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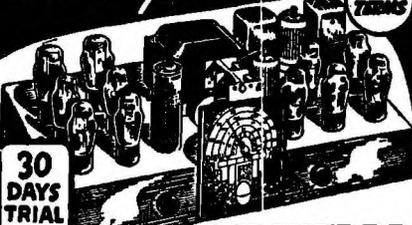
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The fiesta was ha ted, while Don Esteban surveyed the struggling girl



Señor Devil-may-care

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Author of "Don Renegade," "Black Grandee," etc.

CHAPTER I

FIESTA LADY

IN FROM the bay at Monterey that evening rolled billows of mist driven by a fitful breeze. The pearly drops dampened shrubs and trees, clung to buildings, glistened on the shaggy coats of scavenger dogs prowling the streets, and

swirled around the faring night torches fastened to the walls beside gateways.

But the swirling mist failed to dampen the enthusiasm or dull the laughter of natives and peons down by the waterfront, where they were holding a fiesta in celebration of they scarcely knew what. Nor did they care, so long as they had a fiesta.

Guitars were strummed, and men and



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women sang and danced. They ate heaps of food and drank quantities of cheap thin wine. They flirted and made love when there was opportunity, and even fought a bit when wine-heated tempers flared.

A few soldiers from the *presidio* stalked around through the crowd, supposedly there to preserve order, but spending most of their time making eyes at bronze native beauties and pretty peon girls.

A Franciscan *fray* from the nearby mission of Carmel ate and drank his fill, smiled upon the crowd and blessed everybody, then quietly departed, knowing his presence restrained the antics of the revelers.

. . . Señorita María Godines, the only child of Don Luis Godines, recently arrived from Mexico, was delighted with the fiesta. It was the first she had attended

since coming to Monterey, and this one had the added hot spice of wickedness.

When she had heard it was to be held, she determined to attend. She knew her father would not have given permission. So the *señorita* had dressed in ragged clothing, had hinted to her father that she was going to bed because of a headache, and had contrived to slip out of the house.

Señorita María was a little frightened as she walked through the narrow, crooked streets of the town, keeping in the deeper shadows as much as possible. Seldom in her eighteen years had she been alone, and certainly never alone before out in the streets at night.

But after she reached the waterfront and lost herself in the merrymaking throng, her fears fled. These were only

human beings enjoying themselves, though they belonged to a section of society she did not know, and she entered into the spirit of the carnival.

Nobody asked of her a name other than her first, and that meant nothing, for there were many Marias. She felt safe from detection. She sang and danced with the others, ate and drank and enjoyed herself, free from conventions for the moment.

When she thought she had been there long enough, she got away from the waterfront and started home. Her eyes were sparkling, and her heart beat wildly with excitement. Now she had only to slip into the house, bathe herself and get into bed, and her father would never know. It had been an adventure she would remember.

SHE walked quickly along an adobe wall and beneath a flaring torch in front of a house on a corner, and four men lurking there in the darkness saw her.

"Here comes a beauty," one whispered to the others. "She would please Don Esteban. Let us seize her as she passes."

Señorita Maria Godines had time for only one cry of fright as the four ruffians rushed upon her out of the night. They grasped her roughly, swept her up off the ground, and pressed a *serape* against her mouth so her wild cries would not be heard.

"Silence, little wildcat!" one hissed at her. "You are not to be harmed. You are a fortunate girl this evening."

"We have been commissioned by the *caballero* to pick up some girls to dance for him and his guests," another explained. "You are a little beauty, and will please him."

"Do you understand now?" the first asked. "No harm will come to you. Stop trying to pierce the night with your howls."

They thought the explanation would suffice to allay her fear, and put her back on her feet and removed the *serape*. The *señorita* gulped for air, and found her voice.

"Release me!" she cried. "How dare you put your filthy hands on me? I am the daughter of a grandee—"

"Ho!" their leader exclaimed. "Perhaps you are from the house-hold of His Excellency the Governor. You are decked out in silks and satins, I can see, and have jewels gleaming in your hair."

"I am in masquerade. I have been to the fiesta down by the waterfront."

"And does a highborn lady, even in masquerade, prowl the streets of Monterey alone at night? No more of your nonsense, girl! Our fine gentleman wants one more girl to dance, and you would please him. It means a gold piece for us if we deliver you to him, hence you will be delivered."

Señorita Maria screeched once more, and the *serape* was wound around her head so she scarcely could breathe. Her wrists were held tightly, and her leader tossed her over his shoulder like a bag of meal, and carried her while she squirmed and kicked.

Her captors kept in the darkness as much as possible as they hurried through the streets, and one walked a short distance ahead to make sure they encountered nobody.

IN THE covered patio of one of the largest cantinas in Monterey, Don Esteban de la Zamora sat at the head of a long table. Young, handsome, rich, handy with his wit and adept with a blade, Don Esteban had endeared himself to the town. Because of his pranks, he had been dubbed Señor Devil-may-care. All doors were open for him, and he was a frequent guest at the residence of his excellency the governor.

Tonight, Don Esteban had gathered a few friends, had bought all privileges of the patio for the evening, and was holding a private *baile*, as he had done often before. The tables were heaped with food, and skins of the best wine were scattered around. Native servants were kept busy refilling the goblets.

Don Esteban's guests were young gentlemen of blood and social station, each with an ambition to put away more wine than his neighbor. They sang in raucous chorus as native musicians strummed their

instruments, shouted at one another, and thumped their wine goblets on the table-tops.

"The dance, Esteban! You promised us a dance!" one shouted.

Five girls were huddled in a corner of the patio, wide-eyed and giggling. Two were daughters of peons and the other three bronze native girls with slim and graceful bodies. They wore only a scanty garment each.

Their semi-nakedness did not embarrass them, for generally they were half-naked. They had heard of Don Esteban's parties, and knew each of them would receive a piece of gold. And they feared nothing, for it was history that Don Esteban was a *caballero* who mistreated no woman and allowed none to be mistreated in his presence.

A door was jerked open, and the ruffians appeared with the sixth girl.

"Here is a beauty for you, Don Esteban!" the leader shouted. "She has a wit, also, for she claims to be a great lady. You know all the great ladies of Monterey, Don Esteban, since you are often a guest in their houses. Have you ever seen this great lady before?"

Señorita Maria Godines was put down on the floor, and the *serape* was removed from her head. She flung that head high, her dark eyes flashing.

"She is one great lady I never have met before," Don Esteban said, laughing, after looking at her.

"Somebody shall pay dearly for this outrage!" the *señorita* cried. "Is there one *caballero* here present, one man of decency and courtesy? If so, I cry to him to come now to my defense. I am of gentle blood. My father is—"

Laughter from those at the tables interrupted her speech. They saw her ragged garments, her disheveled hair—and whoever had heard of a lady of gentle blood being out alone at night dressed in rags? This was a jest prepared by Don Esteban for their entertainment, they thought.

"Ho! Perhaps she is carrying on in

this manner with the expectation of receiving two pieces of gold instead of one," the leader of the ruffians cried. "Ladies of gentle blood do not dance for a few coins. We leave her to you, Don Esteban."

Don Esteban laughed and tossed the ruffian money. "You have done your work well. Begone!" he said.

The four at the door grinned, saluted and hurried out, and a cantina servant closed the door behind them, barred it, and turned to grasp Señorita Maria's arm.

"Join the other girls in the corner," he ordered. "You are to dance with them beneath the torches. The musicians are ready, and Don Esteban and his guests grow impatient, so make haste. Off with your sandals and stockings and outer garments!"

"Let me go!" she cried. "I tell you I am—"

"Do you want me to tear the clothes off your body?" the servant muttered. "How dare you keep the *caballeros* waiting? What has come over you, wench?"

"How dare you call me that?"

"No harm will befall you. This dance is but Don Esteban's fancy. He is rich, and will give you a piece of gold. You are a beauty, and need not be ashamed to show your pretty limbs."

"How dare you?" she raged again. "Let me go!"

Señorita Maria huddled in the corner. The tatters in which she had dressed for the fiesta seemed far too scanty to her. She could not compel herself to bare her legs as the other girls had done.

THE musicians began playing, and the other girls moved out beneath the flaming torches and began dancing. The exasperated cantina servant grasped Señorita Maria's arm again, tore her dress off one shoulder, and whirled her out to join the others.

With tears of rage and shame streaming from her eyes, she danced a few steps, then turned, tugging at her dress to pull it up. She saw Don Esteban and his guests watching her and laughing at her show of modesty.

There was a smile on Don Esteban's face. It was a strong, handsome face, Maria thought. She had heard considerable about Don Esteban and had hoped to meet him some day—but not like this.

She crouched against the wall again, and pulled her tattered dress around her shoulders. The guests were watching one of the other girls, who was doing a wild dance in hope of receiving a shower of gold pieces.

Don Esteban suddenly turned his head in greeting as a belated guest touched him on the shoulder, and found the man staring at the dancers.

"Esteban, are you mad?" he whispered. "That girl huddled in the corner—she is the daughter of Don Luis Godines, who recently came from Mexico. I have been presented to her."

"Then she told the truth," Don Esteban said, horrified.

"The rascals I sent out to seize girls picked her up alone in the street in those rags, and we thought she was some peon's daughter." Don Esteban sprang to his feet. "Stop the music!" he shouted. "The dance is ended. I have something else by way of entertainment. Here is gold for each of you girls, and you are to depart at once."

He tossed the coins at them, then hurried to the corner where Señorita Maria was crouching with the tears still streaming down her cheeks. The man who had identified her was but a pace behind.

"Forgive me, *señorita*," Don Esteban begged, as he lifted her up. "I should have believed your story. This man has told me your name—"

"You have disgraced me, *señor*," she interrupted. "This affair will shame my father also."

"No actual harm has been done."

"Filthy louts have put their hands on me, because of you. I have been handled roughly and treated like a common wench, because of you. I tell you now, Esteban de la Zamora, that you shall die for this! My father is an old man, but we know young *caballeros* who will take up the quarrel."

"Are you not to be blamed in a measure, *señorita*?" Don Esteban asked. "Did you not forget blood and breeding when you roamed the streets alone at night, dressed like a peon girl? Can you honestly blame me for doubting you when you spoke? Anything I can do—"

"You can allow me to depart immediately," she broke in. "How I hate you! You shall die for this!"

"I'll get the *señorita* away and take her home, Esteban," the man who had identified her said. "I'll do it quietly. Continue the entertainment, so the others will not notice. Call to the servants quickly to refill the wine goblets."

He smuggled the girl out of the patio, and the party was continued. But the story got out and was spread, and Monterey rocked with the scandal before dawn.

Many laughed and called it a prank. But two young *caballeros* thought differently. Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez, who had met the *señorita* and were eager to pay court to her, took the affair as a personal affront.

They called at the Godines *casa* to express their admiration of the *señorita* anew, and were permitted to see her a moment in the presence of her father and *dueña*.

"You are very kind, *señores*," Señorita Maria said, with her head held high. "But I shall consider myself disgraced as long as Don Esteban lives and remembers."

Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez exchanged glances.

"Perhaps, *señorita*, he will not live and remember long," Juan Feliz said.

"Two swords are waiting for his blade to cross them," Marcos Chavez added.

CHAPTER II

TO FLEE IS VALIANT

DON ESTEBAN slept late the following morning. Felipe, his middle-aged, trusted body servant, finally shook him awake.

"You must arouse yourself, Don Esteban," he said. "There is a messenger here

from his excellency the governor. His excellency desires to see you immediately on a matter of importance. The desire is in the nature of a command, Don Esteban."

Don Esteban crawled from his couch after tossing the silk coverings on the floor, and stood yawning in his crockery tub while Felipe drenched him with warm scented water. He toweled himself vigorously, dressed with his usual care, and went forth upon the streets with only a goblet of wine for breakfast.

He found his excellency pacing around the living room in his mansion, hands clasped behind his back. The governor turned toward the door when Don Esteban was announced, bowed, motioned for the servant to retire and close the door behind him, and gestured for Don Esteban to sit in the nearest chair.

"Esteban, my boy, I do not know whether you are exceptionally clever, or whether good fortune merely tags your heels," the Governor said.

"I fail to understand, Excellency."

"I am eager to have you undertake another adventurous mission for me, Esteban. I have been wondering how I could get you away without arousing suspicion. Now, I know."

"How is this?"

His excellency smiled. "First, let me say I have heard of the episode of last evening."

"I regret that exceedingly, Your Excellency. But the girl was in rags, and I never had seen her before. She is almost a stranger in Monterey."

"That is true. Her father, Don Luis Godines, has a splendid lineage. His wife has died, and he intends to spend his remaining days here in Alta California, but has not decided whether to remain in Monterey or go farther south. Perhaps he will not wish to remain here now."

"I must see him at once, Excellency, and make my abject apologies to him and the *señorita*."

"I have other plans for you, Esteban," the governor said. "It has been reported to me that Juan Felíz and Marcos Chavez

plan to challenge you to combat because of the affair, both being interested in the *señorita*."

Don Esteban's face flushed. "I shall oblige them!"

"You will do nothing of the sort, Esteban. They are but boys. You are an expert swordsman. They could not stand before you. I cannot have them slain and their fathers grieving because of the loss of their heirs."

"But, if they challenge me—"

"That is the point, Esteban. We must contrive to avoid having them challenge you. I have a plan for doing that and at the same time make it possible for you to work on the mission of which I spoke. So, because of what happened last night, Esteban de la Zamora, I suggest you absent yourself from Monterey for a time, as punishment."

"Exile? Your command is law."

"Take the first ship that leaves port, and I happen to know she will sail in the right direction to serve our purpose. Avoid those two hotheaded young *caballeros* until the hour of sailing, and so save their lives."

"As you command, Excellency."

"Write a note to your body servant regarding your packing, and I'll send it by a trooper. You will remain here until the sailing hour, so we can discuss the mission on which I am sending you."

"I am prepared to obey," Don Esteban said. "I hope the mission is sufficiently adventurous."

"There speaks Señor Devil-may-care!" The governor laughed and put a hand on Don Esteban's shoulder. "You are a great comfort to me, my boy. You have a natural gift for this work. You are a young man of immense wealth and need not do it at all, save as a labor of love. And I can trust you. Nobody suspects that Don Esteban de la Zamora, who likes to enjoy himself and fling gold around, is a special investigator of mine."

"The work gives me the chance for adventure, Excellency, and allows me to serve you and the Viceroy."

"And how sorely we need faithful service!" the governor said. "In this new raw land of Alta California, where we are trying to build an empire, where there are so many working against us, men who think only of their own ambitions and fortunes—"

"I understand, Excellency."

"I'll explain the details of the work I wish you to do, Esteban; then we will attend to your private affairs."

DURING the remainder of the day, orderlies came and went. The master of a ship was reached, and arrangements were made for the transport of Don Esteban in befitting style.

A note was sent to Felipe, and Don Esteban's capable servant busied himself with the packing.

Don Juan Feliz and Don Marcos Chavez, their eyes blazing, called at Don Esteban's lodgings three times to find him. Then they heard a rumor, purposely dropped in their path by an agent of the governor, that Don Esteban had ridden out to a certain *hacienda* to spend the day and night, and rode hotly in that direction to challenge him. That journey would occupy them until almost sunset.

An hour before sunset, peons carried luggage to a ship preparing to sail. Felipe called at the governor's residence to report that everything had been done, and was sent on to the ship. Don Esteban had an early evening repast with his excellency.

"I still think I should make my apologies to Don Luis Godines and the *señorita*," Don Esteban said.

"And perhaps run across those hot-headed young idiots and have to cut them down? Above all, Esteban, do not forget the mission upon which I am sending you. Nothing must turn you aside from that."

"I shall remember, Excellency."

"This is not like some of the other troubles we have had. This is serious. Behind the affair is the weighty combination of a keen man and much money. We want no slaughter of innocents in the name of politics."

"That is one thing which impels me to this work," Don Esteban admitted. "I do not like to see natives and peons lured to death."

"Jorge Gonzales, my secret agent you know well, is at the scene working now. He will not know you are coming, so you will have to get in touch with him in some manner."

"The method of my work?" Don Esteban asked.

"If this uprising starts, I can crush it with soldiers. But that would mean slaughter, the disgrace of a man of noted name, general disturbance. I want the uprising stopped, Esteban. It must not start. Those behind it—put them at each other's throats, so they cannot work together. Use ridicule."

"I understand, Excellency."

"Now to get you safely aboard the ship. Those two fiery young gallants may have managed to return to town, finding you were not at the *hacienda*. We must dodge them."

At the rear door of the governor's house waited a two-wheeled cart such as was in general use for the transportation of bales of merchandise. In the dusk, Don Esteban got into the cart and stretched out on the floor, and the driver, a soldier in disguise, tossed a heap of dry skins over him. The cart rolled and bumped along the street, going toward the waterfront.

Don Esteban did not relish this part of the adventure. It gave him the feeling of fleeing from peril. But he could understand why the Governor wished it this way.

He boarded the ship safely, and found the shipmaster and Felipe waiting for him on the deck.

"After my journey in that cart, I require a bath in warm water heavy with perfume," Don Esteban said. "Also a change of clothing. I am befouled. When do we sail?"

"Immediately, *señor*," the shipmaster said. "The tide is right."

As Don Esteban went toward the cabin,

he heard the harsh voice of Carlos, the vessel's mate, ordering the crew to cast off and make sail.

CHAPTER III

SALUTE THE CABALLERO

FAVORED by a fair breeze and riding on the morning tide, the ship *Magdalena*, nine days out from Monterey, slipped into the bay at San Diego de Alcalá.

Her white sails glistened as they caught the morning sun. Flying fish played around her bow as it lifted gently to the swelling seas. A flock of gulls convoyed her, soaring gracefully as they gave their plaintive cries of welcome.

On the shore waited a motley group of men from the settlement and the mission up the valley. Traders were there, expecting shipments of goods. Ragged peons were hoping to pick up a coin for labor in the ships' unloading. Bronze natives with inscrutable faces watched the bellying sails.

Off to one side were a couple of haughty grandees with their noses in the air. A Franciscan *fray* from the mission, in tattered robe and frayed sandals, was waiting to do any service that might be required of him.

Also waiting were Sergeant Pedro Salazar and two troopers from the *presidio*, sent by Capitán Juan Angelus, the *comandante* of the district, to greet the ship and receive any official communication she might bring.

The ship's sails ran down as the hoarse commands of her master rolled over the water. Boats were dropped, men boiled over the side and into them, tow ropes were tossed and caught and made fast, and the hard pull began to swing the vessel to safe anchorage in a deep spot near the shore, where a landing stage could be run to the beach from the ship's deck.

When the craft had been moored and the landing stage run out, Carlos, the mate, swaggered down the stage, and with his massive hairy arms outstretched stopped those who would have gone aboard.

"Back, *señores!*" he cried. "We have a disease with us."

They recoiled, fear coming into their faces. But Sergeant Salazar thrust his way forward.

"What is this?" he bellowed. "You have a pestilence aboard, and dare enter the bay and moor your ship?"

"'Tis without doubt a pestilence," the mate replied.

"This is a serious business, *señor*, a menace to the community. My *capitán* must be notified immediately. Do you carry smallpox or the water fever?"

"The pestilence we carry is neither, but much more virulent," the mate warned.

"More virulent? Is it some rare new disease?"

"This disease walks on two legs," the mate explained. "It smites the fair ladies particularly. It has a name not to be found in any book of physic—Señor Devil-may-care. But in official quarters the name is listed as Don Esteban de la Zamora."

"**Y**OU have him aboard?" the sergeant cried. He was quite obviously excited at hearing the name.

"Ha! So you have heard of the *señor* even down here? His fame has spread indeed."

"Why does such a man come here?"

"Why not?" the mate countered.

"Monterey is better suited to his sort. It has large cantinas, lively women, music and dancing, dice and cards. 'Tis a place of life and action. Here in San Diego de Alcalá we slumber peacefully in the soothing sun, frying our sins away. Don Esteban will not like it here."

"Pray that he does!" the mate said, fervently. "If he does not like the place, no doubt he will shape it over to suit him, and raise considerable dust in the labor."

"Why does he come here?" the sergeant persisted.

"Because our ship was bound in this direction, and it was the first vessel to leave the port of Monterey after Señor Devil-may-care received an official intima-

tion that he would do well to absent himself for a period."

"What is this? He was ordered out of Monterey—a man of his wealth and social station? Why?" the sergeant asked.

The mate's shoulders shook a moment with silent laughter. He lowered his voice and spoke again:

"Don Esteban gave a *baile* for some friends, and had ruffians go out into the night and seize girls for dancing. But the rascals picked up one of gentle birth who was returning from a masquerade—"

"And she was compelled to dance with the others?" the sergeant roared.

"There you have it, *amigo*. The scandal blasted the town. And Señor Devil-may-care was informed it might be beneficial for his health if he disappeared."

"For his health?"

"Sí. After all, the *señorita* was of gentle birth, and certain young bloods thought the affront to gentility should be wiped out with the point of a blade."

"So Señor Devil-may-care ran away to save his hide?"

"Ran away? Señor Devil-may-care?" the mate bellowed. "Quite the contrary, *amigo*. He is not the sort to run. I have seen him display real courage in Monterey, and have witnessed him at work with a blade. 'Tis suicide for another to cross swords with him."

"There is the germ of a beautiful argument in that statement," the sergeant hinted, bristling.

"Señor Devil-may-care was sent away from Monterey to give a couple of fiery young *caballeros* a chance to cool their blood, lest they lose some of it. They wanted to fight him because of the affair of the girl. And the Governor did not want two of the finest young men in Monterey to die on the point of Señor Devil-may-care's blade."

The hoarse bellow of the *Magdalena's* master came from the deck:

"Attention, there! Men will be needed to act as porters for our passenger's personal property."

Down the landing stage came a pro-

cession of sailors bent beneath weights of luggage. They carried bags of fine soft leather containing clothing, boxes and bales, baskets, and several chests with metal strips along their seams and at the corners.

"Does all that belong to him?" the sergeant asked the mate.

"It does, *amigo*. When we stowed it, he complained that he had been obliged to leave Monterey with such haste that he brought scarcely anything."

The attention of those on the shore was distracted by something at the top of the landing stage. A horse was being led ashore cautiously. The animal was spirited, built for endurance and speed, and as black as night. He wore bridle and saddle of heavy carved leather which had been darkened with oils and much hard hand-rubbing, and they were chased with silver.

"His horse," the mate announced. "Señor Devil-may-care was of the opinion he could not find a suitable mount here, so he brought his favorite steed with him. 'Tis said the animal understands him when he speaks. And here"—the mate suddenly lowered his voice still more—"is Señor Devil-may-care himself!"

AT THE top of the landing stage, chattering sailors were knuckling their foreheads to a man who was giving each a gold coin. The master of the *Magdalena* was calling farewell in a voice which told he had been handsomely paid also.

Señor Devil-may-care descended the landing stage slowly, head held high and body erect, his attitude that of a man sure of himself. His eyes were twinkling at all he saw.

Atop his curly black hair was a wide sombrero with a carved leather band in which jewels flashed. His clothing was of fine linen, glistening satin and rustling silk. Over his shoulder was draped a *serape* of bright colors. A straight narrow blade swung at his side, and its hilt flamed as jewels caught the sun.

Behind him walked his body servant,

Felipe, dressed in clothing of somber hue. Felipe wore a cutlass and had a pistol thrust into his sash. He seemed conscious of the importance of his position.

Don Esteban stopped when he reached the mate at the bottom of the stage, slapped the mariner soundly on his back and thrust something into his hand.

"Carlos, my splendid fellow, may you live long and prosper!" he said.

Don Esteban marched on to where his horse was standing, put foot into stirrup and swung up into the saddle. As he gathered the reins, he gestured to a group of peons.

"Some of you take up my goods and follow me," he directed. "I pay well for loyal service."

The peons began fighting among themselves for a chance to carry the loads, but Felipe quickly stopped them with kicks and blows and apportioned the baggage among them.

Don Esteban glanced around and bowed slightly to the others who were watching.

"I am Esteban de la Zamora, señores," he announced, with evident pride. "Your names and stations I shall be happy to learn later. Be kind enough to tell me at which *posada* I may find the most comfortable quarters, the best food and oldest wines, and the prettiest serving wenches."

Sergeant Salazar tossed up his head and laughed.

"This is not Monterey, Don Esteban," he called. "There is but one *posada* here, and all the servants are men. The food is only ordinary for one with a fancy taste, but the wine is excellent."

"From the red in your nose, I judge that you speak with the voice of authority," Don Esteban replied.

He gestured to the peons and started his horse forward slowly. The mount swerved toward a group of dirty, ragged men who were watching the ship, and as Don Esteban controlled the animal he looked sharply at those scattering out of the way.

He caught the eye of a barefooted man of middle age who had the appearance of

a penniless wanderer. Imperceptibly, Don Esteban made an unusual gesture with his right hand, and the other answered it in kind.

Don Esteban had made contact with Jorge Gonzales, the governor's agent, sooner than he had expected.

CHAPTER IV

BY CUNNING AND A SMILE

THE fine clothing and highly polished boots of Señor Miguel Brocamonte were not enough to distract attention from his grossness and his uncouth manners.

Miguel Brocamonte was excessively obese, and seemed to exude grease from every pore. Starved in boyhood, he had made it his life work to obtain ample food. He fancied quantity more than quality, washing down the viands with any wine he happened to have at hand, and belching whenever and wherever he pleased as if to advertise the abundance in his larder.

Miguel Brocamonte had prospered as a trader. He was ruthless in business dealings with those he considered his inferiors or equals, but fawned on persons of station. He had a vague idea that wealth might change the blood in his veins, or at least cause men to forget a parentage regarding which very little was known, even by Miguel Brocamonte himself.

Soon after the arrival of Don Esteban de la Zamora at the *posada*—an event which rocked that establishment to its foundations—Miguel Brocamonte left his house and got into his carriage behind a team of spirited steeds. He growled orders to his native driver and leaned back against the cushions, making his great bulk comfortable.

The driver handled the horses with expert skill, and the carriage rolled smartly out of town and along a dusty highway which ended at the *hacienda* of Don José del Rio.

Of all the grandees in Alta California, Don José del Rio was the most haughty. His upflung head carried his shock of

white hair like a silver crown. Whenever opportunity offered, he dwelt at length on the splendid lineage of his family—and on the sad fact that he, a del Rio, was always overlooked whenever political honors were being strewn around by the Viceroy in Mexico.

Don José was ambitious to occupy a high place, and his ambitions were carrying him near the borderland of treason. His son, Manuel, seconded his ambitions, as did his beautiful unmarried daughter, Anita. Conspiracies and plots brought them in frequent contact with persons they would have ignored otherwise, yet they retained their dignity.

So, when his carriage reached the *hacienda*, Miguel Brocamonte ordered the coachman not to approach the front of the house, but to follow a lane to the rear. Despite the wealth he had accumulated through trade, Brocamonte had not attained a position where he could walk through Don José's front door.

To outward appearances, Brocamonte had come to the *hacienda* to talk over a business deal with the *superintendente* of Don José's rancho. The carriage was stopped in front of the *superintendente's* small cottage set in a grove of pepper trees, and the man hurried out and bowed low as Brocamonte got laboriously out of his carriage.

"I hope I find you in excellent health today, *señor*," the *superintendente* greeted. "I am prepared to talk business immediately."

Brocamonte turned to his driver. "Take the horses to that shady spot and remain with the carriage," he ordered. "That would prevent the native overhearing anything damaging."

"Now, *amigo*—?" the *superintendente* asked, after the driver was out of earshot.

"I must see Don José at once." Brocamonte said. "It is a matter of importance."

"I believe Don José is expecting you."

"How is this? I did not send word I was coming."

"Nevertheless, I have orders to conduct

you at once to him in the patio. His son and daughter are with him there."

Brocamonte's eyes were glittering as he went with the other along a curving, flower-bordered path toward the sprawling big house.

DON JOSÉ was waiting in the shady patio, at his ease in a huge chair. He inclined his head a fraction of an inch in answer to Brocamonte's low bows. He motioned for the *superintendente* to leave.

Manuel del Rio was standing beside his father's chair—a tall, lean, morose man of thirty. Señorita Anita del Rio was seated on a bench a few feet away, fanning herself languidly, a picture of cold, fashionably-dressed beauty.

"Don José," Brocamonte exclaimed, "I have been rarely fortunate in locating the very man for our purpose."

"Why not say, *señor*, that he came accidentally to San Diego de Alcala and you heard of his arrival?" Don José corrected.

Brocamonte gulped, and tried again. "The moment I learned he was here, and the circumstances of his coming, I thought—"

"I had a similar thought." Don José interrupted. "I anticipated you would come to see me about it. What are your opinions in the matter, *señor*?"

Brocamonte bowed to the *señorita*, who ignored him, and sat down on the end of the bench when Don José motioned for him to do so. He bent forward, stifling a belch, for once Don José had rebuked him sternly for belching in his presence.

"What could be better suited to our purpose, Don José?" he asked. "This Don Esteban is a man of great wealth. He is young and afire for adventure. He has been ordered around roughly by the governor, a man he no doubt deems inferior to himself, and he probably resents it."

"True, *señor*," Don José admitted. "But would Don Esteban join our enterprise, and give it his time and money? That is the pertinent question. Do not forget that this is a somewhat ticklish business. Success means much for all of us, but failure

may mean—well, an ignominious death.”

Brocamonte shivered at the words, and his triple chins shook, but he compelled himself to give a weak smile.

“I can meet Don Esteban and sound him out gently,” he suggested. “And possibly young Don Manuel can contrive to make his acquaintance.”

“That would be proper, for a Zamora is a man of high degree,” Don José admitted.

“In addition—pardon me for suggesting it, but I am thinking only of the success of our venture—if the dainty *señorita* would but smile upon the man once—”

“Enough, *señor!*” Don José thundered. “My daughter has no share in this.”

“Do not be absurd, father,” Señorita Anita said, in her icy voice. “I am a del Rio in this affair. What is a smile, when so much may be gained by giving it? And, from what I have heard, I may give it willingly. ’Tis said that Don Esteban is handsome, wealthy, gallant and full of fire.”

BROCAMONTE bent forward again. “No doubt Don Esteban is a wild, thoughtless fellow,” he said. “We will play on him, get him to join us and advance funds—”

“We can always use funds,” Don José observed.

“He is a man of action and glamor. He could help win the natives to us. He would be a gallant leader in the uprising. And we can arrange it so, should things go wrong, he will receive full blame for the affair. Men will think he turned against the government because he was expelled from Monterey.”

“Excellent reasoning!” Don José exclaimed.

“Let us have a clear understanding,” Manuel del Rio said. “It is understood we foment an uprising among the natives and peons. My father will then charge that the present governor is incapable of maintaining order in the district, and that lives and property are in peril.”

“Understood,” Brocamonte assented.

“Then my father will declare the governor deposed as incompetent, name himself temporary governor to act in the emergency, and order the capital moved from Monterey to San Diego de Alcalá.”

“Such is the plan,” Brocamonte agreed.

“The revolt will sweep up the coast as far as San Francisco de Asis. Reports will be sent to Mexico that only Don José del Rio can control the situation here, and the Viceroy will be compelled to approve him as governor in fact.”

“May I be permitted a thought?” Brocamonte asked.

“Speak freely,” said Don José.

“Let Don Esteban appear so active in the uprising that men will think and say it was his plan. Let him be named temporary governor at first. Then, when success is assured, he is to say an older and more dignified man is needed for the position, and suggest Don José.”

“Why do that, *señor?*” Manuel asked.

“It will appear the office is seeking Don José instead of Don José seeking the office, which is always a wise move in politics. And, if disaster should occur, Don Esteban would be blamed and Don José safe from censure.”

“An excellent thought!” Don José said.

“All I ask for myself, in return for my share in the work and the money I am prepared to spend freely in the cause,” Brocamonte hinted, “are certain concessions in trade—”

“We have gone over that before, *señor*, and you shall have the trade concessions when I am in a position to grant them,” Don José said, with a show of impatience. “You need not remind me of it continually. A del Rio does not forget his obligations.”

“I crave your pardon, Don José.”

“It is agreed, then that we make an effort to attract Don Esteban to our plan. But we must move cautiously. Be wary how you approach him, Brocamonte.”

Manuel spoke again: “I will call on Don Esteban at the *posada*, suggest it is not a suitable residence for a man of his standing, and invite him to be our guest here at the *hacienda*.”

"Splendid!" Brocamonte exclaimed. "If you have him here under your own roof, you can work on his mind and win him over to the cause easily. And after the *señorita* has smiled upon him as much as thrice, he will be so befogged that he can refuse nothing."

"As much as thrice, *señor*?" Señorita Anita asked. "I fear you underestimate the quality of my smile. But perhaps his own smiles may befog me. That will be something to guard against."

Brocamonte arose when Don José cleared his throat meaningly, knowing that the conference was at an end. He bent his obese body a trifle in an attempt to bow as he backed to the arch in the patio wall, then smiled and waddled away.

CHAPTER V

COURIER OF THE KING

ABOUT the middle of the siesta hour that day, an official government courier came out of the north, riding his lathered horse at top speed and leaving a lifting trail of dust in his wake.

He stopped his jaded mount in front of the *presidio* and almost fell from his saddle because of weariness. A yawning trooper approached to take his horse. The courier lurched toward the entrance of the building, where Sergeant Salazar was propped up against the masonry half asleep.

"Sergeant! Your *commandante*, at once!" the courier ordered.

Sergeant Salazar blew out the ends of his enormous mustache and fixed the courier with a glittering eye. He judged all couriers to be domineering and arrogant, and disliked the breed.

"Capitán Juan Angelus, our *commandante*, is enjoying his siesta, as all honest men should be doing at this hour," the sergeant said. "Here in the southland, we have our moments of ease. We are not like you of the north, always running around like a puppy chasing his own tail."

"Your *commandante*, immediately!" the courier barked, his eyes blazing. "Would

you take it upon yourself to delay official business of importance? Have I ridden like the wind day and night for a vast distance and almost killed several good horses to be balked now by a brainless hulk?"

Sergeant Salazar drew himself up stiffly. "If you are referring to me in such terms, *señor*, we will go into the matter seriously at a later moment."

"Whenever you like!"

"Meanwhile, I'll send a trooper to disturb our *commandante*. If the intelligence you bring is not of supreme importance, this may be an ill day for us both. Capitán Juan Angelus does not like to have his rest broken."

Salazar called a trooper and sent him hurrying to the quarters of the *capitán*, ordered another to fetch a flagon of wine for the courier, and stroked the ends of his mustache as he watched the man from the north sprawl on a bench.

"What is the cause of all this hard riding and excitement, *señor*?" the sergeant asked. "Whence came you?"

"I have traveled the distance from Monterey without relief," the courier replied. "I am an official courier on the staff of his excellency the governor, not an ordinary member of the courier service."

"Oh, I can observe that!"

"I have ridden day and night, with only a short hour of sleep when absolutely necessary. I carry an important communication for your *capitán*. Tell me—has the ship *Magdalena* yet reached this port?"

"She came in on the morning tide."

"Was Don Esteban de la Zamora aboard her, and did he land?"

The sergeant grinned. "*Sí, señor!* He landed, and brought a few rags of personal belongings. Twenty peons were needed to carry the stuff to the *posada*. He even brought his horse."

"*Bueno!* I am in time."

"Your business deals with Don Esteban? Do you bring an order for his arrest? If so, I must clean and perfume our detention room, put bows of ribbon on the

shackles, and dress the troopers in satin so Don Esteban will feel at home."

"The papers I carry deal with him in a way, I believe," the courier replied, guardedly. "His excellency handed me the documents, and ordered me to fetch them through personally instead of forwarding them by relay, so you may judge of their importance. His excellency trusts me wholly."

"Men often misplace their trust," Salazar observed.

"I was also ordered to overtake and pass some others who left Monterey ahead of me, and this I did easily and without them being aware of it. I had orders to reach here as much ahead of them as possible.

"No doubt his excellency would experience great difficulty trying to handle the business of Alta California without your assistance," Salazar said. "You say others are hurrying toward this post? Can it be possible we may have some excitement here?"

"TWO young *caballeros* are riding at top speed to reach here," the courier explained. "But they must stop to drink and boast at every mission guest house, *posada* and *rancho*, so they lose considerable time between their short wild rides."

"'Tis a way they have," Salazar said.

"I passed them at Mission Santa Barbara while they were sleeping off their wine. They will arrive at least a couple of days behind me. They will make the last section of their journey slowly, for they will want to get here fresh and ready for battle."

"Ready for battle?" Salazar's brows lifted.

"Sí. They meant to challenge Don Esteban de la Zamora to mortal combat, but he left Monterey before they could. They learned he had taken ship for here, and have come hot after him. Gallant young fools! I have seen Don Esteban handle a blade. 'Tis suicide—"

". . . for another to cross swords with him. I have heard that tale already, and

will thank you to spare it me now," the sergeant growled. "The mate of the *Magdalena* said something about some young *caballeros* being eager to cut Don Esteban to ribbons because of an affair concerning a girl."

A certain over-eager curiosity crept into the sergeant's voice.

"Let us forget I have told you so much, and ask me nothing more," the courier begged. "Fatigue has made me lose caution. Say nothing about the *caballeros* coming this way."

"All is forgotten," Salazar agreed. "Here comes the trooper to take you to the *capitán*. When he has finished with you, come to my quarters. I'll see you properly fed, and furnish you a pallet upon which you may stretch your weary body. After you have slept, I shall remember that you called me a brainless hulk."

The courier was escorted to the *capitán's* quarters, and Sergeant Salazar sprawled on the end of the bench and yawned. When the courier did not return immediately, he supposed the *capitán* was having the man relate the latest news and gossip of Monterey.

But presently Salazar was himself summoned to the officer's quarters, and there found the tired courier waiting while Capitán Angelus penned an epistle.

"Sergeant, saddle immediately and take a letter and a document to Fray Francisco at the mission," Angelus ordered. "You will wait there until Fray Francisco writes a note, which you will carry with all speed to Don Esteban de la Zamora at the *posada*, or wherever he may be found. If Don Esteban desires it, you will then escort him to the mission, showing him every courtesy, and present him to Fray Francisco."

"Understood, *capitán!*"

Sergeant Salazar clicked his heels together and saluted, accepted the letter and a document bearing the great seal of the Governor, and hurried out of the room. A moment later, he was howling down the corridor for his horse, and growling at the prospect of so much hard riding through the dust and in the heat of the day.

CHAPTER VI

TOUCH NO SWORD

SALAZAR galloped out of town and along the dusty road up the valley, toward where the beautiful mission buildings nestled in bowers of green.

He located Fray Francisco at the mission and delivered the letter and document. Some time later, he received a note from the *fray*, addressed to Don Esteban de la Zamora, and mounted to gallop back to town.

Covered with fine dust and damp with perspiration, the sergeant dismounted in front of the *posada* and entered, to demand of the landlord the present whereabouts of Don Esteban.

"You will find him in the patio, sergeant," the landlord said, speaking like an exhausted man.

"How do you enjoy having such a distinguished guest in your pigsty?" Salazar wanted to know.

The landlord sighed. "I may grow wealthy catering to the man, but it will be the death of me."

"What is amiss?"

"Don Esteban had me engage men to take out a partition and make two of my best patio rooms into one, so he can have a larger chamber."

"Possibly he desires room to stretch."

"He had Felipe, his body servant, throw all my furnishings into the patio, and dressed the room with his own rugs, covers, wall ornaments and even candelabra."

"He desires to feel at home, though away from it," the sergeant decided.

"He told me what he wishes in the way of food, and I have men running around the countryside trying to find it. Just now, he is in the patio trying to teach half a dozen dirty natives how to sing, saying he wishes music with his meals."

Salazar laughed. "A man who gets what he wants!" he commented. "He has a sure way with him. But he is able to pay for what he desires."

"There is no complaint there," the landlord admitted. "Gold does not stick to his

fingers. You would think the coins are red hot, the way he lets them drop. But I'll never live to enjoy my profits. Already, I am a nervous wreck."

Salazar laughed again and strode into the patio, where he saw some frightened natives huddled against a wall while Don Esteban gave them a lecture on music and harmony. Felipe was standing to one side, grinning.

Salazar clicked his heels and cleared his throat to attract attention.

"Ah! The big sergeant who knows where good wine is to be found!" Don Esteban said, smiling. "You have some business with me?"

"I carry a letter to you from Fray Francisco of the mission, Don Esteban," Salazar reported. "And I have orders from my *capitán* to escort you to the mission if you wish to go there."

Don Esteban took the letter and broke the seal. He read swiftly, then glanced up.

"It appears that this Fray Francisco wishes to see me immediately on a matter of importance," he said. "The good *fray* must not be kept waiting. Felipe, give these singing frogs some money, then prepare my horse for a journey. You need not attend me, for the sergeant will act as escort."

SALAZAR waited while Don Esteban went to his room to get riding gauntlets and put on his spurs. The spirited black horse was ready when they emerged from the *posada* a little later. A group of natives and peons were admiring the animal, and they began calling for alms.

Don Esteban swung up into his saddle and turned to look them over. With his head hanging and his bare feet shuffling in the dust, Jorge Gonzales, the governor's special agent, was in the group.

"Alms you shall have, señores," Don Esteban called, "for I am on my way to the mission, and the good *fray* may ask me what I have done recently to aid the poor."

He tossed a few coins into the air, and as they struck the ground and men scrambled for them, he watched Jorge Gonzales carefully.

"Wish me good fortune on my short journey," Don Esteban called to them. "Wish that I may have a big bright moon when I come riding home tonight."

He looked straight at Jorge Gonzales as he spoke, and the latter's eyes narrowed slightly. The word had been passed and understood. Don Esteban knew what Jorge Gonzales would be waiting for him somewhere along the road when he returned.

"This is a delightful country, sergeant," Don Esteban said, as they rode out the highway. "A land of peace and plenty!"

"Too much peace for a soldier, and plenty of nothing to do," Salazar complained. "'Tis no place for a man of action."

"You crave action?" Don Esteban asked. "A man after my own heart! But sometimes action occurs when we least expect it. Trouble may be cooking now under your very nose."

"If that were true, Don Esteban, I could smell it. I can smell trouble twice as far as another man."

Don Esteban's eyes twinkled. "Perhaps the size of your nose has something to do with that," he observed.

WHEN they reached the mission, they were met near the gate by Fray Francisco—an emaciated elderly man with a wrinkled face the color of old parchment, but whose body was erect, who smiled kindly, and whose eyes still burned with zeal. He was a benevolent *fray* with many good works to his credit, and in charge of the mission for the time being.

Fray Francisco greeted Don Esteban warmly, told the sergeant to make himself comfortable in the guest house, and asked Don Esteban to walk aside with him. He directed their steps to the chapel.

"Why bring me here, *fray*?" Don Esteban asked.

"The atmosphere of the chapel suits the moment, my son. Let us sit here by the door and talk a short time before we continue on to the altar."

Fray Francisco smiled at him, put out a wrinkled hand and patted him on the shoulder.

"What a man you have grown to be!" he praised. A true *caballero* in these degenerate days when such are swiftly disappearing. I knew your father years ago, my boy, and admired him. You are worthy of him. If you ever feel the need of guidance while you are here, do not hesitate to approach me."

"I thank you, *fray*. You wished to see me on a matter of importance?"

"Sí, Esteban. By king's courier, I have a communication from Monterey. It tells me of your escapade there recently, my son. I am also informed that the governor saw fit to send you away for a time as punishment—and fearing your presence there might lead to bloodshed."

Don Esteban smiled slightly. "I appreciated the governor's fear and had an understanding of the situation."

"So much for the secular side of it. You have been punished by the governor, no doubt with justice. But is it not possible that the Church requires something of you because of your transgression?"

"You mean a penance for what I did?" Don Esteban asked. "'Twas but a bit of wildness, *fray*, with no actual wrong done. The error regarding the *señorita*—"

"I do not require a penance, my son. But I am instructed to require an oath of you."

"An oath?"

"We must cool your hot blood, my son. You must learn that peace has its power as well as violence. You will come with me now to the altar and take oath that you will not engage in mortal combat with any man unless a foul attack is made on you and you must actually defend your life."

"SINCE I am not roaming the country seeking trouble, *fray*, that oath will not be difficult for me," Don Esteban replied. "But, if I am attacked—"

"I said unless you must actually defend your life, my son. I would keep you from being an aggressor, should your high spirits bubble over in this land which is strange to you. So you will take oath not to challenge to mortal combat, and not accept

any challenge that may be given you."

"Not accept a challenge? Would you have me called a craven, *fray*?"

"If challenged, you may say you are under oath to refrain from violence. I have been requesting this of you, my son. Must I command?"

"I obey, *fray*."

"The oath is to endure for the space of sixty days unless I release you from it prior to the expiration of that time," Fray Francisco concluded.

A few minutes later, they emerged from the chapel, the oath having been taken, and walked slowly beneath the arches toward the guest house, where Sergeant Salazar was waiting. Don Esteban had accepted Fray Francisco's invitation to remain and partake of the frugal evening meal with him.

"Sergeant, you may return to your *capitán* and say that I thank him for your escort," Don Esteban told Salazar. "I will not need you to show me the way back to the *posada* after I have concluded my visit here. But find your own way there—and use this to discover if the landlord's wine is still up to standard." He gave the grinning sergeant a coin.

Salazar saluted and hurried to his horse. Don Esteban walked on with Fray Francisco to the guest house, talking and laughing with the *fray*. Don Esteban had arranged it so he could ride back to town alone—and meet Jorge Gonzales unobserved along the way.

He was gay as he broke coarse bread and ate a stew of mutton and peppers with the *fray* a short time later. Don Esteban did not know that trouble was rushing toward him from at least three directions.

CHAPTER VII

SEEK THE SPY

THROUGH the bright moonlight, Don Esteban finally rode back toward the town. He was wondering about the oath he had been required to take. He guessed the governor was behind it, and decided that his excellency only wanted to be assured

that Don Esteban, on serious official business, would not get into trouble and run the risk of being disabled at a time his services were greatly needed.

Don Esteban made the ride leisurely, watching the shadows along the road and expecting to be hailed at any moment by Jorge Gonzales. But when he had covered half the distance to the town, he had not met the governor's agent.

He trotted around a bend in the road, and saw a dark figure in the moonlight in the distance. The figure melted into a patch of darkness immediately, and Don Esteban slowed his horse. A whisper came to him out of the night:

"*Señor!* Don Esteban!"

Don Esteban pulled the black to a complete stop and bent over in the saddle, searching the darkness. A girl left the deep shadows and ran to his side.

"You are Don Esteban—*sí?*" she asked.

"*Sí, señorita.*"

He could see her plainly in the moonlight—a tall, slender young girl, evidently part native, dressed in a single clinging garment, her arms and legs bare. Her long black hair was hanging down her back, and her eyes were wide.

"Please come with me quickly, *señor*," she begged. "'Tis but a little distance."

"What is this? Who are you?" Don Esteban asked.

"My name is Rosa. Señor Gonzales has been badly hurt. He asked me to watch until you came along the road from the mission, and stop you."

"Hurt? In what manner?"

"Three men attacked him, *señor*. If you will come—"

"Lead the way," Don Esteban told her. "And lead me not into some sort of trap, unless you wish to suffer for it."

Without reply, the girl started walking along the road, and Don Esteban rode close behind her. He slipped his blade out of its scabbard and held it ready as he rode, watching the spots of darkness he passed and half-expecting foes to charge at him out of the night. Penniless peons to whom a piece of gold was a fortune might not hesi-

tate to slay and rob a man suspected of having a quantity of it on his person.

THE girl finally turned off the road, and Don Esteban followed her over rough ground studded with clumps of dry brush, and into a little ravine, where she stopped in front of a small adobe hut.

"I managed to get him here, *señor*," the girl said. "This is a poor hut where I live sometimes when there is no work to be had at some *hacienda*."

"How did you come across him, *señorita*? Tell me the tale," Don Esteban ordered, as he dismounted.

The girl nodded.

"I have known Jorge Gonzales for some time, *señor*. I was with him tonight, for he meant to show me to you, thinking that perhaps some time he would use me as a bearer of messages between you."

"What happened?"

"He heard somebody coming along the road, *señor*, and went out in the moonlight, thinking it was you approaching. But three men came riding around the bend. They sprang off their horses and seized him, and began beating him."

"Did they say why they beat him?"

"One said they had seen him go out the road from town, and had followed. Another called him a spy. I dared not cry out, lest they seize me also. They beat him badly, and told him to begone out of the country, else they would kill him later. So they left him unconscious and rode away."

"And then?"

"I got water from a spring and dashed it into his face, *señor*, and finally he was conscious again. I had difficulty getting him to the hut. He sent me back to the highway to watch for you."

"Let me see him," Don Esteban said.

The girl entered the dark hut, spoke to somebody inside, and presently a candle flared. Don Esteban went to the door and peered in. He saw Jorge Gonzales stretched on a pallet. Don Esteban entered and closed the door, so light from the candle would not streak out into the night.

"This is a sorry business, Don Esteban,"

Jorge Gonzales said, speaking like a man in pain.

"How is it with you, Gonzales?"

"No bones broken. I will be able to travel before daylight. What I fear, Don Esteban, is that they know."

"How could that be?"

"That is beyond my understanding. I have been as careful as usual in my work. If they know, my usefulness is gone—here. But I can work elsewhere."

"Tell me more. What makes you think they know?"

"One called me a spy. They mentioned Miguel Brocamonte, and one said he would be pleased and pay them well."

"Have you anything to report to me, Gonzales?"

"Everything is as I informed the governor, and as he no doubt informed you. Don José del Rio is eager to be a great man, and Brocamonte is egging him on to it, so he can get trade concessions which would make him richer."

"Have they done more than talk?"

"They have started working on the natives and peons back in the hills, especially around San Luis Rey. And today, I have learned, three sailors of the *Magdalena's* crew were induced to desert the ship, join the natives and peons in the hills and start preaching rebellion."

"Who bribed them?"

"Miguel Brocamonte, when he went to the ship to see about a shipment of goods he expected."

"Now, regarding you—?"

"Rosa can get me away from here before daylight, Don Esteban. She can use a cart and old horse belonging to her uncle. I'll get back into the hills and continue my work. They will think I became frightened and ran away."

"You believe they know you are a spy for the government, and say you cannot imagine how they came to suspect you. This girl—"

"Rosa is loyal," Gonzales said quickly.

"Who is she? Have you allowed yourself to be led astray from caution and duty by a pretty face?" Don Esteban asked sternly.

THE girl touched him on the arm. "Please understand, *señor*," she begged. "Jorge and I met first some time ago by accident, and something made me love him. He would have avoided me—"

"We heard whispers of what was going on, and got to talking about it," Gonzales added. "Rosa believed I was only a peon, and talked frankly. I learned that she understood this thing clearly: an uprising will mean only slaughter of the natives and peons with no profit to them. You need not fear Rosa."

"I know Jorge is really working to help my people, Don Esteban," Rosa said. "I want to help, too. Nobody will suspect me. I can gather information. I can do more than that, *señor*—I can talk to my people and urge them against this foolishness."

"We will go back into the hills tonight," Gonzales put in. "Rosa's people will heal my hurts. And if it is necessary, she can carry my confidential messages to you. If I am under suspicion, Don Esteban, we must never be seen talking together. You must show no interest in me."

"Agreed!" Don Esteban said. "Having a girl in this business—it is irregular, but we will try it in this case. Is there anything you need, Gonzales? Money?"

"I need nothing, Don Esteban. I have a few coins, and it would look suspicious if I had more."

"And you trust this girl fully?"

Rosa touched Don Esteban's arm again.

(TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK)

"I would die for him, *señor*," she declared, "though I know I can never hope to be his wife. I am a nameless halfcaste. I knew my mother, but not my father. But I would help my poor people. They are so easily led astray."

Don Esteban put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "Then I trust you," he told her. "Do not betray that trust. Get Jorge away to some safe place and heal his hurts. Communicate with me if it is necessary, but always with extreme caution. Let me have news whenever there is any of value."

For a short time then, while the girl stood on guard outside the hut, Don Esteban quizzed Gonzales about what he had discovered. He had been depending on Gonzales being near at hand and communicating with him regularly, and now that plan was ruined. To a certain extent, Don Esteban would have to work in the dark.

Finally, Don Esteban clasped the agent's hand a moment, and strode out.

"Care for him well," he told Rosa, "for he is a man of great value. And I think, *señorita*, that you are a girl of value, also."

"I thank you, Don Esteban. *Señor, á Dios!*"

"*'Dios!*" Don Esteban whispered in reply.

He swung up into his saddle, made his way cautiously back to the road and entered it when he was sure nobody was observing him, and galloped on to the town.

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits

poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(ADV.)

MEN of DARING

By SPOON & ALLEN



SEA-HAWK

CAPT. JOSEPH A. GAINARD'S 30 YEARS AT SEA HAVE BEEN AS THRILLING AS ANY DEEP-WATER SAGA EVER WRITTEN.

A JUNIOR OFFICER ON THE "PRESIDENT LINCOLN," SUNK BY A GERMAN SUB DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR, HE CLUNG TO A CRUDE RAFT FOR DAYS UNTIL RESCUED.

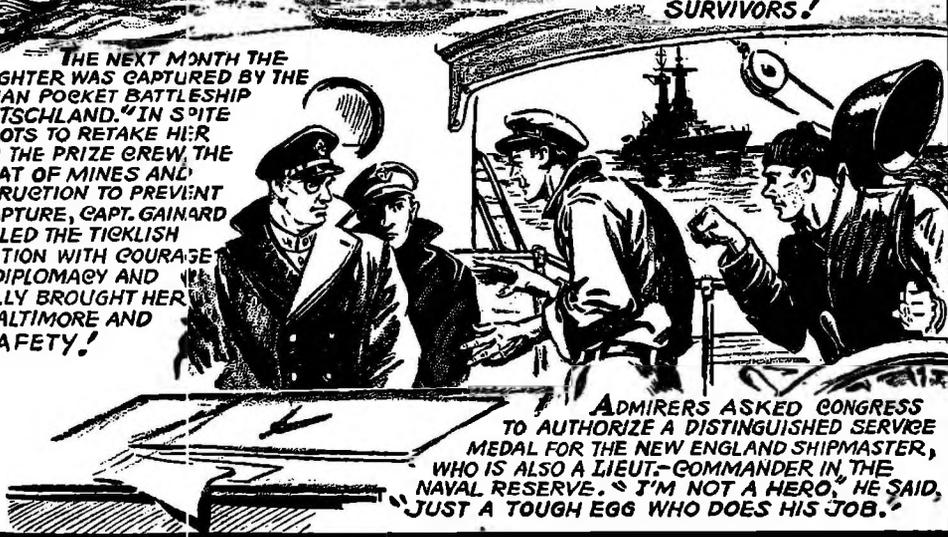


**Capt.
GAINARD
HERO**



GAINARD WENT THROUGH TWO OTHER TORPEDOINGS, QUELLED AN INGIPIENT "MUTINY" IN MONTEVIDEO HARBOR, AND LAST SEPTEMBER WHEN HIS "CITY OF FLINT" PICKED UP AN SOS THAT THE "ATHENIA" HAD BEEN TORPEDOED, HE TOOK HIS SHIP IMMEDIATELY INTO THE DANGER ZONE AND RESCUED OVER 200 SURVIVORS!

THE NEXT MONTH THE FREIGHTER WAS CAPTURED BY THE GERMAN POCKET BATTLESHIP "DEUTSCHLAND." IN SPITE OF PLOTS TO RETAKE HER FROM THE PRIZE CREW, THE THREAT OF MINES AND DESTRUCTION TO PREVENT RECAPTURE, CAPT. GAINARD HANDLED THE TICKLISH SITUATION WITH COURAGE AND DIPLOMACY AND FINALLY BROUGHT HER TO BALTIMORE AND SAFETY!



ADMIRERS ASKED CONGRESS TO AUTHORIZE A DISTINGUISHED SERVICE MEDAL FOR THE NEW ENGLAND SHIPMASTER, WHO IS ALSO A LIEUT.-COMMANDER IN THE NAVAL RESERVE. "I'M NOT A HERO," HE SAID, "JUST A TOUGH EGG WHO DOES HIS JOB."

The Flying Irishman

By WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

Author of "Lo, the Poor Indian," "Happy Landing," etc.

'Twas plain the Ould Wan was no liar when he spoke th' curse av th' Baldorgans: they will be umbrageous an' quarrelsome men, an' trouble shall follow 'em like flies follow after a garbage cart. But let's get on with the story av Dennis Baldorgan, who preferred a club to a Krag-Jorgenson

CHAPTER I

THE OULD WAN SPEAKS

I HAVE heard me good grandmother, Hivin rest the dear old lady's soul, tell the yarn often.

It happens back in the days when Ireland is young. There is a young fellow by the name of Colin Baldorgan livin' by Ballymahon Bog. He is a pleasant enough lad—though small—with a quick grin to the face of him an' a rovin' eye for any pretty colleen as happens to pass. Howsoever, he has a bad fault which is this.

He is sensitive about the size of him an' ye do not dare so much as look cross-eyed at him or he will figure that ye are castin' aspersions upon his bony framework, so to speak. The consequences are apt to be sudden an' disastrous because this Colin Baldorgan, though small, is much similar to a buzz saw when he goes into action.

'Tis this trait that finally gets him into trouble.

He is at Clabber Nolan's wake one night when a big bog-trotter from over Donashee way comes in. This bog-trotter has a stone jug in the hands of him an' it is not hard to see that he has sampled the contents of it frequent an' copious. Colin Baldorgan happens to be standin' there as this bog-trotter busts up to pay his final respects to Clabber Nolan.

"Do ye not stand in the way of a man when he is about to pay his respects to the dead, ye ugly half pint!" the bog-trotter says, irritable.

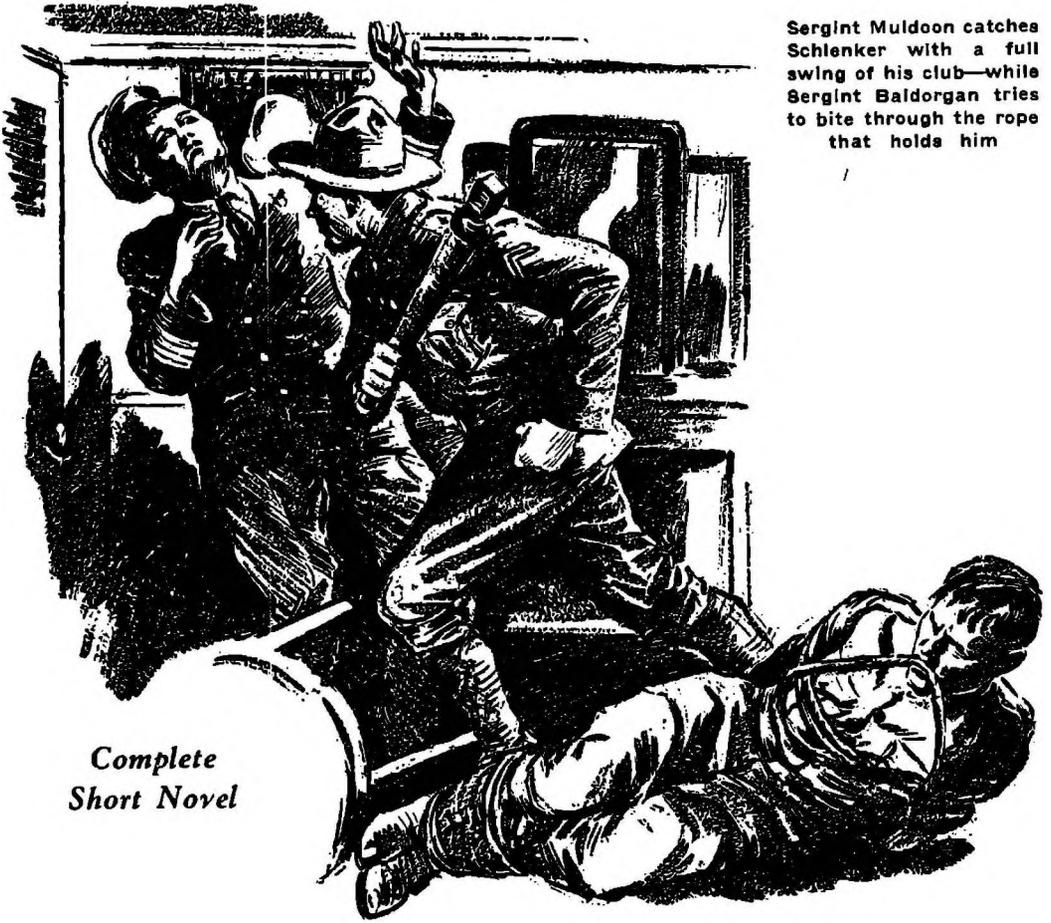
There are them there that could have told him that it was an unfortunate thing to say. The red blood begins to come up into Colin Baldorgan's eye an' he reaches out for a pick handle which is leanin' against the wall of Clabber Nolan's cottage.

"Half pint, did ye say?" he asks, unpleasant.

"Half pint or quarter pint," says the bog-trotter, "it makes no difference. Get out of me way!"

Well, Colin swings up the pick handle but he is a mite slow this time with unpleasant consequences. The bog-trotter hits him over the head with the stone jug an' presently they take him in an' lay him out all nice alongside of Clabber Nolan. Everybody says what a pity an' him so young, too. Still, they admit, he was gettin' to be something of a nuisance, at that.

WELL, accordin' to me grandmother, the next this Colin Baldorgan knows he wakes up at the foot of a flight of gold stairs. The sun is shinin' bright an' the air is full of perfume although Colin Baldorgan, bein' used to the smell of Ballymahon Bog, sniffs at it some suspicious at first.



Sergint Muldoon catches Schlenker with a full swing of his club—while Bergint Baldorgan tries to bite through the rope that holds him

*Complete
Short Novel*

After a little he gets up to his feet an' the first thing that he sees is a big sign with a finger pointin' to the steps. It says:

*This Way to the Pearly Gates
Have Your Tickets Ready*

"Hmmm," says Colin, "I have got no ticket but I will go up an' take a look around anyway. There is no harm in seein' what can be seen."

So he starts up. It is a long climb but he has been used to trottin' over Ballymahon Bog an' so it does not bother him. He comes to the top after a while an' admits to himself that these gates are something to see. They have got gold bars to them an' they are fixed to pillars which are made of pearls. There is a gold but-

ton in one of the pillars with a sign which reads:

Ring for Attendant

Well, Colin ain't in any hurry an' he decides that he will take a little look around first so he walks up slow an' easy an' takes a look through these gates. It is a pleasant lookin' place on the inside although there is an air of peace to it that does not set so well with the Baldorgan.

The place is full of people but they seem to be doin' little except to set around an' whang away industrious on gold harps. The Baldorgan's interest is laggin' fast an' he is about to turn away when a colleen goes past the gate.

She looks at Colin an' he sees that she has got a merry look to the eye of her.

Moreover, she skips a little an' slaps a tricky bit of a chord out of her harp an' then goes on down the road, lookin' back over her shoulder. Colin makes up his mind fast an' goes over an' jabs at the bell.

He has to wait for some time but finally a gent with a long white beard to the chin of him comes out of a little house an' walks forward dignified. He has got a big key ring with a bunch of gold keys tide to it an' he comes up to the gate an' peeks through the bars at Colin.

"What do ye want?" he asks.

"In," Colin tell him, respectful. "It looks to be a nice place that ye have an' I will look it over."

"Have ye a ticket?" the graybeard asks him.

"No," Colin says. "I did not know I was comin' or I would have got one."

"Then ye cannot come in," the graybeard says firm.

Well, Colin argues with him polite but the old man just stands there shakin' his head an' Colin is about to give up in disgust when the colleen comes by again. She has got a pair of black eyes that dance up an' down something scandalous an' she smiles nice at Colin.

He tips his hat an' smiles back at her. "The top of the mornin' to ye," he says.

THE old gent with the whiskers looks some scandalized but this colleen goes up to him an' pulls his chin whiskers playful while she gives him that high power smile. He scowls but it is not hard for Colin to see that he is not displeased.

"What's the trouble, Uncle Peter?" she asks.

The old boy puts his scowl on again. He pokes a thumb toward Colin an' says: "'Tis no trouble, me dear. Just another gate crasher tryin' to get in without a ticket."

"A nice lookin' lad, he is," says the colleen, watchin' Colin out of the corner of her eye. "Could ye not let him in for just a little bit—say a day or so—to take a look around?"

"'Tis most irregular," Saint Peter—for it is no other—says. "An' 'tis establishin' a bad precedent."

"Please?" she says at him soft. "Do it for me, won't ye, Uncle Peter?"

"A bold an' shameless hussy ye are, Molly Mahone," Saint Peter says. "Ye think that rules are made only to be broke. Howsoever, this once I will humor ye."

So he takes one of the gold keys an' unlocks the gate an' Colin Baldorgan goes in with his hat on the back of the head of him an' his hands in his pockets. Molly Mahone digs a toe into the grass an' looks at him out of the corner of her eye again while the good saint is fastening up the gate again.

"First, ye must sign the guest register," Saint Peter tells him then.

So the three of them go over to the little house an' Saint Peter looks over Colin's shoulder as he puts down *Colin Baldorgan* with a bit of a flourish. The good saint blots the book an' then squints at the signature thoughtful.

"Baldorgan," he says, "Hmmm. Baldorgan. The name is familiar but I cannot call to mind what I have heard of it at the moment."

Howsoever, Colin an' Molly Mahone are not payin' any attention to what he says. They have gone out onto the grass again an' Molly runs her fingers over the strings of this harp of hers soft.

"Would ye be carin' to see the sights?" she asks.

"I have seen all of the sights that I will ever care to see," Colin says bold, lookin' square at her. "Howsoever, de ye lead on, Molly Mahone."

She blushes a little an' then the two of them go down the road together. In the little house the good saint is still squintin' at the guest book an' mumblin'.

WELL, it is the next day an' Colin Baldorgan is sittin' under a tree an' listenin' while Molly sings a little song to him soft. It does not take the seventh son of a seventh son to see that these

two are interested in each other more than somewhat. There is a look in Colin's eye an' a happiness to Molly's smile that has not been there before.

She is just startin' a new song when Saint Peter comes down the road with the dust puffin' out from under his sandals an' a couple of celestial police hot-footin' it behind him. The good saint pulls up in front of the two, pantin' some because he is not used to such exercise.

"Ye are the Colin Baldorgan of Ballymahon Bog?" he asks stern.

"None other," Colin tells him, "an' a fine bog it is. It would be a pleasure to show it to ye some time."

Saint Peter waves his arms. "I knew I should never have done it," he says, upset. "Wurra, wurra—the scandal it will cause if it ever gets out!"

"What are ye talkin' about?" Colin asks him. "Do ye have done with it an' go because Molly an' meself have things of importance to discuss."

Molly blushes a little an' looks down at her toes.

"Ye must get out an' right away," Saint Peter says. "It may be that I can hush the matter up."

Colin gets up on his feet slow. "What do ye mean—I must get out?" he asks.

"Quick or I am a ruined man," Saint Peter says, wringin' his hands. "'Tis no wonder that ye did not have a ticket. I have checked ye up an' find out that ye are slated straight through for the other place."

"I will not go," Colin tells him stubborn an' he gets onto the feet of him an' squints at the two celestial cops who are standin' behind the good saint. They shuffle their feet in the dust uneasy an' 'tis plain to see that they do not relish the prospect of bouncin' this Colin out.

"Seize him, men," Saint Peter says. "'Tis in the mind of me that I will never live this day down."

WELL, it is as pretty a little scrap as ye would care to see while it lasts. Howsoever, in the end, the celestial cops

wear Colin down an' presently they give him the old heave-ho through the pearly gates an' he lands on his stern at the head of the steps. Molly Mahone is standin' there with the fists of her clenched an' her black eyes flashin'.

"I tell ye, ye cannot throw him out!" she is stormin' at Saint Peter.

One of the cops touches an eye gingerly with a finger. The eye is beginnin' to close fast an' is turnin' various shades of purple fast.

He says sour to Molly: "Lady, we *have* thrown him out—an' one more job like this an' I resign from the force."

"I say ye cannot throw him out!" Molly says again, payin' no attention to the cop.

Saint Peter pays no attention to her. He is fiddlin' with the lock of the gate an' mumblin' to himself. It is plain to see that he is some upset about the whole business.

Well, this Molly Mahone is not the one to dally around when it comes to makin' up her mind. She looks at Saint Peter an' she looks at Colin Baldorgan, who is sittin' on the top step an' dustin' himself off.

Sudden Molly yanks the keys out of the good saint's hands. She opens the gates, slips through an' slams 'em behind her as she goes across to Colin.

Saint Peter just stands there, lookin' at her with the mouth of him open. Takin' it all in all, this has been a bad two days for the old man an' now he is up against something else that he has never had to cope with before.

"If he goes I go with him!" Molly Mahone says passionate over her shoulder. "Do ye put that in your pipe an' smoke it, Uncle Peter!"

Well, Saint Peter sort of bleats an' tangles his fingers up in his beard while the two cops watch curious. Saint Peter thinks of something to say finally.

"Ye cannot do this, Molly," he says. "Did ye not hear me say that he has a ticket straight through to the other place?"

"He is me man," she says back firm,

"an' where he goes I go, too. A good-day to ye, Uncle Peter."

Well, like I have said, this Colin Baldorgan is a good lad at heart an' he is no longer grinnin' now but is serious an' thoughtful, instead. He puts his arm around Molly Mahone's waist gentle—then takes it away an' turns her back toward the gates.

"'Tis a grand thing that ye would do, Molly darlin'," he says, "but I cannot let ye. Ye will be goin' back now."

Maybe I have said that this Molly Mahone is a colleen with spirit to her. She puts her two hands upon her hips an' she tips her head a little back as she looks at Colin Baldorgan.

"I go down the steps," she says. "Either I go with you or I go alone. Which is it to be, Colin Baldorgan?"

Colin grins at her reckless an' slips his arm about the waist of her again an' the two of 'em go down the gold steps side by side. Saint Peter stands there lookin' after them for a little an' shakin' his head from side to side. This has been a tryin' day for the good saint.

WELL, Colin Baldorgan an' Molly get to the bottom of the steps an' there is the Ould Wan, himself, settin' on a rock with his knees crossed an' the tail of him curled up over his shoulder. He nods to the two of 'em an' grins an' Colin grins back for he an' the Ould Wan have got much in common.

"So Pete kicked ye out, did he?" the Ould Wan asks.

Colin nods. "He did—though how ye have found out about it so soon I would not be knowin'."

The Ould Wan waves his hand an' chuckles. "'Tis simple. Pete calls me upon the telephone this mornin' to check the credentials of ye, so to speak. The ould boy almost swallows the receiver when he finds out that I have ye ticketed straight through to me own bailiwick with never a stop-over on the way. I am afraid for a minute that he is going to have a fit but he snaps out of it finally."

"Indeed?" Colin says polite. "Do ye then be good enough to let us in for Molly Mahone an' meself have things of importance to discuss an' it is sore interrupted that we have been this morning."

Howsoever, the Ould Wan lifts his hand.

"Gently, gently," he says. "Do ye not go so fast, me young rooster. I have spent the best part of the mornin' lookin' over your service record an' I am still undecided in me mind as to what I shall do with ye."

"What is it that ye mean?" Colin asks him, scowlin' a little. "Ye will let me in—what else can ye do?"

The Ould Wan twists his mustache an' looks at Molly Mahone thoughtful. Then he turns his head an' looks for a long time at Colin Baldorgan. Finally he spits thoughtful an' stands up with the bow-legs of him spraddled a little.

"I am goin' to send ye back across the river. 'Tis not me customary policy in such cases but a policy that cannot be broke is no good anyway."

"Why?" Colin says, his mouth droppin' open a little.

The Ould Wan looks again at Molly Mahone, standin' there smilin' a little an' with the hand of her on Colin's arm. Then the Ould Wan smiles a smile which is a little twisted an' he shrugs his shoulders.

"Maybe I wish to save meself trouble," he says to Colin. "It is a peaceable establishment that I run an' a man with half an eye can see that peace an' quiet is considerable foreign to your nature. I would be spendin' most of me time smoothin' out the brawls that ye would start, did I let ye in—so back across the river ye go."

Molly Mahone lets go of Colin's arm an' walks forward a little until she is close to the Ould Wan an' a pretty sight she is with the sun on the black hair of her an' her skin like peaches an' cream. She smiles an' tobs him a little curtsy easy an' graceful.

"We thank ye, me man an' I," she says. "We will not forget ye."

WELL, the Ould Wan looks at her for a minute an' then he smiles quizzical. "Take him as me wedding present to ye, Molly Mahone," he says. "Much heart-ache will he bring ye for he is a brawlin' an' quarrelsome lad an' he has a loose foot. The most that he will ever give ye will be a flock of red-headed childer who will grow up with a loose foot likewise to bring ye more trouble an' more heart-ache."

"No matter," Molly Mahone tells the Ould Wan proud. "He is me man."

The Ould Wan smiles again an' lifts his hand. "One thing more I will give ye, Molly Mahone. Bad though he may be, ye will always know that there will never be any woman but yourself for him."

"What more could a woman ask?" Molly says to him.

The Ould Wan turns around to Colin Baldorgan then an' looks at *him* for a long minute. Then he sighs a little an' stoops to loop his tail back up over his shoulder. -

"'Tis a lucky man that ye are, Colin Baldorgan," he says, "for ye will have the love of a good woman until finally ye come back here to the griddle that I will then have waitin' for ye.

"Likewise shall the Baldorgan clan, which shall come after ye, be marked with this good fortune for they shall need it. They will be umbrageous an' quarrelsome men an' trouble shall follow after them like flies follow a garbage cart; but through the whole of it, they shall keep the love of their women. Now I bid the two of ye good-day an' good luck."

So the Ould Wan bows polite an' goes on off down the road with his hands in his pocket while he whistles: *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Ould Town Tonight* between the teeth of hira. He is well satisfied with what he has done.

Well, to make a long story short, Clabber Dolan's wake is beginnin' to get into full swing when Colin Baldorgan opens his eyes. For a minute he does not know where he is at; then he sees the candles an' tries to sit up. A hand slides under

his shoulder an' helps him. Then a voice says soft:

"I was afraid that ye would never wake, Colin Baldorgan."

So he turns his head an' there is Molly Mahone with the black hair of her soft against the candles. She smiles at him an' the touch of her hand is cool an' good against his forehead.

CHAPTER II

TH' BRAWLIN' BALDORGAN

NOW the rest of this is back in the days when Uncle Sam has decided that the rucus out in the Philippines has been goin' on for long enough an' that something ought to be done about it. I have just enlisted an' am waitin' at the Presidio of San Francisco for a transport which will take me out to Manila.

Not bein' well dry behind the ears yet an' possessin' no sense to speak of whatever, I get me a pass to go out an' see the city on thiſ Saturday afternoon. I have heard about the fascinatin' brands of wickedness which is to be found on the Barbary Coast an' so I head there as fast as a street car will take me.

I disremember the name of the place that I went into but it is not the sort of an establishment such as would appeal to the Daughters of Light class of any first rate Sunday school. Nevertheless, there I am presently, settin' at a table with a beer in front of me an' feelin' like the devil of a fellow.

This is about nine o'clock of the evening, as well as I remember. A feller is playin' on the piano an' a girl, with spangles an' not much else on, comes out an' sings something about just bein' a bird in a gilded cage. It is a sad song so I order me another beer.

The waiter has just put it down in front of me when a big lad, with a cock-eye to him, comes sidlin' up. He kicks a chair around an' sets down, flippin' a half dollar to the waiter an' tellin' him to bring another beer an' take the pay for both of 'em out of the half.

He says to me then: "Seein' the sights, are ye, Jack?"

I am some displeased because, after the four beers I have drunk, I have begun to fancy meself as quite a man about town instead of the hayseed I am. Howsoever, I swallow my dudgeon an' answer him polite.

Then he squints at me uniform. "Soldier, too, eh?" he says. "Now what would be your station?"

There is something about this feller that I do not like but it is hard to put me finger on it exact. It may be his face, which is something like that of a horse, or it may be his cock-eye which gives him a weasel look.

He is a big man, I notice—heavy through the shoulders an' the knuckles of his hands are broke an' scarred. I put him down as a tough customer an' later I find out that I am not wrong.

"Me ship sails for the Philippines come Wednesday," I tell him, an' I cannot help swellin' up me chest a little. "I am goin' out to the war."

"Ye don't say," he says, very interested. "'Tis a brave act an' I respect ye for it. I have no doubt but that the government pays ye well for such hazardous service?"

"Not bad," I tell him. "There are allowances an' settlements an' such. No later than yesterday I have drawn better than thirty dollars an' I have not yet been in the army two months."

"Well, well," he says an' changes the subject. "'Tis a great admiration that I have for you brave lads who are goin' over to fight the Tagalogs. Will ye do me the honor to have a drink with me?"

Well, great ninny that I am, I puff meself up like a toad with importance an' begin to think that I have misjudged the man. Not only is he afflicted with brilliant conversation, I perceive, but he is a man of rare discernment as well.

"It will be a pleasure" I tell him. "Private Michael O'Hare is me name, sir."

"Dolliver Goff," he says to me, "an' at your service." Then he hollers for the

waiter who trots up an' stand waitin' respectful.

"Do ye mix us up a couple of your specials, Tom—make one of 'em extra special for me young military friend here who is about to go out to fight the Tagalogs in the Philippines."

PRESENTLY this waiter comes back with two glasses on a tray an' I am a little perturbed for I had thought me new friend had been talkin' about beer. It is not beer that is in them glasses.

I do not like to say anything though an', while I hesitate, this Dolliver Goff picks up one of the glasses an' hands it to me.

"May ye have a pleasant voyage," he says, grinnin' at me. In spite of the fact that he is buyin' the drink there is something about that grin that I do not like.

Well, I take a little sip out of me glass an' it gags me something horrid. I cough an' put the glass down, takin' a big swig of beer to wash the taste away. Goff is watchin' me close an' I have a feelin' that something is wrong here.

However, he says jovial: "Drink her down, me lad. Ye would not insult Dolliver Goff by refusin' to drink with him now, would ye?"

I manage a sort of a wry smile an' lift the glass again because I do not wish to be shamed here in front of the piano player an' the lady with the spangles. After all, am I not a fightin' man on me way to commit law an' order upon the little brown brothers in the Philippines?

"Just a drop down me windpipe which choked me for a minute," I explain. "'Tis a fine drink, indeed, an' I will enjoy it fine as soon as I get me breath back."

He squints at me but does not say anything. Well, I see I have got to go through with it an' I am just liftin' the glass again when somebody slaps the hand of me hard an' the glass goes flyin' out to smash against the floor.

A voice behind me says harsh: "Get up on the feet of ye, kid, an' work toward the door!"

I get a quick look at the man who has spoke as I stumble up to me feet. He is slight built but wiry an' I see that he is in uniform an' that he wears the stripes of a sergint on his sleeve. Right now he is standin' with his feet spraddled a little an' he is holdin' a table leg in his two hands. He grins wicked at this Goff.

"Up to your old tricks, are ye?" he says.

Dolliver Goff swears vicious an' jumps up, grabbin' his chair by the back as he comes. Out of the corner of me eye I see the bartender comin' around the end of the bar with his bung starter in his hand. A half a dozen others, who have been just settin' around up to now, start closin' in on us an' I see that most of 'em have clubs or blackjacks. 'Tis plain as the nose on me face that they mean us no good.

Even the blond lady with the spangles takes a hand—she climbs up on the piano platform an' starts throwin' beer mugs indiscriminate.

That place explodes sudden.

Dolliver Goff comes in, swingin' his chair vicious, but the sergint parries the blow neat. He used his table leg like it is a rifle with a bayonet onto the end of it an' he gives Dolliver Goff the long thrust with enthusiasm. The point of the table leg catches me cock-eyed acquaintance just above the belt buckle an' he goes backward across a table an' has no further interest in the proceedings whatever.

Sergint Baldorgan, for I learn later that such is the name of him, yells to me: "Guard the back of me, kid, an' keep edgin' to the door!"

He catches one of the other monkeys a whack on the chops with the table leg an' then the two of us begin to move backward cautious. Meanwhile the bartender is hoppin' up an' down, eager to get in a lick with that bung starter of his. Howsoever, he gets a bit careless an' a lot too close an' I catch him with an uppercut which I started from the floor.

I am as awkward as a newborn colt in them days but ye could not have called

me exactly weak an' me uppercut lifts that bartender clean up onto the top of his bar. He sets there for a minute with his mouth hangin' open an' his eyes beginnin' to get glassy. He falls off backward, then, takin' a shelf full of glasses with him an' that is the last I see him.

WELL, we are almost to the door now with Sergint Baldorgan discouragin' any serious pursuit by means of that table leg of his. I am just congratulatin' meself on our escape when the blond lady by the piano gets in her innings. She winds up with a free an' easy swing an' sails a beer mug in our direction. Sergint Baldorgan does not duck in time an' it catches him square in the middle of the forehead.

He says: "The lady wins a cigar," an' drops to his hands an' knees. Out of the corner of me eye I see he is tryin' to get his head up but it will not come.

I pick up the table leg an' start to work.

Like I have said, I am awkward but I have hammered many a wedge into a fir log back in the state of Washington an' I find that the same motion can be used to clout people over the head with a table leg. I get four of the fellers that are left an' the rest go out by the back way, takin' a window sash with 'em.

Even the blond lady is impressed. She is settin' up on the piano now, an' as I turn around she eyes me respectful an' takes her hand away from the beer mug which she has been fondlin'.

Sergint Baldorgan is still on his hands an' knees—not out cold but he cannot get up—so I sling him over me shoulder an' the two of us go away from there. It has come to me sudden that this Barbary Coast ain't really no place for Mrs. O'Hare's little boy, Michael, so I head back toward Market Street with dispatch, so to speak.

I have gone maybe four blocks when the cool air clears the cobwebs out of Sergint Baldorgan's brain. He swears fluent an' digs a fist into me ribs.

"Put me down, ye young simpleton!" he says to me. "It will be a hot day in Hell when Sergint Dennis Boldorgan must be carried around upon the shoulder of a recruit who is not dry behind the ears yet. Put me down, damn ye!"

Well, I put him down an' he leans against a lamp post for a minute while the strength comes back into him. His forehead is bleedin' some but it is not cut bad an' presently he ties his handkerchief over the cut an' pulls his hat down so that the bandage does not show. Then he straightens up an' looks me over with a hard eye.

"What do ye call yourself, recruit?" he asked.

"Michael O'Hare," I tell him, cocky.

Me fight back there has raised me self-esteem something scandalous an' I do not make an overly hard attempt to hide the good opinion that I have of meself.

"Hmmm," says Sergint Boldorgan. He squints at me an' smiles a tight little smile—later I will learn that that smile means trouble for somebody. "Well, Recruit O'Hare, I am obliged to ye for carryin' me out like ye did. It is in me mind that them gorillas would have put the boot to me had ye not done as ye did. Here is the hand of me on it."

HE STICKS out his hand an' I take it, swellin' up with conceit like a poisoned pup the while. If I am not so busy reviewin' me own heroic conduct I would have noticed that the sergint's handshake is like stickin' the paw of you into a vise an' that he has the eyes of a man which it is not good to fool with.

"Ye are quite welcome, sergint," I tell him an'—more shame to me—there is a bit of condescension in me voice. I wave me hand careless. "I had just dropped in for a spot of whisky there an' am glad to have been of service. 'Tis in the mind of me that us soldiers ought to stick together."

"Quite so," he says to me an' the corners of his lips tip up a little sardonic. "Ye will now turn yourself around, Recruit O'Hare."

The thing puzzles me a little but not for long. I do as he says an' then, all of a sudden, a kick catches me square in the seat of the pants. It is a regular grand-pappy of a kick which lifts me a foot in the air.

Before I come down another kick catches me an' I trot forward a few steps an' dive into a trash can which is settin' there convenient.

Sergint Baldorgan pulls me out an' sets me back upon me feet. His expression is severe.

"The first," he says, "was for bein' such a damned young idiot as to go around drinkin' with strangers in a Barbary Coast clip joint. The second was for the purpose of reducin' the swellin' in your head by applyin' a counter-irritant to the other end of ye, so to speak."

Well, I am deflated considerable an' I stand there rubbin' me southern boundary while I wonder what is this that Sergint Baldorgan is talkin' about. He sees that by the blank look on me face an' he snorts disgusted while he kicks me hat toward me.

"An' just why do ye suppose that cock-eyed chimpanzee was buyin' ye drinks, Recruit O'Hare?" he asked.

"Why," I tell him, "it is because I am a soldier an' he admires soldiers. Did he not tell me so hisself?"

"Do ye take care that ye do not wander out in the woods alone, Recruit O'Hare," he tells me dry, "else the birds are apt to come along an' cover ye up with leaves. That was a Mickey Finn that your squint-eyed friend was treatin' ye to."

"A Mickey Finn?" I ask him because me ignorance is a thing ye would not believe.

"Knockout drops," he explained patient. "Tomorrow morning ye would have woke up with a headache an' empty pockets. Moreover, the chances are that ye would have found yourself upon a ship bound for Australia or Corpus Christi or some other foreign port. It has happened to recruits before."

Well, the thought of the thing I have

missed scares me but I am Irish an' me mad is greater than the scare. Sudden I know I wish to get me hands upon this Dolliver Goff again an' I turn to go back the way I have just come. Sergint Baldorgan reaches out an' plucks me by the sleeve.

"Where do ye think that ye are goin', ye young fool?" he says stern.

"I wish a few words with this Dolliver Goff," I tell him short an' he can see by me face that I am not foolin'.

"Let it wait," he says to me, "though 'tis likin' your spirit, that I am. It may be that ye will make a soldier yet."

He talks to me friendly on the street car goin' back out to the Presidio an' I acquire a great likin' for the man. There is a devil at the back of his blue eyes an' he has a twisted an' reckless sort of a grin which warm ye toward him. A great hand with the ladies, I am thinkin', an' also a grand one to have with ye in a fight.

I find later that I am right on both counts.

CHAPTER III

THEY'RE FIGHTIN' WITH MAUSERS

WELL, like I have said, me regimint is to sail on Wednesday for Manila by way of Nagasaki an' Hong Kong. I am considerable excited at the prospect, havin' never been on an ocean voyage before, an' I figure that Wednesday ain't never comin'.

It is me impatience that leads me to go down to the docks on Monday evenin' just to look at the old *Winsford Scott* which is to take us out.

She is a dumpy old tub but she looks like a luxury liner to me since I have not seen anything bigger than a row boat before. The pier is all lit up for they are loadin' cargo into her an' I sit there an' watch for maybe a couple of hours, forgettin' about the time.

It is good an' dark when I finally leave. I go back through the sheds on the pier an' notice that there is a smaller ship tied up in the dock on the other side. She is

a rusty lookin' tramp with *Esmerelda* painted up on the bow of her, an' for a minute I stand there lookin' at her an' wonderin' at all the places she has been. It gives me a funny little feelin' inside of me to think that I will be goin' those same places, too, come Wednesday.

While I stand there a couple of men come down the *Esmerelda's* gang plank an' walk slow along the pier. They are comin' toward where I am standin' in the deep shadow an' I am just about to step out an' go on about my business when I notice that there is something familiar about one of these fellers. So I stay hid where I am—it is not the first time that me curiosity has got me into trouble.

Well, the two of 'em stop maybe a half a dozen feet away from where I am standin' an' I can hear plain what they say. I see that I have not been mistook in thinkin' that one of 'em is familiar for it is me cock-eyed friend, Dolliver Goff, whose acquaintance I have made down on the Barbary Coast.

Hah, I think, when ye finished this business I have a bit of business, meself, which I will take up with ye, Dolliver Goff!

What they are sayin' drives that idea out of the head of me complete, however.

Dolliver Goff laughs unpleasant an' says: "Ye are the doctor, Otto. Do ye dangle the promise of money before them an' I will guarantee that the crew I have picked for ye will do your bidding an' no questions asked—even to cuttin' a throat or two."

Well, I do not like the sound of it but I keep on listening. The light is dim so that I cannot see the other man well but I see enough to know that he is big, with great shoulders to him. He speaks a little guttural an' I judge that his accent is German. He has got a cold voice an' there is a quality to it that makes the hairs prickle along me spine.

"That is good," he says. "I do not have use for men who are squeamish upon this trip. Also it is not good that they know too much, eh? Your navy—I think they

would like to catch us with the guns, no? Also, this man, Tharnbery, he knows too much. A man who knows too much can be dangerous."

"Leave him to me," Dolliver Goff growls. "He will not know his own name even by the time we get to Hong Kong."

WELL, it is gettin' late an' I have got to get back to the Presidio but something tells me that it will not be politic, so to speak, for me to step out now an' let these two know that I have been eavesdroppin'. I have heard what this Otto has said about people who know too much. So I stand still where I am an' I wish that that shadow is twice as black.

The feller with the accent says something then that I do not catch but Dolliver Goff laughs.

"Ye are a foxy one, Otto," he says admirin'. "Whoever would suspect that the *Esmerelda* was runnin' guns when they see them six school ma'ams on board all peaceable an' quiet? What are ye goin' to do with *them* after ye get there?"

Again I do not catch what this Otto says but Dolliver Goff laughs some more an' slaps his thigh. "I have seen the red-headed one," he says, an' I'll put me bid for her in now!"

I do not know why it is—maybe it is just the nasty tone of the man as he says it—but anyway me neck begins to get hot under the collar. I have just about decided to step out an' hang me callin' card on Dolliver Goff's nose when something happens.

There is a commotion of some sort on board the *Esmerelda* an', all a sudden, I see a dark figure break loose from the shadows in the well deck an' come up the gangplank runnin'. Somebody yells an' I see a second figure chasin' after the first. Dolliver Goff spins around an' reaches the head of the gangplank in two jumps.

Well, the whole thing happens so fast that I do nothin' but stand there. I see Dolliver Goff swing his fist an' there is a sort of meaty *chunk* an' the feller in

the lead goes down like he has been hit by an axe.

"He got away from me," the second feller says in a scared voice. "I just turned me back for a minute"

Dolliver Goff is swearin' at him an' then this Otto comes up to them slow. He says in that cold voice of his: "Ye will take care that none of them get away again, Schmidt. Do ye understand?"

They talked a little more an' then Schmidt an' Dolliver Goff pick this other feller up an' carry him back onto the ship. I figured that this is no place for me—bad as I would like to take a poke at Dolliver Goff—an' so I keep to the shadows an' head on out to where the street lights are.

I think that I will look up Sergint Baldorgan an' tell him what I have seen an' heard but it is late when I get back that night an' the next day the regimint goes aboard the *Winfield Scott* an' I do not see him.

WELL, it is me first ocean voyage an' was soon as we hit the rough water outside the Golden Gate I get seasick. The weather is bad all the way across an' so I stay seasick an' when I am conscious enough to be able to, I regret sincere that I have not stayed upon me old man's farm in Walla Walla, Washington.

Howsoever I do not die—though I am wishin' that I could a good part of the time—an' we finally pull into Nagasaki. Toward the last we have run into good weather an' I am feelin' better although I do not relish me meals much yet.

We are four days in Nagasaki, what with coalin' the *Winfield Scott* an' repairin' some of her machinery which has broke down. We are to sail the next day an' on this night I have got me a pass, the company clerk bein' a friend of mine, an' have gone ashore to see the sights.

I enjoy them considerable for I have never seen anything like this before. There is the funny paper houses an' the dinky shops an' the windin' streets all of which are new to me. So I wander around for

some hours, gawkin' at the rickshaws with the paper lanterns bobbin' along on the sides of 'em an' listenin' to the squeaky music which has sort of a heathenish sound but which is pretty when you get used to it.

Well, it is beginnin' to get late an' so I start back toward the water front, meanin' to get a boat to take me out to the *Winfield Scott*.

The street that I turn into is not lighted by street lamps but there are plenty of beer places which throw light across the road an', from the racket that goes on, I gather that this is one of them streets that you read about where sailor men from all the ports gather so to speak.

I am just comin' up to one, which seems to be a little more noisy than the others, when a man comes scootin' out of the door—almost knockin' me down as he goes by—an' plops hard into the dirt of the street.

He gets up, dustin' himself off, an' looks at me. I see that it is Sergint Baldorgan.

HE IS not drunk but 'tis plain that he has had a beer or two for his eye is very merry an' he is grinnin' that twisted grin of his.

"Friend," he says an' he does not recognize me for I am in the shadow, "there are six tough sailor-men in there that I do not like. Will ye do me a favor of standin' here an' countin' them as I throw 'em out?"

I do not have time to answer him for he has spit upon his hands an' he goes back inside. I hear a very considerable ruckus goin' on an' then a figure comes sailin' out again an' lards in the dirt.

"One," I say.

"Never mind," Sergint Baldorgan says in a resigned voice, "'tis me again."

Well, I step into the light as he gets up an' he squints at me—then grins. "'Tis Recruit O'Hare," he says. "I am glad to see ye, Recruit O'Hare."

'Tis plain that he is contemplatin' further argument with the six sailor-men

so I say hasty: "I am on my way back to the boat, Sergint. Will ye not come along? Maybe we could stop for a beer on the way."

He looked sort of longing at the place from which he has just come an' then he grins at me again. Without sayin' anything he falls into step alongside of me an' we go on down the street to where it opens out to the boat landings.

There is a beer place there that I have seen before an' so the two of us turn into it an' sit down at the little table. We order our beers an' Sergint Baldorgan fingers a bruise on his chin thoughtful.

"What was the trouble about, Sergint?" I ask him.

He looks at me surprised an' then his lips twist up. "There was no trouble, Recruit O'Hare," he tells me. "It was a bit of fun only. Howsoever, them sailor-men was Swedes an' a Swede has no sense of humor."

Well, I like a good fight, meself, but I do not like it in the way Sergint Baldorgan does. I make bold to say as much, wonderin' if he will dress me down for me presumptuousness; for in them days sergints did not make it a habit to get chummy with recruits picked green right off the tree. Howsoever, he answers me entirely friendly an' me likin' for him increases.

"There is something in what ye say, Recruit O'Hare," he admits. "It may be that it is a vice with the Baldorgans—the same as liquor or women or horses is a vice with some other people. We are a brawlin' an' turbulent clan with a loose foot to use an' there is no helpin' it."

He drinks at his beer an' gets very thoughtful all at once. I notice, for the first time, that when he is not smilin' that crooked smile of his, there is a sadness to the face of him. 'Tis a hard thing to define an' I do not try to do so but set quiet an' wait for him to talk if he wants to.

Outside I can see the boats, with the little lights on 'em bobbin' up an' down on the bay. The night wind comes in cool an' there are strange smells upon it an'

it carries the sound of the high-pitched, squeaky music which always gets me somehow or other. I have been in Nagasaki many times since but I have never got tired of it. While I sit there sippin' me beer I think that Sergint Baldorgan feels it the same, too.

Finally he says, quiet like he is talkin' mostly to himself: "'Tis the brawlin' an' the loose foot that is the curse of us. Was it not, I would now have me a little shop in Oakland with Katie Mollison bringin' me pipe an' slippers of an evening after the day's work is done."

I do not say anything an' then Sergint Baldorgan looks at me long an' thoughtful—like he has noticed me at the table with him for the first time. I can see that the drink has gone out of him an', in its place, the black dog is beginnin' to ride his shoulders. I think to cheer him up.

"'Tis still early, Sergint," I say, "an' we have yet time for another beer. Do ye empty your glass."

I do not think that he hears me for he does not answer. Instead, he fumbles inside of his shirt an' he pulls out a gold locket which he wears on a chain about his neck. After a minute he opens the thing with his thumb nail an' holds it so I can see.

"'Tis well that ye learn what a fool a man can be, Recruit O'Hare," he says to me. "Do ye look at this picture."

WELL, it is a picture of a girl. 'Tis not a very clear picture but I can see that she has dark hair an' a mouth which is made for laughing an' loving.

It is the eyes of her, though, which I look at the longest for they are the sort of eyes that ye do not forget in a hurry. A beautiful woman an' a desirable one—though the picture does not do Katie Mollison half justice, as I learn later.

"A grand colleen that ye have, Sergint Baldorgan," I say finally.

Sergint Baldorgan laughs short. "'Tis Katie Mollison—but no longer colleen of mine." he says an' his voice has a bitterness to it.

There is nothing for me to say an' I say it. Sergint Baldorgan calls for a new beer an' slumps down lower in his chair. Then he starts to talk an' it is not an uncommon story.

He and Katie Mollison have been engaged for a year an' they are to be married as soon as his hitch is up. Her father has got a bit of a store on the Oakland side an' he will take Sergint Baldorgan in with him. Katie has already picked out the little house in which they will live.

Then the war comes along an' presently the stories come back of the fightin' in the rice paddies of Luzon an' through the jungles of Samar an' across the *cogon* grass flats of Mindanao. Sergint Baldorgan fights against the thing which is bitin' deeper an' deeper into him as his enlistment runs out.

Well, he is a Baldorgan an', when the day comes, he goes in again an' holds up his right hand. He knows already that his regimint is due to sail for Manila within the month. He goes over to Oakland that night an', when Katie sees his face, she knows what she has long been afraid of—that it is all over an' that Dennis Baldorgan will never be a partner in the little store nor sit with his pipe an' slippers in the house which she has picked for them.

She has bid him goodbye that night an' has stood straight an' proud, as he goes down to the ferry which will take him back to the Presidio an' the *Winfield Scott*.

"I have lost her, Recruit O'Hare," he says to me. "Fool that I am—yet I could not help meself for I carry the curse of the clan of Baldorgan. 'Tis the loose foot an' the brawlin' that is in the blood of me. Take care that ye are not such a fool, Recruit O'Hare, when ye find your Katie Mollison."

I was, an' I have lived to regret the day, but that is something else again.

Presently we finish our beer an' go down to the landing. The moon is full an' we do not talk while the boat boy sculls us across to where the *Winfield Scott* is waitin'. It is not until I am in me bunk that night that I remember the story about the

clan of Baldorgan which me old grandmother, Hivin rest her, has told to me back in Walla Walla, Washington.

I go to sleep ponderin' upon that an' upon the things that Sergint Baldorgan has told me this night. Then I remember the look of Katie Mollison's eyes an' I wonder if she is of the same stuff as Molly Mahone.

WE PUT into Shanghai to pick up a company of casuals which has been left there three weeks before when an inspector has ordered 'em unloaded from the *Dakota* because the old tug is too crowded for the hot run south.

Among these casuals is a sergint by the name of Muldoon who, I find out, is an old side-kick of Sergint Baldorgan's.

Since that night in Nagasaki Sergint Baldorgan has been right friendly to me an' I appreciate it. It is a tiresome run down to Hong Kong now that the novelty has wore off ocean travel, so to speak, an' there is little to pass the time away except to set an' talk. Both Sergint Baldorgan an' Sergint Muldoon can spin a grand yarn an' I spend much of me time sittin' up on the boat deck an' listenin' to 'em.

They are talkin' about what war will be like in the Islands ore evening. Sergint Baldorgan does not think that it will amount to much but Sergint Muldoon shakes the head of him doubtful. He is a big man with a scarred face an' shoulders which are as wide as a barn door—a tough an' unafraid man, if I have ever seen one.

He says: "Do ye not be foolin' yourself, Dennis. It is in the mind of me that this is goin' to be a long an' bloody fight before ever we have put our will upon these little brown men. I wil tell ye that they are fighters—good fighters."

Sergint Baldorgan packs tobacco into his pipe an' holds a match to it while he squints though the smoke at his friend. He flips the match stick over the rail.

"Good fighters they may be," he says, "but a bolo cannot hope to win out against a Krag-Jorgenson, me friend."

"True," Sergint Baldorgan admits.

"Howsoever, if me information is not wrong, it will be Krag-Jorgenson against Mauser rifle an' not Krag-Jorgenson against bolo. Do ye put *that* in your pipe an' smoke it."

Sergint Baldorgan squints thoughtful at Muldoon. "What is this that ye mean?"

"The story is goin' around that there is somebody who is runnin' Mauser rifles into the Islands by the thousand an' cartridges by the ship load," Muldoon says sour.

Sergint Baldorgan thinks this thing over sober for a minute. Then he says: "In that case it is goin' to be a long war, Terry, an' there will be no play about it."

Muldoon nods.

Well, now that I think back upon it I do not understand why this talk of gun-runnin' does not bring to me mind what I have seen an' heard back there on the pier at San Francisco before the *Winfield Scott* sails.

The new an' strange things, which I have been seein', have erased that from the memory of me complete, however, an' so I say nothin' but just sit there while it begins to get dark an' the two of them go on to talk of other things.

Later I am to regret me bad memory.

CHAPTER IV

BALDORGAN INTO BATTLE

WELL, we get into Hong Kong early on a morning an' the word goes out that we do not leave until the next day an' that the old man will give passes to go ashore. Me friend, the company clerk, fixes me up with such a pass for I am anxious not to miss seein' anything there is to see.

It is about mid-afternoon when I get ashore an' I am standin' there, wonderin' where I should go first, when Sergint Baldorgan comes along. He has had a beer or two for he is wearin' his hat on the back of his head an' I can see, by the twist of his grin, that he is enjoyin' himself.

"Now where would ye be goin', Recruit O'Hare?" he asks me.

"No place in particular, Sergeant," I tell him. "I had thought to wander about a bit an' to see what I can see."

"A commendable intention, indeed, Recruit O'Hare," he says. "I will go along with ye for a bit if ye do not have any objection."

"'Tis glad that I am to have ye," I say. "Is not Sergeant Muldoon comin' ashore?"

"Later. He is on duty till six o'clock," Sergeant Baldorgan says. "I, personal, will escort ye back to the ship at that hour—Hong Kong bein' no place for a recruit after the curfew has rang. Then I will show Sergeant Muldoon the iniquities of this great city—the soul of him already bein' so black that a little more soot can do no great harm."

Well, I am a little irked by the arbitrary way he has took charge of me, so to speak, me pass bein' good until ten that night. Howsoever, he grins at me with that twisted grin an' I understand that he is just havin' his fun. Ye cannot stay mad at the man.

"Come along, Recruit O'Hare," he says, hookin' his arm into me own.

We go on up into the city, following a narrow an' windin' street an' stoppin' to gawk into the shops as we go. The mouth of me is hangin' open continuous for I have never seen the things in Walla Walla, Washington, that I am seein' here.

There are tiny trinkets cut out of jade an' ivory an' precious stones with a skill which ye would not believe if ye did not see them. There are the bird shops with parakeets screamin' at ye as ye go by an' a hundred canary birds all twitterin' at once an' the love birds—as pretty a thing as ye would care to see—huddled up together in their cages.

Then there is the smell of the streets an' that is a thing that I cannot describe for it is made up of ten thousand different smells an' it has got a sort of tang to it that offends ye an' pleases ye both at the same time. There are the crowds pushin' along the streets an' that shrill jabber of sound which is China.

I have heard it many times since an' there is still something about it that fascinates me, so to speak.

Well, Sergeant Baldorgan an' meself are standin' in front of an open shop an' lookin' at the carved brass Buddhas. A rickshaw comes plowin' through the crowd an' stops a little ways away but we do not pay any attention.

Sergeant Baldorgan has been lookin' at one of the Buddhas; an' then he puts it down an' turns around to me.

"Recruit O'Hare," he begins, "it comes to me mind . . ."

The voice of him trails away sudden an', if I have ever seen a man who is turned to stone, it is Sergeant Baldorgan. He is lookin' on past me as though he is seein' a ghost—then he steps by me an' I turn, too.

THERE is a girl settin' there in the rickshaw, lookin' toward us with a quiet little smile on her face. She has got black hair an' a sort of laughin' mouth an' I know, all at once, that this is Katie Mollison. Sergeant Baldorgan walks up to the rickshaw slow.

Well, 'tis probable that it is the shock of seein' her here an' alone that makes him do it but when Sergeant Baldorgan speaks he has got the parade-ground rasp in his voice. It is in the mind of me that he, himself, could not have explained why he speaks so for he knows now that he wants Katie Mollison like he never wanted anything in his life.

He says though: "What in the name of Hivin are ye doin' here, Katie?"

It is not the right thing to say for I see the laughter go out of Katie Mollison's eyes an' a spark of temper come in, instead. She looks down at him, tappin' her fingers a little against the side of the rickshaw. There are a hundred people flowin' past in the street but these two are as unconscious of 'em as though they are not there.

"An' what right have ye to question my comings and goings, Dennis Baldorgan?" she asks him, stiff.

"The best right in the world," he says, his own temper gettin' the better of him. "Are ye not promised to me?"

"Was promised to ye, Dennis Baldorgan," she says. "'Tis a short memory that ye have, I am afraid. Ye broke your promise to me an' left of your own free will."

It is true an' Sergint Baldorgan knows it. Howsoever, he is not now in the mood to care about truth—all he knows is that Katie Mollison is here in this street when she should be back home in Oakland. He is beyond bein' reasonable.

"What are ye doin' here an' how did ye get here?" he demands an' the parade rasp is worse than ever in his voice.

"I am seein' the sights of Hong Kong," Katie tells him, cold, "an' I came upon a ship—if it is any of your business, Sergint Baldorgan."

"Then do ye get back to your ship an' do ye get back to Oakland. Can ye not see that this is no place for a woman? I cannot look after ye—me ship sails early tomorrow morning!"

She smiles at him sweet an', watchin', I know that that smile cuts Sergint Baldorgan like a knife. "I have no need of ye to look after me, Sergint Baldorgan," she says. "I am quite well looked after, thank ye kindly."

"What do ye mean?"

She smiles again an', standin' there, I suddenly do not feel like a kid recruit any longer for I know that I am wiser than both of them. I understand the thing which they do not an' that is that the two of 'em are cuttin' each other's hearts out there in front of me because they are desperate in love.

"Ye do not think that ye are the only man who has ever looked at me, do ye, Sergint Baldorgan?" she asks him, scornful. "I did not have to come into Hong Kong alone —Captain Schlenker has brought me to see the sights."

"An' who in the black pit is Captain Schlenker?" Sergint Baldorgan asks.

"A gentleman," she says, "an' ye would not know such."

It is then that I see a tall man come pushin' through the crowd toward the rickshaw an' I know that this is Captain Schlenker. He is good lookin' in sort of a heavy way but instinctive I distrust his face. There is a cruelty about the mouth of him an' I do not like his eyes when he looks at Katie Mollison.

He looks at Sergint Baldorgan an' says: "What is goin' on? Would this soldier be botherin' you, Miss Mollison?"

Well, it is amazin' what things a woman will do. Still, Katie Mollison has been bad hurt by the way Dennis Baldorgan has acted an', in a way, I reckon that ye cannot blame her. She smiles at this Captain Schlenker.

"I think he is drunk, Captain," she says. "Would ye mind takin' me back to the boat now?"

SERGINT BALDORGAN stands like a man who has been hit between the eyes as the crowd swallows the two of 'em up. Then he whirls on me sudden.

"Do ye come on, ye damned recruit!" he snarls at me. "I want a drink! I want to get drunk—lousy, stinkin' drunk—do ye understand? Speak up, damn ye!"

I do not resent it for I know that Sergint Baldorgan is carryin' the black dog upon his shoulders for fair now. 'Tis only now that he has lost her that he knows how much he has wanted Katie Mollison an' the thought of her with Captain Schlenker—he with the evil face of him—is like to drive Sergint Baldorgan crazy.

It is best that I go with him for there is no tellin' what he will do.

We go into a bar an' he drums on the table with his knuckles while the waiter is bringin' our drinks. Two glasses he brings an' Sergint Baldorgan sends him back for the bottle.

It is while we are waitin' there that the thought keeps runnin' through me head that I have seen this Captain Schlenker some place before. I go over his looks careful to see if I cannot remember but it is no use an' then I am busy with Sergint Baldorgan again.

Well, I do not know all of the places that we go but it is a lot of 'em. Sergint Baldorgan drinks like a fish but he does not get either happy or drunk. The only sign of the liquor is that his smile gets a little more set an' there is a brightness to his eye which means no good to any man who happens to cross him now.

It is maybe an hour after dark in the evening when we go into a place down at the end of a crooked street near the water front. Sergint Baldorgan slumps down into a chair an' calls for a fresh bottle.

The place is lighted dim an' is nearly empty but there is a feller sittin' at the table next to ours an' I notice him particular because he keeps watchin' the door as if he afraid that somebody is goin' to come in that he does not want to see.

I notice something more, too. His face has been beat until it looks like a piece of raw beef steak an' he has got a dirty bandage tied about the arm of him.

I nod toward him an' say to Sergint Baldorgan, more to get his mind off the drink than anything else: "He has been playin' rough with somebody from the looks of him."

Sergint Baldorgan turns an' looks at the man an' then, for no reason whatever, he gets up an' goes across to the other table. I follow, not knowin' what the sergint is apt to do next, an' wishin' to keep him out of trouble if I can. He sets down.

"Ye have been beat up considerable, friend," he says.

The man does not answer but just looks at him instead. I can see that he is bad scared—then he sees the uniform of Sergint Baldorgan an', though I may be mistook, I think that some of the scaredness goes out of his eyes.

"Well," Sergint Baldorgan goes on, "I am in the mood for a fight tonight. If ye will tell me who has beat ye up I will tear off the ears of him an' make him eat them. Speak up, me friend—who is he?"

This feller swallows an' licks his lips. I can see that he is wantin' to talk an' afraid to talk all at the same time. He

looks at the uniforms of the two of us again.

"Ye would be a soldier?" he asks Sergint Baldorgan finally.

Sergint Baldorgan bows very stiff an' formal. "The best that ever raised his right hand to the oath," he says an' there is an edge to his voice. "Ye would not be doubtin' it?"

"No," the man says hasty. "No."

"Then," Sergint Baldorgan tells him, "do ye be tellin' me who beat ye up."

"Schmidt an' Dolliver Goff," this feller says.

Well, the thing that I have been tryin' to remember strikes me like a flash. I say: "*The Esmerelda!*"

THE man looks at me scared but nods his head. Sergint Baldorgan has sat down again in his chair an' is starin' dreamy at the smoky lamp which is hung from the ceiling.

"Dolliver Goff," he says sort of musing. "Funny name, Recruit O'Hare. Used to know a feller named Dolliver Goff back in Frisco. He was no good."

"Sergint," I says excited, "it is the same one! I remember now. He is on the *Esmerelda* an' this Captain Schlenker is on the *Esmerelda*, too. I could not see him well that night an' it was his voice that I had heard before. That is why I could not place him this afternoon."

Well, Sergint Baldorgan sits forward an' there are little glitterin' points at the back of his eyes. His mouth is set hard now an' I talk fast before he has a chance to stop me.

I tell him about the things that I have heard this Captain Schlenker an' Dolliver Goff say back there on the pier in San Francisco.

The feller across the table keeps noddin' his head an', wher I finish, he breaks in an' talks plenty now. I glance at Sergint Baldorgan out of the corner of me eye an' I can see that he is listenin' and that his face is set into deep lines.

"It is a hundred thousand dollars' worth of Mausers an' cartridges that this Schlen-

ker is pickin' up here tonight," he tells us. "He is to run 'em down along the coast of Luzon an' deliver 'em somewhere there—where I do not know exact."

"What happened to you?" Sergint Baldorgan asks.

"I knowed too much," this feller says. "I heard 'em plannin' the thing in Frisco—they caught me when I was listenin'. I figure that they would have killed me on the passage across but they was afraid that them women—"

"Women, too, eh?" Sergint Baldorgan says an' his mouth is unpleasant to see. He groans, then, like a knife has just been stuck into him hard. "An' to think that Katie Mollison would be in something like this!"

The feller across the table looks at him. "Ye would be knowin' Katie Mollison?" he asks slow. "Then, for the love of Hivin, do ye be gettin' her off that boat! The man, Schlenker, is a devil an' ye do not know what he means to do to them poor women that he has hoodwinked with the rotten schemes of him!"

SERGINT BALDORGAN looks up slow an', watchin' him, I can see that the liquor has gone out of him an' that he is as cold sober as a judge. He keeps his voice low but there is something in the voice of him that cuts like a whip.

"What do ye mean?" he asks.

"There are six of 'em—all schoolma'ams goin' out to Manila under contract," he says. "The *Esmerelda* is fixed up for carryin' passengers an' Schlenker offered these schoolma'ams cheap passage out because he figured that nobody would suspect a boat, carryin' women passengers, to be runnin' guns at the same time.

"Only Schlenker ain't ever goin' to land 'em in Manila because they have seen the things that have went on on board of the *Esmerelda* an' they are liable to talk."

"Then what is he goin' to do with them?" Sergint Baldorgan asks this feller, an' the sound of his voice sets the short hairs to prickling along the back of me spine.

The battered man laughs short. "I heard him tell this Dolliver Goff that, when he is finished with 'em, he will bring 'em back to Macao because white women bring a good price there."

I will not forget that look that sets into Sergint Baldorgan's face if I live to be a thousand years old. He says just one word but it is enough an' I know that I would not care to be this Captain Schlenker when Sergint Baldorgan get his hands upon him.

In the dark outside Sergint Baldorgan says to me short: "Get back to the ship an' find Muldoon—tell him to get hold of a dozen good men an' to come in a hurry. He will find me on the *Esmerelda*."

I start to say: "Ye cannot go out there alone," but he cuts me short.

"Move, Recruit O'Hare!" he says an' I move.

Well, he tells me later what happens.

CHAPTER V

IRISH NECKS DON'T BREAK

THE feller in the booze joint has told us that the *Esmerelda* is layin' off to the side of the regular anchorage an' that the rifles is stored in an old an' abandoned hong to the south of the city. Schlenker means to lighter his cargo out to the freighter in bumboats durin' the night an' be ready to sail at daybreak.

The battered man has give him a route to follow to this hong an' presently Sergint Baldorgan finds what he has been told he would find. He comes to an old wharf which is covered with a shed which looks—as well as he can see it for the night has come down black—as if it has not been used for ten years gone an' is about to fall into the water of its own weight.

The sergint squats himself down in the shadows close to the wall of this shed while he looks the ground over.

There is no sign of anybody about an' he can hear nothin' but the swish of the tide against the piles an' the noises of the city behind him. Out in the roadstead,

maybe a quarter of a mile, there are a half a dozen lights an' finally he can make out the dim form of a ship. It is where he has been told that the *Esmerelda* would be.

He listens a little longer, till he is sure he is alone on the wharf, an' then gets about his business.

He finds a hole in the wall of the shed where a board has rotted away an' slips through it to the inside. It is blacker than Paddy Murtagh's hat in here an' the place smells musty an' full of rats. He cannot waste time so he risks strikin' a match, shieldin' the light of it with his hat while he looks around.

The rats go scurryin' across the floor an' their eyes wink at him like round balls of fire from the shadows in the corner.

He blows the match out quick for he has seen what he has been lookin' for.

Pine boxes are scattered across the floor of the hong, wide separated so that they will not be too heavy on the rotten wharf an' drop through into the water. Sergint Baldorgan feels his way to one of 'em—lifts the end of it an' it is heavy.

He runs his hands across the top of it an' finds that a bit of the cover has been tore away—not much but enough for him to get a couple of fingers through. What he feels don't leave him any doubt. There are rifles in them cases.

Well, he is just straightenin' up when he hears a little bumpin' noise—like that of a boat rubbin' up against piling—an' then voices come to him faint. 'Tis time, he thinks, that he is gettin' out of here for he will do Katie Mollison no good whatever if he is caught in the hong pryin' into things which are not supposed to be known.

He does not dare make a light now an' he has to move slow an' cautious for the floor is as full of holes as a barber is full of talk an' he particular does not wish to step into one of 'em in the dark an' break a leg now.

The voices are gettin' nearer an' louder now but finally his fingers, which he has got stuck out in front of him for he can-

not see a foot in front of his face, touches the wall. He works along to where he thinks his hole should be.

Well, it ain't there.

SERGINT BALDORGAN tells me later that he is sweatin' ice water about that time because he can hear somebody fiddlin' with the lock on the hong door down at the other end an' he knows that the lot of 'em will be in on him in a minute now. He turns around an' goes down the wall on the other side, feelin' careful for the place where he has come in.

He hears the door squeak back on rusty hinges, then, an' sees a square of starlight open slow against the pitch dark. A feller says low, an' he recognizes the voice of me friend Goff.

"Make a light, Schmidt, an' see that ye screen it in the box so that it does not shine this place up like a Christmas tree."

It is just then that Sergint Baldorgan's fingers poke into nothing at all an' his heart goes back to beatin' normal. He slips through the hole where the board has been rotted away an' is out onto the wharf again just as a smudge of yellow light begins to shine through the cracks of the shed.

The shadow is deep here an', for a minute, Sergint Baldorgan squats there while he looks back to the inside. He counts six men besides Dolliver Goff an' is well pleased. The battered man, back in the beer den, has told him that the *Esmerelda* only carries a crew of nine, not countin' the Chink black gang, so there should not be more than three of 'em on board—besides Captain Schlenker—now.

He judges that it will be close to an hour before Dolliver Goff an' the rest can get back to the ship with the first load of rifles.

It would be better, Sergint Baldorgan knows, to wait for Muldoon an' his reinforcements; but the thought of Katie Mollison out there with this Schlenker is drivin' him crazy. So he goes back careful along the wharf an' starts lookin' for a boat to take him out to the freighter.

He finally finds a Chink fisherman an', by talkin' pidgin an' makin' signs for some minutes, he makes this feller understand that he wants to go to the *Esmerelda*. Well, to make a long story short, the Chink paddles him out an' they go alongside the ship without bein' seen.

Everything is quiet on board an', as far as Sergint Baldorgan can tell, there ain't any watch bein' kept. He has already give this fisherman to understand that he is to wait for him because, if he can, he means to get Katie Mollison away before the fireworks start.

There is a ladder which has been let over the side an' Sergint Baldorgan steps onto it cautious an' goes up to the deck.

He crouches down there for a minute, listenin', but he don't hear anything an' so he starts aft to where light comes from a couple of portholes up on the poop deck, so to speak. He guesses that them are the passenger cabins an' that he will find Katie there.

He climbs up the ladder from the well deck an' is goin' along the alley-way toward the portholes when he hears feet scrape on the deck an' a man swear as he stumbles against something.

Sergint Baldorgan ducks into the deep shadow behind one of the boats an' waits. A feller passes him, so close that he could have reached out an' touched him with his hand, an' goes on down to the cabins. Baldorgan hears him fittin' a key into a lock—then the door lets out a patch of light for a minute an' is closed again.

As the man goes through that door Sergint Baldorgan sees that it is Captain Schlenker. He follows till he is standin' beside the port which is part way open.

Well, it is Katie Mollison's voice that he hears an' he tells me later that the sound of it makes him go cold all over. Howsoever, he has not forgot the afternoon an' so he listens for a minute there in the dark.

"Just why have ye kept me locked in me stateroom this evenin', Captain Schlenker?" she is askin' him cold.

The voice of him is a little thick an'

furry an' Sergint Baldorgan knows that he has been drinkin'. He wishes that he has picked up a club of some sort for he remembers this Schlenker to be a big man an' probably armed but it is too late to do anything about that now.

"**Y**E HAVEN'T got a thing to be afraid of, Katie," Schlenker says, tryin' to make that cold voice of his sound jovial. "I just locked the door to make sure that ye would not be disturbed. Sure, Hong Kong is a tough an' wicked place for a girl as pretty as ye are. Do ye not remember the drunk soldier who accosts ye this afternoon?"

"He was not drunk," Katie Mollison says an' the voice of her is angry. "Neither is he wicked—you could be glad if ye were half the man that he is, Captain Schlenker!"

For a minute Sergint Baldorgan, listenin' beside the porthole, does not believe his ears. Then, sudden, he wants to start yellin' an' he starts for the door. He is wishin' that this Schlenker is twice as big so that he can beat him twice as bad.

Inside the cabin Captain Schlenker's voice has got thicker an' there is a suspicion in it. He has took Katie ashore this afternoon because it has pleased him to do so but now he is beginnin' to think that he has made a mistake an' that she knows more than he has thought.

"Ye would be tellin' me that ye know that soldier, Katie?" he asks harsh.

"I would be tellin' you just that," she snaps at him, "an' to you, me name is Miss Mollison an' not Katie, Captain Schlenker!"

This Schlenker does not bother about bein' affable, so to speak, any more. "What did ye tell him?" he says.

"Tis none of your business," Katie tells him. "Now will ye kindly get out of me cabin?"

Captain Schlenker does not say anything to that but Sergint Baldorgan, who is at the door now, hears feet scuffle sudden on the floor inside. He turns the knob easy to see if the door is locked but it is not

an' he pushes it open an' slips inside. What he sees blows up his anger into a roarin' bonfire.

This Schlenker has got Katie by the arms an' is crowdin' her back into a corner of the cabin with the ugly face of him bent down close to her own. She is not makin' a sound but is tryin' desperate to twist away while she kicks at his shins.

She sees Dennis then an' the look in her face is enough to make a man happy for a lifetime.

"Dennis!" she says. "Dennis!"

Schlenker growls deep in his throat an' turns around, lettin' her go, an' it is then that Sergint Baldorgan hits him. Maybe I have said that Sergint Baldorgan is not a big man but he hits like a mule kicks an' this Schlenker takes a couple of steps backwards an' smashes into the wash bowl.

"Get up!" Sergint Baldorgan says between his teeth. 'I would not kill a man while he is settin' down.'

He hits Schlenker in the mouth as the big man gets to his feet—hits him again where his neck bulges out under his left ear. Schlenker lurches over into the bunk, spittin' teeth out as he goes.

Well, he was a fool not to have locked that door, Sergint Baldorgan tells me later. The anger, which is upon him, has made him forget everything but this Schlenker an' he has forgot that there are others still on the *Esmereida*.

Katie Mollison screams sudden. "Dennis! Behind you!"

SERGINT BALDORGAN remembers then but it is too late. Something heavy smashes into the back of his neck an' he drops, sittin', to the deck of the cabin.

He is not unconscious for he can see an' hear an' think but he cannot move. The blow paralyzes him so complete that he cannot wiggle a finger.

A feller is standin' just inside the door with an iron bar in his hand an' it is a wonder that he has not broke Sergint Baldorgan's neck with it. Sergint Baldorgan is tryin' to yell to Katie to run but

the words will not come an' then Captain Schlenker climbs out of the bunk with the blood drippin from his mouth.

"Get rope," he says to the feller in the door, lispin' a little through his broken teeth, "an' tie him up. I'll take care of him when we get to sea!"

The feller, who is a broken-faced Swede with no savvy in his face, nods an' goes out. Then this Schlenker limps across the cabin an' gives Sergint Baldorgan the boot in the ribs.

"Swine," he says. "I will teach you!"

Katie Mollison's face goes dead white an' then she is at him, kickin' an' scratchin' like a hellcat turned loose. This Schlenker is too big for her, though, an' he swears gutteral an' knocks her across the cabin with his closed fist.

Sergint Baldorgan is there on the floor dyin' a thousand deaths an' he still cannot move a muscle.

The Swede comes back an' he an' Schlenker tie Sergint Baldorgan up tight an' roll him up against the bulkhead. Then the Swede goes out again an' Schlenker locks the cabin door.

"I have had me eye upon ye since we left Frisco," he says to Katie who is leanin', half groggy, against the bunk. "I like me women to have spunk to 'em an' ye an' I will get better acquainted."

He goes across an' grabs her, tearin' the neck of her dress as he does so. The sight of it tears Sergint Baldorgan apart like he is bein' broke on the wheel.

CHAPTER VI

NO LIAR, THE OULD WAN

WELL, as for meself, I do not lose any 'time in gettin' back to the *Winfield Scott*. Sergint Muldoon is not there an' I cannot find anybody who knows where he is at first.

I understand well that this is no time for dallyin' an' I am runnin' about like a crazy man when a corporal tells me that he has seen the sergint maybe a half hour before in a place up the street.

I go there at the gallop. There are men

from the ship there all right but Sergint Muldoon is not with em. I learn that he is gone to another place in another street an' I take me foot in me hand, so to speak, an' go there.

I am beginnin' to get panicky when I finally find him in a third place, settin' at a table an' drinkin' beer with five or six others. I rush up to the table, upsettin' a waiter who is bringin' a fresh fill of beers.

"Do ye come with me, Sergint!" I gasp out at him. "Quick, an' bring a dozen of the boys with ye!"

Sergint Muldoon squints up at me an' then spits on the floor. Like I have said, he is a tough customer an' is not accustomed to takin' his orders from recruits. Also, I am not much to look at right then for me shirt is soaked with sweat from me runnin' an' I have fell down a time or two so that I am splashed with dirt.

"Recruit," Sergint Muldoon says, lookin' me up an' down, "it is plain to see that ye do not know much about soldierin' as yet. Do ye go an' clean yourself up—then come back an' I will talk with ye."

Well, I can scarce talk for pantin' but I manage to get out: "Ye must come quick, Sergint! It is Dennis Baldorgan that needs ye!"

That catches the ear of him an' he sets up, pushin' his beer aside.

"Talk on," he says.

I am getting me wind back now an' I tell him, as fast as I can, about the rifles an' that Sergint Baldorgan has already gone out to the *Esmerelda*. I see, when I have finished, that this Sergint Muldoon is not a man to dally when it is time for action. He ranges his eye over the men in this cafe an' then stands up.

"Casey!" he says. "John Swenson. Pete Kelly!"

They come crowdin' around him an' I see, by the faces of them, that they are all oldtimers. There are no lilies among 'em—they look almost as tough as does Sergint Muldoon.

"Do ye each go out an' pick up three good men that ye can trust," Sergint Mul-

doon says in his flat voice. "Be back here with 'em in five minutes an' see that each has got a club."

They do not question him but go out an' Sergint Muldoon swings back to me.

"Where is this *Esmerelda*?" he asks.

I tell him.

"We will need a boat—maybe two boats," he says.

There is a navy file, from one of the cruisers in the harbor, who has been sittin' at the table with Sergint Muldoon an' drinkin' beer. He has listened interested while I have told about the gun runnin' an' now he speaks up.

"We have been lookin' for just such fellers for a month past," he says. "Do ye let me in on this, too, Sergint. I have got a steam launch tied up down at the dock an' I will have the lot of ye out to this *Esmerelda* before ye can bat an eye."

"Good!" Sergint Muldoon grunts at him. "We will make a joint action out of the affair."

The five minutes is not yet up when the three that Muldoon has sent out are back an' they have a crowd with 'em that are as tough as Swenson, Kelly an' Casey are themselves. I see that each man has got a club an' they stand quiet while Sergint Muldoon talks to 'em for a minute. He tells 'em that Sergint Baldorgan is on the *Esmerelda* an' why an' that they are goin' to take that ship apart.

"We will be goin' now," he says.

He tips over the table, at which he has been settin', an' jerks off one of the legs. It makes a good club an' the sailor an' meself help ourselves likewise. Then the lot of us file out into the street with the feller, who owns the cafe, screamin' curses after us in Chinese for the table we have busted up. We turn down toward the water front.

WELL, we load into this launch an' head out into the roadstead, steamin' south. It is a considerable way down an' it seems to me that we do no more than creep through the water. Howsoever, Vin-derson—which is this navv bird's name—

is pushin' the launch as hard as she will go an' there is nothin' to do but wait.

It is maybe fifteen minutes later when the engines cut off an' we slide through the water quiet. Vinderson comes up to the bow where Sergint Muldoon is an' the two of 'em talk in low voices. I see lights ahead an' then I make out the form of a ship dim in the night.

"That ought tuh be her," Vinderson says. "What do ye want me to do?"

"Run 'alongside so we can go aboard," Sergint Muldoon tells him.

"There will be a fine stink if this is the wrong ship," Vinderson says thoughtful, "or if it is the *Esmerelda* an' she is not runnin' guns."

"We will take the chance," Sergint Muldoon tells him grim. "There have been big stinks before."

"You're the doctor," Vinderson says. "Alongside it is."

The engine begins to turn over slow again an' we sort of drift down on the ship which is ahead of us. I can see better now an', as we get closer, I hear the noise of a steam winch runnin' an' presently I make out something dark layin' alongside the freighter. Sergint Muldoon sees it also.

"They are takin' the guns on board," he says soft to Casey who is beside him. "Do ye tell the boys to get ready."

We slide up easy, expectin' a lookout to spot us any minute, an' he does. Somebody sings out harsh on the *Esmerelda* an' the winch stops an' I can hear feet runnin'.

We scrape against the freighter's side then, though, an' Sergint Muldoon gives the word. We go up into the well deck of her like cats over a backyard fence.

It is when we hit that deck that we hear Katie Mollison scream an' then ye could not have held us with a regiment of tanks.

THERE is considerable confusion for a minute. I remember seein' gun flashes an' hearin' the shots. Then there is the sound of clubs hittin' home an' a devil's chorus of yells as our lads close. I follow Sergint Muldoon who is headin' aft to where the scream has come from.

We go up the iron ladder an' Sergint Muldoon jumps into the alley-way which leads to the cabins. I am close behind when a gun goes off in the face of me an' I see somebody crouched by the rail.

Well, I swing me club an' I catch him square, straightenin' him up, an' he topples over the rail. I get a glimpse of his face for a second—it is Dolliver Goff. Then I hear the splash that he makes when he hits the water.

I get down the passageway to where Muldoon is an' I hear the muffled sounds which is comin' from the cabin. Muldoon is standin' back a little from the door—then, as I come up, he drives forward with his shoulder an' that door splits.

Captain Schlenker is standin' there in the middle of the cabin, starin' at us stupid, an'—in that split second—I see that he has got Katie Mollison with one arm twisted behind her. The dress is half tore from her shoulders.

Sergint Baldorgar is lyin' on the floor with his face dead white an' I see that he has got a turn of the rope, which holds him, into his mouth, an' is tryin' to bite it through while the blood runs out the corners of his lips.

"Let her go!" Sergint Muldoon says an' there is a quality to his voice which sends the shivers over me.

This Schlenker shakes his head stupid. Then, sudden, he yells something in a sort of outlandish tongue an' jumps for the door. Sergint Muldoon catches him with a full swing of his club, the blow takin' him just above the cheek bone, an' he goes over backward an' lays there.

Well, the whole thing is over in less time than it takes to tell it. It is maybe ten minutes later that a patrol boat comes chuggin' up an' a couple of officers come on board.

Sergint Muldoon reports to 'em with his club still in his hand an' then the lot of 'em go up forward. There is boxes on the deck an' more boxes in the bumboat down below. These boxes is marked: *Shovels* but they pry the tops off an' each one is full of Mauser rifles.

The officers talk for a minute an' then they turn around to Sergeant Muldoon. The lights have been turned on on the deck now an' I see that there is a gleam in the eye of the tallest of the two of the officers.

"Sergint," he says, "ye have no doubt committed piracy up on the high seas, robbery, pillage an' assault with intent to do bodily harm this night. Do ye understand that?"

Sergint Muldoon spits tobacco juice over the rail. "I do," he says hard.

This officer grins an' holds out his hand. "An' a damn good job ye did of it," he says. "Ye will hear more of this—all of ye, includin' Sergint Baldorgan an' Recruit O'Hare. I do not think that ye will be displeased with what ye hear.

"Now do ye get back to your ship before ye are reported for over-stayin' your pass which is a serious offense."

WELL, to end the thing, we take the five schoolma'ams an' Katie Mollison with us on the *Winfield Scott* to Manila where they will be sent back to the States for they have no contracts after all. This Schlenker has made the thing up out of whole cloth in order to hide his gun runnin'.

Howsoever, Katie Mollison will not go back, for she becomes Katie Baldorgan the day after we leave Hong Kong.

The skipper of the *Winfield Scott* performs the ceremony an' we kiss the bride

by companies. All except Muldoon, that is. He spits tobacco juice over the rail an' looks more tough than ever but me belief is that Sergint Muldoon is scared for once in his life.

It is late that evening an' I am leanin' over the rail an' thinkin' about what all has happened since I have left Frisco when I hear two people talkin' in low voices. I start to move away, for I see that it is Sergint Baldorgan an' Katie.

Howsoever, Sergint Baldorgan is sayin' something which brings back to the mind of me that story which me grandmother, Hivin rest her soul, has told to me. So I stay a minute longer.

"'Tis little that I am bringin' to ye, Katie Baldorgan," the Baldorgan says sober. "The life of a soldier's wife is a hard an' a lonesome one. Are ye sure that ye have no regrets?"

"I have no regrets, Dennis," she tells him soft.

"'Tis no fit country for a woman—a hell that I am takin' ye to."

She says, then, proud: "Ye are me man, Dennis, an' where ye go there I go, too."

Well, I remember how Molly Mahone has gone down the gold steps with her man an' I remember, too, that thing the Ould Wan has promised to Colin Baldorgan.

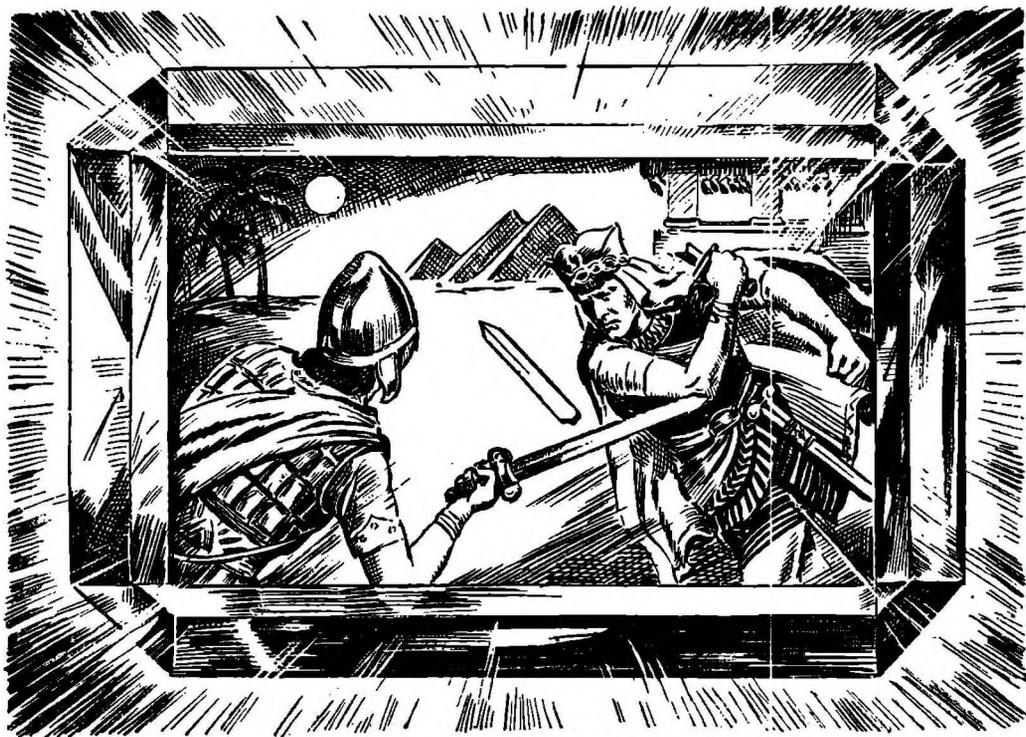
'Tis plain, I think, that whatever faults the Ould Wan may have had, he did not break his promises an' he was no liar.

THE END

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Prosaic enough, this laboratory for testing gems; yet here, with intrigue in old Egypt, begins a series of adventures as strange and exciting as any story ever told

SHIPMAN easily fitted into romantic adventure, being tall, thin, hawk-faced, with an engaging smile and a hard eye. The gem business had sent him knocking about the world's odd corners, and he could take care of himself with anything except (occasionally) a woman.

He was the last person imaginable, however, to touch upon the esoteric. When Miriam Crews walked into his office, nothing was farther from his thoughts. She

stood by the window, under the illuminated plaque of the National Jewelers' Guild, and the light flittered about her dark, proud head and her arrow-slim figure like an aura.

"Are you a jeweler?" she asked. "Do you buy or sell precious stones?"

Shipman repressed a smile. "No, madam. This is a laboratory. We develop new ways of testing and treating stones; we handle problems of cutting, setting and so forth, for the jewel trade."

"Oh!" she said. "Then I can't buy a topaz ring here!"

"You'd have great difficulty buying one anywhere," said Shipman. "The topaz is one of the rarest of all gems; but you can find an alleged topaz on any street-corner. That's one of our many problems—the

ethical nomenclature of gems. You see, we have to educate the jeweler himself; as a rule he has only a rudimentary knowledge of precious stones."

"Oh!" she said again, and hesitated. Her hesitation ended in a smile.

"I suppose, in that case, I couldn't very well ask you to identify a supposedly precious stone that I have here?"

"Nothing simpler," Shipman replied. "Why not? I'd be very glad."

"That's kind of you. I'm Miriam Crews. We live at the Chapin Park—my father's a broker. I was just going by and saw your window sign, and stopped in on impulse. I can't keep you long; there's a meeting of the Nine Little Working Girls—you know, the debutant's charity organization. It's in twenty minutes, so . . ."

She rattled on, searching her bag the while. Shipman had her ticketed. He knew the broker Crews by name, knew her society crowd, and immediately knew her background. There was nothing in all this to warn him—Well . . .

"I've got it somewhere," she went on. "You know, I like precious stones. Not because they're pretty, but because they sometimes tell me things. I have some curious ones, too. Nothing of any particular value, but odd little jewels that attract me—oh, here it is!"

Shipman took the twist of tissue paper she handed him, and opened it. In his palm lay a stone of pale green, unevenly cut, and of no particular beauty.

"It was given me in Egypt," she explained. "It's supposed to be an emerald from a tomb; but it doesn't look much like an emerald to me and you know how these tomb relics are faked wholesale for tourists."

"Yes, I know," Shipman replied absently. "But it's impossible to decide by color alone in the case of emeralds, and the Egyptian stones were quite pale but very fine. Also, the imitations of emeralds are dangerous. Triplets, or thin slices of deep green glass between two bits of pale beryl, may fool the most expert eye."

"You think this is an imitation?"

"No. It may be anything. Nothing's simpler than to test it out. We've developed an instrument here which combines every form of test, from refraction to weight; the scientific world must keep a step ahead of the rascals who also use science, you see. Come into the lab. You'll find it interesting."

SHIPMAN ushered the visitor into the small examination room, which contained only three chairs and the polyandroscope on its stand. As Miriam Crews took a chair, he sketchily explained the instrument.

"We've been working on some igmeralds, the scientific emeralds turned out by the I. G. Farben industry in Germany," he said, carefully placing the green stone in the central clamp and altering the switches. "So you'll have to be patient a moment while the currents are changed."

"This instrument gives us the benefit of everything from polarized light to ultra-violet rays, in an enormous enlargement of the actual stone. In fact, this gem of yours—for I feel sure it is a gem—will light up the entire room in five minutes; it acts as an electric bulb to the currents. The various qualities are automatically checked."

"It's not unlike putting a penny into a weighing machine and receiving your weight on a ticket. I'll turn off the light. You watch the big glass ball, and the silver reflector on the ceiling above."

He darkened the room. Within the huge upper glass ball of the instrument was a tiny needle of light, at first barely visible, which gradually became intensified.

To Shipman, who had helped originate this instrument, it was an old story. He had no idea, certainly, of what was to happen here. As the curved reflector above began to show a greenish radiance, he broke the silence.

"Now watch the light of the stone itself glow; the emerald retains its purity of color even by artificial light. You'll see every flaw."

"Flaw?" she echoed. "Is it flawed, then?"

Shipman laughed. "A flawless emerald is proverbial for unattainable perfection, Miss Crews. It's by imitating the flaws or inclusions, as we term them, that the Germans have managed to imitate emeralds so cleverly. However, their striata run in the wrong direction. If we knew that this stone came from a tomb, its origin would be certain, since all the emeralds of antiquity came from the mines in Egypt."

"But the light isn't a solid green!" she exclaimed.

"Due to the dispersion and refraction of the stone. This instrument brings out all such qualities and magnifies them. We'll know precisely what sort of stone it is by the check on refraction, dispersion, weight and so forth, even if an examination of this illumined image were not sufficient. I'll show you the—the—"

He paused, listening, conscious of a startled sensation, of something that should not be. His first thought was of trouble in the mechanism of the instrument, until he recognized the sound as that of a voice, then of a second voice. He glanced around.

No, the door was closed, the sound-proofed little room was impervious to voices. Amazed, he stole a glance at the young woman beside him. She, too, seemed listening; evidently she also heard the voices.

Her face was clearcut, intent, absorbed. The light was growing more rapidly now. It was as if the emerald itself hung in air before them, enormously enlarged and translucent, filling the whole space in the upper glass sphere and diffusing a lovely pale greenish radiance which made every detail in the room distinct.

What a lovely creature this girl was! Shipman was struck by the realization; then he saw her eyes quicken and dilate. He looked at the green sphere, and was assailed by incredulity. The flaws of the beryl, the inclusions, the striata of the stone, were tremendously magnified and plain to see. The entire structure of the emerald was revealed. And more.

For something moved in that greenish sphere of radiance.

Shipman refused to believe his eyes. Never before had he seen anything like this; a distinct movement was visible. It was taking on form and color. He sat literally spellbound as he watched. The voice became clearer. The movement grew, swelled into a scene that filled the room and absorbed it; Shipman felt himself lost and adrift in space and time.

Egypt— He had seen Egypt, he knew and recognized it. Those were the brownish golden hills, the stark hills on the west bank of the Nile, above the Valley of the Kings. Below stretched the valley of the Nile. Here were sand and rock, a gigantic construction work looming vaguely. In the foreground, two figures.

A MAN, young, vibrantly alive, aquiline features aglow with force and energy, wearing the gossamer white summer robe of royalty. He talked with an older, sterner, harsher man who wore a leather cuirass studded with gold knobs and a conical helmet.

"Nonsense, Hotep!" he was saying imperiously. "It's agreed that we seize the queen, that I'm to take over the throne. You've gone that far. Then why the devil show fear now—you, the general of all Egypt's armies?"

"I fear delay," said Hotep gravely. "I say, we must strike now or never, Prince Tothmes! You're a prince of the blood royal; but I'm a man of the people. I see things in a wider aspect. Here on this visit to the new temple, far from Thebes and the court and the army, we must strike. Egypt is in your hand! Let the moment pass, and we lose all."

The prince grunted. "Here where the olden kings lie buried? Here where the great temple to Amor is rising? This is sacred ground, Hotep!"

"Sacred fiddlesticks!" snapped the soldier. "I'm afraid of Queen Hatasu, I tell you! She has knowledge not of this world, and powers we know not. She, a woman, has become Pharaoh; all the learning of the sacred mysteries, the fellowship of the priests, are hers! Man and woman,

king and queen—thus she calls herself. Strike now, or lose!”

Tothmes smiled at this talk of magic. Why, he wondered, was Hotep so intent on springing the plot here? A shrewd, hard-grained man, this soldier.

“I’ve won over Sen Maut,” went on Hotep. “He’s the architect here, in absolute charge of the slave-camp below and the spearmen.”

“That’s no good news!” Tothmes said. He disliked the architect heartily. Also, rumor hinted at an affair between architect and queen, and Sen Maut encouraged the gossip.

“You said to win over anyone we might need; we need him,” said Hotep. “He’ll keep the news absolutely quiet until we’ve seized Thebes and are securely in power. He loves the queen; I’ve promised her to him as his price. I have six men, picked swordsmen; we need no more.”

Tothmes hesitated. It was well planned; no harm to be done the queen, he himself on the throne in her place—a swift, sure, efficient bit of work. He admired the queen with all his heart—they were both children of the same father—but this did not prevent him from wanting the empire himself and clutching at it with both hands. It was his due.

“Say yes or no, my lord,” spoke up Hotep impatiently. “Say yes, and tomorrow you’ll be the greatest warrior-king ever Egypt knew!”

“Agreed, then.” Tothmes cast the die. “When and where?”

“Dawn. Sen Maut will be with her until late. I’ll be at the top of the ramp, by the first sphinx, an hour before dawn; when the singer intones the morning hymn.”

“Agreed.” The two men struck hands and separated.

PRINCE TOTHMES ascended the long ramp, guarded on either hand by small sphinxes, to the upper level of the temple, and here stood watching the almost incredible activity of construction.

Queen Hatasu had come to inspect this work, commemorating the glory her rule

had brought to Egypt. She, daughter of Tothmes the Glorious, was now both king and queen in one, her husband being dead. The old king himself had lifted her to the throne, ignoring his other heirs. Now, not yet thirty-five, she had built Egypt into an empire that stretched afar in dazzling power and high culture and intellectual resurgence.

But in Prince Tothmes also burned the savagely powerful spirit that had lifted Hatasu to heights hitherto unattained by woman. It was this inheritance of the lion’s blood that drove him to what he now projected, against this elder half-sister of his.

Odd, because in him was no duplicity. He was not a plotter. He scorned lies and evasions. Even to the queen he used no diplomacy; he was a blunt, hard-spoken man, alight with youthful fire.

Yet no man can resist the lure of empire—especially when he is born to it.

“I don’t like that architect, Sen Maut,” he muttered thoughtfully. “Still, if he marries Hatasu, he’ll keep her out of mischief. If only our father had put me on the throne instead of her . . .”

In the ruddy glory of approaching sunset, he saw a lissom shape coming toward him, from the side courts that were occupied by the queen and her small company. She had come from Thebes by chariot, and very few were in her retinue.

The bronzed, harsh features of the prince softened. The girl approaching was Meri, only living child of Hatasu; young—but the girls of Egypt ripened early. She wore the usual gossamer robe of the palace, where the beauty that was in the body was freely revealed and accounted no shame.

Tothmes held out his hands to her. Laughing, she plucked two flowers from her hair and laid them in his palms—this girl with whom, alone, Tothmes could find peace.

“What, Lord Tothmes, standing in empty dream?” she said gayly. “I suppose you and General Hotep have been making new plans for the army?”

“New plans, yes!” he replied, and laughed a little. “New plans for you and me

and others, maybe. Is your mother still talking about having you marry?"

She gazed at him, suddenly wide-eyed; her smile departed. "Yes," she said in a low voice. "She won't talk with me about it. She says she has picked someone, and that settles it. She won't say who he is."

Tothmes' eyes hardened a little. This was one reason for his conspiracy.

"Your mother's a stubborn woman," he said. "And you are very precious. Trust in me. Where is your mother, by the way?"

"Oh, she sent me to find you!" replied Meri, pointing to the side courts. "She wants you to lead the evening prayer. The high priest of Amon is going back tonight after supper."

Tothmes felt his pulses leap and sing at this information. The high priest and his retinue had come today, a long string of chariots, to inspect the work on the new temple and talk with Hatasu. This presence had been a stumbling-block to any action for tonight.

With the high priest gone, everything was now assured and simplified. A little killing—a few of the archer guards—that was all.

As he passed the archers at the courtyard gates, he answered their salutes curtly. They might obey him, but they were savagely devoted to the queen. She, who wore the diadem, was Egypt. He, the prince, was only a leader of the army. Well, by the gods, he would be more than that tomorrow!

THE queen sat in the side court by the fountain; she was talking with the high priest, a grimly solid man eloquent of the politician. A number of his own guards, and some assistant priests, were also here, with the queen's charioteer.

She, who so often wore male attire and the *kepersh* or war-helmet of a Pharaoh, was now all languorous woman, reclining on a gold-adorned couch, her gown of thin tissue revealing every firmly rounded line of her body. Even thus, she was instinct with energy; her sharp, wise face was alive with it. If she was not beautiful, she had

more than mere beauty, thought Tothmes.

Yet, for all his admiration, he was resolved on his course.

He stood chatting with his half-sister and the priest, discussing the work and the temple decorations, until a bell announced that the sun-god was at the horizon. Then his strong, ringing voice swept up in the ritual prayer of farewell to the daylight; the resonant, unctuous voice of the high priest joined in; and from below came the voices of thousands of slaves, workers, soldiers—far below, where the construction camp lay apart from the temple approach.

Then it was over, as the royal disc of Amon-Ra sank under the horizon. Tothmes swung around, and Hatasu beckoned him to sit beside her. He complied, uneasy beneath the scrutiny of her dark, liquid eyes. Meri laughed and joined him. The high priest and his company departed to make ready for the coming feast.

"You two make a royal pair," said the queen, smiling at her daughter and the lithe, stalwart figure of the prince. "It's high time Meri was taking a husband, Tothmes. What do you think of Hotep? A friend of yours, isn't he?"

Tothmes shrugged. "None of my affair, Hatasu. Meri, do you want a husband?"

The girl giggled. Tothmes smiled into her eyes, and smiling, lost his dour air. Then he glanced up at the queen.

"Why not marry her to Sen Maut, your architect here?"

This was sheer insolence, but Hatasu relished insolence and could rise above it. Perhaps she knew of the rumors that linked her own name with that of Sen Maut, the most gifted man in Egypt, who in this temple had carried the builder's dream to new heights.

"Not a bad idea," said Hatasu, laughing softly. "Here he comes now. We'll ask him."

"Or," added Tothmes under his breath, "marry him yourself. You're both queen and Pharaoh, man and woman, twin heirs of the gods in one person!"

Hatasu shot him a swift glance that burned into him with its anger; then looked up at the approaching architect. Desert-

browned, arrogant in his pride and position, Sen Maut was a handsome man and crafty withal. He saluted them, and the queen spoke abruptly.

"Friend, Tothmes has just suggested you as a husband for my daughter, to preserve the throne to an Egyptian. What, think you of it?"

Startled, Sen Maut swept one swift glance to the prince. He smelled a trap here.

"The pleasure of Pharaoh is the law," he said in the time-worn palace formula. "It seems to me that I am a builder, not a ruler."

"Then we agree." Hatasu laughed amusedly. "Have you heard the prediction the priests brought: that within three days Egypt will have a new ruler?"

Sen Maut was startled again. But it was the turn of Tothmes to scent a trap, since he had heard nothing of any such oracle or prediction. A pulse of alarm beat at his temple. Did Hatasu have some inkling of the plot? He leaped to the alert, every nerve tense.

"Queen first, since your beauty cannot be forgotten," Sen Maut rejoined smoothly. "Pharaoh second, since your regal majesty—"

"Oh, stop your silly formal phrases," broke in Hatasu. "I'm sending you a copy of the survey just made between Memphis and the Red Sea, Sen Maut. Look it over with care. I want you to take charge of the work, when you've finished here."

"What work?" demanded the architect.

"The canal. I'm going to connect Memphis and the ocean, with the Syrian lakes and the Red Sea," said Hatasu. "Once it's cut, think of the advantage to commerce!"

The architect swallowed hard. "It'll be a job, though. We'll have to build entire cities to serve as construction camps alone."

"What else are you for?" she flung back coolly. "Tothmes, do you approve?"

"Aye!" said the prince quickly. "A great conception, Hatasu; I've often thought of the possibility. But it needs a soldier in charge, not an architect."

"That may be," she returned. "Sen Maut, come to me tonight, after the feast. We'll look at the stars together, and talk of this canal. Since you're not eager to have Meri, we may find another bride for you, also."

The architect smiled slightly at Tothmes and took his leave. The prince bit his lip; he had his own suspicions of why Hatasu wanted to look at the stars with this handsome, stalwart rascal. And that would explain the cocky, arrogant bearing of Sen Maut, too.

Hatasu, watching his face, smiled in turn, as the twilight deepened.

"**T**OTHMES, it's nearly sixteen years since our father proclaimed me ruler of Egypt and gave me the throne-name," she said softly. "Have you never regretted that he passed you over—you, the finest soldier in the empire?"

He stiffened to the challenge. By the gods, she did suspect something!

"What if I have?" he retorted. "You've done a magnificent job, Hatasu; far better than I'd have done, even if you're not a soldier."

"So you think I'm no soldier, eh?" She laughed a little, lazily, and stretched. "You may change your mind about that one of these days. Meri, child, get in out of the night air and get ready for supper. Give me your hand, Tothmes; I must get dressed."

She took his hand; suddenly, with one lithe movement, she was on her feet and looking into his face, the grip of her fingers like an iron clamp on his.

"Were Sen Maut half the man you are, good brother, you might have reason to dread his ambition," she murmured softly. "And were Hotep half the soldier you are—then you could better trust him."

Her grasp loosened. "You remember the Cretan sword I gave you last year? I know you have it with you. Wear it tonight—by command of the Pharaoh! And don't drink too much wine, either. There'll be a high moon, later."

With a laugh, she was gone.

Tothmes stood half startled, half suspi-

cious, wholly thoughtful. For a moment he almost read false meanings into her words; after all, she was only his half-sister, and it was the custom of the royal family for full brothers and sisters to marry.

But no—no! Too well he knew that agile mocking brain of hers, for such suspicion to linger. Even as girl to boy she had mocked him; and she still did so.

So she wouldn't trust Hotep too far, eh? And Sen Maut would ride ambition, if he could. Then she's one step ahead of the architect, and three ahead of me! Spies, perhaps? Or her intuition? Hotep spoke the truth: she's got too good a brain.

HE WENT to his own room and dressed, carefully. No slaves had come, here across the Nile, no attendants; he had brought none of his own men, the better to avert suspicion. He was alone.

Why had she said that about the moon? It would be up later, yes, riding high and white through the night into the morning. With only a few guards here, this was a lonely spot tonight; this curve nestled amid the gaunt limestone cliffs, holding the half-finished gigantic temple, was far out of the world. And on the morrow, it would bring forth a new Pharaoh.

Tothmes had no intention of killing the queen; no need of that, once he held her in his power.

He buckled on the gay Cretan belt and sword, with a grimace. A gay sliver of steel it was, and sharp enough; but not like the massive weapon he preferred. Still, it would look better at the feast.

The temple architect was giving this feast in the enormous central courtyard, and a hundred slaves borrowed from the ranks of workmen served it. The prince sat through the meal, watching the princess and Hotep, San Maut and the priests, saying little, drinking lightly, his mind uneasy. So she would not wholly trust General Hotep, eh? Neither would he, once he had seized the throne.

Marry the princess to that grim soldier? Tothmes felt a snarl rise in him at the thought. It might well be the queen's in-

attention, but it would never be accomplished. Never! Tothmes knew he had the heart of the girl; Meri belonged to him and to no other. Yet, if he had dared propose such marriage, Hatasu would have mocked him in her scornful way.

Never had he seen the queen more brilliant, keener in mind and spirit, than tonight. She showed no suspicion; she was herself, a gay witty woman, this evening.

Almost the only palace attendant the queen had brought was the Syrian singing girl, who strummed her harp at the feast and sang a blithe song. According to the usual custom, this girl sang softly through the night in the royal apartments.

The meal ended, the high priest, his fellows on his guards, departed at once for Thebes. Tothmes descended with them to where the chariots waited at the lower level, assuming more respect than he felt. This high priest he knew to be a pliant rascal who would bend to whatever wind blew strongest. Tothmes was already sure of his backing.

When Tothmes had seen the high priest off and came back up the ascending ramp, every trace of the recent festivities had vanished. The feast and the music had lasted a long while, indeed; it was already well past midnight. He paused at the head of the ramp and its guardian sphinxes, looking around at the empty moonlight, where a little while ago all had been lamps and song and hearty voices.

Here, on to where the shrine itself was carved deeply into the cliffs, all was silent. To the left stood a single archer of the guard, at the entrance to the royal apartments. Opposite, in the courts to the right, were quartered Tothmes, Hotep and the general's half-dozen men.

From somewhere within the queen's apartment faintly lifted the plaintive voice of the Syrian girl in quiet song. Tothmes went up to the guard, who saluted him.

"Is Sen Maut with the queen?" he asked.

"Not yet, lord; I have orders to admit him. The Pharaoh is at work over the temple plans."

Tothmes repressed an oath of irritation.

"Ask if she will receive me."

"I have orders to admit you at any time, lord."

The prince hesitated, stung by this perfect trust which he was betraying, but only for an instant. Egypt! This dwarfed all else. The violent urge to power, the driving factor of his right to rule, hurled any lesser consideration aside. Empire was in his blood, as in hers.

Tempted to go and get his old massive sword, he decided against it; sight of the changed weapon might cause suspicion. He passed the guard and went into the small court by the fountain.

TWO lamps burned there on the table, flame unflickering in the still night air. Poring over outstretched plans was Hatasu. She looked up and spoke.

"Ah, Tothmes! It's too warm to sleep; come and join me. Here are the sketches for the southwest corridor sculptures—the visit of the fleet to the land of Punt. See what you think of them."

He sat at the table, facing her. She wore her gossamer robe again, her only ornament an emerald that shimmered on a chain at her throat. Educated by the priesthood of Amon as he was, Tothmes had no difficulty in comprehending the sketches and the writing intended for the walls. He glanced over them, and pushed the papyrus roll aside.

"All right, I suppose. You certainly have your name and image everywhere!"

She laughed softly. "You don't like it? And perhaps, if ever you become Pharaoh, you will erase my image from all the monuments?"

"Absolutely," he said, smiling, affecting to treat it as a joke. "Why do you wear that common green jewel? It isn't even cut and carved decently."

"Oh, this!" She fingered the emerald at her throat. "Father gave me this, the day he proclaimed me queen; it came from the tomb of some barbarian king up the Nile, and has magic powers of protection. While I wear it, he said, no enemy can prevail over me. Do you believe that, Tothmes?"

"It remains to be seen," he rejoined, mentally sweeping the matter aside with a laugh. "Better put your trust in your guards, not in a green stone."

"Or both," she said, and glanced up at a step. The architect had just entered; he came forward and saluted them. Tothmes yielded his place at the table and drew back into the wall-shadows.

The other two forgot him. They talked of the sketches, then Hatasu broke into the subject of the great canal that would connect the two seas. Here was a topic leading them from talk into plans, calculations, figuring.

Tothmes grudgingly admitted that General Hotep had done well in drawing Sen Maut into this plot. The man had a head, and used it. Being in absolute charge here, he could quiet all news of what happened until Tothmes and Hotep got to Thebes, seizing the palace and treasury and temples; the rest was simple. And if anything went wrong, Sen Maut could bring up enough spearmen from the barracks below, as Hotep had said, to make all right.

He watched the two: the architect suave, fawning, watching the woman with desirous eyes; and Hatasu, intent upon the calculations before her. Suddenly she rolled up the papyrus and thrust it at the architect.

"Keep them safely. Where is your seal? I want you to make an estimate and seal it, to show the priests."

"My seal?" Sen Maut was astonished. "In my quarters below, lady."

"Then go and get it. No hurry."

Sen Maut rose, saluted her, glanced at the figure of Tothmes in the shadows, and obediently departed. Hatasu came to her feet.

"Wait, good brother, wait a little!" she said, smiling. "I'll be back."

She disappeared into her own quarters. Tothmes came forward and took the chair she had vacated; then he started, listening. The Syrian girl had begun to sing again—and it was the invocation to the dawn.

Yet the dawn was not near! Tothmes stiffened as he sat, drinking in the words of the hymn:

*. . . At last the day will end, and in
the west a fire will burn
And then, star-led, the night will fol-
low, as the day the night;
Rayed Isis and the blue, cool dark will
wrap the troubled day in dreams
And the singer and the song will pass
with the dawn in sleep.*

IN SUDDEN recollection, Tothmes leaped to his feet. It was time, it was time! He must keep the rendezvous with Hotep, at the top of the ramp! But in the very act of stepping out, Tothmes froze. A mailed shape, leaving the rooms of Hatasu, was striding at him.

A man, armed from head to foot, sword in hand; in the moonlight, the nose and cheek-pieces of the helmet lent the face a steely glitter of unreality. So it was a trap! A guard stationed here—then she must know everything! He gripped at his sword and bared it.

"Death," said the guard in a whisper. "Death to plot against the Pharaoh!"

He came striding on as he spoke, with a gliding, silent step. For one instant, fear assailed Tothmes—the dread panic fear of the supernatural. That helmet, those arms, were unusual; perhaps this was some deathly shape summoned up from the other world by the magic arts of Hatasu.

Then, rapping out an oath, Tothmes struck, and struck again. His sword clashed upon the other blade; real enough, then. But his edge could not drive home. Each slash was parried deftly. Furious at this, Tothmes leaped away from a sudden thrust. His brain awoke.

Not too late; it was win or lose all, now! Down with this fellow, and then to seize the queen . . .

"Hotep!" his abrupt shout lifted upon the still night. "Hotep! Inside, quickly!"

He leaped forward, with intent to kill this mailed guard swiftly. And despite the amazing skill and agility of the guard, Tothmes would have accomplished his intent, being the best swordsman in Egypt. But his Cretan blade, clashing again upon the other one, snapped off short at the hilt.

A rasping groan, another oath, and Tothmes hurled himself forward bare-handed, gripping at the mailed figure. He caught it, he evaded the sword—he found a laugh within his arms, and recoiled. Dismay and incredulity paralyzed him. It was Hatasu herself.

"So you want to kill me, brother?" She was laughing again, but was pressing upon him as he recoiled. She thrust her sword-hilt into his hand. "Why, then—be happy! Kill me, since you so desire. I'll not evade the stroke."

As she spoke, she put aside the mailcoat. He saw the emerald glint against her white bosom. He flung down the sword; it skittered and clanged across the stones.

"By Amon, I had no such thought!" he breathed hoarsely.

"I believe it," she returned coolly. "And now you're trapped, Tothmes; worse trapped than you realize. So you never examined that Cretan sword closely, eh? You would have seen that it was made to be shivered after a blow or two. And I'm no soldier, eh?"

He grunted, eyed her, gathered his muscles to spring. Not lost yet! Grip her once more, keep her gripped this time . . .

"Careful, good brother!"

A stir and a rustle sounded from the dark places. Tothmes relaxed, in utter despair and realization. She had known all along. Spies, no doubt; she had a world of spies.

From the entrance came a cry, a clash, a choked alarm. Feet pounded the stones. Into the little court rushed Hotep, a bloody javelin in his hand, Sen Maut at his heels with drawn blade, six more men crowding in. Steel glittered in the moonlight.

"Ha!" cried Hotep, seeing Tothmes empty-handed, and the figure of Hatasu. "Who's this soldier? Never mind—at them, men, at them! Kill them both."

"Stop, you fool!" roared Tothmes. "You know me, Hotep!"

"Too well," barked the soldier. "Too well to let you live lord! With you gone, with the queen in hand—close in around him, men!"

He settled himself to hurl the javelin,

when the voice of Hatasu stopped him like a vibrant force.

"You see, Tothmes? You see what he intended? Who's the soldier now?"

A sharp word escaped her. Somewhere in the shadows, the plunging twang of a bowstring broke upon the night. A shaft quivered aslant the silver air. Pierced through and through, Hotep cried out and collapsed.

Other bows twanged in shrill cadence, like some deathly harp, and the wild voices of dying men made fitting song for that harp. They fell one by one, then all together. The architect turned to escape, but an arrow caught him at the entrance, and he pitched headlong.

There was silence again, while Tothmes stood astare. Suddenly he drew himself up.

"Finish it, men, finish it!" he cried out.

"They obey me, brother, not you," said Hatasu. She came to him, laughing cruelly, and met him eye to eye. "You weren't made to plot, good brother; I was. Strange to say, you're too honest to make a plotter, too good a soldier. Eh?"

"Enough of your mockery," he said thickly.

"Even without a weapon, you would have killed me—"

"I had no such intention," he broke in curtly.

"No, when you knew me for myself. So you did not want my life?"

"Only your throne, Hatasu," he said bitterly. "And your daughter."

"Very well. Take it," she rejoined. "Take Meri for wife, and Egypt with her. Be the third Tothmes, the third and greatest. Your name and mine, in joint rule; and when I die, you and she together. Build the great canal, head the army, and leave the rule of Egypt in my hand. Is it yes, brother?"

Silence, again, the green jewel swinging at her throat.

except the enormous magnification of the emerald, all its flaws and inclusions plain to the eye, a verdant glow that filled the room.

It was gone.

Yet he felt the reality of it. He had witnessed that scene before. It all came back to him with a flash of brief memory. He had been there!

He reached forward to the switch. The room lights sprang on. Miriam Crews was gazing at him, startled, lips parted, breath coming fast.

"Was I—was it my imagination? Tell me, did you see anything? Egypt?"

"Everything." Shipman felt the hammer of his pulses. Her eyes widened on him.

"But you—why, you were that man!" she broke out. "You—the same look—the same profile— Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"Of course not." With an effort, he voiced the lie. "I'll send you the full report on your stone, as soon as we've checked the indices—"

She brushed his words aside. "Tell me, was it real? What we saw?"

"I don't know." He flung up his hands. "Nothing like that ever occurred before. You must be responsible, somehow. I do know that Tothmes was the greatest warrior Pharaoh; and that Queen Hatasu was like the great Elizabeth of England. She built that temple. I've seen its ruins."

"So have I, she assented. "Perhaps it was merely auto-hypnosis."

"That wouldn't explain why we both saw the same thing," Shipman said soberly. "Hello! I forgot about the time, and here you had an engagement in twenty minutes. Sorry I spoiled it for you. Shall I see you again? If you have this remarkable power, I'd like to make some tests later."

"Of course, I'll come back," she said, and glanced at her wrist. "My watch must have stopped!" Her voice was dismayed. "Just what time is it, please?"

Shipman looked at his own watch. He looked again, and swallowed hard. They had been in the examination room exactly four minutes.

SHIPMAN leaned forward—Useless! Everything was slipping away, dimming into a green chaos. Nothing remained

The Captains Pass



The moving story of a peasant who knew that war was only a moment's plague, and that the soil and its people were eternal

By JIM KJELGAARD

Author of "When the Pack Gathered," "First Catch Your Beaver," etc.

THE tank had fallen into the ravine the first time the troops had fought across the farm. Peder had covered it with a canvas cloth, and camouflaged it with leaves. He had no use for it, but discovery of the tank might mean finding the oxen.

His son was somewhere fighting the invader. He had been eager to go; Peder could not have held him back even if he had tried. His daughter was in a hospital, he did not know where, taking care of the wounded soldiers.

He was too old to go to war. When the bitter fight had woven back and forth on his farm he had only sat quietly, hoping it would soon end.

His country's troops had rallied beyond the village, surged forward and chased the invading army back. The battle lines were

ahead of Peder's farm now. The village was a huge ammunition dump. Peder was glad his country was holding the invader at bay.

But he was worried about the oxen. The order that every horse, cow, sheep, pig, and ox be made available to the government had been plain. The penalty for not making them available was imprisonment, and in the most flagrant cases, shooting. Peder thought his one of the more flagrant cases. When the two soldiers had come from the village to get his oxen, he had told them that a scouting detail from the invader's lines had made off with them and that had gone into the official report.

The oxen were down in the rocky ravine, beyond the tank, where they had been all winter. Peder had carried food and water to them at night.

But now it wasn't winter any more. The snow was gone and for two weeks the spring sun had warmed the earth. The land that Peder's father and grandfather before him

had tilled lay steaming under the good spring sun—and not a plow point in it yet. Things were never intended to be this way. In the spring the peasants should plow.

He worked all day with a mattock, breaking as much ground as he could. The rattle of rifles, the stutter of machine guns, the thunder of cannon, and the whine of airplanes from up where the battle lines were holding, were borne to him as a distant unpleasant melody.

As he worked, a little brown bird picked up bits of grass and carried them to a shell-torn tree in the nearby woods. The ravine was in the center of the woods in back of Peter's house, and from there two long arms of forested rocky ground reached out to enclose his field on three sides. Not many farms boasted so much forest about them.

When night came he stopped digging and went to his hay pile to get fodder for the oxen. He carried a great back load of it into the ravine, past the tank, and down to the camouflaged house where he kept the oxen under an overhanging wall. He threw the hay down and they fell to munching contentedly.

The oxen were huge white beasts with black horns. Peder had raised them from calves, and as they fed he ran his hands over them. Their muscles were getting flabby from lack of work, but if he took them out, the army would get them.

For a moment he thought of taking the oxen up and plowing at night. But anybody could recognize plowed land, and know that Peder must have used beasts to draw the plow.

After a bit he returned to his house and slept. He was up with the dawn, and the first thing he saw was the soldiers trotting toward his house.

THERE were forty-two of the soldiers. The only weapons they had aside from rifles were a few hand grenades. At a command from a young captain they deployed in front of his house.

They were mostly young men and all very weary. Their faces were bearded, their

hair long. Uniforms that had once been natty and clean were tattered and filthy. And every one of them moved as though his body alone were alive, responsive to strings in the hands of a puppet master. They were, Peder thought, like men already dead.

At a command from the captain, five men broke from each end of the line and went into the woods. Peder watched them, but not too anxiously. They were not apt to find the oxen unless they followed the ravine down. No soldiers had fought from the ravine because it was too steep and a death trap. Other soldiers could shoot down from the edge of it. Even if the searchers looked into the ravine from the top, they probably wouldn't find the oxen.

The young captain sat down, drew a pair of field glasses from inside his shirt, and peered back over the direction they had come from. After a bit he gave the glasses to a subordinate who, with a desperate and rapt attention, sat peering through them. The captain came to the porch.

"I must advise you that there will soon be a fight here," he said courteously. "You still have time to get to the rear."

The war was the height of silliness to Peder. A man in the village had said that his country was fighting for justice and right. But when the invaders had broken through, a lieutenant who had stayed one night at Peder's house had said that his country was fighting for the same things.

But Peder wasn't thinking of that now. He was watching the captain's hand. The thumb was hooked in his belt, and the fore and middle fingers were crossed just the way Peder's son used to cross his fingers when he talked.

"I'm sorry," he said gravely. "Are many of the enemy coming?"

The captain shrugged.

"A flying force. Their objective is to blow up the munitions in the village. They'll do it, too, unless we move troops up in time to get the ammunition out. Our mission is to hinder the enemy until this can be done."

"And can you hinder them?"

The captain shrugged again, and said wearily, "We will, of course, stop them for a while. But, as you see, we have only our rifles and a few hand grenades."

Peder wondered why they hadn't brought more of the mysterious weapons with which war was fought nowadays, and thought that they probably hadn't been able to. They could still run away and that, on the whole, was the wise thing to do.

With a little jerk of his head, the captain tossed the long hair away from his forehead. More than once, when his son had been hot from labor in the fields, Peder had seen him do exactly the same thing in exactly the same way. His eyes strayed back to the thumb hooked in the captain's belt and the crossed fingers. He warmed to the young officer.

Once, when his son had been a little boy, he had set out to build a dam in a small stream. But it had been following a period of heavy rains. As fast as his son placed the flimsy sticks, the current had swept them away. Grimly the little boy had kept on, and finally Peder had shown him how to brace the sticks with stones.

His son had been pleased and grateful, and Peder had been glad because he had helped his son. He said impulsively,

"Would a tank help?"

"A tank?" the captain said dully.

"Where are we going to get a tank?"

"I mean it," Peder insisted. "There is a tank."

"Old man," the captain said, "this is no time for nonsense."

"But there is a tank," Peder urged. "Let me show you."

He took the captain to the ravine and showed him the tank. The captain ripped the leaves and canvas off, climbed down into the ravine, and opened the steel door. He came out, and started off running.

"You wait here," he directed Peder.

WHEN the captain came back, twenty of the forty-two men were with him. Some of them smiled, and all of them heaved mightily when the captain ordered

them down into the ravine to get the tank out.

But the tank would not move. All it did was slip a few inches sideways and settle back. The men kept heaving desperately, as though they had hidden reservoirs of strength that they could call into play at will.

So intent were they that they did not even hear one of the oxen low. Peder looked quickly at the captain's face, but all he saw there was worry. The men worked with the fury of those who knew that having the tank might mean the difference between life and death for many of them.

Peder sensed what they thought. He had regarded soldiers in an abstract light until he met the young captain who reminded him of his son. They were not people. They were robots who marched until they got shot or bayoneted, and then they were shapeless gray bundles who meant no more than a dead pig.

The forty-two young men had seemed the same way when they had first come to his house. But, somehow, these twenty were different. An army wasn't a smooth, easily running machine. It, or at least what to Peder was an important part of it, was twenty men trying to lift a tank. An army was a cold and impassive thing, but these men were tired and desperate. If he helped them, surely they would not harm him.

He said to the captain, "I can get that tank out."

The captain brushed him irritably aside, pointed down in the ravine, and shouted directions.

Peder was scarcely noticed when he climbed down into the ravine and walked slowly to the white oxen. He was not afraid. All he wanted to do was a neighborly act. Such acts were naturally repaid in kind.

Surely, if he used the oxen to pull the tank, the soldiers would not harm the oxen or take them from him. He adjusted the yoke about their necks, and with a long chain trailing from the yoke, drove them up the ravine.

It was good to drive the oxen again, and

they were glad to be driven after having been idle all winter. The young captain leaped down beside Peder when he saw him coming.

"Where did you get those?" he demanded.

"They'll pull the tank out," Peder said instead of answering.

He drove them up the ravine to a low place, and turned them out there to guide them back along the edge. He fixed the chain to the front of the tank and shouted at the oxen.

With the men pushing behind, the tank moved. An inch at a time, then a foot at a time, and finally with a great heaving and rattling of stones, it came up out of the ravine. The young captain cast the chain from it as soon as it was up. He and one of the men began tinkering with the motor.

As Peder took the oxen back into the ravine, he heard the motor stutter into life. It was good he had covered it.

PEDER watched the fight from beside his house. It was dangerous, but he wanted to see what the young men were going to do. The enemy came in sight, a thin line of scattered figures. But there were more than a hundred of them.

Fifteen of the forty-two young men, crouching low, ran forward from the house and threw themselves flat. They began to shoot with their rifles, and here and there a figure dropped out of the enemy's line. But the rest of the enemy came running forward, bayonets fixed.

They were almost on the fifteen when the rest of the forty-two came out of the woods in back of them and, dropping to their knees, began to shoot. The enemy line wavered a little. Before they had time to organize effectively against this peril at their backs, the tank came out of the woods.

The tank was a light one and very fast. Twin machine guns mounted in front of it were spitting. Peder saw the invaders drop their rifles as their knees buckled,

and before he really knew what was happening, many of them were down. The rest dropped their rifles and raised their hands.

The tank came to a stop. Sweating and bedraggled, the young captain climbed out of it. Efficiently, snappily, he tallied up the prisoners and sent them toward the rear under guard. The wounded men were placed in the shade to await ambulances. The dead were left for sanitary details that would probably be the invader's. Everything in order, the captain approached Peder.

"Where are the oxen?" he asked.

Peder looked at him wearily. The captain was no longer an individual, but a symbol of vast machine that would stop only when its own momentum carried it to destruction. The machine swept over the country, sucking into its hungry mouth everything it could use. It ignored only what it could not use, such as old men like himself.

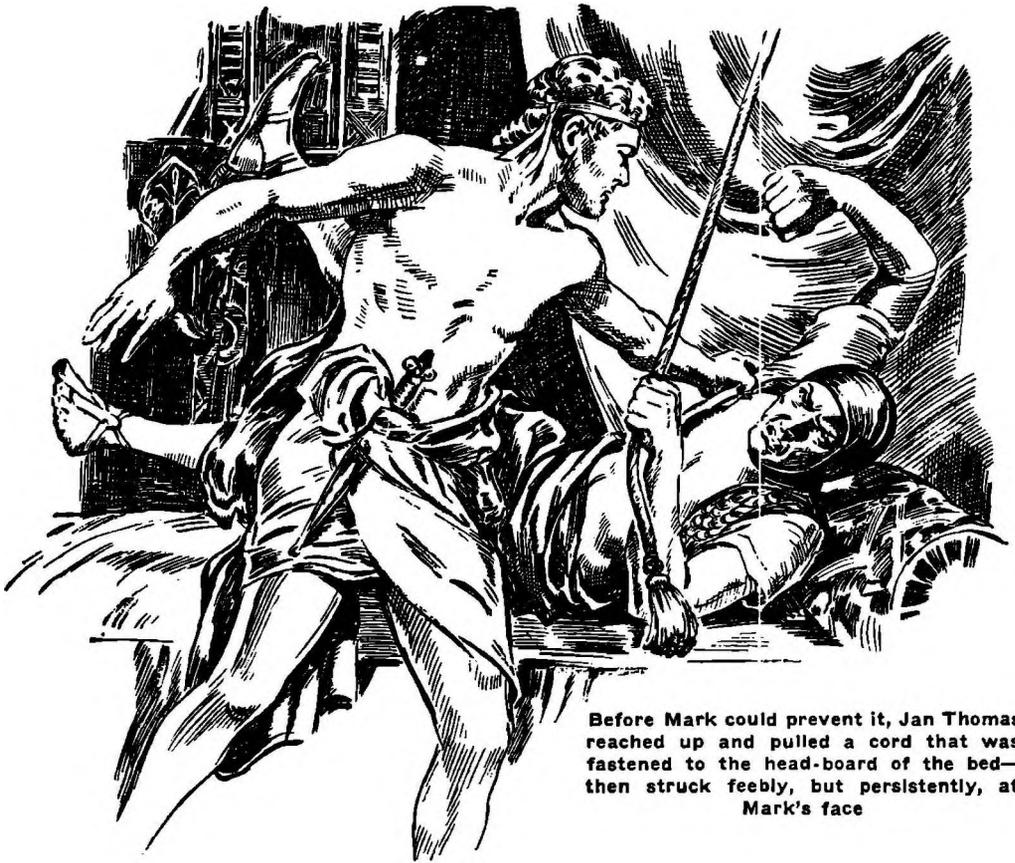
"They're in the ravine," he said.

Long after the soldiers had gone, Peder broke ground with the mattock. The young captain appeared to have forgotten that not declaring the oxen was punishable by imprisonment or death. Peder was grateful for that much.

The invaders would swarm over his farm again now that his own troops were in retreat. Peder thought of them exactly as he would have thought of a plague of locusts, or a long drought that killed all his crops. He wondered if his own troops had been successful in removing the munitions from the village, and what difference it would make if they had.

He would miss the oxen, but within him was a great well of patience inherited from generations of soil-tilling ancestors. His time would come again. Long after all the soldiers had stopped shooting and all the captains had passed, there would still have to be men plowing their land with oxen. Peder was sure of it.

Maybe as soon as next year he would be able to get more oxen and plow all his land.



Before Mark could prevent it, Jan Thomas reached up and pulled a cord that was fastened to the head-board of the bed—then struck feebly, but persistently, at Mark's face

Minions of Mercury

By WILLIAM GRAY BEYER

MARK NEVIN, young twentieth-century engineer, is awakened after a six-thousand-year nap by OMEGA, a disembodied intelligence from the Moon, who is determined to start a new and finer race of humankind. During Mark's long sleep great wars and pestilence have effaced the civilization he knew, and man has reverted to a primitive state.

Satisfied that Mark is the ideal candidate for the role of neo-Adam, Omega effects certain changes in his blood that give him superior strength and endurance and, hence, longevity. He also rouses dormant portions of Mark's brain, giving him complete control of the minds of others, and a more

limited control over inert matter. Through this latter faculty, for instance, Mark learns how to fly.

Mark falls in love with NONA and Omega approves his choice. So Nona is granted superior physical and mental powers similar to Mark's; and after a series of adventures in which the three of them wipe out the last remaining vestige of evil in the world, Mark and Nona settle down to twelve years of peace and security.

OMEGA, however, on one of his regular tours of inspection of the Earth, discovers that all is not well with eightieth-century Detroit. The city is ruled by the tyrant VARGO who has hypnotized his subjects into contentment with their lot.

In this, Vargo has been abetted by five scientists whom Vargo has restored to life

This serial began in the *Argosy* for August 31

from previous generations. These men are worshipped as the Ancestors; and it is they who are responsible for the marked industrial and technical strides Detroit has taken from the semi-savagery which prevails all over the Earth.

Omega further discovers that Vargo plans to spread his doctrine of Happiness-Through-Hypnosis, by force if necessary; and is, in fact, about to launch on a war of conquest.

So he sends for Mark. . . .

ARRIVING in Detroit, Mark quickly learns all the facts about the city. He has a brush with Vargo and comes off second-best; worse, he knows that the next time they meet, Vargo will be prepared.

Mark falls in with TOLON, one of the few un hypnotized inhabitants. Not obedient to Vargo's regime, Tolon and seventy-odd others have become outlaws, thieves, although they are essentially honest men. Mark sees in them the nucleus for a rebel force that may help him destroy Vargo. He joins their band, and one of their number cleverly alters his appearance to that of a gray-haired old man, so that he may escape detection by Vargo's men.

That night Mark invades the palace and meets JAN THOMAS, one of the Ancestors. Thomas tells him that Vargo holds the Ancestors under hypnotic control, and that not one of the five is in sympathy with his plans.

Mark breaks Vargo's mental sway over Thomas, but before he can get in touch with any of the other four, an alarm is given. Promising to return and liberate the others, Mark flies back to the outlaws' headquarters.

MEANWHILE, Nona, who has come to Detroit at Omega's insistence, meets the girl GLADYS, who has been carefully concealing the fact that Vargo's hypnosis was never properly administered to her. Fearful that the slightest disobedience will instantly reveal her independent, unenthralled mind, she has even married a drunken bully whom she loathes.

On Omega's suggestion, Gladys takes Nona out to show her the city. They are accosted by two men who wish to take them to a party—one a young nobleman by the name of BARON, who appears to be distinctly in his cups; the other, Tolon, who frankly confesses he is a thief.

Suddenly Baron rouses from his pseudo-drunken stupor and takes the other three prisoner. Vargo has learned of the existence of the band of outlaws and the whole expedition was a trap to catch Tolon. The girls might just as well go along to prison too.

As they are led into the jail, they are observed by a passerby, who frowns. This is odd, since all citizens of Detroit have been hypnotized into approving the arrest of those who break Vargo's laws. The prison door shuts, the frowner hesitates a moment, then hurries off into the darkness. . . .

CHAPTER XV

CHAPEAU BY VARGO

MARK'S mind was far from placid when he sought out Ira, leader of the thieves. As if he hadn't had enough on his mind, Omega had given him a new worry. Cagily, he hadn't displayed too strong an opposition to Omega's plan, but he certainly didn't think much of it, just the same.

If there was any possible way of solving the problem without accepting Omega's solution, he intended to find it.

Ira seemed pleased when Mark requested that they find a room where they could talk in private. He took Mark to his bedroom, assuring him that they wouldn't be disturbed.

"Nobody'd ever think of looking for us here," Ira said, chuckling. "I sleep in the daytime, and very little then."

They sat at a small table, a bottle of excellent wine between them. A dim ceiling light on the other side of the room cast heavy shadows and illuminated only one side of their faces. Ira's wide, bony features made that half take on a look of sinister strength, quite at variance with his appearance under a more even light.

For while Ira's face depicted strength, there was nothing really sinister about it. His was a calm, assured strength, unruffled and unyielding. His lips were wide, capable of portraying expression; yet seldom revealing an emotion. Wideset gray eyes, imperceptibly calm, twinkled as they looked into Mark's.

"That's a fine set of whiskers you have there," he observed. "Remarkable growth in so short a time."

"It's a gift," explained Mark. "I hope it doesn't spread to the ears."

They talked, and Mark's hazy plan began to take solid form as he learned more about

the organization of the thieves. The fraternity which Ira headed was composed entirely of men who had gone through Vargo's Vocation Board with a knowledge of its methods. Every man possessed a natural resistance against hypnotic suggestion, and also sufficient mental alertness to have been able to deceive the Board into thinking that he had responded to treatment.

Furthermore each man had rebelled, becoming a thief rather than work at his assigned profession in accordance with Vargo's planned economy.

Most of them were fairly young men, only recently banded together, though there were some who had undergone the Vocation Board's training many years ago, and were in their late forties. These older men had formed the earliest nucleus of the fraternity.

There were few of them because in the beginning Vargo had done all of the hypnotic conditioning himself. Few had the resistance to withstand him. It was only in more recent years that he had trained assistants to soften the subjects before he gave them a final treatment.

This latter system had given those with some natural resistance against hypnosis a chance to realize what was coming and to resist even Vargo's great power. As a result, the ranks of the thieves' fraternity had begun to swell only in the last few years.

The brotherhood was held together, not only because of the need for mutual protection, but because of a certain esprit de corps which had risen between them, by reason of the fact that they formed a class radically different from other men of Detroit. Out of a population of more than two million, they were almost the only ones in the city who were really free.

This distinction, carrying with it the necessity for secrecy, bound them together as nothing else could. A thief could talk to another thief with a knowledge that the other's opinions and thoughts hadn't been molded and conditioned by the hated Vargo. And when arguments arose the participants became even closer to one another than they had been before.

For each knew that the other had expressed his own thoughts, and had a perfect right to them. Differences of opinion bound them closer instead of separating them. They were the recognized marks of free minds. Other citizens seldom expressed any thoughts which weren't the direct result of the hypnotic influence under which they moved.

"**H**AVE you made no attempt to nullify any of the works of Vargo?" Mark asked. "Haven't you tried to do something to stop this impending conquest?"

Ira spread his hands, helplessly. "We are few," he pointed out. "Two million minds are intent on this war. They can't be influenced. To try would make us stand out like a damaged thumb. We'd be in jail in no time at all."

"Sabotage?"

"A mosquito stinging an elephant. It wouldn't be noticed."

"The elephant's hide is thick," Mark agreed. "We'll have to poison him. We'll work on his vitals."

Ira looked interested. "Don't forget the minds of those two million," he cautioned. "You could destroy all their guns, and they'd still want to go out with knives and arrows."

Mark nodded. "But as long as they're preparing, we'll have no trouble from that angle. The war can be delayed. A final solution, of course, will have to provide for knocking the idea out of their minds. But until I can work that out, we'll have to take steps to delay the war. And there aren't many days to act."

Hours went by as Mark's plan was worked out between them in detail. Ira did most of the figuring, once the essentials were explained to him.

The plan was simple enough.

It was based on the sketchy nature of the army which was shortly to go forth to conquer the world. Vargo's inexperience with things military had provided the weak spot.

Caravan guards were the mainstay of the army. They were to be its officers; the

prime movers in Detroit's war of conquest.

The choice was natural, of course, for these men were hard-bitten fighters, who knew the tricks and habits of the nomads. They also knew the character of the land over which their army would move, and the facilities for defense possessed by the various cities they had visited. They were admirably suited to the task of guiding the destinies of an army. What they lacked in strategy would be more than made up by guns and numbers.

BUT they presented a weak spot, nevertheless. They numbered less than two hundred. Remove them and the army became a body without a brain. Mark's plan was to remove them.

He and Ira worked out the idea to perfection. Quite a few members of the thieves' fraternity had, like Tolon, come from the ranks of the caravan guards. They knew where their favorite recreation spots were located. Kidnaping the guards, or at least a large percentage of them, would be easy.

There were houses owned by the thieves which could be used to confine those who were captured, but Mark intended to make their imprisonment of short duration. As fast as the thieves brought in their captives, Mark would erase the hypnotic suggestions of Vargo and replace them with ones of his own. The caravan guards would become members of his own band, whether they wanted to or not.

It wouldn't suffice merely to free them of Vargo's spell. There would be some among them who would still like the idea of a war. Fire would have to be fought with fire. And Mark no longer had any compunction about exercising his power.

There would still be some of the younger nobles who were capable and adventurous enough to take part in the leading of an army. Ira already knew of several such, and to try to capture them would be out of the question. But fortunately their number was small, nor were they sufficiently versed to take full command of an army, over the type of country which was to be traversed.

Without the caravan guards to lead the army, the war would be delayed. A lengthy period of reorganization would be necessary, and during that time Mark hoped to be able to formulate a plan which would erase the desire from the minds of Detroit's people.

As the night wore on, thief after thief stopped at headquarters to report, before proceeding to his separate home for a day's rest. Ira collared them, one by one, and issued instructions. There would be a meeting in the late afternoon, and after dark the thieves would begin their task of rounding up the caravan guards.

Those of the fraternity who had formerly been with the caravans spent most of the day in planning and preparation. Upon them fell the job of leading small parties to the various places where their quarry could be expected.

There were several favorite stamping grounds of the caravan guards, and most of them were admirably suited to the business of kidnaping. These men were like sailors in the respect that when they returned from hazardous journeys of long duration, most of their time was spent in having a glorious carouse. Few of them were married, for theirs was a bachelor's business. They lived hard and they played hard.

Even now, when few caravans were being sent out because of the impending war, the guards considered that moment poorly spent which found them completely sober when there was opportunity to be otherwise. Cabarets of the noisier sort were doing a rushing business.

Twice, even before darkness had arrived, caravan guards were brought into headquarters by old friends who were now members of the fraternity. Each time, the guard in question was hilariously drunk, and supposed that he was being guided to a place where liquor was plentiful and the girls agreeable. Mark worked on them immediately, and the fraternity increased by two. Vargo's army accordingly lost two hard-hitting and cagey officers.

Night came, and several more trickled in.

Force was required only once. More than twenty were duly operated upon by Mark's counter-suggestion. Then there came a lull. Almost an hour went by with no new arrivals.

"I have a little business to attend to," Mark told Ira. "You can hold any others who come in until I return."

Ira, so pleased with the way their plan was working that he was actually grinning, promised to take care of things himself until Mark got back.

HIGH over the roof tops, Mark sped toward the palace. His "little business" involved the second portion of his plan Jan Thomas had a part in it, as well as the rest of the Ancestors. With their help he could strike directly at Vargo, no matter how well he was protected and guarded. Vargo would never suspect that his own tools were being used against him.

Mark perched briefly on the window-ledge of Thomas' room, then floated across the ceiling toward the light switch. Reaching it he paused for a second before turning it on. There was something wrong, he instinctively knew, yet he couldn't place it.

There was no sound, except for the gentle snores which sounded from the position which he knew the bed occupied. That was all right

Or was it? Abruptly he knew it wasn't. His last words with Thomas had been that he would be back again tonight. Why then wasn't Thomas awake and waiting for him?

Alert and ready to act instantaneously. Mark snapped the switch. But apparently there was nothing wrong. The room was unoccupied except for the sleeping Thomas. Mark looked at the sleeping man, then dashed to his side and shook him.

Jan Thomas opened his eyes, alarm in his expression. Alarm, but no recognition!

His face looked pinched because of a peculiar night-cap he was wearing. The thing fitted tightly over his skull and covered the back and both sides of his head. Gathered tightly around his neck, it terminated in a wide, elastic collar which fit snugly under the chin. It was this con-

trivance which had caused Mark to awaken the man so roughly.

Before Mark could act to prevent it, Jan Thomas reached up and pulled a cord which was fastened to the head-board of the bed. The raucous whine of a siren split the night with its terrifying wail. As the sound was augmented by that of running feet in the corridor outside, Thomas struck feebly, but persistently, at Mark's face. The sound of approaching feet converged at the door of the room.

Without hesitation Mark snatched up Jan Thomas bodily and slung him over a shoulder. The futile thumps of Thomas' fists on his back didn't slow him in the least as he made for the window.

A second was lost in maneuvering his burden out of the window. In that second the door burst inward. Bullets smacked against the frame of the window, and several others whizzed past his head.

Mark felt a momentary burning sensation along the skin of a thigh as he cast himself outward, but paid it no heed. His greatest fear was that one of the bullets had found a resting place in the body of Jan Thomas.

For a breath-taking hundred feet Mark and Thomas dropped toward the ground. Then, with scarcely twenty feet to spare, they swooped out of the fall and sped through the grove of trees, gaining altitude as they went

Thomas kept up his incessant hammering, which made it pretty clear that he hadn't been hit by any of the flying bullets. The scratch on his own thigh, Mark knew, was already healed. But Thomas didn't have any of the remarkable blood which healed wounds almost as soon as they happened.

High above the city, Mark halted his mad flight. He twisted Thomas around in front of him and gave him the full blast of his hypnosis wave. Thomas only reached out with an intended haymaker and landed on his nose.

Abruptly Mark realized what was wrong. The night-cap was a shield! Holding Thomas with one hand, he ripped it off.

The futile pummeling ceased immediately.

Jan Thomas was seized with a fit of trembling as he looked down at the city.

"Imagine you're in an airplane," suggested Mark. "Papa won't let you down . . . What happened?"

CHAPTER XVI

PLAN FOR PULLING TEETH

THOMAS forced himself to look up. "Vargo must have guessed. As soon as the search for you ended—zingo! He shoved all five of us into a hypnotic trance. I was the last and he must have discovered that you had released me from his influence. I don't know anything after that. Only that when I woke up it seemed urgent that I pull that cord."

But Mark knew how to get the information he sought. It was locked in Thomas' subconscious, whether he knew it or not. And Mark found it quickly.

When Bach had told Vargo that someone had tried to gain entrance at his window, Vargo knew that the only man who could have been there was Mark. He guessed why, and investigated to find if Mark had already reached any of his Ancestors.

Thomas, unwittingly, had told him. Vargo had then placed Thomas in a state of hypnotic sleep and left him in his bed to provide a trap when Mark returned. He had impressed only one suggestion; that Thomas pull the cord if anyone attempted to arouse him. Of the helmet, Thomas knew nothing.

Mark guessed that the thing had been devised by one of the other Ancestors, at Vargo's direction. Work had probably been started on it the instant that Vargo was aware that there existed a greater hypnotic power than his own. And Mark had shown him that, the previous afternoon.

By now there were probably several of the gadgets, inasmuch as Vargo was warned that Mark intended to strike at him through the Ancestors. It was conceivable that he would have all the palace attendants equipped with them.

Mark examined the thing and found it to consist of an extremely fine wire mesh, woven as a lining to the cloth exterior of the helmet. At a glance he couldn't tell what metal had been used, but guessed that it was lead. Whatever it was, it had effectually screened his hypnosis wave.

Once more his plans went aglimmering. His greatest weapon was nullified by the existence of the screen. Morosely he carried Jan Thomas to the thieves' headquarters.

Several more caravan guards had been brought in during his absence. He treated them without enthusiasm. There was now a total of forty-two of the emancipated guards, and more were coming in. Before long Vargo's army would be practically bereft of officers.

But the measure was at best temporary. The war would be delayed, but not called off.

Nor would the postponement be of great duration, either. Vargo was resourceful and it wouldn't take him long to realize that there was another class of men who were conversant with the ways of the nomads and thoroughly familiar with the layouts of the various cities on the conquest list.

Caravan guards weren't the only ones who had traveled to the lands which must be conquered. Every caravan carried a host of porters, laborers and ox-drivers. On occasion many of these were fighters as well.

And even those who had never been called upon to bear weapons in protection of their caravans, had observed the methods of the regular guards. They were also familiar with the characteristics of the trails, and would know how to avoid ambushes. And they were familiar with the defenses of other cities.

It would be only a matter of days before they would be pressed into service, and trained for the job of directing the army.

THE night wore on, and in the intervals between the treating of new arrivals, Mark studied the problem of working out a complete plan for the frustration of

Vargo's dream of conquest. He wracked his brain thoroughly.

And having had no little practice in wracking, he eventually devised a plan. At first glance, the difficulties attending its accomplishment made it appear useless and impractical. But he went on with it just the same.

The afternoon before he had kicked himself for passing up the opportunity to operate hypnotically on Vargo himself. Well—it was still an idea, and he worked it in. Of course, *that* was one of the things which made his plan slightly on the impractical side, especially now that Vargo had a screen against hypnotism.

Mark remembered that he had conceived the thought after it was too late to put it into practice. The recollection had brought to mind the fact that such a course of action wouldn't be so simple as it had first appeared.

From a purely academic standpoint he considered its difficulties. In the first place, Vargo had accomplished his subjugation of the citizens of Detroit over a period of thirty years. It would take almost as long to unhypnotize the same people.

And he doubted that Vargo would live that long, even if he were able to make Vargo suddenly want to undo his life's work.

In the second place, some of the hypnotic suggestions which Vargo had impressed would cause disaster if erased. You couldn't dehypnotize a man who had been happily engaged in a certain occupation for a number of years and let him realize that he had no consuming passion for that kind of work.

Cases like that would have to be handled carefully. For those who got their only fun out of manufacturing war materials, a substitute suggestion would have to be made—such as the delightfulness of making bridges or whipping up batches of insect spray. Otherwise a host of people would be left ambitionless and without any driving urge to live.

These things would take some time, of course, but Mark did solve the problem of

removing the insane desire for a war of conquest.

And what a problem! Hypnotic suggestion was impressed on a timid mind by verbally repeating the desired suggestion. So-o—it was going to take plenty of time even to begin to undo the things that Vargo had accomplished over such an extended period. Verbal counter-suggestions would have to be given individually to each person who had been hypnotized.

Nice and easy, like pulling one tooth after another.

That, Mark knew, was what he would have to do if he tackled the job himself. And, reflecting dourly on such a state of affairs, he had an idea. It was, he told himself, a pushover. But perfect!

The thing was tailor-made. When Tolon went before the Vocation Board, Vargo had dwelt upon the suggestion that Tolon must believe that he was a wise and benign ruler and was therefore to be obeyed without question henceforth and forevermore. The clue was right there:

Almost the entire population of Detroit would react immediately and obediently to the *voice* of Vargo!

Mark remembered how much had been accomplished in his own day by certain European dictators, who used the hysterical qualities of their voices without even possessing the gift of hypnotic power. *Radio!* A science in which Mark was an expert, and with which he could force Vargo to tell his people that war was no longer to be desired.

All he had to do was re-invent it.

COMPLETELY ignoring the fact that he must first hypnotize Vargo and make him really the selfless individual he preferred to be, Mark asked Ira to call in some electrical experts.

"At this time of night?" Ira exclaimed.

Mark nodded. "Rout them out of bed." he ordered. "Pick men who have authority in the plants where they are employed. And be ready to sign a lot of checks. I'm liable to bankrupt the fraternity before the night's over. But I'll make you rich as

a result. Detroit is going to have a new industry.

Mark didn't wait for the experts to arrive. He called for paper and drawing pencils, and went to work. Under his practiced hand plans began to take shape. He filled sheet after sheet of paper with detailed instructions on the construction of various items which go into the manufacture of a radio broadcasting station and a receiving set.

His memory went back six thousand years for the desired information, but in a matter of a few hours he was finished.

Long before the task was completed, the experts arrived and were immediately placed in an hypnotic trance. Mark trained their minds in this state far more easily than he could have done if they were conscious. Each fact that he taught them would be immediately available when it was needed.

Also was impressed the desire for secrecy in the manufacture and fabrication of the finished product. Co-workers of the various experts must be made to believe that the strange articles which each expert would develop in his laboratory were designed for different purposes altogether. Each man left with his plans and plenty of money to cover expenses, fully educated for his task.

Work was to be started immediately. A broadcasting outfit of moderate power would be in operation in less than two weeks. A hundred receivers would be ready for installation in halls and meeting places. The people of Detroit would soon hear from Vargo himself that war was no longer desirable, that there were other methods of lifting the rest of the world to Detroit's cultural status.

That heroic task completed, Mark all of a sudden felt considerably deflated. He had started the ball a-rolling; a ball which promised to bounce off the stone wall of Vargo's impregnability. And there was no sense in trying to plan a way past the man's defenses. Any plan he might devise had too many jokers in it.

There were too many ways in which

Vargo might circumvent anything he might think up. Attack by way of The Ancestors was out. Similarly it might be useless to show himself at the palace. He already had sufficient proof that Vargo had ordered him shot on sight. . . .

Mark suddenly remembered that he didn't look quite the same as the fellow who had first aroused the dictator's ire. Vargo had ordered a bronzed young man with a winged helmet shot on sight. Then he had shown up at the palace as an old man. Vargo had forced that from the mind of Jan Thomas. And he had ordered the old man shot.

Suppose he assumed a new disguise?

Mark growled suddenly, remembering the helmets. Then abruptly he cast the whole subject from his mind, realizing that when the time came he would have to meet a set of conditions which couldn't be planned for now. He would probably have to organize a battalion from the membership of the thieves' fraternity, and take the palace by storm. His mind, momentarily unoccupied, reverted to more personal problems.

Omega—that blasted, meddling, lovable old remnant of a disfranchised spider. . .

CHAPTER XVII

LET'S GO TO PRISON

HIS eye fell upon the slight form of the one Ancestor he had managed to free. Jan Thomas, refreshed from an entire day and night of sleep, was busily chatting with a pair of the older thieves. In them, it seemed, he had found kindred souls.

Both had been technicians, before they had joined the fraternity, and still were intensely interested in scientific research. One of them was a chemist; the other a biologist who had once had a hand in the growth ray's early development. The latter was responsible for the perfection of the nutrition solutions which were constantly fed to the abnormally fast-maturing vegetation.

Mark walked over to the three and listened for a few minutes. They were talking

over plans whereby they would collaborate on some obscure research in which all three were interested. It gave Mark an idea.

"Wait a minute," he interrupted. "I've got a job for you. Especially you, Thomas. Get a syringe. I want to give you a sample of my blood to work on."

Ira, Jan Thomas and the two old men gasped in unison as the glass tube of the syringe slowly filled itself with his blood.

"Duplicate that," said Mark. "Find a liquid which, when injected into the veins of a healthy animal, will cause its blood to become like mine. Experiment on animals only, and let me know the instant you achieve success. Don't use it on a human being. I must first test the animal which you have changed."

To be certain that his orders would be obeyed. Mark once more used his power. Jan Thomas and the two old men would be unable to do other than obey. Ira watched and listened as he repeated the order. He was impressed by the repetition, but didn't realize that the three were under Mark's hypnotic wave. Even as Mark released them, Ira was none the wiser.

"What is its particular value?" he asked—"other than the value of ordinary red blood?"

For answer Mark took a dagger and sliced deeply into the flesh of his arm. A smear of blue blood appeared—and then the wound healed, leaving no trace. Ira's eyes betrayed his astonishment.

"If they succeed," Mark said, "certain worthy ones will be injected. It has other valuable properties as well."

Mark sat down at a table and dismissed the entire contents of the room from his consciousness. He wanted to think; to think more deeply than he had done for some time. Ira, several of the new converts, and a half dozen of the older members of the fraternity were present, but he cast them completely out of his mind.

He had made an initial step in a course of procedure which would have never occurred to him under other circumstances. Inwardly, the thought of his own temerity made him cringe with apprehension.

OMEGA had been his guiding angel since the moment of his awakening, and it wasn't easy suddenly to take a course completely at variance with the omniscient being's wish. He was knowingly running counter to the desire of one who could destroy him in an instant. Destroy the whole earth, for that matter.

It was like flying in the face of a god more mighty than Jupiter. Except that instead of a legendary deity, of doubtful potency, and only rumored authenticity, Mark was contemplating the defiance of a very real entity, one of proven and adequately demonstrated power.

Mark thought. He thought, because it wasn't too late to back out of his decision. He could easily stop the three scientists from analyzing the sample of his blood. He could erase the memory of it from their minds, and Ira's as well. And as he thought, he became more apprehensive as to the reaction of the unpredictable Omega.

Omega liked him. But he liked Mark because he thought Mark was considerably different from the average, emotion-ridden human. He had revived him because Mark was a man of logic, as well as a man of good character. Omega had always insisted that emotion was all right in its place, but that its place was subordinate to cold, rational logic. Where the two conflicted there was no room for compromise.

Mark knew that he was right, and yet he was human enough to refuse to apply the rule in his own case. And there, he greatly feared, was a point where Omega might forget that he liked Mark.

Mark might be placing himself, in Omega's mind, as just another human: worthy of sublime contempt, and to be treated accordingly.

And "accordingly" might take on some obnoxious forms. For Omega had a peculiar sense of humor, as Mark well knew. When he found that his pet plan for populating the earth with the superior descendants of Mark and Nona, had been tampered with—indeed, wrecked completely—it was hard to say what he might not do.

Mark might find himself transformed

permanently and irrevocably into a loathsome reptile. Most anything could happen, and probably would.

Mark suddenly jumped to his feet and laughed. Let Omega fry! He liked the old duffer and valued his friendship. But Mark was a man, and a man had to stand on his own feet, come what may. He'd go through with it.

If the scientists succeeded in duplicating his blood, he'd inject it into quite a few people before he turned up his toes. He'd be careful and pick out only those he knew had few vicious instincts, and then hope for the best.

And unless he was very much wrong, it would come out all right.

AT THAT moment the outer door opened and another caravan guard was brought in, this one feet first. He was either very intoxicated or one of the boys had massaged his scalp with a club.

"What's the score?" he asked Ira.

"One hundred and four," was the pleased answer.

"Any casualties on our side?"

Ira hesitated. "No," he answered. "Not tonight. Though a couple were bunged up a bit. Last night, however, Tolon was captured."

"Tolon!" Mark exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know it until just now," Ira said. "While you were sitting there, one of our men came in, pretty much the worse for wear. He'd gotten in a fight last night and spent the day recovering his senses. He just remembered that before he got in the fight, he saw Tolon taken into the private prison of the nobles."

"Where is he?"

Ira led Mark to one of the bedrooms. He saw the pain-wracked body of a wizened, middle-aged man writhing on the bed. His eyes were wild with the delusions of fever and weakness.

"He's injured badly," Ira said. "I've sent for a doctor, one of our own men."

Mark bent over the man and looked in his eyes. Immediately he became still, and

the pained look left his face. Across his forehead was a jagged cut, its edges inflamed and swollen.

Mark passed a hand over the cut and held it there for a few seconds. The inflamed condition indicated that infection had set in, and Mark knew that his hand would kill the germs which caused it. Omega had once told him that the radio activity of his blood sent emanations for several inches outside his body, and were sure death to any micro-organism they touched.

He had used this quality many times in the past dozen years to heal the untended wounds of the hardy Vikings, who were inclined to ignore any injury which left them with all limbs intact.

The man's eyes opened and the light of sanity returned to them.

"Take it easy, fellow," said Mark, soothingly. "Tell me what you saw last night, if you feel strong enough."

The man cleared his throat and began. His voice was weak and rasping at first but gained strength as he went on.

"The nobles' prison," he said. "Where they take the ones who work against Vargo—the ones who aren't hypnotized. Denbaron and another man had them covered with guns. I waited down the street but they didn't come out while I was there."

"They?" asked Mark. "Was someone besides Tolon captured?"

"Two women. Girls, rather. Both beautiful. The nobles will keep them, but you'd better send after Tolon. He's the third to go in there in the last week and the others didn't come out."

Mark turned to Ira, who looked decidedly grave. "What is this nobles' prison?" he asked.

"We can't touch it," said Ira. "We've never been able to get a man out of it. The nobles use it for special captives who rebel against the dictates of Vargo. Ordinary offenses are dealt with in the regular police courts, but the ones who go to the nobles' prison are never heard from again. They get no trial at all."

"Where is it?"

"Not far from the palace," Ira replied. "They say there's a passage between the two. The belief is that Vargo himself imposes sentence on any captives who are taken there. Poor Tolon. He was one of our best men. Always cheerful, and a demon in a fight."

Mark scratched his chin. "I don't like the way you used the past tense," he said. "I'd rather use the present when referring to Tolon. Take me to this prison, while it's still dark."

CHAPTER XVIII

BLACKOUT FOR AN OLDSTER

A THIN crescent of a moon was just setting in the west. In the east there was a faint lightening of the sky which would spread and increase in brightness as the seconds advanced. Mark knew that his time was limited when he sent his guide back to headquarters and soared toward the upper windows of the prison.

Accordingly he paid little attention to the noise he made as he wrenched at the bars of a window high up on the sheer face of the prison's western wall. Dimly, he could see a long gloomy corridor, only faintly visible by the glow which entered a similar window at its other end.

That window looked out toward the east, and the heightening of the light made him increase his efforts with the stubborn bars.

Finally, with a savage burst which almost pulled the skin from his hands, he wrenched them from their sockets, tearing loose handfuls of powdered concrete in the process.

He lowered himself into the corridor, dropping the last few feet to the stone floor. His sandals made a swift patter as he sped along looking for a staircase to the lower floors. There were cells in this corridor, but none was occupied. He guessed that this was an unused floor, probably out of service since Vargo's rise. It looked like an ancient place, probably once well populated.

But if, as Ira had said, it was only used for rebels against the authority of Vargo, there wouldn't be many occupants in the

palace. There couldn't be many rebels, for one doesn't rebel when under the influence of hypnotism.

The lower floor of the building was windowless, Mark had noted, and it was there that he would find Tolon.

There was a stair entrance in the middle of the corridor. Mark passed it once without seeing it, for its door was the same as the ones which led into the cells. Fortunately it wasn't locked, and he saved the minutes he would have had to use in forcing it. It creaked protestingly as he swung it aside. He swore silently and hoped the sound couldn't be heard below.

THE stairway wound down in short flights, a barred door at each landing. Mark's quiet profanity attained new heights as each of the doors made known its objection to being moved. The noise couldn't be helped, however, and seconds were precious.

He moved down the last flight and was relieved to see a stone door at the bottom. A crack of light shone on the floor beneath it. If the sounds had been heard, he reasoned, someone would be opening that door to investigate. The fact that it was shut was a good sign.

Gropingly he fumbled for a knob or latch. The chances were against the door's being unlocked, but he hoped for the best. He hadn't thought to provide himself with a gun or anything which could be used as a tool to batter away a lock.

But as he groped he remembered the bars he had left on the floor beneath the forced window. One of them would make a good crowbar. On the other hand, it would make a lot of noise as well.

If the thing was locked, he might as well knock and demand entrance, trusting to luck and hypnotism from that point on.

His hand found the latch. The door was unlocked.

Cautiously he opened it, an inch at a time. This door was apparently resigned to being moved, for it made no protest. The crack at the bottom became wider, as he pulled the door toward him. Electricity

made that light, which meant that there were guards in the room beyond. An electric light wouldn't be left burning for the prisoners.

Mark peered through the crack he had made. A blank wall met his gaze. A little further . . . The edge of a cell door came into view. The light came from a point to the left, out of his line of vision. That's where the guards would be. A light cough from that direction confirmed his guess.

A little more . . . He could now see almost half of the cell door. Tolon might be back of that door! As soon as the stone portal moved enough for him to get through and see the guard, or guards, he would step forth without warning and hypnotize them on the spot. They mustn't get a chance to draw their pistols.

Suddenly the stone door let out a shriek of outraged, rusty hinges. As if the sound had touched off a spring, Mark leaped into the room, turning to face the direction from which the cough had come.

But he didn't complete the maneuver. His eyes passed fleetingly across the door of the cell he had been seeing, and then stopped abruptly, shocked by the sight they saw! In the cell was a vision of loveliness . . .

"Nona!" gasped Mark—and pitched to the floor.

HIS eyes had never reached the guard who had stood motionless, gun in hand, watching the slowly moving stone door. His ears hadn't been quick enough to catch the sound of the shot, nor the whine of the bullet that struck him down.

Nona bit at her knuckles as she watched the guard turn Mark over with a foot. For a second she thought . . .

But no, it was an old man who lay there on the floor. His skin was white, and less than five days ago she had seen the deep tan of her husband.

She had been sleeping on the cot against the wall when the shot had rung out. She must have dreamed what she had heard Mark's voice, the instant before the shot had awakened her.

Mark's hair was an unruly chestnut, and he was clean shaven. This poor old fellow was snow white and had a beard that must have taken years of loving care to nurture to its present magnificent proportions.

She calmed herself when she became thoroughly convinced that the man on the floor wasn't Mark. Then abruptly she was furious as the guard callously dragged the inert body across the floor and dumped it in an unoccupied cell.

"Aren't you going to help him?" she yelled. "Call a doctor!"

The guard looked at her quizzically, then carefully spat on the floor. "Take it easy, lady," he admonished. "He's dead. And if he ain't he'd better be. People don't go busting into Vargo's jails and then live to brag about it."

"A fine thing!" said Nona tartly. "How do you know he wasn't lost? The least you can do is report it; Vargo will tear your ears off if you don't."

The guard laughed. "Lost!" he scoffed. "How could he get in here, if he was just lost . . . Say! How did he get in here anyway? There's nothing back of that door but—"

The guard exploded into sudden activity. He peered into the cell where he had placed the old man, then slammed the cell door, locking it. Then he glanced up and down the cell corridor, as if to make certain that everything was all right. Next he disappeared through the stone door which led upstairs.

A clamor came from the other end of the corridor. Gladys wanted to know what had happened. Tolon was also curious. A thief by the name of Forney added a feeble voice to the demands for information. Nona obliged.

Forney had been in the prison for several days and his voice was weak, because he hadn't been fed. When he became weak enough, Vargo would work on him. A similar fate awaited Tolon. Vargo had failed to get any information from him by hypnotism, for he had been fully prepared to resist and had resisted.

Torture was next on the program,

though it had always failed in the past, and would fail again. The members of the fraternity were tough people.

ALTHOUGH Forney had little to console him in his imprisonment, Tolon was finding a certain enjoyment in the state. His cell was directly across from that of Gladys, and Gladys wasn't hard to look at.

He liked the shy way she looked across at him, especially when he caught her at it. The faint blush which had several times appeared in her cheeks when she glanced his way and found him intently admiring her, delighted him.

Nor was he greatly concerned or worried about coming events. He had been in quite a few tight places in his career, and had always come out with a whole skin. There was a certain ever-present buoyancy about Tolon's nature which made it impossible for him to conceive of disaster before it actually struck him.

It was more than likely, he figured, that when they took him out of the cell to torture him he would get a chance to turn the tables and escape, taking the others with him.

Sound of the guard's footsteps diminished in the distance as he trotted to the upper floors. But with their cessation, the prisoners became aware that other footsteps were nearing. They made a hollow sound, as if echoing against the walls of a narrow corridor. They paused and there came the sound of a massive iron lock clinking over its tumblers. A faint rasping of unoiled hinges followed.

A new figure appeared in the cell corridor. It was Dene Baron. Nona raised a clamor without delay, shaking the iron door of her cell.

"Quiet!" snapped Baron.

"I won't!" returned Nona. "See what you can do for that old man in the next cell. The guard shot him. *Do* something!"

Baron looked surprised, but went to look in the next cell. The white-haired figure lay limply on the floor. There was a streak of blue, dried and matted, in the center of the scalp. Baron reached for the ring of keys

hanging on the opposite wall of the corridor, and fumbled with the lock.

"Where's the guard?" he asked.

"He went upstairs to see how the old man got in," Nona told him.

Baron hesitated, before opening the cell door, and looked extremely thoughtful. The three lower floors were windowless, he knew. A ladder was out of the question. The lowest windows were entirely too high for that. No buildings adjoined the prison, and therefore no access could be had from other roofs. The only outside door to the prison was impregnable. And the passage to the palace was securely locked. That left—nothing!

Dene Baron looked carefully at the supine figure on the cell floor. There was no discernible breath. Strands of the white whiskers had fallen across the lips, and they were motionless. The man was dead. There wasn't a doubt of that. But—was this the same man?

Dene Baron was no fool, and in any case two and two invariably added to four. Only a bird could have gained entrance to the prison through the upper floors. And while the man may have been here for some time, and had hidden on the upper floors, he still couldn't have come in through the front door or the passageway.

That left the windows, through which a bird might have flown. Or a man who could fly like a bird!

Baron had never seen such a man, but he had heard of one. A young man, bronzed, and wearing a winged helmet. Like a picture he had once seen of an ancient god called Mercury. But such a man could be disguised. He must find out.

STILL keeping a wary eye on the corpse, he unlocked the door. For while Baron was no fool, he did have a streak of superstition in his make-up. Millions of people had once worshiped gods of various sorts. There might be something to it. The story he had heard of the man who flew, certainly sounded like it.

And if he could fly, maybe he could do other things. Possibly he didn't breathe

air like men. What nonsense! The guard had shot him and brought him down. A god wouldn't be brought down by a bullet. Gods were immortal.

With renewed confidence Baron strode to the side of the old man. He leaned over, looking for a wound, and also for signs of a disguise. Suddenly he tried to jump back, but was too late by a wide margin.

Fingers of tempered steel found his throat and throttled him. Eyes, burning with a wild intensity, bored into his. Frantically he pounded at the body of the old man, but felt himself getting weaker, moment by moment. Eventually he went limp and the fingers let him drop, lifeless, to the floor.

"Is he alive?" called Nona.

She was startled to see the aged man emerge into the corridor, staggering slightly and shaking his head with an expression of bewilderment on his fine old face. Dene Baron didn't reappear. The old man peered at her uncertainly and shook his head again.

He walked, touching the sides of the corridor to keep his balance, toward the other cells. Then he seemed surprised to find a few of them occupied. He looked at Tolon and Gladys, then finally at Forney, but made no attempt to release them.

Tolon watched the old man, a puzzled expression on his face. The aged figure was faintly familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. Long, white beard, hollow cheeks. . . He finally gave it up, deciding that the old fellow must resemble someone he had seen.

"Say, old man," he called. "Suppose you get that bunch of keys and unlock these doors."

The old man turned back at the sound of the voice, and crouched warily, but made no sign that he had understood. Finally deciding that no harm could come from the man behind the iron door, he relaxed and came erect. Then he crouched again, at the sound of footsteps coming from the direction of the stone door. When he identified the source, he quietly placed himself beside the doorway and waited.

He seemed to have regained more control of his legs, for he had walked to his position of ambush with a degree of certainty, no longer requiring a steady hand on the wall.

The footsteps came nearer and the old man tensed. The guard stepped forth from the doorway, and again the steel fingers sank into a soft throat. This time they didn't choke, slowly and thoroughly, as they had with Baron. The thumbs dug into the back of the neck and the fingers raised, forcing the chin up. It was a sudden twisting motion, and the guard's feet raised off the floor for an instant. Then the neck snapped, and the body became limp.

The old man held the body for a minute, the toes barely touching the stone floor. Then he cast it down, his eyes again burning wildly. Like a trapped animal he looked up and down the corridor, then strode swiftly toward one end of it.

The heavy door to the street seemed to baffle him, though its latch was a simple one. He turned back and stopped at Nona's cell. Wondering vaguely why she shrank back at his approach, he marveled at her lithe body.

HE SUDDENLY decided that he wanted this beautiful creature. He didn't know why—he just wanted her. He frowned at the bars of the door which separated them. Grasping them, he shook. They rattled with a loud clatter. The sound scared him and he stepped back, snarling. But when the door showed no sign of attacking him, he gingerly approached it again.

Suddenly taking a bar in each hand, he pulled, exerting every ounce of strength. Gratifyingly, the door bent in the middle, sliding the tongue of its lock out of the socket. He pulled it open and stepped inside.

Nona shrank back into the depths of the cell. The old man walked after her smiling in anticipation. He reached forth, grabbed a wrist, and pulled her to him. His pulse increased rapidly at the contact of her warm body.

Nona hauled off and struck at him with a balled fist. At first he looked surprised, then he laughed—a wild crazy laugh that somehow conveyed the idea that he had expected her to resist, and gloried in it.

The laugh stopped abruptly, however, when another blow hit his cheek with a sound thud. He snarled suddenly and reached for her throat. It yielded softly under the pressure of his fingers.

But he released the pressure as quickly as he had applied it. The sudden fear which had leaped into her eyes stunned him. Somehow he knew that a woman could be expected to resist, but that it was rather a matter of form than anything else.

The horror which he had seen in her eyes a minute before was wrong. And now this terror—that was wrong, too. Abruptly he realized that he wanted this woman to like him, to welcome his attentions. She mustn't be afraid of him.

He released her entirely, letting his arms fall to his sides, a dumb look of hurt in his eyes.

"Mark," Nona whimpered, "what has happened to you? Why don't you know me? Why are you so old?"

CHAPTER XIX

THE EXCHEQUER BLUES

SHE covered her face with her hands and tried to get her thoughts in order. Things were happening too fast. The realization that the old man really was Mark had come to her the instant he had bent the cell door like a piece of wet spaghetti. No man could do that but Mark.

That thought had instantly brought to mind the cry she had thought she dreamed. That had been Mark's voice, astounded at the sight of her in the prison cell. It had resulted in giving the guard a chance to shoot him.

Then she knew what had happened. The streak of blue blood in his snowy hair proved it. The bullet had grooved along his skull, knocking him senseless. The remarkable healing power of his radio-active blood had restored the power to control

his body, but his mind was still fogged.

The concussion had not had time to wear off. The brain was shocked, and had forgotten all it knew. Mark was like a primordial cave-man, conscious of his own existence, but governed almost entirely by instinct. Reason was present, of course, but knew no facts with which to reason.

The shock would wear off, and memory return, but that would take time. And there was no time. She would have to get him out of the prison. She mustn't wonder why her Mark was old or why he had come here. She would learn that when he recovered.

Nona, still sobbing from the shock to her own brain, placed a hand gently on the old man's arm.

The hurt look left Mark's eyes and he smiled. Then he grabbed her again, evidently satisfied that she had come around to his way of thinking. This time he was more gentle about it. But she pushed him away again.

He followed her when she left the cell and went into the one where he had killed the first man. He wondered briefly at the shudder she gave when she inadvertently looked at the distorted face of the man he had throttled.

Nor did he understand why she seemed to want the peculiar pieces of metal which she was trying to remove from their position under the man's body. Obliging, he lifted the dead man off the key ring, by shoving a foot under the shoulder and pushing. The body thudded against the wall.

Nona retrieved the keys and tried one after another in the lock of Gladys' cell. Finally she found the right one and repeated the operation on the doors which confined Tolon and Forney.

Mark snarled a bit at the freeing of the others, but decided that they were friends of hers, and quieted down. He even contained himself when they led him out into a street filled with new people, all potential enemies.

Though possibly by this time he realized that other humans didn't necessarily have

to be enemies, for no one showed any sign of wishing him harm.

By a circuitous route Tolon and Forney led the way back to headquarters.

DAYS went by with little clearing of Mark's mind. Attended solicitously by Nona, who shaved off his beard and removed the plastic skin which disguised him so effectively, he was quite content as long as she remained nearby.

The sight of Ira had momentarily given him a twinge of recollection, but it passed as quickly as it had come. Several times he experienced the same reaction when he saw familiar things or familiar faces, but his mind was not yet over the shock of the concussion, and the effect was fleeting.

The thieves had brought in the last of the caravan guards on the day of Mark's return. The one hundred and five which he had restored mentally helped to capture the others. The new captives were confined in a warehouse, for Mark had lost his power of hypnotism as thoroughly as he had lost his memory.

Ira anxiously awaited his recovery, for he had received information to the effect that Vargo was reorganizing his army and would shortly be able to go on with his plans for conquest. And while Ira was a capable leader and was taking effective measures to circumvent Vargo, he knew that without Mark there would be no permanent solution to the trouble.

In spite of the swelled ranks of the fraternity, they were having plenty of difficulty. It wasn't so easy to capture the new army leaders. Another trouble was the fact that Vargo's nobles were renewing their efforts to stamp out the rebellion.

He expected any moment to be raided. Sooner or later somebody would crack under the double threat of hypnotism and torture, and reveal the location of the hide-out.

Several of the fraternity had been captured in the last few days. One of them might succumb. Ira took steps to prevent any more captures. He ordered that none of them engage in any thefts until further

notice. The treasury would take care of all the expenses of its members until they could again forage for themselves.

He guessed from the evidence of Tolon and Forney that the nobles had been able to make their captures only by the expedient of placing apparently easy victims within the reach of the thieves. Bait, as Baron had called the process. When a thief struck, he found himself caught. The logical answer was for them to cease their larcenous activities and confine themselves to the capture of as many of the new army officers as possible.

Gladys, though she didn't want to at all, thought it her duty to return to her husband. Nona didn't have much trouble talking her out of it. Tolon wouldn't have allowed it anyway. He had been told of her plight, and had Nona's assurance that as soon as Mark regained his mind, he would take steps to annul the marriage.

Nona intended to help Mark in the reorganization of the city's life, taking on the job of ferreting out such couples as were hopelessly incompatible. Mark could free the minds of these people, and let them seek their own mates. Those who were living happily would be left in the state of hypnotic subjection which kept them together.

It would be ruinous to do otherwise. The years, children, and a dozen other considerations made it inadvisable to risk the results of completely freeing the majority of the people who had been hypnotized by Vargo. Much of his work had been a blessing, though he had never meant it that way.

Nona came to develop a real attachment for the people who made up the fraternity. Their loyalty to each other, and the idealistic faith they had in the justice of their motives, aroused her admiration. Thieves they might be, but Nona knew they weren't criminals at all.

In fact it was hard to say who were the real criminals. For the nobles were perfectly sincere in their desire to stamp out the menace to the plans of the great Vargo. They only acted as they did because of

his hypnotic suggestion. The only real criminal was Vargo himself.

A WEEK passed and favorable reports came from the electrical experts concerning their work on the radio equipment. Progress had been quicker than they had expected.

Machines used for the manufacture of electric bulbs had been easily converted to the manufacture of radio tubes. Coils and condensers were simple to make. The apparatus was now ready to assemble and put in operation. Only a day or two would be required.

Mark had slept since the day of his accident—a thing he hadn't done for years. Several hours a day, when the others went to bed, he did likewise. Possibly the cause lay in the shocked condition of his brain, enabling him to revert to a habit he no longer needed. But whatever the cause, the result was as normal as Nona's deep slumber.

He awoke, one evening, and looked up at the ceiling. For several minutes he lay there, gazing upward, trying to orient himself. He became conscious of someone beside him and turned his head. It was Nona, of course, sleeping peacefully. That was all right, perfectly normal.

But he had been asleep also, and that wasn't normal. He wondered vaguely whether he had recaptured the ability, and went back to gazing at the ceiling. Then he became puzzled about its wall-paper design. Abruptly he realized that the Vikings didn't use wall paper.

He sprang to his feet and looked out of a window. A dingy alley met his gaze. With the sight of it he remembered suddenly that he was no longer in Norway. He was in Detroit, and had an urgent task to perform!

Rigidly Mark stood at the window, as memory flooded back into his mind. In the space of seconds he reviewed all that had happened since Omega had dropped him in the ladies' shop. It came back vividly, as if he were viewing it on a motion picture screen. Even to the details which had hap-

pened since his brain had been shocked.

Smiling happily, he turned to face the bed. Nona's face was beautiful in repose, though as he watched her a frown passed fleetingly over it. Reaching over, he ruffled her hair. Her eyes opened and looked up at him in disbelief.

"You're back!" she breathed. "Mark!"

SEVERAL hours were required to bring Mark up to the present. Things had happened during the time his mind was fogged. He was tickled at the progress made by the electrical experts, and wanted to see them immediately. When they arrived he closeted himself with them for quite some time.

Ira fidgeted outside the conference chamber. There were a thousand things he wanted to talk over, and most of them were urgent. Disposition of the captured men was the greatest of his problems.

So many of Vargo's officers were prisoners of the fraternity that it was almost impossible to keep them confined any longer. A warehouse and several private homes were being used for the purpose, but because of the lack of proper facilities it was necessary to use a prohibitive number of the thieves to act as guards.

A point had been reached where no more could be captured because it would be impossible to hold them. Mark could solve the problem easily by hypnotizing the captives and making them members.

And even that was becoming a problem. The membership had reached a point where it was eating large holes in the treasury to support it. This, added to the feed bill of the prisoners, was rapidly bankrupting the fraternity. And there was nothing coming in!

Ira was in a decided dither, waiting to discuss plans with Mark. He didn't welcome Jan Thomas, who joined him in waiting at the door of the chamber, announcing that Mark would want to see him next.

"Who's boss around here?" Ira wanted to know.

"Mark," Thomas answered.

Ira nodded. "So he is," he said, looking

a bit mystified as he realized that such was the case. He frowned at the guinea pig that Thomas held cradled in one arm.

Jan Thomas smiled enigmatically, but said nothing.

Eventually the experts trooped from the room. As before, they wore eager expressions as if they could hardly wait until they got to work at the thing which Mark had discussed with them. Ira pushed past Jan Thomas and entered the room. He tried to slam the door but the smaller man was too quick for him. And then too, Ira had to open the door wide to permit the passage of his own huge body. Thomas went in and darted around him to present the guinea pig to Mark.

"We've got it!" he cried, almost throwing the little beast at Mark. "The analysis was—"

"Mark!" interrupted Ira. "There are more important matters to be taken care of. You've got to—"

"Nonsense!" Thomas cried. "There's nothing more important than science."

It took some moments to quiet them, a thing which Mark accomplished by promising Ira to go immediately and take care of the captives, and while doing so to listen to the report of Thomas. The three set out for the warehouse where the majority of the prisoners were kept. The streets were dark and there was little danger of Mark being recognized.

Gently, as they left headquarters, he pressed the windpipe of the little animal. It didn't struggle, even when he closed off its supply of air completely. It just stopped breathing, as if it were only doing it to keep in practice anyway.

"THE analysis was easy," Thomas told him. "We killed quite a few pigs, however, before we found the proper concentrations to change the blood of a living animal as this one is changed."

"Does its present blood correspond with the sample I gave you?"

"Precisely," Thomas informed. "Not the slightest difference. We've noticed some peculiar things, however. The beast doesn't

eat. And it's slept only once in the past four days."

Mark nodded. "You've got it then," he said. "I don't eat either. I thought you knew that. The radio-activity supplies the energy normally furnished by the consumption of food. Sleep isn't necessary because lactic acid doesn't form. Did you try tiring the animal out?"

"Didn't think of it," said Thomas. "Don't tell me it won't tire!"

Mark shook his head. "Tiring is caused when physical exertion burns up energy faster than food and oxygen can replace it. This blue blood is able to supply energy from the slow breaking down of its radio-active element, faster than the body can burn it. The excess radiates away. And the element has a half-period, as you are aware, of more than ten thousand years."

Jan Thomas stopped dead in his tracks. For a second Mark thought he was going to faint. Ira solicitously extended a steadying hand. But Thomas didn't faint.

"Immortality!" he breathed. "The dream of man for ages!"

"Not quite," said Mark, smiling. "The organism will die as the concentration gets down to about a quarter strength. At least, so I've been told."

"But man! Think what it would mean if everyone had this blood. The earth wouldn't be able to support the population in a matter of a few decades!"

"You forget that food isn't necessary. Not even air. Only water. But don't worry about it. Only a very choice few will be given the injections. Those who will work for the betterment of themselves and humanity as a whole. That is a sort of a trust I must keep. There won't be any crowding for thousands of years to come. Perhaps never."

It was significant that neither Thomas nor Ira said a word of suggestion concerning who might be worthy of the new blood. Men of lesser character would have immediately suggested themselves. But both men realized that the matter lay in Mark's hands entirely, and that nothing they might say would influence him in the least.

THE warehouse was reached, and almost two hundred men were treated hypnotically to erase the suggestions of Vargo. They left as free-men, only slightly under the influence of Mark's counter-suggestions. These were of a benign nature and would tend to nullify any natural hankering that any of the men might have in the direction of a war of conquest.

Several private homes, temporarily serving as prisons, were next on the program. When the last call was made the fraternity had swelled until it numbered slightly over four hundred.

Back once more at headquarters, Mark closeted himself with Ira. The chief of the fraternity immediately went into a description of his many woes.

"... But the worst thing of all," he concluded, "is the shortage of funds. We can't go on any longer than another week, unless I send our men out to steal. And if I do, some will be caught. I had hoped—"

Mark caught at the hesitation. "Hoped what?" he prompted.

"I'd hoped that this thing would be settled before it became necessary to steal again," he answered. "As you know, we steal because we must survive, not because we want to. Every man of the fraternity has a legitimate profession he would rather follow, but refuses as long as he must work under Vargo. Can't we get this thing finished soon?"

Mark scratched his chin. "A week . . ."

"There's also the matter of the men he's captured," Ira interrupted. "Any day now one of them might crack, and we'll be wiped out. There's nowhere we can go, or I'd change headquarters. But right now we're so financially crippled that we can't rent new quarters."

Mark frowned. "That's next on the program," he said, thoughtfully. "And maybe I can do something about Vargo at the same time. Hold the fort till I get back."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

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Still kneeling, China plunged. The impact knocked Apin flat on his back and the empty gun was lost to both of them

Single Combat

By PERRY ADAMS

Author of "Taste of Brass," "Cobra," etc.

On India's Northwest frontier—or anywhere else—there is one occasion on which a brave and honest sergeant major may reasonably tell a lie

SOMEWHERE high along the ridge, jagged as broken black glass against the hard, clean sky of an early winter's night, a hyena laughed. With mournful howls his wild dog followers answered.

On a wide, natural shelf just under the ridge there was a soft, uneasy stirring all down the horse lines; and Sergeant Major Breen, asleep with the flaps of his little cavalry tent open to the east, came

awake in one piece—hard awake.

But it was not the discordant concert, over-familiar across a lifetime of service on India's northwest frontier, that had snapped the warrant officer back to consciousness—and he knew it.

"Sentry," he called, as he jack-knifed his long, spare frame out of its blanket. Standing, even without a helmet, his leathery, almost-bald head brushed the tent's ridgepole.

A bowlegged trooper blacked out the triangle of night between the flaps.

"Pass the word to stand to," China Breen ordered. "Someone—something's coming along the Dharket trail."

The man hesitated, listening. "You—sure, sir?"

"I heard hoofbeats," the sergeant major said. "Still a good way off—that high bit o' trail in the next valley, maybe . . . Yes, I hear 'em now." He spoke patiently; the hearing of other men was not as his own. He had come to make allowances for this.

"And have a runner warn Sergeant Major Aplin's party," he added. "May be just a bunch of stray cattle. And it may mean business—at last."

Still the sentry stood there. "If Sher Ali's comin', sir, we c'n polish orf the job wivout Aplin's lot."

"No squadron politics here, me bucko! We're all together in this. Off you go!"

The man vanished; and buckling on his Sam Browne, China Breen stepped from the tent. Though he was British as Yorkshire pudding, high cheek bones and slant eyes gave his face a decided Chinese cast: the nickname was fairly earned.

Steal a march on Aplin? China's strong, thin lips twisted in a rueful half-grin. If the crisis *was* at hand, how it would suit his book to do just that! A personal triumph in this business could change his whole future; hadn't the colonel said so?

China shrugged. In all his life he had never double-crossed anyone.

Those hoofbeats, now a bit louder, now almost fading out—well, the night was made to order for gun-running, he saw. It was moonless and, despite the stars, very dark.

Muffled footsteps would be the runner starting along the ridge to Aplin's bivouac. Close by, the faint jingle of bits, the creak of leather, meant that China's own detail was already saddling up.

One thing was certain: fox though Sher Ali was, if he was to make the dash before winter cut him off entirely, it had to be by way of the trail below. There was no choice of route; already snow blocked all other passes leading to Dharket, cold-weather headquarters of the Zakka Khel Afridis—Sher Ali's avowed destination.

Last and cleverest of the old-time rifle

thieves, the outlaw had been serving a life sentence at Lahore when he made his jail-break. A few days later he had worked north to Peshawar, his old stamping ground, where through a kinsman—a reputable bazaar merchant—he issued a brazen boast:

"Soon I shall take from the stupid British that which is more precious to them even than rifles. And within the month my loot will be safe in Afridi country."

Almost at once then, and under the very noses of a doubly alert barrack guard of lancer veterans, the elusive *loot wallah* had spirited away *six machine guns*.

If news of the unprecedented theft leaked out—and it was bound to, unless the guns could be recovered quickly—the vaunted First Division would be the laughing stock of India; and with the resulting loss of prestige, heads in high places would be bound to fall.

Beyond that, if the bandit made good his threat to get those guns across the border into tribal hands, they might account for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of British lives.

CHINA leaned against a sudden blast of icy wind which blotted out all sound. As it died with a final great *whoosh*, something moved behind him. Close.

He whirled. Drew his Webley. Before him stood a bull of a man, short necked, with immense shoulders—shorter by a head than himself, but twice as broad. China slid the big blue gun back into its holster.

"Didn't expect you," he said a bit lamely.

"Blimeyriley, but you 'ave got the jitters," Aplin sneered. "This message y' sent—wot's it mean? My blokes down on the trail don't report 'earin' nothin'."

Each warrant officer had a wire from his tent to a separate listening post. Both were camouflaged with infinite care and were never two nights in the same spots.

"I've no word either," China admitted. "Well, then—"

"But I hear hoofbeats, all right. Horses or mules, perhaps both; not cattle. I can tell now."

"Wonnerful, I calls it! Yet y' couldn't 'ear *me* just now—almost touchin' yer."

China ignored the sarcasm. "Listen!"

"Don' 'ear a thing," Aplin said, after a moment.

"Take my word for it."

"'N take my word fer this: If Sher Ali runs them guns in—i's a hunnert t' one 'e won't—neither you nor nobody won't 'ear 'im comin'. 'S 'f 'e 'd try *bargin'* through. Blimeyriley!"

China shrugged. A mounted orderly led up his horse and he was about to mount when from the tent at his back came the droning of a field telephone. He slipped into the tent and was soon out again.

"Those hoofbeats—my men on the trail just picked 'em up," he said simply.

Aplin grunted. "Go on—crow!"

"Forget it," China said, and they stared at each other briefly, dislike thinly veiled.

"Some caravan," Aplin muttered.

"Much too late in the season."

Aplin started to move away.

"I won't be able to wait much longer," China called.

Aplin's voice floated back: "Nice excuse t' beat me to it, eh?"

The stupid unfairness of that brought a hot retort to China's lips, but he heard Aplin break into a run and the words went unsaid.

"We'll move down without word of command," China told the orderly. "Have 'em listen for the sound of my horse on the shale and follow on."

The orderly made off and China sat his mount, man and beast momentarily motionless as a park statue.

THE service could produce some mighty queer situations, China mused, reliving the recent morning at regimental headquarters in Peshawar when the highly personal angle behind this urgent business had come sharply into focus.

China had been summoned direct to the colonel's office. Sher Ali's almost unbe-

lievable theft had been brought off only the night before; the colonel's grave concern was patent in every line of his unshaven face.

"A nightmare," the colonel muttered across his big, flat desk. "D' you realize what this means, Breen; do you?"

"Too well, sir," China said.

"We've simply got to get those guns back! Everything hinges on whether he'll try to run them across the border, as he said, within a month. He knows as well as we that Lallaganga's the only route left open. No ordinary thief would risk such a bottle-neck, of course. But a fanatic like Sher Ali?"

The C. O. ran a nervous hand through rumpled gray hair. "He might—it's just possible—if he felt the way was clear—could be lulled into a feeling of false security."

"But how, sir?"

"Ordinary methods are useless. The man can't be ambushed; he's proved that in the past. So? Well, quite apart from what he did last night, it's natural the C. I. D. should go on hunting him after his prison break. But—they mustn't catch him."

China's mouth fell open. "Not catch him?"

"They mustn't even come close to it. For if cornered, the first thing he'd do would be to hide those guns. His capture without them would be an empty business; that way we'd probably never get 'em back. So the chase—the fake chase—gradually it'll die down. And if Sher Ali could be made to feel there's no trap at Lallaganga, that's the moment he might make his dash: we'd nail him *with* the guns."

"But—but that comes right back to ambush, sir. You just said—"

"Suppose we sent a survey party, in the usual two sections, to remap the Lallaganga district? Everyone knows the job's long overdue. The survey would account for an armed escort with each section, and—"

"But doing it now, sir—pretty pat, isn't it? And troops in the vicinity—Sher Ali'd smell a rat."

"He might. We talked that over at divi-

sional headquarters for hours last night and early this morning. But the party would go down there quite openly and the surveyors would really do their work. We reasoned the entire absence of stealth might throw him off guard."

China considered. "A very long shot, sir, but it might work."

Half absently the C. O. nodded, his eyes on China.

"**B**REEN," he said, "in two months Rawlins goes home for good. That means a new regimental sergeant major. It's you or Aplin. The choice wouldn't be difficult, but for one thing: Aplin's much the better desk man. In a job with so much paper work, I've got to give that angle serious thought. At division and brigade, candidly, they think Aplin should get the post."

China's stout old heart skipped a beat and he felt suddenly cold. That long-coveted top rank—again and again his squadron leader had inferred the job was to be his when Rawlins reached the age limit. Was he to lose out, after all? To a fellow like Aplin?

"Perhaps I know what's in your mind," the colonel said. "You were thinking back—back to those fodder bribery scandals—"

"Aplin was among the men exonerated," China said quickly, in his eagerness to play fair. "They accused a lot of people who didn't deserve it."

The C. O. slowly nodded. "I know, I know. But Aplin—I wasn't entirely satisfied."

Nor had China been, though he'd never said so. But beyond the notorious trial, which had rocked all India, he could think of almost countless other incidents of which the colonel probably knew nothing—things often fairly insignificant in themselves; but their sum was a revealing guide to Aplin's character. . . .

"You and Aplin know the Lallaganga country better than anyone now with the regiment," the colonel was saying, "so I'm putting each of you in charge of an escort. You'll be acting a part, every second, for it must all seem most casual; you'll be

watching that trail like hawks without seeming to watch it in the least."

China shrugged. "Sher Ali couldn't have stolen those guns singlehanded, sir—they're far too bulky. No, he had accomplices; and if he's going to try to run the guns across the border, he'll have to have animal transport, too. That lot makes a pretty conspicuous party."

"That should be in your favor, certainly." The colonel nodded. For a time, then, he stared through a window at the distant Khyber Hills, today filmy through a cold-weather mist which rose from the invisible Bara River. Abruptly his gaze returned to China.

"Should the Lallaganga scheme work to the point where those guns were recovered, it could have a lot to do with this other thing—the final choice of R.S.M. I mean, if you, personally, were somehow lucky or resourceful enough to be the one directly responsible.

"It's no time, Lord knows, for petty competition between you and Aplin—but I can't help hoping you'll stand out down there. So much depends on getting the guns back that no reward would be too good for you: personal success there would make your promotion over Aplin almost automatic."

"But I wouldn't be a better desk man then than now—and that's all division and brigade seem to think of," China said.

"You don't get their point of view," the colonel retorted. "From the records, they rate you two about equal as soldiers; then point to Aplin's superior clerical ability as the reason they prefer him.

"They know about those old fodder scandals, of course, but there's nothing definitely unfavorable to Aplin there; nor can I lay my finger on anything else. And so when I tell them of the vast difference in your characters, I've nothing tangible to back it up; to them it looks merely as if I were favoring you at the expense of the better candidate. They don't—"

The colonel broke off and looked toward the closed door. Both men had heard a slight noise outside it.

"Probably Aplin," the colonel whispered. "I sent for him. Well, I wanted this private word with you—" He nodded dismissal.

In three long strides China crossed the room and flung open the door. Aplin half fell across the threshold. It was plain he'd been listening. How much had he heard?

AT ODD times in the anxious days that followed China had wondered about that; but Aplin's behavior had provided no answer. Wait! Not two minutes ago, Aplin's uncalled-for remark about China's wanting an excuse to beat him to the trail, took on possible new significance.

All at once China snapped from his reverie. The faint hoofbeats that had formed a background to his thoughts—their tempo was changing: the leisurely walk had become a smart trot. Even as he listened, the trot broke to a canter.

Had he hung on too long up here? He pushed his horse from the level rim of ground to the precipitous shale slope. In a few seconds sounds like a series of waves hissing on a pebbly beach told him that the men had heard him and were following.

The hoofs below quickened to a dead gallop.

By now China was near enough to make out dim shapes tearing along the shadowed trail. Orange tongues licked the darkness—men at the nearer listening post had opened fire.

But the flying figures kept steadily on.

They had passed across China's front as he and his men slid into the trail; for a bit there was wild confusion as the narrow way was choked with excited, rearing horseflesh. Quickly they sorted themselves out. Led by China, the cavalcade pounded west.

Aplin's lot, several hundred yards further west, and later in starting down, had now also gained the trail; sudden heavy firing told China that. But apparently they were too late to intercept, for the rapid forward movement of their rifle flashes showed China the course of a breakneck chase.

Soon China's big bay gelding ran well

ahead of the rest of the party, and the warrant officer began to overtake the rear-most of Aplin's troopers.

The trail dipped like a roller-coaster, shot up again, and at a sharp bend China saw a huge boulder, remembered because in outline it looked like the profile of a man. Recalling that from this point the trail ran straight and fairly level for half a mile or more, China was puzzled by the abrupt veering of the chase ahead.

They had left the trail—no doubt of it. But that little side valley into which they turned was a dead end; China had seen the survey people so mark it on their maps only a few days before. A man who knew every inch of this country as did Sher Ali would surely never allow himself to be so stupidly trapped.

Unexpectedly a dark mass appeared directly ahead. The next instant China made out the lance tips of Aplin's men. Nearer he saw Aplin himself and, almost under the hoofs of the bunched horses, several indistinct shapes.

"What you got there?" China cried.

The ring of Aplin's troopers opened, and China saw for himself. A horse, down, was struggling to rise. Near it sprawled the body of a bearded, thickset fellow, hopelessly tangled in the folds of a flowing, heavy felt cloak.

"Dead?" China asked.

"As a smelt," Aplin grunted. "One of our shots plugged 'im be'ind the ear."

China leaned out of the saddle. "Never saw the bird before. Punjabi Mussullman, by the folds of his turban."

"Fer orl that 'e's Sher Ali's man. Look over there." Aplin was pointing toward a large, undercut rock, which half concealed a dead mule. Troopers had already extricated the beast's load—a familiar-looking pair of sole-leather carrying cases.

China saw that the lids were open, and jumped to an obvious conclusion.

"One of the guns!" Each pair of these *yackduns* normally housed a knocked-down machine gun, its spare parts and ammunition belts.

Alpin said carefully: "Them's two of

the very *yackdans* Sher Ali stole the guns in, orl right."

"But the rest of 'em—the other five guns—"

"Don't swaller yer cud," Aplin said dryly. "We let them other mules run on, deliberate. They c'n be found, easy enough. This valley's a blind alley—or didn't yer know?"

"Sure I know! But something's fishy. Sher Ali'd never run head on into a pocket like this. He—"

"Sher Ali ain't in there," Aplin said. "What!"

"Six mules there was—we was close enough be'ind ter count—but only the one bloke on 'orseback. That's 'im we plugged. One mule 'ere leaves five up there. But no more men."

"I don't get it," China said blankly.

Aplin was silent.

"Even if we've lost Sher Ali, at least we can round up the other guns," China said. "Let's go!"

Aplin just sat his horse. Later China was to recall his strange apathy.

He was to remember, too, how a trooper near one of the open *yackdans* started to speak, and Aplin's snarl: "Stow it, you!"

But in his anxiety to make sure of the guns, China paid scant heed at the time. He spurred clear of Aplin's men and his own party fell in behind him. Above the little valley the somber vault of night, he saw, was brushed with gray. Dawn was in the making. The detail galloped off into the cold, paling stars.

TEN minutes later the light was strong enough for China to spot five gray objects some distance ahead. The party rode up to the missing mules; hungrily nibbling at a patch of thorny scrub vines, the laden animals barely raised their heads as the lancers surrounded them.

"Seems too good to be true," China exulted. "Open up those *yackdans*, boys, just t'be sure."

Half a dozen sprang from their horses and opened the cases without removing them from the mules.

One trooper began to curse.

"Well, sink me," gasped another.

"Look, sir," a third cried.

"W'y w'd Sher Ali play a trick like this, sir?" a fourth demand. "Wot's it get 'im?"

"Plain enough, now," China muttered. "He sent this lot on ahead—a decoy to lead us away from the trail, so he could slip by with the real guns while we were off in the blue. And we fell for it, hook, line and sinker!"

A man said: "Funny, though, that the mule Aplin's lot bagged sh'd 'ave 'ad a *pukkah* gun . . . Jut that 'un—out o' six!"

"Damned funny," China said between his teeth.

Riding in daylight it took but a few moments to regain the spot where Aplin had ended his chase. His whole party had disappeared, leaving Sher Ali's henchman where he had fallen; near the dead mule the two *yackdans* were still open. A glance inside showed China that they were filled as had been the others up the valley—with rocks.

"I sh'd have looked before," China said with dull fury. "Aplin's own man tried to warn me—"

Off toward the trail Lee-Enfields began to bark. Sighing, China spun his horse around and the detail clattered on. Once they were back on the trail, the firing drew them west. It grew louder, then stopped. Rounding a blind angle, China rode straight into Aplin's halted party. There were some empty saddles.

Aplin's gaze fell before China's hard, accusing eyes.

"Sher Ali's trick almost worked," Aplin said, talking fast, "but we got back to th' trail a bit sooner than 'e figured—'n there 'e was: 'im 'n seven, eight mounted men 'n more mules, poundin' along fer orl they was worth. Pacin' them mules slowed 'im some. W'en 'e seen us overhaulin' 'im, 'e took ter 'igher ground. 'E's up there on the 'ill now, doggo in a deep *nullah*. Perfect cover. Blimeyriley, they dropped four o' my lot in no time, 'n we come back a bit, out o' range."

"I see," said China. "And I see a lot

more, Aplin. You understood Sher Ali's trick the second you winged that first mule and opened the *yackduns* back there."

"Wot if I did?"

"You let me keep on after the other mules, knowing—"

"I didn't know wot them other loads was. I don't know now!"

"But you pretended the first mule's load was a gun. You—"

"Blimeyriley! Or I said was, the *yackduns* was the very ones Sher Ali stole the guns in. True, ain't it?"

A thin white line ringed China's thin, bronzed mouth. His men saw the look and held their breath.

China rode in close on Aplin; they were boot to boot, their horses head to tail. And China's blazing wrath caught at Aplin, and shook him, and fear filled his muddy, unpredictable eyes.

Then by a supreme effort of will China stifled the tearing desire to fling himself on the man; this was not the time or place to have it out.

China said, when he could, "I've always thought you were a swine, Aplin. Now I know it."

Aplin's eyes darted about, studying the faces of his men; their hostility was plain.

"Ye're makin' up a case out o' 'ole cloth," he said, in a futile effort to save face.

"Am I?" China's voice was dangerously gentle. With a shrug he turned his mount and reined the animal forward to clear a jutting rock shoulder which screened the line of the trail.

"Watch out, sir," warned several of Aplin's men.

THE words were scarcely out when a bullet chipped rock inches from China's head. His horse flung up its head—and when the echo came, reared. China quieted him, quickly got out his field glasses, took a hasty look.

That steep ground that flanked both sides of the trail just here—a tough place to stalk a man, all right! Everywhere *nullahs* laced a crazyquilt pattern across

the soft shale and sandstone; an elaborate trench system, created by nature.

And Sher Ali, doubtless high enough to look squarely down into every approach to his position, could pick off attackers one by one.

Though China did not long expose himself, there was ample time for a sniper to get off more than one shot. Oddly, no more came.

Suddenly he knew why. His keen ears began recording sounds that a man of ordinary hearing would not have sensed. Not hoofbeats, but a reedy, intermittent kind of clatter—a sort of bumping against narrow walls.

China waited a few seconds, to make sure the sounds were continuing.

"Sher Ali's on the move," he said over his shoulder. "Nothing to see. Hear 'em working along in the *nullah*."

The move, just then, surprised all. In that all but impregnable position, there had been every reason to believe that the bandit would try to hold off the lancers until darkness, when escape would be relatively easy.

"He knows we can't see him and doesn't suspect we hear him," China said, as he rejoined the others. "We'll give him enough head start to make him think he's fooled us; he'll drop back to the trail presently to make his final break for the border."

Six men were told off as guard for Aplin's wounded. After a few moments the combined parties, now some thirty strong, rode cautiously forward until halted by China's upraised arm.

About seven hundred yards ahead the trail could be seen cutting through a snowy fold in the hills. And even as China studied the little pass through his binoculars, dark figures swam into focus, like so many currants on a white frosting.

"There they are!" cried China. He could make out Sher Ali himself: a giant of a man in dirty white, who towered above the four other riders that made up his party. China counted six mules, the outlines of the guns plain on their backs.

The group trickled out of sight between the hills—but not before one of the bandits drew rein to look back.

"They've seen us," China added, watching the man's actions.

Further caution was useless. The lancers pressed forward at full gallop, China and Aplin at their head. They were less than a hundred yards from the pass when hell broke loose. Not rifle fire—the ominous stutter of a machine gun!

The first bursts proved harmless. But the British were an unmissable target. Five seconds later the trail was a shambles. But in that fragment of time the two warrant officers and a handful of troopers, miraculously unhit, rode the gun down.

The bandit gunner held on coolly until the last possible second before he abandoned the smoking weapon to fling himself on his already moving horse. He was almost through the little draw when a lancer's rifle shot chipped him out of the saddle. He hit the ground and spun over and over, picking up layer after layer of soft snow, until he looked like a grotesque rolling-pin, turbaned head for handle.

Through the next valley the trail rose steep and straight, the whole reach visible from the far side of the draw. China saw Sher Ali and company pelting on through deepening snow, and already near the skyline. Somewhere not far beyond lay the border.

BRIEFLY China slackened pace and turned to count noses. Aplin was looking back, too. They could see down the draw to the bloody bit of trail just ridden over: dead lancers were everywhere; some were dying in agony. One, shot in the throat, clawed at himself like a wild animal. Another, stomach half blown away, flopped redly in the snow with an earnest, terrible aimlessness.

China said stonily: "Turning one of those guns on us was an obvious move, but I—well, it didn't occur to me they'd do it. For one thing, I didn't figure there was time to assemble it."

"Maybe they 'ad it ready back there

in the *nullah*—packed it on a mule orl assembled," Aplin muttered.

"Must have. . . . If they do that trick again, they'll get what's left of us!"

The remainder had now ridden up.

"Wotever 'appens," Aplin said, half under his breath, "*you* won't live th' day out."

If China heard, he gave no sign.

They were but eleven strong as they picked up the chase.

Sher Ali's entire party had passed over the crest. China pushed his great-hearted bay up the sheer hillside, eyeing the skyline. If another ambush was there, he could see no sign of it. . . . He sensed that Aplin was deliberately letting him set the pace.

"Come on," China called. "You an' I'll top this rise abreast!"

Aplin, glowering, drew level again, and they broke across the summit. Snorting fear, their horses shied away.

A pair of the bandit's henchmen were down on their knees, struggling to assemble another gun. They let it go and were reaching for their rifles when two troopers charged them, lances level. The brown men died in a flurry of crimson snow.

A bare two hundred yards ahead Sher Ali and the one man left him were clubbing their four mules with rifle butts in a desperate attempt to wring more speed from the failing beasts.

China flung up his hand. "Dismount; fire at will. Get the men and the mules'll stop by themselves."

The troopers flung themselves in the snow. Lee-Enfields barked, but the jerkily receding figures made poor targets. After many rounds, a mule broke from the line and crashed.

The rest—men and mules—were getting away, when suddenly Sher Ali's mate stiffened in the saddle; at once he began to slump slowly forward. For a few strides his head bobbed against the mane of his horse. Then, hands pawing the animal's neck, he commenced to slide. The horse veered from the trail and stopped just as the man crumbled to the snow.

Still clubbing the three mules that remained in his string, Sher Ali vanished round a twist in the trail.

The lancers sprang to horse and again pelted in pursuit. Came a stretch of open, level ground, windswept free of snow. China's gelding and Aplin's roan mare, best of the horses, forged ahead. But when they passed the bend and could look ahead, the gain on the bandit seemed small.

Another stretch, another bend. This time when they picked up their quarry they knew they were closing in. Three more long reaches and he was less than a hundred yards in the van. By now China and Aplin had far outdistanced their men.

At intervals Sher Ali had looked back. When he did so now China could clearly see the wide, pockmarked face, well remembered from the man's last trial at Peshawar.

Apparently alarmed at the nearness of the white men, with the agility of a circus rider the *loot wallah* pivoted all the way round on his running horse, swung up his rifle and fired a whole clip. Five wild shots.

Twice China's big Webley roared without visible effect. And now for the second time he was vaguely bothered by Aplin's persistent hanging behind. China turned to remonstrate—to find Aplin's blue gun pointing squarely at his head.

A FLAME belched in China's face. Powder flecks scorched him. His helmet went flying. Half deafened from the point-blank explosion, he heard Aplin speaking: "Right in my line o' fire. Sorry. Mistakes happen."

A mistake? China had turned in time to see the careful aim.

Instead of bothering to argue, he took precautions; gave a curt command that had unmistakable emphasis:

"You ride level with me. Hear?"

Mistake or not, China's helmet had been shot off. A man could not long go hatless under this sun, even in winter, without risking sunstroke. Had to take that risk; no time to go back for the *topi*.

They clattered down to a dry river bed. Beyond, the ground rose sharply. Sher Ali was clubbing his mules unmercifully, but their labored trot slowed to a walk. Then they stopped dead. The mules were done.

Sher Ali hesitated, glanced back; jerked his lathered horse about and raised his rifle. Had his hand not been unsteady from hard riding, the shots must have found their mark; as it was, they whistled past China's ears, far too close for comfort.

Rifle emptied, the bandit fumbled in the pouches of his bandolier for a fresh clip.

Now was the time.

Aplin's roan gasping at his stirrup, China labored up the hill. He saw Sher Ali finally find another clip and jam it into his breech. It stuck. The bandit could not work his bolt.

Face twisted with fury, he stared at his useless rifle, wasting time. Then, with a demoniacal scream of fury, he flung his mount up the trail. The exhausted animal was no more than in stride when China overtook him.

WEBLEY raised, China tensed for a finishing shot. Sher Ali saw, twisted in the saddle, ducked. China's shot passed over his shoulder.

With China right on him a long knife flashed; the bandit's left arm swept back. The thin steel seared across China's gun wrist.

Again the bandit stabbed. China caught his arm. Head to head now, their horses halted. Blood squirting from his wrist, China pushed the Webley against solid flesh.

Somehow the other squirmed away before China could pull the trigger; freed his left arm, too. China's horse reared, destroying his new aim—and suddenly Sher Ali's hulking body was on him.

China half fell, was half pulled from the saddle. Locked together the pair hit the snow, the *loot wallah* on top. Up sprang the knife.

Old China saw the deadly lunge, and crashed his Webley barrel against the sinewy brown wrist in midair. Sher Ali howled with agony. The knife slid from his fingers.

But he still pinned China down. Like a mad dog the Pathan sank his teeth into China's throat. . . . Where was Aplin? . . . China gasped with pain; tried to push the stinking body away; realized all at once that the Webley was still in his hand.

He stuck the gun in Sher Ali's ear, so near his own chin. He pulled the trigger. A wall of blood blinded him. The bandit, twitching, was so much soft dead weight. It was over.

That, thought China, is that.

China rolled clear of the body, lay on his side. He could still see nothing for the blood in his eyes.

"Aplin," he croaked, "Aplin—where are you?" His mangled throat was ablaze with the fires of hell.

"Oh, I'm 'ere, orl right!" The nearness of the voice told China that Aplin had dismounted. Aplin sounded—amused?

"Why didn't you pitch in—*do* something?" China whispered.

"Pitch in?" Aplin repeated the phrase with mock surprise. "Don't tell me yer wanted 'elp from me! W'y, I figured yer aimed t'be a bloomin' 'ero orl by yerself. So I let yer be one. Wasn't that the plan?"

"Well, so we got the guns back and Sher Ali's dead. Perfect, wot? Blimey-riley! Only, it still ain't goin' ter make yer th' next R.S.M. Beastly sorry t' disappoint you and yer pal the colonel, but I wants that job meself." His tone changed. "Goin' ter 'ave it, too!"

China heard the faint lisp of clothing as Aplin bent over him.

"When I tells the men that Sher Ali shot yer before I killed Sher Ali, 'ow'll they know the difference? I'll tell 'em yer died like a 'ero. Clever, wot?"

It was only when China felt cold metal against his forehead that he fully realized the import of Aplin's words. In the split second he lay there, too stunned for action,

the gun barrel pressed harder against his head as Aplin's finger tightened on the trigger.

China made a frantic grab with his good hand: the left. Too late to stop Aplin.

And then—

Then the gun clicked. Clicked harmlessly. Clicked again.

"Empty, by Gawd!" Aplin cursed.

RAGE long suppressed and fanned to white heat by Aplin's incredible baseness gave China new strength. And as the other still squatted over him, suddenly China jerked up his hard old knees. They caught Aplin in the back, knocked him over China's head.

For a second or so Aplin lay full length, shins in China's face. With vision fast returning, China got to his knees and turned just as Aplin pulled his feet under him to rise.

Still kneeling, China plunged. Aplin hadn't expected that. The impact knocked him flat on his back and the empty gun flew from his hand.

Then Aplin saw China's Webley, still clutched in his gun hand. Aplin grabbed China's wounded wrist. China, wincing, battled to shake off the iron grip; failed.

Each with an arm free they rolled and fought, snarling, without speech—fought like tigers with life at stake. China's flailing left made a sodden pulp of Aplin's face.

But slowly, inexorably and with every ounce of his greater strength, Aplin was bending China's right wrist, blood from the torn wound spurting through his thick fingers.

At last the gun fell from China's numb hand.

With a shout of triumph Aplin kicked himself free of China with a vicious knee to the groin.

Half buried in the snow, barrel pointing toward them, the gun lay at arm's length. Both scrabbled for it. But old China was slow from loss of blood and that kick had almost finished him.

Aplin won.

As his hand closed over the Webley, his thumb stuck through the trigger guard of the reversed weapon. And as he tightened his grip to keep the gun from China, he pulled the trigger.

After the explosion—dead silence.

China, all in, lay still for many seconds, cooling his burning face in the snow. Painfully, then, he got to all fours to peer owlishly at Aplin. The chin and neck were black with powder; and as China stared, blood began welling from a hole in the chin. But China was too dazed, even now, to grasp at once what had happened.

True, he seemed to be alive, Aplin dead. But how—

Mechanically he recovered the Webley. Crawling closer to Aplin he removed the spattered helmet. A jagged hole in the brim marked the bullet's flight. The heavy slug had passed from Aplin's chin through the lower part of his brain, carrying away a section of skull.

It came to China finally that Aplin had died by his own hand.

A sudden great rattling of stones on the trail below brought the utterly spent warrant officer jerkily to his feet. He saw that the rest of the party was near. Abruptly the troopers were about him, shouting, questioning. Two of them made to hold him up by the elbows.

"I look lots worse than I am," China shrugged. "All this gore—just a sore throat and a slashed arm. You find me a helmet some place, and field dressings'll fix up these scratches, fine."

"Take more'n field dressings t' fix them other two," a man said soberly, as he studied Aplin and Sher Ali. "Y'can see they died fightin' hand to hand."

The irony of that almost betrayed China into telling the true facts. Instead, he uttered the biggest whopper of his life:

"Sergeant Major Aplin gave a great account of himself, lads. He died bravely!"



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In that dim cantina the two boys' guns thundered together

Brothers of the Gun

By WALT COBURN

IT IS U. S. Marshal Riley Blocker's duty to stop the cattleman-shepherd feud between Bill Rhodes and John Ferguson; and he goes to work with grim efficiency, killing both men. After that gunfight, which costs him his left arm, Blocker turns in his marshal's badge, sick of his bloody job and determined to do some service for the two dead men.

Riley Blocker's way is to adopt the orphaned sons of Bill Rhodes and John Ferguson. He has put away his six-gun, and before he rides the trail for home he collects the two boys, Johnny Ferguson and Billy Rhodes. They are received gladly by Jane Blocker, and they become the foster-brothers of small Norah. So Riley Blocker is content,

though he knows that eventually he will have to settle with two men—Simon Thrall and Frisco Joe, friends of the men Blocker killed.

JOHNNY FERGUSON and Billy Rhodes grow up on Riley Blocker's ranch down by the Arizona Border. They know they have been adopted, but Blocker has never told them that he shot down their fathers. Both capable young cowmen, they are very different by nature. Steady, quiet Johnny Ferguson attends strictly to his cowman's job; but Billy Rhodes is a wild, careless fellow, high-spirited and not too concerned about keeping on the right side of the law. In fact, he's quite willing to make quick money by working cattle across the Border. And it is Billy Rhodes who commands the loyal attention of rellheaded Norah Blocker, now the prettiest girl in Arizona.

This two-part serial began in last week's Argosy

Then Riley Blocker receives warning that Simon Thrall and Frisco Joe have set out at last to settle their debt with him. So Blocker must get out the six-gun that he has not touched in so long; he fears that Frisco Joe and Thrall will attempt to poison Johnny and Billy against him, telling the boys the truth of their fathers' deaths.

Lately a rift has been widening between Johnny and Billy. The former is disapproving, the latter impatient and contemptuous; and when Johnny comes down hard on his brother because of the shady cattle deal, Billy says: "Some day I'll take you for a fist-whippin' you'll remember." And Johnny answers that he'll be ready any time. . . .

CHAPTER VI

WHEN A YAQUI MEETS A YAQUI . . .

JOHNNY was tall and long-muscled and tough as rawhide. Billy was six inches shorter, wide-shouldered, quick as a panther. They had fought before. Sometimes Johnny won. Other times Billy would get the best of it. They always fought with the old set of boxing gloves Riley had given them the first time he caught them fighting with bare fists.

"Whenever you two young roosters have a quarrel to fight out," Riley had told them when he took the new boxing gloves out of the box, "put the mitts on and battle 'er out. I'll referee. If I'm not handy, get one of the boys or call on Norah. She likes a good scrap. Takes after her grandfather O'Hara."

Those boxing gloves were scabbed now and spotted with old bloodstains. The padding was stiff and worn thin across the knuckles. The Block cowpunchers bragged in town that Johnny and Billy Blocker were the two best scrappers in Arizona.

Riley Blocker did his best to keep Jane from knowing about these grudge fights. But she would have been blind indeed if she failed to notice the black eyes or swollen noses that the two boys occasionally showed up with when they sat down to supper.

"The boys are learnin' to handle their dukes," Riley would tell her. "They kin handle themselves in any kind of company. There ain't a man in the outfit kin lay a glove on either of 'em.

"Johnny's got the reach and he's cool-headed. Billy is quick as chain-lightnin' but when he gits tapped hard he'll throw away his science and bore in. And Johnny measures him in the dirt. Billy kin clean Johnny if he don't lose his temper. But it's all in fun, Jane. They shake hands afterward. Let some outsider pick on either one of those boys and he's got a pair of cougars to whip."

Which was the truth. Theirs was a loyalty that was closer than any blood tie. But sometimes it worried Riley Blocker more than he ever let on to anyone. He could never forget that John Ferguson and Bill Rhodes had been bitter enemies who had sworn to kill one another up in Montana. Riley kept his worries to himself.

Riley never worried about Johnny. He would have put the tall, quiet-mannered boy in as ramrod of the outfit if it hadn't been for the fact that he never showed favoritism between the two boys. He paid them each fifty dollars a month and ran the Block outfit himself. But everybody in the country knew that Johnny was the better cowman, even though Billy could handle a rope or a bronc more cleverly.

But it was Jane Blocker who saw the thing which Riley, being a man, did not even notice. Jane Blocker knew that both Johnny and Billy were falling in love with Norah. She knew it long before Norah did. Before either of the boys realized it.

In those black hours of the night between two and four in the morning Jane Blocker would lie awake worrying. Dreading that day that was bound to come when Norah must choose between Johnny and Billy. She knew that Norah did not realize what was coming.

Norah took those two boys for granted. They were her two brothers. And so far as Jane could tell from watching and listening and subtly questioning her red-haired daughter, Norah never for a moment dreamed that her foster-brothers loved her except as they would love their own sister.

She still pestered Billy by trailing him around. Billy teased and tormented her and gave her anything she asked of him. They

still got into all manner of scrapes together and called on Johnny to get them out.

But it was Johnny who shared all Norah's secrets and listened to her troubles. She depended on him and came to him for advice.

RILEY BLOCKER had put twenty-five thousand dollars in the bank in a trust fund for Johnny. A similar amount for Billy. The money had been gathering interest for fifteen years.

"The money is there for you boys," he told them. "Neither of you is old enough to handle it yet. You don't need it anyhow. What's mine is yours and Norah's when Jane and I are gone. The Block outfit is big enough for all of us. Let your money ride in the bank and gather moss. Mebbyso when you're older you might need 'er. Right now you don't.

"You boys have everything you need. I pay you wages but whenever you need extra money come to me and you'll git 'er. You've each got your own irons. The Block J and Block B brands are on plenty of cattle. Build your herds up like I've built the Block. Norah has her Block N cattle.

"We've got one of the biggest spreads along the Mexican border. I want you boys to hang onto it. One of these days I'll swap my saddle for a rockin' chair by the stove. Set in the shade in the summer. You two boys will run the outfit. I'm almighty proud of you both. Neither of you could do anything to make me ashamed to claim you as my sons. Let your bank money gather moss, boys."

Billy didn't need the money he got from the cattle he and Carlos Haggerty were rustling. Billy was shoving the cattle across the line of a night just for the excitement of it. If he needed money to square his gambling debts at Nogales he could get it from Riley and no questions asked or sermons preached.

"It's just downright orneriness, Billy," Johnny told him. "Carlos is a halfbreed Mex and he's a damned cattle thief. He don't buy them Mexican cattle he's slidin' across the Border. He's stealin' 'em from

men that are Riley's old friends. And he's sellin' 'em at rustler prices to Slash M Delaney.

"Delaney has been thumbin' his nose at Long Jim Crowley and the Arizona Rangers for a long time. One of these nights Carlos Haggerty and Slash M Delaney will git you into a tight with the law. You'll have to shoot your way out with that notched gun of yours. You might shoot Long Jim or a Ranger. Riley deserves a better break from you than that. Why don't you keep that pug nose of yours clean?"

"Speakin' of noses," said Billy, grinning, "I think I'll just bloody that purty beak of yours. Get the gloves. I'll be out behind the barn." His blue eyes were cold as ice.

It was Johnny who bloodied Billy's nose. Billy lost his temper and charged like a bull, head lowered, arms jabbing like pistons. Johnny sidestepped and swung long, looping rights. The last time he swung Billy went down for a long count. Norah was refereeing. She made them shake hands. Billy's nose was swollen and he had a black eye.

Norah worked the pump handle and as Billy soused his head and face in the cold water she told him that he would look natural when he took her to the dance tonight.

"Nobody would recognize you without a black eye or a skinned nose. You take me, Johnny. At least you'll not be spending half the night outside drinkin' tequila with Carlos Haggerty while little Norah gets her feet tromped on by Slash M cowhands. Whew!"

"I'm leavin' right now for Sonora," Johnny told her. "Go: a thousand head of cattle comin' up out of the Altar valley."

"The best dancer in the cow country," said Norah, "and he spends the night warbling to a bunch of Mexican longhorns. Dolores Delaney will spend the evening sulking. She burns candles to Our Lady of Guadalupe, I hear, and prays that she'll marry one of the Blocker boys and thus make an honest man out of her father.

"Slash M won't have to lose sleep rustling

cattle then. He'll just borrow a few steers now and then from his son-in-law's range. Dolores is the prettiest girl along the Border. I've heard her admit it."

"Billy," said Johnny, with a sidelong glance at the battered Billy who was feeling his nose gingerly, "will see that Dolores don't get too lonesome." Johnny's gray-brown eyes looked straight at Billy now. His voice was drawling, matching his slow grin, but there was something like a warning in the hard look that crept into his eyes.

"Round and 'round the little ball goes
And where she stops nobody knows.

"But Billy Blocker," Johnny's lazy voice added, "plays both colors and figures he can't lose."

Billy's battered face flushed and his fists clenched. His bloodshot eyes were furious.

Johnny smiled grimly. He shoved a carbine into his saddle scabbard and stepped up on his horse.

"The Mexicans spilled the last drive they gathered in the Altar Valley," he told Norah. "Riley wants me to get this next bunch of dogies across the line. There's not much profit in spendin' two weeks roundin' up cattle down yonder and drivin' 'em a hundred miles and havin' Carlos Haggerty run 'em off and peddle 'em to Slash M Delaney. Carlos needs a dose of gringo medicine. I'm packin' it." He patted the stock of his 30-30 carbine.

"This is one cattle drive that the spur-jinglin' halfbreed won't swipe. *Adiosita!*"

JOHNNY BLOCKER rode off, his hat slanted across his eyes, the flaps of his brush-scarred chaps lifting with every motion of his horse.

Billy stood there by the pump scowling after him. Anger and worry showed on his battered face.

"He's just shovin' sandburrs under my saddle blanket," he muttered. "Damn his sanctimonious hide."

"Meaning what, Billy boy?"

"Don't call me Billy boy and don't ask fool girl-questions. Carlos Haggerty is takin' Dolores to the *baile*."

"Get a hunk of raw beef on your eye," said Norah. "What did Johnny mean about you playing both colors so you can't lose?"

"Ever see a roulette wheel?" snapped Billy.

"I've played 'em. I won seven dollars once on the wheel at Nogales. Remember? Why?"

"The roulette wheel has two colors," said Billy, watching Johnny ride out of sight. "Red and black. Dolores has black hair. Your hair is red. Want me to draw you a diagram?"

"No. I get it, Billy. Trot along to the meat house. Cut a hunk off the neck. Don't waste a porterhouse cut of good steak on that shiner." Norah headed for the house. She was whistling and her chin was tilted.

Billy caught up with her and took hold of her arm. His grin was a little forced. He rubbed a thumb across the blue tattoo marks on her white forehead.

"Yaqui?" He grinned.

"Yaqui," Norah replied, and touched the tattoo marks on Billy's forehead.

He let her go and she went on to the house, the stiff smile still on her red lips.

Billy headed for the bunkhouse. He was cussing under his breath. Cussing Johnny and the world in general. An hour ago he and Johnny had pitched dollars at a mark to see who would take Norah to the *baile*; the loser would go down into Sonora to help the Mexicans fetch up that big drive of Sonora cattle. Johnny had lost. Billy had been elated at winning the chance to take Norah to the dance. Now he wasn't so happy about it.

Johnny was skilled at this game called crack-loo—pitching dollars at a crack in the floor or a line drawn in the dirt. Johnny had lost by a margin that now seemed too wide. What if Johnny had purposely lost? What if Carlos Haggerty had lied the other day when he said he was taking Dolores to the dance? What if the wily Carlos was planning a swift raid on those cattle?

The tall, handsome Carlos was getting a little cocky lately. Billy didn't trust him too far. Not since the night when Carlos

had almost caught Billy kissing Dolores Delaney at the Slash M ranch in the moonlight. Carlos was either in love with Dolores or he was making a strong play for her because he wanted to marry into the big Slash M outfit. And Carlos had a lot of tricks in his sack. Billy Blocker cursed savagely.

There had been more to it than just taking Norah to the dance. That crack-oo game had decided a more vital issue.

"We both feel the same about Norah," Johnny had said. "There's no sense in denying it. Whoever takes her to the dance tonight gets the first chance to ask Norah to marry him. We'll pitch a game of crack-oo to see who gets first chance. Let's go."

It was understood between them without putting it into words that Riley and Jane and Norah must never know. That Riley and Jane should never know that they both loved Norah. Norah would choose between them. The loser would wish them happiness and forever fade out of the picture. Jane and Riley mustn't be hurt in any way.

Billy and Johnny had talked that over. They trusted one another to the limit. They were both men who lived by a strict code. They knew how to take a losing. That was that. And Billy was getting first chance to ask Norah that vital question. There was, of course, the possibility that she would turn them both down. She might even marry Long Jim Crowley. Norah thought a lot of Long Jim.

BUT Billy was almighty hot under the collar right now. Johnny had no business mentioning Dolores Delaney. That, to Billy, seemed like hitting below the belt. Because it was the truth. If there hadn't been any Norah, Billy Blocker would have been close-trailing Dolores who was very beautiful with her ivory white skin and blue-black hair and large brown-black eyes.

Her mother, daughter of a long line of Spanish dons, had been called the most beautiful woman in all Mexico. She had fallen in love with a soldier of fortune. Captain Dion Delaney. They had eloped

and her family had disowned her for running away with the dashing, handsome gringo who left Mexico with his saddle bags filled with gold.

The Señora Delaney had died when Dolores was fifteen. Captain Dion Delaney had a big Mexican lard grant on the Arizona side of the line. His Slash M brand was on every cow-brute his men could round up in Mexico and get across the Border. Carlos Haggerty was Slash M Delaney's ramrod and major-domo. When the cattle business slumped Delaney and his foreman, Carlos Haggerty, weathered drouth and low cattle markets by running guns and ammunition to the rebel forces who were forever fermenting a new revolution below the Border.

Dolores Delaney would appear at Mexican *bailes* or gringo dances wearing the priceless Spanish shawls that had belonged to her mother. Her soft skin was ivory, her lips the color of red pomegranate seeds, her hair the blue-black of a Mexico midnight. She sang old Spanish love songs in a throaty voice and her dancing was a poem in Spanish. And Spanish is the language of lovers.

If it were possible for a man to be in love with two girls at the same time, then Billy Blocker's heart was so divided.

But Johnny had no business yapping about it and Billy had half a mind to saddle his horse and take in after Johnny and yank him off his horse and whip the daylights out of him. The next time he would remember to keep his jaw covered and not wade into that looping right of Johnny's.

Billy bathed and shaved and rubbed talcum powder on his discolored eye. He put on a new pair of Oregon pants that had white buckskin foxed to the seat and inside the legs. His best shirt was soiled so he helped himself to a new one out of Johnny's warsack. He got a little satisfaction out of swiping that fancy shirt. His anger toward Johnny was cooling a little as he and Norah headed for Nogales, riding their town horses.

If Billy and Norah had taken the trail that led past the Slash M ranch they would

have met Slash M Delaney. That white-haired, still handsome exile from Mexico City was headed straight for the Block ranch. He rode alone and he was wearing the two gold-and-silver-handled six-shooters that had been given him by the former Presidente Porfirio Diaz of Mexico. He had been General Dion Delaney, staff officer of the Army of Mexico.

Now he was known along the Border as Slash M Delaney who owned the Santa Maria Grant and was not too particular whose cattle his men under the tough and reckless leadership of Carlos Haggerty put into his Slash M iron.

Slash M Delaney had many enemies but he was too boldly contemptuous of their threats to use a bodyguard. He rode alone. The sun dropped behind the broken skyline and the shadows of dusk thickened in the rocky Geronimo Pass through which he must ride to reach the Block ranch.

He rode warily and his eyes and ears were strained for sight or sound of ambush. But the years had dimmed his eyesight a little and dulled the sharpness of his hearing. The light was shadowed in Geronimo Pass. The men behind the thick brush made little sound because they were skilled at this business of bushwhacking.

There were two men. One on either side of the trail. Slash M Delaney's horse shied. Two guns roared and crimson-orange streaks of flame spewed from their gun barrels. Delaney felt the crashing thud of heavy leaden slugs tearing his shoulders. He raked his horse with his silver Mexican spurs. Reeling in his saddle like a drunken man, he rode through the quick hail of flying bullets at a dead run, his guns spitting fire.

AN HOUR later his big palomino horse fetched him to the Block ranch more dead than alive. His clothes were sodden with blood and his voice was a croaking whisper as Riley Blocker lifted him from his saddle.

Riley and Jane Blocker bandaged his wounds and Riley fed him raw whisky from a water tumbler. Slash M Delaney

smiled his thanks at Jane and told her that he had a few words to say to Riley alone.

"We've never been friends, Blocker," Slash M Delaney told the one armed cowboy. "Not very good neighbors. But I'm damned if I'll see even a man who calls me a cow thief stabbed in the back.

"That's what a pair of blackguards are tryin' to do to you. A tinhorn gambler named Joe Fallon—called Frisco Joe. His pardner is a big renegade named Simon Thall. I knew 'em both in Mexico City. Bad hombres. They knew you and I didn't waste any love on one another so they showed up at my ranch with a proposition. I ran 'em off.

"I was ridin' here to warn you when I got shot. They must have guessed I'd ride here. Bushed up and tried to kill me. They're lookin' for Johnny and Billy. Where are the two boys?"

"Johnny rode across the Border to fetch up some cattle. Billy took Norah to the dance at Nogales."

"Frisco Joe aims to find 'em. He claims that their real names are Johnny Ferguson and Billy Rhodes. That you murdered their fathers. That is what he says he's goin' to tell 'em and back it up with old newspaper accounts of the killin'.

"Frisco Joe and Simon Thall think they kin turn the two boys against you. They'll git to Billy at Nogales. They'll trail Johnny into Sonora. Poison the minds of your two boys. Frisco Joe showed me the old newspaper clippin's. But I know what kind of a father you've bin to those two boys, Blocker. I don't give a damn what else you've done along your back trail.

"You're too big a man to git stabbed in the back by a pair of blackguards like Frisco Joe and Si Thall. Git to Nogales before they locate Billy and Norah. Git down to Sonora before they throw in with Carlos Haggerty and locate Johnny. I don't trust Carlos. He lied to me. Told me he was takin' Dolores to the *baile* at Nogales. But he left her there and rode on into Sonora with some of his men. He's disobeyin' my orders and goin' after the cattle Johnny is fetchin' up out of the Altar

Valley. . . . How about another drink, Blocker. I'm gittin' kinda weak. Dyin', I reckon."

"Jane won't let you die," Riley promised as he gave the wounded man a drink of whisky. "Lie quiet and let her take care of you. I got the two bullets outa your shoulders. You'll live. You *got* to live. Because you and me are tearin' down the drift fence between the Block and Slash M ranges. Cow thief, hell! You're all man, Delaney!"

Riley gripped the wounded cowman's hand. Then he kissed Jane goodbye and hit the trail for Nogales.

IT WAS past midnight and the dance was in full swing when Riley Blocker reached Nogales. Norah and Dolores Delaney were sitting on either side of Long Jim Crowley whose face was brick red and whose tanned neck was getting kinked and stiff from turning from one girl to the other as they tugged his either sleeve and tried to monopolize his attention.

"Where's Billy?" Riley asked Norah.

"Billy's stampeded," said Norah. "He's on the prod. Two men called him outside and talked to him. I don't know what they said but he knocked the big man down and when the other man pulled a knife Billy rapped him between the horns with his six-shooter. He told Long Jim to ride close herd on Dolores and me. Said he was going after Johnny. He pulled a John Alden on me to boot."

"Pulled a what?"

"John Alden. When he asked me to marry him he said that he was repping for Johnny. That Johnny would make a better husband. Billy had been sampling the tequila outside, I suppose. Anyhow it didn't make sense. He blew up like a firecracker when I laughed at him. Then he found that Carlos had left Dolores here and headed for Sonora with some Slash M cowboys and—"

"Who is this John Alden?" Riley broke in. "What's he look like?"

"I don't know what John Alden looked like, Riley. He lived back in 1620 or there-

abouts. One of the Pilgrims. He pleaded the cause of Captain Miles Standish and so won the hand of Priscilla. It's history."

"Wait till I get that tow-headed Yaqui! He brings me to a dance, gets a skin full of Nogales firewater, starts a fight with a couple of strangers, and turns Dolores and me over to Long Jim like we're a pair of pack mules and—"

"You and Dolores git a couple of the Block boys to take you to the ranch," Blocker said. "Dolores's father's there. He got shot but he'll live. Take the doctor along and ride hard. Jim, git what men you kin rustle, Rangers or whoever you kin find quick. We're takin' a pasear into Sonora. To'rds Altar. Git a move on!"

Not until he had taken Long Jim Crowley and a couple of Arizona Rangers and some Block cowboys and had left in a rush did Norah get her breath. She gripped the arm of Dolores Delaney.

"Riley," she said in a small scared voice, "is packing a gun!"

CHAPTER VII

BROTHER, HERE'S YOUR HERITAGE

TEXAS RILEY BLOCKER had never been much of a hand at preaching sermons. When he figured that Johnny or Billy needed advice he gave it to them and told them they could take it or leave it, and he grinned when he said it. And usually the boys grinned back and took it.

They called him Riley and they called their foster-mother Jane. So did Norah. There was a comradeship among the whole family that was wholesome and splendid.

Riley never packed a gun, but he had never lectured Billy about wearing that six-shooter with the notched cedar handle. And when Johnny bought a six-shooter and began wearing it on the roundup Riley said nothing against that. But he told both boys that a gun could get a man into a peck of trouble. And he told Billy, who liked to take a few drinks when he went to a *baile* or got to town with the cowboys, that a six-shooter and a skin full of booze didn't mix.

Johnny never took more than one or two drinks and Riley never worried about that end of it. Billy was the wild Injun who was quick-tempered and liked to swagger a little around town. Riley called it letting his spur straps out a hole so the rowels would drag on the dance floor. He wasn't going to do anything about it, he told Jane.

"I can't go bawlin' the young rascal out for doin' things I used to do before you sawed my horns off, Jane," was Riley's way of giving Billy his head.

"Ride a heady young colt like Billy with a spade-bit and he'll rear over backward and come up a-pawin' and a-strikin'. He's got to be hackamore-broke. Johnny will handle hisself."

Riley Blocker had seen Johnny ride away from the ranch wearing a cartridge belt and sixshooter and with a carbine shoved in his saddle scabbard. Johnny had told him he was going down across the Border to help the Mexicans fetch up that drive of cattle from the Altar range. The Mexican *vaqueros* had spilled the last herd they gathered and their major-domo had told it scarey about being attacked by Carlos Haggerty and his bunch of renegades. Riley knew that the halfbreed Carlos wouldn't have much chance of bluffing Johnny.

Riley had heard rumors about Billy being *muy amigos* with Carlos Haggerty. But he wouldn't believe that Billy would throw in too strong with Slash M Delaney's cattle-rustling ramrod. Billy didn't need to turn cow thief to make a living. But Riley told Long Jim Crowley that if he did catch Billy trying any monkeyshines to put the fear of the law in him strong enough so he'd remember.

It was Long Jim who told Riley about the fight Billy had with the two strangers outside the dance hall.

"Billy had a horn drooped all evenin', Riley. He'd taken on a few drinks but he wasn't full. I heard him ask Dolores where Carlos was and when she told him that Carlos had pulled out for somewhere across the Border Billy acted like he had found a scorpion in his likker.

"Billy was talkin' to Norah, tellin' her that he was goin' to take a little pasear into Mexico, when a Mexican boy told him that two men wanted to see him outside.

"Billy follered the Mexican boy outside. I saw him standin' out there and the smaller of the two fellers was talkin' and showin' Billy some papers. Billy looked at the papers and grinned. Then he tore the papers up.

"The bigger feller made a grab for them. Billy hit him with everything but the 'dobe building. He knocked that big son of a gun down and kicked him in the belly. The other feller pulled a knife. Billy rapped him over the head with his gun and the feller dropped like a shot beef. Billy was still grinnin' but his face was kinda white and his eyes was like sparks.

"'Ride herd on Norah and Dolores,' he told me. 'I'm goin' to find Johnny. And if them two crawlin' snakes is still in town when me'n Johnny git back to Nogales, we're killin' 'em like we'd shoot the heads off a couple of rattlers.' And with that he forks his horse and left town in a cloud of dust.

"The two strangers picked themselves up outa the dust. I saw 'em head for the sheriff's office."

Riley Blocker grinned. Frisco Joe hadn't gotten far with Billy. Right now Billy was riding hard to locate Johnny. And if Carlos Haggerty jumped that pair and tried to steal their trail herd they would make bunch quitters out of the big halfbreed and his rustler outfit. If the two boys cut the sign of Frisco Joe and Simon Thall there would be a ruckus. But Frisco Joe and Simon Thall would never fight in the open.

THE sheriff of Nogales came up as Riley and Long Jim Crowley and two Arizona Rangers were getting ready to pull out for Sonora.

"I got a warrant for your arrest, Riley. Two Montana fellers showed up here this evenin'. One of 'em is a deputy sheriff. He has an old indictment against you. Claims

that you're wanted up in Montana for murder and grand theft. He says that him and the big feller with him has trailed you here and that you kidnapped two small boys fifteen years ago and claimed 'em because you was after fifty thousand dollars that belonged to the boys you adopted.

"This Montana law officer claims you killed their daddies. A sheepman named John Ferguson and a cowman named Bill Rhodes. He showed me old newspaper accounts. The newspaper accused the governor of Montana of bein' a crooked politician and it calls you a hired killer who wore a law badge that you used to protect yourself when you and some hired killers murdered Ferguson and Rhodes.

"I ain't sayin' I believe all this, Riley. But I'm the law here at Nogales and I got my duty to perform. You're the last man in the cow country I'd want to put in jail. But I took an oath when they made me sheriff and—"

"Tuck in your shirt tail, Sheriff," said Riley quietly. "The International Border runs square through the middle of this town of Nogales, don't it? And right now we're settin' our horses on the Mexican side of the line. When you walked acrost the street just now you came over into Mexico. Your badge don't count down here. That warrant ain't worth a lead dime.

"I'll drop around to your office when I git back. Me'n Long Jim and these two Rangers are takin' a little pasear into Sonora. You should have served that bench warrant while I was on the United States side of the street, Sheriff."

"That's right, Riley. I ain't got a foot to stand on. I'm gittin' almighty careless about things, thataway." The sheriff grinned and shoved the bench warrant back in his pocket.

"Them two Montana fellers rode south, Riley. You might cut their sign down yonder. Good luck, boys."

The sheriff walked back across the street, headed for the dance hall.

"There," said Long Jim Crowley, as they headed south at a long trot, "is a man who should be re-elected. He follered you

acrost the street before he pulled that bench warrant on yuh, Riley."

"He's a cinch to git the Block votes," said Riley. "Let's ride!"

CHAPTER VIII

THUNDER ALONG THE BORDER

JOHNNY BLOCKER didn't trust the Mexican major-domo whose name was Juan Tirado. He had seen Tirado and Carlos Haggerty drinking together more than once in the cantina at Nogales. And he had heard that the two men were cousins. Tirado hired his *vaqueros* in Sonora. It had been rumored that Tirado and his *vaqueros* had plenty of pesos right after that last time they had lost a big drive of cattle to Carlos Haggerty and his hard-riding renegades who were a mixture of bad gringos and 'breeds.

Tirado got a shock of surprise when Johnny rode up to their camp. A thousand head of Mexican cattle had been bedded down for the night and only two riders were on night guard.

"*Anda! Anda!*" snapped Johnny as he rode up to the campfire around which Tirado and his *vaqueros* sat smoking and sipping black coffee, their saddled horses standing tied to nearby bushes.

"Get your horses and get out to the herd. Carlos Haggerty and his men are not a mile from here. And listen with both your dirty ears, Tirado. When those thieves ride up and try to take this herd, I'll shoot the first man of you who runs away. And if you value your lousy hide, take good care that you are not that first hombre who tries to coyote!"

Johnny spoke in the Mexican tongue and sprinkled his talk with enough vitriolic profanity to give it the proper weight. His gun was in his hand and he motioned with it.

Tirado and his *vaqueros* had been spending a pleasant hour discussing how they would spend the money Carlos Haggerty would pay them for deserting the cattle Riley Blocker had been paying them to gather. Cattle that Riley had paid good

honest dollars for down at Altar, Sonora.

Tirado had been telling them what a *muy hombre* was this halfbreed cousin of his. How Carlos Haggerty was braver than a whole corral full of stupid gringos. Carlos was Tirado's big hero. Carlos gave him money and many fine presents and called him his *compadre*, and when Carlos married the daughter of Slash M Delaney there would be one grand fiesta. They would all work until they died for Carlos Haggerty and their wages would be as fat as any that the Block paid their gringo cowpunchers.

Tirado had passed a jug of mescal around and had boasted and bragged a lot as the fiery stuff warmed his gizzard. He was describing himself as one *muy valiente hombre* when Johnny Blocker rode up out of the night with a six-shooter in his hand and harsh, biting orders on his tongue.

"*Anda! Anda!*" called Johnny. "Rattle your hocks, hombres!"

Tirado had been mixing marijuana with the crumpled natural-leaf tobacco he had been rolling in his corn husk cigarettes. Marijuana made him loco-brave, and he was half drunk on mescal; the combination of the drug and liquor made him crafty and murderous. He muttered sullen orders to his men to get their horses and got to his feet.

Tirado was taller than the average Mexican. He moved on long and none too steady legs to where his horse was tied. Standing behind his horse, he slid his six-shooter from its holster.

Then his gun spat fire.

TIRADO was handier with a knife or machete than he was with a gun. His aim was that of the average Mexican—poor. His bullet missed Johnny by at least two feet. It was the last mistake that Tirado ever made.

Johnny fired twice at the shadowy blot of Tirado's head and shoulders that showed above the withers of his horse. Both bullets found their mark. Tirado was dead when he slumped to the ground and his horse bolted.

Another Mexican had taken his cue from the major-domo. His bullet nicked Johnny's hat. Johnny shot him in the belly and he toppled from his horse, screaming hoarsely.

Johnny's six-shooter swung in a short arc to menace the other *vaqueros* who lacked the nerve to take part in a losing fight. He made them sit their horses for a couple of long minutes and watch their companions die. He was fighting John Ferguson's son now as he gripped his gun and watched the *vaqueros*, as he told them in a brittle voice what he would do to the next hombre who was fool enough to try to kill him.

The cattle were bedded half a mile from camp. Johnny heard shooting out there. His voice cracked like a bullwhip.

"*Anda! Anda!* Ride out there and fight! *Andale!* Let's go!"

The cattle were running. Men were riding behind the stampeding herd. In the white moonlight Johnny saw a man on a big gray horse that had spots as big as dinner plates across its rump. There was only one such marked horse in that part of the cow country. That horse belonged to Billy Blocker. Billy called the gray gelding his town horse and had named him Fiddler.

That was Billy riding Fiddler and Billy's six-shooter was spitting fire as he rode at the man on the Slash M palomino. The rider on the palomino was Carlos Haggerty. Billy was shouting:

"You doublecrossin' son of a halfbreed snake! You lyin' whelp of a mangy coyote. You—"

Carlos Haggerty shouted to a couple of his men and they rode away from the cattle and straight at Billy.

Johnny slid his carbine from its saddle scabbard and yelled at the top of his voice. His voice rose harshly above the rumble and crash of the stampede. Billy let out a cowboy yell as he heard Johnny's voice. Johnny and Billy Blocker charged Carlos Haggerty and his Slash M renegades and they meant it every time they pulled their gun triggers.

It was Billy who shot Carlos Haggerty out of his saddle. The Block *vaqueros* saw

Haggerty pitch sideways and hit the ground with a thud and lie there like a dead lump. They knew that there would be no Slash M payoff. Tirado, their double-dealing major-domo, was dead. Carlos Haggerty looked dead enough. So now they fought for the Block outfit.

The gun fight was fast and furious. Billy and Johnny rode side by side and their guns made havoc.

THEN it was over and it took an hour or more to check the leaders and get the herd to milling. Carlos Haggerty was dead when Johnny and Billy found him. The Slash M renegades had ridden off into the night. The crippled crew of Block *vaqueros* rode around the milling herd. They had spilled a couple of hundred head of steers but the bulk of the herd was slowing down, halting. Ready to bed down.

"Sing 'em to sleep!" Johnny told his Mexican outfit. "Lose so much as one steer and I'll cut the ears off every hombre in this outfit!"

"What big teeth you have, gran'ma!" chuckled Billy.

"You got blood all over your Sunday shirt," said Johnny. "What tore you away from the *baile*, dancin' man?"

"It's your shirt I'm wearin', brother." Billy grinned. "The white silk 'un you had made to measure. The sleeves were a little long so I borrowed the loan of Dolores' red silk garters to held 'em up," he lied glibly.

"You're bleedin' like a stuck pig."

"Just a scratch. One of Carlos Haggerty's slugs grazed my manly bosom. Better have a couple of the *hombrecitos* load Haggerty's carcass on his horse and take it to the Slash M ranch. Mebbysy Delaney will want to give his cattle-rustlin' ramrod a military funeral. I told that halfbreed son I'd kill him if ever he stole another Block steer. He must have thought I was just joshin'."

They told the Mexicans to hold the herd and bury all the dead except Carlos Haggerty. Haggerty's body was to be taken back to the Slash M ranch for burial. They dismounted at the creek and Johnny band-

aged the bullet rip that had torn a four-inch gash in Billy's thick chest.

"That's goin' to stiffen my left jab," said Billy. "Who the hell is John Alden?"

"Never heard of him," said Johnny. "He must work for the Slash M. Hold still. I can't tie this rag tight when you twist and wriggle."

"Norah called me John Alden. If she was pullin' some boardin'-school insult, I'll git even with her. Ouch."

"I thought a Yaqui never hollered. Hold still. Why didn't you git hit in the head where it wouldn't hurt you any? Not much of a job of bandagin' but it'll hold till we reach Nogales."

"Norah says she'd never marry a man that snorted and gritted his teeth and cussed half the night in his sleep. And was so chicken-hearted that he bribed another feller to do his proposin'. I'm afraid you're out, Johnny. She's got a line on this John Alden gent. Must be some college dude she met when she was away at boardin' school. But I repped for you as best I could and— Ouch!"

"You what?"

"I told her I'd gambled away most of my Block B cattle, but you still had the first cow that ever wore your Block J iron. She won't have either of us for better or worse. I'm swingin' a hungry loop for Dolores. I thought she was stuck on Carlos, but she says not. And anyhow, Carlos Haggerty's in no shape to marry anybody now.

"Just what did you tell Norah?" Johnny's voice sounded stiff and dry as old rawhide. "Nobody asked you to say I—"

"I broke out in a rash of brotherly love and popped the question for you, bonehead. And she laughed in my face. Called me John Alden and told me to go peddle my fish. I was just reppin' for you, son."

"I can't beat up on a cripple," said Johnny. He sat down on the bank of the creek and unbuckled one leg of his chaps. The leg of his overalls was sodden with blood. A bullet had cut his thigh.

"Cripple, eh?" Billy ripped the leg of Johnny's overalls with his jackknife blade

and wrapped a tourniquet and bandage around the flesh wound.

"JOHN ALDEN," Johnny said as he helped with the last knot of the crude bandage, "was the Pilgrim who told the Pilgrim Lady Priscilla that Captain Miles Standish wanted to marry her. I just remembered now. Good men have been killed for less than you did when you repped for me, you tow-headed Yaqui."

"Baaaaa!" Billy blatted like a sheep.

"You've got a chance, shepherd. I saw the glint in Norah's eyes. I got all the hard chores done for you. All you have to do is take the little red-headed Yaqui to the preacher's house and the job's done. Good luck, Johnny. I mean it." Billy gripped Johnny's hand.

"It's bin a long time since you called me shepherd, Billy." Johnny's voice was quiet.

"Yeah, I just remembered somethin'. Is your six-shooter loaded?"

"It's loaded. But—"

"So is mine. And I'm whittlin' another notch or two on it before long. I run into two men from Montana. A man named Frisco Joe. He's travelin' with a big ox named Simon Thall. We'd better head 'em off before they find Riley. Remember the oath we took when we were kids? When we took our jackknives and cut our arms and each of us sucked the other's blood from the cuts and all that kind rigamarole?" Billy was grinning faintly, but his blue eyes were shining.

"I'll tell a man I remember," said Johnny, getting to his feet. "And we had to wait weeks before Riley cut himself and he thought we were locoed when we sucked the blood from the cut and told him it was to keep him from gettin' blood poison. And that made us blood brothers and it made Riley Blocker our blood brother.

"You said it was a Yaqui custom. When I found out you'd made the Yaqui part up I took a poke at you and you licked me. I'll tell a man I'll never forget any of it. Where do we cut the trail of Frisco Joe and Simon Thall?"

"Nogales. I left 'em there with their backs in the street. We'll find 'em, Johnny. We got to find 'em. They're after Riley. And Riley's gun is in the old trunk. I'll tell you while we're ridin' along.

"I should have killed 'em both. But I had to git to you before Carlos Haggerty . . . They might even find Norah and tell her what Frisco Joe tried to tell me. Long Jim's with Norah. I told him to take her home and to take Dolores home. I got kinda rattled or I'd have killed them two snakes right then and there. But I knocked the hell outa Simon Thall and beefed Frisco Joe and hit the trail to ketch Carlos. I was kinda rattled—"

"You managed to save my hide," said Johnny quietly. "You ain't doin' so bad, Yaqui."

Then an awkward silence came between them like a barrier that must be crossed with words that were difficult to find. It was Billy, always the better talker of the two boys, who broke down that barrier with the headlong abruptness that was his nature.

"We came close to hatin' one another, Johnny. A lot of it is my fault. You're everything that Riley wants us to be. Steady and straight-shootin and the best cowman in the country. By rights you should be runnin' the outfit. Riley would make you ramrod of the Block layout if he wasn't scared of hurtin' my feelin's.

"I've bin sort of jealous or somethin' and I've gone wild just to be onery. I've always hated Carlos and I didn't trust him. I trailed with him because I wanted to make you sore. I was jealous of you—"

"That goes double, Billy. Let's get 'er off our chests right now. Come clean and make a new start. We just went through our first gun fight together. We're goin' into another 'un. This Frisco Joe and Simon Thall might be tough enough to get one or both of us.

"Jealous? Me, too, cowhand. You ride broncs I wouldn't go into the same corral with. You rope wild steers that kick dirt in my face and get away because I haven't the nerve to open up my horse on a steep slant. Your ropin' makes mine look like I was a dude pilgrim. You're the best bronc

rider and wildest brush-popper cowhand on this man's range.

"And since we were kids you've bin Norah's hero. It's hurt. And I've tried to hurt you back. If you hadn't showed up tonight Carlos Haggerty and his renegades would have rubbed me out. Somehow that's changed everything. I want you to marry Norah. You're made for one another—Yaquis." Johnny's grin was genuine.

"You're wrong, Johnny. I don't love Norah any more than she loves me. We're Yaquis. Sure. Brother and sister. I realized tonight when I took her to the *baile* that Norah and I both felt the same way about each other. You made that crack about the red and black. It made me fightin' mad. Then when I got to thinkin' it over I woke up all of a sudden and realized I'm in love with Dolores Delaney. And that's the truth. And I know somethin' else, sheepherder. We've put on those old boxin' gloves for the last time."

"Right, Yaqui."

"We swing off the trail here," said Billy. "Yonder is the ranch that Carlos Haggerty and his renegades used for their headquarters. That Frisco Joe let it slip that he and Carlos were *muy amigos. Compadres*. I'm playin' a hunch that Carlos told Frisco Joe and Simon Thall to meet him here tonight.

"They needed a Mexico hideout and they aimed to use Carlos and Slash M Delaney in their plan to wipe out Riley. They'd heard that I was mixed up with Carlos. And they planned to poison you and me against Riley. They figured that Slash M Delaney would be glad to back their play and that they could use Carlos and his renegades.

"So unless my hunch is wrong we'll find Frisco Joe and Simon Thall at that Mexican ranch yonder. Nobody figured on you comin' down here to fetch this herd up across the line. And they don't know where I was headed for when I left Nogales. I think they figured I was ridin' back to the Block ranch to warn Riley. There's a light in the Mexican ranch house yonder."

"Let's go, then!"

CHAPTER IX

MIDNIGHT CANTINA

JOHNNY and Billy both knew the place. It was run by an old Mexican who made and sold tequila there. A few adobe houses, sheds and corrals. It was a hangout for rustlers and gun-runners and renegades of all sorts.

The light came from the open doorway of the squat adobe house that was used as a saloon or cantina. The old Mexican stood behind the bar and Frisco Joe and Simon Thall were opposite him. Frisco Joe's head was bandaged and Simon Thall's red face bore the marks of Billy's fists. They were both a little drunk.

"Simon Thall belongs to me," said Johnny as they rode up to the long hitchrack where two saddled horses were tied.

"Frisco Joe is my wolf meat," said Billy.

They swung from their saddles and walked into the lamplit saloon. Their hands were on their guns. Frisco Joe and Simon Thall stood with their backs to the bar, their right hands gripping their sixshooters.

"Long time no see you, Thall," said Johnny, his voice flat. "Do you still quirt little kids?"

"Look here, boys," said Frisco Joe, "you're getting us all wrong. Billy went off half-cocked at Nogales, but we'll not remember that. Si and I have come a long ways to have a talk with you two boys. One of you is the son of John Ferguson and Billy's father was my old friend Bill Rhodes. I'm only doing what Bill would want me to do to protect his son against the hired gun-toter who murdered him.

"Si Thall meant you no harm, Johnny. He was trying to make a man outa you and he's willing to make up for it now by helping you square the debt that your father, John Ferguson, left behind. Texas Riley Blocker was a gun slinger who was hired by a crooked politician to kill off John Ferguson and Bill Rhodes. Blocker hired a bunch of buffalo hunters and renegade scouts to back his dirty play.

"I got old newspaper files to prove it.

I'm only actin' for my old pardner Bill Rhodes, and Si Thall is still loyal to the memory of his friend John Ferguson. Take your hands off your guns, boys, and have a drink with us and let's pool our bets and get back what belongs to the sons of Bill Rhodes and John Ferguson—"

Frisco Joe's beady black eyes were narrowed. The drooping black mustache under his hawklike nose hid the thin line of his mouth. His voice was quiet. He was as dangerous now as a coiled rattler.

The years had grayed Simon Thall's hair and mustache and his big hard muscles had fattened a little. He looked even more coarsely brutal than Johnny remembered him, and his nose, broken by Riley Blocker's fist fifteen years ago, had been set crooked and gave him a plug-ugly look. There was murder now in his bloodshot green eyes. Simon Thall was half-drunk and in an ugly mood.

"We rode here to find you two blackleg renegades," said Johnny quietly. "We came here to kill you before you could do any harm to the finest, squarest man that ever lived. Fill your hancs!"

FOUR six-shooters belched flame at almost the same split-second. The old Mexican dropped flat behind his bar and hugged the floor. The small adobe hut was filled with the roar of guns.

Then the shooting stopped as abruptly as it had started. Powder smoke hung in white layers in the yellow lamplight. After several long minutes the old Mexican got to his hands and knees and peered over the edge of his pine-board bar.

Frisco Joe and Simon Thall were both dead. Johnny lay in a crumpled heap on the floor and under his head was a widening pool of blood.

Billy's right shoulder was covered with blood and a bullet had cut his cheek. He was gripping the cedar-handled six-shooter in his left hand and he was the only one of the four who was still on his feet.

Then Billy dropped his empty gun and knelt on one knee beside Johnny. A dry sob broke in his throat and tears welled to

his blue eyes and trickled down his bleeding face.

Billy's eyes were blinded by hot tears as he sat down and lifted Johnny's blood-smearred head onto his lap. Blood trickled into Billy's mouth from his ripped cheek and he was trying to wipe the blood from Johnny's thick hair.

Grief was hitting him hard. He didn't want to live now that Johnny was dead. God had played a scurvy trick by letting Johnny get killed. If God had to take one of them, why hadn't He spared Johnny for Norah and Riley and Jane? Johnny was the one who was worth saving. The God in Heaven that Norah and Jane prayed to had killed Johnny.

Billy's grief was not a man's. It was the heartbroken grief of a small boy who made headlong mistakes and loved blindly with a small boy's fierce loyalty. Billy didn't know that he was sobbing and talking wildly as he tried with his one good hand to wipe the blood from the face of Johnny, who was closer than a brother to him.

That was the way Riley Blocker found Johnny and Billy. And it took every last shred of courage that the one-armed cowman had in his tough make-up to go into that adobe saloon and kneel there beside Billy and try to find the right words to quiet the young cowpuncher.

Then Long Jim Crowley helped Riley get Billy to his feet. They sat Billy in one of the home-made arm chairs. Then Long Jim told the old Mexican to fetch warm water. He ripped Johnny's shirt off with his jackknife and went to work. He washed the blood from Johnny's face and head and chest and his big hands were as deft and sure as those of a surgeon.

Riley made Billy drink a lot of tequila. They both watched with dulled, hopeless eyes as Long Jim worked over Johnny. All they could see was blood and spilled water on the floor; the Border Patrol rider shielded his movements, his back turned to Riley and Billy. They thought that Johnny's head was partly shot away and that Long Jim was hiding the horror of it from them. They thought that Long Jim Crowley

was getting Johnny's dead body cleaned up and ready for the journey to the Block ranch in a wagon.

The two Rangers were cutting away Billy's shirt and bandaging his bullet torn shoulder. Riley's face was gray and the old bullet scar on his cheek was putty white.

"Where's the Yaqui?"

BILLY thought that his ears were playing some ghastly trick. Riley jumped as if he had been struck with a hot iron. That was Johnny's voice.

"Where's the Yaqui? Where's Billy?"

"He's here, Johnny," they heard Long Jim Crowley saying. "You got to lay still. You're shot up some. A bullet parted your hair and near took an ear plumb off. Till I got the blood washed off I was afraid the side of your head had bin tore off. The slug through your chest went high enough to miss your lungs or you'd be spittin' blood. Now lay quiet."

Billy jerked away from the two Rangers. The color came back into Riley Blocker's gray face. They grinned down at Johnny and he grinned stiffly back at them and none of the three could speak for a long moment.

"We got 'em, Riley," Johnny said quietly. "Frisco Joe and Simon Thall. We knew we'd have to get 'em some day. Billy remembered Frisco Joe. I remembered Simon Thall. And when we were kids we got into the old tin trunk where your white-handled gun was. We found the old newspaper accounts of the killin' of Bill Rhodes and John Ferguson. And the letters the governor of Montana wrote you and Jane. We figured out why you never packed a gun. And we took a kid oath to protect you.

"We had no business pokin' into the trunk. But you know how kids are curious, Riley. We even listened once when you and Jane were talking about us. Tryin' to make up your minds to tell us about how our fathers had been enemies. How you'd had to kill 'em. We should have come to you long ago and told you that it didn't make any difference. . . . Tell Riley about the blood-brother and blood-father business,

Billy. And get that shoulder tied up. You're bleedin' all over the place, Yaqui. And your face looks shore purty."

"You don't look so handsome yourself with an ear half gone, steppherder."

Texas Riley Blocker was too bewildered to do anything but grin at the two tough young cowpunchers who refused to admit that they were suffering any pain. The heavy burden that he had carried all those years had been lifted from his weary shoulders. He wanted to tell Jane about it. Billy gave him the six-shooter with the notched cedar handle and told him to put it back in the trunk with his white bone-handled gun that he never wanted to use again.

Long Jim Crowley told Johnny and Billy that if he thought he had a Chinaman's chance he'd propose to both Norah and Dolores while their two men were bandaged up like a pair of Egyptian mummies. But from the girls' talk at the Nogales *baile* he knew he was a rank outsider and running a poor third in the race.

IT WAS a month before the Border Patrol officer acted as best man at the double wedding. The wedding was at the Block ranch. Slash M Delaney and Texas Riley Blocker gave the brides away. Jane Blocker mothered both girls and got them dressed for the wedding.

Big Kate came from Montana to attend the wedding. But she stayed only a few days. She had recovered the money Frisco Joe had stolen from her and to it Riley Blocker added more. He made her accept it for old times' sake. Big Kate was going to her old home in San Francisco to open the biggest vaudeville house and concert hall on the Pacific Coast. That was her life and she could know no other, Big Kate told them. San Francisco was her home town. She was going back.

Riley Blocker put Big Kate on the train at Tucson. A few minutes before the train left Riley broke what had become an awkward silence between them.

"I shipped Frisco Joe's body to San Francisco, Kate. Here's a letter I got from the undertaker there sayin' where he's buried."

It took Big Kate a full minute to answer. Tears misted her eyes as she took his hand in both of hers.

"He treated me bad, Riley. But he was my husband. The only man I ever cared much about. You're all white man, Riley Blocker."

"You're a good woman, Kate."

Texas Riley Blocker stood on the platform, watched the train out of sight. He watched until he could no longer see the large woman in the black dress with dyed yellow hair and diamond rings on her fingers standing on the rear platform of the last car waving a white handkerchief bordered with black silk.

Then he mounted his horse and rode along the trail that would take him to his home ranch and his wife Jane. To the peace that he had fought so hard to attain. A one-armed cowman with a scarred face and snow-white hair and mustache.

He smiled a little.

Memories rode with him in the soft Arizona twilight. A smile softened his leathery face. He was dreaming a little. There would be grandchildren. Norah's and Johnny's and Billy's. Jane would fuss over them. There would be the laughter of children in the big adobe ranch house. Life held a-plenty for a man. So Texas Riley Blocker rode home.

THE END



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COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—SEPTEMBER 28



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



WELL, you've been asking for it and here it is—a good fat space for Argonotes. Maybe we can't do it every week; but don't say we didn't *try*. And we've got some fascinating letters here that ought to see print.

So, without further ado, we turn you over to your fellow readers. And what's more appropriate than to begin with a beginner:

WILLIAM A. McCLELLAN

This being my first letter to your magazine since I began reading it last October, I don't know exactly where to begin. I guess the best place is to start congratulating you on your new cover design.

I have just bought the August third issue and I am all for this new cover. It adds new dignity to the magazine that above all deserves prestige. Why not alternate the color scheme of the background each week? (*Editor's aside: We're doing just that. Notice!*)

Now to talk about the inside of ARGOSY. First of all you must keep Theodore Roscoe working on his hypothetical moments in the lives of our Presidents. Let him use them all, including F. D. R.

Also Phil Ketchum ought to make his new series as long as possible. I would like to see more of Roy DeS. Horn's Robin the Bombardier stories and A. L. Zagat's Dikar and the Bunch novels.

And finally, give us as much C. M. Warren as you can get.

By the way, what has happened to M. R. Montgomery and his two French heroes? Would like to see them again. (*That ed. again: More of Montgomery coming up soon.*)

I think you ought to keep Argonotes no less than a page each issue. (*How we doin'!—Ed.*) I believe that all of your readers enjoy this department and would like to see it larger.

That's about all I can think of for now. In closing I can only say that you have a great magazine and I thank you for the many hours of enjoyment it has given me.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

Mr. McClellan's letter naturally leaves us brimming with satisfaction.

Next we present a reader whose criticism cuts both ways in a detailed analysis:

EDWARD C. CONNOR

I used to read all of the serials in ARGOSY, but lately a number have appeared which are definitely below par. I stumbled through two or three parts and then was overcome.

Why ARGOSY should publish such stories as "The Devil's Diary", "Death Under Water", and "Dead of Night" is beyond me. The plots of the first two are especially thin, and like a balloon are full of hot air. The last is certainly not a "great mystery".

However, not all your new writers are as bad as Dubois. On the contrary, Warren is superb. His "Bugles Are for Soldiers", was tops, regardless of such criticism as Arthur Straw's, in the July 27th issue. Why doesn't he say what's wrong with Mr. Warren's Indians?

"The Harp and the Blade" by John Myers Myers is one of the most interesting and unique historical novels I have ever read. I would like to see more by this author; also more of Montgomery's Cleve and d'Entreville and Roy DeS. Horn's Robin the Bombardier.

I am glad to see Philip Ketchum back with a new series. In my opinion, ARGOSY publishes the best historical stories to be found anywhere. The same is true of fantastics.

I want Burroughs and Cummings back in ARGOSY. How about a long novel by Zagat about Dikar? I would also like another fantastic by Jack Mann, and others by Beyer, Painton, Reed, North, and Williamson.

I hope you can give us stories by Klein, Mason and Bedford-Jones soon. (*See page 50, this issue. And more coming!—Ed.*)

One thing that I believe ARGOSY has improved in is the short stories. "If You But Wish", "The Pearls of Madame Podaire", "The Flying Eye", and "Postmarked for Paradise", by Arthur; "The Playful Powerhouse" and "Apart from Himself" by Templeton, and the Wayne McCloud stories are excellent.

PEORIA, ILL.

Now here's a dissenting opinion on "The Harp and the Blade", based on a very interesting premise:

KENNETH ANDRAE

I have a peculiar habit of waiting until I get all of the installments of a continued story before starting to read it. Therefore my remarks on "The Harp and the Blade" by John Myers Myers which started in the June twenty-second issue may be a bit late.

I like historical novels very much, but I also like to have the author stick to the language of the times about which his novel is written.

Therefore, after reading only one chapter of this story about Medieval Europe, the time being soon after Charlemagne's death, I threw up my hands in disgust.

Witness the following modern slang expressions taken from the first chapter: "Lousy"; "chivvying"; "beat up"; "kicked you all over the place"; "washed-up has-beens"; "finnick"; "Look, . . ."; "a gang of this guy's men"; "he came to these parts with a gang of a few years back"; "He can make it stick"; "I cussed a bit".

I am actually afraid to go on with the story for fear the author will ring in Tommy guns and the like.

DELAFIELD, WIS.

WELL, we see Mr. Andrae's point of view. There are undoubtedly readers who don't like their history peppered with modernisms. And other readers who do. With writers like Philip Ketchum, we more than strike a balance.

Here's more of the other side of the picture, from:

N. C. DREW

That novel, "The Harp and the Blade", is so good I'm sorry it will end next time. I don't

read many long things. . . . Hooray for ARGOSY. SAYBROOK, CONN.

And yet again, a word of warm commendation for Mr. Myers from:

WILLIAM SHARPE

I have been wondering why you have called your magazine ARGOSY for a long time. Surely, there was nothing in it to represent a boat of any make or kind. But now, as you have a new frontpiece, and a very good one, I see where it not only gets its name, but also my praise.

I have been reading the ARGOSY for a long time, and as I am only seventeen, spend many delightful hours reading it. I can truthfully say that your magazine is on my top list for fictional reading.

As many other persons have said, where are your old writers? How about bringing back Bedford-Jones, Mr. Bruce, and last but by no means least, Mr. Burroughs. Have another story by Mr. Myers Myers, and make it soon. His last one was a honey.

ELTINGVILLE, S. I.

Finally, we are happy to welcome the ladies to our kind words department, with this letter from:

JUNE BLAKELY

For a long while I've been reading the ARGOSY, and I think it's about time I told you how much I like it.

It's nice to have something to read that's so good.

In this number I specially like that story "Two for One", by Mr. Kjelgaard, and "Meet Mrs. Wildcat", by Mr. Curry. There's lots of interest in both of them—and in Mr. Surdez' novel too.

I'll enjoy seeing your new cover.

RICHMOND, VA.

TO OUR READERS

Present conditions in the paper market have made it expedient for the publishers of this magazine to reduce the number of its pages. However, by using a slightly smaller type, not one word of the fiction contents of the book has been sacrificed. In many issues we have found the wordage to be *higher* than formerly.

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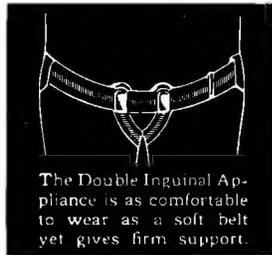
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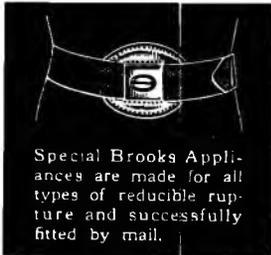
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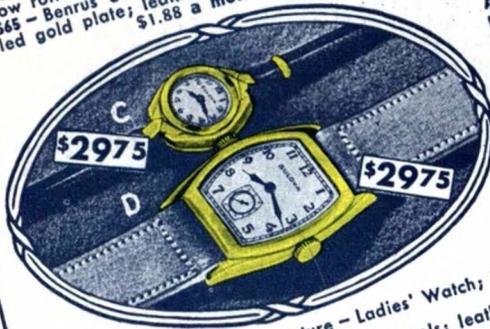
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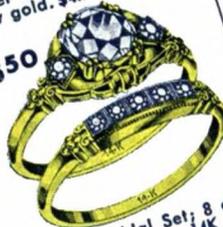
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