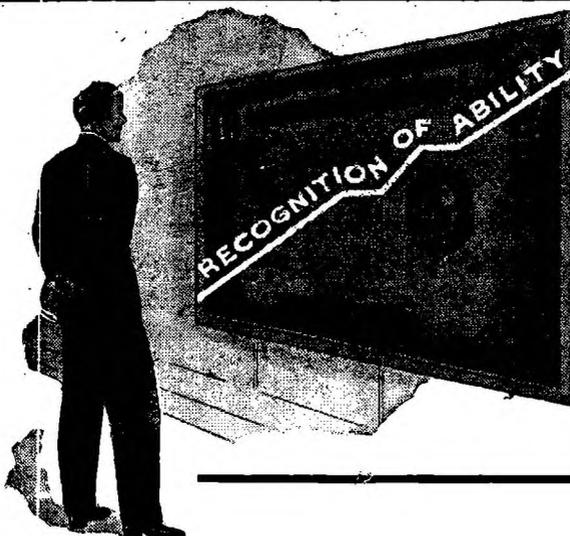
In trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. If you are looking for a business that is not overcrowded—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you set foot—regardless of size—that is a necessity but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, get in touch with us at once for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, use the coupon below—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. Address

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ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

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THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, N. Y.
WILLIAM T. DEWART, President

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EST. 1866

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MEN PAST 40

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Blue-White and Perfect

By BORDEN CHASE

Author of "Midnight Taxi," "Once for a Thousand," etc.

CHAPTER I

PROPOSITION

IT WAS a small place on West Forty-sixth Street not far from Broadway. A white-faced bartender ran a damp cloth across the polished surface of a bar that led back from the door. There were small tables with red-and-white checkered cloths where men sat and talked in low-voiced conversation. Outside a late-summer sun slanted past the tall buildings of New York's midtown section. But in Riley's Cafe the lights were on. It was always dark in Riley's. His customers didn't like the sun.

A tall blonde came down the short

flight of stairs from the street. She rested an elbow on the bar and stared into the dimly-lit depths of the room. Her eyes traveled slowly across the faces of four men at a nearby table. One man smiled and lifted his glass invitingly. She looked at him—through him—and turned her eyes to the next table.

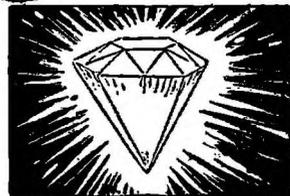
He nudged one of his companions, a thin-lipped man with a scar on his cheek.

"Nice-looking dame," he said. "Who is she?"

"Lay off," said the man with the scar. "That's Gilda Garland."

"So what?"

"Plenty."



"Never heard of her. Maybe she'd like a drink."

"If you'd spent more time in New York you'd know better," said the man with the scar. "Gilda doesn't drink with small timers. And little guys that get smart, sometimes get hurt. Better stop looking at her and drink your beer."

He had spoken in a voice that was little more than a whisper but Gilda had heard him. She smiled and patted his shoulder lightly as she walked past the table. It was the old routine. A newcomer to Times Square being warned by one of the thin-lipped crowd who knew her by reputation. And Gilda was glad this was so. She nodded to an acquaintance at another table and answered a waiter's greeting. Soon she was facing a well-dressed, wide-shouldered man who had kicked back his chair and risen to his feet in a single motion.

"Hello, Rod," she said and extended her hand.

Rodney Martell lifted her fingers to his lips in a European gesture that was natural to the man. Then he stepped back a pace or two, let his eyes move slowly from Gilda's neat black turban along the lines of her well-cut linen suit to a pair of small suede sandals. He bowed and smiled. Then he motioned Gilda to a chair.

"Each year makes you more beautiful," he said quietly. "I don't know how you do it, Gilda."

"That sounds like a back-handed compliment, Rod," she said. "I'm not exactly ancient."

"Hardly," he said. "But I didn't expect you always to look as if you were waiting for your eighteenth birthday."

"Let's compromise and call it the twenty-eighth."

"I'd never believe it."

"I would," said Gilda. "There was a

gray hair in my comb this morning."

"Nonsense," said Martell and motioned to the waiter. "Too early for a Martini?"

"Just one. I'll drink while you talk."

WHEN the waiter had taken the order Martell rested his elbows on the table and stared into Gilda's eyes.

"Are they gray or green?" he asked. "I've never been able to determine."

"A little of both," said Gilda. "But you didn't ask me to meet you here to talk about the color of my eyes. What's on your mind, Rod?"

"Must we talk business? I haven't seen you in a few years, Gilda. Tell me about yourself."

"Tell you?" said Gilda. And she laughed. "Stop kidding, Rod. There isn't much you don't know about me."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I've worked for you."

"And made quite a bit of money," he said. He lifted the glass the waiter had set on the table and touched it to the rim of Gilda's. "Paris—Marseilles—the Riviera. Those were good times."

"For you, perhaps," said Gilda. "But not for the suckers who tried to beat your wheels."

"They got a run for their money," said Rod. "I always used an honest wheel. Roulette doesn't have to be dishonest to make money for the house. You know that, Gilda."

"And I know that two and two make four," said Gilda. "But right now I'd like to know why you are in New York."

"To make money."

"Gambling?"

"Naturally."

"And is that why you asked me to meet you?"

"A good reason, isn't it?"

Gilda put down her glass. A slow smile touched her eyes as she shook her head.

"That's out," she said. "I haven't worked a wheel since—"

"Since you met Smooth Kyle," finished Martell.

Gilda's eyes lost their smile. "What do you know about Smooth Kyle?" she asked quickly.

"Quite a bit," said the gambler. "He's one of the best men working for the Treasury Department. A fast thinker. Not much of a detective but hell with a gun." Martell sipped his drink and looked across the rim of the glass at Gilda. "His name fits him. Smooth—smooth as silk—that's Kyle. And"—there was a pause and a knowing grin—"Gilda Garland is in love with him. She expects to marry him."

"Is that all?" said Gilda.

"That's enough for the present."

"Then you should know better than ask me to work for you, Rod."

Martell shrugged a shoulder. "No harm asking. You haven't married him as yet. And it costs money to live your way in New York."

"I get along."

"How?"

"That's my business," said Gilda.

"Fair enough," said Martell. "But where is Kyle now?"

"That's his business."

"In other words—you don't know."

"Do you?"

"Maybe I do."

For a time neither spoke. Gilda studied the man before her and her mind raced back to their last meeting. A richly-furnished gambling establishment on the Riviera. Rod Martell had always played it big. He was a clever, suave man. He knew his way around in any of the big cities of the world. His deals ran into big money—thou-

sands, hundreds or thousands. And now he was in New York. He was interested not only in her but in Smooth Kyle. He was waiting for an opening, some word from Gilda that would give him an opportunity to get to the business at hand. Rod Martell never hurried. But Gilda was impatient.

"What's the play?" she asked. "Where does Smooth Kyle fit into any deal of yours?"

"Who said he would fit in?"

"Stop stalling."

"Don't jump to conclusions," laughed Martell. "I've merely asked you to have a drink with me and talk about old times. I was under the impression you might like to work in one of my places."

"I heard you the first time," said Gilda.

"I might find room for your friend Smooth," suggested the gambler.

"That doesn't make sense," said Gilda. "You know Smooth is a Treasury Agent."

"He can always resign."

"And you would like him to do that?"

"Very much," said Martell. "So much that I would pay him three hundred dollars a week to work for me."

GILDA shook her head in bewilderment. "I don't get it," she said. "Why do you want Smooth to quit the Department?"

"Because I'm no fool, Gilda," said Martell. He leaned forward across the table and tapped a thin finger against the stem of Gilda's glass. "A few years ago Smooth Kyle was assigned to one of the toughest cases ever handed to a Treasury Agent. Before it was over Smooth had killed a few acquaintances of mine and sent the rest to jail. You

should remember that, Gilda. I think it was your first meeting with Kyle."

"I remember," said Gilda slowly. "I was working for Bet-a-Grand Rudd. He decided to crack into the narcotic racket and—"

"And Smooth cleaned up Rudd and the rest of the crowd," said Martell. "He fell for you in a big way and gave you a chance to clear out when the crash came."

"Never mind that," said Gilda.

"But I do mind it," smiled Martell.

He opened a silver cigarette case and offered it to Gilda. She shook her head. Martell lifted an eyebrow, tapped a cigarette against the back of his hand and looked into Gilda's eyes.

"Some time later," he continued, "Sid Bragoff and some of the boys decided to try a little counterfeiting. And now Sid is dead."

"He asked for it," said Gilda.

"Of course," agreed Martell. "And during that little affair you were helping Smooth. Am I right?"

"What of it?"

"A great deal," said Martell. "It proves Kyle is either very lucky or very dangerous. Perhaps both."

"That shouldn't worry you," said Gilda. "His job with the Treasury Department won't interfere with your racket. He's not interested in gamblers."

"But he might be interested in my latest business venture."

"What kind of business?"

Martell nodded toward a ring Gilda wore on one of her slim fingers. The stone reflected in blue-white tones the lights set in the wall niches.

"Diamonds," he said. "I'm an importer."

"Importer?" Gilda smiled. "Don't you mean smuggler?"

"Call it that if you wish," said Martell. "I'll admit that I neglect to pay duty."

"And the Treasury Department is after you?"

"Yes," said Martell. "Now do you understand why I am willing to pay Smooth Kyle to work for me?"

"Don't be a fool!" said Gilda. "If you know anything at all about Smooth you know he doesn't play ball that way. You can't bribe him."

Martell laughed. "I wouldn't think of such a thing."

Gilda reached across the table and helped herself to a cigarette. She drained her glass, set it firmly on the table and reached for a match. Martell lit one and held it to the tip of her cigarette. With blue clouds swirling about her blond head Gilda caught Martell's gaze and held it. Her lips were thin when she spoke and there were tiny bulges at the base of her jaws.

"Come clean, Rod," she said. "We've both been polite long enough. Don't toss pretty words at me. If you've got a proposition—let's have it!"

"Fair enough, Gilda," said Martell. The lightness was gone from his voice. "I represent a group of men who are smuggling stolen diamonds into this country. We've got a foolproof system and if we can operate for about three more years we can retire with a fortune. Three years—that's all."

"I'm listening," said Gilda.

"Recently the wholesale jewelers made a complaint to the Treasury Department and an investigation was started. We've run circles around the Federal Agents for the past six months. But the other day we learned Smooth Kyle is about to be assigned to the case."

"And you think you can buy him off?"

"We've got to."

"Why? Are you afraid of him?"

"We're afraid of any man with Kyle's connections."

"Connections?" said Gilda. "Meaning—"

"Kyle has too many friends in the smart money crowd. And he's got a nasty habit of being lucky. We can't afford to gamble."

"But even if he doesn't take the case," said Gilda, "some other Treasury Agent will get it. You can't buy them all off. In fact, I doubt if you can buy any."

"We're not worried about the others," said Martell. "We've got a system that will keep them guessing until we've made our pile and quit."

"But you think Smooth will trip you?"

MARTELL leaned back in his chair and looked through the smoke that hung lazily above the table. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his coat and smiled.

"We can't afford to think, Gilda," he said. "We've got to play safe."

"You're not doing that now," she said. "Suppose I tell Smooth what you've just said? Suppose he cracks down on you and tosses you into a Federal jail?"

Martell's smile was broad. "Conversation isn't evidence," he said. "Besides—Gilda Garland isn't a fool, even if she is in love."

There was a moment of silence. Martell nodded to the waiter who carried the glasses to the bar to be refilled. Somewhere nearby Gilda heard a clock ticking off the seconds. She flicked the ashes from her cigarette and studied

the red mark left by her lipstick on the tip.

"No," she said at length. "I won't tell him."

"Naturally," said Martell. "And while we are on the subject of love, have you ever thought how tough it will be to live on a Treasury Agent's pay when you are married?"

"Let me worry about that," said Gilda. "You stick to your story."

"It's finished," said Martell. "If you can persuade Kyle to work in one of my gambling houses I'll pay him three hundred a week. Perhaps five hundred. With that you could both have a nice little apartment in town—a summer place in the Connecticut hills—a few horses—a car—"

"Quit it," said Gilda.

"Five hundred will buy just about anything a newly married couple could ask. It will mean security. Safety. No more guns going off in dark alleys. No more—"

"Hold it," snapped Gilda. "I didn't like that last crack."

"About guns going off in dark alleys?"

"Yes," said Gilda. "It sounded bad."

Martell ground out the stub of his cigarette against the ash tray. He took another from his case, held a match to it and watched the flame.

"When a man's luck runs out he doesn't last long in Smooth's game. A gun goes off and—" Martell snuffed the flame. He dropped the dead match into the tray and looked at Gilda. "Some of those little homes in the Connecticut hills are beautiful."

"In other words," said Gilda, "if Smooth doesn't sign up, you intend to kill him."

"What else can we do?"

"I'll answer that question with another," said Gilda. "If you're afraid

of him, why haven't you killed him? Why are you trying to buy him off?"

"Don't be an idiot," laughed Martell. "It isn't exactly healthy to kill Treasury Agents. We're not looking for trouble. If Smooth Kyle were found dead in an alley every man in the department would be turned loose with orders to shoot first and talk later. And that's something we'd like to avoid."

"But if I can't make Smooth quit—"

"I'm sure you can if I help you," insisted Martell.

"Answer my questions!"

"You know the answer, Gilda," said Martell. "And the orders won't come from me. There's a bigger man than Rod Martell running this party."

"Who is he?"

"That's *my* business," laughed the gambler.

CHAPTER II

PRESSURE

A GROUP of band boys in white flannels and Panama hats stood at the corner of Fiftieth Street and talked wisely of race horses they would never see. Lean-faced touts nodded wisely in agreement, took their two-dollar bets and hurried off to another group of suckers. Hackmen lounged against their cabs, looked hopefully past the glare of lights that arched the Main Stem but saw little promise of rain in the sky. To them it was just another summer night. But to Smooth Kyle it was the big night.

He nodded to one of the old-timers on the hack line, pushed open the swinging doors of Landy's Restaurant and hurried to a table near the back wall. Two months of Florida sunshine had tanned his face and the backs of his hands. Otherwise he was the same quick-moving, easy-laughing New

Yorker who had taken off his hack badge some years ago to become one of the Treasury Department's smoothest operators. He tossed his hat onto a rack and put one hand on the shoulder of a girl seated at the table. Then he grinned.

"How's about a little kiss for the wandering boy?" he said.

Gilda Garland put down her coffee cup. She turned and studied him thoughtfully. For a moment she did not speak. Her eyes started at Smooth's polished shoes, traveled upward over his blue-serge suit, paused for an instant where his shoulder holster bulged the material under his left armpit, and then widened in apparent recognition as they reached his face.

"Fancy meeting you here," she drawled in an exaggerated British accent. "Mr. Kyle, I believe." Then her eyes narrowed a trifle and the accent was gone. "Where the hell have you been—and why?"

"Which means I don't get the kiss," laughed Smooth. He dropped into a chair, ordered coffee from the waiter and helped himself to one of Gilda's cigarettes. "You're gorgeous, Beautiful—getting better looking every minute. Did you miss me?"

"Oh, not at all. I'm used to having men promise to marry me and then go chasing off to Florida." She glanced at her compact mirror, powdered the tip of her nose, snapped the bag closed and leaned forward. "Talk fast, Handsome—the last time we saw each other you were on your way to a jewelry store to buy little Gilda a wedding ring. Then I got a wire from Miami saying, 'Sent here on important job by Department. Letter follows.' And I'm still waiting for the letter—you tramp!"

"All right—all right. Take it easy and let me explain," said Smooth. I

stopped in at the Department and they assigned me to a Florida case. It looked like a pushover and I expected to grab a plane back to New York in two days. But things didn't break so well and I stayed another day—"

"And then another and another," said Gilda. "Of course you *couldn't* write and there were no telephones in Florida and—"

Smooth lifted both hands above his head in complete surrender. He often wondered if it were not worth while annoying Gilda for the sake of seeing her angry.

"You win," he said. "I'm sorry. And now we've settled that, how about jumping down to City Hall tomorrow and grabbing a marriage license?"

"How about jumping off the end of a dock?" suggested Gilda. "I've been doing a lot of thinking while you were away, Handsome. First of all, Gilda isn't a gal who likes to sit at home and watch the rubber plants bloom while friend husband is bouncing hither and yon for the Treasury Department. And—more important—what do we use for money?"

"The pay check. It's not much but it's steady and honest. And maybe the boys in Washington will get big-hearted and make me District Supervisor and—"

"Yes—maybe!" said Gilda. "And then we can buy a nice little house in Canarsie and take in a movie once a week."

"Oh, you want big money, eh?" said Smooth. "What would you suggest—that I knock off a bank?"

"No, stupid—just use those worn-out brains of yours and connect with some smart change. You're not dumb, Smooth. You'd have checked out long ago if you were. Why not make your wits pay you a decent living?"

SMOOTH stared into his coffee cup as though looking for an answer. He had known for weeks that a show-down was due between Gilda and himself. When the Treasury Department assigned him to that Florida job he had purposely neglected to write.

Smooth knew Gilda was not the girl to be satisfied with a small income. She had worked her way up in New York's night life from a thirty-dollar-a-week chorus girl to a position where big-shot gamblers were eager to pay her thousands of dollars to manage their game rooms.

There had never been any talk of "reform" or leading a different life. Gilda was a product of New York. Smooth was a Federal man with little or no respect for the life of a gangster. He enjoyed his work, but Gilda liked big money. And because of that there seemed to be an unsurmountable wall between them.

"Well—come out of the trance," said Gilda. She leaned across the table, caught one of Smooth's hands and held it in her own. "Because I suggest that you make some real money, is that any reason for you to drift into a stupor?"

"Not at all," said Smooth thoughtfully. "I like the idea, Beautiful. But how? How does a fellow like me step into the thousand a week class?"

"Stop playing Santa Claus for the Treasury Department. You hop around all over these United States taking quick shots at gun-slingers. You out-smart dozens of guys who are costing the Government a fortune. And then the Department pays you off with a nickel's worth of mixed cakes at the end of the month."

"So what?" snapped Smooth.

"So you're a sap!" answered Gilda. "Look—do you see that guy standing at the bar?"

She nodded toward a tall man who was twirling the thin stem of a cocktail glass between his fingers as he stared out at the crowds on Broadway. He was slightly under six feet, wide-shouldered and dressed in a conservative gray suit. Smooth turned in his chair and looked him over carefully. As he did so, the stranger turned also and their eyes met. Smooth found himself staring into a pair of dark brown eyes that seemed to laugh a little. Beneath them was a full-lipped mouth and a firm chin.

"Yeah, I see him," said Smooth as he again faced Gilda. "Looks like someone on a vacation from Hollywood. What about him?"

"He's Rodney Martell—and half of Europe knows him as Monsieur Rod, the gambler. He operated a dozen places on the Continent and now he's in New York. I've told him about you."

"What of it?"

"Plenty," said Gilda. "If you hook up with him you'll learn what real money feels like."

"You mean quit the Department?"

"Why not?"

"But I like the work, Gilda. I get a great kick out of it. Besides, the customs crowd want me to handle a job that looks like a beauty. Want to hear about it?"

"No, I don't!" snapped Gilda. "It's the same old stuff. They knock you around like a golf ball and all you get is credit. Why don't you get wise to yourself and quit?"

FOR a moment Smooth said nothing. He had expected almost anything from Gilda but he did not think she would be so violently opposed to his work. After all, she knew what he was doing when they met. And there had never been any hint from him that he

would change. Promotion was slow and big pay even slower in the Department. But there was a kick to the work that more than compensated Smooth. Now Gilda was asking him to quit cold and tie up with the very type of man Smooth enjoyed fighting.

"One of us is crazy, Beautiful," he said. "I'm willing to listen to a sensible proposition, but when you suggest a racket like that . . ."

"I see," said Gilda. "Smooth Kyle, the fair-haired Boy Scout of the Treasury Department would rather chase diamond smugglers than cut in on a deal that would pay him a few hundred a week."

"Diamond smugglers?" said Smooth slowly. "How did you come to mention that?"

Gilda laughed and sipped her drink. "Is there really a moon over Miami?" she asked.

Smooth looked at her and his lips were unsmiling. Less than three hours ago he had sat with a group of Treasury officials and discussed a case that was causing an overdose of headaches in the Customs House. The wholesale diamond merchants had filed a complaint stating that the country was being flooded with small stones—one and two karat stuff—that were obviously being smuggled. The merchants had put it squarely up to the Customs and Smooth had been called in.

He had been assigned to the case, and then he had left the Customs House and stopped at his hotel for a quick shave and a change of clothing. After that he had come directly to this midtown restaurant to meet Gilda. And already *she* knew the nature of the job on which he was working. It didn't make sense—but it was the sort of thing he had grown to expect from this blonde with the laughing eyes.

"Who tipped you?" he asked.

"How far is up?" she evaded. "And how about more coffee?"

"Never mind the smart cracks. Suppose you lay a few cards on the table and tell me where you got your information."

"You're supposed to be a detective. Well—detect. You took the assignment and promised to stop the smuggling. It was all supposed to be a deep, dark secret. Nuts! Half of Broadway is telling the other half what a chump you are."

"And you're telling me to be smart and quit?"

"Smooth . . . please be sensible and get out of this Treasury racket before they carry you out feet first." There was no laughter in Gilda's eyes now. She held Smooth's hand tightly, so tightly that her nails made little crescents in his palm. Her voice was low and earnest. "You've been lucky, Handsome. You've bucked the smart boys and beat them. But they'll get you. They're sure to get you."

"Forget the sob stories, Gilda," he said. "I want to know where you got your information. How do you know I'm on a smuggling job?"

"It doesn't make any difference how I know," she said. "The fact that I *do* know should convince you you're bucking some fast workers. They know all about you—know how you work and the chances you take. Every move you make will be tipped off. And you'll wind up in a sack in the river."

The man at the bar set down his glass and walked to the table. He bowed slightly and smiled.

"I beg your pardon," he said, and there was just a trace of an accent in his speech. "Could I intrude for a moment?"

"Hello, Rod," said Gilda. "Grab a

chair and be comfortable. I want you to meet Mr. Kyle." She turned to Smooth. "This is Rod Martell."

Smooth pushed back his chair and extended a hand. "Glad to know you, Martell. Gilda says you've got a proposition for me."

"That was good of Miss Garland," said Rod. His grip natched Smooth's for firmness and there was amusement in his voice as he continued. "She and I were great friends in Europe. And I have often heard about the cleverness of her friend Smooth Kyle. You do not mind if I call you Smooth?"

"Call me anything you want but talk fast. What's the deal and where do I fit?"

"A partnership," said Rod. "I intend to open a few places here in your country. You would be a valuable asset."

"Not interested," said Smooth. He stood up and reached for his hat. "Glad to have met you." He tossed some change on the table, hooked one hand under Gilda's arm and drew her to her feet. "Let's grab a little fresh air."

"Always the gentleman, eh, Smooth?" said Gilda in annoyance. She turned to Rod Martell. "Keep that deal open, Rod. I'll pound some sense into this egg's head and we'll look you up."

"As you wish," said Rod and his shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. "And as for you, Smooth—may I advise that you listen to Gilda?"

"You can advise anything you please," said Smooth. "Personally I don't like the way you wax your moustache. Besides I'm busy."

SMOOTH hurried Gilda through the restaurant, turned north on Broadway and headed for Columbus Circle. Gilda walked silently by his side until they reached the entrance to Central

Park. Here she seated herself comfortably on one of the wooden benches and faced Smooth.

"Well, Stupid, what was the idea of the Garbo act?" she said. "I introduce you to a fellow who wants to cut you in on a sweet deal and you say, 'I vont to be alone.' How come?"

Smooth grinned and fumbled through his pockets for a cigarette. He wanted to tell Gilda that a picture of Rod Martell had been shown to him by the Customs' officials as one of a group of suspects. For months the authorities of a half-dozen countries had tried to pin something on Martell with no success. They were sure he was part of this new diamond-smuggling outfit.

That Martell should be in Landy's when Smooth walked in to meet Gilda might have been coincidence. But that he had tried to cut Smooth in on a gambling deal made it seem like a set-up. Again, there was the fact that Gilda knew Smooth had been assigned to this case. She had suddenly taken a decided stand against his work in the Treasury Department and was trying to force him out of it. And when he put it all together it didn't sound right.

He trusted Gilda. He loved her and wanted to marry her. But for some reason she was not running this deal from the top of the deck. He had to know why and he decided it might be a good idea to play stupid in the hope Gilda would loosen up and tell what she knew. When she again asked about his rudeness to Rod, he laughed.

"Oh, I just didn't like him," he said. "Besides, I wanted to talk to you. This new case is a chance of a lifetime. Friedlander, the head of the Bureau of Investigation, has given me permission to handle it any way I want. I figured you and I could move right in and—"

"*You and I?*" snapped Gilda. "You think I'm fool enough to buck the mob who are mixed up in this deal?"

"Why not? They're probably a bunch of petty-larceny crooks with few brains and less nerve. We could clean it up in a month."

"Don't kid yourself, Handsome," she said. "This crowd will run circles around you. And they're plenty tough." She leaned closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder. "Listen, Smooth—if you insist upon being a Boy Scout, why not cash in on your daily good deed?"

"What do you mean?"

"Go into business for yourself—be a private dick. I'll play ball with you and we can clean up some real money. If you want to chase smugglers, all right, we'll chase them. But let's get something besides credit for the job."

"Oh, you mean cash in on the Treasury payoffs to people who turn in the smugglers?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. It—"

Suddenly his arm went out, knocked Gilda from the bench and threw her to the walk. A car swung wide in the traffic that looped around Columbus Circle and from the side window a pair of automatics spun a shower of lead into the Park entrance. Smooth fell forward. His arms were around Gilda and he was holding his shoulders between her and the line of fire. For a moment the slugs clipped patches of grass from the lawn and ricocheted from the cement walks.

Then the guns stopped and Smooth was on his feet.

"See you at your hotel!" he called and ran toward a taxi parked at the curb.

"Wait a minute—you chump!" cried Gilda.

SHE scrambled to her feet, ran after Smooth and threw both arms around his shoulders as he started to step into the cab.

"Quit it!" he snapped. "Do you think I'm going to let a pair of amateurs chuck lead at me and get away with it?"

Gilda turned to the driver. "Down Broadway to Forty-fourth, and don't pick any buttercups on the way."

She pushed Smooth into the cab, stepped in beside him and slammed the door.

"And I suppose you were going chasing up Broadway after those two mugs, eh?" she said.

"Yeah, until you jammed things. What's the idea?"

"Oh, just trying to keep you alive until the preacher does his stuff and makes me Mrs. Kyle." She put her hand on his arm and shook it. "Why don't you grow up? You've been in the racket long enough to know when a slug really means business. If that pair of gunners was really out to get you they'd have sprayed you with a Tommy-gun—and they wouldn't have missed."

"And that was just a friendly warning?"

"You're alive and that's the answer," she said quietly. "A mob that will hand it to you in Columbus Circle will try anything. Why not be smart and turn down this assignment?"

"Oh—that's it, eh? First Rod Martell offers to cut me in and then he sends his boys after me with another argument. Well—suppose you tell me where I can find Rod and we'll have a quiet little talk."

"It's no wonder I love you, Smooth," laughed Gilda. "Any guy as thick as you would have to be lovable. No—you don't get to see Martell alone or any of that crowd until you tell me

you've quit the Treasury Department."

For a while Smooth watched the lights of midtown Broadway flash past the windows of the cab. It was obvious the mob had talked to Gilda. In some way they had convinced her it was dangerous for Smooth to fight them. Probably she had made a compromise in which Smooth would be cut in on some big money in return for not handling the case. Gilda was far too clever to suggest this openly to him. She would realize it was merely waving a red flag before a bull. And she had tried to make him quit the assignment by saying the financial return was inadequate to the risks he would take.

The suggestion of hers that he open an office, become a private detective and cash in on his knowledge, had been a shrewd move. In fact, there was a chance she would have put it across if Rod Martell had not sent his gunners to lend weight to the argument. Now Smooth realized this was going to be a personal affair between Martell and himself. Besides, that suave foreigner had been a little too intimate in his tone with Gilda.

"How long have you known Rod?" he asked.

"Oh, for years. He's not a bad chap when you get to know him. Thinks well of himself but so do most of you males."

"Yeah, but we don't all wax our mustaches when we grow them. By the way, where did you say he was living?"

"At the Aquarium with the seals," she laughed. "Oh, Smooth why don't you relax and be nice? Whenever you try to outsmart me I feel like reaching up and taking a bite out of your ear."

"In other words, if I stay on this job I get no help from you—that it?"

"But you're not going to stay on this job," she said quickly. "You can't.

Not unless you feel like telling me to go to hell."

The cab swung into Forty-fourth Street and Smooth tapped on the window as it drew before his hotel. He passed the driver some change, stepped out of the cab and turned to face Gilda. As she leaned forward to get out Smooth kissed her, put both hands on her shoulders and pushed her back into the seat.

"Go to hell, my dear," he said and he slammed the door.

CHAPTER III

BON VOYAGE

A CLOUD of blue tobacco smoke hung in heavy folds in Smooth's hotel room. And it whirled into logy circles as he paced the floor. Seated comfortably in an easy chair, his feet crossed on the edge of a nearby table sat McNeary. This hard-faced Federal man had been Smooth's Supervisor in the Bureau of Narcotics. And it was to him Smooth turned when he needed advice. They had worked together many times. McNeary knew and respected Gilda, even though he had at one time tried to send her to a Federal penitentiary. But he was puzzled by her latest move.

"There's only one thing I don't understand," said McNeary. "You feel that Rod Martell is mixed up in this smuggling game. But when Gilda gave you a chance yesterday to hook up with him you refused. Why didn't you play it through and at least grab a few leads?"

"I'm dumb, Chief," said Smooth, "but not that dumb. Rod would have opened a few gambling joints and kept me so busy I wouldn't know whether it was day or night. And with Gilda to help him, they'd have kept me a thou-

sand miles away from the real job."

"But you don't think Gilda is mixed up with that crowd?"

"How do I know? I'm as much in love with Gilda as I'll ever be with any woman. And I think she is with me. But I've told you what happened and she refuses to say a word more."

"Naturally—after you told her to go to the devil."

"I was more direct than that," smiled Smooth ruefully. "But you should have heard what she said when I called her on the phone this morning."

"I can imagine," grinned McNeary. "But suppose you bring me up to date on the case. Just what do the Customs' crowd actually know?"

"Very little," said Smooth. "There's a flock of small diamonds drifting into the country. The jewelers think this syndicate has opened a chain of stores throughout the country and is disposing of the stones a few at a time, mixing them in with enough legitimate stuff to cover their deals."

"That's all very well," said McNeary. "But the margin of profit on smuggled diamonds wouldn't allow for that sort of expense."

"It would if the stones were stolen."

"You mean stolen in Europe and smuggled into this country?"

"That's right," said Smooth.

"Then you're up against a gang of European crooks as well as smugglers."

"Not necessarily. The Customs' men have figured most of the stones come from Antwerp. It's all new-cut stuff, according to what the wholesale jewelers say. And Antwerp is the central market. They cut and polish thousands of diamonds there every week and it isn't particularly difficult for the cutters to grab a stone now and then."

"You mean the stones are first stolen

by men in the trade?" asked McNeary.

"That's just a guess. But if it were true, a man could collect quite a few diamonds on short order in Antwerp. However, he'd need a bill of sale to take them into any other country."

"Oh, I get it," said McNeary. "Something like the stories you hear of the diamond mines in South Africa. The laborers can pick up the stones and hide them but they can't get them away from the mine. They're x-rayed and fluoroscoped—something like that—and the stones show up."

"Exactly," said Smooth. "And these birds in Antwerp can steal the stones but they can't sell them in Antwerp. And anyone who tries to take them into another country is nailed by the Customs."

"So they smuggle them in, eh?"

"Right. And it's my job to catch them."

McNEARY poured himself a drink and sipped at it thoughtfully. For a time he stared at the ceiling and said nothing. Smooth continued his pacing and waited for McNeary to come through with an idea.

"They've watched all the regular points of entry?" asked McNeary.

"Sure—they've gone over every known smuggler with a fine comb. Result—nothing! And now what?"

"I give up," grinned McNeary. "It seems as though you've lost your contact down Rod Martell. If you think he's mixed up in it, he's your best bet."

Smooth smoked thoughtfully for a moment and then reached for the phone. "Get me the Continental Hotel," he said to the operator and winked at McNeary.

"Calling Gilda again?" asked McNeary.

Smooth nodded. "Miss Garland,

please," he said into the transmitter. "Gilda? Now don't start yelling—this is Smooth."

"Oh, it is?" said Gilda's voice over the wire. "Now what's eating you?"

"That Rod Martell guy. I'd like to meet him and rib up a deal. Where can I find him?"

"In Landy's in a half hour. Good-bye!"

"And that's that," said Smooth to McNery. "That gal can think faster than anybody I've ever met. I want another crack at Martell so she picks a spot like Landy's for the meeting."

"And you're going to keep the date?" asked McNery.

"Sure, but not the way she thinks. Stick around, Chief, and make yourself comfortable. I'll be back later."

He crossed to a closet and grabbed a peak cap and light topcoat. He pulled the cap well down over his eyes, slipped into the topcoat and faced McNery.

"Just a hackman at heart," he laughed and opened the door.

When he stepped into Forty-fourth Street it was a little after the noon hour. There was a line of cabs parked in front of a nearby cafeteria. Smooth looked in through the large plate window. After a quick study of the men at the tables he hurried inside. He crossed to a hackman who sat hunched over his rolls and coffee. Smooth dropped into a chair beside him.

"Lo, Chiseler," he said. "Still shoving a hack?"

"Well, if it ain't Smooth Kyle," said Chiseler. "Long time no see, feller. What's new?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Smooth and drew a bill from his pocket. "How long since you earned one of these in an hour?"

"A two pound note!" said Chiseler. "Feller, I ain't even *seen* ten dollars

in years. Who do I have to kill to get it?"

"Just let me take that egg crate of yours for about an hour," said Smooth. "Nothing crooked, no knock-off or anything."

"Ah, there must be a catch to it," said Chiseler. "You mean I let you take my rig for an hour and I get ten bucks?"

"That's the gag."

"Gimme the ten but, remember, I don't know what you're doing. And if the cops ask me, you stole the car."

Smooth tossed him the bill and hurried to the cab at which Chiseler pointed as he stuffed the ten into his pocket. It was a company cab, the same as hundreds of others on the street. Smooth kicked over the starter, cruised east to Sixth Avenue and doubled back to Broadway. He swung in at the end of the line in front of Landy's Restaurant and hunched down in the seat.

There were three other cabs ahead of him and as they pulled away with calls Smooth moved slowly toward the head of the line. From this position he could see Rod Martell standing at the bar glancing occasionally at his wrist-watch and twisting nervously at the ends of his waxed mustache. When a couple left the restaurant and approached Smooth's car he shook his head and motioned them to the next cab in the line.

At length Rod tossed a bill on the bar, shrugged and left the restaurant. He paused for a moment, looked up and down Broadway and crossed to Smooth's cab.

"Take me to the foot of West Fifty-fifth Street, driver," he said and seated himself in the cab.

SMOOTH grunted and swung west through Fifty-fifth Street and headed for the river-front.

"Got a match?" asked Martell when the cab bounced across Ninth Avenue.

"Yeah," grunted Smooth.

He found a package in his pocket and passed them through the window without turning to face the passenger. Martell took them, lit a cigarette and tapped the matches against Smooth's shoulder.

"Here you are, driver," he said. "Rather a pleasant day for this time of year."

"Yeah," grunted Smooth.

"Not much on conversation, are you?"

"Yeah."

"Any idea of the time?"

"Nope," said Smooth and kept driving.

He wondered if it would not have been smarter to let some other hackman take this call and then to have followed him. Martell might be making conversation to while away the time. But on the other hand he might have caught a glimpse of Smooth's face and decided to have a little amusement. Smooth stepped down on the gas, hurried the car 'crosstown and swung into the wide expanse of Twelfth Avenue.

"Whereabouts?" he asked.

"Straight ahead—the Cuban Line."

The cab pulled in at the steamship pier and a porter opened the door. Martell tossed a dollar bill to Smooth, waved away the change and walked along the dock to the gangway. A moment later Smooth had parked the cab and was running toward the same gangway. When he reached it Martell had gone aboard and was nowhere in sight.

"Did you see a tall bloke with a trick mustache come here?" Smooth asked a steward at the head of the gangway.

"A tall—er—bloke?"

"Yeah, looked like ready money. Sort of French . . ."

"Oh, you mean M'sieur Martell. He went to Miss Clonet's cabin. Why?"

"He left something in my cab," said Smooth. "I want to give it to him."

"Very well. Let me have it."

"Let you have it, my eye!" snapped Smooth. "Just show me the way to this Clonet dame's cabin."

"No—no! That's irregular."

Smooth dipped into his pocket and found a few one dollar bills. He waved them slowly before the steward's nose and then pushed them into the side pocket of the white mess-jacket.

"Does that fix things?" he asked.

"Well . . ."

A moment of hesitation and the steward nodded. He hurried down a short passage to a stair, mounted this and turned out onto the upper deck. Smooth trailed along at his heels and stopped when the steward pointed to the door of a cabin.

"That's Miss Clonet's cabin."

"Steward, old sock," said Smooth, "you're a man after my own heart. When a few dollars find their way into your pocket, you don't ask foolish questions, you act. And just between you and me I think I can show you a way to make a few more of those beautiful, green dollars. What's the answer?"

"Er—nothing irregular, I hope?"

"You surprise me!" gasped Smooth. "I merely wish to grab an earful of the conversation going on in that cabin. Nothing irregular about that."

"But . . ."

Smooth found a five-dollar bill and waved this slowly before the eyes of the steward. Gently, he tucked it into the man's pocket. The steward started to protest.

"The five is yours," said Smooth.

"I say—what sort of nonsense is this?" said the steward. "Dollar bills—five dollar bills—"

"Oh, that's all right. Just my way of being cute. You see Miss Clonet is a very dear friend of mine and I *think* she's interested in Mr. Martell. So, her father, the Duke, asked me to keep an eye on her. Understand?"

"Not at all."

"That's swell," said Smooth. "Now we've got that settled. Where can I hear what's going on in that cabin?"

"Oh—a romance. Is that it?"

"Ah, you guessed it," said Smooth in mock surprise.

The steward grinned knowingly and led Smooth to a cabin that adjoined Miss Clonet's. He put his fingers to his lips, tiptoed to the wall and leaned his head against it. Smooth nodded and waved him to the door.

"Nice going," he said. "Now just take a slow walk around the deck for a while. And by the way, is this cabin taken for the trip?"

"Not as yet," said the steward. He paused and looked at Smooth. "Er—I hope everything is quite regular about this proceeding."

"Scram!" said Smooth and closed the door.

SMOOTH took a drinking glass from the rack in the bathroom, placed the open end against the cabin wall and set his ear against the bottom. Through this improvised dictaphone the voices of those in the next cabin came quite plainly.

". . . and I would have been here sooner but for an appointment," came the suave tones of Rod Martell.

"I had hoped you would be with me on this trip," said a lighter voice. And Smooth decided that if Miss Clonet's face and figure matched her voice she must be well worth looking at.

"So sorry, my dear," said Martell. "But the next trip perhaps."

"Yes. In a few weeks. The last time I saw Murchison he—"

"Have you anything to drink in the cabin?" interrupted Martell.

"Ah, shut up!" whispered Smooth, and then grinned at the ridiculousness of his own whispered order. Miss Clonet had been about to mention names that might have helped considerably. But Martell had stopped her by his request for a drink. Smooth pressed his ear harder against the glass and hoped for the best. He heard the clink of glasses, a laugh and then both people in the next cabin apparently decided to carry on their conversation in whispers.

For at least ten minutes nothing came through to Smooth but the low hum of words that were not distinguishable. He tried the glass against the other ear with no better results. At length the voices rose and he was able to piece the words together.

". . . can't stay any longer," said Martell. "I expect a call from Gilda . . . about three . . ."

"Very well," said Miss Clonet. "*Au revoir*—until next time."

The cabin door slammed and Smooth put down his glass. He rubbed his ears, wondering who Murchison was and just where Gilda fitted into this mess, and whether it might not be a good idea to kick Martell off the dock and save himself a lot of trouble. It was just like Gilda to mix in on a deal and learn all the answers. And it was also typical of that adorable blonde to refuse to tell them to Smooth.

"I say, there," said the steward as he poked his head in the cabin. "There's no use fussing about in here, you know Mr. Martell has gone."

"Fancy that," said Smooth. "Well, I'd say t'hell with him and let's have a drink."

"I can't do that. I'm on duty."

"Come to think of it, so am I," grinned Smooth and hurried along the deck.

When he went down the gangway he headed toward a phone booth in the steamship office. A moment later he was talking on the wire to McNeary.

"Throw a few socks into a bag, will you, Chief?" he said.

"What's the idea?" demanded McNeary.

"I'm on my way to Cuba—The Princess Nola—Cuban Line. She leaves at four and it's nearly that now."

"Are you crazy?"

"No—busy! I'll get in touch with the Department and fix that end if you'll pack my bags and get them over here. 'Bye!"

He dialed the Customs Chief and after a ten-minute conversation stepped out of the booth and smoked a cigarette while awaiting a return call. When the bell rang he grabbed at the receiver.

"Yeah, this is Kyle. Everything set?"

"All set," said the Chief. "You get the cabin you asked for—B 24. Your ticket will be at the Purser's office. Goodbye and—"

Smooth tossed the receiver on the hook, hurried down the dock and climbed the gangway. Again he was met by the steward and stopped.

"Back again?"

"Well, as I live and breathe, it's Oswald," said Smooth. "Haven't seen you since my last trip, Oswald. Show me to the Purser's office."

"My name is Tibbs, sir—Freddie Tibbs. And why do you wish to see the Purser, may I ask?"

"Yes, you may ask," said Smooth. "I'm a passenger, a jolly old vacationer going to Cuba. And my cabin number is B 24."

"Right next to Miss Clonet's?"

"Unless they've moved it," said Smooth.

AT the Purser's office Smooth found a passage had been arranged and with Freddie Tibbs marching at his side he returned to B 24 and made himself comfortable.

"If it's not presuming, sir," said Tibbs, "may I ask what this is all about?"

"Hanged if I know," said Smooth. "Just decided to go to Cuba and here I am."

"Won't Miss Clonet be surprised!"

"I'll say she will," said Smooth. "And so will Gilda."

"Er—who?"

"Skip it," said Smooth. "Can you arrange for me to sit at Miss Clonet's table?"

"You'll have to speak with the Chief Steward, sir."

"You do it for me," said Smooth.

He handed Tibbs the last bill in his pocket and pointed to the door. Then he paced the cabin floor and wondered whether he was actually following a lead or whether he was making a complete fool of himself. He had acted upon a hunch—no, it was something stronger than that. Martell was definitely part of the smuggling mob and it was reasonable to suppose anyone with whom he was connected was also in on the deal. This Miss Clonet might be merely an acquaintance. But when Martell had interrupted her conversation it had sounded as though she was not merely traveling for pleasure. Well, thought Smooth, if his luck were good this trip would be worth while—if it were not, by the time the ship returned to New York Gilda would have cooled off a bit. And that was something.

There was a knock at the door.

"Your bags, Chump!" said McNeary and pointed to three pieces of luggage that Tibbs was setting down. He put his hand to his coat pocket in search of some change for Tibbs but Smooth threw a pillow at the steward and chased him out of the cabin.

"That burglar has me broke before the trip starts," he said. "Never mind tipping him. Dig down and let me have a few dollars."

"Didn't the Department put any money to your credit with the Purser?" asked McNeary.

"I haven't had time to find out."

McNeary handed him a few bills and laughed. "And now, would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

Smooth sketched briefly the events that had taken place and told McNeary he had decided to follow Miss Clonet to Cuba. He asked McNeary to give a detailed report to the Customs Chief and tell him to put a few men on Martell.

"What about Gilda?" asked McNeary.

"Tell her I went to Alaska to hunt seals," said Smooth. "If she knew I was on this ship she'd probably get a plane and drop eggs on me all the way to Cuba."

"Lord help you when you get back. That girl loves you, Smooth. She wants you to quit the Department and she's not going to stop trying until you do."

"You're telling me? Say—she wants me to set up a private agency and go into competition with you birds."

"Might not be a bad idea," said McNeary thoughtfully. "It's a sure bet you'd make plenty of money."

"Yeah? Has Gilda been singing a tune in your ear?"

"No, but I'd think it over if I were you. You'll have plenty of time. Nice quiet hours on the Atlantic and—"

THE door opened and a tall, exquisitely-dressed young woman stepped into the cabin. Her navy-blue tailored cape was opened and beneath it a trim suit seemed moulded to her figure. The skirt was slightly shorter than the length favored by the style experts but when Smooth glanced at her ankles he could readily understand why she had taken this liberty.

"Oh—I beg your pardon," she said slowly. For an instant she stood still as though adjusting her eyes to the darkness of the cabin. She looked at McNeary - then turned and smiled at Smooth. "I—how stupid of me. I thought this was my cabin."

Smooth had leaped to his feet at the sound of her voice and now crossed the cabin quickly and extended his hand.

"Please don't run away," he smiled. "Maybe I've made the mistake. This might be your cabin at that. I've just come aboard and the steward may have dropped me in the wrong place. My name is Kyle and this gentleman is Mr. McNeary."

"It's nice to know you," she said, and slipped her hand into Smooth's. "But rather awkward under the conditions. I'm sure the mistake is mine." She was holding the door open and now she glanced at the number and laughed. "B 24—how foolish of me. I'm next door in B 23."

"I'd call that luck," said Smooth and turned to McNeary. "Did you order some drinks, or shall I?"

"Maybe Miss—er—the young lady will join us?" said McNeary and smiled at her. "I don't think I caught your name."

"Miss Clonet," she said. "And if you'll excuse me, I don't believe I'll have a drink just now. Later, perhaps. Do look me up."

She stepped out of the cabin and

Smooth bowed low as the door closed. Then he turned to McNeary and slapped him on the shoulder.

"That's the dame next door—the one Martell was talking to. Not bad, eh?"

"Not good, either," said McNeary. "Gilda could think circles around her. You don't imagine that was a mistake—her coming in here?"

"Of course not. Mistakes like that don't happen. She wanted to look me over and pulled the oldest gag in the book to do it. And what's more, she knew we were wise to her and didn't care."

McNeary rang for the steward and grinned at Smooth in evident amusement.

"How about putting two and two together?" he asked. "If she wanted to have a look at you—*why?*"

"Martell may have pointed me out."

"And how did Martell know you were booked for Cuba?"

"Probably got a squint at me when I drove him here to the boat. Clever egg, that Frenchman."

"Suppose he wanted to get rid of you," said McNeary. "If he spotted you at the restaurant and knew this dame was going to Cuba it would be a swell way of sending you off chasing rainbows. In fact, he's probably told her to make a play for you, marry you and take you around the world on a honeymoon. He may even know you're a sucker for a trim pair of ankles."

"Hey—be nice!" laughed Smooth. "You're jumping to some cockeyed conclusions and you sound like Gilda with a mad on."

"I'm talking sense," snapped McNeary. "If there's one place in the world where diamonds *don't* come from, it's Cuba. They grow pineapples down there. You can pin one on your chest on the way home."

"Wait a minute, Chief. Maybe we're both thinking too fast. That Clonet dame might have seen me coming aboard and decided I was worth knowing. Sort of a pleasant companion on the trip to—"

"Would you like to take a screen test?" yelled McNeary. "Or shall I try to get you a job doubling for Clark Gable?"

"Now, I don't mean—"

There was a tap on the door and Tibbs stuck his head into the cabin. "You rang, sir?" he said.

"Yes. A bottle of Scotch and some glasses. Make it fast," said McNeary.

"Hold everything!" ordered Smooth and caught Tibbs by the arm. He pulled him into the cabin and tapped an insistent finger against the steward's chest. "Now think hard, Tibbs, me son—did Mr. Martell come aboard *after* I left?"

"*After* you left?" Tibbs tilted his cap and scratched above his ear thoughtfully. "You followed him aboard, sir. Remember?"

"Sure I did. And I followed him off, too. But then did he come back again?"

"Of course. And you followed him back, sir. Remember?"

Smooth's wide mouth grinned.

"That's all, Tibbs, old sock. Get the Scotch," said Smooth and pushed him out the door. He turned to McNeary and lifted his hands in an explanatory gesture. "Simple, eh? Martell must have seen me when I phoned you, so he ducked back and tipped that sweet-looking number next door. Probably told her I was the big bad wolf."

"And you start off with Martell and his crowd holding all the aces in the deck. They've got you spotted right from the go and they'll make a chump of you. What do you expect to do about it?"

"How do I know?" asked Smooth. "I never claimed to be a master mind, Chief. All I can do is tag along and hope for the breaks. If I can make the boys get rough I may get somewhere. If not—well, it looks as though it might be an interesting cruise."

TIBBS brought the Scotch, poured it and started to leave.

"Ten minutes to sailing time," he said. "And I've arranged to have you placed at the table with your friend, sir."

"His *what*?" said McNeary.

"Miss Clonet, of course," said Smooth quickly. "I've told Tibbs Miss Clonet and I are old, old friends. But you better grab a quick drink and run or you'll be bound for Cuba with me." He turned to Tibbs. "Er—what's Miss Clonet's first name, Tibbs?"

"Oh, I say—you really should know that, sir," said Tibbs. "It's Sonia—Miss Sonia Clonet. And she's very lovely, may I add."

"We'll take that up later," said Smooth. "But how do you happen to know so much about Sonia?"

"She's made the passage on this ship at least a dozen times. And Mr. Martell travels with us at times."

Smooth took Tibbs by the arm and escorted him to the door.

When he again faced McNeary he was grinning.

"Did you hear that?" he asked. "Martell and Sonia travel back and forth to Cuba, but you say there's no diamonds there? What do they go for? The trip?"

"That's something for you to worry about," said McNeary and got up from his chair. "I'll send word along to the Customs Office and anyone who tries to bring stones in from Cuba will meet with an unpleasant surprise. In the

meanwhile, enjoy yourself and look out for dark-haired women."

"Oh, you noticed that Sonia is a brunette, did you?"

"Yes, I did. And when I get back to headquarters I'm going to go through the files. I expect to find a girl five foot nine, weight about one thirty, black hair, blue eyes, small ears, small mouth and straight nose. *One* of her aliases will be Sonia Clonet and I'll bet my last dollar she's been picked up for everything from smuggling to murder."

"Chief, when you look, you certainly get an eyeful," laughed Smooth. "And when you get her pedigree send it to me by radio. It might come in handy. I've got a hunch that Sonia and I are going to be great pals."

They walked along the deck to the gangway and for a moment McNeary said nothing. Smooth put out his hand and McNeary grasped it. Then he caught Smooth by both elbows and stared at him.

"Keep your head down, Smooth," he said quietly. "Your luck has been better than good for a long time. But one little slug can change all that."

"I'll be careful, Chief," said Smooth. "And give my regards to Gilda. Tell her that marriage gag still goes—when I finish this job."

McNeary nodded and walked down the gangway. Smooth stood for a moment and watched the waving crowds on the dock. Stewards were calling "All visitors ashore!" and the ship's deep-throated whistle sounded a series of sharp, warning blasts. Passengers and visitors hurried about the passageways, laughing, shouting, stopping for a last handshake or farewell kiss. It was the usual scene at sailing time of any passenger ship and suddenly Smooth felt very much alone.

CHAPTER IV

LOOK PLEASANT PLEASE

SMOOTH walked toward his cabin and was about to open the door when he heard laughter and voices in the adjoining room. Evidently Sonia Clonet had friends who were delaying their departure until the last moment. The door to her cabin was open and Smooth glanced in.

"Hello, there," called Sonia.

She was standing near a table upon which was a variety of bottles. Freddie Tibbs, the steward had been pressed into service as bartender and was busily mixing drinks. Standing near the door were two men, both well-dressed in conservative clothes and each held a drink raised in salutation to Sonia. With them was a dark-haired girl. When Sonia called, her friends turned and smiled at Smooth. He grinned in return and pointed toward the dock.

"Better hurry up," he said. "You'll be left aboard when we sail."

"Always time for one more," said Sonia. "Come in and join us."

"Glad to," said Smooth and entered the cabin.

"He's my neighbor," said Sonia by way of introduction. "I think his name is Mr. Kyle." She turned and checked off her friends, "Miss Bartlett—Mr. Downs—Mr. Craven."

There were hurried handshakes and murmured acknowledgements. Smooth looked closely into the face of each but could not remember having seen any of them before. Then Tibbs touched his elbow and handed him a glass.

"Scotch and soda, sir," he said.

"Nice work, Tibbs," said Smooth.

"Let's drink to a successful trip." said Sonia.

"A great idea," agreed Smooth, and raised the glass to his lips.

But Sonia's trips are always successful," said Miss Bartlett. "Let's drink to something new."

"Always successful?" said Smooth.

Sonia laughed. "They're business trips, Mr. Kyle."

"That's interesting," said Smooth.

"What type of business?"

"You'll have lots of time to learn that on the trip to Cuba," said Miss Bartlett. "Finish your drink. It's time for us to go."

They started toward the door and the steward reached down and picked up a beaded bag that had been lying on one of the chairs.

"Don't forget your purse, Miss," he said and handed the bag to Miss Bartlett.

"Oh, thank you, Tibbs," she said. "Careless of me."

She tucked the bag under her arm and stepped out onto the deck. Downs and Craven followed and Smooth stepped aside to let Sonia pass. Tibbs had already started to tidy up the room. There was another warning blast from the ship's whistle and Sonia's friends hurried toward the gangway. Smooth walked to the rail and waved to them. The pungent odor of a heavy perfume came to him and he turned to find Sonia leaning against the rail at his side. In her hands was a small movie camera of the sixteen-millimeter type and she was pointing it at Miss Bartlett as she walked along the gangway.

"Is that a hobby of yours?" asked Smooth.

"Yes," said Sonia. "I've a wonderful collection of films. Most of the good shots were taken at sailing time. Like this, for instance."

Miss Bartlett had stopped and was waving her bag toward Sonia. The camera ground out another few feet of film and Sonia waved a last fare-

well. Then she turned to Smooth and slipped her arm through his.

"Let's go somewhere else," she suggested.

"Anywhere you say," said Smooth.

"How about a few pictures of you? We could get a good action background against the cargo booms at Number One hatch."

"Against the what?"

Sonia's laugh was pleasant and intimate. "Evidently you haven't been to sea very often," she said. "Don't you know what a cargo boom is?"

"Never heard of one," said Smooth.

SONIA pointed to the long arm of a derrick that swung from the forward mast of the Princess Nola. There had been some last-minute cargo and part of the crew was busy closing and battering down a hatch. Above them the long stick swung slightly to the motion of the ship as the tugs nosed her from the dock. The boatswain hurried from his work at the lines and shouted orders. Smooth saw him pointing to the boom. Everywhere was noise and seeming confusion. Men milled about like scurrying ants. In the midst of it all Smooth saw the white jacket of a steward. He laughed and pointed.

"Look at Tibbs," he said. "That fellow seems to be all over the ship. What's he doing down there?"

"Goodness knows," said Sonia. "You're apt to find Freddie Tibbs just about anywhere. But I was going to tell you about the cargo booms."

"So you were," said Smooth.

"That one over there has to be lowered. Let's go down and use it as a background for a picture. Shall we?"

"Why not?"

Smooth helped her down the ladder that led to the forward deck and they picked their way through piles of rope

and scattered gear. A member of the crew waved them back but Sonia ignored the warning and walked forward.

"Are we supposed to be on this part of the deck?" asked Smooth.

"Of course not," said Sonia. "That's what makes it interesting." She glanced toward the sun that was slanting over Jersey. She made a few adjustments of the camera lens and then she pointed to a place on the deck. "Stand over there, Mr. Kyle. Just laugh and wave your arms. Be natural and we'll get a good shot."

"Why not let me take one of you first?" he asked.

"No. You're first. And take off your hat so the brim doesn't shade your eyes."

Smooth took off his hat and walked toward the spot she had indicated on the forward deck. He heard one of the crew shouting at him but decided to ignore it as Sonia had done. This picture business might be Sonia's idea of a good joke on a Treasury Agent but Smooth could afford to humor her. If she were working with Martell in this diamond smuggling deal, Smooth expected to have her behind bars before she could show these pictures to her friends. And if things went wrong it would be a simple matter for him to take the films from her cabin some evening during the trip.

"How's this?" he asked. He faced the camera and waved an arm.

"Back a little," said Sonia. "I want a long shot first. Stand closer to the boom cradle."

"The which?" laughed Smooth.

He had pretended an ignorance of ships and meant to carry it through. During his years with the Treasury Department Smooth had often found that it paid dividends to appear stupid.

There was no reason Sonia should know he had served a hitch in the Navy during his youth.

A member of the crew was taking turns off the topping lift—a stout cable that ran from the tip of the boom to a block in the mast, and from there down to a cleat near the deck. When Smooth glanced at him the man looked away and called to another sailor.

"Farther back," said Sonia. "And a little to the left. I want the sun on your face for this shot."

"How will this do?" asked Smooth as he moved to the spot Sonia indicated.

"That's good," she called from her place near the rail. "Now smile and wave."

Smooth waved, then turned slightly away from the camera. Something was troubling him. Something wasn't right. His eye caught the shadow of the boom outlined against the bridge of the ship. The shadow moved. Instinctively Smooth leaped forward and threw himself to the deck. There was a scream of cable as it whirred through the block on the mast. Men shouted. And from the bridge came an officer's warning cry. Then the huge cargo boom crashed down upon the deck.

FOR a moment Smooth did not stir. He heard Sonia Clonet screaming as the boatswain and a sailor helped him to his feet. He grinned and waved an assuring hand and then turned to face an officer who was hurrying toward him.

"Are you hurt, sir?" asked the officer.

"Not at all," said Smooth.

"I can't imagine how you were allowed on this part of the deck. Please come aft with me now and see the ship's doctor. There may be a sprain or—"

"Just a minute," said Smooth. "I'd

like to have a talk with the man who was lowering that boom."

"But that won't be necessary, sir," said the officer. "Not now, at least. Later there will be a complete investigation."

"I'd like to make my own investigation," said Smooth. "In fact, I'd like to sock that guy between the eyes for luck."

"I don't blame you," laughed the officer. "However I'm afraid you'll have to pass up that pleasure. May I ask your name, sir?"

"Kyle—Peter Kyle."

"Mine is Lawson—second officer."

"Glad to know you," said Smooth. "An now it's my turn to ask a question."

"Certainly."

"Did you notice whether that deck-hand had a turn around the cleat when the boom fell? Or did he throw the topping lift clear and let it ride?"

"I think he had one turn on the cleat."

"Then he could have checked it when it started to fall. Why didn't he?"

"I'd suggest you ask that question at the investigator, Mr. Kyle. It's very logical."

"You bet I will," said Smooth and started aft.

There was a touch of soft fingers on his arm and he turned to find Sonia at his side. Her face was white and there were marks on her lips as though they had been held tightly between her teeth. The camera was tucked under one arm and she looked questioningly at Smooth.

"Are you all right?" she asked nervously.

"A hundred per cent," said Smooth. "But I could stand a drink."

"So could I," said Sonia. "Shall we have one in my stateroom?"

"Not a bad idea," said Smooth evenly. "Let's go."

The door of Sonia's stateroom closed behind them. The sun was low and the room was dimly lit by the light that came through the curtained ports. Sonia crossed the small parlor that was part of the suite and stood at the door that led into her sleeping quarters.

"I'm—I'm afraid you'll have to mix your own drink," she said. "I don't feel—very well."

"No?" said Smooth.

"Perhaps if I lie down for a few moments—"

"And after I've mixed a drink I can bring it in there," said Smooth. "Then I can sit in a comfortable chair and talk while you rest. That it?"

"Yes, if you wish."

"Nuts!" snapped Smooth.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Cleopatra invented that come-on and dames like you have been using it ever since. Personally, I like to do my talking across a table. Especially to a girl who has just tried to kill me."

Sonia paled.

"Are you out of your mind?" said Sonia.

"Some people think so," said Smooth. "But I don't."

"Then what on earth are you talking about?"

"Act your age, Sonia. You know that boom was supposed to scatter Smooth Kyle all over Number One hatch. And you know it wasn't an accident."

Sonia's fingers were tight about the door knob. She swayed and steadied herself. Smooth saw the color come and go in her cheeks. There was a tremble in her lower lip and her head dropped.

"Really—I am ill," she said.

"Sit down," ordered Smooth. "Right there by the table."

SONIA sank limply into the chair and accepted the drink Smooth poured for her. Her hand shook as she lifted it to her lips and Smooth decided this was a pretty piece of acting—if it was acting.

"Did Rod Martell give you those orders?" he asked.

"What orders?"

"To stand me under a boom and kill me?"

"No one gave me any such orders. It was an accident."

"Do you know Rod Martell?"

"No—yes. Yes, I do."

"Make up your mind," said Smooth.

"Of course I know him. He's an old friend of mine."

"That fellow in the crew who dropped the boom—do you know him?"

"No!" Sonia was emphatic in her denial.

"Who told him to drop the boom?"

"I don't know," said Sonia. Then quickly, "No one told him. It was an accident."

Smooth was insistent. His sharp, mocking glare made the girl nervous, jittery. Her long hands toyed restlessly with her scrap of lace handkerchief.

"Stop lying," said Smooth. He swung one leg across the edge of the table and leaned toward Sonia. "We're not kidding each other, Gorgeous. You know who I am and you're out to get me. You missed on your first try but it's a long way to Cuba. Somewhere between here and Havana you may work up enough nerve to try it again."

"Yes?"

"And the best way to stop you would be to toss you gently into the ocean the first chance I get."

"Why don't you?" asked Sonia.

Smooth laughed. "Why isn't your hair red?"

"It is red," said Sonia and now there

was a trace of a smile on her lips. "But why don't you turn me over to the captain if you're so sure I tried to kill you?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Do I?"

Smooth picked up Sonia's glass and helped himself to a sip. He studied the rim for a moment and abruptly set the glass on the table. When he looked at Sonia there was that expression on his face Gilda Garland had come to know and love. Laughter was there, but it was as though Smooth were enjoying a joke upon himself. A joke he was ready to share. And there was a certain recklessness in his eyes that shaded the laughter—made it sharp. Like a gambler who stakes his last chip on a long shot and calls himself a fool as he places the bet.

"Get this, Sonia," he said. "I know Rod Martell is smuggling diamonds. And I know you are helping him. But I don't know how on earth you're doing it."

"Now isn't that too bad," laughed Sonia.

"It's practically breaking my heart," said Smooth. "But whatever system you're using is damn clever. So clever that you don't intend to change it. In fact, you're going to keep using it right under my nose. Nothing I can do can stop you. Is that right?"

"Why ask me?" said Sonia lightly. "You seem to know all of the answers."

"Not all of them. But I'll learn them as I go along. When I get the last answer, you're going to spend about ten years in a Federal jail."

"Poor little me," laughed Sonia.

"It may be a laugh to you now," said Smooth. "But the food isn't so good and the nights are long when you're on the inside looking out."

"You sound like the big bad wolf. Are you trying to scare me?"

"No," snapped Smooth. "Just trying to make a smart deal with a wise dame. How about it?"

"I'm listening."

"FAIR enough," said Smooth. "The set-up is this—you're in up to your neck and Rod Martell won't let you out. You know too much. As long as Rod wants to play in this racket, you have to string along. Am I right?"

"You might be."

"Now I'm betting my life against a weekly pay check that I can catch you and Rod napping. So I must be pretty sure I'm going to win. Right again?"

"Keep talking."

Her eyes were steadier now, almost defiant.

"If you play ball with me, I'll guarantee you go in the clear when the crash comes. And for your bit, you get the total award given by the Customs Department. Every cent of it."

"That award goes to informers, doesn't it?" asked Sonia.

"Yes."

"Do I look to you like an informer?"

"You look like a very beautiful dame who thinks she is smarter than she really is."

"Wait until you see me in evening clothes," laughed Sonia. "I'm even more beautiful."

"Does that mean you won't play ball?"

"It means that I'd like to get ready for dinner," said Sonia.

Smooth rested the palms of his hands on the table top and swung his legs while he smiled. "Have it your way, Sonia. Personally, I think you're a chump."

She crossed toward him and cupped one hand beneath his chin. For a time

she stood there, looking down into Smooth's eyes while a vague smile played about her lips. Smooth watched the pulse in her throat as it throbbed slowly, rhythmically. He caught an elusive scent of heady perfume that grew stronger as Sonia leaned toward him. He saw the even rise and fall of her breasts and felt the warmth of her breath upon his forehead. Her lips were moist and very red. They moved slightly and Smooth heard the words come to him as though from a dream.

"You're right, Smooth," she whispered. "I do know who you are. They told me about you. Told me you were a wild, reckless killer. Told me that nothing could stop you but a quick death. But they didn't tell me that"—her arms were about his neck now and her face was close to his—"you were a man I might love."

Her lips brushed across his eyes, touched his cheek and pressed against his own. For an instant Smooth did not move. Then his hands went to her shoulders and gripped them. Slowly he pushed her away until he could look into her eyes.

"And you could love me?" he asked.

"Very much," said Sonia.

Smooth laughed. "You're the most

beautiful liar I've met in months," he said. "But the next time you play a love scene be sure to have music. I'm a sucker for a violin."

There was amusement in Sonia's eyes as she stepped away from the table. "For a minute I thought you were slipping," she laughed. "But you can't hate a girl for trying."

"Not at all. It's all part of the racket. If you miss a guy with a falling boom—"

"Stop talking about that!" cried Sonia.

"Don't let it throw you," grinned Smooth. "You'll get used to killings if you stay in this business."

He swung down from the table and started toward the cabin door. As he opened it Sonia caught his arm and turned him to face her. The smile was gone and there was a desperate earnestness in her eyes.

"Smooth!" she said quickly. "You look like a regular. A fellow that deserves a decent break. Take my word for it—you can't break this case. Get out of it! Ask for another assignment before—before you're—"

"Thanks, Sonia," said Smooth as he stepped out onto the deck. "It's going to be swell fun fighting you."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Long Ears

By ROBERT CARSE

Author of "Pay the Devil," "The Wall," etc.



The Foreign Legion is used to renegade recruits from every corner of the globe—but a Kentucky mule is something new in the Sahara

HAWKEY moved with his head down, hauling hard at the halter rope and swearing in a low, cracked voice. The mule walked with deliberation, stopping full from time to time as protruding pieces of the mass of gear strapped on its back scraped against the limestone wall on the inner side of the trail. The sun was not yet fully up and shadow filled the bleak depths of the gorge below, but sweat already soaked the back of Hawkey's tunic. "Come on, yuh misfit son," he repeated to the mule. "Git up! Step out!"

From ahead, where the gorge narrowed to the heights of the pass, he heard a sharp whistle-blast followed by the throbbing of an automatic rifle and the solid crash of Lebel fire. He

halted and pushed his *képi* back on his head, stood with his feet wide apart. The Legion was catching it again, he thought. His outfit was always the one who got it. Since May, for four months, the mobile column had been working up from Taza to the final conquest of the Grand Atlas and the submission of the last dissident tribes in Morocco. The Legion had taken the brunt of the fighting, was seeking for a culminating battle now beyond the pass. Hawkey looked back, at the slate-colored, shambling mule. "So you," he grunted, "come on. We rate leave and real chow, an' a lot like that, when this here's done."

The mule snuffled with its nostrils distended and Hawkey sawed sharply on the halter rope. He jumped forward with a trained motion, for the beast had reared and whipped a kick within an inch of his knee cap. Hawkey kept on at a shuffling kind of trot, grunting curses at himself and laugh-

ing a little at the way the mule had tried to kick him. "Yo're dumb," he muttered. "Dumber'n cne o' these here *bico* mules. Yuh can't even kick yourself."

Before him the trail veered at an abrupt angle and he had turned it with the mule when he saw the staff car and the group of officers. The car was small and light, designed for mountain work, but the right front wheel sagged in now and it canted out dangerously over the gorge. The officers had lots of gold braid on their sleeves and *képis* and only one wore the numerals of a combat outfit. He waved at Hawkey and said, "Slip on by, soldier, and get that stuff along. They need it up ahead."

Hawkey nodded, both hands on the halter rope, but the smallest and fattest of the officers, a man who wore a general's stars and the double rosette upon his Legion of Honor ribbon, blew out his cheeks and bawled, "*Hahé-la!*"

Hawkey halted with an anxious eye on the mule. "Yes, sir, General," he said, his bony, deeply-tanned face set.

The general crossed over and studied him and the mule. "What is your outfit?" he asked. "Why are you carrying such a load on one animal?"

That was his outfit up ahead, Hawkey explained in his very bad Legion French. He was from the machine-gun section of the Fourteenth Company. One of the other mules had reared and broken its leg down at the bivouac; that was why this one here was so heavily loaded. The sergeant had told him to get the stuff through as fast as he could.

"*N'est-ce-pas?*" the general said. "*N'est-ce-pas?*" He wheeled on the combat captain. "It is to me evident that the man wears the uniform of the Legion, and that the mule is a good mule, and carries a Hotchkiss gun complete, and

at least a thousand rounds of ammunition. But as for the soldier, I cannot understand one word he says."

The combat officer nodded seriously. "The man is an American," he said. "He is a very good muleteer. He and the mule come from the same part of North America, a place called Kain-tuck-ee. His captain has told me about him."

THE general made a sound that was a cross between a snarl and a bel-low. "What is this, this Kain-tuck-ee, when we have a battle ahead, and a wrecked automobile here blocking the trail? You, Legionnaire!" he jabbed a thumb towards Hawkey. "Get your beast ahead, at the front end of the automobile. Then we will attach a rope and drag the automobile in, out of the way. With a spare wheel and a mechanic from the depot the machine can be fixed to perfection."

Hawkey gave a beseeching and brief glance to the combat officer. "This," he said, "is a bad mule. It's the worst damn' mule in the Legion. He's the stubbornest long-ears I ever saw."

"Enough," the captain said. "Maybe. But you heard the general. Bring your long-ears up slowly, then hold steady while the rope is fixed."

Hawkey hung to the mule's headstall as the chauffeur and a trio of the lesser officers got out and rigged the rope. He talked in his native Kentucky dialect, in a soft and prayerful voice, to the mule. "Listen, yuh dumb an' ign'rant brute, you kick now, you just kick yourself t' brimstone an' no return. This here general is tough. He don't like Kentucky, and he don't like no mules from Kentucky. But you know me, and I know you. So go ahead—kick him, er kick me, then draw what's comin' to yuh."

With haste and yet thoughtful care, the chauffeur and the combat captain approached the mule's high withers to make the rope end fast to its harness. The mule nearly brained both of them, sent them jumping aside white-faced and awed. Hawkey talked to the mule in frantic exhortation. Up the trail, he had just seen the first stream of walking wounded and headquarters runners starting back, and coming up from below a heavily-loaded and very hurried mountain battery. "Be smart, Kain-tuck'," he whispered. "Be decent, will yuh?"

The mule rested absolutely still. Except for the quivering of its nostrils and the rolled slant of its eyes, it seemed like a statue cast in gray granite. Hawkey looked over at the combat captain. But that man and the other younger officers had chosen to group around the car, make a pretense of pulling at the fenders. It was the general who advanced towards the mule, and in his hand he held lifted his walking stick of stout Norman ash. The general called the mule names, French words of derision and insult which made Hawkey's ears tingle as he listened. Then, twice, the general struck the mule's flank with a walking stick.

The mule's motion was so fast as to be nearly unseen. But the general spun with a speed exceptional for a man of his age and weight. He was wheeled around and starting swiftly away when the kick caught him behind. A kind of whistling, screaming cry came from him. His feet left the ground at the terrific impact and he vaulted through the air, head down, heels up. He hit swerving sidewise against the middle of the automobile; that alone saved him from sailing out into the gorge beyond. The automobile trembled, began to slide, tilted, creaked and was gone

into space. The general lay, flat on his stomach and panting hoarsely, while he stared after it. The sound it made in striking at the bottom was very small, and very far away.

THE general rose and thrust from him the officers who came to his side. He touched gingerly with his finger tips the crescent-shaped indentation in his flesh that the mule's hoof had left. His teeth clicked and he whispered softly. "All my maps were in that car," he said, "and my lunch, two bottles of brandy and my new field-glasses. . . ." He stalked with a slow, limping stride to where Hawkey stood, but taking a wide detour around the mule. "Tell me," he commanded Hawkey, "just how you met this mule, and who told you that you could handle it?"

"We come from the same place," Hawkey said, his lips working stiffly. "From this Kain-tuck-ee. I was a mule-skinner there, at home, and in the American Army in the War. Then some man bought up a lot of mules for shipping out of the country. He hired me to herd them and keep them on the ship. It was the French government buying them, in Marseilles. But I got a little drunk there, when I got off the ship. I spent all my pay. Then . . . The captain, here, maybe can—"

"No," the general said in a clipped voice. "I can understand you now; I don't need the captain. . . . You followed this mule, eh? Both of you were inflicted upon the Legion, and upon France. And this"—he raised one hand and made a sweeping gesture which described his flight and that of the automobile—"this is the end!" He stood back and eyed the tight-mouthed group of officers. "Take this man's name and number," he told the combat captain. "Later, at headquarters, I will want to

see him. I will find him—work of a more suitable sort. Him, and his Kain-tuck-ee mule.”

The captain spoke in a whisper as he wrote down Hawkey's name and number. “Clear out now, soldier,” he said. “Get yourself and this four-legged indescribable out of the general's sight, or he's liable to have you both shot right here. Good luck. If that kick had only lifted a little higher . . .”

“Sure,” Hawkey answered, very low. “Thanks.” He drew up his big, raw-boned body and saluted stiffly. “This here cross-breed of a billy goat and a pine tree didn't have enough sense to kick for keeps.”

The mule followed him almost eagerly, nuzzling at his shoulder as he went on up the trail. But he paid it little attention, walked with a numb, mechanical pace. He had learned in his sixteen months' service in the Legion what it meant to feel a noncom's wrath; what a general could do passed far beyond the boundaries of his imagination. “Boy,” he whispered once, “you're fixed up pretty. You'll get all they got, an' more.” He swung, thinking how surprised the mule would be if he suddenly kicked it, but then he heard the wild burst of firing and felt the cold whip of lead right past his neck.

He dropped down to his knees, and threw himself flat. The trail widened out here. This was the peak of the ridge and within a couple-of-hundred meters of the pass. He saw the forms of dead men near him, Legionnaires and Moroccan *tirailleurs*. The ground was littered with empty cartridge-cases and discarded equipment; at one side of the trail a machine-gun emplacement had been started and abandoned. A Legion sergeant sat within the low barrier of earth, his blue eyes lifted vacantly, the hole the bullet had made, a

small, neat mark on the canvas of his tunic over his breast.

“So,” Hawkey whispered. “The captain sure sent me to the right place—”

Forward of him the ground rose and dipped roughly, studded with great boulders and thick growths of conifers and cedars. Savage and constant fighting was going on there and in the notch of the pass itself. The air vibrated with the pulsation of machine guns and the blasts of hand grenades. The sounds of the rifle-fire made a rippling wave which beat heavily against his eardrums. He noticed small, crawling groups of Legionnaires, their white caps and bayonet points distinct; and the slower, less concerted movements of the men of the native rifle-regiments.

Then for the first time he saw the enemy.

They were strong and bearded men of the Berber people. They wore long white cloaks they had looped into their belts and their bare legs flashed as they ran across a patch of open ground. Hawkey grunted and hitched forward on his knees. There was no time for him to do much, he thought. The Berbers were between him and the Legion fighting line. He slid down his carbine and then cast free the halter rope. He jabbed the mule in the side with the carbine-butt.

“Git back!” he called at the beast. “Git on down the trail!” Then he slipped over into the shallow emplacement beside the dead sergeant and started to shoot swiftly.

THE Berbers came singly, in quick little rushes. Their idea, he saw, was to take care of him and then block off the trail. They handled modern Mauser rifles and their fire was accurate and rapid. A slug whacked the *képi* from his head and blood from the

scalp wound ran down into his eyes. He swiped the blood away, reloaded the carbine and stood halfway as the first of the tribesmen rose and charged at him.

He fought them coolly, in the way he had learned first in the American war-time Army, and again here in Africa with the Legion. But there were four of them, all as big as he. He had no bayonet, and the flow of blood bothered his vision. They had sent him stumbling down; were poised to leap in and finish him as the mule caromed forward, both forefeet off the ground, lashing out.

The tribesmen yelled at each other and leaped back. One fell with the front of his skull kicked in, right across Hawkey. Then a strapping, dark-skinned man advanced and jumped sideward at the beast, caught the dragging halter rope. He hauled the mule down and delivered it a glancing blow across the neck. He yelled in the Shill-hah dialect at the men around Hawkey.

"Let him live!" he said. "Bring him along. He must show us how to work this gun the mule carries."

Hawkey understood the man's expression and part of his words. He sprang, striking with the carbine butt. The Berbers blocked and crossed his blows. The carbine shattered in his grip and the long, silver-mounted stock of a flintlock banged his skull dully. He tumbled in among the Berbers and their hands caught and lifted him in his last instant of consciousness.

THE way they had brought him, Hawkey found, was down from the pass and through the valley of the Gigo. He came to slowly, his body aching with cruel throbs of pain as the pony which carried him stumbled through the swirling waters of the

river. There were about twenty men in the war party, he saw, and the man who led them was the one who had saved him from death back at the pass. Hawkey tried to lift in the saddle as he made out the mule's familiar, long-eared head and shambling form. It was at the rear of the line, and six tribesmen guarded it, shunting the beast forward with long poles.

Hawkey laughed at that, despite his pain and the memory of how the Berber tribes treated their prisoners. "Yuh dumb brute," he muttered feverishly, "if it wasn't fer you, I'd be all right. Just as soon, though, as they get where they're goin', they'll dish it out to you the same as me. You can't go kickin' a fighting man's skull in for nothing."

He pulled and worked at the cords holding his wrists and ankles, a half-formed idea of escape in the back of his brain. It would be better, he thought, to drown in the river or be shot right here rather than wait for the gradual and terrible torture they would certainly give him later. But the narrow-faced leader of the war party had heard his muttered words, swung in beside him as his mount climbed the bank.

"Listen, my soldier," he told Hawkey in clear French, "stop being a fool. You can't get away, and we won't kill you quickly. But maybe I'll see that you live if you show us how to work that machine gun. I'm Olu el-Arzal, *caid* of this clan of the Beni Mitoun. I know the French and I know the Legion. In the big war, I served the French in their own country. I was a sergeant in the Moroccan *tirailleurs*. But this type of gun is new to me, and I want to learn how to use it. We gave the French a good beating back at the pass, and they will slow up now until Spring. They're almost as afraid of the

snow as they are of us. So you'll have plenty of time to show me how to use the gun. In the Spring I'm going to teach the French a little lesson, so they will remember the Berbers were born free men. . . ."

Hawkey answered deliberately. "The French," he said, "will kick you stiff, next Spring or sooner. They must have chased you out of the pass or you wouldn't be running here now. The snow might save you, but not for long. That's a laugh, about teaching them anything; they know what the Berbers are—the sons of cows"

The man who had named himself Olu el-Arzal and chief of his clan raised in his saddle and seemed to smile. A plaited leather whip hung from his wrist and, with the lead-studded end of it, he struck Hawkey squarely across the face. "Quiet!" he said. "You want more proof of who is master here?"

Hawkey was half-blinded, and the shock of the blow made him giddy, sick. "No," he moaned, and then was silent; but his muscles were strained taut beneath the bonds. Very slowly, very clearly, he told himself how he would answer that blow whenever his time came. The thought helped him to forget the pain, and what lay ahead for him.

ON THE far side of the Gigo the war party rode with less speed, along trails that led to a high and broad plateau set about with tall cedars and junipers. Flocks roamed the plateau under the care of the old men and boys of the clan and at the far end, set right in the side of the sheer red limestone cliff, was the Berber town. It was a *kasbah*, a true feudal castle, with massive crenellated walls and battlements cut from the solid stone and

long caves and tunnels connecting the various quarters of the families. This would be tough for the Legion to take, Hawkey thought; the Berbers had held the place for a long time against all comers. Then the men and women and children of the entire clan gathered about him, and he was pulled down, his clothing torn from him until he stood nearly naked before them.

He staggered, weak from his wounds and the days in the saddle. Some of the bigger boys and young women hit him with heavy sticks and sent the mangy yellow mastiff dogs snapping at him. He still wore his hobnailed Legion-brogans, and he caught one dog fairly under the jaw, hurled it sagging back among the others. The crowd gave from him a little and he started towards the ungainly Legion mule, calling out thickly: "Start along! Bust out of this!"

The mule heard him and the long ears flapped up and twitched. A boy held its halter rope and tried to keep the beast still. But it broke free and came lunging through the crowd. The Berbers sidled a bit away and the boy made a grab at the halter end. The mule's hoof made a drumming noise in the air, and the boy revolved backward with the kick, his hands clapped to the pit of his stomach.

"The next time, sonny," Hawkey muttered, "he'll kick your skull in. That's a Legion mule, from Kentucky."

Several of the warriors pulled their long knives from their belts and moved toward Hawkey and the mule, but Olu el-Arzal cursed them to a halt. "Now you see," he told the clan. "Even their own mules are smarter than the French." He moved close and grasped Hawkey's lashed wrists in a cruel grip. "These people," he said, "like to work slowly with a prisoner. Their captives

do not die for days, and then usually it is out there, at the edge of the forest. Perhaps you've heard of the Berber custom of pegging a man flat to the ground and leaving him for the jackals and the vultures, or the ants."

Hawkey held himself straight, his lips tight, but he could not keep the sweat from starting on his forehead. Olu el-Arzal smiled at him.

"Come on, Legionnaire," he said. "It won't be dark for another hour yet. Show me how to use that machine gun."

Hawkey took a slow glance at the ugly head and flopped ears of the mule, then out at the forest and the mountains beyond. This was, he thought, a little bit like his own country at home. Enough, anyhow, to make him think of the Cumberlands and the far ridges up around the Gap. That was all a long way away now, too long. There was no chance that he and long-ears would ever see the Cumberlands again. Up until now, he had never really cared, and never understood what that country at home meant to him. But he had been fed-up, back there in Kentucky. He had asked for this, come to the Legion looking for action. It had been all right in the Legion, too, and he couldn't regret any of it. A man was a soldier, or he wasn't, and that was all.

"Right," he said to Olu el-Arzal. "Come on. I'll show you how to work that gun."

The chief and about a dozen of the senior warriors took him and the mule down past the *kasbah* to a space facing the open cliff. "Take the ropes off me," Hawkey said to Olu el-Arzal. "And let the mule be; he's used to gun-fire and he won't run. Don't worry. I won't try any tricks on you."

"No, I know you won't," Olu el-Arzal said. He had brought from in-

side his cloak a big Luger pistol. "I know enough about machine guns to understand when a thing is done wrong. If you fool with this one, I'll shoot you in the stomach, and you'll be hours dying."

HAWKEY gave him a brief, quiet stare. This man, he thought, was not as shrewd as he had believed. And the Berber knew little or nothing about machine guns, or he would not have spoken like that. The Berber wanted to frighten him. He wanted to give him, Hawkey, the idea he would kill him if he tried to wreck the gun. But, without him, the Berber would not learn how to handle the piece.

"Yuh led with your chin that time, chief," Hawkey said beneath his breath. "And led too hard." He turned as soon as one of the warriors freed his wrists and began to assemble and set up the gun.

The Berbers grouped behind him in a fanwise formation, Olu el-Arzal closer than the rest and with the pistol up in his hand. As Hawkey worked, they followed each motion, their dark eyes narrowed and oddly alight. Hawkey lowered an ammunition case down off the mule and took out a loaded belt. He looked around at the chief. "You want to stand beside me," he asked, "while I start firing?"

"I'll stay right here," Olu el-Arzal said harshly. "Go ahead. Fire straight at the cliff. Start to swing the gun, and I'll kill you."

Hawkey nodded and entered the belt in the gun, opened with rapid fire. He let almost fifty rounds go before he slid his fingers out along the breech and jerked the moving belt. The trembling clatter of detonations dragged out as the gun jammed. His face screwed up into a nervous scowl.

"*Ne marche pas,*" he said. "It's jammed."

Olu el-Arzal came up and thrust the Luger into his ribs. "Fix it," he said. "Quick."

"I'll try," Hawkey said. "But it might be a jam I don't now how to fix. I'm a mule-skinner, and no gunner. This sort of stuff isn't my job."

The Berber's thin lips came back and his teeth showed. With a cold, quiet curiosity Hawkey watched the man's long finger where it crooked about the Luger trigger. Then Olu el-Arzal lifted the pistol and punched him savagely in the side of the jaw with the butt.

"Fix it!" he said.

Hawkey could no longer see the machine gun clearly as he started to work over it. But he scattered breech-parts about him on the grass, bent the jammed cartridge case farther in the barrel. He kept his head down, his body lowered over the gun. Olu el-Arzal and the other Berbers were right beside him now, and he heard the irregular pitch of their excited breathing, the quick words they whispered among themselves. When the chief cursed and grasped at his hands, he was all through. He had done his best, he knew; he had wrecked the gun as much as possible in the time given him. If Olu el-Arzal tortured him now, it wouldn't matter a great deal . . .

He swung his head to see the mule. "Skip on out o' here!" he told the mule. "Run! You're still carrying a good five hundred rounds, yuh scatter-brain!"

But then Olu el-Arzal laughed at him and told the warriors to hold the mule. "You're wrong if you think I will kill you, Legionnaire. No: now, I won't; not for this. I will keep you and the gun, and the mule. You'll learn how to fix the gun, no matter what you've done

to it here. You'll teach yourself, this Winter. . . ." Olu el-Arzal lifted him erect. "Start moving. Like this, we are all wasting time."

Hawkey was never sure of the details of that place, and his memory of it later was that of an incoherent and terrible nightmare. It was a stone-walled room somewhere in the lower mazes of the *kasbah*. It was always cold and dark; water seeped down the stones and when the snow came there was a glaze of ice underfoot and upon everything he touched. A great, rough, wooden beam projected across the room and was secured to an immense grinding stone in the center. Every day, at early morning, and again at night, Berber women entered to bring the barley to be ground and then to take it away.

Hawkey and the mule worked side by side at the beam which propelled the grinding stone. They were made fast to the beam with a cruelly intricate harness of ropes and leather thongs. The sound the stone made as it turned was rasping and constant; whenever they stopped work during the day a warrior was there immediately at the door to lash them into motion with a whip.

FOUR or five times a week the women left food for Hawkey, coarse barley cakes and bits of rancid mutton, a few dates and raisins. Hay was pitched in to the mule and at one end of the room was a low place in the rock where water pooled and they could drink. At the beginning, during the first few weeks, Olu el-Arzal came to the door and spoke with Hawkey. He asked him if he was ready yet to work on the machine gun. Hawkey failed to answer him after the second visit, and then did not speak at all, except to the mule.

He talked to the mule of home, of the Cumberland Mountains. He told the mule about the war in France, and other mules he had handled there, and the first mule he had put to harness when he was a kid on his father's farm on the Big Sandy. He was not crazy in any way, and knew it, but to talk to the mule was good for him. It kept him from losing his reason, and helped to pass the awful hours. Often, too, his strength left him and he was unable to press against the beam and thrust it forward. Then the mule carried him along, dragging in the galling harness, and he called to the mule in encouragement and thanks. He was waiting for the Spring, he knew, very much as Olu el-Arzal waited. When Spring came and the Legion returned to the Grand Atlas, it would be over, one way or another. Either Olu el-Arzal would kill him when he failed to fix the machine gun, or he would be left here like this to die.

He was aware it was Spring when the ice began to melt and he heard the cries of the storks and birds on the eaves outside. The days and nights were still cold and he was surprised at the white intensity of the sunlight the morning Olu el-Arzal came and opened the door and cut him loose from the beam. He covered his eyes with his hands and nearly screamed as the men who followed the chief carried him out into the full light. He was shaking and hardly able to stand, and when his eyes were adjusted he saw that there were wide gray streaks in the beard that matted against his chest and his feet and legs were swollen far beyond their normal size.

Olu el-Arzal and the warriors let him stand alone. Olu el-Arzal had got a bit fat during the Winter, and he wore a new, beautiful cloak of camel's

hair and the stock of his Mauser rifle was patterned with solid silver set in an oak leaf design. All the warriors carried rifles and bandoliers, Hawkey saw, and above on the parapets sentries walked back and forth.

"The French are in the mountains," Olu el-Arzal said to him, smiling. "The first parties of the mobile group started this way from Taza and Tidelt last week."

"They'll tear this dump to the ground," Hawkey said, saying the words he had prepared and repeated to himself all Winter. "They'll leave you under it, where even the jackals won't find you. Have you got any other machine guns? You'll need them."

Olu el-Arzal kept on smiling. "Yes," he said. "Three more, Spanish guns that came in from the Oued Draa and the Ifni. But I have given them to the other clans in the valley. I still have that gun you brought us last Fall. You're ready to fix it now?"

In all the foul French and gutter Arabic he knew Hawkey cursed the man. "Go ahead," he said. "Kill me. You're talking to the wrong Legionnaire."

Olu el-Arzal made a sign to the warriors. "Pick him up," he said. "Bring him down into the camp."

TWO tall young warriors carried Hawkey, laughing as he winced at their grasp on his legs. Then they were through the arched gate and out on the open slope. Black sheepskin tents were set up all along the plateau and Hawkey saw hundreds of warriors and long lines of picketed ponies. Knives and polished rifle-barrels shone in the sunlight and women moved around the cooking fires before the tents, filling saddlebags and leather water-bottles.

"You see," Olu el-Arzal said. "We're

ready, *regionnaire*. In anther week we'll have a hundred more prisoners like you here, if we want them."

"But you still want me," Hawkey said. "To fix that gur." The men who had carried him had dropped him down before a big cooking fire and his breath came short as he felt the heat on his legs and feet.

"So," Olu el-Arzal said. He pointed, and Hawkey saw within the door of the tent across the fire the canvas-hooded machine gun. "During the Winter, you must have remembered your machine-gun instruction. You must know by now how to repair that gun. If you don't—" He stopped speaking and his glance went to the piled embers of the cedar-wood fire.

"I told you," Hawkey said, "before. It's the same now." He locked his teeth then, and tightened his hands and body to check back the trembling.

"I will remember you as a man who made me laugh," Olu el-Arzal said. He turned and spoke quickly in the dialect. The earthenware jar was already black hot and full to the brim with coals. The warriors who brought it forward handled it with green sticks.

"Take him," Olu el-Arzal ordered. "It was cold there in the grinding-room. Maybe he has forgotten what heat means."

Hawkey fainted twice as they lifted his feet out over the coals. Olu el-Arzal watched him with a critical, calm concentration.

"No," he told Hawkey finally. "You are too stupid to break easily. And we haven't got a lot of time. But the women who went to the grinding-room with the barley said that you used to talk to the mule there all the time. They said that it sounded as though you talked to another man, to your best friend. Maybe you are crazy, and think

that about the mule. So we will bring the mule and see. We will let the dogs go after the mule, and then—"

Hawkey dragged back in the hands of the men who held him. He struggled to get loose and strike Olu el-Arzal. "Let the mule be," he said. "Don't touch it. It will knock your dogs to bits."

"Yes?" Olu el-Arzal grinned and snapped a command at one of the warriors. "You forget," he went on to Hawkey, "that neither you nor the mule are quite as strong as you were last Fall."

The warrior sent for the mule had to pull it almost bodily down the slope from the *kasbah*. The mule's ribs stood forth like the slats of an unfinished barrel; its head lopped far down, the gaunt legs splaying weakly out. The noise of its breathing was painful and very slow. When it heard Hawkey's voice, the hammer-like head raised a bit, but then sagged back again.

"Keep quiet," Olu el-Arzal told Hawkey. "Your talk won't do any good. The dogs will pull that beast apart like an old sandal. You can understand me, now?"

Hawkey made a stiff little gesture with his hands. "Give me the gun," he whispered.

A NEW group of five young warriors joined the men about him as he worked at the gun. They were not Berbers, Hawkey noticed, but Riffs, and two of them wore old Spanish tunics over their short *djellabas*. They studied his work intently, and from time to time Olu el-Arzal asked them low questions. Hawkey looked at them when he was finished, and not at Olu el-Arzal. "You're machine-gunners," he said in the few words of Arabic he knew. "You try this gun."

Olu el-Arzal answered for them, rapidly. "Why do you ask that?" he said. "How do you know they are machine-gunners?"

Hawkey grimaced. "You told me you had three other Spanish guns. These Riffs must have brought you the pieces. So let them work the gun. I've been kicked around enough; I can't take any more. If the gun jams now, it's not my fault."

"They say they don't know this type of gun," Olu el-Arzal said. "All they know is the Spanish gun."

"They're not very bright then," Hawkey said. "All machine guns work a lot alike."

Olu el-Arza grunted, then gestured to one of the Riffs wearing a Spanish tunic. The man crouched behind the gun and fired it in intermittent bursts at the cliff wall. The scowl left Olu el-Arzal's face and he smiled once more. He told the Riffian to stop the gun and glanced at Hawkey.

"We're going now, Legionnaire," he said. "You're going with us. If that gun jams again, you'll be there to repair it."

Hawkey almost laughed. "I can't walk," he said. "It won't do you much good to drag me along."

"You'll ride your Legion mule," Olu el-Arzal said. "If you stop a couple of Legion bullets later, it will be quite funny."

Hawkey did not answer him. He was watching the mule. "Long-ears," he whispered beneath his breath, "we're still both alive, an' we still got something like a chance. But now we both got to be smart. Because it ain't us alone any more; it's the Legion now."

The place where the Berber clans met the French mobile group and the column of the Legion was at the valley of the Gigo. Olu el-Arzal and the other

Berber leaders knew every yard of the terrain and they spread their men out skillfully through the cedar forest at the edge of the plateau and along the high bluffs above the river. When the Spahi scouts and native *partisan* cavalry of the French force came riding down the river bed at dawn, they were swung back at once by a concerted fire.

Hawkey hunkered in one of the machine-gun pits that Olu el-Arzal had ordered dug along the bluff. He was still exhausted by his ride here upon the patiently-stumbling mule, could do no more than sit upright and watch the Riffian gunners work and listen to the sounds of the fighting. The Riffs worked their weapons with fair skill, but the Spanish pieces were old and badly worn, often stopped and jammed. It was the Legion piece, the Hotchkiss in this pit, which served swiftly and well. The young Riff handling it had stripped to the waist and pushed his turban aside on his head so that the bulge of his scalp lock showed. He wore a fixed, fierce grin and his eyes were hot in his head. Olu el-Arzal crouched next to him, feeding the belts, and Hawkey saw that the chief understood the gun now, would be able to take it over if the Riff was hit.

STRENGTH and purpose came back to Hawkey slowly. He would lift with an abrupt movement, he thought, shove the gun over upon the Riff, then leap for Olu el-Arzal. He had waited all he could now; waiting was good no more. Up the river, with a sound that brought the blood sweeping and pounding through his veins, the Legion bugles gave the call for the charge. The Legion would come right down the river, drive up the bluff in open attack. It was the only way for the Legion—the famous charge-with-

the-bayonet which no men had been able to stand for long. But the bluff was high, and in the frontal fire of four machine guns . . . Hawkey started from his knees, reached for the gun-tripod.

Olu el-Arzal did not seem to look around, or move. Yet the bullet-heavy ammunition belt he held in his hands cracked Hawkey upon the rear of the skull and neck, knocked him flat. "Stay that way," Olu el-Arzal said. "I'm watching you, mule-skinner."

Dizzy and very weak, Hawkey shoved with his hands against the side of the pit to get up again. He could hear the Legion now, the men's yells and the low commands of the officers and non-coms as they surged running for the bluff. He did not hear the click of the pins or their flight as the Legion grenadiers below prepared and lobbed their bombs. When they hit and exploded all around him in the machine-gun pits, he was staggering once more to grasp at the gun before him. But the Riff gunner pitched against him, head and chest crushed. Olu el-Arzal was gone, lost somewhere in the gusts of flame and dirt writhing along the edges of the smashed pits. Then, though, Hawkey distinguished Olu el-Arzal's voice. The man was safe, had slipped into the forest and was calling commands to the Berber riflemen gathered there.

"Yeah," Hawkey muttered aloud. "That's your luck. But this is mine." He began to haul the machine gun around to sweep the forest-rim. He was running in a belt and clearing the action as the bugle call shrilled from beneath the bluff. The Legion commander was slowing his men, holding them for a time until they made the final rush.

"That's all right," Hawkey told himself in that same low, feverish voice. "Still, the Berbers ain't going

to wait for you here. They'll pull back out o' the woods to the *kasbah*. They know that without artillery you'll get beat there. So I'll have to go; I'll have to do my job alone."

The gun was still hot, and very heavy, but he picked it up and looped three extra belts over his shoulders, went staggering and dragging along the ragged craters made by the grenades. The Berbers fired at him from the forest; bullets nicked off the tripod and one creased his thigh with a flick of flame. He dropped, spent and unable to move. Then before him, immense, seeming unreal in the drift of explosive smoke, he saw the mule. He laughed and yelled out at it, waved his arms.

The mule trailed a broken picket-rope behind, and blood smeared down its withers, and yet it came toward him steadily. He made it kneel down in the gashed earth of the crater where he lay and took the picket rope, made fast the machine-gun and belts to its back. He clung to the headstall and the mule rose at his command, pulled him up to his feet. They ran together, out into the smoke-drifted open space between the bluff and the forest.

Berber riflemen ran and shot after them and the mule whinnied once, nearly went down. Then they were in among the great trees, in the greenish darkness of the forest, and were safe. "All right," Hawkey said to the mule. "Now you got to run some more. We got to meet these guys out on the plain, in front of the *kasbah*. . . ."

It seemed to him that he and the mule were hours going through the forest. They were lost at times, he knew, and again they were forced to stop. Then, for several hundred yards at an interval, he carried the machine gun across his back, the mule weaving

along behind him while it regained strength.

NIGHT had fallen and the pasture land of the plateau before the *kasbah* was held in blue-black dark as he and the mule came out from the forest. There was no light from the *kasbah*, and no sound. Yet the old men and the boys waited there, Hawkey knew, kept the place safe for the return of the warriors. Now, as his tortured breathing eased and the pounding of his blood fell away, he was able to sense the pitched bursts of firing at the far end of the plateau. He had figured right, he told himself; Olu el-Arzal and the other clan chiefs were leading the Berber force back this way in slow retreat before the Legion. Olu el-Arzal and the men with him were still quite confident; they were sure that without artillery assistance no force could ever take the *kasbah*. Their way was fully open to it, they believed, and all they did now was make the Legion pay for every yard of advance.

Hawkey brought the mule prone behind a flat-topped boulder on a small knoll almost in the direct center of the plateau. With his hands and sharp stones he hollowed out an emplacement for the gun and a space for himself and the mule. He set the gun up slowly, with great care, trying the action and making sure of the bullets in the belts. The flicker of rifle-fire was before him along the level of the plateau now, and he whistled silently beneath his breath, reached to smooth his hand down the muzzle of the mule.

He did not start firing until the Berber line was very close, within less than fifty yards of him. Then he swung the gun from right to left, in full, repeated enfilade fire. The Berbers had no protection upon the open plain.

They got up and ran for him, group after group. They came from different sides, spacing their rushes and trying to get on past to take him in the rear. Then, though, he set back his head and yelled with all the power of his lungs. "*À moi! À moi, la Legion! Come on and take 'em from behind!*"

Whistles shrilled and the bayonet points showed pale in the dark. The Legion line moved solidly, the khaki-uniformed figures sweeping forward like gale-driven surf up a beach. Between it and the lash of machine-gun fire the Berbers broke and fell fast. Those who were left eddied and formed together in the center, retreating shoulder to shoulder. It was among those men that Hawkey made out Olu el-Arzal's voice. The chief commanded the group, held the warriors together against the shock of the Legion charge. Louder than he had hailed the Legion, Hawkey called that man's name:

"Olu el-Arzal! Back up a bit more and step right into it. I've got it waiting for you; Let's finish this, you and me!"

The group of tribesmen opened up and Hawkey could see the Berber chief. Olu el-Arzal still wore his costly robe and carried his silver-leafed Mauser. He lifted the rifle up and ran with a muttered, cursing kind of cry straight forward. There were no more than twenty rounds left in the belt in the gun and Hawkey held them until the last moment. He let Olu el-Arzal get so close he could see his eyes and face. Then, as the chief swerved in a final leaping bound, he tripped the gun. He fired no lower than Olu el-Arzal's shoulders, decapitated him. After that, he waited for the Legion. When the Legion reached him, he nodded and murmured, "You guys are getting slow.

Another Winter, and this mule and me wouldn't have waited for you. . . ."

THE parade was on the plaza before the white-walled buildings of Taza. The troops passed in review were of all the units of the French colonial forces serving in Africa. There were several generals in the reviewing group, but the only one Hawkey recognized was small and fat, wore the double rosette upon his ribbon of the Legion of Honor. He came forward with a peculiar limping gait to decorate Hawkey with the Colonial Medal, then slowed, stood still as he stared at the rawboned soldier and the rawboned mule. "It's you," he muttered.

"Yes, sir, General," Hawkey answered. "That was the orders I got—me and the mule. I just obeyed orders."

"*N'est-ce-pas?*" the general muttered. "*N'est-ce-pas?*" He eyed the mule, but it stood a full yard behind Hawkey at the end of a brand new halter rope, its eyes shut as if in sleep. The general advanced and said clearly the words of Hawkey's citation for valor. He took the bright piece of ribbon and metal in his hands, leaned forward to pin it upon the breast of Hawkey's tunic. His head was bent a bit, his eyes were on the medal, when the mule chose to kick.

The blow met Hawkey's rear several inches from the end of his spine. His head came down and his knees jerked up, his chin caught the general flush on the nose. Together, tangled in each other's arms and driven by that furious force, they swirled into the air. The general freed himself and brushed the sand and dust of the parade ground out of his eyes. With the back of his hand he stopped the flow of blood from his broken nose. Then he looked from Hawkey back to the motionless mule. The beast had lifted its head during the moment of their flight, and now the big lips were pulled back, the slant eyes filled with an odd, gleaming light.

"You," the general croaked to Hawkey, "are just a good soldier. But that mule . . . Tell me the truth. Is that mule laughing at me?"

Hawkey spoke slowly, knowing that this would be an imperishable moment in the history of the foreign regiments. "Yes, sir; I guess so," he said. "There's plenty of men in Kentucky who swear a mule laughs. But they—"

"I know," the general said. "Now, I am able to understand. Some day, I am going to go to this Kain-tuck-ee. With enough of those mules, the Legion could kick itself into victory all around the world. Now, if you can stand, help me up!"



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TOES
SORE
BURNING
FEET

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ATHLETE'S FOOT

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YOUR DRUGGIST STOCKS OR CAN PROMPTLY GET MERCIREX FOR YOU. IF NOT WRITE US.

Mike the Magnificent

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

Author of "Call Me Mike," "Enter the Tiger," etc.

I

AS the space of swirling muddy Whangpoo lessened I studied the crowd on the dock, thinking: Somewhere in that bunch at least one man is fingering a gat and looking at me.

There were gamins doing tricks for tossed coins; there were porters, coolies, stevedores, customs officials, hotel runners; there were even a few white men.

"Think you will like China, my Georgie?"

"It's not new to you, is it?"

"Oh, no. I have visited it many times. A very gay city here. It is a shame we are only staying until tomorrow noon."

"You mean it's a good thing! This is one of the toughest towns in the world, and if you think I'm going to let you hit the high spots tonight you're nuts!"

Mike smiled a little, gazing down at the babbling crowd. He was Mike to his friends, Mike Lang on the passenger list of the *Myanosha Maru*; but this pretty-faced brown slip of a lad actually was Prince Mikuud-Phni Luangba, oldest son of the Sultan of Kamorirri. Graduated from Princeton, he was returning to his native land. He had a passion for jewelry—a passion his dotting father, one of the richest men in the world, let him indulge—and he was carrying back watches, rings, cigarette cases, studs, links, tie-pins and other gauds worth a quarter of a million dollars. A careless kid, who

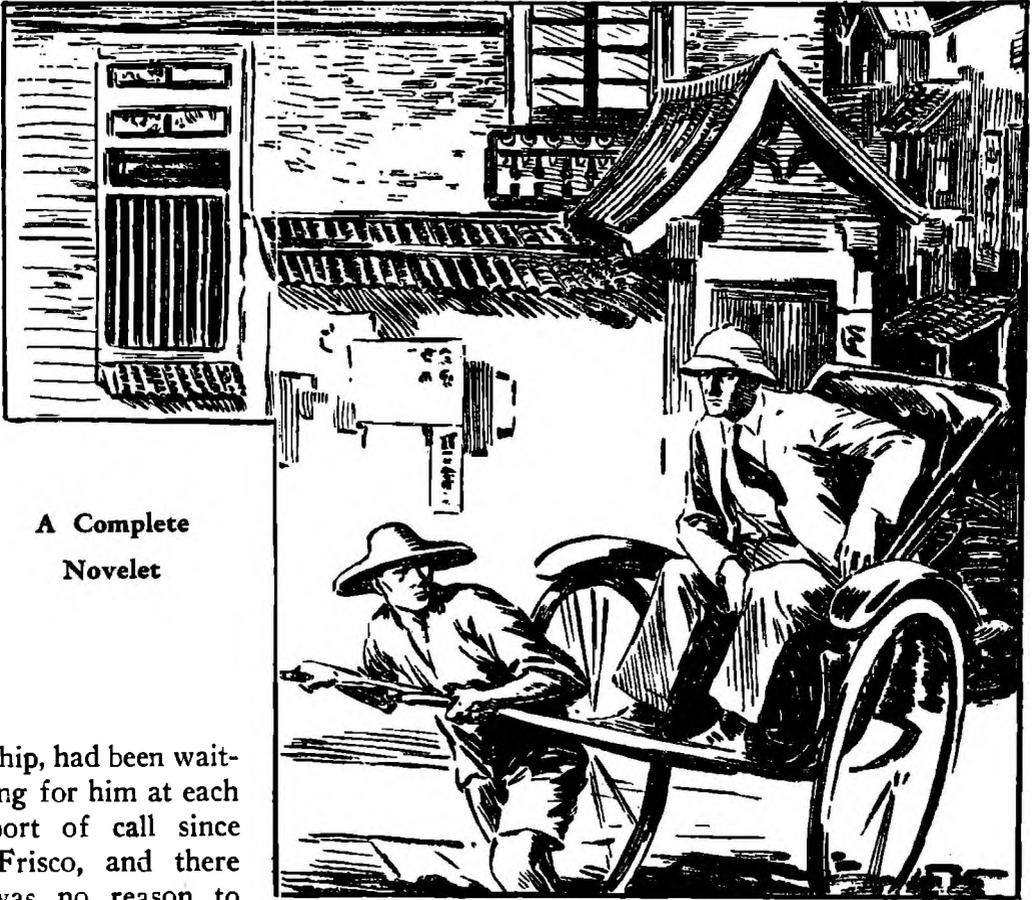
loved to have a good time, a kid with a genius for getting into trouble, he was a walking invitation to crooks. The company I worked for had written travel insurance on that jewelry as far as Saigon, French Indo-China, where Mike was to be met by an honor guard from his old-man's dominions; and it was my responsibility to see that he and his gemmery got there intact.

A great boy, Mike. You just couldn't help liking him. You forgot he was an Oriental prince, and simply remembered that he was one of the swellest guys you ever knew.

"Oh, I am not interested in seeing the sights," he said. "What hotel are we to stop it? The Cathay is—"

"You'll stop where I put you, and you'll stay there!"

He smiled again. I had absolutely no authority over him, of course, and he could have told me to go climb a tree; but twice on the trip, once in Hawaii, once in Japan, he had actually been kidnaped by crooks who wanted his jewels as ransom, and on each occasion I had been able to help get him free without giving up a thing; so that he was grateful. I don't think he was scared. I don't think Mike had an ounce of fear in his delicate body—he was descended from a long line of warrior kings—but he was, at last, coming to realize how the bad boys viewed him. He knew, just as I knew, that somewhere here in Shanghai it was more than likely that gangsters were waiting for him. Gangsters, notified in advance by somebody on this



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ship, had been waiting for him at each port of call since 'Frisco, and there was no reason to think that Shanghai, the last stop before Saigon, would be any exception.

MIKE was, for him, grave. He answered quietly: "Very well, my Georgie. I will do as you command."

We were to take a *Messageries Maritimes* ship the following day at noon, for Saigon. That would be the end of my worries.

"After all," Mike sighed, "it is only for overnight."

"That's enough," I said grimly.

A tow-headed character named Mason, Sidney "Mase" Mason, came drifting along the deck. When he saw Mike he simpered, ignoring me.

"Good morning, your highness. Where are you putting-up in Shanghai?"

"None of your business," I answered. "Keep moving."

But Mike, who trusted everybody, smiled and said good morning. He added that he didn't know yet just where he would stop. And Mason smirked again and sauntered on.

"You do not like him," Mike observed.

"I used to know him when I was on the force in San Francisco," I said. "He's a finger artist, a pointer-outer, a tipper-offer. He plans jobs. He never gets in on any of the dirty work himself, and the police never manage to slap him in the jug where he belongs, but he's always among those present when the gravy is being dished out." I waggled a forefinger in Mike's genial face. "You mark my word for it: That

guy Mason is the guy who was behind both those attempts to snatch you. He had them all fixed up in advance, by wireless."

"Oh, no. I think Mr. Mason is a very pleasant gentleman."

"And I happen to know he's a first-class rattlesnake. He has plenty of underworld connections back in 'Frisco's Chinatown, and I shouldn't be surprised if he had a few local thugs waiting right here for him now. You're going to keep under cover tonight, whether you like it or not."

"You command, I obey, my Georgie."

He acted as if he was humoring a crazy alarmist, but he consented to stick close to me when we went down the gangplank and entered the churning mass of Chinese on the dock. He stood by smiling politely while I got his valet George Washington to fetch the baggage, and while I talked pidgin to the customs and immigration officials, and while I got us a taxi.

There were three of us in that taxi. I never did learn the valet's right name, but he was George Washington on the passenger lists, and since he could only talk a few words of English anyway it didn't much matter what his name was. He was a Kamorirrian, the only one I'd ever seen outside of Mike himself, and he had waited on Mike all through the four years at Princeton. He was a small, suspicious, wiry guy, crabbed and crabby. He worshipped Mike.

"We go first," I announced, hugging cases that contained a quarter of a million dollars' worth of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, pearls and so forth, "to a bank."

"But we will be here only—"

"We go first," I repeated, "to a bank."

All around us were tooting automobiles, beggars, coolies with loads slung on long poles over their shoulders, rickshas, trackless trolley-cars that ran on rubber-tired wheels like buses, pushcarts, wheelbarrows—every kind of vehicle under the sun. I used to think that San Francisco was pretty noisy and confusing, but Shanghai . . . Boy!

The driver, who could talk and understand a little pidgin which I had picked up while pounding a Chinatown beat back home, took us through Hongkew and over Soochow Creek, which smelled terrible, and out onto The Bund. He took us past the Cathay and the Palace. He took us to a big white-domed building which looked like a state capitol—*The Shanghai and Hong Kong Banking Corporation*.

Mike was bored, but I was determined. We stuck the jewels away in a safe-deposit box.

"Now," I said, wiping my hands, "we'll see if we can't find a nice quiet little hotel where nobody would think of looking for a highly-kidnapable crown prince."

We went back over the Garden Bridge and dismissed the taxi and climbed into three rickshas. We changed rickshas twice after that. I wasn't taking any chances of being tailed. We'd left most of the luggage on the dock and had only one small suitcase apiece.

THE hostelry I finally selected was small and on a comparatively quiet side street in the International Settlement. Mike engaged a couple of connecting rooms for himself and George Washington, but I didn't register. I wanted to see Shanghai, and I didn't want any of Mase Mason's pals trailing me back to this joint and finding Mike. I told him so, in his room.

"You stay here," I told him. "I'll come back and say hello at eleven tonight, and tomorrow morning we'll go down to the French ship together, but in the meanwhile you stay right here. Don't even show your face downstairs. Have your meals sent up."

"Oh, well," said Mike, shrugging. "I'm tired anyway."

I went to the windows. They faced a small closed court about fifteen feet below. The only persons who could see Mike at those windows would be coolies passing in the court or maybe guests in other rooms of the hotel, the windows of which faced this one. I nodded, satisfied.

If you think this was an unnecessary lot of precaution to take about my prize package, you don't know what I'd been through. Where Mike was, trouble was. And, far from ducking it, the kid loved it, asked for it. He thought it was fun.

I put a hand on his shoulder and said quietly: "Promise me you won't step out tonight, Mike."

"I promise you," he said, smiling up at me. He was like a girl in some ways, but don't get the idea that he was any sissy! He could fight with the best of them. I know. I've seen him. "You go out and have a good time, my Georgie. You have not seen Shanghai yet, and I have."

So I left him there, that seeming the best thing to do. There was an American café across the street, and I went into it and had a long slow beer, sitting at a window through which I could watch the hotel entrance. No white men went in or was hanging around, so after a while I decided I had Mike in a good place, and I felt easier. I knew how the kid hated a bodyguard. Until I'd been assigned to the job, in 'Frisco, he had made it a habit to slip the operatives the company put on him; he'd

thought it was a lark to get out of their sight and raise merry hell. But he wouldn't do that with me. The experiences in Waikiki and in Tokio had sobered him a bit, and besides I figured he really did like me and was willing to cooperate.

I found myself a somewhat larger hotel, registered under my own name, unpacked, and went down to the bar for another beer. When I returned to my room to shave I got the first intimation that somebody was after me. I got it, literally, in the neck. The back of the neck.

As I opened the door and stepped into the room there was a movement on my left, and before I had a chance to turn, or even to snap my eyes in that direction, something smacked me not tenderly right on the spot where my rear collar button would have been if I wore collar buttons.

It didn't knock me out, but it stunned me. I pitched forward on my face, carrying a chair along with me. Cursing, I got to hands and knees, tried to get up, tried to turn, but I was so dizzy I slipped down on my face again. I heard the door slam.

By the time I did succeed in getting up, and going back through that door, the corridor was deserted. I went to the elevator bank, but both cars were, according to their indicators, at the lobby floor. I went to the fire door, opened it, listened, heard nothing. I went back to my room.

The room had been thoroughly but hastily searched. What had happened was that I'd interrupted the searching party.

Well, they couldn't find much. None of Mike's jewelry, which was all in the bank; nothing to give a hint as to Mike's whereabouts; not even my gun, which I was carrying with me, prob-

ably in defiance of some local ordinance.

I didn't make any complaint to the management. What was the use? These babies weren't after me, really. They were after Mike.

But I reflected as I went downstairs again that Sidney "Mase" Mason certainly was not losing any time! And I reflected too that it would be a lot of satisfaction to bust Mason on the nose if I ever ran into him again. I had an idea I would, too. I had an idea that lots of things were going to happen in this town in the very near future.

BECAUSE I was still dizzy, I had decided not to shave myself. Instead I drifted into the barber shop which opened off the lobby, and plopped down into the only chair, and rubbed my chin, and told the one barber: "Cut-em off. Shavem. Savvy?"

"Yiss," he hissed.

Stretched out, my eyes shut, I heard the barber go to the door, which was behind me, and heard him whisper to somebody there. I heard the door close. The barber came back, lathered my face, stropped a razor, started on my neck.

In dead center, about half way up, he suddenly stopped. But he did not remove the razor, which was poised right at my Adam's apple.

A voice behind me said: "Open your eyes, Marlin."

I opened my eyes. Because of that razor I did not dare to turn my head or sit up, but by looking along my nose I could see the mirror, and in that mirror I could see the reflection of a man who had apparently just entered the shop.

He was Chinese but wore Western clothes. He looked smart, taut, nasty. Except for the slanted eyes and the

color of the skin, he might have been a 'Frisco street-corner sport. In his right hand he held a large automatic. He held it low, not pointing it at anything in particular.

"What you're going to do, Marlin," he said quietly, with no accent at all, "is answer my questions and answer them honestly. Otherwise that barber's hand will slip. Understand?"

Well, I understood. It was too easy. I rolled my eyes up to the barber but he would not look at me; he kept looking down at the razor he held at my throat. He was almost white with fear, if a Chink can be said to go white, and his face shone with sweat. He was scared, nervous; and that made it all the worse.

Just like in driving a car, a lot of the time your real danger is not caused by speeders who cut in and out of traffic—to give them credit, those guys usually know how to drive—no, the real danger is from fifteen-miles-an-hour 'fraidycats who have no sense of distance, no ability to know what's behind them, and no control over their own nerves. Your speed artist may go nuts, but at least he's more or less predictable. You can keep out of his way most of the time. The breathless, trembling, teetering new-driver is likely to jam on his brakes right in front of you for no reason except that he thinks he sees a leaf fall at the side of the road; or he might swing into a left turn without any signal; or something like that.

Well, that's the way it is with criminals. Give me the really bad boys every time. They might be killers, but at least you know where you stand with them. They've had experience. They won't lose their heads and start shooting in all directions.

Sitting in that barber chair, I wasn't

half as scared of the Chink with the big gat as I was of the hand-wobbly whisker-cutter who hovered above me. For all I knew, he might faint and fall right against me, cutting my throat.

"Understand, Marlin?"

I said, "Oh, yes." I barely whispered it, trying to keep my throat muscles from moving. But even so, my Adam's apple must have slid up and down a little. I didn't feel the razor nip, but I felt a driblet of warm blood come out and mix with the cooling lather. Not bad—just a skin cut. The steel hadn't yet reached my jugular vein. It was a good sixteenth of an inch away.

II

THE psychology of the thing was perfect. They had brains enough to know that they weren't going to frighten me by the sight of an automatic in a place like this, right off the lobby. That would be too raw. The gat, as a matter of fact, probably was displayed only for emergency purposes, or maybe only to impress the barber and intimidate him into going through with his act. The big selling argument was the edge of that razor tickling my throat.

You can maybe laugh at a guy holding a gun on you. But if I'd have laughed at *this* set-up I might have cut my own throat! Even to sneeze would be committing suicide!

"Where is the Prince, Marlin? Answer fast!"

There was more than blood mixing with that lather on my face. There was sweat now, cold sweat. It was standing out all over my forehead and temples in large shiny blobs—I could see its reflection in the glass—and every so often one of these would wander

down my neck, tickling me. It almost drove me crazy, that tantalizing sweat. But I didn't dare move.

I ran my tongue over my lips and whispered: "Metropole Hotel, Room five-one-nine."

It was a lie, of course, but I figured it might gain some time. I didn't think the barber was going to last much longer. He was scared sick, and his hand trembled, and his eyes, still fastened on that razor, were glassy. He was practically out on his feet.

"We're going to check that by telephone, Marlin," the smart guy said quietly, "and if you're lying, Lord help you!"

He reached behind him, unlatched the door, opened it an inch, and without ever taking his gaze from me spoke out of a corner of his mouth to somebody in the lobby. He spoke only a few words, in Chinese. Then he closed the door again and started to lock it.

It was this moment that the barber selected to swoon. The strain was too much for him, and he must have had a dizzy spell. He lurched against me, and the razor in his hand slithered across my left shoulder, biting right through the barber-chair cloth, the cloth of my vest and the cloth of my shirt, and cutting me deep and hard. But the shoulder wasn't the throat!

The Chinese at the door swore, and started to bring up his gun. Whether he really would have fired I don't know, because I didn't wait to find out. I grabbed that barber's right wrist with both my hands, and I lifted the guy clear over my own legs from the right side of the chair to the left. Then, all in the same motion—I think my fear must have given me the strength—I spun him around and pushed him to-

ward the doorway, at the same time springing out of the chair myself.

The barber collided full-on with the gangster, and I crouched behind the chair, fumbling for my own gun.

Time dragged out—that blurred split-second seemed to last a month. At the end of it, my gat was leveled.

The Chinese didn't hang around to shoot it out. He was gone through that doorway before I had a chance to unholster. The barber was left asprawl on the floor, but who cared about him? I vaulted him and threw open the door and started racing across the lobby to the street door, where my friend was just making his exit.

To this day I'm convinced that the bellhop got in front of me purposely—that he'd been hired to do the act. But there was never any way to prove it. Apparently the bellhop, another Chinese of course, just happened to be passing the barber-shop door at the time. A sheer coincidence, that's all. Yeah.

Anyway I rammed him, and he fell, and in falling his legs somehow caught themselves in mine—just a coincidence, sure!—and so I fell too.

I was up again right away and out to the sidewalk, but there wasn't any sign of my tough friend. It was a busy street and the middle of the afternoon. Some of the people were in Western clothes, some wore Chinese clothes, but they were all hurrying, bustling. I made myself ridiculous for a little while, coatless, the barber cloth tucked around my neck, blood flowing from my left shoulder, and bloody lather all over my face—I made myself look silly by dashing this way and that, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man with the gun. No use. I gave it up when I started to collect a crowd. I clumped back into the hotel.

THE bellhop who had tripped me approached with all sorts of apologies. He was still apologizing when I smacked him in the mouth so hard that he sat right down on the lobby floor.

The manager began yelling from behind the desk, porters and bellhops began running in all directions. I didn't pay any attention. I was sore. I stamped into the barber shop, left the cloth there, recovered my coat, and went out again. The barber, of course, was not in sight. I later learned that he was never seen around the hotel again. If it comes to that, I have an idea that he was never seen anywhere again. He'd bungled his job, and these Chinese are not what you'd call a forgiving sort of race.

I went up to my room. I locked the door, and with my gun cocked and resting on the washstand I proceeded to finish the shaving job myself, using the barber's original lather. Cool lather now. White on my lips and cheeks, pink on my neck.

While I shaved, glowering, still sore, I wondered what to do next. They knew who I was, and they wanted to find out where I was hiding Mike: that much was clear. I thought of telephoning Mike to make sure that he was all right, but I was afraid they might have the switchboard boy listening in. Besides, if they were going to so much trouble to ask me where Mike was, certainly they didn't know that themselves. So I figured Mike was safe. I figured that the best thing for me to do was keep as far away from him as possible until the last minute before sailing.

Meanwhile, I thought, I'd do exactly what they might expect me to do. I'd play tourist. I wanted to see the sights of Shanghai anyway, and here was my chance.

If they persisted in trying to catch up to me, I'd be ready for them. I had my gun, and it was broad daylight, and after all this was a big modern seaport. The police departments in the International Settlement and in the French Concession, I had heard, were headed by white men.

I thought for a while of calling in those cops, but then I gave up the idea. They'd pay attention, I was sure of that! The trouble was, they'd pay too *much* attention.

Kamorirri, in case I forgot to mention this fact, lies on the upper reaches of the Me Nam between Burma, which is British, and Loas, which is French. It's all ruby mines and wild jungle, with practically no towns at all. It would be a difficult and extremely expensive country to conquer—which is why Mike's father remains one of the very few really independent sovereigns in Asia today. He's a tough old baby, too, that father of Mike's, and the absolute ruler of about 200,000 nasty fighters. He never cared much for civilization, and though he lets them develop his ruby mines he has never trusted either the French or the English. Mike, however, is the apple of his royal eye; and the two colonial offices were hoping that in Mike's return as an American-educated crown prince—the Sultan wouldn't let Mike go to college in either France or England and it had been only with reluctance that he permitted the lad to go to Princeton—he would have a soothing effect on his old man. It was for this reason that both France and England were extremely anxious to see Mike get home safely, jewels and all. If anything happened to him on the way there was no telling what the truculent old Sultan might do.

A French agent and a British agent,

in fact, had tailed Mike all the way from Princeton to Japan, but in Japan, while trying to protect him, they'd both been wiped out by kidnapers. As far as I knew there weren't any of them near Mike now. But if I were to report to the International police who Mike was and where he was, I could be sure that a flock of detectives would surround him immediately.

I knew my Mike. That kid just hated to be babied. He took an unholy delight in slipping all bodyguards excepting me, and he was clever at it too. He was a swell guy, but after all he was an irresponsible kid accustomed to having his own way; and he loved wine and women and was crazy about jazz. Throw a cordon of secret agents around him, and before you could say Jack Robinson they would be running around in circles wondering what had happened to their charge—while Mike himself would be enjoying himself in some place five miles away. That's just the way he was; and that's why I decided not to report to the cops.

WHEN I stepped out on the sidewalk there was a rush of ricksha boys, fifteen or twenty of them, all dropping the shafts at the curbs and jabbering like mad. It looked like a race riot. I'd gotten to know rickshas in Japan, but the boys are comparatively quiet and polite there. In Shanghai they almost mob you.

I stood blinking while they grabbed me from all sides and tried to shove me into this ricksha or that. Getting an American tourist is like striking a gold mine to one of those guys.

The big bearded Sikh doorman came to my rescue, beating and kicking the coolies away, bellowing at them.

"This boy good boy," the Sikh said finally, panting.

I said "Thanks," tipped him, and climbed into the vehicle he indicated. I didn't even look at the puller. You don't somehow. Pullers are blanks, just backs, much less personal than taxi drivers in the States.

"Drive around," I said, making a vague gesture. "Me see Shanghai, catchem?"

And off we went.

We went up Nanking Road and Bubbling Well Road, encircled the race track, and started back toward The Bund by way of the Avenue Edouard VII. Ordinarily there is something about the motion of a ricksha which soothes a guy who rides in one. They roll along smoothly, and the pullers all have a monotonous, lulling sort of trot, lifting their heels high behind them. It looks awkward at first, but they can keep it up for miles, and after a time it makes you kind of sleepy and forgetful.

This particular ride, however, did not affect me that way. For one thing, I still had a strong hunch that something was wrong, that something was going to happen. For another, the very motion of this ricksha seemed not right, not smooth and even enough. I began, for the first time, to watch the puller.

He must have been a beginner. He held the shafts easily, and kept his elbows out the way the others did, and he lifted his heels behind him as he trotted, but he wasn't keeping an even pace, he was tired, and he was not adroit in traffic snarls. He was barefooted, like so many pullers, but I noticed that the bottoms of his feet were not covered with callouses. And once, forgetting myself, I called: "Better swing left or you'll poke that car"—and he swung left!

Now any Chinese in Shanghai who

understood that much English wouldn't have to be pulling a ricksha. He'd be working in a hotel.

When this boy turned off the avenue and entered a maze of small crooked streets where there were no foreign offices or stores, I began to get definitely alarmed. Just about then, too, I observed that underneath his dirty flannels shorts he was wearing silk drawers: I could catch glimpses of them sometimes as he trotted. They were good silk drawers too. I'd have been proud to own them myself.

"Hey," I yelled. "You'd better stop and let me out!"

He turned, grinned, and then went right on. He was pretending that he did not understand me.

"I said *stop! Chan chu!*"

He only went the faster. We were in a narrow alley somewhere in the French Concession. There were warehouses on either side, or *go-downs* as they call them in Shanghai, and nobody in sight. Even in the afternoon, it would be a swell place for a snatch.

Jumping out of a ricksha while it's in rapid motion is no cinch. I slid forward in my seat, and kicked the puller in the back of the head. I kicked hard.

He pitched forward, losing his grip on the shafts, and fell flat on his face. He was yelling something as he fell. I couldn't understand it because it was Chinese.

THROWN forward when the shafts were dropped, I landed on hands and knees right behind him. And before I could get up four Chinese came running out of a doorway about thirty feet ahead of me. They came straight toward me, and obviously they'd been waiting for me. One carried a rope. Another had an automatic pistol.

I let myself go flat, rolling, and at the same time tugging my own roscoe out from under my left arm.

The Chinese stopped, evidently dumbfounded to find opposition. I don't know what they'd expected! The one with the automatic, when he saw my own gun appear, lost his head completely. He closed his eyes, and holding the gun at arm's length, fired four times. It was sheer panic. He didn't aim. He just went crazy.

I snapped one shot back at him, clipping him in the left shoulder. It wheeled him right around, and he was screaming with pain when he staggered back into the doorway from whence he had come. The other three tumbled along after him. The ricksha puller had scrambled to his feet and was sprinting back toward the entrance of the alley. I could have shot him in the legs except that I was afraid somebody might appear at the end of the alley and catch lead. Besides, it would be hard to bring yourself to shoot at a man when his back is turned. So I ran after him instead.

I had an idea that this ricksha puller could tell me things if I caught him and treated him rough enough.

But I didn't catch him. A fat Chinese picked this moment to step out of a warehouse door, probably in order to see what all the shooting was about, and I collided with him full tilt. Fat as he was, I knocked him over, but he grabbed my coat as he fell and took me with him.

I squirmed loose, got to my feet, and ran on. But by the time I reached the entrance of the alley my puller had disappeared. There were dozens of places he might have gone, but as I stood there wondering where to look a couple of Annamite policemen came pelting around a corner from the di-

rection of the Avenue Edouard VII. Fortunately they had not seen my smoking pistol, which I held behind me. I pointed up the alley with my left hand, and cried: "There! Murder!" They went right past me and up the alley, running like mad. And it occurred to me that it would be a good time to get out of this neighborhood. I didn't know what the local gun laws were but I had an idea they'd be strict, and after all my job was to guard Mikuud-Phni Luangba, not to get into jams with the police.

I walked rapidly up one street and down another. I never glanced back. It simply didn't occur to me that I'd be tailed. I figured I'd thrown plenty of scare into the ricksha puller and his friends, and I supposed that all I'd have to do would be get myself a taxi and return to the hotel.

That wasn't as easy as it sounds. In Shanghai there are no cruising taxis, no stands in the streets. If you want a cab you must phone for it. There were plenty of rickshas, of course, but I'd had enough ricksha travel.

I finally found a dim little shop with a public telephone sign in front, and the proprietor, a sleepy-eyed, beaming little man, understood some English. He showed me to a sort of closet in back, where there was an instrument. I called the hotel and asked for a taxi. They wanted to know where they should send it, and I asked them to hold the wire a second. I stepped back into the shop to ask the proprietor where this was. He didn't seem to be around, and the place was curiously quiet. I whistled, called, frowned, and then I leaned over the counter.

There was my sleepy-eyed friend on the floor, only his eyes were closed now and there was blood running down his face.

I started to step back, reaching for my gun, but the ricksha puller was too fast for me. He'd been crouching behind the end of the counter. I caught just a flash of him as he rose—and a flash of the blackjack he held. It was probably the same weapon with which he had sapped the proprietor an instant earlier.

He caught me clean, not a glancing blow like the man who had been burglarizing my hotel room. It did not quite knock me out, that first wallop. I can remember hitting my forehead against the counter as I fell. Then he must have clouted me again.

III

THE next thing I knew was music. I heard it even before I opened my eyes. Not squeaky tuneless Chinese music either, but American jazz. It came from somewhere on my left, but not, apparently, in the same room with me.

Next I became aware of the rag in my mouth, which was sickeningly dry. I wanted to reach up and take it out, and then I learned that my wrists were taped. My ankles were taped too. I could scarcely move.

As a matter of fact, I didn't much want to move for a while there. I had a splitting headache which the strains of "The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down," loudly played by an uninspired band, did not help. So I lay still.

I did open my eyes for a little while, and rolled them, but this didn't do much good. I was on my back and seemed to be in some kind of office, but there was not light enough to be sure of this. Near my head was a metal waste-basket, and on the other side, about seven or eight feet away, was a wall in which there were a sort of shut-

tered window. The music came from the other side of the window.

When the door opened I closed my eyes again. I was not anxious to meet my kidnapers just yet. I wanted to wait for my head to clear.

There were at least two, maybe three. They came and stood over me, and one of them kicked me in the ribs. I didn't move.

"I had to hit him hard. He almost got away."

"Oh, well, he's got a thick skull." This was Mase Mason's voice. "He'll come around all right. Not that it matters."

They didn't seem to be worrying very much. I received another kick, this time in the side of the head, and then I heard them go out. I heard them close and lock the door after them.

After a while I started to work on the tape around my wrists. Though the taping didn't seem to be very thorough, this was not easy. I rolled over to the waste basket, felt for and found a rough corner, and started sawing at the tape. Shred by shred I was cutting it, but it was hard work. In the position I was in I could not put much pressure against the basket, and I seemed weak as a kitten. I had to stop every now and then to rest.

The door opened suddenly and Mase Mason came back, accompanied by a couple of Chinese. One of them was my recent ricksha puller, well-dressed in Western clothes now, and the other was the gunman who'd questioned me in the barber shop.

They did not see that I'd been working on the tape. I dropped back in position with my hands behind me, in time to prevent that. But they did see that I was conscious.

Mason came to me, grinning. He was all confidence. The fact that he showed

himself at all was proof that he was sure of the game now. Mason ordinarily never appeared in person when there was any dirty stuff to be pulled. Ordinarily he had a well-established alibi. He did the ground work, the head work, and let lesser criminals attend to physical details.

Now he knelt by my side and took off the gag.

It was some time before words would form in my mouth. I had to get back a lot of saliva first. Mason knelt there grinning in my face: they had switched on a light as they entered, and I could see him well.

At last I whispered: "Where is this?"

"This, Mr. Marlin, is one of the establishments in the Rue Chao Pau San."

"Oh," I said. "Blood Alley."

"Yes, Blood Alley," he said.

I HAD heard of the place before I even landed in Shanghai. It is the happy hunting grounds of soldiers, sailors and marines, of ricksha chiselers, professional guides, steerers, bums, drunks—flotsam of every known nationality. There's something like sixteen or seventeen dance halls packed into one short block—it isn't really an alley at all—and on a good night there you'll see fights at the rate of one every ten or fifteen minutes. Practically nothing is barred. Maybe if you murdered a cop you might possibly be arrested, but otherwise you can do just about anything you like. It's a very, very tough locality. The fighters are invariably shoved out into the street, but there nobody disturbs them. They can smack one another all over the place, and do. Street signs and city maps call it the Rue Chao Pau San, but everybody else calls it Blood Alley.

"If you think," I said, "that I'm going to tell you where Mikuud-Phni Luangba is staying, you can go buy a kite."

Mason looked at me with watery blue eyes and stroked his chin thoughtfully. He never had liked me, and right now he was pleased with himself because he happened to be tops.

"The Chinese," he said, "have ways of asking questions."

It wasn't nice to hear, the way he said it. But I managed a sniff.

"Turn it on, sweetheart, if you're going to be that way," I answered. "I think I can take anything you can give."

"These Chinese," he said, "are very clever. They make an art of it."

He walked over to the shuttered window in the wall, and opened it. There was a painted wooden grillework there, and beyond that, by rolling my eyes, I could see into the dance hall itself. This window looked out over the musicians' gallery, and the musicians, all Filipinos, were grinding out mechanical jazz. They would play for a few minutes, stop for half a minute, start again. A dime a dance—a Shanghai dime, that is, worth about one-third of an American dime. The place was crowded. Facing us, at the far end, was the bar, where even then a fist fight was in progress. Three waiter-bouncers pushed the battlers out through the door, and no doubt they finished their scrap in the street, as is the custom in Blood Alley.

On the two sides, and probably along the end of the floor which the musicians' gallery overhung, and which I couldn't see, were the *woo niuhs* or dancing girls, forty or fifty of them, Chinese, Japanese, French, Russian, Javanese, Burmese, Tonkinese, Annamites, all sorts of complexions and all

sorts of gowns, but on each face, brown, white or yellow, a uniform expression of deepest nonchalance. They sat eating watermelon seeds from platters on taborets at their sides. Now and then a sailor, or a sleek Chinese youth, or a great grunting Russian exile, would step up to one, hand her a ticket, lead her out on the floor. Dime a dance. The orchestra played almost continuously.

There were four or five American sailors in that crowd, and they looked mighty good to me. Nice hard-boiled lads with red faces and gum-champing jaws. If they had known that a fellow countryman was captive in this room behind the musicians . . .

I opened my mouth, stretched my head toward the window.

Before I could make a sound one of the Chinese had punched me in the mouth. My would-be yell bubbled out in gore.

Sidney "Mase" Mason turned only for an instant, and then only to toss me a pitying glance.

"You ought to know better than that, Marlin. I thought you were smart."

I said nothing. I couldn't say anything. One of the Chinks was holding a dirty yellow paw over my mouth, which was all hot and wet with blood.

BUT my hands behind me, underneath me, were feeling looser now. Strength seemed to be coming back as my head cleared, and I had an idea that with one good hard wrench I might have freed my wrists. But I couldn't be *sure* of this. If I failed it would mean curtains; for I knew that these babies wouldn't hesitate to kill me. And even if I succeeded, I'd be no match for the three of them, weak and stiff as I was, and still groggy. So I remained quiet.

Mason said: "Well anyway, you've got us wrong, Marlin. We'll go to work with a charcoa fire and some nice sharp pincers if we have to, but I don't think it's going to work out that way. My first idea was to snatch His Highness and make you trot out those jewels for ransom, but now I've changed my mind. The snatch is on you, kid."

"If you're trying to make me think you've caught hold of Mike—"

"No, but we will. He'll come to us when he learns that you're missing. *You're* the one we're snatching."

"Why, you damn fools! I haven't got any money!"

"No, but the Prince has. And he likes you, Marlin. He likes you a lot. I know because I've watched him on board the *Myanasha Maru*. He's not dumb. When you don't show up he's going to guess what happened, and he's going to let that ship go without him and start looking for you. I don't think he'll call the cops. I think he's too wise for that. But whether he does or not, we'll hear where he is and what he's doing. We'll get word to him giving him a swift sketch of what will happen to his friend George Marlin unless he kicks through with those trinkets. He's an Oriental himself. He'll understand. He'll know he'll get half a finger a day, with maybe an ear now and then for variety, unless he does what we say. Catch on?"

Well, naturally this was not nice to hear; but still some of the sting was taken from it by the fact that as shrewd a guy as Mase Mason firmly believed that Mike thought so of much of me. What's more, Mason will willing to stake everything on it, though he wasn't ordinarily any gambler. I just couldn't help feeling a little good about that part of it.

"You're dumber than I thought," I

said. "Mikuud-Phni Luangba is a prince of the Kamorirrian royal blood. I'm only an insurance dick hired to bodyguard him—practically nothing but a servant. You think he'd shell out for *me*?"

"Yes," said Mase Mason, "I do."

He chuckled. He was pretty pleased with himself. His two Chinese friends meanwhile were looking at me as though they'd like to start the red-hot pincers act immediately; but they kept their traps shut and let Mason run things.

"Yes," said Mason, "he'll kick through all right. Twice you pulled him out of jams at the risk of your own life, and he's not the kind of a kid to go back on a pal."

"If you think I'm going to tell you where he is—"

"Not necessary. When he misses you he'll guess what's happened. He'll circulate among the dives, asking questions. And we'll hear about this. We've got ways of hearing such things. And we'll approach him with the proposition. And he'll pay."

He chuckled, closed the window. He jerked his long chin toward the door.

"Come on, boys. Fix this smart detective's mouth again, and then we'll leave him alone to his thoughts."

Well, those thoughts weren't pleasant. Here I was a prisoner, while the guy I'd been hired to protect was going to be asked to pay ransom for me with the very jewels my own company had insured. It was nice to think that Mike maybe liked me as much as all that—I hoped so, because I certainly liked him—but on the other hand, I give you my word for it, I'd almost rather have taken the torture and death than go back to the States and confess to my company what a mess I'd made of the job.

NOT that I didn't have an excellent chance of taking torture and death anyway. Mason and his friends would not hesitate, I knew, to hack off one of my ears, or a couple of my toes, just to impress Mike that they meant business; nor would they hesitate, after that, and even after the ransom was paid, assuming that Mike did pay it, to kill me anyway and weight my body and dump it somewhere deep in the deep and muddy Whangpoo. After all, I'd *seen* Mason. I'd seen the other two, for that matter, but they could lose themselves in these parts easier than a white man like Mason. Whatever else he was, Mase Mason was always cagey. When he actually got around to showing his face as an operating criminal, you can be sure that he'd planned an excellent out. He knew me, and knew I'd prosecute if I ever got free—in fact I'd spend the rest of my life, if necessary, getting him behind the bars. The only out he could have in this case was the surest one of all—death. *My* death, of course, not his. He would promise Mike to deliver me alive, and then he would speak the proper words to his Chinese buddies. And nobody would ever know what had happened to George Marlin.

Well, I didn't waste time with this ugly thought. As soon as the snatch brigade had gone I rolled to that broken metal waste-basket and heaved myself up in the back and began sawing again. They'd slapped the gag back into my mouth and fastened it there. I had to take it slow and easy. If I'd moved fast I'd almost choke myself to death. I'll never forget the agony of those cramped, gasping minutes, twisted half out of human shape, with my arms behind me in a sort of hammerlock, while I hacked and sawed with all my might at the sturdy tape.

When the last shred broke I fell to my back and with my freed hands yanked the gag out of my mouth.

Even then, it seemed, I could hardly breathe. I lay making noises like a fish out of water, and the blood was pounding in my temples, and my chest felt like bursting.

There were no windows in this office except the one which opened out on the musicians' gallery above the dance floor, and evidently the door was a tight fit.

The place was hot.

All this, however, I didn't really notice at the time. What riveted my attention, as I pushed my face against the grille, gasping for air, was Mike! Prince Mikuud-Phni Luangba of Kamorirri in Blood Alley! My Mike consorting with these human dregs at a bar. . . . For Mike was laughing, clowning and buying champagne. Splendid in his tails, looking like some elegant figurine in a Fifth Avenue show-window, he was weaving drunkenly among his fawning underworld sycophants. It seemed to me that every eye in that vicious crowd was riveted on the rings that flashed multi-colored messages of opulence from his fingers.

I've got to admit, the sight almost made me sick. This is what I got for risking my neck all the way across the Pacific on behalf of the elegant, charming little princeling whom I had come to think of as my friend—my pal. And here I was, aching, groggy, bloody, with about one chance in ten of getting out of this dive alive. And now here was Mike! Mike, who had promised to stay in the hotel, was double-crossing me, double-crossing his lineage; Mike was drunk, reeling at the bar with a company of bums.

I tell you I was almost ready to give up then.

A SLICK Chinese came up to Mike from behind, tapped his shoulder, whispered something. Mike turned instantly, nodding. He wasn't swaying now, he wasn't laughing. He was alert, businesslike. The drunken act had been dropped.

Nobody missed him as he stepped away from the bar. There was too much champagne there, and too many people were scrambling to get a share of it.

The slick Chinese, a young guy I'd never seen before, led Mike to the end of the bar, and there stood my late ricksha puller and likewise the Chink who had held a gun on me in the barber shop. They both spoke to Mike, and again he nodded impatiently. He fished a key out of his waistcoat pocket, he took a white form out of another pocket and started to write something on it.

I had misjudged Mike!

He was, as Mase Mason had predicted, looking for me. He was handing over the key of the safe deposit box and an authorizing letter to the bank. He was willing to do this, and even *eager* to do it—to toss away a quarter of a million dollars of the jewels he loved and had collected so long—in order to save me, his friend. He wasn't hesitating, bargaining, arguing. He was paying up instantly, at first demand, knowing perfectly well that he was dealing with a tough outfit and that my own life was at stake.

This much I saw, and then I went into action.

After all, I could breathe now, and my hands were free. It's true my ankles were still taped together, but I didn't wait to go to work on them. It would take too long. Instead I grabbed a couple of those flimsy wooden spirals that made up the grillework, and wrenched them off in a shower of splin-

ters. I thrust my head out of the opening. I yelled: "*Mike! Don't do it!*"

The music stopped with a crash. The musicians, of course, were right near me, with their backs turned to me, and when they heard that yawp it must have scared them half out of their wits.

Mike looked up. The guys he was talking with looked up too.

Mike yelled: "*Georgie!*"

I never heard anybody sound so glad about anything. He snatched the key from the guy he'd started giving it to; he snatched back the release form. He started running across the floor, bumping aside couples who'd stopped dancing, toward the musicians' gallery.

I heaved myself head and shoulders through the busted grill. I wriggled the rest of the way out on the gallery. I was yelling to Mike all the time, and I could hear him yelling to me.

A trombone hit me across the ear, and in kicking my way to the edge of the gallery I put my bound feet through a snare drum, but it would have taken a lot more than that to stop me.

I squirmed over the rail and somehow got myself to a standing position.

The ricksha puller had caught up to Mike, had grabbed his shoulder, had wheeled him around. Mike's back was to me. The puller was demanding something of him. And Mike, at least thirteen inches shorter than the Chinese, and outweighed by at least forty pounds, was every inch a prince. What Mike was saying I couldn't hear: the place was a madhouse by this time, with people yelling and screaming all around: but the curve of Mike's back and the set of his shoulders told me plenty. Mike might clown around with the boys in the lowest dives on earth, and drink with them, and sing with them; but he wasn't taking anything from a yellow-faced mongrel like this.

The ricksha puller tried to grab the key out of Mike's hand. He tried to slug Mike in the jaw.

Mike, bless his game little heart, cocked his head to one side and sent a right fist into the puller's digestive section.

The puller doubled up and went over backward.

MEANWHILE the Chinese of the barber shop had slipped around back of Mike and was raising a clubbed pistol. And at the same time Sidney "Mase" Mason came charging around the end of the bar, jerking another pistol from under his coat.

All this happened, you understand, faster than the time it takes you to blink your eyes twice.

Shouting would have been useless: Mike couldn't possibly have heard me. I did the only thing I could. I bent my knees and with my ankles still taped together I jumped clear over the rail.

Remember the daring young man on the flying trapeze? Well, he was used to it, I wasn't! It sucked the breath out of me and I think I must even have lost consciousness for a split-second there on my way down. But anyway, I hit right. I hit exactly where I'd wanted to hit, feet first, on the back of that Chink with the clubbed pistol.

I weigh two - hundred - and - twenty pounds, and that musicians' gallery was a good fifteen feet above the dance floor. We learned later that the Chinese I landed on suffered a broken right shoulder, a broken clavicle, a broken left forearm, and four broken ribs. But that was later.

I landed pretty violently myself, even after bouncing off the Chink. Everything was legs around me for a moment, and with my feet tied together I had a mean job getting upright again.

When I did, it was to face Mase Mason, who was raising his pistol. He was only a few yards away. He must have been yelling curses, for his mouth was open and his eyes flamed with hatred; but of course I couldn't hear a thing in that pandemonium.

The gun went off three times, but the shots were hopelessly high and only clunked holes into the ceiling. The reason for this was Mikuud-Phni Lu-angba.

It all happened so fast that it's difficult to tell it in detail like this. Mike, after knocking down the ricksha puller, had been grabbed from behind by another Chink. This Chink, as it later turned out, was nothing but a common house bouncer who didn't know what it was all about and was only intent upon doing his duty and chucking all scrappers through the doors to the sidewalk. Mike naturally didn't know this then, and he didn't have time to learn. He wrenched himself loose, side-stepped, and clouted the bouncer three times in the face, right, left, and right again. The bouncer slumped to his knees. And it was then that Mike saw Mase Mason raising his gun to slaughter me.

Mike never played football, but he should have. He did not try to turn all the way around, or to yell, or to run in the direction of Mason. There wasn't time, and he knew it. He simply jumped sideways, throwing his whole little body against Mason, striking Mason across the knees, knocking Mason flat.

No spectator at the Rose Bowl ever saw a neater piece of interference work.

If Mike had even paused to twist around and jump straight at Mason, in an ordinary conventional football tackle, it would have been too late. It would have meant lead for Marlin.

Mason was stanned but not out. And he still gripped his gun. He lifted his head, he started to get up on one elbow.

I bent my knees again and with arms outstretched I jumped on him—not feet-first as I'd jumped from the gallery, but head-first, full-length. I landed right sn ack on top of him. It knocked me colc, but fortunately it had exactly the same effect on Sidney "Mase" Mason. And the fight was over.

WHEN I came to, with Mike swabbing my face with ice water and holding a bottle of American whiskey to my lips, the joint was crowded with Annamite policemen and with French police officials in snappy blue-gray uniforms. The customers had been cleared out, and cops were holding back the curious outside the doors. The *woo niuks*, chattering like a pack of frightened monkeys, had been herded to one end of the dance floor. The bartenders and waiters and bouncers, white-faced, panting, were standing in front of the bar and trying to explain what had happened.

Mike himself was laughing. "Ah, my Georgie, you are well again! It is not easy to knock you out, eh?"

I muttered "Yeah, I guess so," and sat up. Somebody had taken the tape off my ankles.

"Here, drink this. It will do you good. And then we will go out and celebrate your escape, eh? I have identified myself to the Commissaire of Police, and we are free to go whenever we like. Come, my Georgie! We will do the rounds, eh?"

I got to my feet, grumbling. The joint was certainly a wreck. Even Blood Alley, which is used to rough stuff, had never seen anything like this before.

"Hell," I said. "haven't you had

enough for one night? We go to any of these other dumps and we're likely to get into another scrap!"

"But when we fight *together*, my Georgie— When we fight *together*—"

I smiled at Mike then, because I knew now that we were pals: the Crown Prince of Kamorirri and George Marlin, who had grown up rough-and-tumble South-of-the-Slot in San Francisco. I had had pals before but I had never had one like Mike.

To conceal the encroaching huskiness in my voice I said gruffly: "All right, you Kamorirria dope—all right. Let's go. . . ."

* * *

A WEEK later, after a nice quiet trip through the China Sea and across the Gulf of Siam, we sat at a table in the Continental Palace Cafe on the Rue Catinat in Saigon. We were right out on the sidewalk, French style, under a striped awning. We were sipping vermouth and water in very tall glasses. Rickshas rolled by soundlessly, and smart shiny automobiles. Yellow-skinned waiters in white coats bobbed around us, emptying ashtrays, bringing fresh ice. And beyond the waiters, but short of the sidewalk pedestrians and street traffic, were the Kamorirrians, twenty-four of them red-brown fellows with bare legs, bare feet, magnificently braided tunics, spectacular shakoes. The Kamorirrians were Mike's official bodyguard, sent down from the jungle by Mike's doting father, who himself had sworn an oath never to leave his native land. They were picked men, each a giant, each with a forty-inch saber at his belt and on the other side a huge old double-action Colt.

"So you thought when you first saw me there that I was out on a spree, my Georgie?"

"Yeah, I got you wrong at first,

Mike. I might have known you better than to think you'd break your promise."

"I knew *you* better than that, Georgie. You had promised to stop at the hotel at eleven o'clock, and when you did not come I was sure that something was wrong. I feared that they had you and would ask for ransom. If they could not come to me, then I must go to them. So I dressed. I went to the low places and made myself conspicuous. Somebody, I was sure, would report me to the criminals who had you. Somebody would approach me."

He lifted his glass in a hand glittering with rings set with diamonds, rubies, emeralds. He smiled a little, glancing at me.

"Well, I guess you're all right now," I said. I looked at the motionless ring of Kamorirrians, solid, watchful. People were staring at them even more than they stared at Mike himself, the visiting prince, the city's guest of honor. But I noticed that nobody got too close to them. "You really should have had these babies all the way from Princeton," I added.

"Ah, but it would not have been so much fun!" He put down his glass, leaned close to me, touched my arm. "Listen, my Georgie. Why do you not resign and come with me back into Kamorirri? My father the Sultan would be delighted to greet you. You will be created Commander of the Household Guards. You will have a palace all to yourself. You will have a harem—"

I shook my head. I knew he meant it, too; but I shook my head.

"No, Mike. Thanks just the same, but I guess not. I don't mind a little gunplay now and then, or a nice old-fashioned barroom brawl, but I can't help feeling just a teeny-weeny bit

homesick. I—I—It sounds foolish, but I want to get back to San Francisco where we have just ordinary everyday American gangsters and racketeers. I want to be kind of quiet again for a while."

"Maybe some day, my Georgie?"

"Maybe some day when you've ascended to the throne I might drop over and say hello. I'll bring a couple of bottles of rye with me and we can sit around and chew the rag about the old days. But meanwhile . . ."

I finished my drink and started to rise. He held my arm.

"Your ship does not sail for half an hour yet, my Georgie. Let us have another drink."

"But the guard . . ."

I waved toward the twenty-four Sampsons who had been standing absolutely motionless for more than an hour and a half.

"The guard," said Mikuud-Phni Luangba of Kamorirri, "can wait. Sit down, my pal. *Carcon!*"



M-m-men S-s-stutter M-m-more

Mr. Henry Lewis Mencken who championed the feminine cerebrum so ably in his book *In Defense of Women*, will be pleased to get this bulletin from Little Rock, Arkansas. It is news that should put the name of Dr. Robert Milson on every woman's lips; it is a challenge that can only be accepted with gravity and foreboding by the men of America. Men, Dr. Milson says, stutter more than women; they stutter more because their minds are not as nimble as those possessed by females.

In his recent address before the Arkansas Stutterers Association Dr. Milson pointed out that stuttering is caused by a lack of "one-sidedness" in the brain. "In the normal person both sides of the brain function as one," he explained. "Thus people are right-handed or left-handed.

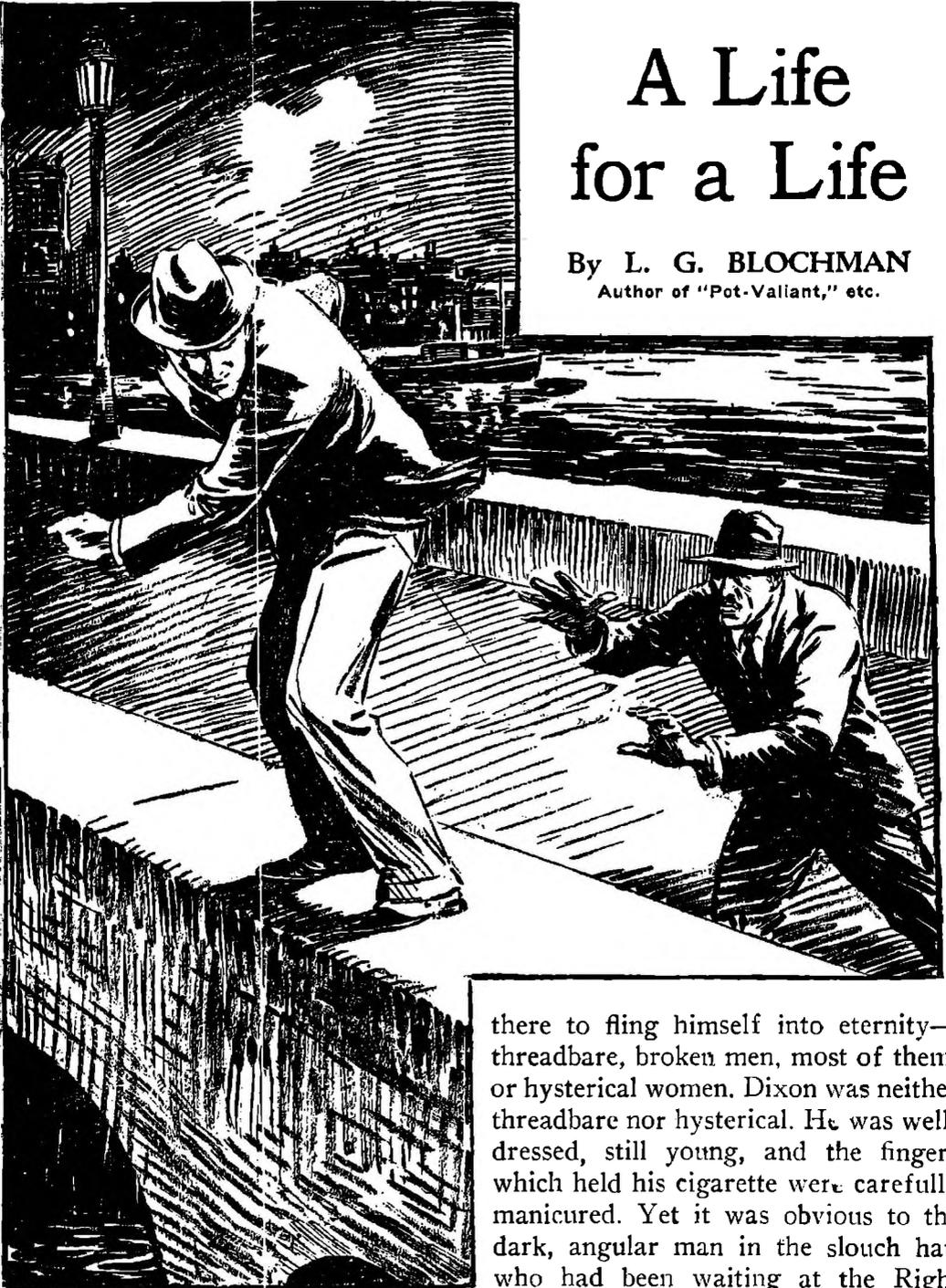
But in the stutterer each side of the brain attempts to assert itself. In the female, the plasticity of the brain appears to enable one side or the other to assert itself with less trouble than in the male."

It is high time someone picked up that gauntlet that Mr. Mencken and Dr. Milson have been flinging around with such abandon. There is a crying need for some male to write a book in defense of males. And in it the author might argue that mental plasticity is not necessarily an admirable quality. It is mental plasticity that makes females change their minds so much. It is this cheerfully plastic quality of the female mind that causes wars, divorces and burned toast. It is really no wonder a m-m-man st-st-st-st—can't talk plain.

J. Wentworth Tilden.

A Life for a Life

By L. G. BLOCHMAN
Author of "Pot-Valliant," etc.



THE Pont des Arts is popular among those seeking oblivion in the Seine because the balustrade is not very high. Hardly a night passes but some dreary, despondent soul goes

there to fling himself into eternity—threadbare, broken men, most of them, or hysterical women. Dixon was neither threadbare nor hysterical. He was well-dressed, still young, and the fingers which held his cigarette were carefully manicured. Yet it was obvious to the dark, angular man in the slouch hat, who had been waiting at the Right Bank approach to the bridge since nightfall, that Dixon was intent on suicide. Perhaps there was a characteristic suicidal droop to his neatly-tailored shoulders. . . .

At the middle of the bridge Dixon

threw his cigarette away, leaned his hands on the parapet, and raised his head for a final look at the world. Upstream the lights of the Pont Neuf stared back at him; the red and white reflections squirmed on the sluggish blackness of the river. He flexed his knees slightly, preparatory to hurdling the last obstacle this side of death. But he did not jump. The bow of a tug slid out from under the span directly below him. A cloud of sparks swirled upward from the broken stump of a smokestack which had been folded back to clear the bridge. Dixon realized that he would only land on one of the string of barges.

The dark man in the slouch hat had been walking rapidly toward Dixon. Now he sprang into a run. He caught Dixon's arm.

"*Monsieur! Je vous en prie!*"

Dixon turned on him savagely.

"Let go of me! What right—"

"Every right, *monsieur*." The man switched instantly to English. "I have been waiting for you for days. Come with me."

"I won't let you interfere—"

"I do not intend to interfere with *monsieur's* desire to die. All I ask is a delay of ten, fifteen minutes. My only wish is that *monsieur's* death shall be of use. Come?"

Dixon did not answer, but his fingers suddenly curled into a fist. The man in the slouch hat saw the fist and tightened his grip on Dixon's arm.

"Very well," he said. "If you will not let me assist you to die, then I will call a *sergeant de ville*—who will insist that you live. Come?"

WITH a listless shrug, Dixon yielded. The man in the slouch hat hailed a taxi and drove with him to a dingy cafe near the Place de la Bas-

tille. In the smoky back room of the cafe, five men sat around a table. They were not the usual Frenchmen who played *belotte* in the back rooms of Paris *bistros*. Even Dixon could tell they were foreigners.

"I have found him, Uzak," said the man with the slouch hat.

The man addressed as Uzak had a soft brown beard that curled close to his face. As he held out his hand, his glance struck Dixon as a blast of fire. His eyes were strangely vital, burning with fierce earnestness. Four other pairs of eyes converging on the newcomer, even those peering through thick lenses, gleamed with the same fanatical light. In contrast, Dixon's eyes were dull and empty. Something had gone out of them, as though part of him were already dead.

"Welcome," said Uzak. "For a week we have been watching the bridges for a man who wants to die. Is a woman the cause?"

"What difference?" asked Dixon. A woman? There had been too many women. Three divorced wives. Countless others. All alike, all unimportant.

"Money, then," said Uzak. "You are a ruined gambler."

Dixon's handsome, dissipated face might have been that of a gambler. But gambling bored him. Money bored him. He had had too much of it, too easily. The things it would buy no longer amused him. All his life he had played, until he was played out. His senses and desires were jaded. Travel was stupid. Same faces at the bars in Calcutta as in Cairo or Chicago; same drinks; same headache every morning. A deadly sameness. There was nothing more to live for. Life bored him. He asked only that it be ended quickly.

"See here," he said. "If you only want to pry—"

"Please, please!" said Uzak quickly. "I come to the point. We are all exiles here. We are lovers of liberty. Our own beloved country is in the hands of a tyrant. For freedom's sake, the tyrant must die. But the man who kills the tyrant will himself be killed. It is inevitable. That is why we have sought a man to whom life has lost its meaning. That is why we want you. You will assassinate the tyrant."

A glimmer of interest flickered in Dixon's once-lifeless eyes.

"Afraid?" he asked with a faint smile. "You're all afraid to die—even for your cause?"

"No!" replied Uzak emphatically. "But it is more important that we live for our country than die for it. Unless there is organization to take over and advance the cause of freedom when the tyrant dies, then his assassination is futile. We are that organization."

Dixon's faint smile persisted as he said: "I can't give up my plans to help half a dozen strangers. The Seine—"

"But we do not ask you to help us!" Uzak protested, "you would help humanity! You would help millions of oppressed people who today are afraid to talk above a whisper!"

UZAK leaned forward tensely until his beard was very close to Dixon's face. His feverish zeal flamed brighter in his compelling eyes as he began his passionate story of a nation in spiritual thralldom. He spoke movingly of the tyrant's bloody intolerance, of dissenters hideously murdered, of men torn from their homes at midnight to be tortured in sound-proof cellars, of families destroyed. His words were eloquent with the crunch of bludgeon on bruised flesh, the crackle of rifle fire, the wail of

bereaved women, the hushed fear of millions awaiting emancipation.

The cafe clock, barely visible in the thickening tobacco haze, ticked on endlessly. Cigarette stubs piled higher and higher in ash-trays. The chill of approaching dawn seeped into the room. Uzak was still talking of the bleeding body of liberty, awaiting resurrection through the death of the tyrant, of the freedom and happiness that Dixon's bullet would bring.

Dixon listened without interruption. His hands, no longer listless, were clasped tightly on the table. The droop had gone out of his shoulders. Little by little the dullness faded from his eyes, until they seemed to reflect the half-mad light of enthusiasm from Uzak's. At three o'clock a waiter came into the back room.

"*On ferme, messieurs,*" said the waiter. "We are closing."

Dixon leaped to his feet. He wrung Uzak's hand.

"You win," he said. "You've converted me."

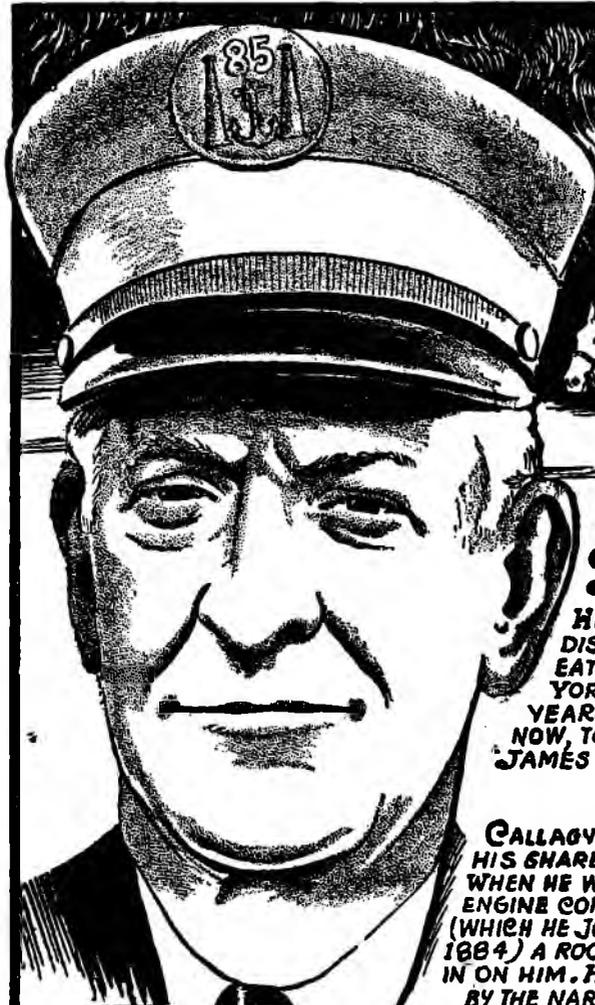
Uzak pressed a small pistol into Dixon's palm. "Comrade!" he exclaimed. "Our people will thank you. Unborn generations will praise you. Jon will take you to the station. He will put you on the morning train. The address of our man—"

Dixon shook his head.

"You've converted me," he repeated, "so completely, that I don't want to die—not even for the cause. Like you, I want to work for it, live for it!"

When night came again, Dixon was back at the Pont des Arts. He and the man with the slouch hat lingered at the approach to the bridge, waiting for another prospective suicide, for a man with the courage to die and without the will to live.

MEN



Fireboat Captain

HE WAS BORN IN THE OLD 'GAS HOUSE DISTRICT' AND HIS CAREER AS A SMOKE-EATER PARALLELS THE GROWTH OF NEW YORK CITY'S FIRE DEPARTMENT. FOR 50 YEARS HE'S ANSWERED THE GONG, AND NOW, TO HIS MATES ON THE FIRE-BOAT, 'JAMES DUANE', HE'S KNOWN AS THE 'IRON MAN'.

CALLAGY HAS HAD HIS SHARE OF DANGER. WHEN HE WAS WITH ENGINE COMPANY 30 (WHICH HE JOINED IN 1884) A ROOF CRASHED IN ON HIM. HE ESCAPED BY THE NARROWEST OF MARGINS. RISKS LIKE THESE WERE ASSUMED BY FIRE-EATERS OF THAT DAY FOR AN HONORARIUM OF \$60 A YEAR!



➤ Martin J. Callagy



ANOTHER TIME HE WAS TRAPPED BY FLAMES IN A LOFT BUILDING. TURNING HUMAN FLY HE LOWERED HIMSELF FROM A WINDOW AND KICKED IN THE GLASS OF A WINDOW FAR BELOW. CALLAGY HAS TWICE BEEN CARRIED FROM THE FLAMES UNCONSCIOUS, AND BURNS AND FIRE BATTLE WOUNDS HAVE MADE HIM A FAMILIAR FIGURE IN N. Y. HOSPITALS.

AFTER 42 YEARS OF SERVICE, THE OLD WARRIOR WAS ELIGIBLE FOR RETIREMENT IN 1926; INSTEAD HE CHOSE TO CAPTAIN ONE OF THE FLOATING FIRE ENGINES THAT PATROL NEW YORK'S WATERFRONT.



A True Story in Pictures Every Week

DARING



FRESH AT HIS NEW POST, HE HAD A CHANCE TO PROVE HIS WORTH. A FREIGHTER CAUGHT FIRE IN THE HARBOR, AND THE BLAZING HULK BECAME SO FULL OF WATER THAT IT BEGAN TO TOPPLE TOWARD THE FIREBOAT.

.... BY QUICK WORK CAPTAIN CALLAGY MANAGED TO GET HIS BOAT CLEAR-- HE WAS JOLTED FROM HIS LOOK-OUT POST TO THE DECK, BUT, USED TO FALLS, HE WAS UNHURT.

LAST APRIL, HIS GAME OLD HEART ALMOST GAVE OUT IN A SIEGE OF HEART ATTACKS, BUT NOW, AT 75, CAPTAIN CALLAGY SWEARS HE'LL PUT OUT SOME MORE FIRES. HE SAYS HE DOESN'T LIKE TO SIT AROUND IN HIS SLIPPERS AND LISTEN TO THE ENGINES GO SCREAMING PAST. AS THERE IS NO RETIREMENT AGE FOR MANHATTAN'S FIRE FORCE, CALLAGY MAY, LIKE SOME OF THE LOYAL HORSES THAT USED TO PULL THE CRUDE EQUIPMENT OUT OF THE VARICK STREET STATION, SPEND HIS LAST DAYS IN HARNESS.



Next Week: Ray Woods—Dare-Diver



The Man In the Next Office

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of "The Sink of Iniquity,"
"The Richest Widow," etc.

Complete Novelet

I

WHEN I entered my office Patty, my little blond operator, was telling a story; Jewel was polishing her nails, her head bent and on her lips was that slight, withdrawn smile which suggests that she is listening to Beethoven's music inside her head, whereas, as a matter of fact, Irving Berlin is her line.

"Hi, Pop!" they called out, and Patty started her story all over for my benefit. Patty always shows you the tip of her red tongue when she begins a sentence; it makes her lisp.

"Pop, you were perfectly right about

that playful pet who dated me last night. He was really pretty foul. I will never question your judgment of a man again. He was like a left-over éclair; looks all right on the outside, but sour when you bite."

"Where's Stella?" I asked.

The two girls exchanged a look. "She just stepped into Rufe's office," said Patty.

"Who the heck is Rufe?"

"The man in the next office."

"Rufus Penry, manager of the St. Nicholas Toy Company," added Jewel. "Haven't you noticed the lettering on the door?"

"How long has this been going on?" I asked, getting a little annoyed. "And what exactly is going on?"

Pat made a face. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Rufe just happens to be very nice—



and—and friendly. And he likes Stella. Quite a lot, I think. As a matter of fact, he's very nice. Probably even you'd like him."

Pat and Jewel were all right. Smart and quick and pretty shrewd, both of them, but Stella was the one I really counted on, and I didn't want her to go getting messed up with any collar-ad in the next-door office.

"I'm not paying her to put in her time down the hall," I said sharply, and wished I hadn't spoken. I've never been very good at barking, and I've always made a point of letting the girls do pretty much as they please. But it was one of those July broilers that generally makes me feel pretty mean. I was tired and uncomfortable. I wanted people to be around when I wanted them.

So I said some things I didn't really want to say, and Stella walked in right in the middle of them. . . .

MY OLD friends on the force have, at one time or another, given me a pretty stiff ribbing about opening up an investigator's office with just three girls to help me. But between the four of us we've had pretty good luck with cases that have given my old plainclothes pals plenty of headaches. In the five years we've been operating, we've eaten regularly, and stalling the landlord for the rent is something we haven't done much of.

As a matter of fact the girls are about twice as dependable as any men I could have hired. I'm not, for instance, always having to have them pulled out of speak-easies and stuck under cold showers before I can get them on the job. They don't lose

their dough on the gee-gees nor blab everything they know about a case to some doll-faced gal who turns out to be the guilty party's girl friend. No, sir. You can take all the men operatives in town and dump them into the East River—I'll stick to my girls.

Patty's the youngest. Her uncle was a cop. Her father was a cop. She's got a brother on the Homicide Squad—and her sister's married to a desk-sergeant in Brooklyn. She's small and pert and pretty fresh and at least twice as smart as any flatfoot in town.

Jewel came to New York originally to study law. After she passed her bar exams, she tried to get a clerkship in a big commercial office. But the best she could do was a thirty-five-dollar-per job as a legal stenographer. Patty brought her to me about a year ago.

She's the one who smiles at you when you come through the door; the one who takes your name and makes up her mind whether I'm going to see you or not. And with her law experience, she can check and double-check any offside play the boy we're after might make, faster than he can yell for his attorney. Nope, I couldn't do without Jewel.

There's no sense trying to explain to you about Stella. She's only twenty-four but somewhere in those twenty-four years she's found time to try her hand at almost everything. She was an actress on the Coast for two years. She worked on a newspaper in Chicago. She was a waitress in a hash-house on Eighth Avenue and sang at a night club off Fifth. She speaks three languages, can spot me three strokes at golf and win by four, cooks *spaghetti indienne* better than Tony ever did, rides like an angel and drives like a fiend, and handles herself in a jam as coolly and as smartly as any man I've ever met.

That's telling you what she can do—but it isn't even giving you the smallest idea what she's like. She's tall and slender without being what they call willowy. She's got the poise of a princess and the good-natured charm of a child. She wears warm

browns a good deal, to match her eyes and hair, and when she smiles it makes you feel as fine as you do just after the first, perfect puff of good tobacco in a friendly pipe.

No, I'm not maudlin about Stella. I'm just trying to tell you calmly. And I don't need her any more than I do my right arm. Not that there's ever been anything sloppy between Stella and me. In fact, until that day, she'd never seemed to be particularly interested in men, even if nine out of every ten were more than particularly interested in her.

I guess maybe I began to be afraid I was going to lose her. Seeing the glance Patty and Jewel had exchanged—amused, sympathetic and interested the way women get when another woman has fallen in love—had scared me. Anyway, as I say, I was jawing away like the middle-aged chump that I am when Stella came in through the door. I didn't see her right away, so I don't know what she heard.

THE other girls sent her warning glances but she blurted out, "Pop, something has happened. The police have come looking for Rufe—I mean Mr. Penry. You must help him, Pop."

"Yeah!" said I.

They all started yelling at once. Finally I got them more or less under control, and Stella told me what happened. She'd been in the outer office next door when the police had come in asking for Penry. Without waiting to find out what was up, she had slipped out to get me. I could see how upset she must have been, because I'd never known her to lose her head before.

While she was talking, a shadow darkened the window; ill and we all turned around. There he stood on the ledge outside. My offices, in case you didn't know, are in the Waltham Building on the twenty-first floor.

All three girls gasped and froze where they stood. The man seemed to be clinging to the frame by his fingernails. He grinned, and letting go with one hand, tapped on the glass.

"Oh, Rufe!" Stella whispered.

I crossed the room and raised the lower sash very gingerly in order not to shake him off. He caught hold of the frame with a sinewy hand and jumped in.

"Thanks," he said. "Sorry to intrude. I just had some unwelcome callers in my office . . . so I stepped across."

The girls laughed shakily. But the whole fool stunt made me sore. Not that there was anything wrong with Penry. I would have liked him myself, but he was just a little too sure of my girls. And much too good-looking.

"You can go out this way," I said, pointing to the entrance door.

"No!" said Stella quickly. "One of them is watching in the corridor."

Penry started back for the open window. Stella's hand fluttered out. "Rufe—please!"

He stuck his head out. "I suppose the next two windows belong to your private office, Mr. Enderby. If I could only get around the corner of the court I could go through the room that opens on the side corridor. There's a fire exit at the end of it."

"What's the use?" said Stella.

"I'm at the peak of my year's business," said Penry. "I've got eight important appointments today. I've no time to fool with the police."

"There's a door into the side corridor from my private office," I said stiffly. I wished something would make a little sense.

"Swell!" said Penry. "I'd like to have a word with you before I go. Look," he went on to Patty, "if the flatfoot should take it into his head to look in here while I'm talking to your boss, just shove that book off on the floor, will you?"

"Surely, Mr. Penry."

"Rufe to you, darling. It's a good thing to protect you from the weather."

At the door of the private office he paused to look back at the girls. He was dark and young, with fine shoulders and a sweep of straight black hair across his forehead. A gleaming smile glistened on

his dark face. He took it for granted that everybody liked him. He said to me: "Enderby, I've got to hand it to you! With the demand for beauty what it is, how in blazes did you manage to cop three such winners? *Three* of them!"

"It's a sort of gift," I said. "Come in."

Once inside, he came direct to the point. "You're a detective Mr. Enderby."

"I prefer to be called a confidential investigator."

"Right! Well this is confidential."

"What are you wanted for?"

He produced his cigarette case. "Murder."

"That all?"

IT rolled off without even touching him. "Most men in my situation would run to a lawyer," he said. "I don't want a lawyer. I want somebody to stall off the police for me. Until this mess gets straightened out."

"Who—whom—are you accused of murdering?"

"They don't know it, but it's Matthew Sleasby. They have come to get me to identify the body. He was found floating in the Buttermilk Channel with a bullet in his skull."

"Well, why don't you identify him and have done with it?"

"Because the trail would lead straight to me. I profit by his death, see? He had a stranglehold on my business; held all my stock in escrow. His death automatically releases it. And I'm a free man." He flung up his arms. "Free!"

"Did you kill him?" I asked.

He bared his white teeth in that gleaming smile. "Do I have to commit myself one way or the other?"

"Naturally."

"I don't see why. I wouldn't have to tell a lawyer. A lawyer would work to get me off just the same whether I was innocent or guilty."

"That may be," I said nettled, "but I'm not a lawyer. And I'm pretty particular."

"Good! he cried. "Then you're the man for me."

"What do you want me to do? Pin the murder on somebody else?"

"No!" he said waving his hands. "This Sleasby was a number one so-and-so, you understand—a skunk, a swine of the purest water. Whoever bumped him off was a public benefactor."

The conference—if you can call it that—was cut short by the slap of a book on the floor in the outer office. Penry made swift tracks for the side door. The key was in it. As he went out he said:

"Sleasby's death releases the profits of my business. I can pay you your fee. I'll call you up."

As I locked the door after him I reflected that he had not told me whether or not he had killed Sleasby. I dropped the key in the bottom drawer of my desk.

A plainclothesman stuck his head in the other door and looked around the room. "Beg pardon for disturbing you, Mr. Enderby. Orders are to look in every office on the floor for a man we want. It's Rufus Penry. Is he a friend of yours?"

"No," I said, honestly enough. I was pretty sick of Penry by then.

"Where does that door go to?"

"Opens on the side corridor. I don't use it. The key is somewhere in my desk."

"Don't trouble yourself, Mr. Enderby."

An hour later a messenger boy arrived bringing (a) a dozen American Beauty roses for Jewel, (b) a five pound box of Maillard's for Patty, and (c) a bottle of some French perfume for Stella. They told me that the translation of its silly label was *Adieu to Wisdom*. I thought it well named.

ABOUT nine that night, Penry turned up at my flat. He brought a pocketful of good cigars and a bottle of fine scotch. Within half an hour we were calling each other Ben and Rufe. He didn't seem to irritate me so much when the girls were not around.

"Well, Ben," he said, "what have you done in the case?"

I pointed out that I had not yet taken it.

He grinned. "Anyhow, what have you found out?"

"Matthew Sleasby was a widower of fifty-five," I said. "He had no near relatives. Though reputed wealthy he lived in modest style—"

"Say he was as tight as a bale of hay and have done with it!"

"He lived in a small cheap flat on East Fifty-fifth Street, alone except for an old woman-servant. Night before last, about seven-thirty, he was called to the phone. Immediately afterward he told his servant that he was going out. Didn't say where. Would be back in an hour, he told her.

"She didn't see him again, but did not worry, because he often went away for a day or two without telling her. He was last seen by a newsdealer walking east on Fifty-fifth Street near Second Avenue. At dawn this morning his body was discovered by a pilot of the Hamilton Avenue ferry. He had been shot in the back of the head by a bullet of thirty-two caliber which was found in his skull. In his pocket was a notebook with an entry reading: *In case of accident notify Rufus Penry, and your address.*"

"Oh-oh!" said Penry; "So that was what brought the police to me! A grim little joke of Sleasby's!"

"The body has not yet been identified."

"It will be soon," he said gloomily. "As soon as it is, Sleasby's attorney will show the police the agreement between Sleasby and me. Then goodnight!"

"Who is Sleasby's attorney?" I asked.

"Thomas Rekar, another chromium-plated crook."

"What was in the agreement?" I asked.

"Understand, I've been working for this toy company since I was a boy. Five years ago the boss died and the firm was forced into bankruptcy. I saw a big opportunity in it, but I was only twenty-one, I had no money. Matt Sleasby put up the necessary capital to reorganize the concern and drew up this agreement

"It sounded all right. He took fifty-one percent of the capital stock and allotted forty-nine percent to me. My stock was to

be placed in escrow until I had paid him for it in full. After that, I was permitted to buy Sleasby's stock as I could, until I acquired full control. The price of the stock to be based on the profits of the concern at the time of purchase.

"For five years I have been nailed to that damned agreement. We prospered from the start, but it did me no good. The more money we made, the more I had to pay Sleasby for the stock. His object was to milk the concern of every cent of profits, and at the same time delay the day when he would lose control. He and his dummy directors voted me down at every meeting.

"I haven't had much of a life these past five years, denying myself everything—good times, girls, spending—while I scraped together enough to pay off Sleasby. By January first I would have been a free man. Well, when Sleasby saw that he couldn't hang on any longer, what did he do? Opened negotiations to a big toy firm to sell out to them and give me the big laugh. And as he was still technically in control I couldn't do a darned thing to stop him. Whoever killed him certainly handed me a new deal on a platinum platter—"

"I know how you feel," I said; "but unfortunately—"

"Unfortunately, my story makes me an object of suspicion, eh?"

His grin made me sore. "Confound it, Penry, a charge of murder is no joke!"

"Are you telling me?" he said. "I'm just whistling in the dark—and boy, it's plenty dark." He smiled again, less jauntily.

I couldn't help but like the kid. And he really was worried. Dark fear had come to lodge in his eyes; his voice was edgy.

"What's to be done?" he asked calmly.

"According to the medicos," I said, "Sleasby was killed soon after he left his house. Can you establish an alibi for the time between—say, seven-thirty and nine-thirty last night?"

"Sure!" he said quickly. Then he hesitated, biting his lip. "I took a girl out to dinner in a restaurant," he went on more slowly. "Mary Douglas."

"Can you bring forward others to support her story?"

"Sure. The proprietor of the restaurant where we dined knows me."

"What restaurant?"

"I'll tell that later."

"Blast it! If you have a real alibi, all you've got to do is to tell it to the police and they'll quit bothering you."

"The police are not going to give up as easy as that. They'd try to shake my witnesses— No, they're not going to let go of me until they find another stooge."

"It doesn't matter, if the stories of your witnesses stand up in court."

"Sure!" he agreed. "But what am I going to do until my case comes up? Sit and twiddle my thumbs in a cell and see my business go to smash? All the toy-buyers in the country are in town to stock up for Christmas."

"That's just silly," I said. "Do you think you can dodge the police and carry on your business at the same time?"

"Not indefinitely," he said, grinning, "but within two or three days I expect you to clear me."

"I'll have nothing to do with it," I said, "unless you take me into your confidence!"

He got up. "Sorry," he said. "I like you, Ben."

I was sorry myself then that I had spoken so quickly. I tried once more. "Tell me plainly as man to man, did you kill Matthew Sleasby?"

"I decline to answer," he said, grinning still, but the grin was not so brash. It conveyed some feeling that I could not analyze. "Good night, old fellow," he went on. "I still have hopes of winning you over."

I WENT to bed in a very bad temper. I had no more than got to sleep when I was awakened by the ringing of the telephone at my bedside. It was about two o'clock. I heard Rufe's cheerful voice over the wire and silently cursed him.

"Oh, Ben," he said, "I just thought of something that I thought I ought to pass on to you at once."

"Is that so?" I said.

"I hate to cast suspicion on anybody else," he went on, his voice sharp with irony. "But I am forced to do it in self-defense. Take down this name, Ben. Fred Wiser. Got that? W-I-S-E-R. Works as a salesman for the Manhattan Novelty Co., Five Hundred and Ninety-one Broadway. Lives at Eighteen Locust Street, Leonia, New Jersey. I have a photograph of him. I'm mailing it to you now.

"Listen, Ben. Matt Sleasby has been on the outs with this Wiser for a long time back. Can't tell you what first started it. I heard that Sleasby bought up a first mortgage and a second mortgage on Wiser's house in Leonia. Also a chattel mortgage on his furniture. The interest seems to have been paid up—or most of it.

"Sleasby allowed the due dates of the mortgages to pass without saying anything. Last week he presented a demand for immediate repayment under threat of foreclosure. Wiser has no money and the property has depreciated in value since the mortgages were given. He couldn't possibly renew elsewhere. So I reckon he had even more reason to liquidate Sleasby than I had, eh, what?"

Rufe's laugh was too much for my temper. "Go to the devil!" I said, shouting into the receiver. "And why couldn't you tell me that when you were here?"

Laughter gurgled into my ear. Rufe Penry's tone was the serene, sweetly reasonable twelve-year-old placating a scolding parent. "I thought," he said, "that you were mad at me." And hung up.

II

I OVERSLEPT myself next morning, and awoke unrefreshed. What I found when I arrived at the office—half an hour late—did not improve my temper. An air of suppressed excitement; Patty tapping the typewriter with unusual industry; Jewel filing away the accumulated correspondence; and Stella's desk—empty again.

"Rufe called Stella up half an hour ago," Patty began chirping before I was well

inside the door. "Said he had a bookkeeper and a stenographer but neither of them could sell a bill of goods if their lives depended on it. So he asked Stella to go in and take care of the customers until he could make other arrangements. He said he would keep in touch with her by phone. The bookkeeper would furnish her with all prices and discounts."

I was so sore that I turned around without waiting to take off my hat and overcoat, and hit out for next door. Rufe's office was similar to my own outer room—a rail inside the door, and beyond it a bookkeeper working at a high desk, and a homely stenographer at a low one. Knowing Penry as I did, her homeliness surprised me. In the center of the office sat a plainclothes man with a distinctly sour expression. It was not a man that I knew. The door of Penry's private office was on the right.

The showroom was in a long L to the left, lined all around with shelves and show-cases displaying toys of every description. Dolls, tops, fire engines, airplanes, bears—everything. Here I saw Stella active as if she had been in toys for years. She had two buyers on a string, and both of them had more eyes for her than for the toys. Stella had two pads in her hand and was entering their orders first on one pad then on the other as she led them around.

The bookkeeper came to the rail to greet me. He was skinny and flat-chested with carrot hair and wispish sideburns; red-rimmed eyes and an expression as meek and gentle as a dying sheep. His name was Bryan but I learned later that everybody called him Joe.

"Good morning," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"I want to speak to Miss Deane—when she is free."

He missed my sarcasm completely.

"Yes, sir. What name, please?"

"Enderby. From next door."

The bookkeeper paled. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir," he stammered. "Mr. Enderby, would you mind—if you please—making out that you are a customer. You see—this man behind me is a police officer."

"So I see," I said.

He raised his voice for the benefit of the plainclothes man. "Yes, sir. Certainly, sir. Will you have a seat or would you prefer to look around at the stock while you're waiting?"

He leaned toward me. "Mr. Enderby," he whispered. "Excuse me, but is there any news? Have you found out anything? You see—we're all so attached to Mr. Penry. This means everything to me, Mr. Enderby. What has happened? Is Mr. Penry in danger?"

He was a pathetic object, but I was too burned to bother about him then. "There is no news," I said.

He went back to his desk.

THE telephone rang. Flatfoot made a move toward it, but the stenographer beat him to it. "Miss Deane, you're wanted," she said. Stella excused herself and came into the room. Passing me she said sweetly: "I'll be with you in just a minute, sir." Lord! but women can be exasperating.

As soon as she picked up the receiver I knew from her expression that it was Penry on the line. The plainclothes man knew it, too, and scowled.

"Yes?" said Stella. "Oh yes. Just a minute." She drew pencil and pad towards her and proceeded to take down his instructions. Afterward she said: "Mr. Rugose and Mr. Pine are in the showroom now. I'm taking care of them."

The plainclothes man could stand it no longer. "Here. Let me talk to him, sister."

Stella was not at all intimidated. "Just a minute," she said, waving him back. She continued to Penry: "Mr. Ploughman telephoned that he was at the Hotel McArthur, and Mr. Staples is at the Conradi-Windermere. Mr. Verney will arrive tomorrow. There's a gentleman here from Police Headquarters who would like to speak to you."

The plainclothes man snatched the instrument from her. "Say, looky here," he began roughly. Then a blank expression came over his face. "Damn! He hung up

on me!" he muttered, smashing down the receiver. "Where was he phoning from?"

"Oh, were you cut off?" she said sweetly. "He called from the Vandermeer."

He banged out through the door, and Stella gravely winked at me.

She went back to her customers. When she had their orders signed, she disengaged herself smoothly and had eased them out the door before they knew what was happening to them. Then she came back to me, looking so contrite that I couldn't stay sore.

"Oh, Pop, don't scold me."

All my anger evaporated like smoke. All I could do was puff out my cheeks and make a bluff at it.

"I'm truly sorry," she went on. "But how could I have done any differently, Pop? Rufe expected to consult you about it, but you were late this morning and his customers were already coming in. I had to help him, didn't I, Pop? It's what you'd have wanted me to do if you'd been here."

I made my eyes severe. "This attempt to stall off the police won't do Penry any good. If he goes to those hotels to meet his customers—"

She smiled. "Foolish," she murmured. "Those were not the right hotels. We fixed up a code for telephoning." She looked as pleased as Punch, and blew me a kiss with her fingertips.

When I got back to my office, Patty and Jewel rushed at me like bloodhounds. "What is happening, Pop?"—"What have you turned up?"—"Give me an assignment on the case, Pop. I'm caught up with my office work"—"Let us help!"

I gave in all along the line. "All right," I said. "I've got an assignment for Jewel. I want to get a line on a man called Fred Wiser. He works for the Manhattan Novelty Company, Five Hundred and Ninety-five Broadway, and his home address is Eighteen Locust Street, Leonia. Find out what you can about him. Fetch him into the office if you can, otherwise arrange for me to meet him some place."

Jewel had her hat and coat on and was gone before you could count ten.

I turned to Patty. "Sorry, child. Somebody's got to hang around here, and you're elected." She pouted. So I said: "Penry might call up," and she brightened, like quicksilver.

I HAD Fred Wiser's photograph from Rufe by then, and my idea was to take it up to Matt Sleasby's place and show it to the servant. In the picture, Wiser's face was sort of ratty. He was dark, looked about forty. I'd been to Sleasby's old-fashioned flat the afternoon before. It was on East Fifty-fifth Street near Third.

The grim old female who was his servant nodded at me glumly and raised a hand to shove back a blowsy wisp of gray hair from her forehead. She did not ask me in.

"You again?" she said. Her mouth tightened.

"Have you heard anything from Mr. Sleasby?" I asked, staring right back at her.

"No," she muttered.

"I'm looking for information about a man who owes Mr. Sleasby money," I said. "This man." I showed her the photograph.

She snorted. "I know *him*. Name's Wiser. He was here to see Mr. Sleasby. Last time was a week ago come Thursday. They had a fight. Mr. Sleasby was awful mad—I could hear their voices just as plain. This fellow here wanted to beg Mr. Sleasby off from foreclosing. Said him and his wife would starve if Mr. Sleasby put them on the street."

"And what did Sleasby say?"

"He says it was nothing to him. Says the business was in his lawyer's hands."

"What then?"

She grinned and looked wise and ugly. "Why, I showed this fellow out. What else?"

"You told me Sleasby was called up on the phone just before he went out Monday evening," I suggested. "Who took the call?"

"Me. He was called up twice. The first time he wasn't home."

"Was it Wiser's voice?"

"I couldn't tell you, mister. He spoke sorta growling-like."

"Disguised, eh? Would you know the voice again?"

She shrugged. "Mebbe."

"Did Sleasby call him by name when he talked to him?"

"Nope."

"Well, go on."

"The other fellow must have said he had news because Mr. Sleasby says: 'Well spill it!' Then he listened and looked real pleased. 'Good!' says he. And then: 'Are you there now?' Then he says: 'I'll be there in ten minutes. Sure, I always carry a gun,' and hangs up."

THAT was all I could get out of her. And it didn't get me very far. If the old woman's version of the telephone talk was correct, it couldn't have been Wiser who had called Sleasby up.

As I came out of the house I noticed, across the way, the side door of a saloon that fronted on Third Avenue. It struck me that if anybody had been trailing Sleasby that saloon would have made a swell observation post. I went over and showed Wiser's photograph to the bar-keeper, who was a good-looking young Irishman with a forearm that could have felled an ox.

"Sure, I seen this guy before somewhere," he said. He called his boss out of the back room and they consulted over the picture. Finally the boss said:

"This guy was in here two or three days ago. Three. Yep, that's right. I noticed him because he acted so funny. I was in the back room figuring up my accounts and he was sitting by the window."

"What time of day was this?" I asked.

"Well, he was here for more than an hour. From about quarter past six to half past seven, I guess. Made two beers last him out while he watched through the window. Then all of a sudden he went out and walked away from his beer. I watched him crossing the avenue. He was trailing a guy on the other side."

"What did the other guy look like?"

"Man of fifty, but slim-like. Dry, leathery kind of face and pale blue eyes."

That was Matt Sleasby, all right.

I had a direct lead now and I felt pretty good. I called up my office from a pay station. Patty told me that Jewel had phoned in to report that Fred Wisner had been discharged by the novelty company ten days before and nothing had been heard from him since. Jewel was going on over to Leonia and would phone from there. I told Patty to get her number when she called up, and tell her to stand by the phone until I called her back.

I needed to know a lot more about Matt Sleasby before I could hope to solve his murder. So I thought I'd best drop in to see his lawyer, Thomas Rekar, while I waited for another report from Jewel.

THERE was nothing shabby or mean about Rekar's place. His offices were in a good building on Fifth Avenue. There was heavy mahogany furniture and thick-piled rugs all over the place. I sent in my card and was admitted right away. I find that people are generally pretty curious to find out what a detective wants of them.

Rekar was a tall man. He was thin but flabby, too. He had a neat gray mustache and a soapy voice that set me against him from the start.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Enderby?"

"I am looking for a man called Fred Wisner," I said.

A subtle change came over his face. "Never heard of him," he said. "What made you think I had?" His pale eyes were brightly speculative.

"I am informed that he owes a sum of money on mortgages to your client, Matthew Sleasby."

"Why not go to Mr. Sleasby himself, then?"

"I have been to his house twice, in fact. He is away from home. His servant said the matter was in your hands."

He ran up his eyebrows. "What does she know about it?"

"She only said that she overheard Mr.

Sleasby tell Wisner that the matter was in the hands of his lawyer."

"A routine matter, I presume," Rekar said carefully. "It would not be brought to my attention. No doubt my clerks are attending to it."

I thought he was lying. "Sure," I said. "Sure."

"But you must understand that I can give out no information without instructions from my client," he added. "Whom do you represent?"

"I'm not permitted to say. It's another party that Wisner owes money to."

"Oh, a bill-collector," he said.

"Wisner gives it as his excuse for not paying my client that Mr. Sleasby has been bearing on him pretty hard," I said.

Rekar leaned back and placed the tips of his finger together. "That's a deliberate falsification," he said. "Many people believe that Sleasby is something of a"—he smiled—"a skinflint. That is not exactly the fact. Nobody knows Matt Sleasby better than I do, and I say to you that some day, Mr. Enderby, some day, when Matthew Sleasby is gone, the world will learn how truly generous he really was."

"You mean—his will?" I said, playing up. This would be a valuable piece of information if I could tease it out of him.

"I mean his will."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask—?"

"It is indiscreet, and Matt would be angry if he knew I had divulged it. Still—under the circumstances I think I may tell you, Mr. Enderby. But it must not go any further. Matthew Sleasby is leaving his entire fortune to found homes for working-girls in several of our largest cities."

To save myself I couldn't help grinning. But I quickly flattened my smile. "That's pretty fine of him, all right."

From that point on we sat there telling each other how noble Sleasby was, and if Rekar had any idea that Sleasby had been dead for at least twenty-four hours, he was careful not to give himself away. And the only other bit of information I could dig out of him—painlessly—was that Sleasby's will named him executor and trustee.

So I left him, putting two and two together, hopefully, and getting totals of three and five and eight—but never four.

III

WHEN I got to the office Stella came in to hear my story. She listened quietly, making no comment. When I had finished, Patty said breathlessly:

"Are you going to tell the police about Wiser?"

"Not yet," I said.

"But we know now that Fred Wiser did it!"

"All we know is that Wiser *might* have done it. We can't prove a thing. We don't even know where Sleasby was murdered. Judging from that telephone conversation, he started for some place he'd been to before."

"Yes," said Stella. "And he said, 'I'll be over.' That suggests that it was neither uptown nor downtown, but crosstown."

"Right. And he said he'd be there in ten minutes. Well, how far can a man walk in ten minutes? About two-thirds of a mile, if he's a brisk walker, and Sleasby was. We can narrow it down even further because he was seen by a newsdealer crossing Second Avenue. That would be two minutes later. And he was still heading east. If he had eight minutes to go, it could not be to any place in that block, consequently we have him at the corner of First Avenue and Fifty-fifth, four minutes after he had left home and with six minutes to go."

"Pop, you're smart," Patty put in.

"Sure." I grinned. "One of us should start from the corner of First Avenue and Fifty-fifth, and explore the territory that a man could cover in six minutes. Always keeping to the east of First Avenue, of course, because he wouldn't retrace his steps. There isn't so much ground to go over because there's only one block east of First, then the river."

"Let me do it, Pop," Patty begged. "It's my turn." I'd never seen the girls so anxious to work on a case before.

"All right," I said. "You can start out as soon as Jewel comes in."

Shortly after twelve o'clock Jewel called up from Leonia. "Pop," she said, "the Wisers have pulled a sneak."

"So," I said. "When?"

"About nine o'clock this morning, they locked up their house here and set off in a little old Chevie that Wiser owned."

"Did you get the license number?"

"Sure. Got it from a garage that had made repairs on the car. According to the neighbors the Wisers were right up against it. They weren't very popular. Wiser was a sorehead. Always fighting with somebody. For some days past they have been telling people that they were going to Utica, New York, to live with Mrs. Wiser's sister until something turned up. I mooched around the house and found a window on the back porch that had been left unlocked. So I went in. The house was a mess.

"I found that they had left all their winter clothes hanging in the cupboards, including Wiser's heavy overcoat and a fur coat of Mrs. Wiser's—not a very good one, but wearable. So they weren't starting out for northern New York in October. Next I went through the waste paper and in a basket I found a crumpled-up circular issued by the Chamber of Commerce of Miami, Florida. I also found a scrap of paper with a mysterious row of figures on it. May not mean anything, but I kept it."

"Good work, Jewel," I said. "There's nothing further you can do out there. Come on in to the office."

"What are you going to do, Pop?"

"What d'ya think?" I barked. "I'm going after the Wisers."

YOU cannot drive south without passing through Baltimore. I knew a guy on the Baltimore force so I called him up. After describing the Wisers and their car, and giving him the license number, I asked him to set a watch for them and to detain them if they came along before I got there. Then I hustled over to the Newark Airport and took the one o'clock plane for the South.

I got in Baltimore before three. According to my figuring it would take the Wisers, driving an old car, at least six hours to make it. I got in touch with my friend Sergeant Driggs, and we started out in a police car to relieve the man he had set to watch the Washington Boulevard.

It was too easy.

We hadn't been waiting beside the road more than quarter of an hour when the Wisers came bowling along, all unsuspecting. When we told them to pull up, Mrs. Wiser was shrill and indignant, but Wiser didn't say much, only smiled in a nasty way. His wife was all dolled up in sleazy finery, and plastered with rouge, lipstick and mascara. I took the wheel of Wiser's car and drove them back to the police station. Driggs followed in his car.

When we got to Driggs' office, Wiser turned on me with an ugly grin. "Well, what's it all about, mister?"

"Matt Sleasby," I said. "He's pretty dead. I think maybe you could tell us something about it."

"Have yourself another think, pal."

"You were seen watching his house from about six until seven-thirty three days ago. And when he came out you followed him. That was the night he was killed."

Wiser, still grinning, said: "Ain't it funny the way things happen? Sure I was watching his house, I wanted to make a touch. I didn't expect him to ease off on the foreclosure, but I thought he might be good for a ten-spot when he was putting me on the street."

"Did you get it?" I asked.

"I did not. Sleasby told me to go to blazes and I beat it."

"And where did you go from there?"

"I got a watertight alibi, mister," he answered. "I happened to think of a friend of mine who might give me a loan and I went right to his place. I took a taxi because I knew he was going out at eight o'clock. He lives on East Forty-second and I was there before quarter of eight. I would've had to be pretty sharp to kill Matt Sleasby in that short time, now wouldn't I? Where was he killed?"

"Never mind that," I said. "What's your friend's name?"

"Manny Harris. He's a lawyer, and he's got an office by Jefferson Market Police Court. You can call him up right now."

"Leaving that for the moment," I said, "if your hands are clean, why did you go to all the trouble of telling everybody you were going to upstate New York and then started out for Florida?"

Wiser began to laugh. "You certainly been fooled bad, mister! Say, it's a wow! Coming all the way to Baltimore just to get the ha-ha! I feel sorry for you, really I do, but I got to laugh!"

"Cut the comedy," I said sharply, "and answer my question."

"Listen," he said, "I'm broke, see? And my wife and me had to go up to Utica to live with her folks. That's what I wanted the ten bucks for. It wasn't no picnic for me, but I hadn't no choice. Well, last night, past one o'clock it was, there was a ring at the door and I says to my wife it must be Santy Claus, and she says we need him bad enough. So I goes down to let him in. And by golly, it was Santy Claus! Santy Claus in the person of Rufe Penry, the toy man!"

The skin of my face began to tighten.

"Rufe knew all about me and my trouble with Sleasby," Wiser went on, "because when I got fired I went to Rufe for a job but he didn't have any. So last night Rufe says to me: 'Fred, they say that Matt Sleasby has been killed. The cops have got me on the run,' he says, 'and I'm so darn busy at this season I just can't fool with them. Now,' he says, 'everybody knows about your trouble you had with Sleasby, and if you was to disappear, like, it would drag a red herring across the trail as they say, and I'd get a chance to turn around.'

"I says: 'How much is it worth to you, Rufe?' 'Five hundred smackers,' he says, so we shakes on it, and here I am. I'm darn sorry you run me down so quick. Don't seem like Rufe is getting value for his money." He went off into his ugly laughter again.

His story had a fatally convincing ring. I scowled.

"Call up Rufe Penry if you don't believe me," Wiser said. "It was part of our agreement that if the cops run me to earth he would square me."

I went into another room to telephone. I got somebody who said he was Manny Harris and he substantiated Wiser's alibi. Afterward, through Stella, I got Rufe on the wire, and Rufe, apologizing all over the place, said that Wiser's story was the McCoy. I swore at him for a while and hung up.

So there was nothing for me to do but let Wiser go. I was as sore as if I'd had a smack in the face. I got Driggs to telegraph the chief of police in Miami to ask him to keep the Wisers under surveillance. Partly because Wiser had my goat, and partly—well, you never can tell what's going to bob up in a murder case. Anyhow I couldn't think of anything else to do.

MY BLOOD was hitting the high Fahrenheits. I was going to find the murderer of Matt Sleasby if it was my last act on earth. I don't have to tell you that Rufe Penry was still my favorite candidate. They could have slapped him into the electric chair right then and I wouldn't have lifted a finger. Except for the girls. And my biggest job was to make them see the light.

When I got back to New York my office was closed, but there was a memo from Stella on my desk telling me to look in the safe. Unlocking it, I found a note:

Dear Pop:

We hope you will get back in time to have dinner with us. If you can make it by seven o'clock (we'll wait until half past) come to Forty-seventh Street, east of Broadway, and stand at the curb in front of the cigar store—for five minutes. Or you can walk slowly up and down if you're restless. Then cross the street and enter the building directly across the street. Climb four flights of stairs and go to the front suite on the right. Smith is the name on the door. Knock three—one—three, like this: - - - - -

Stella

These dime-novel precautions made me grin. But I went to Forty-seventh Street and obeyed directions. I knocked on "Smith's" door, and, after Patty had peeked out at me through a crack, the door flew open and the girls pulled me through.

They were all there, the girls, Rufe Penry, and Rufe's bookkeeper, Joe. The girls were getting dinner in a kitchenette off the living room while Rufe sat and made unhelpful suggestions. They all talked at once, got in each other's way, snatched things off the stove, burned their fingers, and in general acted more like village belles at a strawberry festival than the three girls I'd come to know and respect.

Rufe was sitting there grinning like the lord of all creation. Joe said little, but kept staring at Rufe with a kind of dumb admiration. Rufe was Joe's hero. In fact thinking Rufe Penry was a sort of cross between Alexander the Great and Clark Gable seemed to be a disease that was rapidly becoming an epidemic.

"Quite a hideout you have here, Penry," I said, sourly.

"Isn't it? Patty found it for me this afternoon. There aren't any doormen or elevator boys to give me away. There are people going in and out all night. It's as public as an aquarium."

"Just what you want," I said.

They put me at the head of the table, served me first and treated me like Napoleon entering Warsaw. It was Pop this, and Pop that, every face turned in my direction and there was loud laughter to applaud my feeblest cracks. I wasn't fooled by it. It just made me madder. I could see that there had been a general agreement to smooth the old man down. The real hero of our festive little love-feast was the black-haired lad who was wanted by the police.

It gave me a wrench to see the look that passed between Stella and Rufe as we were sitting down. I haven't forgotten what it is to be young. I hated to think how I was going to hurt her by taking

the line I'd made up my mind to take. However, better for her to be hurt now than when it was too late. That's what I told myself, anyhow. But it wasn't going to be easy.

When we had finished eating Rufe got up to give a toast. "Ladies," says he. "Ladies—and Joe. I give you Pop. Four-square, true-blue, no-surrender Pop. You can tell he's a stout fella by the way he turns his toes out. And Pop is going to yank little Rufe right from the jaws of an unpleasantly public execution. I hope." And the damned young idiot grinned all over.

I got away before I'd bust out and tell Rufe off. He came to the door with me. "No hard feelings on account of what happened today, Pop?"

"None whatever," I said. "Leave Stella alone until this mess is cleared up, Penry. Or I'll take you apart. And don't pull any more fast ones."

"Look Pop, send me a bill for the time you have already put in on this case, will you?" he said. "And forget the darn thing."

"Going to be a martyr now, eh?"

His face darkened. "You don't like me," he said suddenly.

"Don't let it bother you. Everybody else does." I looked at him wearily. "Oh go lie down and gnaw a bone somewhere, won't you?"

His eyes had a funny light. "Okay, Pop," he said, swallowing hard.

IV

WHEN I entered the office next morning Jewel and Patty were chattering like parakeets.

"Come on, girls, let's get to work," I said. "Patty, what about that assignment I gave you yesterday?"

The girls stared at me. "But—but Pop! Rufe told us that you had given up the case."

"He misunderstood me. I belong to the bulldog breed. I never let go." I'd had a night to think it over, and I was tired of

being a sorehead. I had to settle this thing . . . one way or another.

"But Pop! . . ."

"Only two days ago you were keen enough to have me take it up," I said.

Womanlike, they ignored this. Jewel said cajolingly: "There's nothing in it for a man of your standing, Pop."

"I know darned well that there's nothing in it for me," I said. "Nothing but abuse. However, I'm going to see it through."

The two girls exchanged a look of understanding. Jewel got up and slipped through the door. They always called on Stella when they got in a jam.

"Well, what did you find out yesterday?" I said to Patty.

"Nothing," she answered.

"Patty, you've never lied to me before." I slammed a fist down on her desk. "What the hell's got into everybody around here?"

She began to weep.

"Cut it out," I said. "Let's have the situation understood. Two days ago Rufe engaged me to represent him on this case. Last night he fired me. I am now working on my own, and you're working for me, not for him!"

"How can you be so m-mean!" she wailed, glancing toward the door to see if Stella was coming.

"What did you find out yesterday?" I persisted.

"What did I find out?" she repeated, suddenly turning voluble. "I walked up one street and down another until my feet groaned. What did you expect me to find out? Did you expect some man to come up to me and say: 'I shot Matt Sleasby with my trusty thirty-two!' Or perhaps you thought there'd be a sign out on one of the buildings: 'Matt Sleasby shot here. Twenty-five cents to view the spot!'"

Jewel came back, bringing Stella. Patty went off into a driving rain of tears and I lost my temper.

"Look here," I shouted, "you do your work as well as any men, but I can carry on my business without cloudbursts, I—I'll fire the lot of you!"

Stella flushed. "I'm not crying, Pop." Her eyes were defiant. "You never get squalls from me."

She was right, but I was too mad to be fair. I didn't answer.

Stella turned on Patty then. "You're acting like a lunatic, Pat. And you're not helping Rufe, either. What has Rufe got to fear if he isn't guilty? And he isn't. The only way to get at the truth is to let it all come out."

Patty gave in. "Rufe's toy factory is on York Avenue. That's the street nearest the East River, and it's just six minutes walk from the corner of First Avenue and Fifty-fifth."

"And that would be a place of course where Matt Sleasby would often go," I said. "And if a message came from the factory it would arouse no suspicion in his mind."

Stella turned on me. "There's nothing conclusive in this, Pop."

"Oh certainly, not conclusive," I said. "It's just one more link in the chain."

"What links have you to connect Rufe with the crime?" she demanded.

"Three," I said, and counted them off on my fingers. "First: he had a powerful motive for putting Matt Sleasby out of the way. Second: no innocent man would be so keen to keep out of the hands of the police. Third: he went to any amount of trouble and expense yesterday to create a false scent."

Stella turned without a word and went back to the toy shop. I wanted to go after her and take it back. But I didn't.

BY PULLING a wire or two, I got a young building-inspector called Bracker to take me with him to visit Rufe Penry's factory. York Avenue after masquerading for a few blocks as fashionable Sutton Place, dips down a hill and resumes its own name. It runs through a kind of No Man's Land with nondescript buildings, many of them vacant, and various storage-yards. I could see that it would be a lonely spot at night. It was none too reassuring in broad daylight.

The toy factory had begun life as a stable or milk depot, but had been cleaned up and painted and furnished with a new red sign. It was not directly upon the river; there was a junk-yard between. It was primarily a warehouse.

There was a tumult of packing and shipping on the ground floor. The building-inspector introduced me to the foreman. This foreman was a keen young fellow named McClary who regarded me with truculent blue eyes. He had evidently been warned against me, but under the circumstances he couldn't do anything. Like everybody else who worked for Rufe, he was for the boss right or wrong.

The inspection was completed, and we went up to the second floor. The foreman tagged along. There were a couple of dozen girls at work here painting little porcelain figures with movable heads. The rear of the long loft was empty.

"You don't seem to be very busy," I said.

"All our manufacturing is completed for the season," the foreman said curtly. "This is a special order"

I found nothing to get excited about until I saw the little office boarded off in the front. Naturally Matt Sleasby, if he had come to the factory that night, would have headed for the office. I glanced in and saw a couple of plain chairs, an old safe, a battered desk. There was a woman scrubbing the floor, and I thought that was odd, since all attempts to keep the ancient floor clean had obviously been given up years ago.

"Why are they so keen to wash up this particular corner?" I asked her.

"You can search me," she said. "It's twice this week they had me in to scrub it."

"You don't seem to be getting it very clean at that," I said. "What's this brown smear in front of the safe?"

"I been over it three times," she said, "but it won't come out."

The young foreman came up. "It's an old varnish stain," he said sullenly.

Or blood, I thought.

WHEN Bracker had finished his so-called inspection we went out in the backyard. I could see the foreman standing back inside the building, watching me. The yard was a small one, about fifty by fifty. A dilapidated wooden fence separated it from the junk-yard. Examining the fence, I found a spot where two of the boards had recently been wrenched off and nailed back on again with *new* nails. Taking a line between this hole in the fence and the back door, I was able to establish a faint wavering track which showed in the soft spots. It was a heel-track—made by the heels of . . . a body. I could also make out, here and there, a footprint of the man who had dragged it.

The inspector and I left. He went back to his office and I turned into the junk-yard. For half a dollar I was given the run of the place, and by degrees I was able to piece out the sinister track from the hole in the fence across the yard to the river. More than this, I found a brown button by the fence which had been torn from a man's coat. Some shreds of material were clinging to it.

There was a tumbledown wharf at the water's edge. Sleasby's body had undoubtedly been dropped overboard here. The place where it had been recovered was about six miles away. If the tide was at the ebb, it would just about make it. I made a mental note to look up the tides.

Adjoining the junk-yard to the south was the shanty of a squatter who made his living by repairing and renting small boats. He was a battered hulk of a man and, I suspected, not above turning his hand to any shady job that came along.

"Have you had any experience in recovering objects lost in the river?" I asked him.

"Sure," he said with a grin. "It's part of my trade, mister."

"What I'm after is a gun," I said. "I figured that a man stood on the junkman's wharf Monday night and threw it in the river.

"If it's there, I'll find it," he said.

"I'll pay you for your time," I said,

"and if you get the gun, there's a ten-dollar bonus. Keep your mouth shut."

"That's part of my trade too, mister," he said with a snagtoothed grin.

On my way downtown I stopped at the Morgue where Matt Sleasby's body was still being held for identification. I asked to be shown his clothes first, and I saw at once that the button in my pocket had been torn from the jacket of his coat. I was then shown the body on its slab—a lean, stringy figure with a hard, ugly face. Even in death he had no dignity. Nobody regretted him. He had done nothing but harm in his fifty-odd years of life.

"Do you know him, mister?" asked the attendant.

"Never saw him before," I said.

WHEN I got back to the office, the girls were peeved because I wouldn't tell them what I was up to. We were all sore with each other; all the good feeling of the office was gone, and I cursed Matt Sleasby's memory—and Rufe Penry's presence.

By two o'clock the waterman was in my office with the gun. He kept it hidden from the girls until he was alone with me. It was a thirty-two automatic, made by one of the best firms. Only one bullet had been discharged from the magazine.

I started tracing the sale of the gun, and before I left the office I had full information. It had been sold two years before by a prominent sporting-goods store to Rufus Penry of One Hundred and Fifty Central Park South.

So there it was. I wondered at Rufe's foolishness in leaving so open a trail. But of course when he bought the gun he didn't know he was going to kill a man with it.

Now the only thing needed to complete my case was to prove that the bullet which had been taken from Matt Sleasby's skull had been discharged from this gun. The police had the bullet and I could not obtain it without putting my whole case in their hands. I still hesitated to do this. I decided first to test the alibi that Rufe had given me. He had told me that he

took a girl called Mary Douglas to dinner on the night of the murder. There was a Mary Douglas in the phone book but it proved to be the wrong one. So I tried a little ruse. Rufe kept a servant at his apartment. I called up and asked to speak to Miss Douglas.

"Why, she doesn't live here," answered a surprised female voice.

"Miss Mary Douglas," I said. "Don't you know her?"

"I know the young lady, but she doesn't live here."

"Isn't this Central six-one four one o?"

"That's the number, but Miss Douglas lives at the Allingham."

I hung up grinning. After dinner, I drove to the Allingham hoping to catch the Douglas girl before she went out for the evening. I sent up my card and was promptly shown to her suite. She was pretty—trust Rufe Penry for that! A medium blonde with fine grey eyes. She was looking at my card wonderingly.

I said: "You are a friend of Rufus Penry's."

"Yes," she said. "What of it?"

"When did you see him last?" I asked.

"Why do you ask?" she parried. "Who are you, anyway?"

"You have my card," I said. "I must call your attention to the word 'confidential' upon it."

"I won't answer your questions," she said with spirit. "I don't have to."

"Of course if there's any reason why you *shouldn't* answer—"

"There's no *reason*! Rufe Penry is the finest chap I know! I had dinner with him Monday night."

"Where?"

"At a little restaurant called *Charles à la Pomme Soufflée*."

"At what time did he leave you?"

She flushed up. "I don't know. I won't answer any more of your questions!" she said angrily.

I tried a little bluff. "I'm sorry, but you must answer. If you want to know who I am, call up Police Headquarters."

It worked. "It was early when he left

me," she stammered. "About a quarter to eight. He said he had to go back to his factory."

I got up. "Thank you," I said. "That's all."

"But *please* tell me what this is all about," she begged.

"I'm sorry, I'm not free to do so."

Before I got to the door the telephone rang. She picked up the instrument and I heard her exclaim: "Oh, Rufe!"

She was listening to some communication with growing dismay. "Oh Rufe! he's here now!" she cried. "And I *have* told him!" She dropped the instrument.

"Rufe's been terribly busy," I said.

She jumped up in anger. "Well, it's not going to do you any good!" she cried. "If you attempt to put me on the stand I'll lie out of it! I don't believe Rufe Penry has done anything wrong, and if he has I don't care!"

I bowed myself out. Certainly Rufe had a way with him! A regular card, that guy. Right then I'd have given my right arm up to the elbow to have had his neck between my fingers. . . .

V

I DROVE home in a low state of mind. Inspector Lanman was a personal friend, and I felt it my duty to put him in possession of the facts. But my hands were reluctant to take down the receiver and I kept putting it off from moment to moment. I have a three-room flat on University Place on the sixteenth floor. I was still pacing up and down when there was a ring at the bell. I went to the door and the three girls came tumbling in, all talking at once—or rather two of them were talking, for Stella was oddly quiet.

"Oh Pop, what have you done?—Have you notified the police yet?—You mustn't do it, Pop!—You are making a terrible mistake!—" And so on! And so on!

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" I protested. "One at a time!"

"Have you communicated with the police?" Stella asked sharply.

"Not yet," I said. "But I am about to do so."

She dropped in a chair as if her knees had suddenly given way under her. "Thank the Lord we're in time," she murmured.

This made me a little sore. "Let's have a long drink to cool our fevered blood," I said. "What'll it be, girls?"

Stella waved the glass aside.

"We have come to prevent you from making a terrible mistake," Stella said.

I looked them over with mixed feelings: all flushed and bright-eyed with excitement, they were a treat to a man's eyes—but I saw that I was in for a bad time. I prepared to be firm and unyielding.

"I'm delighted to see you," I said, "but your coming here cannot change me from the course I have decided on."

"Stop talking like Frank Merriwell's grandfather," Jewel snapped.

"What is the exact situation," Stella demanded.

"Listen!" I said. I told them how Rufe had lied to me about spending the fatal evening with Mary Douglas, when he had gone to the factory at quarter of eight; that Matt Sleasby had arrived there at about the same time; that a man had been shot in the factory and his body dragged across the yard and dropped in the river; that the button I had found was from Matt Sleasby's coat; and finally that he had been shot with Rufe Penry's gun which I now had.

They wouldn't believe it because they didn't want to believe it. My story was received with a storm of denials and counter-accusations—even from Stella. "Rufe didn't do it! Rufe didn't do it!"

"Wait a minute!" I said. "You, Stella, answer me. How do you know he didn't do it?"

"I—I just know, that's all," she said with her chin up.

I flung up my hands. "Well, I'm no clairvoyant," I snapped.

"I know Rufe didn't do it because he acts so strangely," said Patty.

"And how can you explain his strange actions except that he *is* guilty?" I asked.

"If Rufe had done it," Jewel said, "either he would say he *had* done it or he would say he hadn't done it."

BOTH the other girls seized on this as if it was the judgment of a Solomon. "That's as clear as mud," I said.

"Pop, all I ask of you," Stella said, "is not to act in a hurry. Rufe isn't going to run away—or he would have run away already. Give yourself forty-eight hours, and I know you'll discover the truth."

"Forty-eight hours of this and I'll go off my nut!" I said.

"Then drop it, Pop. Give us girls a free hand and we'll prove Rufe's innocence."

"I haven't a doubt of it," I said.

"Well, you needn't get nasty," said Patty.

"You'd better go, all of you," I said, "or we'll really quarrel."

"We'll go," said Stella quickly, "if you will promise not to take any action within forty-eight hours."

"I refuse!"

"Twenty-four hours."

"No!"

"Just give me time to get in touch with Rufe, Pop."

"That's just what I don't mean to let you do!"

"You talk about being reasonable!" she said with a breaking voice.

That drove me wild. I said: "What women can't understand is a man's sense of duty. It is my job to expose crime."

"Oh, goodness, don't mount *that* hobby horse," cried Patty.

At that I flew off the handle altogether. "Get out! Get out! Get out!" I shouted, waving my hands.

They only looked at me. Patty's and Jewel's faces were working like those of children about to cry, but Stella's was set and white.

"It's useless to try to reason with him," she said to Jewel. "Go and do what we agreed on."

Jewel ran into my bedroom.

"What's this?" I cried, starting after her.

Stella and Patty, making an unexpected rush, pushed me backward into an easy chair. Patty began to cry. I sat there staring at them with my mouth open. Then I began to laugh.

Jewel came out of the bedroom carrying the telephone. She had cut the wires. My laughter turned to swearing. Stella said:

"Did you get the keys too?"

Jewel nodded.

"Then put that down and come help us."

I jumped up in a fury but Stella and Jewel seized hold of me, and Patty pushed from behind. No man in the world was ever in such an humiliating position. I couldn't hit my girls. I could only push them off. But I could only push one off at a time, and when I turned to another, the first one grabbed me again. I planted my feet and was pushed along the floor like a balky mule.

All the while little Patty was crying: "I hate to do this, Pop! I hate to do it!" And Jewel with big tears running down her cheeks: "But you wouldn't listen to reason, Pop!"

This only made me madder. I was choking with rage.

Stella said to the others: "What are you bawling about? When you've got a thing to do, do it and shut up!"

We struck against the table and the whole darn thing crashed over carrying lamps, books, papers, ashtrays to the floor. I got behind a heavy chair, but they pushed the chair along with me. It caught on a rug, and the whole crowd of us went down in a heap on the floor. When I picked myself up they ran in on me like three terriers. All the time we were nearing the open door of the bedroom.

I tried to temporize. "Wait a minute, girls. You're doing something you'll be sorry for!"

They went on hauling and shoving.

I got a clutch on the edge of the door-frame and hung on, gritting my teeth. The girls let go of me suddenly, and moving back a little charged me like a battering

ram. My hold broke and I went sprawling on the bedroom floor. The door slammed and the key turned.

I RAN into the bathroom. There was a door from the bathroom into the kitchen. However, they had locked it and there I was, a prisoner sixteen floors above the street. I ran to a window. But I shrank from opening it and hollering for help. Suppose I did succeed in bringing the police and the fire engines, what a figure I'd cut! After all this was a private matter between the girls and me.

I went back to the door through which I had been thrown. It was a heavy panel of mahogany that opened towards me. Putting my ear to the crack I could hear Patty crying outside, and Jewel's murmuring voice. Nothing from Stella, and I took it that she had slipped out to warn Rufe Penry. So they had got the best of me!

Presently I heard Patty on the other side of the door. "Pop, dear," she said, "are you all right? I hope we didn't hurt you."

I wouldn't answer her.

"Pop," she went on, "let the cold water run and put a wet compress on your bruises. It will take the sting out."

Not a sound from me.

"Pop! Answer me!"

From behind her I heard the calm voice of Jewel saying: "Ah, let him alone. He's only sore and you can't blame him."

I HEARD a ring of the bell and made haste to put an ear to the crack again. It was Stella back. I heard Patty's and Jewel's exclamations of relief upon seeing her. Then I got a surprise. There was the rumble of a man's voice. I hardened. It would be a satisfaction to have a man to deal with.

After a whispered consultation, the door was thrown open and Rufe stood there. "Gosh! I'm sorry for this, Pop!" he said.

I marched out ignoring the outstretched hand.

"I know how you feel," he went on. "The girls meant well but—" Suddenly his

face broke up. He struggled against it, but laughter broke from him with a roar. He dropped in a chair laughing and gasping out: "I'm sorry, Pop—I'm sorry—but I can't help it!"

The girls were laughing, too, and holding their hands over their mouths—even Stella.

"I'm glad you think it's so funny," I said.

"Look in the glass, Pop!" said Patty.

I looked in the mirror but I couldn't see anything funny.

"Like a little turkey gobbler with his feathers all ruffled up!" cried Patty. "Oh, I'm sorry, Pop!"

I started for the door. If I wasn't safe from insult in my own house I could leave it. Rufe ran after me and drew me back.

"Ah, come back, Pop," he said. "We're all for you. Come back and let's talk things out as man to man."

"All right," I said. "Did you or did you not shoot Matt Sleasby?"

"I did not," he said, looking me square in the eye.

"Then why in blazes didn't you say so in the beginning?"

"I had my reasons," he said, "good ones, too."

Another evasion! "What did happen?" I asked.

He hesitated. "In telling you this I am trusting you further than I ever expected to trust any man."

I shrugged impatiently.

"All right. I said I trusted you. First, about the gun. I bought it because our factory was in such an out of the way spot. So far as I know it was never out of the office safe."

"Who possesses the combination to the safe?" I asked.

"I have it; McClary my foreman has it; Bryan my bookkeeper has it; Matt Sleasby had it; and his attorney Rekar has it."

The girls were listening with sharp attention. They had tidied the room. Patty came over and smoothed down my ruffled hair.

"Now as to Matt Sleasby," Rufe went on. "I didn't call him up at any time last Monday. I had a perfectly legitimate reason for going to the factory that night. McClary had been after me to come and pass on a new figure we were starting to manufacture. I couldn't make it during the day, and I phoned him to leave the stuff out where I could see it.

"I took Mary Douglas home and drove on up to the factory. It was about eight o'clock. As I turned the corner I saw that there was a light on the stairs and another in the office above. I let myself in with my key. On the stairs I saw a gun. Not my gun. I left it there. When I entered the office I was aware of four things: the safe was open; my gun was gone; there was a splash of blood on the floor; a man's hat on the table. I looked inside the hat. It had Matt Sleasby's initials."

"Was there any money in the safe?" I asked.

"No, only on payday. Robbery had no part in this killing. . . . I could dope out what had happened. Sleasby was always snooping around, you understand, trying to get something on somebody. He had made so many men hate him that this was bound to happen sooner or later. I won't pretend that I was sorry.

"The blood was still wet, and with the hat and gun there and the lights burning, I guessed that the killer was still around. I went downstairs. The back door of the shipping room was standing open. While I watched it was darkened by the shadow of a man coming in. It occurred to me that I had better keep out of this, and I dropped behind a pile of boxes until he passed and went upstairs. I then let myself out of the building and beat it for home. Next morning the police came to my office to make inquiries. You know the rest."

I SAID: "The notebook found in the dead man's pocket was described to me as being a new one. It had no other entries but your name which was printed in block letters. It suggests that the note-

book was planted in the dead man's pocket by the killer."

"That's not possible," said Rufe quietly.

This answer gave away more than he intended. I lit a cigar and studied. "Rufe, your story is true up to a point," I said.

"Where did you catch me lying?" he asked with a grin.

"Human beings have inherited a sense of curiosity from the monkeys," I said. "It is incredible that anybody could have let the killer pass him without peeping out to see who it was."

Rufe grinned and let it go at that.

"Who was it, Rufe?" I asked softly.

"I will never tell you that," he said.

"Good grief, man! I can't cover up a murder!" I cried. "I've got to report this case. Consider the evidence there is against you. You'll have to stand trial and you may well be convicted."

"I have faced that out," he said. "I didn't kill the man."

"Ah, don't fool yourself!" I cried. "Many a man has been sent to the chair on less evidence than they will have against you!"

"I shall make a good witness for myself," said Rufe confidently.

Stella pleaded with him. "Think what it means, Rufe! Months of imprisonment followed by a trial that's bound to be sensational. Even if you are acquitted, it would ruin you."

He lowered his head. "Sure, it's a hard choice," he said in a low tone. "But I have no other. My mind is made up."

"Don't kid yourself with talk of an acquittal," I said. "This story about arriving on the scene a few minutes after the crime and seeing the shadow of the killer is the kind of story that a hard-pressed defendant always tells. It's typical."

A painful scene followed. The girls pleaded with Rufe, but he only set his mouth in a hard line and shook his head. It was maddening to see him bent on sacrificing himself.

In the middle of this the door bell rang. "Don't answer it!" said Rufe. "We don't want any outsider horning in."

"I'll get rid of them," I said.

When I opened the door I saw Joe, Rufe's meek bookkeeper. I let him in. He stammered so that it was difficult to make out what he wanted. He had been working late at the office, it seemed, and a telegraphic order had come that he thought Rufe ought to see.

"How did you know I was here?" asked Rufe.

"I took it to the flat on Forty-seventh Street. McClary was there. He said Miss Deane had come to fetch you down to Mr. Enderby's."

Rufe gave him his instructions but he didn't go. Everybody is familiar with the spasms of boldness that shy people exhibit. "What were you talking about when I came in?" he asked suddenly.

"The National Debt," said Rufe. "Run along, Joe."

The little man's voice scaled up. "No! I want to know. . . . Is Mr. Enderby still trying to prove Rufe guilty of murder?"

"Don't be silly," said Rufe.

A hunch came to me that Caspar had used the telegram merely as an excuse to find out what was going on. "Unluckily I have proved my case," I said. "Rufe will have to stand trial."

Rufe sprang up white with anger. "Damn it, Pop!"

The little bookkeeper smiled peculiarly and stroked the back of a chair. "You are on the wrong track, Mr. Enderby—"

"Don't say it Don't say!" shouted Rufe.

Joe only raised his voice. "—I shot Matt Sleasby."

The girls cried out in amazement; a groan was forced from Rufe.

"I couldn't let you stand trial," Joe stammered.

"I've got a good thick skin," said Rufe, "I could take it. But you!" His voice broke. "They'll kill you!" He turned to me in bitterness. "Well, I hope you're satisfied, Pop."

"Joe knows all my business," Rufe went on presently, "and I suppose he brooded on what Sleasby was doing to me until

something snapped in his brain and he did this thing. For *me!* How can I let him suffer for it?" He turned away to conceal his emotion. "Well, it's up to you, Pop."

I was floored. What could I do or say? It was one of those situations where every possible course of action seemed wrong.

Joe stood looking at me as if his life hung on my next words. I couldn't meet his piteous eyes. Rufe remained glum and silent. The girls began to plead with me in broken voices.

"Pop, you couldn't lay a charge against Joe! It would be like hurting a child! He did it for Rufe!"

"You all know that this is useless," I said. "I couldn't fall for hushing up a murder."

VI

THERE was silence in my living room. Two of the girls were crying softly; Rufe was scowling and biting his lips; Joe sat with his chin on his breast awaiting his fate. As I thought over what had been said, a maggot began to stir in my brain. Had I after all got to the bottom of the case? I said to Joe:

"How did you decoy Sleasby over to the factory?"

"I didn't decoy him. I just happened to meet him there."

This confirmed my suspicions. Certainly somebody had decoyed Sleasby out of his house that night.

"Are you willing to tell me just what happened?" I asked.

Joe nodded. "I worked late at the office on Monday. A couple of things came in that I wanted to show Rufe. He had told me that he was going to the factory after supper, so I went up there with them. Mr. Sleasby was there. He suspected that Rufe was cooking the accounts. I hated him because I knew he was going to sell the company out and destroy everything that Rufe had built up since he was a boy.

"Mr. Sleasby started to question me, trying to trap me into something to Rufe's

discredit. It was more than I could bear because Sleasby was the crook, not Rufe. Finally he offered to pay me if I would help him to 'get' Rufe." Joe began to tremble at the recollection. "At that I became a different person. It came to me that we were alone in that solitary factory and that the river was handy. I made believe to fall for his offer. When he turned his back I took the gun out of the safe and I shot him."

The little man had to stop for a moment until he could control himself. "I then got a rag and wrapped it around his head so that he wouldn't leave blood on the way and I—"

"Did you do this right away?" I interrupted.

"Oh yes! Quickly. Quickly. I was terrified of somebody coming."

There was a discrepancy here. A man bleeds but slowly after he is dead and there had been quite a lot of blood on the floor. I figured that Sleasby must have lain there for some minutes at least. "Go on," I said.

"I dragged him downstairs through the shipping-room, out the back door and across the yard . . ."

"Weren't you afraid?" I asked.

A shiver went through him. "I was sick with fear. But it had to be done. I pulled a couple of boards off the fence, dragged Sleasby through, and dropped him off the wharf. I threw the gun into the water. I then went back to clean up the blood and get the hat. Sleasby's gun had fallen out of his pocket on the stairs. I didn't make a very good job of the floor. I got a hammer and nails and fixed the fence. Then I went home. I dropped Sleasby's gun in a sewer opening. I dropped pieces of the hat in different places."

As I mulled over this story, a gleam of light came into my mind. "Have you and Rufe talked this over?" I asked.

"Oh no!" he said quickly.

"You didn't know, did you? that when you came back from the river, Rufe was in the shipping room watching you."

"Oh no! Rufe *wasn't* there!"

"Rufe himself told us."

"I—I don't understand."

"And what's more, shortly before you came in Rufe looked me square in the eye and told me that he had not killed Sleasby."

"He said that—he said that—" Joe turned to Rufe with his hands clasped together. "Didn't you kill Sleasby?" he asked.

"Have you lost your wits?" said Rufe. "You have just told us that *you* killed him."

A wild cry broke from Joe. "Oh, thank heaven!" His mild eyes were blazing with joy. "I didn't kill him!" he screamed. "I would never have the nerve to fire a gun. I only said that because I thought Rufe had done it!"

WE LOOKED at each other to see if we had heard right. Rufe flung an arm around the thin shoulders. "Oh, you little fool!" he cried, in a voice warm with feeling. "Did you think for a moment that I would stand for that if I *had* done it?"

"You can't be spared," stammered Joe. "I'm nobody."

Let me pass lightly over the scene that followed. We laughed and cried; shook hands, clapped each other on the back, and otherwise comported ourselves as if we were demented with joy. Each of them assured me fifty times over that I had saved the works. Such was my revenge.

Finally I asked Joe to give us the real dope. He said:

"Monday night I went uptown on the First Avenue bus and walked over to York. As I came to the corner I heard a muffled shot from somewhere near by. I couldn't locate it exactly. It gave me a nasty turn and I hurried across the street as fast as I could and got into the factory. The light was burning upstairs and I supposed that Rufe was there. As I went in I heard somebody throw up a window above."

"Wait a minute, was the street door locked?" I interrupted.

"Yes," the same as usual." Joe drew a long breath and continued. "When I got

upstairs," he resumed, "I saw the body of Matt Sleasby in a pool of blood. Of course I thought Rufe had done it. I knew what provocation he had. I thought he had been frightened away by my coming, so I—so I disposed of the body as I have told you."

We looked around at each other with the same question in every pair of eyes. "Then who did it?"

"Well," I said, "we've got to start from the beginning. Now that these false suspicions and theories are cleared away, what is there left to go on with?"

"You lay it out to us," said Rufe.

"The man who killed Sleasby possessed a key to the factory door, also the combination of the safe. It must have been somebody in whom Sleasby had confidence, because Sleasby came in answer to his summons over the phone. Whom did Sleasby trust?"

"Nobody that I know of," said Rufe. "Isn't it possible that the killer may have called up Sleasby and made believe to give him a message from somebody else—from me, say?"

I shook my head. "Matt Sleasby would never have fallen for so simple a trick as that."

"It's got me guessing," said Rufe.

"McClary, your young foreman, fulfills all the conditions." I suggested.

Rufe scowled darkly. "Confound it, Pop! Why do you always pick on somebody I like? It's impossible!"

"Why impossible?"

"Well, suppose that McClary had shot him out of some idea of helping me. McClary knew I was coming to the factory, but he didn't know Joe was coming. You never could make me believe that he skinned out of the window and left me to hold the bag."

"Who else fulfills all the conditions?" I demanded.

No answer.

"Well, anyhow phone and ask him to come down here."

It was done.

"Now that Rufe and Joe are out of the

picture," said Stella quietly, "how about casting back to the Wiser theory?"

Here was an idea! I stared at her while it unfolded in my brain. "Wiser has admitted that he was watching Sleasby's house Monday evening, and that he followed Sleasby when he came out," Stella went on. "His story about wanting to make a touch from Sleasby sounds pretty phony to me. It's true that Wiser provided an alibi, but it was only a one-man alibi."

"But Sleasby would never have trusted Wiser," Rufe objected. "And where would Wiser have obtained a key to the office and the combination of the safe?"

"Maybe there were two in it," said Stella softly.

"It would certainly be a rum go if I had hired the actual killer to fool the police!" put in Rufe with a grin.

"Not so strange when you consider that you went to Wiser because he too, had a powerful motive for killing Sleasby," said Stella. "As for Wiser, he would feel secure because the body had not been identified. The crime was ready to be planted on you, and he had arranged an alibi."

"Damn!" Rufe muttered.

"**W**AIT a minute!" I protested. "There is nothing in the world I would like better than pinning this murder on Wiser. But I mustn't let my wants sway my judgment. There was no motive."

"The mortgages!" they all said at once.

I shook my head. "Rekar inherited the mortgages, and he wouldn't have been any easier on Wiser. Wiser knew this so well that he abandoned his property. We've got to find a better motive."

"Revenge," Stella suggested.

Again I shook my head. "Wiser is above all a practical man."

"Here's a point," said Rufe, "when I went there late that night, lying in the dining room I saw an open box from some department store. It contained a fluffy white dress that looked expensive."

"Good!" I said, "that proves that he had money before you gave him any . . . Quiet! my children. Let me dope this out!"

I paced the room chewing my cigar. Suddenly I pulled out my wallet. "Here's a bit of evidence that we overlooked," I said. I spread out the paper bearing a string of figures that Jewel had retrieved from Wiser's waste basket.

"That's the combination of my safe!" cried Rufe.

"So we have Wiser!" I said, pretending to be very offhand. "The next thing is to find out who gave him the key and combination."

They looked blank.

I went on: "There was a spy in the factory; he overheard McClary telephoning, and reported that Rufe was coming to the factory after supper. The plan, of course, was to pin the murder on Rufe."

McClary came in a moment or two later. I put it to him.

"Sure, there were spies in the shop," he said, "but I was never able to prove nothing. There was a long-nosed guy called Billings who hung around the office too much and asked too many questions for my taste. But he was a good worker."

"Have you any recollection of the movements of this Billings on the day of the murder?" I said.

"I sure have," said McClary. "He came to me and asked could he phone. I said go ahead. Thought maybe I could catch him out. I seen him go to the rack where the workers' clothes hang, and look at an envelope in his pocket; then he goes to the office. I go into the office but he is too smart for me. I can't hear nothing. So I go back to his street coat and take a look at that envelope. It had a telephone number pencilled on it."

"Did you write it down?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Enderby." He produced it. *RH 2-2194*.

"Why didn't you tell me?" cried Rufe.

"Next morning," said McClary grimly, "when I got down to the shop you was there. There was blood on the floor of the office and you already had a woman in scrubbing. Naturally I doped out that there had been a killing and you had done it."

Rufe, half-exasperated, gave him a clap

on the back. "Pop, do you know anybody in the telephone company who will give you the name of the subscriber?"

"Maybe it won't be necessary to ask for it," I said.

They slapped the Manhattan directory down on the table in front of me. I turned the pages and put my finger on this entry:

Thomas Rekar, Attorney, 3469 Fifth Ave. . . . RH 2-2194.

"But why? But why?" stammered the girls.

"Simple enough. Rekar was appointed executor, administrator and trustee under Sleasby's will. He had Sleasby's millions to play with. The working girls would never have got it."

"So that's that!" said Rufe.

"That's that!" I repeated. "I'm glad I kept a line on Wiser. I've got to telephone to Miami now and to Inspector Lanman. He can have the case! While I'm telephoning, some of you go out to the delicatessen for the makings of a supper. Rufe, you take care of the drinks. We will forget crime, my children!"

NOT much remains to be told. Fred Wiser was apprehended in Miami and additional evidence was forthcoming. It was found that he had brought three thousand dollars from New York in addition to what Rufe had given him. He was unable to explain where he had got it.

The police found the taxi-driver that Wiser had hired on Monday night, and this man testified that he had taken Wiser to within a block of the toy factory instead of to Forty-Second Street as Wiser claimed. Seeing how things were shaping up, Wiser's friend, Manny Harris, repudiated the alibi he had provided. Said he had been mistaken as to the time of Wiser's call.

Wiser finally made a full confession of his share in the murder. He charged that Thomas Rekar had hired him to do it and hand arranged the details of the plot.

Rekar had covered his tracks much more skillfully than Wiser. When he was tried, though his guilt was as plain as the nose before your face, the jury felt obliged to acquit him because there was no positive evidence against him except the testimony of a self-confessed murderer. Wiser on the was sent to the chair.

Everybody felt that a miscarriage of justice had occurred, and the governor sought to repair it by commuting Wiser's sentence to life imprisonment. Also the surrogate of New York held that the circumstances justified him in ousting Rekar as executor and trustee of the dead man's estate. Rekar died shortly after—from excess of bile I am sure, so that justice worked itself out fairly well after all.

There was another outcome to this case. One Saturday at noon, Rufe Penry marched into my office with a grin as wide as the Mississippi River, bringing Stella with him, her hand tucked under his arm.

"You son of a gun!" I said. "So this is what I get for saving you."

He gave her a hug without minding me at all. The face that Stella turned up to him was like that flower that blooms only once in a lifetime.

"How about a little wedding?" said Rufe. "The Christmas rush is over."

Just like that! "Sure you can spare the time?" I said.

Patty, Jewel and Joe had crowded into the room after them. The other two girls were consoled by new dresses and hats. Joe looked as pleased as if he were the bride.

"Shut up the shop and let's go, Pop," said Rufe. "Just the six of us."

"What am I supposed to do at this here wedding?" I said.

"You're the best man."

Stella came and gave me a kiss.

"Come on, let's go," said Rufe.

"Pop, can I stay away until Wednesday?" asked Stella. "Everything's straight."

"Are you coming back here?" I said.

"Why of course! I can take on both jobs."

"Heaven help us, Pop!" said Rufe.



Kingdom Come

By MARTIN McCALL

AMERICA is in the hands of the Red Sleeves! All over the nation this secret army has risen and struck with paralyzing suddenness. Transportation lines, telephone and telegraph, power plants, munitions—all have fallen to the Red-Sleeved horde. Within the space of a few bloody hours the orderly course of democratic life has been turned into chaos; freedom of speech and personal liberty are suspended. And yet the Red Sleeve battle-cry is "America for Americans!"

The revolution is backed by a group of potent financiers, chief among whom is H. R. Dawson. These men—fearing the spread of economic liberalism in the country—seek to achieve absolute power by setting up as a puppet dictator the egomaniac General

Ellison, rabble-rouser and one-time war hero. For his staff Ellison has recruited some of the nation's most vicious criminals: gun-men who are used to internecine struggle with their own kind or the police. His army, lured by chauvinistic propaganda from the citizenry, has been drilling secretly for months. And when word went out to act, the gray-shirted, Red-Sleeved troops did so with the precision of a machine. All of them fight believing that they are really patriots, they fight drugged by the spurious Red Sleeve dogma which is predicated on the assumption that the machinery of democratic government has become too slow to meet the issues of the day, and that forceful direct action is needed to set the country on its feet.

DOMINICK VANE, ace federal agent, knows this propaganda for what it is—mere pap put out by H. R. Dawson to delude the people while Dawson seizes power. It was Vane who, going to New Jersey to investigate the strange death of a brother

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CHAPTER XIV

MANHATTAN ISOLATED

officer, first uncovered the secret Red Sleeve movement. With the help of Philip Jaxon, a nephew of H. R. Dawson, Vane was able to link the financier with the secret organization. But Vane was too late. He had just succeeded in convincing the President of the United States that the Red Sleeves actually existed when the Red Sleeves, fearing to delay any longer, went into action.

Vane heads a special squadron of picked men whose lives are now dedicated to exposing the real caliber of the Red Sleeve leaders to the people. The army and navy are powerless to act: the army can maneuver against Red Sleeve troops but it cannot shell cities containing innocent citizens; the navy, for the same reason, cannot unleash its guns. The administration is staking everything on the efficacy of Vane's squadron in undermining the movement. The task of Vane and his men is to collect proof of the unscrupulous purposes of the Red Sleeve leaders.

The President feels that if the body of the Red Sleeves know that they are mere dupes, they will turn against their leaders.

AFTER a dozen brushes with death Dominick Vane makes his way through the insurrection-torn streets of New York to the mansion of H. R. Dawson. Vane wants to know what has become of Angela, Dawson's adopted daughter, and of Philip Jaxon, whom Dawson holds captive—or has killed. The mansion is deserted. Vane searches the rooms frantically, wild with fear for Angela. Then, soberly, he realizes that his country is more important than his love for a girl. Methodically he proceeds to search the house for clues. In Angela's room, written on the fly-leaf of Sinclair Lewis' novel *It Can't Happen Here* he finds a West End address. In the West End apartment Vane talks to Kay Garvin, mistreated sweetheart of the gunman, Moxelli, mobster and member of the Red Sleeve General Staff. Miss Garvin denies knowing the whereabouts of Angela Dawson. While Vane is questioning her, Moxelli, who has previously tried to machine-gun Vane, enters the apartment and leaps at the agent. As they struggle other Red Sleeves batter at the door. Suddenly Kay Garvin seizes a gun. With an abrupt switch of allegiance, she uses it, not to kill Vane, but to hold the Red Sleeves outside the door at bay while Vane subdues Moxelli. There is a shot through the door and the girl falls. She dies in Vane's arms as the Red Sleeves batter anew at the apartment door.

Vane turns to face them. . . .

ABEWILDERED city awoke the next morning to the second day of the Red Sleeve revolution. It was hard for the average citizen of the great metropolis to assimilate what had happened. Yet there was evidence enough to aid the slow percolating of the truth into his mind. His morning paper was there—but different. It spoke of the revolutionists in heroic terms. It spoke in high-flown, patriotic terms of the "Cause"; of "America For Americans"; of "The Spirit of Our Forefathers"! It told of "treacherous and double-crossing city officials" fleeing the city.

Mr. Average Citizen was faced with a curious situation. Obviously he would not go to work today. Subways, buses, taxis, were commandeered, some by the revolutionists, some by the battered police and military forces. Only men employed at certain vital points concerned with the necessities of civilization found their way to work. Telephone service was completely disrupted.

The Red Sleeves had taken no chances on holding telephone exchanges. They had destroyed the service. The twisted masses of telephone cables under the city streets had been hacked to pieces. But over the radio came news flashes and a constant stream of propaganda; nothing else. The usual and familiar broadcasters were not at the microphones. Instead, agents of the Red Sleeves poured out sympathetic facts about the revolution: It was rumored from Washington that the President had met his death in the first hours of the revolution. It was rumored that there was wholesale mutiny in both army and navy. Red Sleeve officials promised that order would be restored within a week and that men of high caliber would take over the offices of government. Citizens were urged to throw their weight on the side of Right! To give moral and physical support to those sons of the early Americans who were out to crush

oppressors of the people! There were speeches about General Ellison, "that great American hero who had given his arm 'to make the world safe for democracy' in 1917 and is now waging this war within the country to place us back on that level of high ideals, of Americanism, that our forefathers visioned for us!"

Then General Ellison came to the microphone. "We are fighting," he said, "to drive political rats and greedy men of wealth out of high places and supplant them with *Americans!*"

But Mr. Average Citizen was a little too bewildered to take in anything but cold facts. There was blood in the streets; transportation and communication systems were crippled; what about food? What about water supply? People who had cars considered the possibility of taking their worldly goods and leaving town for the comparative safety of scarcely-populated rural centers. Those who tried found the Island of Manhattan ringed with steel. Red Sleeves held the bridges, the tubes, the ferries.

Where were the police? Where were the military from Governors Island? Where were the National Guard and the emergency organizations? In the early hours of the second day neither blue nor khaki was visible anywhere in that great city. What was the answer? Were there no forces left loyal to the government? Had the Red Sleeves swept everything in front of them in the short space of twelve hours? It was incredible to Mr. Average Citizen.

THE answer lay in one of the strangest gatherings that a country had ever seen—a gathering in the offices of the Mayor at City Hall on lower Broadway.

Men sat around a table, faces grim, listening to the most extraordinary ultimatum that was ever delivered to men in power. The Mayor was there; the police commissioner and his chief; General Trent, in command of the first army at Governors Island; and commanders of National Guard and Reserve Officers units. And one other man was there—a man in the gray

shirt and scarlet arm bands of the Red Sleeves. He was short, stocky, red-haired, with the quick shifting eyes of a fighter, and there was a mocking smile on his lips as he looked scornfully at the men around the table.

"This is a moment, gentlemen, for which I have waited a very long time," he said. There was a knifelike, insulting edge to his voice.

"We are waiting to hear what you have to say, Mr. Brace," said the Mayor quietly.

"Oh, I've got plenty to say, Mr. Mayor," drawled Lefty Brace. "I have come here, as a matter of fact, to issue *orders!*" And his eyes blazed.

General Trent sprang to his feet and his fingers hovered close to the revolver he was carrying in a holster on his hip.

"Sit down!" Brace's voice cracked like a pistol shot. "I'm doing the talking, General Trent, and you'll do well to listen! When I'm through it will be your turn! I have come here alone under your guarantee of protection. If you should be tempted to use that gun on me, General, you would have the lives of millions of citizens on your conscience!"

Trent sat down, his jaws clamped together, his face white.

"We're listening, Mr. Brace," said the Mayor in a harsh voice.

Brace looked around the room, smiling. He was taking full satisfaction in this moment of power. "The orders I have come to issue are these, gentlemen. There must be no military movement against the Red Sleeves in New York. The police must withdraw from their positions and throw down their arms. The National Guard units must disband!" He said it all very calmly.

Somebody laughed, a jangling, high-tensioned laugh.

"And if we refuse these absurd demands, Mr. Brace?" said General Trent.

"It is not our purpose, General, to take life unnecessarily. But if our hand is forced we will kill *millions* to gain our objective—which in this instance is control of New York!"

"Are you trying to tell us," said General

Trent slowly, "that you believe you have a strong enough force of men here in New York to defeat the combined forces of the army, the navy, the police, and the reserve units, Mr. Brace? Because if you are, you are talking lunacy!"

"I am making no such claim, General," said Lefty Brace suavely. "But what I am claiming is, that unless you withdraw *all* your forces at once we are in a position to wipe out almost completely the entire civilian population of the city. Let me point out just what the situation is—in case you are not aware of it."

"Go on, Mr. Brace," said the general grimly.

BRACE smiled his crooked little smile of triumph. "In less than twenty minutes from the time of a given signal, General," he said, "we can snap off New York's water supply. The Croton Dam is in our hands. You might be able to fight off our men, but you could not fight off the charge of dynamite which would blow it to hell before they were defeated. Further up State we are prepared to destroy aqueducts or put disease germs in the water. The freight yards and provision warehouses of the city are in our hands. They would meet with the same fate. We hold every single bridge and tunnel leading out of the city. In twenty minutes after your refusal to obey our orders, general, those bridges and tunnels would be nothing more than a mass of twisted iron and stone! Without food and water people cannot live, General. And without bridges and tunnels they cannot leave to find it elsewhere. And if you believe this is a high-sounding threat, a boast rather than fact, call in your engineers and I will prove my familiarity with the situation by telling them exactly the spots where our high explosives are placed. This is not a gag, gentlemen—*it is fact!*"

"And what about your own men if you destroy sources of food and water?"

Brace smiled. "Do you imagine that if we were so well prepared to strike this blow, we have not prepared for such a

contingency. No, gentlemen, you have the manpower but we have the strategic jump on you. In short, gentlemen, this is a very excellent case of blackmail and you've got to *pay our price!* And our price is the withdrawal of your armed forces at once."

There was a prolonged silence in the room. Then General Trent spoke:

"How long will you give us to come to a decision, Mr. Brace?"

Brace glanced at his wrist-watch and a very faint smile curled his lips. "I'll give you exactly one hour," he said.

At that moment the door of the Mayor's office opened and a haggard secretary stepped in.

"Mr. Dominick Vane," she announced.

Vane, his clothes rumpled and dirty, his face gray and streaked with dust, came in. He was the picture of infinite weariness, and only the intense brightness of his eyes gave hint to the vitality that lay beneath the surface. He started to speak, and then his eyes rested on Brace and his whole figure stiffened as if from a jolt of electricity.

"*Brace!*" His gun was out of his pocket in a flash. It was General Trent who sprang up and seized his arm. Lefty Brace smiled that mocking, twisted smile of his.

"Well," he drawled, "If it isn't our hero from Washington. What a situation! All ready for fireworks and he can't set them off."

"Brace is here under a guarantee of protection and a safe-conduct pass from us," said Trent harshly.

Dominick wrenched his arm free and his gun was pointed steadily at the Red Sleeve leader. "I don't give a damn about safe-conduct passes," he snapped. "This man holds the whole key to our problem in the palm of his hand! Where is Dawson, Brace?"

"Little boys must learn to keep their tempers," said Brace mockingly. "You really don't think I'd answer any questions of that sort, do you?"

"You're going to answer whether you like it or not," said Dominick grimly. "You're going to tell me where Dawson

is. And you're going to tell me what's become of his ward, Miss Angela, and his nephew Philip Jaxon."

"So touching, all this," said Brace. "We now have the heart interest. What has become of the heroine? Dear, dear Mr. Vane, a smart man like you ought to be able to find out a thing like that."

SOMEHOW Dominick managed to jerk himself away from Trent and the police commissioner who was standing on the other side of him. His left fist shot out and caught Brace flush on the mouth. The Red Sleeve staggered back against the Mayor's desk and his hand was streaked with crimson as he brought it away from his lips. The general and the commissioner had seized Vane and were holding him tightly now.

"Get this straight, Vane," said the general grimly. "This man holds the safety of millions of citizens in his hands."

Lefty Brace straightened up and there was a glow of murderous fury in his close-set eyes. "For that, Dominick Vane, I'll cut your heart out!" he said, very slowly, his voice deadly cold. He turned to the others. "There is no need for me to stay here any longer, gentlemen. If you have not issued your orders for the withdrawal of troops in accordance with our demands within one hour, we will take it that you refuse to comply with our wishes and act accordingly! Good day." He stalked toward the office door.

"You can't let him go!" Dominick cried. "Why, damn it, he can be made to tell us all we need to know! Hold him! Defy these rats! Knowing what Brace knows we can wipe 'em out in twenty-four hours. I don't know what kind of a bluff he's pulling on you, but don't let him get away with it. *You can't let him go!*"

General Trent tugged savagely at his gray mustache. "God help me," he said bitterly, "I can't take the responsibility."

"Goodbye, Mr. Dominick Vane," said Brace, at the door. "You need have no fear about seeing me again. I shall make a personal point of it!" And he was gone.

For a moment Dominick stood staring at the door, his body shaken by a wild, impotent fury. Then very suddenly he sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands. No one spoke. The minds and hearts of all those men must have been dark with despair at that moment. Finally Dominick looked up.

"You will have to forgive me, gentlemen, if I lost control for a moment or two," he said, in a low voice. "You see, in Washington we feel that the only quick way to smash this rebellion is by getting evidence of the real purpose behind it. Brace knows everything! To see him walk out of here unmolested was just too much!"

"Tough on all of us," said General Trent gruffly.

"And only an hour ago I had another big-shot in my hands and had to let him slip through my fingers, too," said Dominick. He told them about his encounter with Moxelli.

"You killed him?" Trent asked.

Dominick shrugged. "I don't know. I doubt it. It was only a glancing blow I struck him. I couldn't wait to make certain because a dozen of his men were breaking into the apartment. I just got down the fire escape and away by the skin of my teeth. What did Brace want here?"

"Plenty," said the General grimly. And he outlined the Red Sleeve demands.

"What are you going to do?" Dominick asked.

The general tugged fiercely at his mustache. "What *can* we do? Personally I can't take the responsibility of defying them. There are millions of innocent and loyal citizens here in New York. Their lives would be too great a price to pay for victory! New York is only one center of the revolt. If we were to fight back and they carried out their threats . . . well, millions of people all over the country would swing to their side out of fear for their lives. I am going to withdraw my troops and await orders from the President. The responsibility must rest with him."

"I feel the same way," said the police commissioner gravely.

The Mayor nodded. "There is no alternative left us, gentlemen, but to give in to these demands—for the time being, at least. None of us, I think, wishes to be responsible for mass murder!"

DOMINICK left the council chamber with General Trent. The tough old warrior's face was black as a thunder cloud. Retreat and submission went as strongly against the grain with him as it did with Dominick Vane. Outside the Mayor's office they paused.

"Well, I suppose we go our own way, General," said Dominick. "I have a job to do that is not affected by this ultimatum."

"I want to talk to you before you go," the general said. "There's an empty office down the line here." He took Dominick's arm and led him along the corridor. Once in the empty office the general began to storm the floor like a caged animal.

"I know how you felt in there, Vane," he rapped. "You felt as if we were all quitters. Well—I for one am not. But we've got to tread cautiously—very cautiously."

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean I know all about you, Vane. Know what confidence the President has in you and the job he's given you. I had orders to cooperate with you in every way. But I couldn't hold Brace. You see that."

"Yes, I see that," said Dominick grimly.

The general continued to pace the floor. "If we were dealing with an alien enemy, Vane, it would be a different story," he said. "There'd be no compromise then. We'd blockade the city—bring the fleet into the harbor—let 'em die in their own trap! But this—well, a man can't deal with it in the same way."

"I know."

The general stopped his pacing and stared thoughtfully at Dominick. "You fellows believe there is concrete evidence which would prove that Dawson and other financiers are back of this thing?"

Dominick nodded. "And we believe further, sir, that if that evidence were placed before the sincere members of the Red Sleeve organization that they would turn

against their leaders and the back of the revolution would be broken."

"How do you propose to go about getting that evidence?" the general asked.

Dominick lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply on it. "Somewhere there is a secret headquarters where Dawson and his friends are hiding out," he said. "If I can find them the evidence I need will probably be close at hand."

"Any clues?"

"None," said Dominick darkly. "Moxelli could have told me if I'd had a chance to make him talk. Brace could have told us. But with those chances gone, sir, I feel pretty well baffled."

The general looked thoughtfully out the window. "I don't pretend to be an expert on intelligence work," he said. "But I do know this. In war-time a spy who operates *outside* the enemy ranks very seldom gets any information worth having. Without undercover men in the enemy ranks, your spy system breaks down entirely."

Dominick's hard cold eyes were fixed intently on the general's face, but he said nothing.

"One of the main reasons for the Red Sleeve success in these first hours," said the soldier, "is the fact that we haven't got one shred of information coming to us from the inside. We are handicapped in a military way—an army without eyes cannot fight an enemy with eyes. And it's undercover men in the enemy ranks that are the eyes of an army."

"And how do we go about placing undercover men in their ranks?" Dominick asked. There was a curious, flat quality to his voice because he knew the answer to his own question. He was thinking far ahead.

The general looked down at the gnarled knuckles of his right hand. "They are enlisting recruits to the cause already," he said quietly. "Half a dozen recruiting stations have been set up here in the city."

Neither man spoke for a moment, and then their eyes met in a long, steady stare. "Of course you're dead right, General," said Dominick at last. "Until we have men

on the inside who can anticipate their next moves they'll go on winning by sheer surprise."

"Exactly."

Dominick stood up and held out his hand. "I'm glad I had this chat with you, sir. I—I think we can do something about this."

"If you do," said the general, "try to arrange some method of keeping me in touch." They shook hands warmly. "Good luck, Vane."

"Thank you, sir," said Dominick grimly. "I have a hunch I'm going to need it."

CHAPTER XV

TO THE PEOPLE

IN A QUIET corner of a reading room of the Public Library Dominick met his three assistants, Harbold, Ives and Dugan. The three men had very little to report to their chief that he did not already know or guess! The city was in the hands of the revolutionists . . . it meant death to open your mouth against the Cause . . . food was being doled out on a ration basis.

Then Dominick told them of his own adventures, and of his plans. "I'm not issuing orders," he said quietly. "Spy work is volunteer work."

"Naturally we're for it," said Johnny Harbold quickly. "But I'm thinking about you, Nick. You're known. It's suicide for you to attempt this job. Dugan and Ives and I can swing it—report to you. But you stay out of it."

Dominick laughed, a short, clipped laugh. "I'd be fit for a psychopathic ward in twenty-four hours . . . just waiting for you guys to turn something up," he said. "Besides, the only people who know me by sight are Brace, Moxelli and Dawson and his crowd. I'm not apt to get next to them in a hurry. No, Johnny, we're all going to take a crack at this. One or more of us may get somewhere."

"I think it's crazy, Nick, for you," said Harbold stubbornly.

"Which may be one reason why I might

succeed," said Dominick. "About reports . . . Pass on any news you may pick up to Trent. We'll have to perfect some means of communication with him later. Until we do we can use this place for meetings and for a message depot. We're not apt to be bothered here." He turned and looked at the bookshelves behind him. A faint smile twisted his lips. "*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire!* I doubt if anyone will be reading that in these times. If any of you have any information to pass on to the rest of us, write it somewhere in the margins of this book—volume two. Try to keep in touch as often as possible. You're to go about this thing in your own way. I don't care how you get on the inside—but get there! That's all."

Dugan and Ives went off, but red-headed Johnny Harbold lingered behind. "Listen, Dominick," he said gravely, "you're not kidding me about the risk you'll be running trying to muscle into this outfit. You're a pretty important guy in the scheme of things."

"Johnny, I never did my fighting from behind a desk. I've been ordered to do a job and I'm going to do it. This seems the best way of accomplishing our objective and so this is the way we're going to work it."

"I've seen some pretty unpleasant things in the last few hours," said Harbold gravely. "I saw a guy shot down in cold blood in Times Square for speaking against the Cause. They're dealing brutally with all loyalists on the basis that the tougher they are now the less trouble they'll have later. You can stumble over dead sympathizers of the government almost anywhere you turn. And the Red Sleeves won't be nice to the spies they catch. There's too much at stake. You would be fair game for any of them! Active Chief of the Intelligence Service! The man who blows your brains out will rate plenty high!"

Dominick's lips relaxed in a faint smile. "You aren't trying to scare me, are you, Johnny?"

For a minute Johnny Harbold looked at his chief in silence. "It looks like I'm

wasting quite a lot of time," he drawled. So long, Dominick."

"Good hunting," said Dominick.

* * *

Washington, D. C.

The President's Study.

"That's the way the situation stands, sir. General Trent is waiting for your orders." It was a young man in the uniform of an army flier who stood before the Chief Executive's desk. He had just arrived from the Army Headquarters at Governors Island with news of the Red Sleeve ultimatum.

The President gazed at Corcoran who, with Hewitt and Barrett, had gathered to hear this report. Suddenly he brought his clenched fist down on his desk. "We never realize in times of peace how vitally important the normal means of communication are! I should be able to call Trent on the phone and talk things over with him. It's like being handcuffed in front of an expert boxer! One not only in front, but on all sides of us—between us and our sources of information and our weapons. This is checkmate, gentlemen! If we attack we alienate millions of supporters. If we don't attack, we're beaten. They have probably made this same play all over the country. The reports will be coming in soon and there isn't anything we can do!"

"If the people could be informed of your situation, Mr. President," said General Barrett. "If they could be told that your hand is forced and that you *have* to fight, it would make a tremendous difference in their morale."

"And how are we to get such information to the people, General?" the President demanded. "They have taken over the newspapers. With one or two minor exceptions all are in their hands. They control the radio stations. How are we to broadcast?"

Corcoran leaned forward in his chair. "There might be a way, Mr. President," he said slowly, "—a spectacular and effective way." He turned to the other two men. "How many planes can we get our hands on in the next eight hours, gentlemen?"

General Barrett thought for a moment.

"Perhaps three hundred or more army, naval and commercial planes could be mustered into service in that time."

"Good," snapped Corcoran. "This is my suggestion, Mr. President. That we have this great armada of planes fly over New York City. The Red Sleeves have a few fighting planes, we know, but not enough to endanger such a fleet."

"And the purpose of this maneuver, Corcoran?"

"We can't drop bombs on the city, sir," said Corcoran, "but there's nothing to prevent our dropping information. It is my suggestion that the government printing presses be put to work at once and that a statement of the situation, signed by you, be drawn up. Explain the Red Sleeve ultimatum. Tell the citizens that as President you cannot give up without a fight. Your hand has been forced and that unless the Red Sleeves withdraw from their position in three days you will have to bring army, navy and flying corps to bear on them and wipe them out, no matter what the cost in life and property. Tell them that they can avert such an eventuality by turning against the revolutionists. We could drop millions of copies of such a proclamation so that in the long run everyone would be bound to know about it. The sight of those planes would encourage people . . . make them realize that we are ready, that you are still in the saddle, and that we mean business!"

"Corcoran, it is a brilliant idea!" said the President. "We *could* reach almost everyone that way. Copies will be in the hands of the people all over the city before the Red Sleeves can do anything about it!"

"Precisely, sir."

"But what happens, Corcoran, if the Red Sleeves stand pat—refuse to move out—carry through the threats they made to General Trent?" asked the President.

"Then, sir, we attack. We'll wipe them off the face of the earth. Trent can cut off New York by land with his troops. The fleet can move into the harbor. Planes overhead. We can wipe out every Red Sleeve within the city boundaries."

"And a million others at the same time."

"That is something you will have to face, sir. If we show we mean business by handling this New York situation with an iron fist, we may not face resistance anywhere else."

The President looked steadily before him. "We'll go ahead and distribute the proclamations," he said and his gaze shifted to Corcoran. "You can't ask me to give the order to wipe out New York City. I couldn't do it, Mr. Corcoran, nor—if you think—could you. There *must* be some other way."

THEY came, like the humming of a million bees in the distance—like the droning of some huge dynamo. First they were a blot on the distant blue horizon, then a huge, dark cloud, and then suddenly, in awesome array they were over the city, a great roaring, mechanical blanket that seemed at times to blot out the sun. Three hundred or more planes flying in elaborate geometrical formation. If the Red Sleeves had fighting planes they did not appear. It would have been futile to offer resistance to this enormous fleet.

Already paralyzed by the brutal bewilderment of the events of the past days, the city was completely stunned by this new show of force.

At first there was panic in the streets below. People rushed out of their houses to stare up, pale and trembling at what they thought must be an attacking squadron that would demolish the city before they could scurry to places of safety. But there were no bombs.

Around the city they wheeled, the roar from those hundreds of motors deafening, terrifying. Out of every house people came to stare up at the heavens. Lower and lower the planes flew until it seemed they were in danger of fatal collision with some of the taller buildings. And then, suddenly, the air was white—a sudden storm of gargantuan flakes of snow. Paper, tons and tons of floating white paper, came drifting down into the canyons that were the city streets.

The imagination of a populace, raised to a hysterical pitch by what had gone before, could easily envision its dreadful situation if the planes had dropped bombs, not paper.

Round and round over the city they flew, leaving behind their heavy clouds of proclamations. There could not have been a hundred who did not have the chance to pick up one of those slips of paper. And then the planes roared away south again, leaving the people of New York with the pounding of motors in their ears and the pounding of fear in their hearts as they read the President's Proclamation:

TO THE PEOPLE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK:

The Red Sleeves have handed down an ultimatum to the Government of the United States.

They have ordered the Government to withdraw its troops, its police, its national guard units. To offer no resistance to the revolutionary movement.

If we fail to obey this order they threaten to cut off the city's water supply, its food supply, its means of communication. To spread disease and death that will wipe out the city's population.

The Government has complied with these demands. BUT WILL DO SO ONLY FOR A PERIOD OF THREE DAYS.

In that time it is hoped the Red Sleeve leaders will reconsider their purpose. At the end of three days the Government will move to take the city from their control.

Our hand has been forced. In three days, army, navy and all other Government forces will attack.

The President has sworn to uphold the Constitution and he will do so with men and guns!

Unless the Red Sleeves have relinquished their hold on the city by Saturday morning the Government strikes!

THE PRESIDENT

* * *

The light of battle was in General Trent's eyes as he looked up from his desk to confront Dominick Vane. The old war-

rior's jaws seemed a little squarer, his mouth a little grimmer. He looked like a man who had just been reprieved from the death house.

"Well, Mr. Vane, how do you like our government now?" he cried.

Dominick moistened his lips. His face was pinched, haggard. "I never saw anything like it," he said a little hoarsely. "Those planes were magnificent . . . and they were terrible. An air force of that size could turn this city into a shambles in half an hour!"

"And *will!*" snapped the general. "Unless these Red-Sleeved vermin back down we'll blow them to hallelujah. I'd like to see Mr. Brace's face now."

"It's—it's not a bluff, sir, this proclamation?" Dominick asked.

"Bluff! *Bluff!* Look out the window, Mr. Vane. Do you see that smoke on the horizon? That's smoke from cruisers and destroyers that are steaming into the harbor. Their guns will be trained on the city for the next three days—waiting!"

Dominick sat silent, his eyes almost closed. He was thinking of the faces he had seen as he made his way to the general's headquarters . . . faces haunted by fear, and doubt; the faces of people who had struggled all their lives for peace and security and found themselves suddenly caught between the jaws of two fighting machines. He had heard snatches of hushed, frightened talk. He thought he knew the temper of these people. They had lost sight of causes and rights and wrongs. They were thinking of their homes and their loved ones, about to be wiped off the face of the earth unless one of two relentless forces gave in. Dominick knew he would never forget the sight of these faces tortured with the thought of the three-day ultimatum—that would be Saturday—to live or die, yet without the volition to choose.

"I've been proud of my country before," the general was saying. "I was proud when I saw the doughboys marching in the streets of Paris; I was proud when I saw them stand up under fire during their first

engagement at the front. But when I read that proclamation and knew that we had men in authority with nerve enough to fight this thing out, then I was really proud."

"But, General Trent, we will be killing our own people!"

"That's war!" said the general. "The innocent must suffer with the guilty!" And then the general cleared his throat. "There is a letter here for you, Vane, from Washington. From the President!"

Vane took the letter and ripped it open. He read:

My dear Dominick Vane:

By now you have read my proclamation to the people of the City of New York. It has been written and delivered with a heavy heart. You know what this means. I cannot write the words which would describe what will happen if we are forced to act. It is too horrible to contemplate. There is only one hope left me, Mr. Vane, and it is bound up in you.

You said in my office you believed you could get proof of the duplicity of the Red Sleeve leaders. If that can still be done we might yet avoid this catastrophe. You have only three days. I know how hopeless it is—and yet I refuse to give up hope until you have failed. I know you will do whatever is humanly possible for a man to do.

And I want you to know that during every waking moment I shall be praying for you. I have prayed for wisdom in making the decision I have made. But my most earnest pleading is that I will never have to give that order to attack on Saturday morning. And it would seem, Mr. Vane, that you must be the instrument of God if my prayer is to be answered.

God keep and guide you,

The President of the United States.

Very slowly Dominick folded the letter and slipped it into his pocket. That was another face he would never forget—the strong face of that suffering man in the White House.

"The President still hopes the clash can be averted," he told Trent. "He's counting on me to gather the evidence that will do the trick."

"Not a chance, Mr. Vane. You couldn't

do that job in three weeks—let alone three days.”

“I’m going to try,” said Dominick. “What are your plans, General?”

“We’re already moving to surround the city,” Trent told him. “We’ll have ’em shut in here like flies in a bottle. They’ve got the city shut off now, but we’ll spread a wider circle and then move in and crush ’em.”

“Will no effort be made to get non-combatants out of the city?”

“An *effort* will be made,” said Trent grimly. “We shall try to retake bridges and tubes without destroying them. If we succeed there will be an avenue of escape. But I doubt we’ll succeed. The Red Sleeves will blow up those places to keep us out of the city.”

Dominick drew a deep breath, and his lips were drawn thin. “Goodbye, General,” he said quietly. “You won’t see me again till I’ve won—or lost.”

CHAPTER XVI

RECRUIT

GENERAL EDWARD ELLISON stood with his back to the mantelpiece in the library of the stone house on Fifth Avenue from whence the Red Sleeve orders for the whole country were issued. Crumpled savagely into a ball in his one, talonlike hand was a copy of the President’s proclamation. Three men stood facing him at attention. In a far corner of the room Lefty Brace sat on the arm of a chair, cigarette dangling between his lips, watching the general with a thoughtful frown.

“Your orders, gentlemen,” the general snapped. His lower lip jutted out in that peculiar, pugnacious fashion, and his eyes burned bright beneath the frowning brows. “You will convey to all divisional commanders orders to prepare for a gas attack. See that our men are equipped. Have our chemical experts at their posts twenty-four hours a day, ready to act at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have special orders for the men at the detonators controlling the explosives planted at all bridges, tunnels, water-works and other places. You know exactly where they are all posted, Macklyn?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want extra men at those posts. And I want it understood that if they are attacked or molested at any time they are to set off the explosives without waiting for orders! You understand? We cannot afford to lose a single one of those vantage points. Rather than run a risk of losing them we’ll blow them to hell without waiting for the strategic moment. You understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And lastly, I want prisoners from among the official ranks of the government forces. I want any high-ranking officer of the police, army, navy or intelligence service brought to me in sufficiently good condition to answer questions. We’ve got to get every possible scrap of information possible as to plans, movements of troops and ships, and exactly how serious they are in this threat of attacking the city. And I want to ask those questions *myself*! I’m not relying on anyone else at this time.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You may go.”

The three officers left the room and Ellison was alone with Brace. The one-armed commander of the revolutionists stood so that he could see his own reflection in the full length mirror. He was a strange, very forceful figure at that moment. Even the cynical Brace recognized it as he exhaled a lungful of cigarette smoke toward the ceiling. Mad Ellison might be, but he had the courage of a lion and his tactical genius as a commander could not be questioned.

“You really mean to use gas?”

“Why not?” the general snarled. “We know how effective it is from the use we put it to at the Piney village. Government chemists haven’t had time to prepare their men with equipment that will withstand it. If we are faced by a superior force we must use the weapons we have which will make us equal.”

Brace's fingers shook a little as he raised his cigarette to his lips. "You know what that means," he said. "Every living, breathing creature in this city, not equipped with protective masks, will be dead in an hour. I saw what this stuff could do in the swamps."

The general's eyes flamed. "We are not here to consider weaklings who are not prepared to fight for the cause of right, Mr. Brace. There is no half-way measure for winning our fight. If the government forces us to brutalities then the responsibility is theirs, not ours! We have set out to gain control, and we are going to gain control!"

Let your beard grow for three days. Wear an old suit, wet it, let it dry on you; sleep in it. Do not wash your face and hands, or your eyes. Do not brush your hair. Rub iron rust into your hands and neck and face and let it seep in beneath your fingernails. At the end of three days your own mother won't know you.

DOMINICK VANE remembered these instructions on disguise which had been handed out to him when he first joined the Department of Justice. He was in the grimy little room of a mid-town hotel, about an hour after his visit to General Trent. He stood before the smudged mirror in the bathroom, looking at himself. There was no time for the elaborate preparations in disguise suggested by the department, but the face that stared back at Dominick from the glass gave him something of a shock. There had been no time to shave for the last two days and a dark stubble of beard covered his chin and cheeks. His usually sleek black hair, grayed slightly at the temples, was matted and unkempt looking. His eyes, sunk in their sockets, were red from lack of sleep and fatigue. There were deep scratches on one side of his face where Moxelli's sharp nails had dug at him. His clothes were rumpled and torn from that same struggle. As he looked at himself Dominick decided that he had come pretty close to acquiring that

suggested disguise without doing much about it.

From the window of his room he could see one of the Red Sleeve recruiting stations in Times Square. It seemed to be doing a brisk business. Apparently a great many men had decided that the balance of power lay with the revolutionists, and they were hopping aboard before it was too late. Well, that was to be his job, too.

He had three days in which to get evidence that must be guarded so closely that even high officials in the Red Sleeve organization did not guess at its existence! Three days in which to find Dawson and make him talk! Three days to find Angela—if she still lived! (It seemed like an eternity to him since that brief sweet moment when he had held her in his arms and kissed her!) Three days to find Philip Jaxon, who had thrown himself so recklessly into the fray—if he still lived!

For one bitter moment Dominick felt a flood of resentment sweep over him! What sin was he expiating that forever forced on him the loss of the people he loved, that prevented him from ever finding the peace and contentment that is a man's right. He had a right to Angela, and to happiness! And yet he must force her into the background of his mind. He must set his teeth and walk into the enemy circle, risking everything in an almost impossible quest. For what?

"... during every waking moment I shall be praying for you," the President had written. "You must be the instrument of God..."

Now Dominick saw again those faces . . . thousands of twisted, agonized faces waiting in mortal dread for the scarlet Saturday to come! And behind them he saw the leering spectres of Dawson, Moxelli, Brace, men driven by greed to strike at the heart of their own country and its people! It was worth a thousand lives like his to bring about their defeat, Dominick thought.

Grimly he made a bundle of the things he would have to leave behind him. His letter from the President he burned. His

Department of Justice credentials, his shoulder holster and the gun it contained, the tailor's labels from his suit. All these things must be discarded before he faced a recruiting officer.

OUT in Times Square a curious crowd, dozens deep, made a circle around the old voting booth that had been turned into a recruiting station. Squatting on the pavement outside the building were a half-a-dozen Red Sleeves prepared to operate four machine guns that were set up, ready to take care of any loyalist demonstration in the mob.

Slowly Dominick edged his way through the crowd toward the clearing. People looked at him curiously as he started across the open space toward the building. In some faces he saw silent approval—in many he saw an unspoken anger. Before he reached the building one of the Red Sleeves blocked his way.

"Recruit?"

Dominick nodded, eyes downcast, cigarette between his lips, feet shuffling as though he were awkwardly nervous. Quickly the man ran his hands over Dominick's clothing in an expert "frisk."

"Okay," said the man. "Inside."

A recruiting officer sat at a desk. Two men, armed with rifles stood behind him. A civilian stood by the desk, answering questions. Dominick listened and prepared himself as best he could. The officer scarcely looked at him when it came his turn.

"Name?"

"Ray Brown," said Dominick coolly.

"Business?"

"Dock worker," said Dominick, cigarette bobbing between his lips.

"Address."

Dominick laughed, a short, staccato laugh. "Any one of a number of Park benches I could mention."

"Out of work, eh?" The man looked up, but there was no interest in his glance.

"Out of work and anxious to get a crack at some of the rats that have kept me there!" snapped Dominick.

"What can you do?"

"I was a sharpshooter during the World War," said Dominick. It was the first word of truth he had spoken.

"Handle a rifle, eh?"

"I could once," said Dominick.

The man scribbled something on a piece of paper. "Main entrance to Madison Square Garden," he said. "We're outfitting recruits there. If you can handle a gun we can use you."

"The fighting can't come too soon to suit me," said Dominick, "if there's a square meal thrown in somewhere!"

"They're handing out coffee and hot dogs up there," said the man. He nodded toward the other recruit, an Italian. "This guy's name is Ferrotti. You two trek along together."

Dominick looked at the Italian. "Okay, pal, let's go," he said.

The two men went out of the recruiting booth and started west toward Eighth Avenue. They walked in silence for a moment. Dominick stole a glance or two at his companion, sullen-faced, broad shouldered man, a pretty tough looking specimen.

"How come you joined up?" Dominick finally asked him.

Ferrotti shrugged. "Like you—outa work. Italy done all right under a dictator. I guess Uncle Sam could stand a good two-fisted guy in charge of things."

Dominick chuckled. "I guess you'd have to call Ellison a good one-fisted guy, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, I guess so," said Ferrotti unsmiling.

They walked another block in silence. "What do you think about the President's proclamation?" Dominick asked.

"The government wouldn't have the nerve to open up on this town," said Ferrotti harshly. "They'd be cuttin' their own throats by killin' their own people. They won't dare."

"I'm not so sure," said Dominick. "They're in a spot."

"Well, suppose they do?" Ferrotti argued. "The Red Sleeves has got all the important places. I ain't so sure we couldn't

lick 'em in a straightaway fight with a smart guy like Ellison bossin' the job."

"There are some other smart guys in the outfit, too," said Dominick. "Brace and Moxelli and that crowd." He hoped to draw something from the Italian, some gossip that might give him a notion of how the general public felt about things.

"Yeah, they're plenty smart, and tough too," said Ferrotti. "I guess I'm satisfied to string along with 'em. What the hell, we get shot if we don't. I'd rather have a gun in my hand when the shootin' starts."

"Me too," said Dominick.

THERE were huge crowds blocking Eighth Avenue and Forty-Ninth and Fiftieth Streets. As Dominick and Ferrotti worked their way through to the entrance of the Garden men shouted at them.

"There go a couple more suckers!"

Somebody smacked the man who had shouted. There were cheers. "America for Americans!" A Red Sleeve officer met them at the entrance and examined the slips of paper the recruiting officer had given them.

"Down that passage to the right," he said. "You have to see the main cheese before you can get outfitted."

Through the opening into the arena Dominick saw a long line of men being dealt out uniforms, guns, and other equipment. The business of recruiting was evidently going well. They started down the passage the guard had indicated. And suddenly Dominick felt his heart turn to ice. There was a gun jammed in his ribs. He spun around.

"Don't move or I'll blow the insides out of you!" snarled Ferrotti. He had a service revolver in his hand and his face was dark with purpose. "You dirty stool pigeon!"

"What are you talking about?" Dominick demanded steadily.

"You're coming with me to see the Chief," snapped the Italian. "You can do your talking then!"

"Have you gone crazy?" Dominick's voice was cool, even.

"Yeah! Crazy. I ain't no recruit, Mr. Ray Brown, see? It's my job to hear what

you guys have to say and find out if you're okay. You know too much. Moxelli and Brace! There's been no publicity about them, wise guy. You wouldn't know about them unless you were on the inside. And if you was on the inside you wouldn't be enlisting at no recruiting station! Now march! Up them stairs!"

Laughter welled up in Dominick's throat and he had to fight desperately to keep it back. He had failed! And with such tragic swiftness that even the gods must be laughing. He had been guilty of the most cardinal sin that any intelligence officer can be guilty of. He had underrated an opponent. He had taken Ferrotti for granted, not stopping to realize that at this time the Red Sleeves would be doubly cautious about the men they recruited.

Very slowly he trudged up the stone stairs, Ferrotti's gun pressed hard in the small of his back. As they walked the Italian contented himself by calling Vane every foul name he could think of in English, Italian, Sicilian and some other dialects which Dominick couldn't recognize. Dominick wasn't afraid of Ferrotti. Ferrotti! Ferrotti was a little atom in the scheme of things, which made his success in trapping the government agent a bitter pill to swallow.

Dominick's mind was racing through a half-dozen possible stories he could tell the commanding officer which would account for his knowledge about Moxelli and Brace. He might be able to squeeze through this thing yet. He could say he had been a friend of Samuel Seaver, and that Seaver had told him about Brace and Moxelli. Seaver was dead and could not contradict his tale. He knew a lot about Seaver; where he had lived; what he looked like; tricks and mannerisms of speech. Seaver had been an agent of the Red Sleeves—albeit a pretty poor one. Still, Dominick felt that he might stand a chance of talking his way out of this spot.

THEY had come to the door of an office which had a few days before been the Garden superintendent's.

"Open her up!" ordered Ferrotti.

It was a small square office with cement floor and walls and one large window that was above the line of vision even of so tall a man as Dominick. There were pictures of fighters, hockey players, and bike riders on the wall. A man in a gray uniform sat at a desk, head bowed, writing. Behind him lounged a couple of guards.

"I got a stool pigeon here, Boss," said Ferrotti proudly.

"Oh yes?" the man at the desk looked up.

Every last ounce of courage, hope and strength Dominick had seemed to desert him in that moment. He felt the room whirling dizzily about his head. The commanding officer was Lefty Brace himself!

For a moment Brace stared at him blankly and then very slowly a one-sided smile twisted his lips and a cruel gleam came into his eyes.

"Well, well, well," he said, very softly.

Dominick fought back his nausea—nausea brought on by the grim realization that this was ultimate defeat. A strange, irrational thought pounded inside his head. In that moment he was not thinking of his country, or the mission in which he had failed, or even of Angela. He was thinking: "I must die with dignity. I mustn't give this man one moment of satisfaction."

Ferrotti was bubbling over with his story, unaware of the drama in the meeting of these two men. There would have been more pride in his voice had he known that his prisoner was the one man in all the government forces the Fed Sleeves were most anxious to capture. Brace wasn't listening to the story. He had risen from his desk chair and stood looking at Dominick, moistening his lips.

"All right, Ferrotti, all right!" he said suddenly, harshly. "You've done well. Now get back to your post."

Reluctantly Ferrotti retired. Still Brace said nothing. Dominick looking into the cruel, shifty eyes, could almost read the man's thoughts. He felt a chill run along his spine. Then Brace snapped an order.

"Search him!"

The two guards went roughly over Dominick. There was nothing to find.

"Tie him to that post," ordered Brace, indicating a round steel pillar.

They shoved Dominick against the post, and handcuffs were snapped over his wrists from behind. A strap bit cruelly into the flesh of his legs. Apparently other prisoners had been fastened this way, for the men moved without hesitation.

"Now get out!" said Brace.

The guards looked at him in evident surprise.

"Get out!" Brace thundered. And then suddenly his voice sank to a cold, deadly quietness. "I want to be alone with this prisoner."

CHAPTER XVII

INQUISITION

VERY slowly Brace came around from behind his desk, his eyes never shifting from Dominick's face. He moved with a soft, noiseless tread, smiling, gently massaging the knuckles of his closed right fist with his left hand.

Dominick knew what was coming. His impulse was to tug futilely at the handcuffs that held his hands behind his back, but he knew that to struggle would only add to Brace's satisfaction in the situation. So he stood perfectly still, steeling himself to the ordeal that lay before him.

Now Brace was only a couple of feet away. Dominick could see the little blood-shot veins in the man's eyes . . . could feel his hot breath. . . . Brace was in no hurry. He just stood there, looking at his prisoner and rubbing his knuckles.

"I hadn't hoped for this moment to come so soon, Vane," he said, voice soft, purring. "The first time we met you called me a heel; the second time, you hit me when my guard was down. It seems to me it's my turn now."

Dominick stood there, tight-lipped, silent.

"You can dish it out, all right, Vane. You gave Moxelli quite a beating up. But

it may interest you to know that he suffered no permanent ill effects—except that he's quite sore at you, Vane. You see, his girl got killed in the mix-up. Most unfortunate for you if Mox gets his hands on you."

A man can take only so much, Dominick was thinking. After a while he becomes unconscious or dies. It couldn't last very much longer and all he had to do was to take it without giving Brace any satisfaction.

"Aren't you going to speak a little piece for me, Vane?" Brace asked sardonically. "I expected you would lash me with rhetoric—call me naughty names. You disappoint me, Vane. Don't all heroes make speeches about God and country and the purity of American womanhood before they get the works? Ah, well—I suppose I can't have everything."

And then he struck. A slashing right uppercut to Dominick's unprotected jaw that drove his head snapping back against the steel post. The double impact sent his knees sagging. Bright spots of pain danced before his eyes. But he stood upright.

Something like murder was in Brace's eyes. He swung again, right and left, to the mouth, to the point of the chin. He seemed to work himself into a frenzy. He kicked savagely at Dominick's shins, his powerful fists tore at Dominick's stomach. It was as if all the pent-up hatred of a lifetime were being taken out in this brutal assault.

"Keep standing! Keep on your feet." Dominick kept saying that to himself. There was a red fog before his face through which he could only see his attacker vaguely. His knees kept sagging, and he kept pulling himself up, trying to keep his chin sunk in on his chest so those terrible blows to the head did not send him slamming back against the steel upright.

Brace was unrelenting in the fury of his attack. At last human flesh could stand no more and very slowly Dominick sank down the post to the floor. The toe of Brace's heavy, military boot caught him back of the ear as he fell and he remembered no more.

BRACE stood over him, sweat pouring off his face, breathing heavily from his fierce exertion. After a moment he delivered another kick at his unconscious prisoner and then he turned away. He looked as if he were disappointed because it had all been so brief. He went to the office door and opened it.

"All right," he snapped at the men who waited outside.

They came back into the room, looking curiously at the fallen man.

"Get anything out of him, sir?" one of them asked.

"I'm taking him to Ellison," Brace said shortly. "He wants to ask the questions himself. This guy is a big shot—chief of the government Intelligence. Otherwise I'd have killed him." He stood behind his desk, straightening his black uniform-tie. "Unhitch him from that post but keep his hands locked behind him. Load him into my car and have a couple of men ready to take the trip with me. Ellison's gone to the country for a conference with the big shots. I'm taking him there."

How long he was unconscious Dominick didn't know. When he came to he was lying in a cramped position on the floor of a car which seemed to be moving at a considerable rate of speed. Tentatively he tried to move and every muscle in his body cried out in protest. He was in the back seat of the car and two men were sitting with their feet on him.

He lay perfectly still. He wanted a chance to do a little thinking without being roughed up again. His lips were thick, swollen, cut. A sharp pain in his side warned him that he had a broken or badly bruised rib. Then he heard Brace's voice from the front seat.

"Left turn up ahead here."

Brace and the driver up front; two men behind. It was ridiculous even to consider the possibility of escape with his hands manacled behind his back. He guessed he was being taken somewhere for questioning—probably to Ellison himself. It was ironic that in this instance there was very little he could tell the Red Sleeve com-

mander even if he would. He knew the government planned to fight back—but Ellison knew that himself. There was nothing of importance they could force him to tell because he knew nothing.

To steel himself against the coming of death was all he could do. He had no illusions as to what the final outcome of this affair was to be. Brace, Moxelli and Dawson would demand his life. And Ellison would grant their request. After all, he was a spy.

Yet, even as he resigned himself to the inevitable, his senses were alert. His mind told him he was at the end of the road, but his spirit would not give up. He could not guess how long they had been traveling before he regained consciousness. They were taking him somewhere out of the city—that was certain. In the country there would be fewer guards. If they once freed his hands—left him alone for any time at all—there might be a chance.

Suddenly the wheels of the car crunched on gravel as they made a sharp turn. A moment later the car came to a halt.

“Drag him out!” was Brace’s sharp order.

Rough hands seized him by the arms and pulled him out of the car. He managed to get his feet under him and stand. They were in front of a large Colonial house with sweeping lawns and beautifully kept gardens and shrubbery. Red Sleeve guards stood on the little terrace that led to the front door.

“So you came to,” drawled Brace, looking at the battered government agent.

DOMINICK was swaying on his feet, his head light, aching. The Red Sleeves took him by the arm and dragged him across the driveway and up the path to the house. Brace gave crisp orders and they were admitted to the house.

“Keep him here,” said Brace, “while I have a chat with the general.”

The guards let Dominick sit down on a bench at the foot of a beautiful spiral staircase that led to the floor above. The guards apparently had no intention of baiting

their prisoner. One of them was almost solicitous.

“Want a drag on this, buddy?” he asked, holding the cigarette he had been smoking to Dominick’s lips.

“Thanks.” Dominick drew the smoke hungrily into his lungs. He looked up at the guard. “Where are we? Whose place is this?”

“Sorry. We can’t do any talking,” said the man. He smiled dryly. “I guess you’ll be taking the same line yourself.”

“I guess so,” Dominick admitted.

“You’re just out of luck, bein’ on the wrong side of the fence with these guys,” said the guard. “They don’t play nice. But I guess you found that out already.”

Then suddenly the guard snatched the cigarette from Dominick’s lips and crushed it out under his heel. He stood at attention as Brace came along the hall.

“Can you walk?” Brace rapped at Dominick, “Or do we have to carry you into the General’s office?”

“Oh, I can walk,” said Dominick quietly.

“This way, then.”

Unsteadily Dominick preceded Brace along the hall to the room at its end. As he stepped across the threshold his muscles tightened. This was the works and no mistake. He had never seen Ellison in the flesh, but he recognized him immediately. The general sat at a big desk, staring out from beneath his shaggy eyebrows. Beside him was H. R. Dawson, suave, smiling smugly as the prisoner’s eyes met his. Behind the banker, a large patch of adhesive tape on the side of his head, was Moxelli, thick lips twisted, eyes fixed hungrily on Dominick as if he couldn’t wait his chance. Corbet and Frampton were there too. This was the high council of the Red Sleeves—the real powers of the Revolution. And Dominick faced them, helpless, hands locked behind him. These were the men he had been hunting, but he had found them too late.

Ellison was the first to speak: “You are Dominick Vane?”

“Yes.”

"You are accused of attempting espionage in our ranks. Is that true?"

"Would it make any difference if I denied it?" Dominick asked dryly.

"You know the war-time penalty for spies?"

"Yes."

"Have you any interest in living, Mr. Vane?"

Dominick's eyes were hard as he met the general's stare steadily. "Are you proposing a bargain, General?"

"What are the government's plans?" Ellison rapped.

"You know them as well as I do, General."

"Do you really think they mean to go through with it or are they bluffing?"

Dominick's bruised lips moved in a faint smile. "What do you think?" he countered.

Dawson leaned forward, fingering the tip of his waxed gray mustache with slender fingers. There was a mocking note in his voice. "You know, Mr. Vane, you have been a great nuisance to us from the start. You stumble over our plans before we are ready and force us to act ahead of schedule. You force some of us into hiding. You beat up our men. You have influenced my family against me. Really, Mr. Vane, you have put us to no end of trouble."

"The pleasure," said Dominick dryly, "is all mine."

"But that pleasure has come to an end, Mr. Vane," Dawson said softly. "Now it's our turn for a little fun. There are several of us who would like to have a minute or two with you alone."

"Especially," said Dominick, his cold eyes shifting to Brace, "if my hands are tied behind me."

"Tut, tut, let us have no recriminations," Dawson drawled. "You must see, Mr. Vane, that whatever your prowess as a fighter may be, we hold all the cards now. I admire bravery. As a matter of fact, I must confess to a sneaking admiration for your own qualities along that line. But I would like you to see that bravery isn't going to do you any good."

"So what?" said Vane.

DAWSON sighed like a man who is having difficulty with a recalcitrant child. "Mr. Vane, you are chief of the President's flying squadron of intelligence men. You know the government plans. You know what military manouvers they intend making. In short you are just brimming with information of an accurate nature. We don't want to force you to talk. In fact we are willing to bargain with you as you suggested. Give us the information we want and we will overlook the little matter of the firing squad."

Dominick eyed the banker steadily. "Mr. Dawson, your lack of intelligence is a constant source of amazement to me. You have made some rather serious mistakes since the beginning of this affair. And you are making another one now."

"Don't waste time with him," Moxelli snarled. "We'll make him talk!"

"We have found one very effective method," Dawson went on, his eyes fixed thoughtfully on the ceiling. "The driving of fine wire nails up under the fingernails seems to be most effective. It's a method that seems to break down the strongest of men. Some of them scream, Vane. It is a very distressing sound. They scream, and, at last, they talk."

The jaw muscles under Dominick's cheeks rippled. "I have no special information to give you if I would," he said. "Of course you won't believe that."

"Of course," said Dawson. He looked at Ellison. The beetle-browed general made a sudden sharp gesture with his thumb.

Instantly Dominick was seized from behind. Strong hands fastened on his wrists and his hands were pressed flat on a table top. Dawson rose from his desk and sauntered over to a window, his back to Dominick. And then pain came, so agonizing that for all his will power a groan escaped Dominick's lips. There was the faint tapping sound of a hammer on a fine wire nail.

Then Dominick fainted. Dawson turned back from the window. His face was pale but perfectly composed, as he looked at the crumpled figure on the floor.

"Less resistance than I expected," he

said. "He must be pretty well all-in. Perhaps later . . ."

"Put him down stairs," snapped Ellison.

Consciousness of a sort returned swiftly to Dominick. He was aware that he was being carried out of the room, and then down a steep flight of stairs. Suddenly they dropped him, and his body bounced down over three or four steps to a concrete floor. He lay still, too weak to move, too racked with pain. He could hear the footsteps of the men who had carried him retreating up the stairs and the slamming of a door.

The cement was cool against his hot face. And then, suddenly, very gentle hands

were lifting him to a more comfortable position.

"Take it easy, old man." It was a familiar voice, but Dominick didn't place it for the moment.

Then there was a startled cry: "Philip! It's Dominick!"

Dominick opened his eyes, incredulous. The light was very dim but he could see Angela's face. Then her cheek was against his. . . .

"Oh, my darling, my darling!"

Dominick tried to speak but nothing happened. And then he faded again, very gently this time, into unconsciousness.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Aw, Wilderness

THE United States Senate, a competent body which cannot observe a sparrow fall without forming a committee to investigate the bird for subversive dying, has now turned its attention to American wild life. Aid is in sight for our big game animals. The buffalo, the deer and the bear are to be conserved and restored.

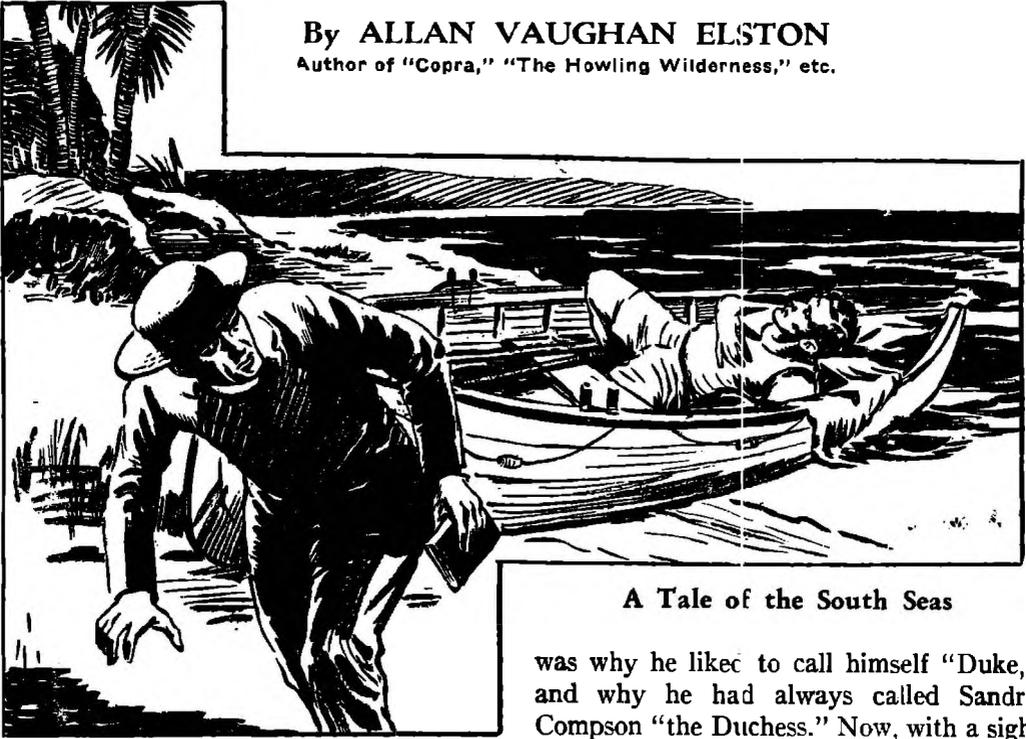
Shock troops in the wild-life rehabilitation program are 800 rangers of the Forest Service. They enforce the game laws, keep on a friendly basis with the animals, and, every few years, count them. Mr. F. A. Silcox, chief of the foresters, remarks that "pioneer conditions can never be restored. With the building of the railroads in the West," he says, "buffalo were killed by the tens of thousands for their tongues alone, and hundreds of thousands were slaughtered for their hides; elk were killed for a pair of tusks; and huge construction camps were fed chiefly on the meat of the antelope."

Spurred by the Senate, the Rangers have set to work to make our vanishing beasts more comfortable. Forests are being redecorated, appetizing grasses are being sown for the herbivorous and for the carnivora there will be a bit of steak now and then. The animal kingdom is a-buzz with the good news. The grizzlies are discussing pre-fabricated caves, the geese are hoping for new klaxon honks, but the deer are worried because they heard that some senator suggested that the deer must plow under every other acre of their feeding grounds.

—Peter Kelly

The Bishop's Passport

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON
Author of "Copra," "The Howling Wilderness," etc.



A Tale of the South Seas

WHEN "Duke" Dunton offered to toss dice for the last ration of water, the other man declined listlessly. Dunton gave the dice a roll anyway. He kneeled there in the boat, snapping his fingers—just as though he were at a green-baize table instead of hopelessly adrift in the South Seas.

The other man, Missionary Josiah Goodwyn, looked down with sun-inflamed eyes as the dice came to rest with a six and an ace exposed.

"You see I win anyway, Bishop," Duke grinned. He reached for the bottle and drank the last inch of water thirstily. Then, just to keep his hand in, he continued to roll the dice. "Look at that, Bishop. I make a pass pretty near every time."

"I'm not a bishop, if you please," Goodwyn answered wearily.

But it pleased Dunton to call him Bishop. Dunton had a way of bestowing titles, the higher-sounding the better. That

was why he liked to call himself "Duke," and why he had always called Sandra Compson "the Duchess." Now, with a sigh, he could picture Sandra reclining luxuriously in her Papeete bungalow, sipping cool absinthes. Dunton had been on his way to join her when that insectivorous little schooner, the *Reefrunner*, had foundered in a gale to leave him adrift with no choicer foil for his talents than a robust, though purseless, missionary.

"Where are we, anyway, Bishop?" Dunton pulled the helmet lower over his eyes and gazed wryly from one pitiless horizon to another.

For answer the Reverend Goodwyn quoted piously:

"I know not where His islands lift
Their froned palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care."

"Horsefeathers!" Dunton derided.

Goodwyn, wincing, took a pocket Bible from his black pongee coat. Turning to the Book of Jonah for testimony pertinent to his present situation, he read aloud:

"So the shipmaster came to him and said—'Arise, call upon thy God, if so be it God will think upon us; that we perish not.' 'And they said every man to his fellow, 'Come let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah."

Josiah Goodwyn then dropped devoutly to his knees to pray for deliverance; while Dunton, likewise on his knees, continued to practice with the dice.

"Look at 'em! They're the McCoy!" Dunton broke in to exclaim. "You could pawn 'em for fifty quid each, any day in the week."

Goodwyn saw him balance the dice admiringly in his hand. The dice were indeed unusual and beautiful, a delicate shade of green on which the sun flashed brilliantly.

"Pure jade!" Dunton announced with pride. "Lifted 'em out of a joss house in Hong Kong. Watch me make a pass with 'em."

AS DUNTON rolled, a conviction came to Goodwyn that the dice were loaded. It made him flush faintly that he should even know about such things. But he did. Not always had Josiah Goodwyn been a missionary, or even particularly religious. He recalled now days long ago when, as a derelict urchin in the alleys of San Francisco, he had thrown dice more than once himself.

"Toss you to see who takes a rap at the oars," suggested Dunton.

Goodwyn waved the dice aside. "I'll row as long as my strength lasts," he said quietly. Seating himself in mid-boat he began rowing. The tropic sun beat on him fiercely and the oars were blistering to his touch.

His vague hope in keeping a westerly course was that Faluhaa Island might lie that way, and that it might be the nearest land. In the line of duty the Reverend Goodwyn had been on the way to Faluhaa at the time of the *Reefrunner's* disaster.

Duke Dunton now began chanting with a mockery of encouragement: "Pull for the shore, sailor, pull for the shore!"

Which led Goodwyn to reflect on how strangely the scope of men's lives overlap. Here was a seagoing swindler who evidently knew a smattering of his—Goodwyn's—trade; while Goodwyn, because of his perception that the jade dice were loaded, had a faint knowledge of Dunton's.

"Don't weaken, Bishop," Dunton urged.

Goodwyn pulled until he fainted at the oars.

As the burning hours passed, Dunton himself sagged to the verge of collapse. His tongue thickened, his duck-clad shoulders drooped and all the swagger wilted out of him. The white-canvas helmet pressed on him like a crown of fire. He closed his eyes, finally, against the glare of the sun and the sea, and dropped to a wilted, sweltering heap beside Goodwyn.

Night came, and with it a fresh east wind. The boat drifted more swiftly toward the west, waves lapping at the gunwales—on and on toward some limitless boundary of the dark. When the sound of surf roaring on a reef came over the water, Dunton did not hear it. When by a miracle he crossed the reef without swamping the boat, he never knew it. Neither Dunton nor Goodwyn knew when the boat grounded on the sand of a beach.

THE sun on his face aroused Dunton. He blinked in amazement at a line of shore palms with an up-sloping jungle beyond. As he stepped unsteadily from the boat he saw a small trickle of water emerging from the trees. Dunton staggered to it, dropped to his face and drank greedily.

The draught revived him and his head cleared. Where was he? Was this island a British mandate, or French? If French, all was well. But if British, Duke Dunton could still foresee trouble.

For the British had him tagged. Persistent fellows, those Britishers. For the past year, ever since a fraudulent use of the royal mails out of Suva, Dunton had been giving British mandates a wide berth.

So his first move now must be to ascer-

tain whose flag flew over this island. No human or house was in sight. How far was it to the nearest village?

In his bleached ducks and helmet, Dunton walked down the waterline to a bend in the shore. From here he could see a settlement. A few sheet-iron buildings smothered with Bougainvillea vines, and rows of thatched roofs beyond. Dunton's face now clouded when he observed that a British flag flew over the main building.

Faluhaa Island, probably.

Walking into that village might mean walking into jail. So instead, Dunton returned thoughtfully to the beach. There, in the boat, lay Missionary Goodwyn. Goodwyn, in his black, clerical pongees and broad-brimmed straw hat, appeared to be either dead or dying.

Did he have a passport? Without compunction Dunton stooped to explore Goodwyn's inside coat-pocket. From it he produced a passport. The photograph of it was old, faded and water-soaked. Only by the clerical attire could one know it was of Goodwyn. Yet the typed name and occupation were clear enough.

Here, Dunton discerned immediately, was a perfectly safe way to pass inspection at Faluhaa. He could masquerade as Goodwyn until a chance came for safe passage into the French sphere.

So Dunton removed his own white ducks and dropped them in the boat. When he stepped out on the beach again, he was attired convincingly in the black pongees of Josiah Goodwyn. Goodwyn's sober straw hat was on his head and Goodwyn's Holy Bible was tucked under his arm.

What about Goodwyn himself? The man was past reviving anyway, Dunton thought. There was a land wind, he noticed, and the tide was ebbing.

With a push of his foot Dunton set the boat adrift. Breeze and tide carried it swiftly from the shore. Far out, Dunton could see a barricade of foam where the surf hurdled a reef. The boat would smash there, he thought.

Then a disturbing memory struck him. Engrossed with his immediate problems he

had forgotten all about those jade dice. They were in his duck trousers, and the trousers were in the boat with Goodwyn.

For a moment Dunton was tempted to try swimming after them. But he realized with dismay that he was in too weak a condition. He'd never make it. Besides there might be sharks.

Possession of the dice would defeat his assumed character of missionary. So with a sigh of regret Dunton gave up his treasures. There they drifted, toward the hazards of the reef, with Goodwyn.

Thirst took Dunton to the streamlet again, and hunger lured him to the jungle. He found bananas, mangos, wild oranges. When he emerged on the beach again the boat was nowhere in sight.

Then, with the Bible piously under his arm, Duke Dunton set off downshore for Faluhaa village.

"YOU mean you're the only survivor!"
A hawk-eyed British official was exclaiming an hour later. Dunton nodded. One look at the official's sharpness made Dunton thankful that he had chosen to mask his true identity. The passport had received a perfunctory glance and was now safely returned to his own pocket.

"We're thankful *you* survived, at least," Resident Courtland said warmly. "You knew the Reverend Weatherell? But of course you did, or he wouldn't have recommended you to succeed him. Grand old chap, Weatherell. The natives thought the world and all of him."

Dunton marshaled his wits quickly. What was he up against, anyway? Apparently these islanders had been expecting Josiah Goodwyn to arrive and carry on in the place of some venerable old missionary who was now deceased.

Courtland raised his voice. "Hey, Billy."

From a trading store opposite the residency a young American emerged. A tall friendly chap with honest brown eyes and a short-stemmed pipe in his mouth. He was coatless, and his arms, bare to the shoulders, were as brown as a native's.

"Billy, meet the Reverend Josiah Good-

wyn," introduced Courland. "He just got washed up on our beach."

Billy Howe's handclasp was strong and hearty. "Glad you got here, Mr. Goodwyn. Old man Weatherell left us a pretty good opinion of preachers, around here. Salt of the earth, he was."

"I hope I can measure up." Dunton smiled.

It wouldn't be for long, he thought. He would get away from here on the first boat. It meant playing a part, but all his life Duke Dunton had been playing parts. And he always took a professional pride in the finesse with which he carried them off.

Curious natives were already gathering. Plump brown matrons, shy young girls, grinning old men and staring children. Some of them came forward to chatter welcomes.

Dunton greeted them. "Blessings on you, my people."

He stood before them, convincingly benign in his clericals, with the Bible under his arm.

"Weatherell's old quarters are ready for you," Billy Howe said. "Come along, I'll show you the way."

He led Dunton down a path to a modest grass cottage with a neat little garden in front. Flowering shrubs grew in profusion; a fine spreading breadfruit tree gave shade.

"Weatherell made me trustee of the mission fund," Billie Howe said. He added with a laugh: "He had to do that because I happen to have the only safe on the island."

Dunton pricked up his ears. A "fund" suggested interesting possibilities. Was there anything worth getting away with, he wondered.

Just as Howe ushered him into the cottage, a patter of rain began falling on the roof.

THE same sprinkle of rain revived Josiah Goodwyn. The missionary sat up weakly and found himself alone in an open boat, just outside the reef. He was stripped of everything but his drawers. In the boat with him lay Dunton's whites.

For the moment all that concerned Goodwyn was this blessed rain. He cupped his hands, caught drops of it and slapped them ravenously into his mouth. He trapped more water with the bailing bucket, and soon his thirst was assuaged and he felt better.

On his knees in the open boat, he offered his thanks. Then he discovered that the oars were gone and he was drifting swiftly seaward. Far beyond the reef he could see the dim outline of a rapidly-vanishing island.

Faint with hunger, he knew he couldn't last long. However he could at least clothe himself decently. He did so, in Dunton's garments.

When he looked about for his Bible, he could not find it in the boat. Then his hand, groping in a pocket of the duck trousers, brought out a pair of green dice. Goodwyn gazed disapprovingly at these tools of iniquity. Why had Dunton taken his Bible and left these dice?

The missionary's first impulse was to hurl the dice overboard. Then it occurred to him that they were worth a good deal of money. Pure jade, Dunton had said, good for at least fifty pounds each. A certain Scotch strain in Goodwyn was definitely opposed to tossing a hundred pounds into the sea. Not that he would use the money for himself. But at least he could hold it as a hostage against the return of his clothing and his Bible.

So he put the dice back into his pocket.

The boat continued to drift outward, and Goodwyn grew constantly weaker. Only the downpour and the friendly screen of clouds kept him alive that day.

It was near sundown when four stalwart Polynesians homeward bound to an outlying atoll found an unconscious white man in a boat.

Goodwyn opened his eyes to discover that he lay on a mat inside of a bamboo house. Brown faces were bending over him.

"His fever is like fire," a voice said. "He must sip the milk of many ripe coconuts before he is strong."

"And eat of the poi," said another.

AT FALUHAA Duke Dunton, gambler and talented opportunist, was sipping a cool limeade in Billy Howe's trading store.

"Don't get me wrong, Mr. Goodwyn," Billy was saying. "I'm as hard as the next man down around these islands, and I've raised my share of hell from Peru to Timbuctu. All the same, old Weatherell sort of got under my skin."

"You owe him gratitude for his work here, no doubt," Dunton purred.

Howe nodded. "I landed on this island a beachcombing kid, five years ago. Weatherell took me in. He pumped a little ambition into me—now I own this store and something of a decent reputation. So naturally I'd like to see that dream of the old man's go through without any hitches."

"He had plans for expansion?" Dunton prompted.

"He was here half a lifetime, you understand," Howe explained. "Was both teacher and priest to the natives, and they all loved him. Thirty years ago he got the idea of building a big educational layout on this island. Chapel and school combined, with all the trimmings—woodwork and all that for the boys, you know, and domestic science for the girls. To finance it he put out a glass jar and invited them all to contribute—and they've been doing just that for thirty years. You'd be surprised how that fund's piled up."

Billy Howe went to his safe and unlocked it. When he returned to the table, he brought an ordinary Mason jar and a roll of blueprints. Dunton looked disappointedly at the jar. He had hoped for something big. But the jar seemed to be filled only with an accumulation of tarnished shillings and a few wadded old bills. Dunton calculated and guessed that the entire fund couldn't amount to very much.

Howe unrolled the blueprints and displayed drawings for a complete mission school, with a chapel annex. "The old man had an architect draw them up," he explained. "He got a rock-bottom bid from a Tahiti contractor to build the layout, entirely furnished. It'll take an even ten

thousand pounds to do it, Mr. Goodwyn." "An ambitious project," murmured Dunton.

"One which the old man refused to start until every farthing is raised," Howe said. "He said he didn't want to leave a heritage of debt to the islanders. A patient old fellow. Year after year he kept urging them to bring in their contributions, always promising that the job would be started just as soon as ten thousand pounds are in the jar."

"It takes lots of shillings to make that much," suggested Dunton.

"Yes, but once in a while some pious and lucky islander would sweeten this pot with more than a shilling. Look, Mr. Goodwyn."

Billie Howe inverted the jar, dumping the contents in a heap on the table. Dunton's pulse quickened when he saw, scattered here and there amongst coins and bills, an occasional pearl. They were small pearls, many of them far from flawless. And yet the number of them was impressive.

"As each pearl came in," Howe explained, "it was appraised accurately by an expert and the value recorded in a book. So the old man always knew just how close he was to his dream. When he died recently, the values footed up to a trifle over nine thousand pounds."

It was hard for Dunton to conceal his excitement. "Just what," he managed to inquire, "were Mr. Weatherell's final instructions?"

"He brought the jar to me. 'Put it in your safe, Billy,' he said. 'When my successor arrives, tell him the situation. Tell him to add to the fund according to the contributions of his people. When the fund is finally complete, and not until then, turn it over to him, Billy. He can take it to the Tahiti contractor and get the work under way.'"

Dunton watched avidly as Howe restored the pearls and money to the jar and relocked it in the safe. A windfall, thought Dunton! Ten thousand pounds handed to him on a silver plate!

HE LEFT the store rejoicing. Yet on reflection he could see that there was a catch. Only a little over nine thousand pounds was now assembled, and Howe was not to give up the money until the entire sum was raised. In dribbles from poor islanders, that might take years. Duke Dunton was of no mind to wait here years. He must rush this business through, somehow, and be away with the loot.

Here was a problem to challenge his guile. How could he reduce those years to months or weeks? By what convincing strategy could he get his fingers on that glass jar and sail safely away from Falu-haa? Obviously any suggestion that he leave for Tahiti with an uncompleted fund would arouse suspicion. It would be crude, and Dunton prided himself that he never went in for anything raw.

That night, in his snug quarters, he relapsed into profound meditation. Finally he had it. The Duchess! Sandra Compson.

He would send for Sandra. She would delight and fascinate both Billy Howe and the resident. Probably she would be the first beautiful white woman either of them had seen for years. Adorable and gracious, they would think her, when she began taking interest in the welfare of the native youth. And positively angelic when out of the goodness of her heart she impulsively dropped into the glass jar enough to bring the total up to ten thousand pounds.

"A natural!" Dunton exulted, snapping his fingers as with a cast of loaded dice.

When a copra boat left for Papeete a few days later, it carried a note from Dunton to Sandra. "Make your own reason for coming," the advice ended. "And when you get here, turn on the charm."

Having summoned the Duchess, the Duke then gave thought to the business of carrying on. How did one go about being a missionary? It was easy, he decided. On weekdays you visited the sick and patted little children on the head. You beamed at all comers. And on Sunday you went to the meeting house, wherever it was, and passed out hymn books for the singing of songs.

Suppose he were asked to conduct a christening, a baptism, a burial! Again it was simple. For among the effects of the late Reverend Weatherell he found a handbook which gave all those rituals. He even found many manuscripts of old sermons written by Weatherell in his lifelong ministry. Easy to memorize a few paragraphs and spout them glibly, Dunton thought. The natives wouldn't understand more than one word in ten, anyway. If his spirit flagged, he could always enliven it by thinking of that jarful of pearls.

When the first Sunday came, Dunton boldly chose that jarful of pearls for the theme of his persuasions. He expounded passionately on the ideals of his predecessor, and urged his audience to carry them out forthwith.

"Time and tide waiteth for no man," he declaimed, counting on their not knowing it wasn't Scripture. But being a seafaring race, they should at least know all about tides. "We will now sing Number One Hundred and Sixty-nine," he finished. Dunton led them lustily as they sang:

"Pull for the shore, sailor, pull for the shore!"

On weekdays he spent most of the time lounging in his cottage. Seen abroad, he was always the pious, black-coated Josiah Goodwyn. He assumed a winning, gentle manner. The Faluhaans brought him breadfruit, yams, turtle eggs—all the manna of the island.

Sometimes they brought him coins and once a small pearl. These, in the presence of Billy Howe, he dropped with benedictions into the glass jar. But it wasn't enough—yet. The final *coup de grâce* must be delivered by Sandra.

WHEN Sandra Compson arrived, Dunton had never seen her looking more handsome. She was radiant. Her ship anchored out in the lagoon and she came ashore in a skiff, her brilliant yellow parasol matching the gold of her hair. She was smartly tailored in white, with a chic that might have just emerged from a shop on the Rue de la Paix.

Billy Howe and Resident Courtland saw and were fascinated. Dunton had guessed rightly—many years had passed since either of these men had seen a girl of their own race, even a plain one.

She stepped ashore under escort of the ship's captain, who first introduced her to Courtland. All Faluhaa witnessed her arrival. Dunton was there, too, although he appeared never to have seen her before. The Polynesians gazed at her, entranced.

"Is she not beautiful?" exclaimed one of the young Faluhaan women to Billy Howe.

Billy admitted it. The vision of this slender blond Nordic, with her penciled eyebrows and her delicately fair skin, took him back with a lurch to the boulevards of his homeland.

She explained to the resident that she had come to meet her brother. He was somewhere in the islands looking for pineapple acreage and had assured her he would be here waiting. Since he wasn't, she hoped he'd be along on the next ship. "Will I be a nuisance?" she asked anxiously.

Courtland assured her that indeed she would not. Gallantly he took her to the village guest-house, just back of the pub, and apologized for the lack of conveniences. "You'll find it pretty dull, I'm afraid. Only a few of us here."

Before sundown she had met those few, including Billy Howe.

Howe, she remembered from Dunton's letter, was the one to whom she must be especially gracious. Sandra greeted him, as she stood among her bags and hat boxes brought by a Kanaka sailor from the ship. Courtland had commandeered a native maid for her. And a detail of brown boys were scrubbing the guest-house, getting out the cobwebs and cockroaches. "Your Faluhaans are perfectly charming, Mr. Howe," Sandra said. "I hope I can do something for them, while I'm here."

Later, when she was alone, Duke Dunton slipped furtively into her room. "How do you like our fall guy?" he grinned.

"Who? The Howe boy?" Sandra held a

small mirror while she powdered her nose thoughtfully. "I think he's nice. Good looking if he had a shave and a haircut. Just why must I charm him?"

"To make him think you're genuine—the real thing," Dunton explained.

She laughed. "And not a fake, like these?" She turned her profile first one way then another, so that he could see what appeared to be diamond earrings. The diamonds were artful imitations and would have deceived anyone but an expert.

Dunton nodded. "Not a fake like those earrings," he assented. "So that when out of the bigness of your heart you drop them in a glass jar, you crack the jackpot wide open."

She lighted a cigarette, then produced bottles from her luggage and mixed a cocktail for Dunton. Dunton peeled off his missionary's coat and sat with his feet cocked on a table. As she handed him the glass he gave a sigh of contentment. "You saved my life, Duchess."

DURING the warm tropic days which followed, Sandra Compson took pains to show a growing interest in the youth of Faluhaa. Inevitably Billy Howe became her escort as she went welfaring from house to house in the village.

"They're so intelligent and deserving," Sandra exclaimed. "And they speak such good English."

"They owe it to Weatherell," Billy said. "He was the missionary we had here before this chap, Goodwyn."

He told her about Weatherell's project for a mission school and chapel. About the fund in a glass jar which was almost, but not quite, complete.

Sandra was brightly interested. "A shame they have to wait! When they only lack so little of the sum needed!"

"It is a shame," Billy agreed very earnestly. He took her to his store and produced the glass jar from the safe. He explained about it—recounted the sacrifices of a simple, hopeful people throughout thirty years. "Yes, it's too bad," Billy repeated, "that they still must wait until

they bring in a few more measly little pearls. That grand old man spent a patient lifetime planning for this thing, you know."

Sandra found her interest straying from the pearls to Billy Howe himself. She couldn't help but respect the way he talked about old man Weatherell. And in spite of herself she liked his brown eyes and the square-cut honesty of his face. He was neatly shaven now, and his hair was brushed back in rugged waves.

One evening when the moon was full she stood with Billy Howe under palm trees by the shore. Waves were whispering and the lagoon spread out before them like a dark purple mirror. "Believe it or not," Billy said with a laugh, "I was washed up right at this spot five years ago. Cabin boy on a hell-ship. The skipper kicked me off one night when I served him some sour victuals—right out there where you see that splash of moonlight on the water."

He pointed—but she looked instead at the man himself. What if he knew why she was here? "Why didn't you take the next boat home?" she asked presently.

"Never had any home," he told her. "I was raised in an orphanage and ran away to sea."

"And made something out of nothing. Sometimes it's the other way, isn't it?—people make nothing out of something." It surprised Sandra to hear herself saying that. Yet she couldn't help remembering. Once *she* had been "something"—and now she was the Duchess.

When Billy left her at the guest-house, Sandra flung herself on a couch and smoked innumerable cigarettes.

"What's the matter, Duchess?" Duke Dunton asked when he looked in a little later. "Isn't your heart in your work?"

"If it is, it's upside down," she said.

He gave her a searching look. "You mean you don't like this job?"

"Not one small bit." Sandra tamped out her cigarette angrily.

"Oh, so that's it!" Dunton's eyes gleamed shrewdly in the gloom there. "Going soft on this trader boy, are you?"

"Suppose I am, Duke? You said I'd find a man down here who hadn't seen a girl like me for years. But you overlooked one thing. The fact that maybe I never saw a man like Billy Howe. Funny, isn't it? A marvelous joke really . . . Now get out, please, I'm tired."

"I get it!" Dunton exclaimed. "Well, it's too late. You've already told them you're waiting for a brother. There isn't any brother. So you're in up to your earrings, Duchess. You've got to go through with it."

"And if I don't?"

"The jails are big enough for both of us," he warned, and left her.

SANDRA did go through with it. A few days later she took the earrings to Howe's store. "I'd like to contribute to the mission fund," she said.

Bringing the glass jar from his safe, Howe supposed she would drop in only a few shillings. When her hand opened and exposed the earrings he had seen her wearing all these past weeks, he was amazed.

"Gee! Diamonds!" He stared as the light flashed brilliantly on them. "Say, Sandra, you oughtn't to—"

"Why not? I shan't miss them," she said, and dropped them into the jar.

"They're big ones!" he exclaimed. "They must be worth—"

"Enough to make up the deficit," she said quickly. Her voice was forced but he didn't notice. All he could think of was that the dream of old Weatherell's lifetime had at last come true.

"Wow! It means we're over the top—all in one jump! Won't that preacher be surprised? Let's go tell him now."

"You tell him," she said.

"You bet I will!" Billy exulted. "He can catch the next boat for Tahiti, with this fund complete, and get everything started."

A mistiness came to her eyes and he thought she was sharing his exultation. "You've made a lot of happiness for these islanders, Sandra. They think you're a good angel—and—so do I!" Impulsively he took her face in his hands. "I didn't

mean to say that—just yet. But it's the truth, so you might as well know it."

"Don't, Billy!"

Billy laughed. "It was ever so much easier than I thought—telling you I love you. Will you marry me, Sandra?"

She couldn't believe he was saying that. To her. She could still barely believe it even when she felt his arms around her and his kiss on her lips. "You will marry me?" he urged again.

She knew she couldn't. For beyond him she could see the glass jar. In it were the cheap, spurious trinkets she had dropped there. So it had to be no.

She drew away from him. "No, Billy. No. Please don't ever think of me that way. You mustn't. And please don't ever ask me again." She said it and it had to be final. Dunton was right—it was too late now. She had dropped her soul into that glass jar.

DUNTON was in his quarters when Howe joined him. "We're over the top on that building fund, Mr. Goodwyn," Billy announced. "Thanks to the generosity of Miss Compson."

Dunton affected surprise and delight. "Let us rejoice," he exclaimed, "and thank the Lord for sending a good angel to our midst."

"She's all of that," Billy agreed earnestly. But Dunton could see that something was lacking in his jubilation. There was a hurt underneath it, he thought—some personal disappointment which had nothing to do with the contents of a glass jar.

"This automatically winds up my trusteeship," Howe said. "According to Weatherell's instructions I'll turn the fund over to you. You can be off with it to Papeete on the next boat and get things started."

"There'll be a boat soon?"

"In three days," Billy said. "In the meantime I might as well keep the fund in my safe. Just as a matter of form. I'll deliver it to you in Courtland's presence an hour or so before sailing time."

Dunton smiled graciously in assent.

At the first opportunity he slipped over

to the guest-house to talk to Sandra. Dunton found her nervous, tense; she was staring into space with a tragic hopelessness in her eyes.

"Thanks for feeding the kitty, Duchess," Dunton grinned. "And cheer up. You'll find another boy somewhere. And quit hating yourself just because you slipped over a fast one."

"Yes." She smiled languidly. "I slipped over a fast one—on myself!"

His eyes hardened. "All right. You slipped over a fast one on yourself. You fell for the fall guy—and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Isn't there?" she challenged. "I wonder."

"Nothing except telling him who I am," he warned. "And if you denounce me you denounce yourself. There's tar on both ends of this stick, Duchess."

"I don't want to make him hate me," she admitted drearily. "And I don't want to go to jail."

"Of course not. Instead you'd rather clear out with me on that ship, with ten thousand pounds of soft money."

"I'm not going on the ship with you," she said.

Dunton frowned as he helped himself to one of her cigarettes. He lighted it, puffed thoughtfully for a moment, then his face cleared. "Yes, you're right, Duchess. It might look bad if we scrambled on the same boat. You better hang around waiting for your brother one ship longer. Then you can join me for the divvy in Papeete."

A sound of cheering and the happy chatter of natives came from the village street. Sandra went to a window, looked out, saw Billy Howe surrounded by Faluhaans. Evidently he had told them about the fund.

Biting her lip, Sandra turned to face Dunton. "There must be some decent way out of this!" She began to walk up and down.

"There isn't any way—except *my* way. Don't kid yourself, Duchess." With this warning, Dunton opened the door to go.

"Wait! There is a way!" she said.

Dunton saw that some plan had come to her. It seemed to harass and frighten her—and yet her eyes had grown stubborn and hard. She crossed to Dunton and said to him: "You're going away on that ship, alone and empty-handed."

He stared. "Are you crazy? You mean you're gonna squeal?"

"No," she promised. "I won't say a word to you or about you. You won't be accused. You won't even be suspected. You're simply going away in good standing, but alone and empty-handed."

While he stood in the portal, gaping, Sandra slammed the door in his face.

FOR three days Dunton worried. He reviewed every possible angle for some twist which might expose him at the eleventh hour. What could Sandra mean by prophesying that he would, without being accused or even suspected, renounce the loot and slip away empty-handed?

She wouldn't expose his masquerade, he reasoned, because if she did she herself would stand shamed and convicted before Billy Howe. Besides, she had promised: "I won't say a word to you or about you." Dunton's mind repeated that promise over and over, and always it reassured him that he was safe.

During the three days he did not see her once. She kept to her room, and Dunton felt certain that she made no contact either with Billy Howe or the resident. Both of these young men continued to be cordial and unsuspecting. The natives likewise continued to be respectful, as to a revered pastor. Clearly Sandra had given no one any inkling of the truth.

The morning of the third day came and Dunton exulted when he saw a little one-funnel steamer chugging in through the reef. "She's only dropping anchor long enough to take on a few copra bags," Billy Howe came by to announce. "Soon as you're ready, I'll meet you at Courtland's office to turn over the glass jar."

"I'll join you there directly," Dunton promised.

In half an hour he did so, accoutered as

always in sober ministerial garb and with the Bible under his arm.

Courtland and Howe were seated at a table with the glass jar between them.

"Here you are," the resident said with sincere cordiality as Dunton entered. "Billy insists on getting a businesslike clearance from his trusteeship, so I've checked over the items and made out a receipt."

"I'm sure he's been a faithful steward," Dunton murmured.

Courtland nodded. "Yes. The items check with the records. Now if you'll sign here, please?"

Dunton laid the Bible down in order to sign. He was in a glow now. Nothing could stop him except Sandra—and she wouldn't dare. Since the silly little fool wasn't going on this ship with him, he wouldn't even need to divide the spoils.

Courtland, after signing the receipt as a witness, shook hands with Dunton. "Here's wishing you a fair voyage and a speedy return from Tahiti, Mr. Goodwyn. You haven't too much time. That boat'll be weighing anchor in less than an hour."

"I'll arrange the contract without delay"—Dunton smiled—"and be right back." His hands reached out to take up the glass jar.

Then he became unpleasantly aware that Sandra had entered the office. One look at her—at her pallor and at the tight-lipped desperation of her expression—made Dunton grow tense against the shock of exposure. She had promised she wouldn't. But would she? Did she dare?

TO HIS infinite relief Sandra said no word to him or about him. Instead she went directly to Billy Howe and spoke to him just as though he was the only man in the room—and just as though there was no problem in all the world except her own and Billy Howe's. "I've changed my mind, Billy," she said with a natural tremor of embarrassment. "If you still—"

Surprise on Billy's face gave way to elation. He stood up and caught both of her hands. "Of course I still want you, Sandra! You mean it's 'yes' instead of 'no'."

She couldn't meet his eyes. But she did say, "Yes, Billy."

Billy Howe gave a whoop, swept her into his arms. "Did you hear that? Sandra's going to marry me. And just in time, too. An hour later we'd 've been left stranded without a preacher."

Courtland, with an approving grin, looked at his watch. "You'll miss connections with this one," he warned, "if you don't hurry."

Billy released Sandra and turned excitedly to Dunton. "That's right. Won't take you but a few minutes, Reverend Goodwyn. Then you can catch your boat." He turned again buoyantly to the girl. "It's all right with you, Sandra?"

"Yes, Billy," she said.

Dunton looked at her searchingly. Was this a trap? Maybe she thought he could not get away with it. But he could. He was sure of it.

"Of course, my children," he agreed serenely. "Prepare yourselves. I shall repair to my study for a moment of devotion, then marry you as I return on my way to the ship."

Dunton managed to avoid all appearance of strain or hurry as he left the office. Once outside, he quickened his pace to the quarters which had been Weatherell's.

Entering, he saw traces of a recent invasion. The place had been searched. And the thing for which he himself had come was now gone. The little handbook was missing—the one which gave the ceremonial for weddings. Sandra!

She had taken it, of course. And lacking it, what could he do? Could he conduct a marriage ceremony? Before a group of semi-literate natives, yes. Before two intelligent white men, no! Duke Dunton hadn't the foggiest idea where to begin. Wasn't there a prescribed invocation? A charge to the couple, a charge to the man, a charge to the woman? Or was there? You asked questions—do you take this woman?—do you take this man? That was at the end. But what came at the beginning?

Dunton broke into a sweat of indecision. If he tried going through with it, he'd

blunder. He'd stumble. To say he'd mislaid a handbook would do no good. For any real preacher could be expected to do this job easily from memory and long practice. Damn Sandra! She'd figured it out with that facile finesse he himself had taught her.

He knew it with a sinking at the pit of his stomach when he saw a line in Sandra's writing on the table. It read: *Don't kid yourself, Duke. If you try to go through with it, you're sunk.*

Underneath she had printed with apt challenge an old couplet:

*The devil a priest would be,
But the devil a priest was he!*

As he tore the paper up savagely, Dunton cursed again. Could he risk it? He couldn't forget that he was wanted for a mail fraud out of Suva. As far as he knew he had murdered Josiah Goodwyn, made fraudulent use of his passport, and by signing a receipt had already technically accomplished the theft of ten thousand pounds. In the face of such guilt did he dare risk arousing suspicions, now?

Sandra had even timed the thing to leave him stranded with this dilemma, at a moment when both Howe and Courtland stood guard over the glass jar. He didn't dare go by there now. He must skulk to the ship, empty-handed. Sandra, without a word to him or about him, had checkmated him with a simple affirmative spoken to the man she loved.

THEY were waiting at the residency. Billy was too engrossed with Sandra to note the passing of time. But Courtland kept looking at his watch. When a warning whistle came from a steamer in the lagoon, the resident called in a native.

"Go to the missionary's quarters," he directed, "and see what's keeping him."

The Faluhaan went out and returned in ten minutes. He reported that the missionary wasn't at his quarters.

"That's odd!" puzzled Courtland. "Go look for him."

After a while the native returned again. "I not can find him, please. Maybe he have go to ship."

"Nonsense! He wouldn't go without that." Courtland gestured at the glass jar. He moved impatiently to a window. "Look!" he exclaimed, pointing. "He's missed his boat."

Sandra and Billy joined him there. They saw the steamer roving out to sea.

Also they saw a smaller craft which was coming in. As the latter came nearer, it appeared to be an outrigger canoe containing four natives and a beachcomber.

They were still waiting, all of them puzzled except Sandra, when a man in soiled whites and battered old helmet appeared at the office door. He was pale, unshaven, hollow-eyed.

"Is this the resident's office?"

Courtland surveyed him without warmth. This was some stranded ne'er-do-well, he supposed, looking for a free passage home.

"Yes, and who are you?"

"I am Josiah Goodwyn, a shipwrecked missionary."

Two men and a girl stared at him.

"But you can't be," protested Courtland.

"I am," Goodwyn insisted. He smiled with understanding as his eyes fell upon a jar filled with coins and pearls. "Did my predecessor fill his budget? He wrote me about it, when he asked me to succeed him here. He said it was almost—"

"Say," broke in Courtland harshly, "if you're Goodwyn, prove it."

Billy squeezed Sandra's arm and whispered hopefully: "Gee, Sandra, if he really is Goodwyn he's just the man we want—yes?"

Sandra wanted to run from the room. But she couldn't. Billy held her too tightly by the arm. Here was something she had not bargained for.

"Have you a passport?" Courtland demanded of the newcomer.

"I did have one," Goodwyn answered. Since they believed him an impostor, how could he convince them? He was pale,

shabby, bearded, utterly without credentials.

But was he? His gaze fixed upon a Book which lay on the table. "I still have a passport," he said then with confidence. "There it is. It is mine."

He indicated the Bible.

"No," objected Courtland, "it belongs to the missionary who has been among us these last months, and who was here only an hour ago."

"If it is not mine," Goodwyn argued, "how is it that I can name the very passage now marked by the ribbon marker?"

He knew the place from which he had last read. And he could fairly assume that the impostor had never opened the book at all, but had merely carried it as a theatrical prop.

Courtland regarded him shrewdly. "That should be a fair test," he conceded. He took the Bible and opened it at the ribbon marker. "Cite the passage," he invited.

"The last verse on the page is," Goodwyn quoted:

And they said every man to his fellow,
"Come, let us cast lots, that we may know
for whose cause this evil is upon us."
So they cast lots—

"That is right," Courtland broke in. "But if you are Goodwyn, who is the man who took your place?"

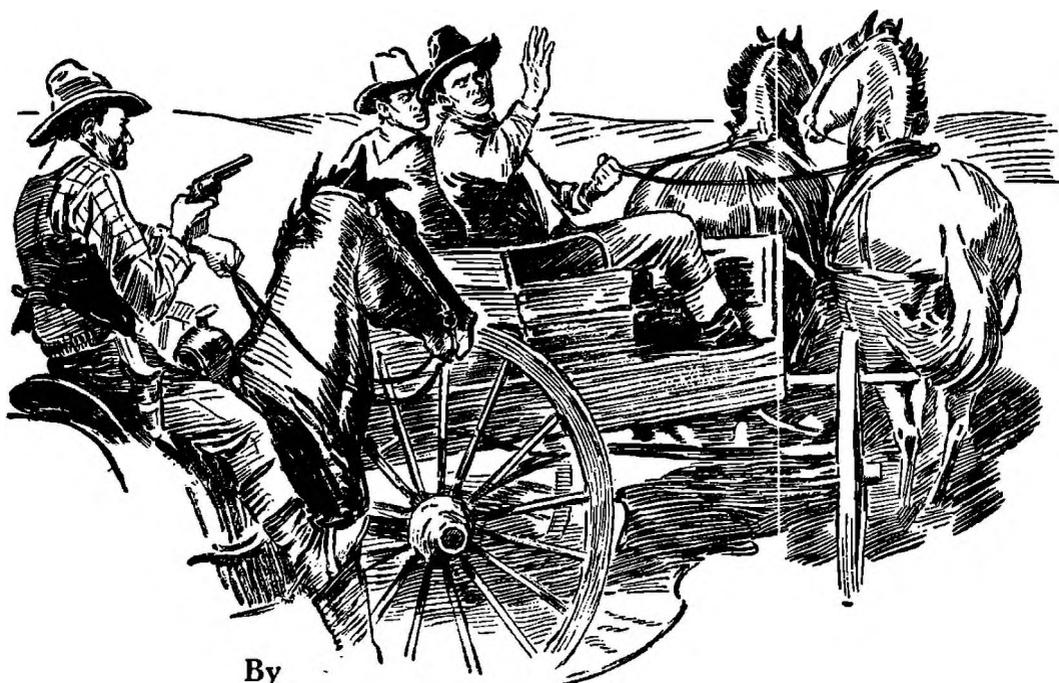
"By calling, he is a caster of lots," Goodwyn stated. With a sad smile he produced from his shabby whites a pair of green dice. "These were his tools—loaded dice. Precious stones of high value, he assured me, pure jade and of rare beauty."

He balanced the dice on his palm while the others stared.

"So I now cast them for the last time," Goodwyn said, "amidst silver and pearls, should there be any values lacking there, to fulfill a covenant and build a temple for the Lord."

With a sweep of his hand Goodwyn did so, casting the dice not upon the table but into the glass jar.

Trails West



By
BENNETT FOSTER

CHAPTER XXI

"DEAL ME A HAND."

WINK REVIER, Curly Feltman, and Colin McFee arrived in Tramparas half an hour after sun-up. The Tramparas House was not yet awake when the three went to Miles' room and knocked, and Miles, his face weary, admitted them. Trask had slept little during the night, lying far over against the wall so that Lester King might rest. Miles was patently glad to see his friends.

The first thing Wink did after he entered the room was to pull a gun from his waistband and offer it to Miles. "I reckon they kept yores," said Wink. "I had a spare an' brought it along. Put it in yore belt, son."

Miles nodded. "Thanks, Wink."

Curly and McFee had crossed the room to the bed to shake hands with King and

Wink followed them. "I'm changin' my opinion of easterrers day by day," announced Wink, extending his hairy hand.

"Colin told us about what happened up here," Wink continued. "Looks bad, Miles."

Miles nodded. "It does," he agreed. "You fellows must have got up before breakfast to get here this time of day."

"We were a mite early," Wink agreed. "Pulled out without eatin', too. We'll have breakfast together."

"I've got to go home," announced McFee, "an' tell the wife I'm back. Why don't you come down to my place an' eat?"

"Might do that," agreed Wink. "You go on, Colin. Don't keep Bridget waitin'."

"I'll be back shortly," said McFee. "See you Miles."

Miles thanked McFee for the trouble he had taken and McFee went on out. Wink squatted down against the wall, rolling a cigarette, and Curly lounged by the door.

**The first installment of this serial, herein concluded,
began in the Argosy for August 14**

"Leandro Chavez was killed, Miles," Wink said abruptly.

"Leandro?" Miles peered at Wink, amazement in his eyes.

"Him an' Bud Pond," Wink went on. "Curly seen part of it. Tell him, Curly."

MILES stared at the youngster by the door. He could feel the change that Curly Feltman had undergone. Feltman had been a kid, a good-natured, unheeding boy; but now a hard-eyed and very competent young man lounged beside the door, a gun butt jutting from a holster at his hip, his gaze steady and level.

"Pond killed Leandro," Curly said, an' Irish Keleher killed Pond." He went on, his words clipped, concise, and brief. When he finished, Miles Trask was silent for a moment.

"Old Leandro," said Miles at length. "He pretty near raised me. I'd like to thank Keleher."

"You'd have a long trip," grunted Wink. He's likely headed for Mexico. What you done about this razzle-dazzle up here?"

"Not much," answered Miles. "I was in Stern's warehouse the night Benbow was killed. I broke in to look over some hides he had. I found plenty."

"I figured some such foolishness as that," grunted Revier. "What did you find?"

Miles recounted the findings. "They're practically all reburned," he said in conclusion, "and they've a holding mark on the ribs. I'll bet that every brand below the rim has been reworked. These hides I found came from beeves that the butcher here has used."

"Just got hawgish an' took stolen stuff to sell here," commented Wink. "That puts a name to it, I guess."

Miles nodded. "Arburg," he said. "I wrote to Wentworth to find out who had pushed Arburg's appointment as an inspector. Haven't had an answer yet, but there's no doubt that Arburg's crooked."

"Uh-huh," Revier grunted. "Might be a good idea to find out who got him his deputy sheriff's appointment, too, but there ain't much doubt of that."

"What do you mean?"

"Ryland." Revier pulled out his pocket knife and opening it fell to digging a splinter from the palm of his left hand. "Ryland calls the dances as far as politics goes around here."

Miles, frowning, said nothing; and Lester King spoke up. "There might be a connection with the Hemings," he suggested, eyeing Miles. "They seem to want Miles out of the way badly enough."

"How?" grunted Wink, surprised.

"From what happened last night. They called on Miles." Miles averted his head and King went on, telling Wink of the attempt that had been made against Miles.

When King finished, Wink was silent for a long moment. Then he grunted his distaste. "They're breakin' up," he said. "Benbow an' Heming must've been shipping the stuff. That's where they'd come in."

Miles still made no comment. King was watching him, trying to fathom his quiet, expressionless face.

Wink folded his knife, thrust it in his pocket, and stood up. "Curly," he said, "why don't you go on down to Colin's an' eat with them? Tell Bridget that we won't be there. I reckon us three'll eat here."

Curly nodded. "I'll be back," he replied briefly, and opening the door stepped out into the hall. Wink looked at King. He wanted to talk with King without Miles being present. Lester King, evidently with the same idea in mind, nodded to Wink and spoke to Miles.

"I'm going to dress," he said. "I'll have to go to my room."

"I'll take a look out in the lobby," announced Wink. "You get dressed, Miles. We'll meet you there."

King thrust his legs into trousers, pulled on his coat and donned his shoes. Miles, getting up from the edge of the bed where he sat, crossed to the wash stand and poured water from the pitcher.

"I'll meet you in the lobby," said King, going to the door. Wink moved to accompany the lawyer but Miles called him back. King went on into the hall.

"I don't want him messed up in anything, Wink," said Miles, nodding toward the door. "Keep him out of it."

"Oh, sure," promised Wink. "What you plannin', Miles?"

"A break," answered Miles. "There's a hole in this some place. The whole thing hooks up with the cow stealing."

"Yeah," Wink was noncommittal. "Where you goin' to start?"

"I don't know yet," returned Miles, "but I'll start."

"I figured you would," Wink grunted. "Just deal me a hand when you do. That's all I ask."

MILES nodded, and, bending down lifted water in his hands and began to wash. Wink Revier walking out into the hall found Lester King waiting for him. "Come up to my room a minute," King said, and Wink, boot-heels thumping on the floor, followed him up the stairs. In King's room, Wink sat on the edge of the smoothly-spread bed and hoisted a boot until the spur caught in the counterpane. Then with his hands locked around his knee he surveyed King.

"Well," said Wink, "spill it."

King was removing the clothing he had donned in Miles' room. He poured water into the basin, washed his face and hands and dried them before he spoke. When he did, it was to ask a question. "What about Miles?" he asked.

"You ever see a gun that was loaded an' cocked?" Wink peered at King. "That's Miles," continued Wink. "He ain't made up his mind yet but when he does he'll sure fire fast."

"I'm afraid so." King selected a clean shirt from a bureau drawer.

"I know so," Wink grunted. "I know that kid. I've see him. When he makes up his mind somethin' is sure goin' to happen."

"The thing we want to be sure of is that it doesn't happen to Miles." King buttoned his shirt as he spoke.

"You got an awful lot of interest in Miles," suggested Wink.

"I have." King was frank. "In the first

place he saved my life. In the next place I've offered to do what I can to get the YT back for him, and go in as a partner. And in the third place—" King broke off, struggling with his collar button.

"Yeah?"

"My sister is in love with him," completed Lester King.

"The hell you say!"

King turned and faced him. "I do say!" he snapped. "So what about Miles Trask, Revier?"

"He's a man," answered Wink slowly. "If I had a girl, I wouldn't ask better for her."

There was a silence following that and then King nodded. "Thanks," he said briefly.

Again there was silence. King bent and picked up a pair of shoes and carrying them to a chair sat down to put them on.

"An' that bein' the case," drawled Wink Revier, "you won't want nothin' to happen to Miles. Is that it?"

"That's it."

Wink rubbed the side of his nose. "We might take care of it between us," he suggested. "I ain't goin' to be exactly against findin' the man that planted this thing on Miles."

"Do you think that Heming—?"

"Might be," Wink shrugged, "but not likely. Heming's not overly gifted with brains. More likely Heming's daddy-in-law, or else Whitey Arburg. Arburg's plenty wise, an' some salty."

"Well?" asked King.

"This Sam Warfler," Wink rolled his eyes at King, "he's kind of a weak sister, an' he done some talkin', too."

"I've thought of Warfler," agreed King.

"Suppose," Wink drawled, "just suppose you an' me was to take him out an' reason with him some."

"You mean question him?"

"Under right favorable circumstances," Wink agreed.

"We might discover something," King said thoughtfully.

"Worth a try," returned Wink. "Could you get him out for me?"

"I might. He has been trying to sell me a buggy and team."

"That's it!" Wink unlocked his hands. "Get him to show 'em to you. Have him take you out of town, an' I'll meet you."

"I could get Grace to stay with Miles," said King thoughtfully. "She would keep him here."

"It's a short-stake rope, but it's sure the best we got," commented Wink. "He'll stay with her unless he's made up his mind to somethin', or somethin' breaks."

"I'll speak to her." By now King had finished dressing. He went to the door and, asking Wink to wait, disappeared into the hall. When he returned he nodded.

"She'll be here before we finish breakfast," he announced. "Let's go down now and join Miles."

Wink got up from the bed and together they left the room.

MILES joined Wink and King in the lobby and the three went to the dining room together. It was seven o'clock by then and there were patrons in the dining room. They looked curiously at the three men entering, but turned their eyes quickly away under Wink's fierce glare and the cool stare of Lester King. As for Trask, he looked neither to his right nor left, but stared straight ahead, his face as expressionless as a wooden Indian's.

Wink and King ate heartily, Miles with but small appetite. Finishing their silent meal, the three companions rose from the table and went out into the lobby.

"I'm goin' to 'tend to my horse," Wink said, glancing out to the hitch-rail where his horse stood.

"I have a little business," announced King. "I'll—"

"I'll go with you, Wink," said Miles.

"You got that iron I brought you?" Wink asked casually.

Miles nodded. The gun was in the waistband of his Levis. King had moved away and was now at the desk talking to Sam Warfler.

"Are you going to attend to your horse?" Miles asked.

"I reckon," Wink sighed. "Seems like I'm always lookin' after horses or somethin'."

Grace King came down the stairs. She was fresh and smiling, her eyes sparkling. "Good morning."

Miles and Wink returned her greeting as Lester King came back from the desk. "I've been talking with Warfler," he announced. "He is going to show me the buggy and team I spoke of buying."

Grace turned to her brother. "But I thought you weren't going to buy them," she objected. "You said that you weren't interested."

"I've changed my mind." Lester King standing behind Miles, shook his head at his sister. "We're going out as soon as Mr. Warfler can get ready."

"Be sure you take 'em out of town an' see how they road," cautioned Wink, looking King in the eyes.

"I plan to," returned King. "What are you doing this morning, Miles?"

Miles looked at Wink and at King, his eyes showing bewilderment. He had thought that they would consult together and that from that consultation a plan of action would arise, but now it seemed his friends were deserting him. They were going on about their every-day affairs as though nothing had happened, as though there were no murder charge hanging over him.

Grace King answered the question for Miles.

"Miles," she said, "is going to stay with me. He'll come with me while I breakfast and after that we may take a walk." As she spoke she laid her hand on Miles' arm. The touch thrilled him and for a moment he forgot his hurt.

"I'll kind of scout around a little," announced Wink Revier. "I'll be back pretty soon, Miles."

Warfler came from his room behind the desk and announced he was ready to go. Lester King, saying that he would return shortly, joined Warfler, and Wink, with a careless nod to Miles and Grace King, turned and followed Warfler and King out of the door. Grace King, her touch light

on Miles' arm, led him toward the dining room.

Sitting at the table, drinking a cup of coffee because she insisted, Miles looked now and again at the street outside the window. Restless, wanting action but not knowing where to act or how to begin, he was like a young horse that first feels the saddle.

GRACE KING sensed his restlessness. "There is nothing that you can do, Miles," she said, speaking suddenly. "Not at the moment."

Miles shrugged. "I ought to be out of here," he answered. "I ought to ride down below the hill. There are things there that—"

"You must not leave town." Grace King was decisive. "Not yet."

"Your brother is out with Warfler," said Miles. "I wanted to talk to Warfler. I wanted to—"

"Do you think that you could learn as much from him as Lester could?" asked Grace. "Lester will be friendly. He'll have Mr. Warfler talking to him before they get back."

Miles brightened. "That may be the way to do it," he admitted.

The girl laughed. "You're like a caged animal," she said, rising from the table. "Wait until I get my hat and a coat and we'll walk. You must be patient, Miles."

That was easy to say and hard to do, Miles thought, standing in the lobby waiting for her return. "Be patient." He had been patient. He had moved slowly, too slowly, perhaps. Here his hands were numerous facts; here were things that he knew, and yet could not act upon. He had wanted to be sure of the identity of the men who were stealing cattle, to know who had shipped the stolen beef. He had wanted to close the Cow Thief Trail legally and for always, and he stood here in the lobby of the Tramparas House, a murder charge against him, and waited for a girl! His very helplessness bore him down. When Grace came downstairs, Miles was looking out through the door, his eyes far away.

With her hand tucked under his arm, the two left the Tramparas House. Miles did not care where he went and Grace directed their progress. She set a course away from the main street and shortly they were at the edge of town, making toward a little ravine where cedars showed their dark heads. When they reached the edge of the ravine the girl stopped. She threw her arms wide and drank in great draughts of the clear air.

"It's glorious to be alive on a day like this," said Grace King. Miles said nothing and the girl turned toward him. "You must not," she said softly. "You mustn't brood, Miles."

The bitterness, the long-repressed thoughts that were in Miles Trask, broke their bounds. "Why shouldn't I?" he demanded fiercely. "What have I to be glad about? I haven't done what I came to do. There's a murder charge against me! I'm just as likely to end up on the gallows as not—" His hands clenched into fists.

"You have friends," interrupted Grace King. "You haven't failed. Not yet. And the charge against you is nothing."

"Murder—and you call it nothing!" Miles faced the girl.

"You didn't kill Benbow Trask," Grace spoke calmly. "So of course it's nothing!"

Miles laughed. A short, bitter sound. "I ought not to have walked out here with you," he said, his voice as bitter as his laugh. "I'll put you in bad with everyone that sees us. They'll say—"

"And how much do you think I care what they say?" Grace's voice was scornful. "Let them say what they please!"

"You don't mean that." Miles was gloomy. "You're being kind to me. Because I helped your brother one time, you—"

"Of course I'm glad and grateful for that," interrupted the girl, "but that isn't all I'm grateful for."

"You're being kind," Miles said again.

"I'm not being kind!" Grace King stamped a slender foot. "I'll spend every cent I have clearing you of this foolish charge. So will Lester. But it doesn't make any difference to me whether you are

cleared or not. You—' She stopped suddenly. She had said too much.

Miles, who had been looking down the cedar-dotted length of the little ravine, whirled to face the girl. His hands shot out and caught her arms, the grip fierce and cruel with suppressed emotion. "What do you mean? Why did you say that?"

Grace King faced him bravely, her blue eyes steady. "I mean that I love you," she said. Color flooded her face. Her eyes were lowered momentarily, then sought his face again.

Miles Trask's hands on her arms became suddenly gentle. His voice was husky as he spoke.

"I love you, too, Grace," he said gravely, "but I've no right to."

"Why not?" Again her clear blue eyes lifted to his.

"Because of what I am," said Miles, steadily. "I have the clothes I stand in. I have a horse. That's all. I'm supposed to be in here as an undercover man looking for cow-thieves. I've got a murder charge hanging over me. That's what I have and what I am."

"You have"—the girl's voice faltered—"happiness for me, Miles."

Miles Trask shook his head. "Best not," he said gently. "Best not, Grace. This thing will be cleared up sooner or later. I'll clear it, but when I'm through you might be sorry that you ever knew Miles Trask. Best to forget it."

"Can you forget it?" Grace King's voice was trembling. "Can you walk away—?" The import of his words struck her fully. "What do you mean to do?" she asked anxiously.

"To go through," Miles returned. "We have talked too much. I must take you back."

His hand, still on the girl's arm, turned her toward the little town. Slowly Grace obeyed the pressure. She walked beside Miles, her cheeks flushed and her eyes watching the ground. Miles stared straight ahead, holding himself. As they came to the edge of the town he spoke once more.

"All my life," said Miles Trask, "all

that's left of it, I'll think of you, and love you. No matter what happens."

Without answering the girl stepped up on the board sidewalk, Miles beside her.

"It's almost noon," he said. "I'll take you to the hotel."

Still she did not speak. Side by side they walked toward the center of the little town. At the Tramparas House they paused and Miles put his hand on the door, pushing it open. With his free hand he lifted his hat, his eyes grave as he looked at Grace King. "You—" he began.

From down the street, from the corner, came a voice calling his name. There was excitement in the voice—excitement and something else. Miles turned toward the sound. Awkward in his boots, Curly Feltman was running toward them and as he ran, he called.

CHAPTER XXII

INTERROGATION

IT WAS as much as Lester King could do to talk pleasantly to Sam Warfler as they walked to the livery barn. Warfler's fat equanimity, his self-satisfaction, were more than King could stomach, but effortfully he fought down his feelings. At the barn, while the hostler brought out Warfler's team of bays and harnessed them, King was forced to listen to a glorified account of the horses, and he felt relief when the team was finally hooked to the buggy.

Warfler drove as they left Tramparas, having first asked King where he wanted to go. King was not sure as to what direction to take but decided that it would make no particular difference for Wink, he was sure, was occupying some vantage point and watching them.

The two drove north from the town and when they had gone half a mile King turned the conversation from the proposed sale. "Too bad about Frask, isn't it?"

Warfler's glance was sharp. "Mebbe," he said. "Seemed to me that you stepped right up for him. You like him?"

"He saved my life, you know."

"I heard you tell it." Warfler nodded. "Yeah, I'd say that it was bad luck for Miles, but you got to expect bad luck when you kill a man."

"I don't think Miles killed his uncle," said King.

For that statement King was rewarded by another searching look. "I heard 'em fightin'," reminded Warfler. "It sounded to me like Miles was willin' to have it out with Benbow, and them rags was found in Miles' room."

"They could have been put there," King said reflectively.

Warfler shook his head. "Not a chance," he refuted. "I was right there in the lobby all the time. Say, whatever happened down in Trask's room last night? You was there, wasn't you? That was sure a racket down the hall an' Ellis Heming an' Phil come out an' Ellis was layin' down the law. What was it about?"

"There was a difference of opinion," replied King, "or there seemed to be one." He was watching a horseman bearing in from the right.

Warfler did not see the horseman. "Phil was drunk," he said sententiously. "He's been drinkin' more an' more this last year. Dang fool!"

AS THE horseman came closer King recognized Wink Revier. Warfler, looking to the right, noticed the rider for the first time. "Wonder what Wink wants?"

"Pull up and we'll find out," King directed.

Warfler stopped the team. Behind them, Tramparas was out of sight over a rise, and ahead the top of an old shack just peeped over the hill. Revier, riding in, halted beside the buggy and grinned at King.

"What do you want, Revier?" Warfler asked.

"A little conversation," announced Wink, "an' some of yore company." As he spoke, his hand dipped to his hip and came back holding a gun.

"Turn the lines over to King," Wink

commanded, "an' get yore hands up around yore neck."

Lester King was genuinely startled and Sam Warfler's protruberant eyes became more prominent. "What—?" began Warfler.

"You heard me!" snapped Revier.

Reaching out, King took the lines from Warfler's lax hands while Warfler slowly lifted his arms. "Drive right on to the old shack," Wink ordered. "I'll be with you."

The team, with King driving, took up a trot and Wink followed behind the buggy. "He ain't goin' to shoot," Sam Warfler spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Take a chance!"

King, pretending fright, shook his head.

When they reached the littered ruins of the shack, with remnants of a corral behind it, King stopped the team. Wink dismounted and, waking up, signified that Warfler should get down. This Sam did with bad grace, expostulating and making dire threats as to what would happen when this was reported to Arburg. Wink paid no attention to him and, under Revier's directions, King tied the team to a post.

"What you tryin' to do?" Warfler blustered. "You said you wanted to talk to me. You don't have to throw a gun on me for that."

"To do this kind of talkin' I do," Revier answered. "Who got you to put them gun-rags in Miles' room?"

The question came as a thunderbolt. Warfler shied like a horse frightened by a train, and his face turned a pasty white.

"I never put 'em there," he exclaimed.

"You've lied enough already!" snapped Wink. "Who was it?"

Again Warfler denied all knowledge of the thing Wink asked. He demanded Wink's right to question him and, being answered by a gesture of Wink's Colt, began to threaten. "Wait 'til I tell Whitey about this," blustered Warfler. "When—"

"Are you sure," interrupted Wink, ominously, "that you'll ever tell Whitey? Think I'll go this far an' not go the rest of the way?"

Wink's ferocity disturbed King but he held his peace, determined to let Revier play the string out.

"Who got you to do it?" Wink snapped again.

"I never did!" Warfler answered.

"Just plain stubborn," commented Revier. "You might as well speak out, Sam, I'm goin' to know."

"I tell you I had nothin' to do with it," growled Warfler. "Dang it! How often have I got to tell you that?"

"Well," Wink drawled, "I got a month or two but I don't reckon it's goin' to take that long. You goin' to come across, Sam?"

"You let me go an' I'll forget about this," Warfler generously offered. "I'll go back to town an' forget it. I'll give you time to pull out before I say a word. We'll do that, won't we, King?"

King was silent and Revier reached into the side pocket of his coat and pulled out a short length of quarter-inch rope. "Nice of you, Sam," he scoffed. "King, take this an' tie Sam's hands."

King took an uncertain step and Warfler snapped at him: "You goin' to help?"

"Hold yore hands behind yuh!" Wink ordered.

WARFLER, taking a chance, dived forward sudderly, thinking that Wink would not fire because King was close. Wink, anticipating some such move, stepped back and thrust out a booted foot. Tripping over the foot Warfler went down and Wink landed on him, a good deal like a flanker hits a calf that has been tailed down.

For a moment there was a wild struggle, for Warfler was strong and he fought with the frenzy of a frightened man. Lester King did not come to Wink's aid. He saw Revier's gun tossed aside and he saw Wink, with the practiced strength of the flanker, handle Warfler, gradually working him into position. A half-nelson and an arm-lock did the business, and Warfler lay quiet, his face in the dirt and Wink's strong arm across his neck.

"Now," Wink Revier grunted.

Still maintaining his half-nelson Wink worked cautiously with his rope, got one of Warfler's hands noosed and pulled it up, forced the other hand to join it and took a quick hitch. He could release his hold then, and did so, completing the tie with both hands. Then he climbed to his feet, retrieved his gun and walked back to Warfler.

"All right, Sam," Wink Revier said.

All through the struggle King had stood aside. The rapidity, the fierceness of the attack had momentarily paralyzed him.

"Yo're hawgtied, Sam," said Wink Revier, panting a little from the exertion. "You goin' to speak up?"

Warfler's voice was muffled by the dirt but plainly the answer was negative. Bending down Wink caught one of the fat man's arms and pulled him around so that he was partially erect.

Warfler spat dirt from his mouth and cursed. "Revier, you'll pay for this! I'll kill you, you—"

"Shut up!" Wink snapped. "Who got you to put them rags in Miles' room?"

Revier took a step in, his face menacing, and Warfler stopped his tirade. "Yeah," said Wink, almost to himself. "Yeah, Sam. I reckon yo're stubborn."

He stood a moment, stock-still and glaring at the man on the ground. King, watching them, had no idea of what was in Wink's mind. As though he had suddenly reached a decision Revier turned and went to his horse. Returning from the animal Wink carried his saddle-rope in his hands. He shook out a little loop of the rope, adroitly snared Warfler's feet, and, pulling the rope tight, made it fast with two swift turns and a half hitch. Warfler had fought against the rope but to no purpose; Wink was not to be denied. Now, with both hands and feet bound, Warfler sullenly ceased his struggling and Wink Revier pushed back his hat, scratched his graying hair, and looked at King.

"Remember tellin' us about them Moros?" drawled Revier. King nodded for suddenly he had an idea as to what was coming. At that moment he would have

given a great deal to recall his tale of Moro torture. What unknown ferocity had that story suggested to this fierce old man?

"You aren't going to torture him," King blurted. "Revier, I won't stand for that. I can't—"

Revier's eyes were stony, cold and hard, as they met King's. "You'd be surprised what you can stand," drawled Revier. "I'm the man with the gun, King, an' I'll go through with this."

"What are you going to do?" demanded King.

REVIER put his gun back in its scabbard. Again reaching into his coat pocket he brought out another short length of the quarter-inch hemp. "You ever shoe a horse?" he asked conversationally.

King made no answer and Wink went on as though he had expected none. "Take a bad horse," continued Wink Revier, "an' you got to shoe him. He's got his mind on kickin' an' raisin' hell an' you got to give him somethin' else to think about. Na'chully you put a twitch on his lip an' it takes his mind off his troubles. All he can think of is that twitch. We'll put a twitch on Sam here an' see if he can't get his mind on who give him them rags."

As he talked Wink moved. His hand, big and hairy and deft, fashioned a knot in the rope he held and his eyes, searching the immediate vicinity, spied a short length of wood. With a swift step he reached it and bending, picked it up. Again his hands were busy with the rope and when he finished he held up an unfamiliar object before King. In Wink's big hands was the board, and fastened to its end was a loop of rope.

"You see?" said Wink.

King did not see, but Wink's next movements told him a great deal. Walking casually over to Sam Warfler, Wink dropped the loop over Warfler's head where a bald spot shown through thinning hair and with the loop at Warfler's temples, turned the board. The loop tightened. "Purty good twitch," remarked Wink Revier.

The loop was not as yet tight, simply firm against Warfler's head. Warfler was babbling curses through lips that were pale.

King took a step forward. "You can't do that, Revier," he said firmly. "You can't! . . ."

Revier's gun appeared in his hand, its muzzle pointing to King's middle. "Stand still, King!" ordered Revier harshly.

Lester King stood still. Wink's eyes were hard as agate and his lips were a thin, tight line under his mustache. "Now, Sam," commanded Revier, and the board turned a little in his brown left hand.

"Curse you!" shrilled Warfler, "I'll kill you!"

"The rags, Sam. Remember who told you to put 'em in Miles' room?"

Again the board turned a trifle. The quarter-inch rope was tight around Warfler's head. King's face was white.

"You . . .," began Warfler. "Owww! It was Ryland!"

"So!" Revier grunted the word. The cord loosened. "Go ahead, Sam."

His courage broken, Sam Warfler spilled words from his mouth. The rope around his head, the rasping reminder of its hurt, was with him, but more than the rope the fright on King's face and the grim passivity of Wink Revier urged him on. Sam Warfler talked, almost babbling at times, incoherent at others, but logically enough, sanely enough so that the two men who stood there beside the ruined shack, could piece out the sorry story. When he had finished, Wink Revier looked at Lester King. "Well," said Wink.

"You were right, Revier," Lester King answered, slowly. "You were right to go ahead with what you did."

"I figgered so," grunted Wink. "Now we'll load this jasper in the back of the buggy an' go to town. There's folks there that are goin' to be pleased about what we learned."

SAM WARFLER, now that it was over, offered no resistance. Without a struggle he allowed the two to lift him up and

place him, still bound, in the back of the buggy. Wink Revier led his horse over and tied his bridle reins to the hames of the off horse of the team. King untied the team and handed up the lines to Revier who climbed to the seat. King took his place beside the old man and Wink clucked to the horses. The buggy rolled toward town.

"How far would you have gone, Revier?" King asked, curiously.

"Listen," answered Wink, "I just don't know. I reckon I'd 've gone some further though."

"But if Warfler hadn't broken?" King was still curious.

"Plague it," said Wink, "don't ask questions that I can't answer. How do I know? He busted right in two an' that's good enough, ain't it?"

King was silent. There was no refuting that, and after a moment Wink spoke again. "We'll be late to dinner," said Revier, "but I ain't sure but what it's worth it."

The buggy rolled steadily toward Tramparas and as the wheels turned, the horses trotting briskly, the noon train whistled, far down the track; a compact group of men rode up Gonzalitas hill, heading for Tramparas; and on the main street of Tramparas, Curly Feltman called: "Miles! Miles!"

Curly Feltman had been a little hurt when Revier dismissed him that Saturday morning. Curly felt, and rightly, that he should have been included in any consultations and in any contemplated action. It was with ill grace that he left the Tramparas House and went to Colin McFee's cottage.

He found Colin building a fire, for Bridget and Jackie Belland were not as yet up and dressed. Curly carried in an arm load of wood and helped the stocky blacksmith put things to rights in the kitchen. Then Bridget entered and with her Jackie, and Curly forthwith forgot that he had been mistreated.

Bridget cooked breakfast while Jackie set the table and Colin changed clothes.

The four ate together, Colin recounting his trip to the Coffin camp and Bridget making much of Curly. Curly enjoyed the fuss made over him and he enjoyed the way Jackie looked at him, her big eyes wide.

When breakfast was finished, Colin went to his shop where work awaited him. Curly went back to the hotel. There he found that King and Wink had departed, and that Miles and Grace had also gone out. With nothing to do Curly put his horse in the livery barn and walked back to McFee's.

He had been there but a short time when Bridget was called away. A neighbor's baby had mislaid a safety pin and Bridget went to aid in the search for that important article, for the neighbor feared that the baby had swallowed it.

Alone with Jackie, Curly became bashful. Whenever the girl spoke to him, he stammered his answer, and when she looked at him, he blushed.

"You aren't goin' away?" Curly asked when other subjects of conversation had been exhausted. "You talk like you thought you'd stay here."

"I am going to stay here," answered Jackie. "Bridget and Colin are going to adopt me."

"What does Miles say about it?" Curly asked hopefully.

"He said that I could stay," the girl smiled. "Thursday night he told me."

"Thursday?"

Jackie nodded mysteriously. As with most youngsters, a secret was no fun unless it was shared, and Jackie dared not tell Bridget or Colin of her escapade. "I was running away," she explained, lowering her voice. "Miles found me."

"Runnin' away?"

"Yes. I heard Miles and Bridget talking, and he said that he was going to send me to the convent. I wasn't going to go, so when Bridget and Colin went to sleep I got out of my window."

"Where were you goin'?"

The girl shrugged. "I don't know," she replied. "Just away. It was raining hard and I went down to the depot."

"Goin' to take the train, huh?" suggested Curly.

"I thought about it. But I got scared."

"Somebody see you?"

"No. But just as I got down by the big store—"

"Stern's?"

"I guess so. Anyhow when I got there a man came along through the alley. He was driving a buckboard and I thought he saw me."

"An' then what?"

"I hid. There is a little building close to the store—"

"Ryland's office, that is."

"I don't know the names of the buildings. If it's Ryland's office, then it was Ryland driving the team. He stopped and tied the team and went in."

"What did you do then? Run?"

"No. I stayed there a while wondering what to do. It was raining and dark but the street lights showed a little. Ryland, or whoever it was, came out of the building carrying a man."

"A man?" Curly was startled.

"It looked like a man. He was carrying this thing and I thought I could see arms and legs. Anyhow he put it in the buggy and started off and I got scared and ran."

"And then what happened?"

"I ran right into Miles. He caught me and made me tell him where I was going and when I said that I was running away he brought me back here and put me in through the window again. He said that he wasn't going to send me to Las Cruces. Are you glad, Curly?"

"Ryland totin' a man out of his office . . ." In his absorption in this new train of thought Curly did not hear Jackie's question. "That was Thursday night, the night it rained?"

"It was Thursday night."

Curly's face wrinkled into a scowl as he concentrated. "Thursday," he repeated. "Ryland carried a man out of his office an' put him in a buckboard. Benbow Trask . . . Oh, my gosh!"

"What's the matter?" Jackie was concerned.

"I got to see Miles!" snapped Curly. "You stay right here 'til I get back! I got to see Miles!"

WITHOUT more ado Curly snatched up his hat and leaving the wondering Jackie, ran out of the kitchen door and headed toward the center of town.

On the corner below the Tramparas House Curly Feltman spied the object of his search. He called loudly and Miles stopped at the entrance to the hotel and waited as the boy came panting up.

"What is it?" asked Miles Trask.

"Ryland," panted Curly. "Jackie Bel-land seen him carryin' a man out of his office Thursday night. The night you caught her an' kept her from runnin' away. Ryland put him in a buckboard an' drove away. I thought— Gosh, you don't suppose it could 've been Benbow, do you, Miles?"

"Jackie saw that?" asked Miles slowly.

In the doorway of the hotel Grace King leaned forward, listening.

"She just told me," assented Curly.

"Was it Benbow, Miles? Did Ryland—?"

"I'll just go ask him," said Miles, his voice deceptively soft. "You wait here, Curly."

Turning, Miles started up the street. Grace King put her hand on Curly's shoulder and pushed. "Go with him," she commanded, and as Curly started to obey, the girl gathered her skirts in her hand and as fast as she could, followed the youngster. Miles Trask, not looking back, strode along. Behind him followed Curly, keeping his distance, and behind Curly came Grace King. Far down the track the noon train whistled a long station call for Tramparas.

CHAPTER XXIII

THREADS OF EVIDENCE

AS A RYLAND reached his office early Saturday morning. He sat down and sorted through the papers on his desk, opening the mail he had brought from the post office with his sharp little stiletto paper-knife. There was nothing of im-

portance in the mail and there was little on his desk to require attention. Ryland had plenty of time to think.

He spent that time turning over events in his mind, sorting them out and trying to arrive at a plan of action. He had asked Arburg to ride out to the YT and bring in Benbow's personal papers, and now with impatience he awaited the tall deputy's arrival. Sam Warfler bothered Ryland. Warfler had been nasty the night before. He had shown unexpected signs of possessing brains and becoming nastier. Ryland did not like that. Sam Warfler, he believed, should be eliminated from the picture and he set about conceiving a plan to that end. Warfler was the weak link in Ryland's chain and Ryland wanted desperately to strengthen that link.

Ryland's thoughts were interrupted by Whitey Arburg's arrival from the YT. Riding up in front of Ryland's office and tying his horse to the hitch rail, Arburg carried a little cloth sack into the room and placed it on the lawyer's desk.

"There's Benbow's stuff," Arburg announced.

Ryland opened the sack and sorted through the contents. There was nothing of any particular importance in the jumble of papers, and Ryland laid them aside. He did not know for sure but he suspected that Arburg had not brought all of Benbow's papers to him.

"How were things at the ranch?" Ryland asked.

"All right," groused Arburg. "I went out early this mornin'."

The lawyer nodded. "It's sad about Benbow," he said. "You're going to miss him, Whitey."

"Why me?" Arburg was blunt.

Ryland allowed himself a small smile. "Because you will have only one man to ship for you now," he answered.

Arburg's light blue eyes met Ryland's and held them in a long, narrow stare. "That's right," said the deputy at length. "Of course you knew about it. Heming told you."

"Where did you think the bills of sale for

the cattle were coming from?" scoffed Ryland.

"Well," Arburg drawled, "I knew you made 'em, of course."

Ryland slid open the drawer of his desk. From it he brought a folded paper, slid it across to the blond man and then put his hand back in the drawer. The drawer contained a gun. "Look that over," Ryland directed.

Arburg opened the circular, studied it carefully, his face expressionless, and then put it back on the desk. "Well?" he drawled.

"Interesting, isn't it?" suggested Ryland. "Of course if I were asked I could positively state that the description there does not apply to you. I have known you a long time, remember? And it was I who recommended you for the deputy's appointment."

Arburg nodded decisively. "You played fair," he stated. "What do you want?"

"The YT." Ryland leaned forward.

"There's young Trask." Arburg spoke speculatively.

"Curse him!" Ryland broke his calm. "I thought that I had him but this King gave his bail and now he's free. You know that he is a brand-inspector?"

"Oh sure," Arburg replied.

"Are you going to let him interfere in your business?"

"I hadn't figured to. What's on your mind, Judge, about Trask?"

RYLAND was interrupted. The office door opened and Ellis Heming entered the room. She walked directly to her father's desk and, looking at Arburg, spoke sharply. "I want to see you alone, Dad."

"Mr. Arburg and I are talking," answered Ryland, his voice showing his irritation at the interruption. "Can't you wait?"

"No. Phil is at home drunk and I had to come to you. It's about Miles Trask."

Ryland leaned back and looked at Arburg. Arburg's face was impassive. "Mr. Arburg and I were just talking about Trask," said Ryland slowly. "What is bothering you, Ellis?"

"He's a brand-inspector," the girl answered. "Last night Haroldson and Bride came in from the ranch. Emelio Sisneros was with them. They told Phil that Bud Pond had been killed and that Irish Keleher was gone. Bud was killed at Leandro Chavez' place and evidently he had killed Leandro."

Ryland's eyes widened. "I didn't know."

"I knew," grunted Arburg. "Go on, Mrs. Heming."

The girl recognized force when she saw it. She ceased addressing her father and spoke to Arburg. "Miles Trask," she said wrathfully, "is going to stop the thing that you've been doing. He's going to find out about it and—"

"I reckon he's found out already," drawled Arburg.

"Then what are you going to do?" snapped Ellis. "Are you going to sit here and let him take all you've got?"

"Yore dad an' me was just talkin' about that when you come in." Arburg's voice was silky smooth. "Seems like we'll have to oblige a lady. Did you want Trask put out of the way?" His eyes searched Ellis Heming's face.

There was a long pause and then, with a motion so slight as to be almost imperceptible, Ellis nodded.

Arburg looked at Ryland, a glint of amusement in his eyes. "She don't beat around the bush much," he said. "Comes right out with it. I reckon that would suit you too, Judge?"

Ryland echoed his daughter's nod.

"An' me!" agreed Arburg. "Now how—?"

Again the door of Ryland's office opened. A man stood there, straight and steady. Miles Trask.

RYLAND'S hand dropped into the open drawer of his desk. Ellis Heming caught her breath sharply. Whitey Arburg was motionless.

Miles took a step and was in the office. Behind Miles, a moment later, another man appeared in the doorway. Curly Feltman moved to enter the room.

"I want to see you, Ryland," Miles said levelly.

"What about, Miles?" Ryland's voice was high, freighted with tension.

"About the man you loaded into a buckboard Thursday night," said Miles. "Was it Benbow, Ryland?"

For an instant no one in that little room moved. A breathless second, and then Asa Ryland jerked the gun from the drawer of the desk. As it cleared the desk top, Ryland fired. Curly Feltman, at the door, staggered and then, his leg buckling beneath him, went to the floor.

With Ryland's movement Whitey Arburg's hand leaped to his gun. It was time to go and Arburg knew it. Fast as he was, he was in poor position. His gun came out and he fired a shot. He had no time, for Miles Trask, with the appearance of Ryland's gun, had leaped to the wall and brought his own gun from the waistband of his trousers. Ryland's shot struck Curly above the knee, felling the youngster, but the slug from Arburg's gun whistled past Miles' head. Curly on the floor, fired three times, his lead going wild, but Miles Trask did not miss his shots. Miles Trask planted a bullet at the base of Arburg's throat, a bullet that tore through flesh and back bone and spinal cord. Miles Trask caught Ryland coming up from behind his desk and shot him twice, low in the abdomen, and once through the heart.

ELLIS HEMING, crouching beside the desk, snatched up the sharp stiletto that was her father's paper-knife, and as Miles, eyes wide, moved forward toward the two men that were on the floor, she also moved. With the knife raised she slipped behind Miles, ready to do the thing in which those other had failed.

The knife poised above Miles as he bent down. Curly Feltman could not walk but he could roll. One hand shot out and caught a high heeled shoe and Curly jerked with all his strength. With the knife flying, and a scream on her lips, Ellis Heming came down.

Instantly, it seemed, the office was filled.

There were Grace King and Lester King and Wink Revier, and there was old Cap Hall in town for Saturday and thumping his wooden leg; and there were Colin McFee and others. Pushing through the crowd from the door came a tall gray mustachioed man, and a short compact fellow who moved swiftly and with authority.

Wink Revier, seeing the tall man, caught his arm.

"By Harry, I'm glad yo're here, Jeff," hailed Wink Revier.

JEFF LYCOMB, the sheriff, cleared the room. A passenger on the noon train, he had heard the shots as he came up from the depot, and accompanied by Norris, the district attorney, had run toward the source of the sound. Lycomb took charge. To him Miles surrendered his gun, and to him and to Norris Miles told his story, omitting nothing, giving all the details.

There were others to corroborate that story. Sam Warfier, brought in from the back of his buggy, was scared and white and glad to talk. Jackie Belland, hastily summoned from McFee's cottage, told her tale; and Curly Feltman, with his trousers' leg slit open and a bandage wrapped about his wound, made a contribution before he was taken to McFee's for Bridget to nurse. Circumstances and detail: Norris and Lycomb got them a l.

But from Ellis Heming they got nothing. Ellis Heming sat in a chair, restrained there by Wink Revier, and all that came from the woman was an hysterical: "Damn you! I meant to kill you! Damn you, Miles Trask!" There was something compellingly unpleasant, revolting about seeing her that way, and the men that Lycomb had summoned hastened to take her from the office and to her home.

But before the investigation had more than begun, and shortly after the bodies of Ryland and Arburg were removed, there was an interruption. There came a knock on the door of Ryland's office, an insistent summons, and when Lycomb answered it, a voice demanded Miles Trask.

CHAPTER XXIV

COW THIEF TRAIL

WHEN Miles went to the door Tyban Valverde stood there, and behind Tyban were the ranchers of the Gonzalitas, all of them. In the midst of that compact, armed group were four who carried no weapon. Emelio Sisneros and Primo and Segundo and Julio sat their horses, their hands bound to their saddle horns, ropes crossing under the bellies of their horses, tying the prisoner's feet.

"Thees man, Miles," gravely announced Tyban, proud of his English, "ees the man who steal the cows. We have bring thees man to you for arrest."

Perforce Tyban was brought into the office where he added his bit, talking fluently in Spanish and speaking to point and at length. As the result of his speech, Colin McFee, hastily deputized, with two other townsmen, relieved the Gonzalitas ranchmen of their prisoners. The seed that Miles Trask had sown with Esteban Romero had borne fruit.

Norris questioned witness after witness. With painstaking care the district attorney followed the tangled threads of Benbow Trask's death, of the death of Leandro Chavez, and of Bud Pond, and so to the final tragedy—the deaths of Whitey Arburg and Asa Ryland. The afternoon drew to a close and near its end Norris was satisfied.

"You can prefer charges against the Heming woman," Norris told Miles after he had shaken his hand. "I'll issue a warrant."

Miles shook his head. "No," he said, "I won't do that." His eyes caught and held those of Grace King.

"Then," said Norris, "let me congratulate you, Trask. You have cleared up the thing you came to do and besides that you have been very lucky." The attorney's eyes sought the spot where the bodies of Asa Ryland and Whitey Arburg had fallen.

"You mean," said Miles slowly, "that you're through with me? That you don't want to hold me?"

Norris shook his head. "I'll want your testimony at the formal inquest," he answered. "You must not leave town, but so far as there being any question of our holding you is concerned, there is none. After all you are an officer and certainly there can be no question as to a man's right to defend his life. Now about these men that were brought in from the Gonzalitas—what do you want to do with them?"

"My instructions were to turn them over to the nearest officer," Miles answered, a weight gone from his shoulders. "I guess that's you, Lycomb."

AND finally they were done. Phil Hemming, roused from a drunken slumber, was in jail. The Sisneros and Sam Warfler, mightily glad to be rid of Wink Revier, were also in cells. There was some doubt concerning the charge against Warfler for he had insisted, when questioned, that he had but acted for Ryland and that Ryland had said that Benbow's death was accidental. Still there was no question about holding him. Of all the men who had used and profited by the Cow Thief Trail only Case Bride and Bert Haroldson were free and for them an impromptu posse was even then being organized. Walking down the street toward the Tramparas House, with Wink on one side and Grace King on the other, Miles Trask was a free man.

In the lobby of the Tramparas House the three stopped beside Lester King. None of them wanted supper; they were too tired, too excited to eat. Wink, having shaken Miles' hand for the third time, made an announcement.

"I'm goin' down to McFee's an' tell Curly how it wound up," he said. "The kid will want to know, an' anyhow I got to take the swelled head out of him. When I left him there Bridget an' Jackie was makin' him a hero."

"I'll come down later," Miles said. "I want to see him, I have Curly to thank." He was thinking of the unearthly scream that Ellis Heming had uttered and the knife that had fallen from her hand. "Tell

him I'll be along, will you, Wink?" asked Miles.

Wink nodded and turned to the door. Lester King looked at Miles. "And now—?" King asked.

"I don't know," answered Miles.

Lester drew his sister aside. "He's upset," he said, low voiced. "Who wouldn't be? Leave him alone, Grace."

"You leave *us* alone," Grace King ordered her brother; and then, returning to Miles' side, she put her hand on his arm. Miles looked down at the fair face that was upturned to his.

"Are you very tired, Miles?" asked Grace King. "Are you too tired to walk to the little ravine with me?"

Wordlessly Miles Trask put his hand over the girl's where it rested on his arm. Miraculously the fatigue, the weariness, left his body.

"I'm not too tired," he said softly.

Lester King stood bewildered as his sister and Miles Trask walked through the doorway of the Tramparas House. Then smiling, he went alone to the door of the dining room.

ON A bright April morning Wink Revier, accompanied by Lester King, rode down the Gonzalitas Hill. They rode in a buckboard, the property of Lester King, and as they progressed Wink chewed tobacco industriously and King watched the horses.

"I got to get my clothes," said Wink for the third or fourth time. "If I'm goin' to ramrod the YT an' look after the Three Dollar, too, I got to move from the Coffin. I been puttin' it off too long."

"You'll need them for the wedding, too," suggested King slyly.

"Yeah, an' for the weddin'," agreed Wink. He spat over the turning wheel. "Wouldn't be surprised if there was another weddin' sometime," he observed after a moment's silence. "Curly is buildin' up to Jackie Belland like a sick kitten to a hot rock. Bridget is kind of egg'in' him on in it. Ever since you bought the Three Dollar from that hellcat an' promised

Curly a job, he has been feelin' his oats."

"Why shouldn't he?" King asked.

"No reason at all," Wink answered. "Only he's goin' to be hard for me to live with. Him comin' in at the finish thataway sure put him in solid."

"You're in sclid, too," reminded King.

"Stop a minute," Wink said suddenly.

King stopped the team. The buckboard stood on the second bench of the Gonzalitas Hill. Below them stretched the Gonzalitas, the sand and the red hills, the grass and the yucca and the silvery thread of El Rito Comanche, a haze hanging over it, peace settling like the haze.

"Pretty, ain't it?" grunted Wink Revier, drinking in the beauty of the scene below him. "Nice country. It's the people, though, that make a country, kind of."

Lester King nodded wordlessly.

"They're all in the pen or on the way there," mused Wink. "The Sisneros, an' all that was left. It was a funny layout."

King said nothing but sat looking out over the country below.

Again Wink Revier spat a brown stream over the wheel. "Well, there she is," he commented. "The old Cow Thief Trail, closed for keeps. I reckon you can drive along."

THE END



STUNT MAN

Hollywood—America's Baghdad, the place of fabled dreams where anything can happen, and almost everything does. Take the case of Dexter Hathaway. Obscure yesterday—idol of a million women today—threatened with destruction tomorrow. The cry of "Get a double" came easily to Hathaway's lips. In a real-life jam, he hired stunt-man Jerry Banning to fight his battle for him.

Beginning an exciting new novel of the capital of Make-Believe, by

EUSTACE L. ADAMS

DEATH IS A FAR COUNTRY

Once in a blue moon a story as unusual and distinctive as this one comes into an editorial office. Compounded of the strange spell that rises like mist from the waters of the Ganges, and the eerie enchantment that is a Gypsy's heritage, it tells a fascinating tale of strange conflicts and strange loves that fix the destiny of the girl called Sinfire. The novelet-of-the-year by a gifted author who hides behind the pseudonym of

BARY BORU

A STREET IN SINGAPORE

The most famous painting in the Straits Settlement looked like a chromo to Brennan. And nobody guessed that it was a key to the riddle of one crowded Oriental night. A complete novelet by

JOHN K. BUTLER

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—SEPTEMBER 25TH



A GLANCE at this week's table of contents will be enough to make our older readers think they are attending an Old Home Week of ARGOSY authors. Nearly all the names to be found there—Footner, Elston, Chidsey, Blochman, and Borden Chase, for instance—are those of well-established favorites who have been gracing these pages for years. And some of them have not been heard from in a long time. Except for the unavoidable absence of *Tarzan*, *Tizzo the Firebrand*, and *Peter the Brazen*, this issue constitutes our answer to the never-ceasing cry of "Whatever happened to McWhooziz? Why have you stopped printing those fine old *Whatnot* yarns?"

Well, the Get-Together is in honor of Smooth Kyle. Smooth's been away from home for a long time. And although he is a reasonably self-reliant fellow, given to single-handed combat with the forces of disorder, and epic triumphs over what are generally termed nefarious machinations, we did think that he might feel just a little *bewildered to find his old stamping-grounds* populated exclusively with fresh new faces. He's been to Hollywood, you know, and although he can talk about his experience "in pictures" as casually as you please, there is a brooding look in those once piercing eyes that warned us the moment we saw him that Smooth would have to be treated a little tenderly for a while.

In fact almost the first thing he said to us as he climbed out of his cab was: "Where's Hamilcar? I gotta speak to somebody sensible." We mean—well, really, if Hamilcar's disordered spirit can seem like sanity to anyone, then that unlucky anyone has been taking a terrible beating.

So we all put our heads together and decided to do something nice for Smooth. We thought—having rejected Miss Finney's suggestion of a combination clam-bake and block-party—that just a nice, quiet Tuesday afternoon with some of his oldest friends would be what he'd like the best. So that's how it happened.

And now let's listen to the gentle spoofing of

ARTHUR H. THOMAS

I have been reading the ARGOSY so long that it is impossible for me to say when it first came into my hands to read. If my memory is correct it then was called THE GOLDEN ARGOSY. Until the Argonotes appeared I took what was given and enjoyed the contents. Since then I have become more critical.

Your last number dated Aug. 7, 1937 for instance is one which calls for criticism. I have been amused by your editorial comments on the many letters in the Readers' Viewpoint, and thought some of them were rather drastic or caustic. Now I know how it is that someone doesn't throw a bomb in the office. The number cited above claims in plain view on the front leaf of the cover that it has one hundred forty-four (144) pages of fine fiction. In looking up what the pages had contained I find more than two pages of ads, nearly two pages given to the Readers Viewpoint and one page of index. That leaves one hundred thirty-nine pages of regular reading matter, unless the Argonotes and the ads are included in the list of fiction.

If the latter is so, your magazine is the first to be honest enough to call ads fiction, and still more remarkable, to be brave (or foolhardy) enough to say so. No wonder your ads are so few. I personally would hesitate to advertise where the publication classes ads as fiction. Aside from such little slips, which seem to me to make the magazine a little more human, because it is natural to err (for instance look back a few numbers and see numerous funny mistakes in the spelling) the stories are entertaining and well written.

Your proofreader should be jacked up a little if you don't want some disgruntled reader sending a more drastic calldown.

In spite of the spoofing I prefer to buy the ARGOSY at the newsstands rather than get any of the rest of the pulp periodicals at the same or higher price. For your choice gives the public what I call an appetizing magazine which one does not get tired of.

Glen Ridge, N. J.

You have us there, Reader Thomas. . . . As for jacking up that proofreader, however—well, we have been riding that fellow so hard these past four months that he runs now when he sees us coming. We think it's beginning to have some effect, too. A lot of those inexcusable typographical errors are beginning to disappear.

WE'LL now make room for another reader, and what we're going to say when he's through is plenty. Says

HOWARD TIERNEY

So your magazine, supposedly all fiction, is now playing politics? I call your attention in this connection to the following excerpt from page 75 of your August 7th issue:

"I thought of hollow-eyed, dull-faced little children bent over the treadles of a spinning wheel, the sun not risen yet; and I thought of a court that had said the law of which I boasted forbade the stopping of this crime."

Why not come out openly with a pro-Roosevelt editorial (instead of sneaking in such a remark) and advocate doing away with the Supreme Court entirely?

Please remember that judicial decrees are based and issued, not on sentiment, but on other factors—and in the above instance, on the point of State rights. Individual States can (yes and should) pass laws prohibiting child labor; but if they do not do so, the Supreme Court should not be blamed for declaring null and void a Congressional law that usurps State control.

Washington, D. C.

Firstly, let us say that we are inclined to disagree with Reader Tierney in that we don't consider that Hugh Lambert was taking a crack at the Supreme Court. As we recall that passage, he was having a discussion with Nalinah as to whether our law was better than the law of the Mer-nians. Although believing that ours was best, it did give him pause to remember

that what he believed to be an injustice, child labor, could continue under our law—which was not, as he stated it, the fault of the Supreme Court, but of the law itself. This led him to the belief that, after all, our law was not perfect.

Secondly, let us state here and now that the opinions of characters in ARGOSY stories are not, as far as we are aware, the opinions of the authors, and certainly not of the editors. If you tried to take a political census of the editorial staff, your ears would be buzzing from the variety of opinions you'd hear. And none of these opinions ever get into the magazine. We continue to feel that ARGOSY is a magazine for entertainment, not a propaganda machine. Nonetheless, we do feel that if a character in a story wants to air his views, he has a right to do so—whether he cry "Hurrah for Fascism!" "Ain't Communism grand!" or "I hate Democrats."

What about it, readers? Shall we continue to make our characters more human by allowing them to talk about the things people are inclined to talk about these days—or shall we make them namby-pamby fellows who discuss only the charms of the heroine and the dastardly conduct of the villain?

We suspect you'll agree with us. . . .

NOW here is a reader, though, with whom we can't take issue on anything. There's not a chance to get our dander up at

MILTON B. BEARD

I have been reading the ARGOSY since I could first remember, and have derived a great deal of enjoyment from it. I don't think that I have missed over three issues since I started.

After reading stories by most of the best authors I am still under the impression that your authors are tops.

Why not print some more stories by Borden Chase, John Hawkins, Albert Payson Terhune. These are a few of my favorite authors. Are they so rich that they have retired? If so you had better close down the "RAG."

Don't forget the "Peter the Brazen" stories for he sure was a hero and in no small way. Norfolk, Virginia

Be a RADIO EXPERT



Learn at Home to Make
\$30, \$50, \$75 a WEEK



Chief Operator Broadcasting Station
 "When I completed 20 lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WJEC, where I am now Chief Operator."
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Own Business Pays \$300 a Month
 "I now have my own Radio Business which shows three hundred dollars a month profit."
 "Thanks to National Radio."
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Earned \$50 First Month in Spare Time
 "I knew nothing about Radio. After four lessons, I began servicing Radios, earning \$60 the first month. Last winter I made as high as \$100 a month in spare time."
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Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$6,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$200 to \$500 a year—full time servicing jobs pay as much as \$20, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts operate their own full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer many good opportunities. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in Radio.

Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money job sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send special Radio equipment which gives you practical experience—shows how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important Radio principles.

Find Out What Radio Offers

Mail coupon for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 18 years old. It points out Radio's spare and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning; shows my Money Back Agreement. **MAIL COUPON NOW** in an envelope or paste on penny postcard.

J. E. SMITH, President
 Dept. 7JK
 National Radio Institute
 Washington, D. C.

Mail this Now **FREE**
 Get 64-page Book

J. E. SMITH, President,
 Dept. 7JK,
 National Radio Institute,
 Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....



CHRISTMAS CARD BARGAIN

Earn up to \$22.50 in a Week!
 Take orders from friends and others for amazing new Christmas Cards valued **Made-to-order** with sender's name. You sell 50 folders for only \$1.

Sell 50
 With Sender's Name
 FOR ONLY \$1.00

FREE Samples, Liberal earnings. Many men and women earn up to \$21 a hour. No experience needed. Also sell 61 Assortments of 25 Christmas Cards; only \$50. Make big money every week now to Christmas, full or spare time. Send today for **Free Selling Outfit**.
 General Card Co., 400 S. Peoria St., Dept. F-60, Chicago, Ill.

LAW STUDY AT HOME

Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. They command respect. Greater opportunities now than ever before. Six corporations are headed by men with legal training.
More Ability: More Prestige: More Money
 We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL. B. conferred. Successful graduates in every section of the United States. We furnish all text material, including foreign-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 64-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Dept. for them NOW.
LASALLE EXTENSION, Dept. 938-L, Chicago, Illinois



You Can't Collect Damages from a Railroad Company if You are Bitten by a Runaway Horse. You'll Find This Little Episode in

Heart Balm for Passengers

by Jim Holden, in the October

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In answering advertisements it is desirable that you mention ARGONAUT.

PAY NOTHING UNTIL AFTER YOU GET RELIEF

ATHLETE'S FOOT (Foot Itch)

According to the Government Health Bulletin, No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot. Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form and the skin cracks and peels. After a while the itching becomes intense and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

Here's How to Treat It

The germ that causes the disease is known as *Tinea Trichophyton*. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ, so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissues of the skin where the germ breeds.

Itching Stops Immediately

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. Sent On Free Trial

Sign and mail the coupon and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed to you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money, don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you we know that you will be glad to send us \$1.00 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



Beware of It Spreading

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

GORE PRODUCTS, INC. 860 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

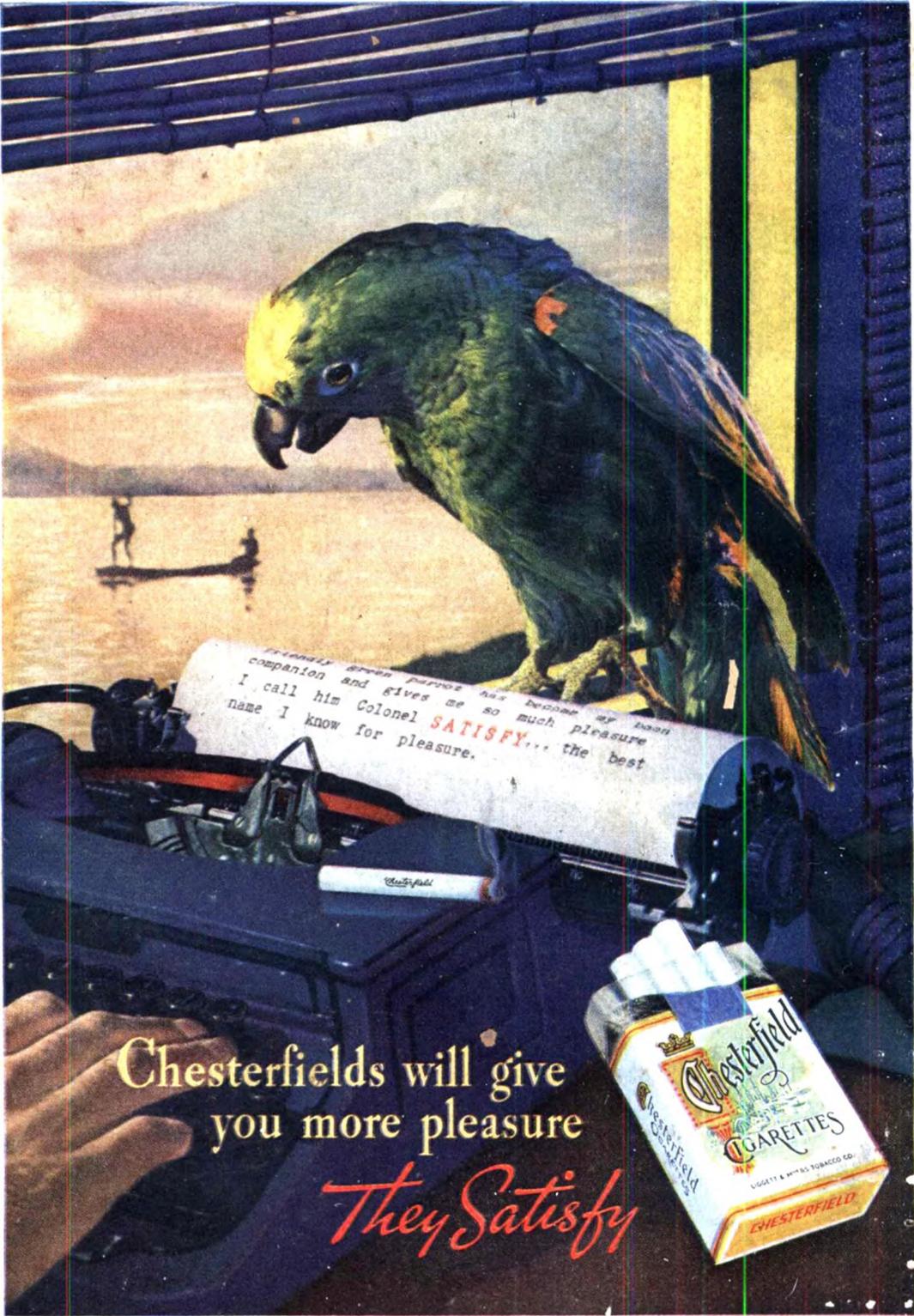
M. G.

Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you \$1.00. If I am not entirely satisfied I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY STATE



Chesterfields will give
you more pleasure

They Satisfy