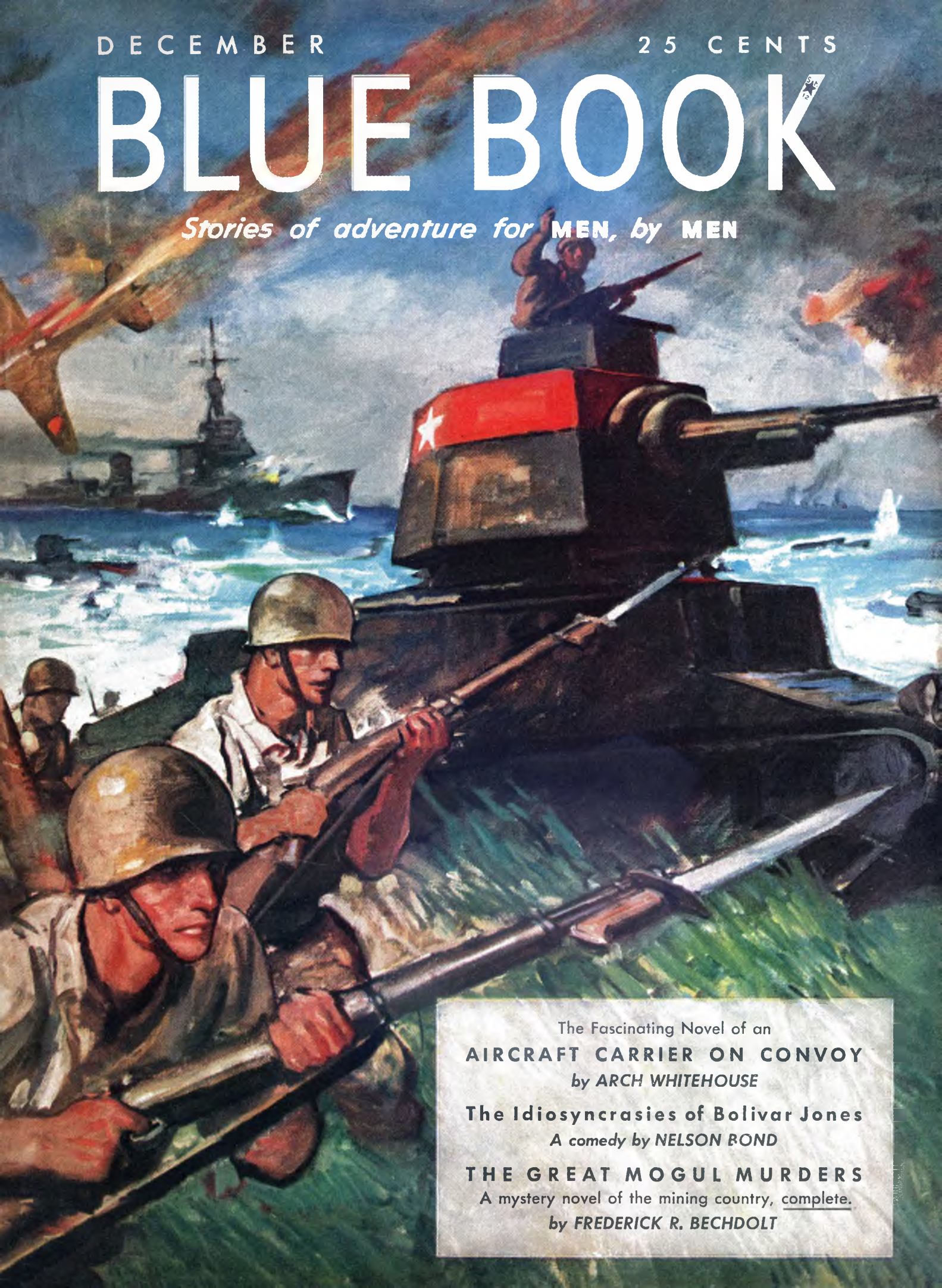
DECEMBER 25 CENTS

BLUE BOOK

Stories of adventure for **MEN**, *by* **MEN**



The Fascinating Novel of an

AIRCRAFT CARRIER ON CONVOY

by ARCH WHITEHOUSE

The Idiosyncrasies of Bolivar Jones

A comedy by NELSON BOND

THE GREAT MOGUL MURDERS

A mystery novel of the mining country, complete.

by FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

WHO'S WHO in this ISSUE

Will James

WHEN Will James was thirteen, the Canadian trapper who had been his foster-father failed to come back from his trap-line—probably drowned; after that time Will was strictly on his own. And he made for himself a career that was strictly his own. After his years as cowboy and rodeo rider, he taught himself to draw and to write in his own individual and inimitable fashion. "Cowboys, North and South," was received with enthusiasm. Then came "The Drifting Cowboy" and "Smoky." Readers of BLUE BOOK will specially remember "Big Enough," which we serialized in 1932, and the twelve drawings of "The Cowboy's Calendar." His last story "A King in Rags," begins on page 91. He died early in September.

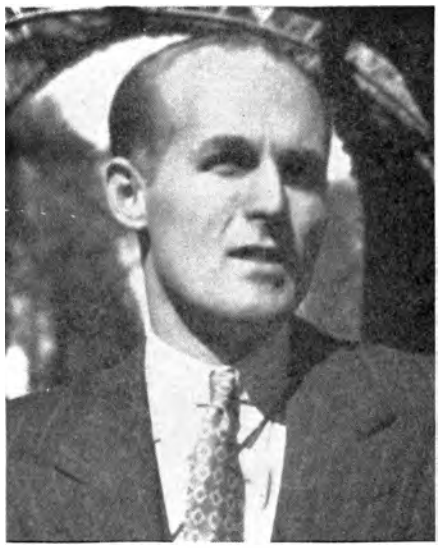
Apeda, N. Y.

Will James

Harold Titus

BORN in Traverse City, Michigan, in 1888. After three years at the University of Michigan he became a newspaper man until his health went back on him. Thereupon he retired once more to Traverse City, where he spent the summers. In the winter he went mining, cattle-punching and writing stories for the magazines about those things which he was actually doing. Then he turned his attention to what he calls "his front and back yards," *i.e.,* Lake Michigan and the Michigan forests.

Mr. Titus confesses to two great luxuries—one wife and two children. His major vice is fly-fishing and for recreation he dallies with fruit culture, reforestation and the works of Conrad. He is a member of the Michigan State Conservation Commission.



Frank Bonham

Frank Bonham

FROM his training camp, Frank Bonham writes: "I began experimenting with fiction to kill time while spending a winter alone in the mountains. It kept me from talking to myself during snowbound months, and led me into the most fascinating job in the world. I was twenty-one then, and have had seven years of writing since.

"It seems as though writing about adventures has kept me too busy to go out and have any. But my wife and I have managed to see a lot of places and meet a lot of people, in between stories. Usually we seem to wind up in Mexico or on a cattle ranch somewhere.

"But there will be no more trips for a while, except perhaps in a troopship. I may be getting some of that story material before long in some distant corner of the globe where Uncle Sam sends me."

William Richard Bird

BORN on crest of Cobequid hills of Nova Scotia at Mapleton. Educated at Amherst Academy. Homesteaded in Alberta, Canada. Enlisted in first World War and served two years and two months in the trenches as scout with famous Canadian Black Watch. Began writing in 1922 for Sunday editions Canadian newspaper. Have had over four hundred short stories published in Canadian, American, British and Australian magazines. Hobby is collecting military badges of all types and countries. Married. Two children. Son a lieutenant in a Canadian Highland battalion. Daughter attending Dalhousie University. Live in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Bob Dorman, N. E. A.

Harold Titus

Robt. Norwood, Halifax

Will Bird

READERS' FORUM

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE ARAB

I have just finished reading the September issue and note the suggestions made by two members of the opposite sex in the "Readers' Forum," with reference to illustrations and women authors.

Women's invasion of our magazine recalls the story of the camel begging permission of the Arab to be allowed to at least keep his head warm. You know what happened to the Arab.

I realize that it is next to impossible to keep the ladies from reading BLUE BOOK *as I usually have to wait until my wife finishes it before I can get at it; but—you can keep it as is, at least "Stories of Adventure by Men."*

Those two letters are the handwriting on the wall—if you start printing the tripe dished out by women writers with a few touches on the latest in female apparel—well, I guess I'd better get me a subscription to the Ladies' Home Journal.

Here's hoping that you will maintain the present high standard.

John J. Durham,
Kensington, Md.

(Continued on Inside Back Cover)

Statement of the Ownership, Management, Circulation, Etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933,

of THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE published monthly at Dayton, Ohio, for October 1, 1942.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.

Before me, a Notary In and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared Louis F. Boller, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Assistant Treasurer of McCall Corporation, Publisher of The Blue Book Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:
Publisher: McCall Corporation, 230 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Editor: Donald Kennicott, 230 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor: None; Business Managers: None.

2. That the owner is: McCall Corporation, Wilmington, Delaware. The following are the names and addresses of stockholders holding 1 per cent or more of the capital stock of McCall Corporation:
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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

Louis F. Boller, Assistant Treasurer.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 10th day of September, 1942. Victor J. Lore, Notary Public, Kings County. Kings County Clerk's No. 122, Reg. No. 4123. Certificates filed in N. Y. Co. Clks. No. 232, Reg. No. 4L128. Commission expires March 30, 1944.

BLUE BOOK

December, 1942 **MAGAZINE** **Vol. 76, No. 2**

A Complete Book-Length Novel

Two Serial Novels

Nine Short Stories

Special Features

Prize Stories of Real Experience

Except for stories of Real Experiences, all stories and novels printed herein are fiction and are intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or to actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.

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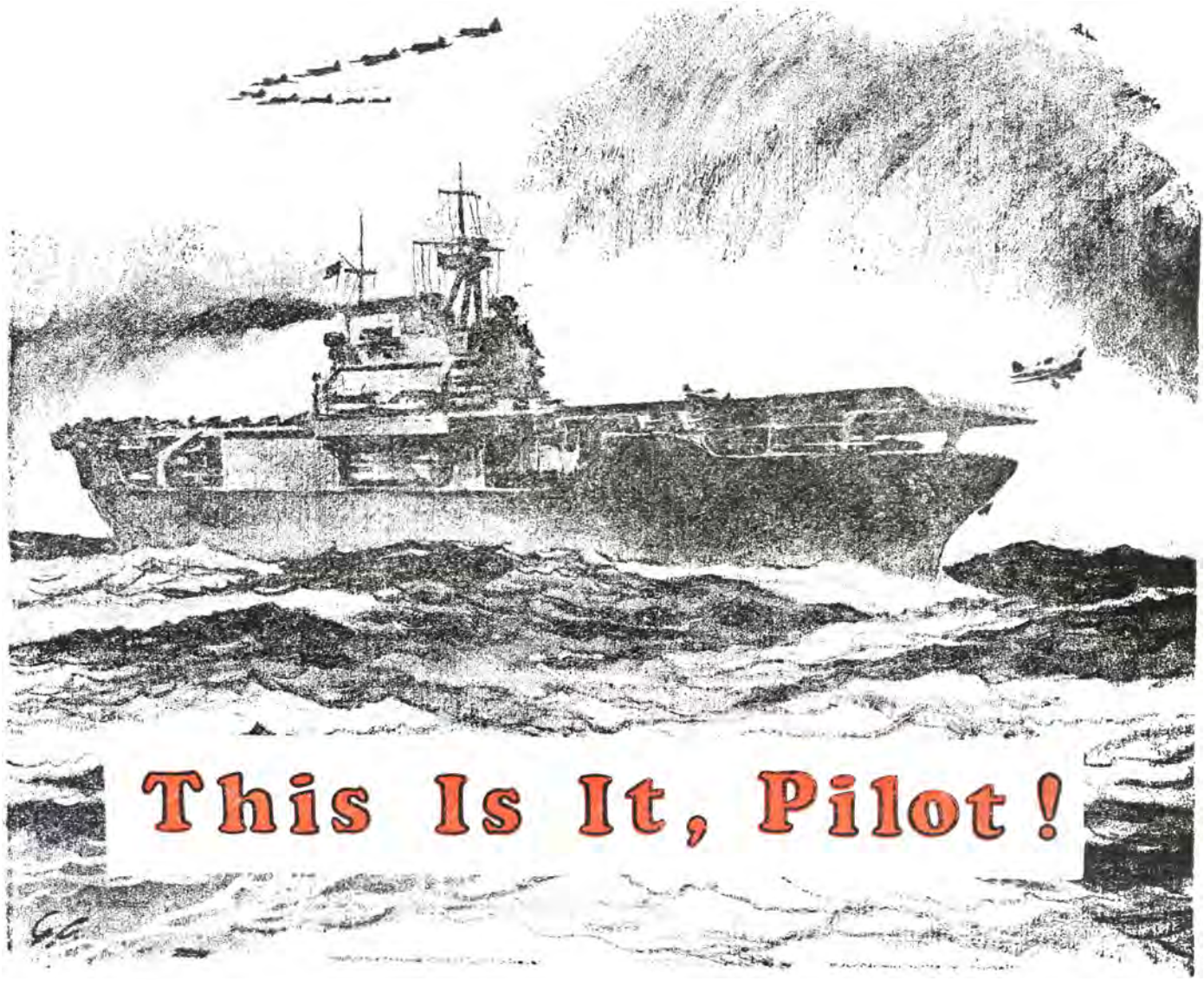


This Is It, Pilot!

A BLUE battle-light gleamed over the bulkhead, brushing a leaden tone over everything metal in the compartment. Outside the hiss of a racing prow slicing the waves maintained a sizzling taunt of derision. The prow of the aircraft carrier was rising and falling like a massive wedge that would slip beneath the horizon line and lift the canopy of heaven by brute force.

The compartment was square with little to offer in the way of comfort. The walls were painted a dull white above the waistlines of the figures standing in a half circle. Sturdy rasp-edged I-beams parted the ceiling into panels in which rivet heads appeared —like mushrooms through an untimely snowfall.

Three or four figures sat on the edge of a heavy maintenance table and watched with professional interest the dexterous movements of the man who sat before them.

A gallery sweeping down to the glare of an operating-table might have displayed the same segment of expression; a pennon of awe, admiration, emotional fear and disbelief while a master hand wielded a scalpel, tied tendons or stitched in spaced sutures.

The figure of interest sat behind a metal tripod and fingered the important parts of a beautiful piece of oil-shiny mechanism. He was blindfolded so that the hollows of his temples formed small pockets inside the bindings of the handkerchief. His broad forehead was only slightly marked by the tracery of concentration. An oriflamme of reddish-gold hair had escaped the discipline of a pair of military brushes and seemed cascading over the ironed-in circle left by the pressure of a Navy hat.

"To strip back plate," the blindfolded figure was saying, as if by rote, "remove latch pin, cotter pin and back plate latch pin. The back plate latch spring plunger. Unscrew adjusting screws and remove buffer discs, friction pieces and plunger."

While he spoke, his spatulate fingers carried out the movements dexterously. He spoke quietly, selecting his words carefully, and placed the stripped parts of the Browning gun on a small table on either side of him. A Marine Captain watched, consulted his wrist-watch at intervals and raised his eyebrows to signify his incredulity.

There was a soft New England inflection to the masked performer's *a's* and a studied indifference for the pronunciation of his *r's*. "Next, the bolt. . . . Remove the driving spring assembly. The extractor is removed by turning it to a vertical position and pulling it out."

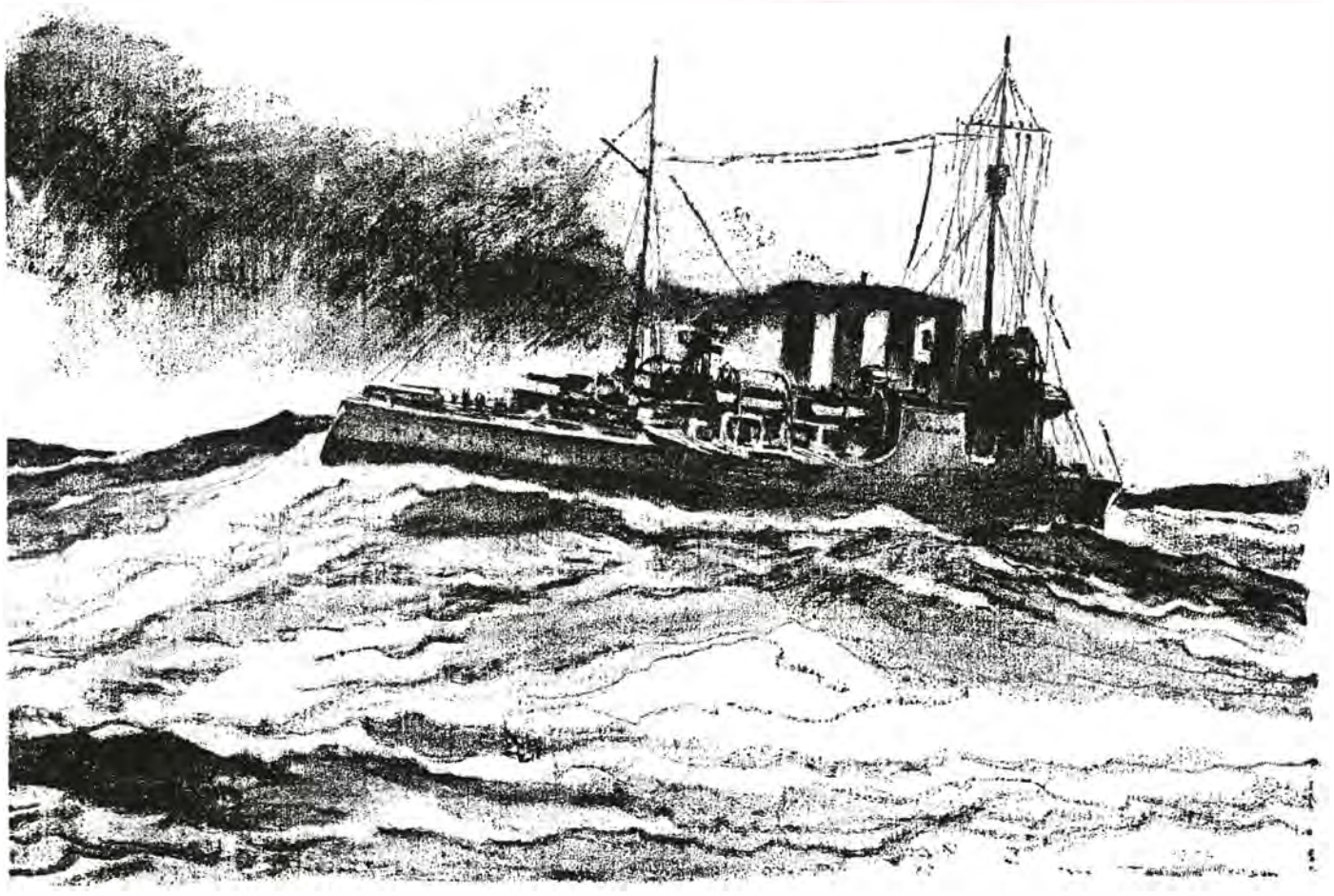
Below the bandage an almost too-perfect mouth attempted to take some of the masculinity from the face, but a strong squarish jaw that centered from a dimpled and slightly cleft chin stacked a keystone that left no question as to its singleness of purpose.

"Now the extractor," Ensign Edward Prebley went on.

There was a *scrawnch* of a bulkhead latch wheel and the blindfolded man sensed the impulse of amperage that snapped around the room. He heard the others of the Armament check-up group slip from the table and the *klok* of heels that marked the

A novel about the men who take warplanes aloft off the flight-deck to meet the enemy in battle to the death.

by Arch Whitehouse



respect being paid to inspecting Gold Braid

"At ease, gentlemen. Carry on!" a voice said. It was unquestionably the voice of authority, but to Eddie Prebley it carried a deeper impression. It was a sturdy voice that as yet had not been rasped into bridge bellicosity or the throaty tonelessness of the quarterdeck. It was the voice of a gentleman who could command and who knew how to conduct a war with dignity. It rang a gong in Eddie Prebley's chest and made him rise to his feet, straddling the long leg of the gun tripod.

"Carry on!" the voice ordered again and the maintenance table grumbled as the rest planted their haunches on its splintered edge.

Eddie Prebley sat down again and continued. "Remove ejector pin with the point of a drift," he went on, making certain that the ejector spring did not fly out while the ejector pin was being removed.

Commander Edward Ranford, Air Officer of the U.S.S. *Bennington,* stood practically at attention as he watched and listened. Eddie Prebley could almost feel the intense study of the unseen man's eyes on the backs of his hands as he dismantled the extractor. He carried on automatically, wondering who the man was who injected such a tumult of anxiety through his frame. Several new Line officers had joined the vessel out of Falmouth the night before. They had darkened ship two days ago out of Newport News, where Fighting Squadron 92 and Torpedo Squadron 212 had joined the newly commissioned *Bennington.*

There had been no formal presentation of the ship's company on the quarterdeck, and Prebley had not as yet officially met many of the executive officers. This was like a check-out flight at Pensacola when you wondered whether you'd made it or not. This was worse, in fact, sitting here going through a blindfold routine of stripping a gun.

"Okay, Mr. Prebley," the Marine Captain said suddenly. "You're well under time. Good effort. Take over, Du Laigne!"

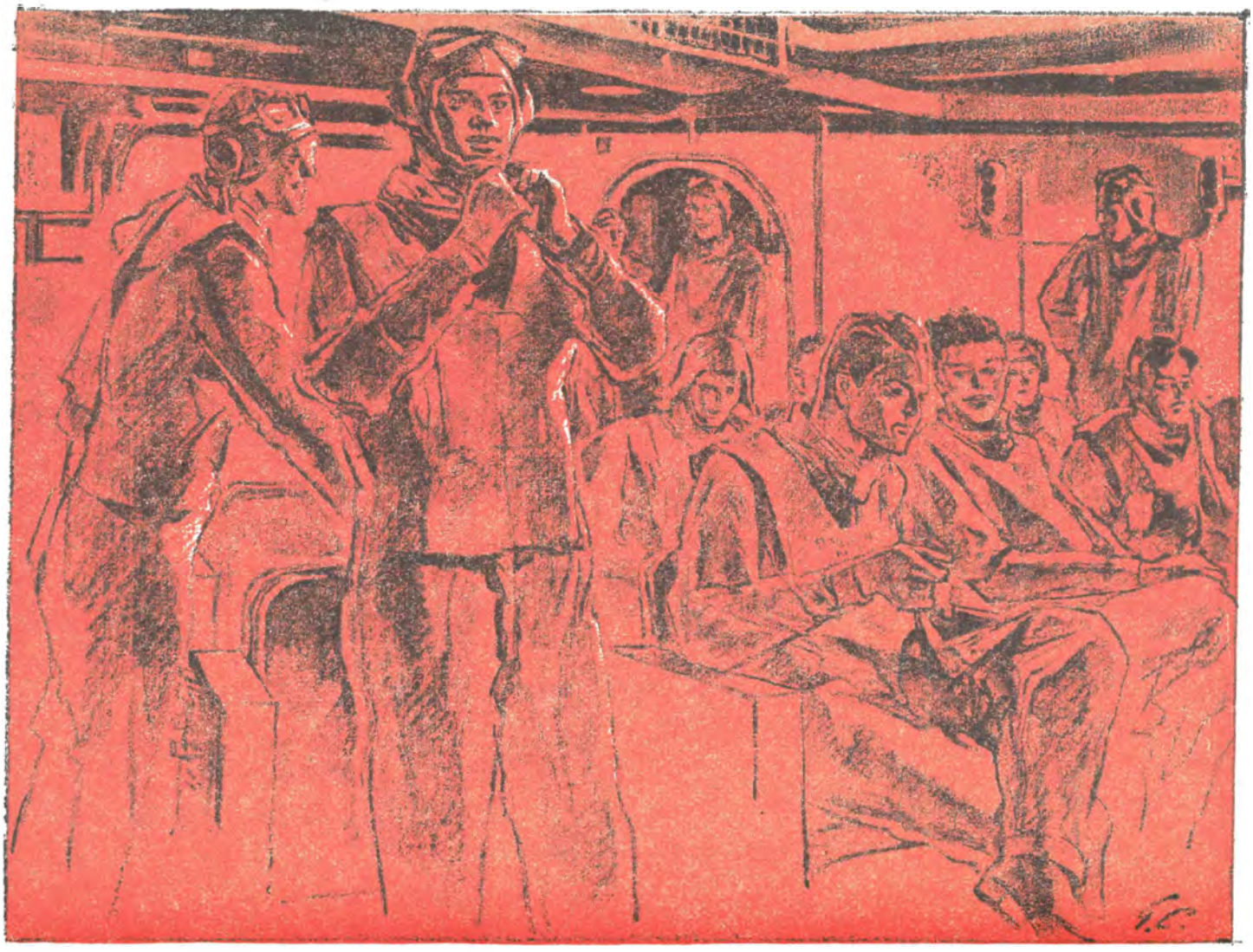
Prebley stood up and thumbed the handkerchief from his eyes and handed it to a C.P.O. aviation pilot who wore a suit of dirty whites. He stepped back, blinked against the light and the C.P.O. pilot stood over the metal saddle seat while the Marine adjusted the blindfold.

Prebley wanted to back away and perch on the maintenance table with Tod Moresby, but he couldn't resist the attraction of the man who had entered a few minutes before. He stared at him openly.

"One side, Mr. Prebley," the Marine Captain snapped.

Something tightened a band around Ensign Prebley's forehead, but he stepped to one side, keeping his eyes on Commander Ranford. He saw a man of medium height, sleek and polished. He had a good chest that carried his wings and ribbons well and he was devoid of the usual belly bulge of authority.

Commander Ranford was not molded on the accepted order. He might have been a business executive hurriedly shoved into a trim Navy uniform. Only his sleeve braid and the double row of ribbons on his chest—



"Tod, I'm on the wrong ship."

ribbon that indicated more than the fact that his name had been on a vessel's roster during an almost forgotten engagement—gave evidence of actual service.

"Firing pin and lock frame," Du Laigne began, fumbling awkwardly with the parts of the gun.

"Baby, you sure gave the Big Guy a show," Tod Moresby whispered over Prebley's shoulder. "You had him goggle-eyed."

Prebley did not answer or turn around. He was transfixed by the eyes of the man who held an operation command. Outside, the bull horn was bellowing an order from the battlements of the carrier's island and a squadron of aircraft answered the summons by spluttering their motors.

A boatswain's pipe screeched tunelessly over the loud-speaker system and another group of the flying personnel was ordered to be ready for a later patrol.

Through all this two men stared at one another. Commander Ranford no longer showed interest in the stripping proceedings. He was too taken up by the features of the man who had just removed his blindfold. He studied the well-set eyes carefully placed beside a nose that was a trifle off center. The lower lids were curved with a flourish and there was a distinct flair to the eyebrows which imitated the sweep of a pair of albatross wings. The eyes themselves were Quaker gray.

Prebley's belt felt loose and he hitched it a notch. He reached for a wad of waste to daub the oil from his fingers, but he still submitted to the penetrating inspection of the man who wore the rings of gold braid on his sleeve. Du Laigne was reciting his piece and stripping the lock frame.

COMMANDER RANFORD muttered something to the Marine Captain and turned to leave. Prebley was still unable to take his eyes off the man and hard offered an acknowledgment when the Captain said, "The Air Officer wishes to see you in his quarters in half an hour."

"Yes sir." he answered finally as the gold braid was heading through the bulkhead.

"Well, that was the new A.O., boys," the Marine Captain said, mopping his forehead with a gaudy handkerchief. "Lord! What a figure! There'll be no slacking aboard this lugger, you can bet your socks."

"What's his name?" young Prebley inquired. His voice was without cadence and his eyes were still immobile and fixed on the bulkhead door.

"Ranford—Edward Anthony Ranford," the Marine answered, poking Du Laigne in the ribs. "That's all, Du Laigne. "Your turn next, Mifflin."

"Do you know the guy?" Tod Moresby inquired. "Glory! The way he stared at you! And he wants to see you? Here goes a damn' good pilot, I suppose."

"I don't get it," the Marine Captain broke in.

"Aw, you know the old stuff. The A.O. sees a guy with a pair of hands and I suppose he wants to grab him for a specialist's job. Jees! The way he was staring at your hands when you were jerking the extractor apart, Eddie," growled Moresby.

"Ranford! Edward Anthony Ranford," was all Prebley could muster for a minute. "That's strange."

"You better buzz off and muck up if you're for the A.O.'s quarters in half an hour," the Marine Captain suggested.

Du Laigne caught up with Prebley a few yards along the companionway where Eddie was struggling with the wheel latch of a bulkhead. "I got excused too," he grinned, feeling in his blouse pocket for a butt. "You sure created an impression on the A.O., sir. You'd almost think he knew you."

"No. Never met him before in my life," Prebley answered. "He's probably nailing me down for some regulation. That is—I don't remember ever meeting him before."

DU LAIGNE studied him as they went along the hangar deck, making their way through the organized chaos of wings, propellers and portable repair benches. Shadowy figures in drab coveralls .... refracted light spattering from steely metal surfaces. The clank of great chains and the wheeze of hydraulic buffers. This was the platform of proficiency where aircraft were stored, serviced and repaired.

The C.P.O. pilot was a slim lad with a small bronzed face. He had clean-cut features and an expression of keen interrogation whenever he set his eyes on any particular object. His shoulders sloped and his flanks were as slim and as hard as those of a panther. Two hitches in the Navy had made a typical sailor of him even though he had worked his way up the hard way for his pilot's rating.

"Well, I gotta get after my serfs and see that they've checked a sloppy undercarriage leg. Be seein' you, sir!"

Prebley flipped a nondescript farewell gesture, continued on through the maze of machines and made his way down two lengths of metal ladders to the Officers' Quarters deck and entered the stateroom which he shared with Moresby.

He glanced in the mirror, felt his chin for a few unclipped spears of stubble, brushed his teeth and knotted a black tie under his khaki shirt-collar.

It was the time for summer dress and he put on a chino jacket, buttoned it carefully and made certain he was strictly regulation. The small clock above his table disclosed that he had fourteen minutes before appearing before the Air Officer.

He sat down, threw a knee over the arm of their easy-chair and tried to figure it out.

"Wouldn't it be strange?" he mused, drawing a cigarette from a pack and replacing it again. "I wish I could remember his full name."

Somewhere a bugle blared a set of officious notes through the loud-speaker system and the raucous tones clanged along the passageways like squads of invisible yeomen bearing boarding-gear. In response a group of youngsters burdened with helmets, life-jackets and flying-gear clumped along the passageway, clambered over water-tight door frames and jangled up the ladders for the flight deck.

That would be the mid-morning patrol going out to relieve a formation that had taken off three hours before. They would fan out for the northeast and scour the leaden seas for undersea marauders lurking to prevent the *Bennington* from joining her convoy, already started for Murmansk.

Prebley looked about automatically for a telephone. He smiled and closed his eyes, wishing he could call his mother. She would know—and remember. She would know what *that* Ranford's full name was. Still, if the A. O. wanted to speak to him, it was obvious that he wanted to check up on him—in private.

The clock on the desk gave him four minutes to get aloft again and make his way up the ladder into the technical glory of the island superstructure. He passed from the hangar deck and tripped lightly up the ladder-way to the platform that led out to the flight deck. Another ladderway and he was on the U-shaped bridge where a signalman and the Deck Officer stood watch under a puny awning. There were several members of the plane-director crews there too. The Navigation Officer called down from the upper director bridge and jerked his thumb aft.

"In the Line quarters, Mr. Prebley! You're expected at once."

Eddie saluted and worked his way through the passageway between the streamlined stack and the bridge structure, received a nod from a Marine guard who opened the door adroitly and stood aside.

"Ensign Prebley reporting, sir," he said standing stiffly after his salute.

The Commander turned from a sheaf of papers stacked on a chart table. His writer rose from the desk where he had been pecking at a portable typewriter.

"All right, Swayle," Ranford directed the man. "Take these back to the office. I want to be snug here for a quarter of an hour or so."

There was directness in Ranford's order and the writer leaped with alacrity. He took the folder from the Commander, and glanced uncertainly over his shoulder at Prebley.

Swayle was a typical clerk. He had a fine skin, with blue vein tracings over his temples. His hair was short and crisp and against the pale complexion seemed to have been carefully glued on by an expert wigmaker. He had small round eyes that moved slowly in their deep-set sockets. Prebley immediately put him down as a clever operator who had been planted in this important post by someone in the Air Intelligence department.

The Commander's writer mumbled something when he took the folder and moved out with deliberate strides.

Commander Ranford ignored Prebley for fully a minute after the clerk left. He was obviously setting the stage for his own entrance. Eddie watched, fascinated by the man's eyes.

Suddenly Ranford spun on his heel and said, "You have quite a name, haven't you, Prebley?"

"You—you mean, sir, my being named after old Commodore Edward Prebley?"

"Oh, I'm not amazed that you know about old Prebley." The Commander snapped back and dropped into a swivel-chair. "After all, books are free in the United States."

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Ranford had several openings left and he was selecting his ammunition. "Strange, you should be assigned under my command, isn't it, Prebley?"

"I don't understand, sir."

"Mr. Prebley," the Commander went on, taking a beautiful briar pipe from a velvet-lined case and packing it carefully with tobacco from a leather bound canister on his desk. "I'll respect your name for the time being, but I want it thoroughly understood that I intend to carry out my part of this mission, pick up my convoy and see that these vessels get to Murmansk. Is that clear?"

"I'm sure you will, sir!" Prebley replied, wondering what this tack meant.

Ranford applied a match to his pipe and pierced Prebley with his dove-gray eyes through the smoke. It was like being shot at from ambush. Eddie took it and asked: "Is anything wrong, sir?"

"Not yet. I'm just curious as to how she worked it. After all, it wasn't general news that I was back in the service. As to my being given air operations command of the *Bennington* —that hasn't appeared in Navy orders as yet."

PREBLEY could think of nothing to say in answer to this. He was certain now, however, that this was the Commander Ranford he had thought of the instant the Marine Captain had mentioned the name.

Ranford got up and began striding the floor. "Your name isn't Edward Prebley, is it?" he said suddenly.

"Sir?"

"Prebley is your mother's name, isn't it?"

"Yes sir!"

"Then we know how we stand, don't we?" Commander Ranford went on accusingly. "Do you mean to tell me that out of all the vessels in the United States Navy, it was a coincidence that you were assigned to the *Bennington?* There are several thousand Navy pilots: but you, who use the name of Edward Prebley, somehow managed to get aboard this flattop during a mission that may make or break me."

"I am a commissioned officer in the United States Navy, sir." Prebley fought back. "I have no choice of berth."

"You use the name Prebley, but you've never seen the inside of the Naval Academy. You came in the back door. Jacksonville, Pensacola, Corpus Christi—what does it matter? You came direct from civilian life. You call yourself Edward Prebley. God, the old devil must be piping his eye in his tomb!"

"I had no choice of berth, sir," Eddie Prebley repeated. "There was no—influence—to get a Naval Academy appointment."

"So now you slur the government which you profess to defend," stormed Ranford. "Where is your mother now, sir?" the Commander digressed with injured dignity.

"She is where you left her—in Portsmouth; and still living in the same house," Prebley said, with a catch in his throat.

There was a silence that had grappling-iron hooks in it. Ranford was pivoting, but he stopped halfway.

"Portsmouth?" he said sibilantly. "Then you—you know. Then she did have you assigned here. You know then who you really are. You're not Edward Prebley, are you?"

"You just had my papers, sir," Prebley challenged. "If you had read them through, you would have seen that Mother is my— Well, I assign an allowance from my pay to her."

"Why doesn't she leave me alone?" Ranford stormed. "Hasn't she hounded me long enough? I've paid my tot."

"I'm sorry, sir. Mother had nothing to do with my being assigned to the *Bennington*. In fact, she does not know where I am stationed."

"God!" muttered Ranford. Then: "We're taking this convoy through, Mr. Prebley. We're being sacrificed, perhaps. We have about as much chance of getting all the way through with them, as we might have steaming up the Kiel Canal. Would you call it coincidence, sir, that I was posted here—and find you, who call yourself Edward Prebley, aboard? Is it coincidence that I, who once commanded a destroyer flotilla, should be wiped off through the machinations of a lot of barnacled sea-lawyers, who are ruled by a petticoat parliament ashore?"

He stopped and smiled, and Eddie Prebley saw a new Ranford.

"Now I'm slurring the Government, aren't I?" Ranford said.

"Commander Ranford, sir!" Ensign Prebley responded. "I know nothing of the differences between you and my mother. She's a brave and noble woman, sir; I am proud to bear her name. I'm assigned to the *Bennington*, and I shall not betray my trust."

"You've already betrayed one trust. Your name, sir, is Edward Anthony Ranford—not Prebley."

"Yes sir. Now I have two great names to live up to. Mother kept her own name after you left. The rest was routine, I suppose. These are personal matters." Eddie was boiling with rage, but he held his fire beautifully.

"Everything said here this morning is a personal matter, Mr. Prebley," the Air Officer said, "but one thing is for ship's company information: We're taking the *Bennington* through to pick up our convoy, and we're keeping the *Bennington* afloat all the way to Murmansk. Is that clear, sir?"

"Yes sir!"

"That's all, Mr. Prebley."

Chapter Two

THE Marine guard stood aside as Prebley went out. He had a blank expression on his heavy-featured face, which might have been concentration of thought or a pose assumed while maintaining his vigil at the threshold of the Air Officer's office.

As Eddie rounded the sheltered companionway forward of the streamlined stack, the bull horn began booming again. Overhead the returning squadron circled, dim indistinct midges against the dappled glare of a cloud-specked sky. The Flight Deck Officer crossed the deck with his control semaphores under his arm and the strap of a light flying-helmet flapping gently under one heavy-lobed ear. Asbestos Joe in his fireproof teddy-bear suit stood near the blast screen polishing the oblong plate glass window of his helmet. His assistant was experimentally opening and closing the handles of a massive pair of metal cutters with evident anticipation. The arrester gear crews in their green jerseys were taking up their posts along the line of cable snubbers, and the plane handlers—men with the muscular agility of flyweight boxers—were lolling in groups along the safety catwalks.

"What are they, the V.S.B.'s?" asked Prebley, for the sake of talking to forget what he had just undergone."

"Yeh! Scout-bombers," a familiar voice at his elbow along the rail answered. It was Du Laigne, the C.P.O. pilot of his own torpedo-bomber squadron. Prebley glanced at him and wondered what he was doing up here on the signal bridge. Before Eddie could question him, Du Laigne turned and passed a greeting to Swayle, the Captain's writer, who had just come up the companionway from the flight deck.

A deep bellow of the ship's whistle warned that they were turning into the wind and the Talker on the bridge began his brass-throated litany. The crash barrier was raised and the Flight Deck Officer stood out from the aft ramp on the port side and began to flutter his paddles with a playful batball gesture.

Eddie Prebley had already logged fourteen carrier landings without a hitch, but the fascination of a wheeled land plane hitting an undulating deck still held him and he dismissed the unpleasantness in the Air Officer's cabin by remaining on the control bridge to watch the scout-bombers come in.

The escorting destroyers waved plumes of steam from their saucy stacks, answered the command and swung over to take up their assigned landing formations. The leader of the scout-bomber formation dropped out from the circling covey of low-wing monoplanes above, curled around, passed on astern and banked sharply.

"Jackson really puts on a swell show coming in, doesn't he?" Prebley said quietly. There was no answer and he turned and noticed that Du Laigne had left the bridge.

Lieutenant Jackson brought the Vought-Sikorsky around with a deft touch while the Flight Deck Officer stood with his arms and semaphores extended. He began to gyrate them gently, but Jackson had everything under control and the S.O. simply stood there, lowered his paddles slowly and flipped them with an air of, "Great, Jackson! You don't need me out here!"

The scout-bomber seemed to glide up over the depressed stern ramp of the flight deck, hold her breath in her steel nostrils and then drop gently to the deck, her wheels and hook dabbing in at the same time. The hook engaged the second cross cable. There was a twang of snubbed metal. The scout-bomber snatched the cable to a taut Victory-V and came to an abrupt stop.

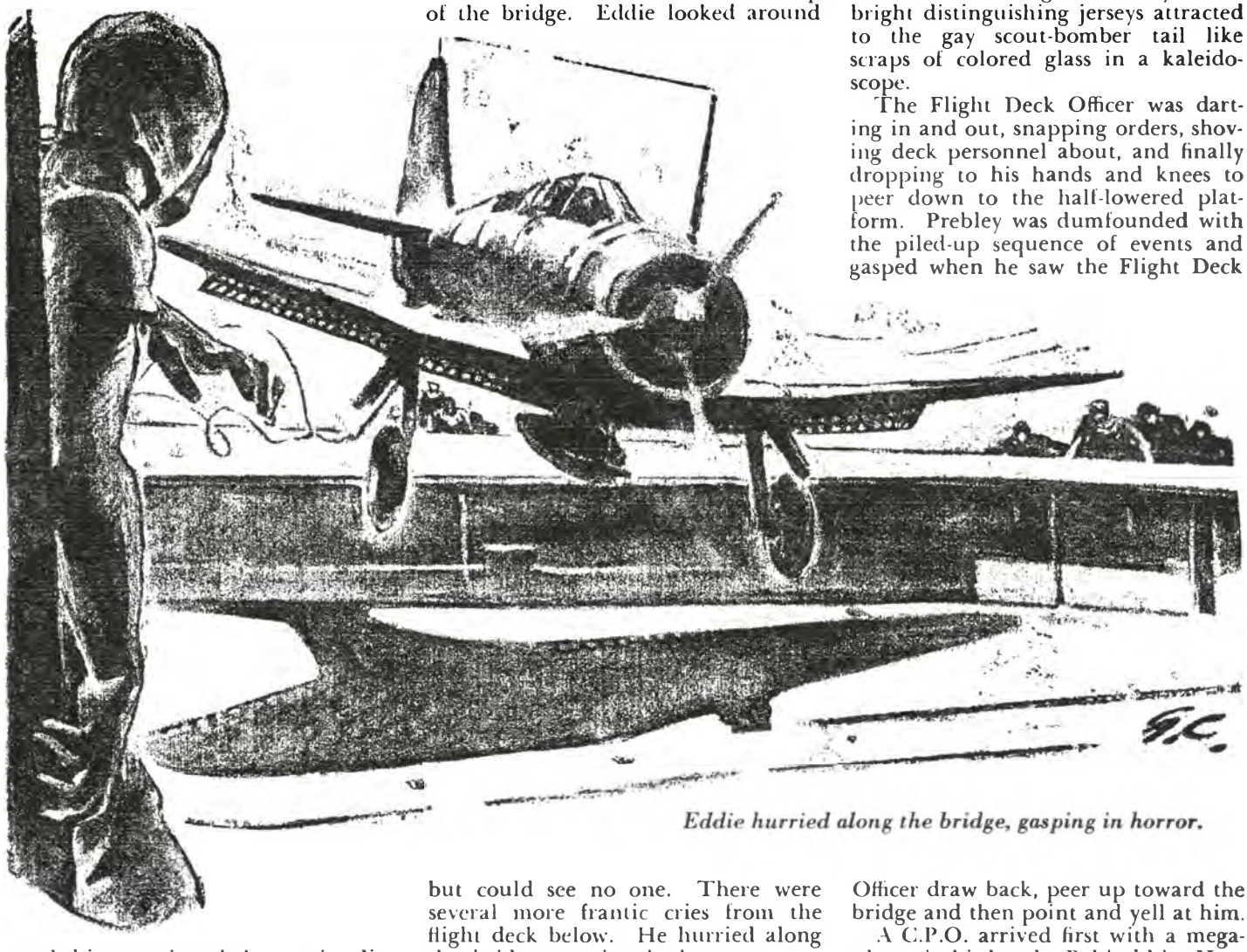
Plane-handlers in gaudy blue jerseys darted out of their safety nooks and grabbed the wings. The arrester gear crew released the hook and the cable snapped back into position. The crash barrier was lowered so that the machine could be run to the forward aircraft elevator and lowered to the hangar deck.

"That guy sure has it down," agreed Prebley, glancing up and watching the rest of the formation break up and then reform into a single-file maneuver and circle the carrier until their turn came to land.

He watched the machine-like precision of movement below him and wondered if he would ever have to assume the duty of Flight Deck Officer. The plane handlers came back and took up their stations along the line of the catwalk. The speaker clacked again and a battery of bridge binocu-

lars was turned upward once more as the second scout-bomber swept down, corkscrewed into position and banked boisterously for the approach.

"Just the opposite," mused Prebley, wondering who was following Lieutenant Jackson in. "A grandstander, this guy. You'd think he'd watch his step since he's carrying live stuff in his bomb-rack."



Eddie hurried along the bridge, gasping in horror.

It was evident that the second pilot was attempting to emulate the smooth set-down his leader had pulled off. Eddie Prebley saw the incoming plane dip dangerously below the waving ramp of the approach lip. The Flight Deck Officer darted out, jerking his semaphore paddles in descriptive upward sweeps. The Talker began to gargle words and a metal signal panel on the stack clanked and spat off a signal. The plane handlers crouched along the catwalks and it was hard to figure whether they planned to clamber up or flatten out below the buttress of the safety wall.

"Here's one for Joe," someone below yelled. "Come on, Joe!"

The speaker stopped suddenly as Prebley gripped the rail of the bridge and waited for the disaster. He saw the Vought-Sikorsky clamber into a soggy climb and come over the edge of the ramp with but inches to spare. She held it and seemed to be setting herself for a stall and Prebley breathed again, accepting the fact that the best he could get out of it would be a buckled landing-gear.

"Mr. Prebley! Hey, Mr. Prebley!" a voice called from the forward sweep of the bridge. Eddie looked around but could see no one. There were several more frantic cries from the flight deck below. He hurried along the bridge, gasping in horror.

The amidships aircraft elevator was being lowered!

Prebley started to hurry to the forward curve of the bridge and then suddenly went sprawling over something that lay across the narrow beam of the bridge. There was a grinding crash somewhere on the flight deck below and Prebley sensed that the incoming scout-bomber had bounced over the outstretched cables and had stumbled headlong into the yawning oblong hole left in the deck when the elevator was lowered.

HE sat there, his eyes half-closed, waiting for the expected explosion. Nothing happened.

He got to his knees and pulled himself up. He saw that he had flopped over the inert figure of the bridge Talker—a burly Navy boatswain. A trickle of blood was forming a broad exclamation mark on the narrow deck and the man's head and handset lay in its widening course.

Instinct made Prebley grab at the instruments and he stood there peering over the bridge with them in his hands, anxious to ascertain just what had happened below. He saw the deck crew moving cautiously, their bright distinguishing jerseys attracted to the gay scout-bomber tail like scraps of colored glass in a kaleidoscope.

The Flight Deck Officer was darting in and out, snapping orders, shoving deck personnel about, and finally dropping to his hands and knees to peer down to the half-lowered platform. Prebley was dumfounded with the piled-up sequence of events and gasped when he saw the Flight Deck Officer draw back, peer up toward the bridge and then point and yell at him.

A C.P.O. arrived first with a megaphone in his hand. Behind him Henderson, the Navigation Officer, and behind him Bloxham, the Executive Officer. They were swept in closer by a small mob of seamen and Marines.

"What the hell?" the Exec' began.

"Did you order that elevator lowered—er, Mr. Prebley?"

"The bo'sun has been slugged," a young Marine gagged from a kneeling position beside the prostrate bridge Talker. "Gosh, what a sock!"

Prebley looked down again and for the first time sensed what had happened. He pawed about with the Talker's telephone instruments and then stared at the battery of control buttons that gleamed in reds and greens on a metal control-box set against the bridge wall.

"I just found him here," Prebley began. "I was standing down there—someone called me and I hurried along, watching that ship coming up

over the ramp. I didn't see him. I—I just fell over him, that's all."

"Did you order that elevator lowered?" the Exec' demanded again.

"No sir!"

"What are you doing with his instruments?"

"I—I just picked them up—out of the blood. He was lying here when I came around the curve of the bridge."

"There's no blood on the phones or the cord," someone else accused.

"No. I mean, I guess I picked them up so they wouldn't get any blood on them. It was drooling all over the place."

"You didn't punch any of those buttons," the Navigating Officer demanded, "or give an order over the phone? The elevator went down just as Pfeiffer was landing. That was murder!"

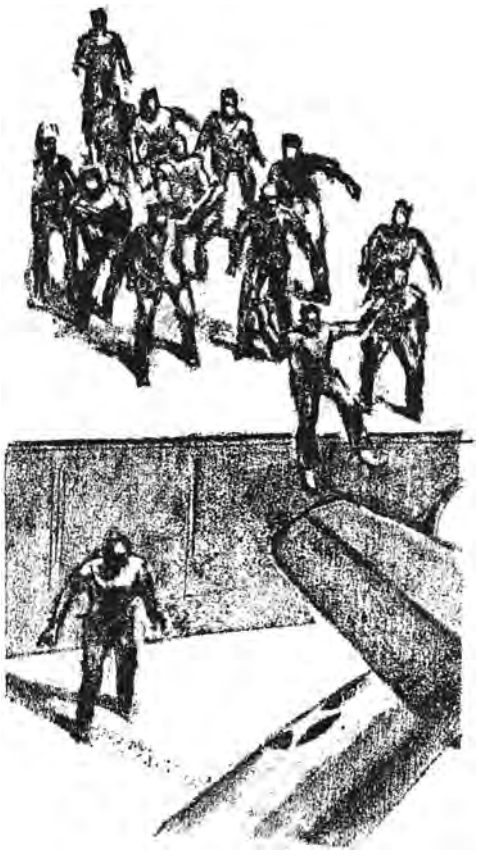
"He could have pushed in the amidships elevator button, if he fell over the Talker," a Marine lieutenant suggested. "Let's check up."

"I tell you," raged Prebley, "I touched nothing and I spoke to no one. Someone called to me from the fore part of the bridge. Just called my name, that's all. I don't know who it was—there was so much racket."

"Well, who socked the Talker?"

"I don't know. He must have been out when I came around here. I was looking over the rail and didn't see him. That's how I fell over him. What happened below, anyway?"

No one answered him. They were lifting the boatswain to a sitting position and making him comfortable.



Overhead the rest of the scout-bombers were maintaining their in-line circuit above the carrier, awaiting the signal for the next plane to come in. The drone of their motors only seemed to accentuate the painful period of doubt and suspicion.

There was an understandable amount of anxiety on the bridge and the speaker was taken over by Erickson, the Gunnery Officer. The elevator was lowered and the damaged scout-bomber moved with some difficulty and dollied to a space on the hangar deck where immediate repairs could be undertaken. The whole world was out of tune for Prebley as he watched the ship's surgeon, assisted by a pharmacist's mate, work on the snuffling man who sat up like a grotesque bayonet-practice dummy and kept asking: "Where did they come from?"

"You sure, Mr. Prebley, you didn't accidentally touch one of the swtich-buttons?" Davidson, the ship's Damage Control Officer, was saying from a kneeling position before the lift-control box.

"I couldn't have," Eddie argued again. "I must have fallen over the Talker before I reached that thing. He was lying down here—by this—this blood-stain."

"You could have hit it as you fell."

"No! Wait a minute. . . . The elevator was going down before I fell—I remember seeing the widening gap in the deck before I went down. I sat there waiting for something to explode. He was carrying live bombs, wasn't he?"

"All I can say," a florid little C.P.O. was saying over and over, "is that I got the signal on the indicator to lower the 'midships elevator. Next thing I knew a V-S crashed and was sticking her engine cowling through at us. I figured there'd be an explosion, but I was too scared—"

"Did you get a verbal order from Staples to lower the platform?" demanded Davidson over his shoulder.

"No sir! Just on the telegraph-indicator. That was enough for me. I got orders to respond either to the indicator or the speaker. I just figured they had a plane on that had to go somewhere special."

"I just walked into this," said Prebley, trying to attract the attention of Swayle, the Air Officer's writer, who was bustling about and scribbling notes on a fluttering pad. "They're not going to railroad me for it. Someone socked the Talker before I got here. If I could remember whose voice that was, I bet I'd know who started all this."

Swayle gave him a look that had battery-acid in it.

"There'll be an investigation, of course, sir!" he said with a hint of keel-hauling in his voice.

Prebley was dumfounded when he saw the F.D.O. peer up and then yell.

"Well, I'll be there. You know where to find me."

Commander Ranford appeared on the signal bridge and asked a few pointed questions, and then suddenly caught sight of Prebley. From the expression in Ranford's eyes Eddie knew what he was thinking. A jolt of nausea punched through him as realization of his own position clarified itself.

Ranford came over and said: "You have anything to do with this?"

"No sir!"

"What happened?"

Prebley repeated his story again in as few words as possible.

"You weren't supposed to be on the signal-bridge, were you?"

"I had just left your stateroom, sir. I stayed at the rail here to watch the scout-bombers come in," Eddie stated lamely. "The elevator was dropping before I got to the talker. It was simply a series of—well, for me—unfortunate events. I had nothing to do with it at all, sir."

"Anyone else here, besides you?"

"I don't think so, sir. I had seen Du Laigne—he's a C.P.O. pilot in my

flight; and had passed a word with him about how well Jackson came in. He disappeared after that. Then there was your writer, sir. He was returning to your office."

"Very unfortunate," Commander Ranford said testily. "There'll be an inquiry at four bells. You'll be available?"

"Yes sir. We have the late afternoon patrol."

"This will be more important."

The rest of the V-S squadron was coming in now and landing with a display that reflected the tension of the accident. Prebley hurried down the companionway inside the island to seek the cheer and confidence of Tod Moresby in the wardroom.

On the hangar deck Eddie Prebley stopped and watched the activity surrounding the damaged scout-bomber. By raising the lift platform to deck level, they were able to fold back the wings, damaged though they were, and lower the elevator again. Once on the hangar deck, it was but a matter of minutes to clear it and get it up on the jacks where the damaged engine and undercarriage could be removed and general repair work begun.

Overhead the incoming scout-bombers were rumbling in with clockwork regularity and coming down on the forward lift and being manhauled into their storage spaces.

FOR the first time Prebley considered the details of this mysterious series of events. He moved in and out listening to scraps of shouted conversation and tried to piece some of the hangar-deck observations together. He learned for one thing that Pfeiffer, the pilot of the damaged plane, who had suffered a badly gashed cheek and a sprained wrist, had gone aft with a pharmacist's mate arguing that someone had deliberately tried to "wash him out." His gunner-observer, Aviation Machinist's Mate Capehart, was shaken up and generally bruised.

"They got away lucky," a P.O. 2nd Class explained. "One of these days we're gonner get one of those mix-ups that will blow the belly out of this covered wagon."

"If they'd hit hard enough they still might have detonated that five-hundred pounder in the rack," agreed Eddie. "She could have been jerked out and set the detonator."

"I think I'll earn me a bonus figuring out how to lock that amidships elevator when the crash screen is up for landings," the P.O. 2nd Class muttered, rubbing his bristly chin. Then he looked suddenly at Prebley as though he had been prodded somewhere by a hornet. "Cripes!" he gasped. "A guy could make up a swell sab-oo-tage story about that, couldn't he? Suppose that platform was all the way down to the lower hangar deck, sir. Just suppose, like. He could have hit the edge of the flight deck, jerked the bomb out of the rack and it could have set the detonator in falling two decks. Whammo!"

"A U-boat couldn't do a better job," Eddie said after a minute of consideration. "But you have an idea in that elevator-locking gadget. Work on it."

"Sure will, sir. Sure will!" the Navy mechanic said, with visions of another chevron on his sleeve. . . .

The possibility of deliberate attempt seriously to damage or even sink the *Bennington,* as suggested by the P.O. 2nd Class, was magnified tenfold in Prebley's mind. The fact that the ship's Talker had been slugged was self-evident. Why he had been slugged was not exactly clear, except for the opportunity of either getting momentary control of the elevator-control indicator, causing Pfeiffer to crash into the open elevator well; or it was an attempt to discredit Boatswain Staples. If so, it was a personal matter: one that Staples himself ought to be able to clear up. They'd find that out at the inquiry in the afternoon.

"But if someone was out to get Staples," he argued with himself as he crisscrossed through the pattern of stowed aircraft, "why did they try to drag me into it? That guy Du Laigne was there a minute or so before and Swayle went past just after that."

He decided to make a little further investigation before heading for the wardroom.

On the second hangar deck he found several of the aircraft crews of his own torpedo-bomber squadron still checking their charges. He went around to a machinist in dungarees who was working at a vise.

"You see Du Laigne around here?" Eddie asked in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Du Laigne? He was here, sir. About half an hour ago. Beefin' about a undercarriage leg. See, here it is. He took the upper spindle away to show Lieut. Commander Winton. I guess he went to draw another from Machinists' Stores. It was worn some."

"You can't hate him for that," observed Prebley. "I'll look around."

A cursory inquiry at the Machinists' Stores revealed that the C.P.O. pilot had been there but a few minutes before and had brought a worn undercarriage leg spindle for a replacement.

The storekeeper explained further that he had told Du Laigne that he would have to get a replacement ticket signed by his squadron commander.

"I can't give no parts out without a ticket, sir," he explained.

"You're right," agreed Prebley with a flick of his hand. "I'll see him when we assemble for Flight Quarters."

CHAPTER THREE

HE found Tod Moresby in the wardroom on the outer fringe of a group of pilots that surrounded Pfeiffer, who sat in a large club-chair before an electric fireplace.

Lieutenant Jackson of the Scout-Bomber Squadron was saying: "You wait, Pfeiffer. Wait until you see the movie strip of your approach. You were lucky to get away as light as you did."

Jackson was referring to the length of film exposed every time a plane made a landing on the deck. These strips were used in evidence of any infraction of landing procedure.

"Came in like a plowmaker's mate," argued Jackson. "There's plenty of room on that teak. You don't need to sneak in over the lip like that!"

"If I had made the best deck-landing in my book," growled Pfeiffer through his puffed lips, "I would have hit that open elevator. Who the hell lowered that platform, anyhow?"

"No! If you had made a normal approach, you wouldn't have had to hoik her that way. You missed the last cable entirely. You'd have hit the crash screen."

"Why was the elevator lowered?" growled Pfeiffer. "That's what I want to know."

Tod came over to Eddie and grabbed his elbow. "Hey, what's this scuttlebutt rumor going around?" he asked, drawing Prebley over to a big table littered with magazines, newspapers and soft-drink bottles.

Tod was a happy misshapen chap with a mop of curly yellow hair. He had girlish blue eyes, a flippant nubbin of a nose and a mouth that maintained a perpetual smile. His head was mounted on a fine browned neck and set on an abnormally broad pair of shoulders. He tapered down slim at the thighs, but his legs seemed to have been deformed by an overdose of dodge-drill through a set of badly spaced auto-tires.

Moresby had spent the first fifteen years of his life within the confines of a Presbyterian minister's manse. His father, one of the dour Scotch types, felt no compunction in hammering home the stiffest rudiments of godliness.

Tod was making up now for those fifteen years and thoroughly wallowing in the comparative freedom of action and thought that Navy discipline and regulations allowed.

"You see the A.C.?" Tod demanded as Eddie pointed to an easy-chair.

"Tod, I'm on the wrong ship," Prebley began.

"Spill it to the Voice of Experience, kid," grinned Moresby.

Prebley looked around and saw that several of the others were trying to listen in with their eyes. "I can't tell all of it," he confided, "but someone's trying to make me shin the chains. That business on the flight deck—"

"Pfeiffer seems to think someone's trying to wash him out. What happened?"

"I had a grubby interview with the Air Officer. That part's personal, Tod. All I can say is that he thinks I've been planted aboard to muss up his log. You can't understand that, but that's the way it is."

"What the devil does Pfeiffer have to do with it?" Moresby queried, after wrinkling his face for a few seconds.

"Nothing! He was the innocent victim. Someone smacked the Talker up on the signal bridge and took over just long enough to have the amidships elevator lowered when Pfeiffer was coming in. I was at the rail watching them come in. Pfeiffer was horsing around under the ramp and looked like smacking it. Everyone was intent on watching him and all of a sudden, someone called me—that is, called my name from just around the wing of the bridge."

"You're not making any of this up, are you?" Tod grinned like a gargoyle. "Where was everybody?"

"I don't know. They seemed to have moved to the forward portion of the bridge to yell down at the fire and rescue squad."

"They say Staples got a swell sock on the noggin," said Tod.

"Whoever hit him, hit him with something solid," Prebley said thoughtfully. "Look, Tod, just before all this happened, Du Laigne was on the bridge too talking to me. He disappeared while Jackson was coming in. Then there was Swayle, the A.O.'s writer; he came around the bridge almost at the same time, spoke to me and went on into the office."

"Either one of them could have done it?" asked Moresby.

"Hard to say now. I can't reassemble the time factors—as they do in detective stories. Everything happened pretty fast."

"Detective stories," Moresby mused, fumbling for a cigarette. "Who would have a reason—a motive, as they say?"

PREBLEY looked around the spacious, comfortable wardroom and realized there was a big possibility of his losing all this. The thought made him swallow and fight back a throaty gulp. All these men were his friends and he was a part in all this. Months of effort, study and labor had brought this reward and now that he had achieved his goal someone was trying to ease him out. For years he had wanted to fly. He had once considered going to Canada and joining the R.C.A.F. Later on he had had hopes of getting out to China and volunteering with General Chennault's A.V.G. Like many others he had no interest in commercial aviation, but the tang of service discipline, the thoroughness of Navy maintenance and the high standards involved, had nurtured the latent talents that were his natural heritage.

He tried to remember some of the details of the trouble between his mother and the man who today was Air Officer on the U.S.S. *Bennington*, but the scarlet mist of his bitterness and the fog of bewilderment swabbed out many of the poignant details.

"A guy has to have a motive to take these chances," Moresby was arguing. "But they ought to have papers on every guy in ship."

"Sure! Du Laigne has served two full hitches already. They must have him checked close. Swayle couldn't get into the A.O.'s office unless he was well in the clear. That's a real snug post."

"Well, we're sure of one thing. Staples certainly didn't slug himself—or did he?" Moresby said, with one of his enigmatic grins.

The mess stewards were setting the tables for lunch and Prebley and Moresby wandered back to their stateroom to muck up for the meal. Most of the ship's officers had forsaken their whites and were now at the Exec's table in their heavier blues. The members of the flying personnel still retained their working khaki slacks, oil-dulled shoes and service shirts with the sleeves rolled up. A Filipino mess attendant passed out copies of the ship's paper, neatly mimeographed with the latest radio news, Washington dispatches and pertinent items concerning the war in all theaters.

"Jees!" gasped Biff Thoreau, as he did every noontime. "There's a war on!"

"Well, that's that," someone else said with resignation. "Now we can chow. Biff's been informed again."

"I'm going to take up a subscription and get that guy a history book. It's amazing what he doesn't know."

"You're just presuming he can read. You're taking an awful chance on a point like that."

"He can read that there's a war on," a young freckle-nosed ensign added in Biff's defense.

"That's sight reading. He can't tell one letter from another. Remember sight reading in the third grade?"

"Shut up," stormed Biff, waving his great semaphore-like hands. "You guys got me believing it."

They settled down to the cutlery exercises. . . .

Commander Ranford, because of his staggered duty schedule, took his meals alone in his stateroom. The pleasantries of the wardroom were of the past when he was a rising young lieutenant commander in Asiatic waters. The officer's steward spread the white linen and set out the silverware adorned with the service crest.

"The condemned man ate a hearty meal," he quoted quietly as the nimble hands of the steward ladled out the steaming consomme.

"You say something, sir?" the steward asked. He had caught the faint movement of Ranford's lips.

"No," the Commander answered, and then for the first time looked up and considered the man who served him. "You married, steward?"

"Me? Yes sir. Two children, too. A boy and a girl."

"Fine! That's fine. Something to go home to, eh?"

"Yes sir. That is when we get home, eh, sir?"

"Your son. In school still?"

"Finishing his last year at M.I.T. He worked his way through. Wants to get into the Navy when he winds up. Worked his—"

"Good! Quite an accomplishment. You must be very proud."

THE steward stood off respectfully adjusting his stole of office. "Proud? Of course, sir. But I sometimes feel that all he accomplishes only makes me look pretty worthless—that is, my being just a steward, so to speak," the man floundered on, trying to find words that would fit the situation of this unexpected interview.

"That's hardly fair," Ranford said, his spoon poised above his plate. "You've a very commendable row of hash-marks on your jacket."

"Thank you, sir. I suppose he gets what he's got from his mother. Boys usually do, don't they? My daughter, now—"

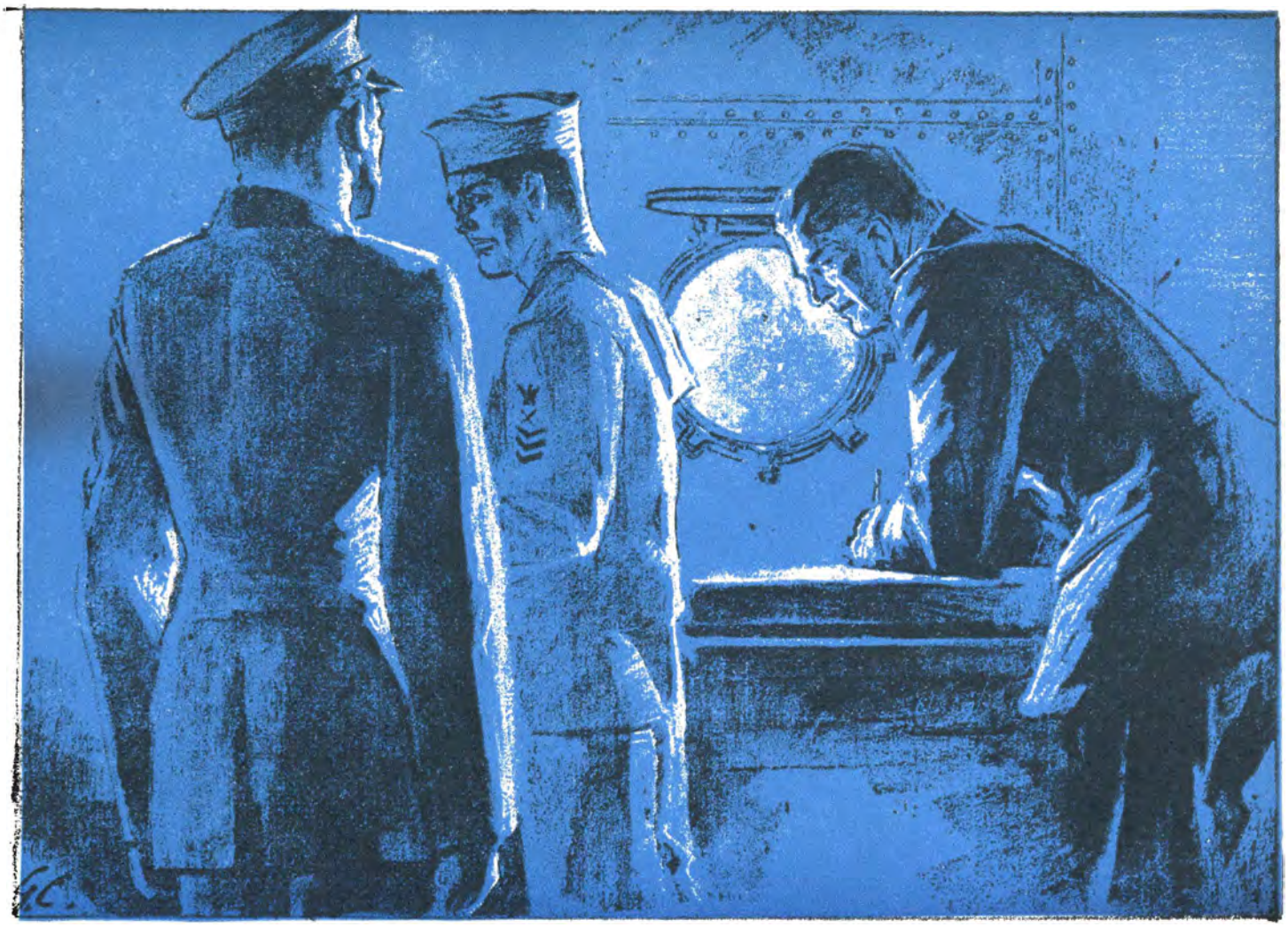
The Commander sniffed and stared into the gathering mental mist.

"You have a family, sir?" the steward inquired.

"I *had* a son," Commander Ranford answered. "I didn't have him long enough to really know him. Do you really believe sons inherit the qualities of their mothers?"

The steward turned to the buffet to hide his emotion. He was a sentimental man, not above a tear in a movie house. He pawed about the entrée and salad and unwittingly timed his reply with the skill of a clever actor. "I suppose I shall have to salute my son one of these days. That won't be hard, sir. I shall do it, just as I tip my hat to a lady. To his mother—you know what I mean, sir?"

"I think I know what you mean," agreed Ranford dabbing at his lips



"All right, Swayle," Ranford directed. "Take these back to the office."

with his napkin while the steward removed the soup-plate and brought on the broiled chop and salad. "That will be all, steward. I'll forgo the dessert."

"Yes sir. I suppose his mother is the only woman I ever tipped my hat to."

"There aren't many, are there, steward?" Ranford said with finality.

"No sir."

Commander Ranford forked at the rest of his meal and reviewed the past. Twenty-five years before he had returned from his first real war cruise with a Navy Cross and the two full rings of braid of a lieutenant. Those were the thrilling and glorious days of the winter of 1917. There had been a leave and the inevitable romance. Dianne Prebley, a daughter of Vice-Admiral Prebley, a direct descendant of the famous Commodore Prebley, knew whom and what she wanted—a real sailorman. The romance blazed with the intensity of guncotton fire; the wedding and short honeymoon were over, and Lieutenant Ranford was back over the North Sea stalking German commerce-raiders, before he realized what had happened to him.

A few months later he was back, to suffer two soul-shattering bolts of news. Dianne Prebley Ranford, with the realization that she was shortly to become a mother, became so emotionally unbalanced that she persuaded her father to use his influence and have her sailor husband transferred from his beloved Naval air squadron to a shore post at Portsmouth.

"Just for a year, Daddy," she pleaded. "Just so I can be sure he will be near me when his child is born. . . . To be near me, safe, for the first few months. You can't deny me this one request!"

ADMIRAL PREBLEY was shocked at this unexpected display of moral cowardice, but he was old and experienced, and he agreed, believing that once the child was born, Dianne would find a new idol upon whom to pour her maternal devotion, and young Ranford could be returned to the cockpit of his Navy scout-plane.

They had tried to explain all this to Lieutenant Ranford after his initial explosion of wrath and charges of calumny. For weeks he sat in an office chair at the Portsmouth Navy Yard, silent and morose, bitter and disillusioned. His duties were ignored, and those who had no compassion or understanding brought charges against him which resulted in demotion and loss of seniority.

The birth of Edward Anthony Prebley Ranford brought no pride or paternal thrill to the soul of Lieutenant (Jr. Grade) Ranford. Instead, the bundle of warmth that squinted and wrinkled its putty nose at him from the nursery basket only taunted him and strengthened the bitter conviction that here lay the real cause of his disgrace and downfall from the pedestal of national homage.

"I was Rammer Ranford, a Navy hero, before you stepped into the picture," he had erupted before the tiny basket. When the child instinctively recoiled under the savage outburst, he gripped the frail rim of the basket and lifted it from the low luggage-table beside Dianne's bed. "It took me four years at Annapolis and two years at sea to win two rings of braid and a bit of blue ribbon. In less than a year you, you squawking little brat, scuttled it all!"

Dianne Prebley Ranford lay there, horror-stricken and helpless, pleading with her eyes, and tried to raise her arms. The jetting spurts of hate from Ranford's eyes intensified his anger. She was certain he had suffered some serious mental disturbance

and was about to hurl the basket to the floor.

"Please! Please, Edward," she managed.

He halted and regained control. A sneer wounded her deeper, as he placed the basket back gently.

"I wouldn't hurt it," he snarled, turning for the door. "I want to be sure you have him—forever! I want you to always have him—to remember me by. I want him always at your knee to remind you of what you have done to me. He's all yours!"

She lay there, knowing what she wanted to say, but she had nothing left. She knew that he knew what she would say, the defense she would put up, the words that would defend the mite in the nursery basket; but all her strength and effort ran out with the realization that she had lost a battle that never could be refought.

After he had gone, the thought came to her: "You can't disown him. He's yours. You can't deny your own flesh and blood. He's yours!"

Exhaustion pitifully took over, and she fell asleep, wandering through the tremulous halls of velvety space.

When she awoke, the first bitter draft of her revenge had begun to take shape. . . .

"A son usually inherits his mother's qualities," Commander Ranford muttered as he folded his napkin. "It will be an interesting observation. It might make all the difference whether we get to Murmansk or not."

THE court of inquiry which sat in the ship's chapel followed routine procedure and revealed little more than they already knew. Commander Ranford, Commander Davidson, the Damage Control Officer, and Commander Henderson, the Navigation Officer, subbing for the Exec', who couldn't be spared, sat as the court. Captain Tennant, the ship's Skipper, had appointed Ranford to take charge.

Swayle, at one end of the baize-covered table, took shorthand notes with the air of a patronizing court stenographer.

Staples, a heavy bandage about his head and wearing his greatcoat over his pajamas, came in, gave his testimony first and was excused. All he knew was that just as Lieutenant Pfeiffer was coming in he sensed that there might be trouble. He remembered starting to raise his hand mike to warn the fire-and-rescue party, but couldn't remember whether he had spoken a word or not.

Eddie Prebley sat watching the eyes of the man whose name he should have brought aboard and placed on the list of flying personnel. He was trying to make up in his own mind whether he hated or respected the man. For the first time he noticed the gleaming strip of blue ribbon on the Air Officer's jacket that testified to the performance of an heroic act. He wondered about that. His mother had never mentioned anything like that about his father. All she had told him was that he had been a shiftless, spoiled Service nondescript, who after several years of drifting from one department to another, had resigned while serving with the Asiatic Fleet and had disappeared. . . .

"All I remember after that," Bo'sun Staples was saying, "was that I suddenly went blind and my knees gave way. I think I tried to yell and grab at the rail, but I simply can't remember. I think I thought we'd been bombed—I guess."

"You know, sir," whispered Du Laigne, beside Prebley, "he could've punched that elevator-indicator button himself when he went down."

Prebley turned, startled, at Du Laigne's voice. He hadn't seen him come in. He wondered what the C.P.O. pilot would have to say about his being on the bridge when he was supposed to have been checking a faulty undercarriage spindle.

Staples left with the Advocate's admonition to take it easy. Du Laigne was called next, and he went forward and stood to attention.

"What were you doing on the signal-bridge?" Commander Davidson inquired. "According to Ensign Prebley you were up there shortly before the incident we are investigating occurred."

"I had been below to check on a slack-acting undercarriage, sir," began Du Laigne. "I had reported it yesterday, and my crew had the unit down and stripped. I felt that the spindle, which was badly worn, should be replaced, but I had to get a replacement-part ticket signed by Lieut. Commander Winton."

The Damage Control Officer nodded understandingly.

"I tried to find Lieut. Commander Winton below, sir, but I was told he was probably topside at Airplot getting his met. report. I went up and looked around for him, as I wanted him to see it personally—"

"You had the spindle with you?" the Air Officer broke in.

"Yes sir."

"Was Winton at Airplot?"

"No sir. They hadn't seen him."

"What did you do after that?"

"I just left through the starboard doorway. Lieutenant Jackson was just coming in, and I went around to the deck side and watched a minute. I didn't stay long, because I knew I had no further business there."

"Did you see Bo'sun Staples?"

"Yes sir. He was just talking routine stuff and dispersing the plane-handlers."

"You saw Ensign Prebley on the signal bridge?"

"Yes sir. I spoke to him. I think I said something about Lieut. Jackson coming in—or something about scout-bombers. Nothing important."

"What was Prebley doing?"

"Just looking, sir. Just at the rail watching Lieutenant Jackson come in. That's all."

"He makes it sound swell, for him," Prebley reflected. "Still, if he was carrying that spindle—"

"Where were you, Du Laigne, when Lieutenant Pfeiffer crashed into the open elevator?"

"I can't say for sure, sir. I think I was on the ladder almost to the upper hangar deck-level. The hangar crew was running to the well by then."

"That's all, Du Laigne. Thank you."

DU LAIGNE saluted and went back to his seat. "Funny how you can't remember details when you get up before the gold braid like that, eh?" he whispered to Prebley.

"Yeh," agreed Prebley, but without looking at him. "Funny."

A signalman who had been on the bridge, and a gunnery officer who had been taking a watch, were called in order, but neither had noticed anything unusual until Lieut. Pfeiffer had crashed and Ensign Prebley had been found standing near Bo'sun Staples—with Staples' hand-mike set in his hands.

Next Swayle, the Air Officer's writer, was called, and he got up and explained briefly that he had been below to the ship's office to return a personal-history file on Ensign Prebley. Eddie felt that every head in the chapel turned to stare at him.

"I had left the Commander's stateroom a short time before, as Commander Ranford had expressed a desire to hold a private interview with Ensign Prebley. I purposely took a little time in the ship's office and went over some other office matters."

"You saw Ensign Prebley and Du Laigne on the bridge when you returned?"

"Yes sir. I believe Ensign Prebley was asking Du Laigne if those were the scout-bombers coming in."

"Jees!" Du Laigne nudged at Prebley. "He's right. You did say that, didn't you?"

"Something like that," agreed Prebley.

"And from that point you returned to the Air Officer's office?" inquired Davidson.

"Yes sir!"

Prebley thought he caught a frown of uncertainty on Commander Ranford's face, but he was unable to classify it.

"Then you didn't see any of the incident that happened later?"

"No sir. I think we heard it, and I remember Lieutenant Commander Henderson coming in and reporting

to Commander Ranford. I stayed in the office until the Commander left to investigate the crash."

"That's all, Swayle."

"Ensign Prebley, please."

Prebley went forward and saluted. Commander Ranford turned away and stared at the open porthole of the chapel.

"Will you please relate your movements from the time you went to the signal bridge?" Henderson demanded.

Prebley outlined in detail his going to the Air Officer's stateroom for the personal interview.

"You needn't go into details on the subject we discussed," the Commander broke in peremptorily.

"Yes sir," Prebley answered coldly, sensing that everyone else in the room was burning for details. "After dismissal," he continued, "I went out to the signal bridge just as the V-S squadron was coming in."

"Why did you ask Du Laigne what they were? Didn't you know? Can't you identify service planes?" demanded Henderson.

"I was making conversation—I t' ink," explained Prebley lamely. "I was a little upset."

"That part is irrelevant," snapped Commander Ranford over his shoulder. "Go on from there."

"Yes sir! I spoke to C.P.O. Du Laigne, and I think I made some sort of complimentary statement about Lieutenant Jackson's approach. When Lieutenant Pfeiffer was coming in, I made a remark to the contrary. I was afraid he was going to mess it up."

"Go on."

"Du Laigne had left the bridge, it seems, and didn't answer me. I didn't think much of that. I was watching the second plane come in. It was obvious that he would have trouble unless he cleared and gunned her for another try."

"Quite a critical observation. Go on, Prebley."

"Suddenly I heard my name called from the forward sweep of the bridge, but I couldn't see who had called me. I was watching the incoming plane. I also saw the amidships elevator dropping, and sensed that there would be a crash—possibly a serious crash.

"The rest is not very clear now. So much happened at once. I moved forward along the rail to see who had called me; they—or he—had used my name, Prebley," Eddie went on. "Next, I fell over the Talker, Bo'sun Staples, who was out cold in a heap at his station. I never saw the scout-bomber crash. I was floundering around trying to get clear of the Talker's gear. I picked up his hand-set to keep it out of the pool of blood that was forming. That's where I was found."

"You were found standing up, looking over the rail at the crash. The Flight Deck Officer remembers seeing you standing there with Staples' hand-set in your hands."

"I guess that is right, sir. I guess I was," admitted Prebley with the realization that circumstances were piling up against him.

"Did you speak into that hand-set at all or make any signal that resulted—or could have resulted in that elevator being lowered?"

"No sir! Positively not, sir."

"Did you know who was making that landing?"

"No sir."

"There was nothing personal in all this?"

"No sir! I did not strike Bo'sun Staples; neither did I give the order for the lowering of the elevator. It was being lowered before I was anywhere near the Talker's station."

"Ensign Prebley, do you know who did? You must have seen someone—besides Du Laigne and Swayle here—on that bridge."

"I saw no one else, sir, on that level of the bridge."

"That's all," concluded Commander Davidson. "Have you anything further, sir?" he asked the Air Officer.

"Nothing. It is evident that an attempt was made to do one of two things: This could have been a personal-grudge move against Lieutenant Pfeiffer—or some other person aboard. Or it could have been an attempt to damage this vessel. We expect further attempts, but we shall watch out for them. That crash could have resulted in a serious explosion—one that might have disabled the *Bennington* for several months. However, I intend to continue this investigation further, and I might add I shall take no further chances. We are taking a convoy to Murmansk; and if we get it, I'm going to make sure we get it from the outside—not from some agency aboard. That's all, gentlemen!"

"Whew!" wheezed Du Laigne as they went out. "The A.O. must feel we're in for a rough ride."

"He'll make sure we get one, at any rate," agreed Prebley with emphasis.

Chapter Four

As the *Bennington* dipped her bull prow into the leaden waves that rose and shouldered into her path, matters of the accident on the flight deck and signal bridge had been mainly forgotten in the necessary activity of preparing the late afternoon patrol to be carried out by Torpedo-Bomber Squadron No. 212.

The plane-handlers were taking over the Douglas Devastators being brought up from below on the elevator. From the island the first clarion call of the bugle over the loud-speakers was sounding Flight Quarters. There was a tooth-setting *scrawnch* of gears and cranks as the folding wings were spread and locked into flying position.

Below in the ready-room, Lieutenant Commander Jeffrey Winton, a lean pedantic type of man, cackled the dogma of pre-patrol instructions. The air crews fingered crisp sheets of paper on which were typed the details of the afternoon's mission. Winton went over it again, his arms sweeping in flights of torpedo-bombers, pushing out imaginary units that were out of position, encouraging more conservative pilots to move in closer.

The ruled blackboard took on fantastic designs as Winton chalked up figures and section positions.

"We will climb to fourteen thousand feet and proceed in section Vees to western point of patrol triangle here: Lat.—W, Long.—N. From that point we turn to starboard and take up a course of 146 degrees which may bring us within sight of first section of the convoy. Let's see who can nail her down first. Any questions?"

He repeated the figures of temperature, dew-point, recognition signals, code and radio calls to be used only in an emergency.

The pilots and navigators checked and rechecked over their plotting boards, raising their heads once to catch a reported change in the surface wind. From above came the inquiry from the signal-bridge Talker.

"All pilots ready to man planes?"

"No. 1 ready, sir!"

One by one the section leaders reported readiness, and there was a concerted flurry of arms and legs as they pulled on safety jackets and snapped parachute-harness swivels.

"I told you there was a war on," Biff Thoreau explained again as they scampered out to the flight deck. "Look! They even got torpedoes tied on these darning-needles. Someone's gonna get hurt one of these days."

"I hope that guy don't start playing boomps-a-daisy with that elevator again," Johnny Boyle growled.

"Forget it," whispered Tod Moresby as Eddie Prebley raised his head slowly from the nav. table. "Don't let it get you."

"I know. But I also know they all think I pulled that one!"

The bull-horn drowned the rest out with, "*Stand by to start engines!*"

They split up and joined the variegated groups peppered among the wings and tails fitted together like parts of a jigsaw puzzle. Ensign Slater, Prebley's bomber-navigator, was already aboard, and Craig, his machinist's mate gunner, was leaning over and bellowing something at a C.P.O. armament man. Prebley climbed up, adjusted his belt and began operating the wabble-pump to build up pressure.

"Clear propellers!" the bull-horn warned. *"Start engines!"*

There was a concerted sandpaper rasp of starters, and twelve-850 h.p. engines bashed into the metallic turmoil of struggle. A package of jumbo crackers banged, and straggling gusts of smoke swept back and were sliced to nothingness by the flailing propellers of the planes behind. Gradually they simmered down with curbed grumbles of impatience, then smoothed into compact blocks of steady power.

Yellow sheets were signed and handed over to the crew captains. Prebley checked his fuel again and passed the acceptance sheet over the side.

The *Bennington* pointed up into the wind as a blast from her stack whistle gave the warning to the escorting destroyers. A plunging four-stacker swept across the carrier's bow and took up her launching position. An ostrich-plume of steam fluttered from the bow pipe and swabbed a light dab of condensation on the white guide-line that split the long teak deck.

The *Bennington* was dead into the wind now, and the Flight Deck Officer in a shapeless yellow sweater took his position near the safety catwalk and raised one arm. The squadron leader's Devastator stiffened with the grab of power and moved obliquely toward the guide-line. A fan of the rudder and the plane nosed around and roared away with an extra bellow of enthusiasm as it passed the island superstructure.

Whango!

Biff Thoreau, wagging his head in a token of exaggerated morbidity, shunted his Devastator into position and awaited the signal. He turned and looked at Prebley and then pointed to the long black seventeen-hundred-pound torpedo with a scarlet war head that frowned between the wheels of Eddie's ship and wagged his head mournfully again.

"Get going!" Prebley signaled, and managed a grin.

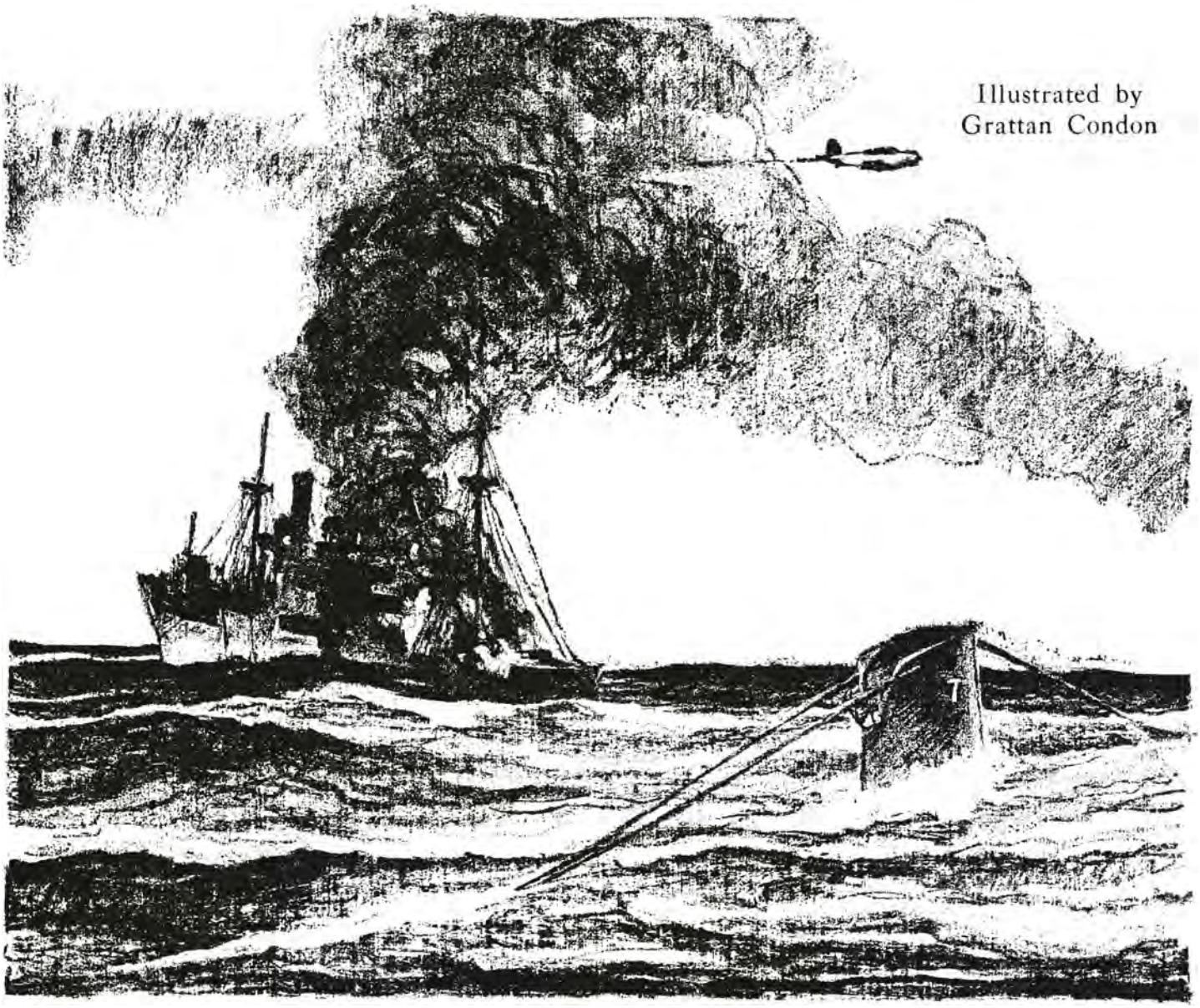
"Wouldn't it be funny," reflected Prebley as he sat and waited for his turn to pound away, "if that damned elevator went down just as I was taking off? Well, that would put me in the clear for fair—and how!"

The Flight Deck Officer gave him the office and he fanned the Devastator into position and caught Du Laigne's eye. The C.P.O. pilot, muffled up in a heavy helmet, peered across at him from his high seat with an intensity that made Eddie turn and try to interpret the gleam in the man's eye.

"Come on! Come on," Slater was prodding from behind. "You're getting the clearance."

Thoreau was well in the clear and making his turn to pick up Winton, and the Talker was prodding Eddie for not maintaining take-off schedule.

"I could swear that guy was trying to put a hex on me," Eddie muttered as he palmed the throttle and aimed the torpedo plane down the deck. He eased the control column forward gently and the tail came up as they swept past the island and banged a blast of exhaust drum-fire off the steel walls of the superstructure.



Illustrated by
Grattan Condon

The white guide-line raced toward them like a ribbon that was being reeled into some whirling spindle within the throat of the charging Devastator. There was a thump and Eddie held her down until they had cleared the forward ack-ack recesses and then he allowed her to steady herself until the fluid support of air smoothed out their course and they were in the clear. He brought her around in a smooth climbing turn, drew back a small shining lever, held it until there were two distinct thumps somewhere below and watched the landing gear indicator light change from green to red.

The wheels were up and the airspeed indicator moved over a notch or two. In two minutes he had edged up behind Winton's port elevator and grinned across at Thoreau. Below the sea was a white-capped carpet of bottle-green. Above had been brushed in a layer of fleecy clouds that offered openings through which they swept and came out above a pebbled cumulus skyway along which their twelve sharply defined shadows raced with them.

Three other sections, headed by Lieutenants Branscomb, Lennox and Boyle moved into position so that they now formed a stepped-up diamond formation. Their course was almost due north.

"This is the life," Prebley beamed to himself. Then he remembered all that had happened in the last few hours and quaked with the realization that this was his first real war mission and he had to make good or be relegated to the roster of reserve pilots.

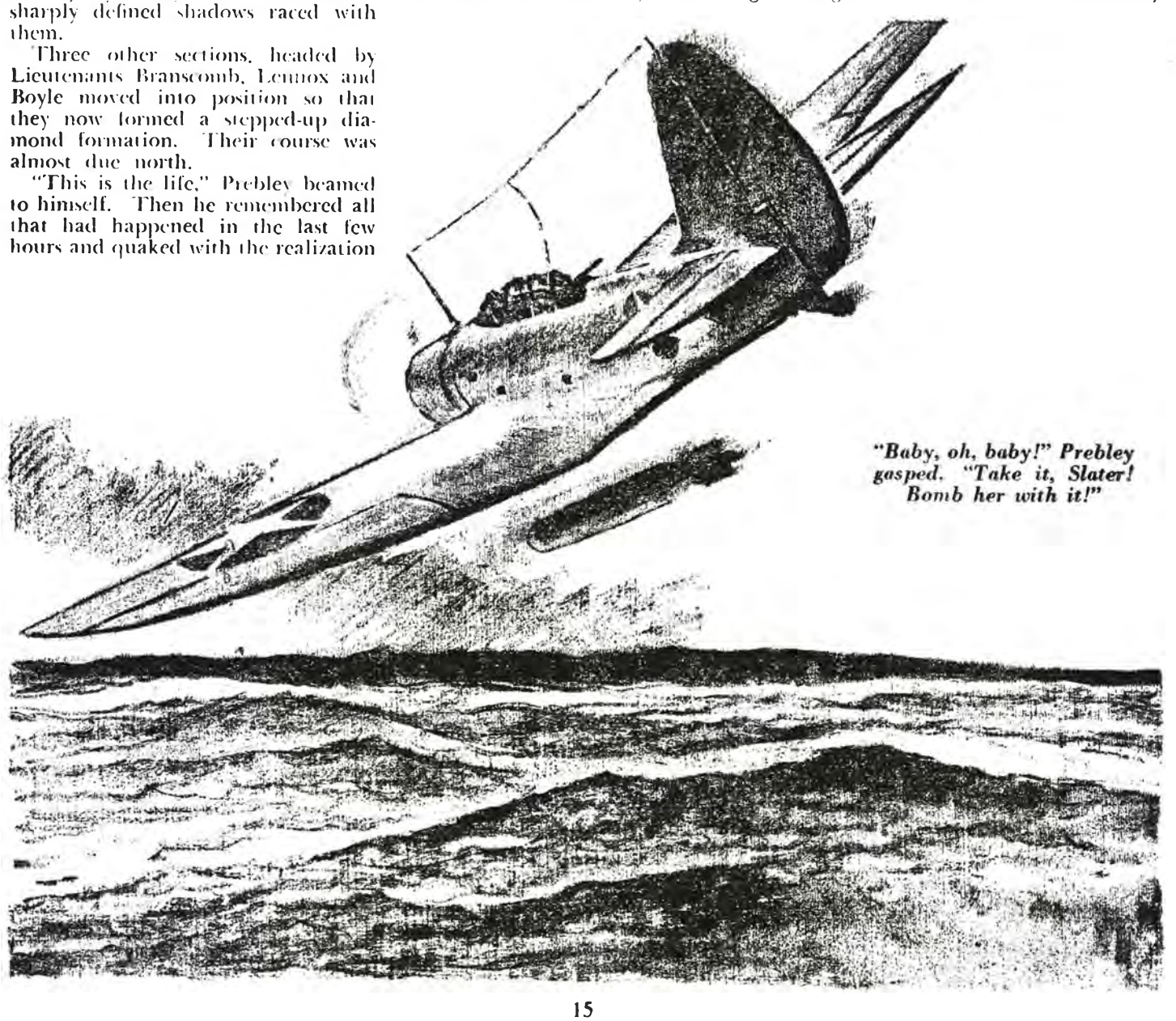
"There are about seven commissioned carriers in this man's Navy, and I had to pick the one aboard which my father is Air Officer! What a break!" he muttered to himself.

He wondered again what the real story behind the separation of his mother and father could be—what the bitterness in Commander Ranford's eyes and words reflected. He wondered for the first time why he had never shown a boy's normal interest in his father. There had been years of coddled and sheltered existence when for a time it appeared that his mother's devotion would shield him from all outside interests and contacts. Several terms at a modest country day school where academic routine, attuned to the required finances of the institution, left him plenty of opportunity to enjoy long vacations. Games were played and awards won. Short coastal schooner trips were planned and made and eventually the heritage of the sea became apparent and he was allowed to enter a third-rate institution that flourished in a genteel way under the name of Tangmere Naval Academy.

The rest of his path to an ensign's commission and a pair of Navy wings was both smoothed and impeded by his family background. The Prebleys were still a name in Washington, but it was a name that required much living up to. Even so, Eddie Prebley never questioned his mother's right to deprive him of his rightful name.

All this danced through the shutter of his memory and was high-lighted in spots by his imagination. There was an instant—a black-shrouded instant—when he wondered whether he was actually entitled to the name of Ranford. That left him dry-tongued and shuddery at the prospect. Still, there must be papers that couldn't be questioned, just as there were papers for Du Laigne—and Swayle . . .

But there was plenty to do maintaining position behind Winton's port wing and in about half an hour they



"Baby, oh, baby!" Prebley gasped. "Take it, Slater! Bomb her with it!"

had cleared the cloud layer and a surly section of the Atlantic provided an interminable and obscure pattern over which they must search for traces of the enemy.

Winton called them and ordered a wider formation; "And check on everything," he ordered. "There can be a lot of trouble in this. —Hello!"

Several of the observer-bombardiers had caught the low puff of smoke, and their voices clattered over the sets.

"Ahead off starboard quarter," Slater was saying. "Looks like a torpedoing job going on."

Winton waggled his wings and ordered Sections three and four to maintain altitude: "Number two follow me. Navigators of three and four check position and report through to Chatham. —Yellow code, remember."

"This is it," grinned Prebley.

The six screaming Devastators nosed down and then swept into line-astern at Winton's signal. Prebley could see Thoreau's gunner wrenching his weapons out from beneath the camel-back and he could hear Slater folding his chart table away and preparing to take a prone position over the bomb-sight.

"If that baby will only show a sliver of periscope," breathed Prebley. "Just a sliver—that's all we want."

Below now a slim-stacked merchantman was partially shrouded in smoke. There was still a faint streak of the U-boat's torpedo course and Winton was slamming for its outer extremity.

"One at a time," Winton warned.

"Baby, if we only had delayed-fuse stuff," mooned Eddie.

"I told you there was a war on," Biff Thoreau added as Winton took a chance with his tin fish. "Someone's gonna get hurt yet."

"Baby, oh, baby!" someone else bellowed over the set.

Winton's torpedo hit at a dangerously sharp angle and threw a double-feathered geyser of green and white which fell back after seemingly trying to clutch at the squadron leader's prop. Thoreau feinted to the right, snapped over hard and repeated Winton's effort. Another shapeless blast of foam and water and a dull nothingness followed.

"Just a splinter!" Prebley begged.

THEN, as if in answer to his plea, the seas parted and a slim section of conning tower wedged up through the rollers. It came up far enough to show a portion of Teutonic lettering and Prebley whanged his Devastator over blindly, leveled off and bellowed something into his hand-set.

"Baby, oh, baby!" he gasped. "Take it, Slater! Bomb her with it!"

The big Devastator jerked with the release of the torpedo. She came up in a mad zoom and clawed blindly at the air and almost slid back. There was a thunderous boom somewhere below and an ear-crushing blast of explosive against metal. The Devastator received a belch of concussion that hoiked her tail high and almost rammed her over into a dive that threatened to end up a few fathoms below the surface of the sea.

Prebley, displaying the reflexes of a bullfighter, snapped her out just in time. He held her level and found himself racing headlong into the mainmast and piled derrick booms of the wallowing freighter.

"Ju—*das!*" he gasped.

The control went over again and he depressed the rudder pedal in perfect coördination. The Devastator came around on her wing-tip when he dragged the stick back into his belly. He looked down and saw a number of men scrambling to get aboard a Carling raft and wondered if he'd be with them—any minute.

"Top rudder, you fool!" he bawled at himself. "Top rudder and keep her nose up!"

The Devastator slobbered out, leveled off and staggered away while Slater crawled back up and slapped Eddie across the shoulders.

"What happened?" he gasped.

"Plenty! *Boppo,* smack in their wardroom, I think. You sure had your spec's on, Slate. She was just surfacing, when you jammed their keyhole. *Whammo!*"

"Cripes, but you were slinging us all over the place! What was that?"

"I don't know. I found myself zinging into that freighter. I had to whip her over fast."

They circled again and tied on to Winton's tail and tried to figure out what had happened. Below them was a blob of olivaceous oil that was moving away slowly from the upended stern of a U-boat. They could see the dripping bronze screws and her diving-planes hanging at a depressed angle.

"Those poor suckers sure got a shock," Slater was saying over the inter-plane set. "There she goes!"

Prebley circled behind Winton and heard him bellowing at Number two section to save their torps, while the doomed undersea boat slithered away and disappeared, leaving a vortex of bubbles and gurgling oil.

"I told you someone was going to get hurt," Biff Thoreau's voice was mooning over the radio from somewhere above.

Then for the first time Prebley realized just what had happened. They had actually struck a blow. Someone had been killed. A lot of people had been killed—drowned. On the way down behind Biff Thoreau, it was just another tactical exercise—another day at Pensacola doing a normal surface target attack with dummy projectiles.

"Those poor suckers sure got a shock," Slater had said.

That's what you get in a war. Shock after shock. Prebley carried on, and found his position without thinking much about the business of ailerons, elevators or rudders. He tried to look back to see if there was any further evidence of the destruction his crew had caused. Craig, the gunner, was still chewing the fat over the inter-plane set, and building up a beautiful picture of the carnage they had caused.

"Blew 'em to hell and gone, sir!" he continued to squeak excitedly. "Jees! I saw our tin fish smack her just where there was a figure '7'. He sure popped out, eh?"

FOR the first time Prebley noticed that they were circling the merchantman, and that Winston's navigation guy was pounding brass on the key set to bring help to the vessel. They circled minute after minute, and while it was tight flying for the pilots trying to maintain position behind the squadron leader, they had a chance to see war at its worst down there.

The merchantman had apparently suffered a severe blow and was plainly buckling in the middle. Her big stack had lost whatever angle of sweep-back it might have flaunted. Two hatches in the forward well deck had been blown open and claws of smoke and tentacles of flame were reaching out to snatch at the crates and bales that had been piled topside.

On the lee side a number of men, stripped to the waist, were struggling to get a lifeboat clear of the davits. Another group aft were huddled together, their arms about their heads, awaiting their turn to go over and down a swaying Jacob's ladder. Someone on the bridge wing was snapping off a series of signal flashes, but for the life of him, Prebley couldn't remember a letter of the Morse code. He hoped Slater or someone would be able to read it.

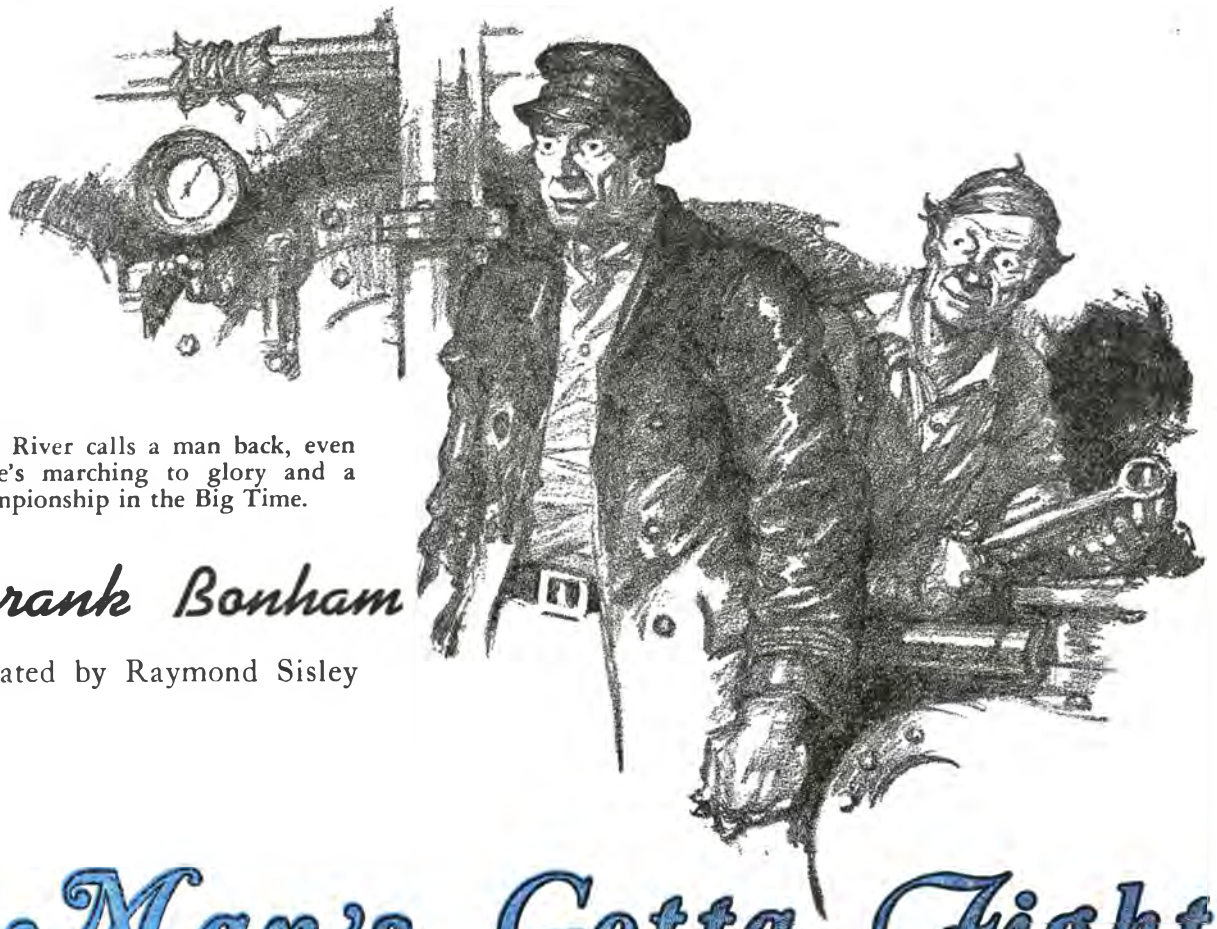
"Re-form! Re-form!" Winton was saying over the radio. "There's nothing we can do here now. Re-form—and stand by, Sections three and four."

"Poor devils!" muttered Prebley. "Where's the glory of war for those guys? What do they get out of it? They can't even go ashore in a uniform to let the world know they're in it. A few days in a water-front, a night or two in a gutter from which someone will drag them into a Seaman's Mission and sponge them off with a swab of hell-and-hymnal charity!"

"Maybe we get a citation—eh, sir?" Craig was saying from the rear pit.

Five minutes later they were back in squadron formation and turning south to pick up the carrier again.

This story of a carrier on convoy through the Battle of the Atlantic continues in our January issue.



The Big River calls a man back, even when he's marching to glory and a championship in the Big Time.

A Man's Gotta Fight

by Frank Bonham

Illustrated by Raymond Sisley

FROM the warehouses at the foot of Robin Street the sun drew the odors of tobacco, dried shrimp and new pine planks. Joe Lomas hadn't known any heat like this since he left the river. Nor had he smelled that intoxicating mix of odors.

He had thought never to smell it again, for he'd done all right since he quit the river. And besides, in a superstitious sort of way, he was afraid —afraid the river would take him by the ear and put him on a shanty-boat with a jug of corn whisky and the eternal case of malaria, and say: "Here's where you belong, shanty-man." Or give him a rouster's card and a hand-truck and show him a stack of crates.

And he didn't want a lot of memories about Bess awakened in his heart.

The impulse had come to him while he was buying his ticket in the railway station an hour ago. He had called the docks on the off chance that Ed and Bess Painter were in with the *General Beauregard.* They were, and due to straighten up for Cairo in twenty-four hours.

The rest was a matter of logic. Why not go up on the *General* as far as Memphis, since it was three days before his fight with Eddie Britton, and he could do his road-work right on the boat and maybe even stand a trick or two at the wheel as he'd done in the old days?

So here was Joe Lomas with his suitcase in his hand and a tan straw on the back of his head, and already a shadow of doubt in his heart.

For—well, there was a wrongness to things as they were that had kept him awake on many a night. Old Ed Painter, breaking down under his years. Ed, needing the kid he'd fathered for ten years, teaching him the river pilot's trade against the day he'd need him.

He needed him now. But Joe wasn't coming back. The river had whipped a lot of men, but it wasn't going to whip Joe Lomas.

Joe heard a big Red Shield boat chow-chowing black smoke from her stacks; caught a nostalgic tang of coffee beans on the hot, lazy air; and these things called up a lot of pleasant memories, and a lot that were not so pleasant.

The pleasant ones were all a sort of shiny *montage* of Bess and Joe and the *General Beauregard.* They had the muddy odor of the river and the kingly sensation of tramping the wheel of a packet in a glassed-in pilot-house that scraped the stars. River nights, a hundred of them, and the boat tied up in some sleepy backwater while Joe and Bess lay on their backs on the hurricane, talking and dreaming, two kids in love and thinking it was just the big, fragrant darkness that made them tingle.

Times like that, he had felt that if the river had any boss at all, it was Joe Lomas. Other times he felt a big foot planted on the back of his neck and knew who was really the big boss. Freight fares would be so low that it was cheaper to let the *General* saw the dock spilings months on end. A towering new line-boat would be floated, and there was that much less freight for the little boats. Or the longshoremen struck, and for weeks the wharves were a graveyard.

It was the summer of the strike when Joe Lomas realized that a man could climb just so high on the river, and if he raised his head an inch higher, he got knocked back down where he belonged. So Joe said good-by to old Ed and Bess, and in his heart he had said he would never come back.

HE knew her stacks when he saw them a block away—rust-red, topped with sooty crowns. Five years hadn't erased any lines from the *General's* dissipated visage. Dirty gray paint was cracking off by the yard; the

elegant oil painting on the fan-tail had become woefully blistered.

He crossed the sagging landing-stage. His heart was slapping his ribs like a six-ounce glove as he went up the deck. Ed would be a lot older since his heart attack, a year ago March.

They hadn't written Joe until it was all over and Ed was on the mend. Ed wrote a cheerful letter about it; a little rest, he'd needed, a little less whisky. They'd tied up the boat, lacking the price of a pilot. But they did fine. Bess got a good job in a restaurant—slinging hash.

That was Bess. Loyal as a hound pup; spunky, and full of an abiding faith that no place was fit to live but the river. Once Joe had slipped a check for a hundred in an envelope and had been about to send it. But he'd torn it up, rather than have Bess do it. Proud, those river folks!

JOE came around a stanchion and put his head in the engine-room; there were Ed Painter and Gramp Sutherland, with the "doctor" in a hundred pieces on the floor between them.

Gramp had a greasy part in his hand, and he was mad.

"We'll have steam tomorrow, like I said, and not a minute sooner! I got gaskets to make, and valves to seat. What do you want I should do—fill my boilers by bucket?"

"Put 'er back together as she is! We're leaving tonight."

Ed looked just as ungainly as ever, but he'd lost weight. He still wore the black leather cap on the back of his head. He had always made Joe think of a tow-boat: single-minded, square-headed, full of the notion that while there was a teacup of water in the Old Mississipp', there would be the need of men like him.

"Is that contraption still breaking down?" Joe said, a grin on his face.

"Joe! Well, *damn* me!"

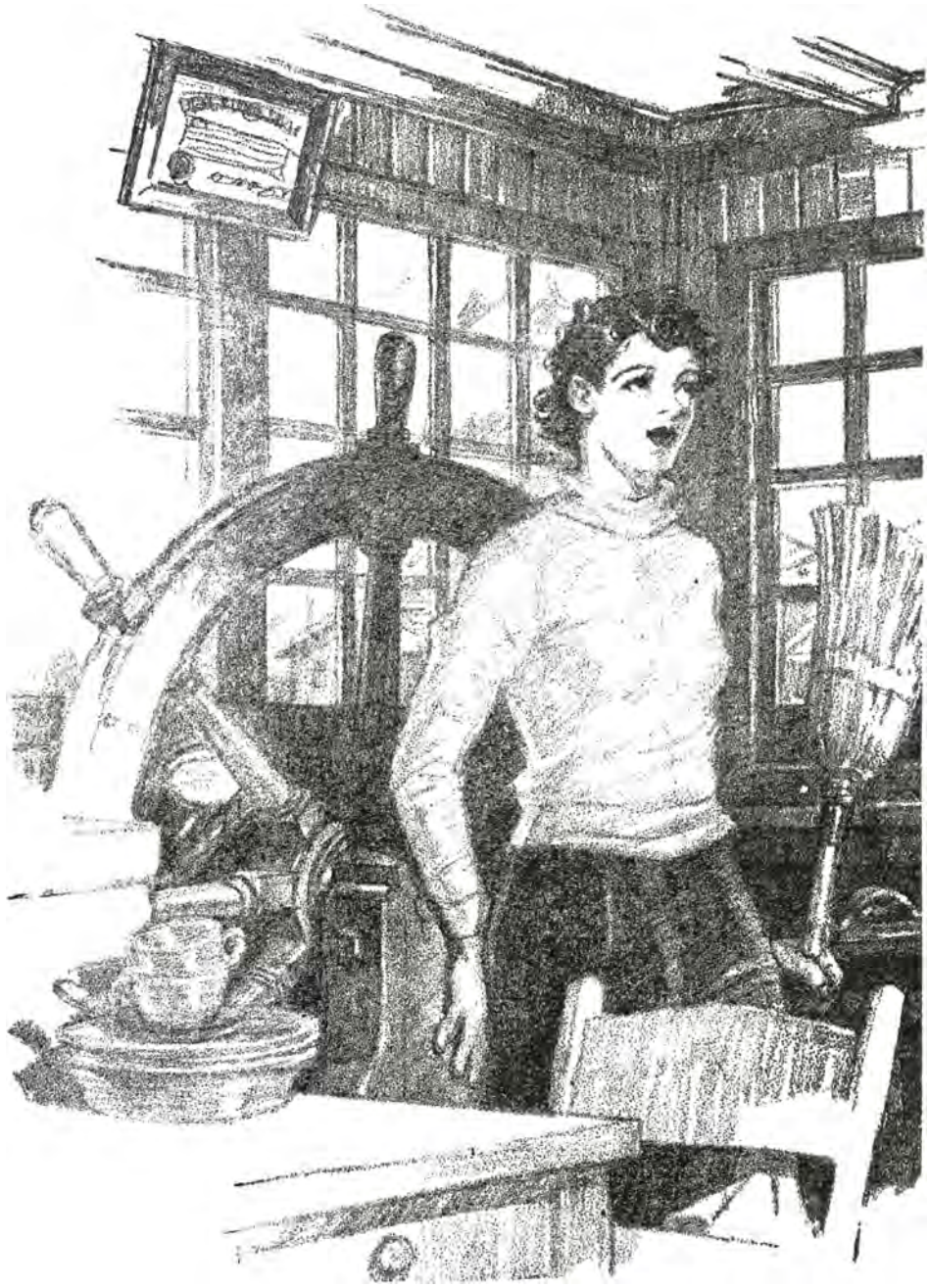
Captain Ed turned and slung his cap onto the floor, and he pumped Joe's hand while Gramp, first engineer, cackled, grinning:

"If he ever buys me a new doctor, the *Gen'ral* will plumb shed his medals! Where you from, Joe?"

"Places," Joe said. He sniffed the oily reek of the engines, finding it the same thrilling perfume as ever.

"But no place like the river," Ed said. "So you come back. You want your old job? I'm workin' short-handed. Got Bess so she can handle her long enough I can catch some sleep. But I could use a lightnin' pilot, by gravy." His face had tired lines, and his color reminded Joe of a man who has been hit over the heart.

"No," said Joe. "Just thought I might hook a ride to Memphis. I'm fighting there on the twenty-third."



"Oh," Captain Ed said, in his face disappointment. "So you're a fighter."

"I'm doing a little fighting."

A little fighting—he'd done nothing but fight since he left the river. It seemed the world was full of guys who thought they were a little tougher than a hick from the bayous who talked with a drawl. He had picked lettuce in Imperial Valley, tried tool-dressing in the oil-fields, swamped for truckers; and all the time those big fists of his were busy.

Joe was five-eleven and weighed one hundred and sixty, ringside. His bones were hard and the muscles grew close to them, lean and resilient. He had the kind of build that makes a tailor's job easy: a wide swing of shoulder, flat belly, narrow hips.

One night he took a crack at pro boxing at a place in Nashville called Jeffrey's Barn. He got ten dollars for knocking out a Mexican kid in one round. After that there were good club bouts and some prelims, and then the big time. This match with Eddie Britton pointed straight at the crown; and his manager, waiting for him in Memphis, counted heavily on it.

("We're headin' for that middle crown, Joe," he told him. "Another year. You can quote me.")

"Well," Ed said. His sudden good spirits were settling; he picked up his cap. Joe noticed that his thinning black hair was peppered with white.

"Doing good, Joe?" Ed asked.

Joe shrugged. "Eating regular. How's things on the river?"

"Good! We've got a party interested in backing us fifty per cent on a new boat. If we can tie him up—" He made a slicing motion with the edge of his hand. "We're set! The old *General* gets retired on half-pay.

Bess had to look an instant at the stranger before she knew him. Then she yipped: "Joe!"

Better get some books on Diesel and read up. When you come back, you don't want to be out of step."

He was talking big; Gramp was silently scornful. . . . Ed Painter could build higher castles out of the merest straws of rumor than any other man on the Mississippi!

"No, Ed. I'm not coming back. I found out that there's some other places besides pilot-houses and wharf-boats. Places where a man can make a few bucks. Big towns. With the river, it's like the rubes say about New York: a great place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."

It was in the steamboat man's eyes that he had a mean answer on his tongue. But he only said:

"Well, maybe you'll change your mind some day. Fighting the twenty-third, eh? We'll hit Memphis Friday. That give you enough time?"

"Just. . . . Bess around?"

He tried to make it casual; but he was conscious of overacting. Suddenly he knew why he'd come. Not for auld lang syne. Just—to see Bess. And right then Joe Lomas knew he'd been a fool to come.

"Up in the wheelhouse," Ed said. "Go on up."

Joe found her in the pilot-house with broom and dust-pan. She had to look a quizzical instant at the dark-skinned stranger in brown gabardines and white shirt, before she knew him. Then she yipped, "*Joe!*" And she was around his neck, hugging him.

It was a purely ingenuous act, but nothing she could have done would have confused him more. For one instant a lot of good intentions balanced on the edge of a chasm.

Then Bess was standing back, a little embarrassed, and pulling her jersey down to cover the strip of white skin above her skirt. Her tawny hair was caught back with a red ribbon. She was older, and her eyes were graver.

All Joe could say was: "Hello, Bess."

Bess laughed. "I didn't mean to scare you, Joe. It *is* you, isn't it? You're different."

"It's the nose," he grinned. "I tried to stop a left hook with my face."

"No, but more than that—"

She stood back to look him over; he felt like a kid just back from summer camp undergoing his mother's inspection. "You're bigger—a lot. And older."

"Three years took care of the age. The ring took care of the size. I'm fighting now."

And he went on to explain about Memphis and Eddie Britton and the three days he meant to spend on the *General Beauregard.* They talked, but it was of banalities; and just when Joe was getting his legs under him again, she laughed and tilted her face almost as if for a kiss.

"And all the time I was thinking you had come back to me. You haven't thought of me once since you left."

"I've thought of you every day." He hadn't meant it to be so fervent.

She smiled, and her teeth shone between lips that were softer and fuller than he remembered them. "Then you haven't forgotten about us. You still love me, don't you, Joe?"

As easily as that, she broke the wooden sword with which he'd armed himself. Joe felt the starch go out of him.

"You know it!" he said. "But, Bess, I won't go back on the river—not even for you. I'll take you with me today or next year or ten years from now. But—I'm not coming back."

"What's wrong with the river?"

He looked around him at the shabbiness of the wheelhouse. "There's nothing in it. What has Ed got after fifty years of fighting it? What's it done for those malaria-rotted skeletons that cuss you out when you rock their shanties? Nobody but the big outfits with a half-million dollars' worth of Diesel boats can show anything on the black side."

"You can be poor in the big towns too."

"But you can't be anything but poor here."

Bess' eyes confronted him with a faint hostility. "I didn't know," she said, "that a man could be afraid of a river."

"Afraid of it? I'm afraid of what it could do to me if I hung around long enough. I remember my dad. . . . I reckon I'd be good for nothing but rousting, if Ed hadn't sort of adopted me after whisky licked the old man."

ON the dock a big red van blew an air-horn; and Bess, turning her head, exclamed sharply:

"That Smoky! I told him to keep away from here."

Joe watched a chunky man in a dirty panama hat swing open the back doors of the van and throw down the loading-ramp. Bess started down there.

"Trouble?" asked Joe.

In the pause he sensed annoyance. "Not exactly. Only, we don't like his kind of freight."

Joe sat on the pilot's stool, his glance hefting the small pile of freight on the head. He recalled Ed's hurry to be

"Cap—you go talk to Conklin. Meantime, I'll start unloading."

getting up a head of steam for departure, that had been causing friction between him and Gramp when he boarded. Ed Painter, it seemed to Joe, was not in a position to refuse any man's business.

He went below and stood on the boiler deck above the heel. Bess and Ed were on the wharf, and the man called Smoky was now seated on the back of the truck, letting them both talk at once. Ed had his feet wide apart and his fists against his hips.

Smoky nodded, pulling at his lower lip. Facing Joe as he was, his voice carried:

"I see what you mean. Tell you what, Cap—you go talk to Conklin yourself. In the meantime I'll start unloading."

Joe Lomas knew, then, that something was wrong; for Ed Painter took it. Took guff from a teamster! Boatmen, even tired and sick ones, didn't do that. Ed came back to the packet, and his brogans rang in the companionway. He went up to the texas; directly the door of his cabin slammed, and down he came again. He left the boat and headed north.

IT did not occur to Joe that he was snooping, in following Ed, for Ed's welfare and that of Bess were things of sharpest importance to Joe; and there were indications that matters were slightly out of focus on the *General Beauregard*. Maybe there was some palooka who had Captain Ed in a corner over a little money.

The thought was somehow heartening. He would feel better about things if he could retire some of the principal on the debt he owed Ed.

Following the stooped figure in the black leather jacket, he went past the dungeon-like entrances of the crumbling buildings of the French Quarter. Captain Ed knew where he was going. He moved along under overhanging balconies, down many-scented streets where Negro women with trays on their heads hawked sweets, and sailors, artists and panhandlers mingled.

At a small French restaurant called Maison Albert he turned in; and here Joe, glancing inside a moment later, saw him stop at a booth in back where a man in shirt-sleeves was working over a big account-book. Joe saw the man look up as Ed slid into the seat across from him.

He was nearly bald, and his heavy jowls were blue. His eyes were black and bright; busy eyes, like those of some small animal. He wore a black bow tie and a pongee shirt, and soiled linen pants.

Joe sat down in the next booth, with only the thin green partition between his back and Ed's. A waiter with a dirty towel over his arm came up. He looked sleepy and his voice was careless: *"Oui?"*

"Cup of coffee." Joe grunted it, so that Captain Ed would not hear.

He picked up a ketchup-stained newspaper. In the next booth, Ed Painter's words were husky.

"Aint you got it through your petrified skull yet? I'm done—finished with it! There's plenty other boats in the harbor. Find somebody else to carry your damn'—"

He didn't finish. Conklin said with nasal petulance: "Why kick up such a fuss over a few crates of shrimp?"

"Shrimp! If that was all! But I aint kidding when I say I'm done." In the pause, Joe could feel the partition

move as Ed shifted. "I brought this along—to make it businesslike; you know?"

Joe's heart gave a surging, upward bounce. Something was laid with a slight thump upon the table. "*Ed!*" he thought. "*Has his brain gone lame as well as his ticker?*"

But Conklin's response was a snort. "Put it away before some dick runs you in on a Sullivan. What's the matter—aint the pay good enough? Two hundred for a two-hundred-mile haul is better than you've made since the Civil War."

Ed Painter was old and tired and defeated. He put the gun away. He said wearily: "It aint the pay. It's the whole idea. It's the risk."

"The risk aint any bigger than getting me sore. You've been paid by check. I've still got those checks. If it's one of us gets in trouble, Painter, it's both."

Ed got up. Conklin said, as if in afterthought: "I guess I and Smoky will run up to Bearpaw Slough tonight. See you around sunset tomorrow. You'll be there?"

ON Julia Street Joe caught up with him. Ed gave him a sharp look. Then he twisted his lips into a grin. "Where you been, Champ?"

"In a fly-specked joint called Maison Albert—next to the last booth in back."

Ed took it with a tightening of the lips. "It's nice to have a nursemaid to follow me around. Maybe you better wipe off my chin and tuck in my shirt-tail."

"How'd you get in this mess? What've you been running—dope?"

Ed stopped and wearily leaned against a dock piling. Joe had seen faces like his just before he laid that last punch on the point.

"The old standby," said Ed. "Alky. The crates are partly frozen shrimp. We keep them in the cold locker. Underneath, it's five-gallon cans of alky."

"All this time I've been dying to help you if you'd give me the sign; and you take up with an outfit like Conklin."

Ed sighed. "I know it, kid. But first it was—well, sort of legitimate. He offered good money to get it across the line. I knew it was more than shrimp. But I didn't look, so I was sort of inside the law. Then I got to thinking—maybe it's dope! I opened a case. I told Bess. We've tried to dodge him. Hit the docks, unload, haul out again. But it's no good."

"Who's this guy Conklin?"

"Restaurant man, he calls himself. He's got some kind of a rat-poison distillery back in the sticks. Bootlegging didn't die out in '32—not by a damsight." He looked at Joe, half of his mouth turned in a grin. "Maybe I ought to write to Beatrice Fairfax. Any suggestions?"

"Refuse to haul it, and how can he squawk to anybody?"

Ed started walking again. "All I got in the world," he said, "is a broken-down steamboat and the grandest girl in the world. I'd hate to have anything happen to either of them."

"There's that angle too," Joe agreed.

All during the bustle of leaving, these things churned around in Joe's mind. "*The old fool! To get himself in a jackpot like this.*" Then he would remember that if he had come back a year ago, it wouldn't have happened.

But it had happened, and what was to be done about it? Conklin seemed very sure of himself, confident of having Ed under the forked stick with those checks. Maybe—a good strong *maybe*—they could be bent into a boomerang to slap him in the back of the neck. Joe thought they could....

It was late afternoon when Gramp Sutherland got the doctor—the steam pump that kept his boilers full—reassembled. At sunset the *General Beauregard* rolled her wheel and smoked up, and with Captain Ed at the wheel, she went 'scaping up the channel.

Beyond town the river looked lower than Joe had ever seen it. All the old marks seemed miles back from the banks. Doubling back and forth like a hound coming through a wheat-field, the packet sought the deepest water; but it was pool water everywhere.

Once she smelled a bar, shaking her timbers as though she would collapse. Ed rang double gong and lifted her across by the very boot-straps. He went with increasing caution after that.

Joe put on trunks and sweater and found a corner of the head that was dark. He did some shadow-boxing and skipped rope, and afterward stretched his legs in a few turns of the guard. With sweat drenching him, he put on a dressing-robe and sat in the darkness watching the river-bank creep by.

Creep—it was slower than that! All at once Joe wished he'd never got this crazy notion of going up by boat. The train would have been sure, and safe.

The pilot-house was dark. When he went up, Ed Painter's form was sketched in rough strokes against the gray of the river.

"Is this the best we can do?" he asked him.

"May have to go to the bank before morning. Never seen her so shoal."

"Listen, Ed—that date in Memphis isn't a gag—I've got to make it!"

"We'll make it."

His placid confidence was exasperating, because Joe knew as well as he that they couldn't lie up overnight and make it. . . .

They got through the night somehow. Joe awoke tired, his nerves snarled up like a wad of string. He'd go into the ring tight as a drum-head—tired and tense. Eddie Britton was a butcher when they threw a man like that in the ring against him.

The channel was so tricky that Joe, not knowing the marks any more, did not try to handle her. They wallowed on with clanking engines, through the red river of morning, splashed with scarlet; the dull brown currents of midday, that marked with slow whorls the danger-spots; the beaten-brass river of afternoon.

And now the sun was gone, and Bess and Ed and Joe were all up in the darkened wheelhouse with their supper plates on the table. Ed Painter spoke to them from the wheel.

"Yonder's Bearpaw Slough."

They looked out at a wide, marshy bayou; and while Ed swung the *General* toward it, a lantern came on in the lush tangle of cypress and rank jungle growth.

"It's the last time," he said darkly. "By gravy, it's the last."

Then Joe was beside him, hauling the wheel around so that the boat warped back to mid-channel.

"Wrong," he said. "Last time was the last."

Ed looked at him with a kind of panic. "I told you! He'll get me—"

"Ed," Joe Lomas said patiently, "*we've* got *him*. You're going down there and tell the mate you've got a bee in your britches about what's in those crates. He doesn't know, does he? . . . Good. Get him to open one. Then you blow up about what kind of a boat does Conklin think you're running? At Memphis you turn it all over to the Government. If he springs those checks—fine! They only prove you've innocently tripped for him before. It'll be ten raps instead of one!"

IT was quiet, then, with the cross-compound engines thudding dully against the timbers and small waves washing fretfully against the bow. Slowly Ed began to nod.

"With a head like that," he said, "you'll lick this Eddie Britton without him laying a glove on you. Take the wheel. No time like now to try it!"

Joe rang half speed. Ed went below. Off to starboard, Bearpaw Slough was sliding past. "Conklin and Smoky are going to be mad," Joe said. "To think of any old geezer like Ed stealing their marbles!"

"I wonder just how mad," Bess said thoughtfully. "They might follow us."

"We can take care of them," Joe said. . . .

Soon they heard wood splinter, and then Ed's voice raised in anger. There was some stir below. But Joe was busy reading the river's fine print, and spoking off from every suspicious whirlpool and streak, and he caught

little of it until Ed Painter came stamping up the steps. He let a heavy box drop. He faced the door so that anyone below would hear.

"Can you tie that! I've been carrying contraband for that Conklin outfit all these months! Look at that—packages of frozen shrimp on top—imported grain alcohol underneath!"

He let a pause gather. Then: "By gravy, we'll turn it over to the revenue boys in Memphis. Conklin will get striped sunlight for this!"

Joe was glad to turn the wheel over when Ed came forward.

"We're into it whole hog, now. Conklin will try to turn me back sure as hell," said Ed breathlessly.

AFTER that there was a vigilance in Ed's bearing. For Joe it was still like one of those dreams in which a man runs like mad on a treadmill and never gets anywhere. The old *General* went shambling along on slow bell. The channel was increasingly perilous; Memphis seemed a long way off. Ed put a leadsman on the bow, and his sing-song musical cries came through the open window: "Quarter-less-twain!"

A boat of the *General Beauregard's* draft was not safe in water shallower than half-less-twain—nine feet. Ed lost his jubilance. When the shuddering craft seemed contemplating disintegration, he said:

"We've got to go to the bank."

"And lay up twelve hours?" Joe snapped. "I can't get a postponement this late. It'll set me back six months, to default. How much farther to Memphis?"

Ed hesitated. "Two days, if we lay up."

Joe stood with muscles carving his face into sour lines. "Then we're going through," he said. "I'll take the dinghy and pilot you."

He set out in the small-boat with a sounding-line and a dozen lantern-buoys. It was still oppressively warm, the river's stagnant backwaters stewing with mosquito wigglers and malaria. He rowed, sounded, set out lighted buoys. The packet crept along behind, a deck-hand picking up the buoys as they came upon them.

It was after about a half-hour of this that Joe noticed a difference in the sound of the boat's engines. Through the steady clank came a bass drone, fading, then swelling until suddenly Joe knew it was a new sound: the song of motor-driven screws.

The *General Beauregard* was about two hundred yards below him. A cabin-boat, running dark, came out of the gloom to quarter ahead of her. When the cruiser turned downstream, Joe could see two shapes patterned against the windshield of the open cabin. The launch churned alongside the larger craft.

Joe heard Bess scream; he turned to discover Smoky in back of Ed: in his down-flashing fist was a sap.

Joe swore and began to row, steadily, strongly, saving himself. Gaining the boat, he threw the painter to a rouster who had just finished making fast the cruiser.

"That Mistuh Conklin," the Negro said, "and that Smoky fella—they's aboa'd. You reckon theh's going to be trouble?"

"Not much trouble," Joe said.

He went up, breathing deeply, not hurrying, getting his wind again. The pilot-house door at the top of the companionway was open; the ceiling light burned. Joe stood in the portal and saw Ed facing, from the wheel, two men who had their backs to Joe.

"Back she goes, Pop," Conklin said. "It aint as easy as this. And I think we'd better cook up something one of these days to keep it from happening again."

Joe said, coming into the room: "It isn't going to. Not any."

Smoky was nearest; Joe took him first, hitching up his belt as he came.

The man fell back, reaching into his pocket. Joe did not need to see the gun to know he must finish this fast.

With an unbelievably long left he tagged the man on the nose. Smoky fell against the wall, but succeeded in ripping the automatic from his pocket. Joe heard Conklin go after Ed; heard Ed grunt, and was afraid for what the heavier man would do if he landed one over that heart.

He went in close to Smoky, battering him with body blows while the man struggled to jack a shell into the breech. Smoky tried to turn aside; and here Joe caught him in the belly with a blow that brought him to his knees, gasping, green-faced. Joe scooped up the gun and hurled it out the window.

Conklin had Ed in a corner. Bess was clawing at him; but those big, slogging fists kept pumping into the boatman's body.

Joe crossed the carpet fast. Conklin heard him, and held the cocked fist that would have put Ed down, maybe for good. Conklin faced him, and he was wary, knowing Joe had murder in his fists and the ability to land them when and where he chose. But the man looked tough enough, and even a boxer is not immune to haymakers planted on an overconfident jaw; so Joe was watchful.

HE jabbed Conklin around, trying to get him to open up. Conklin boxed with him, taking those stinging punches without losing his head and

trying to slug. Then Joe feinted with his right; as Conklin covered up, he pounded the unguarded head with a hard left. He was after him as the man staggered.

Joe led him around with stabbing lefts, and when Conklin's face was cut to pieces, he brought in the siege-gun power of his right. It went home against the heavy blue jaw and turned off the lights in Conklin's brain.

That was when Joe heard Bess scream, and he turned to discover that Smoky was back in the fight. He was in back of Ed; and in his down-flashing fist was a black leather sap.

Bess' cry seemed to freeze Ed. There was no time for him to have ducked the blow, anyway.

Joe saw what had to be done. There was no apparent hesitation, but in the instant before he acted, he thought of several things: Of Memphis, and Eddie Britton; of the big towns, where money came easily to a boy who knew how to use his fists and his head; of his father, drowning in the Mississippi after he fell in one night, dead drunk.

Then Joe's arm went up like a semaphore between Ed's head and the blackjack. The shot-weighted leather struck, and he felt bone crack and sharp pain shot clear up to his shoulder.

Joe's arm dropped, and the sap flashed up again and Smoky was coming at him, Ed darting out of the way.

Joe was instantly inside Smoky's guard, driving with the savage power of his good right arm to the man's chin. It took him clean and square, snapping his head back and lifting him to his toes. His broken jaw aslant, Smoky looked at Joe. He took a wobbling step toward Joe; then his legs buckled and down he crashed on his face.

THE *General Beauregard* pulled into a little village twenty miles upstream. Here a doctor set Joe's arm, and an excited sheriff took two half-frozen men out of the cold-locker.

Ed looked at Joe as he lay on the wheelhouse cot with his splinted arm across the bottom of a chair.

"You!" he said. "Taking that sap instead of letting me have it. Letting him bust your wing. You knew what would happen."

"It was that or your skull," Joe said. "Call it back interest on what I owe you."

"You owe me nothing," Ed replied doggedly.

"I've been doing a lot of figuring the last couple of years," Joe told him. "And it's all been for Joe Lomas. Nobody else counted, just so Joe got where he was going."

Bess sat near him, her blue eyes troubled. She said: "You're still going there, Joe. The arm will be all right in six months. You aren't going to give up all your plans now."

"No," said Joe. "There'll be other fights. But this time I'll know what I'm fighting for, because I can't come back to the river till I've got that championship and all the money that goes with it. Maybe two more years. Then I'm coming back, and we'll take on the toughest champion of them all—the river. Keep your eyes open for a boat that the *General* and a few thousand will make a down payment on, Ed. In between fights I'm going to be studying—about Diesel."

"You do that," Ed said, smiling; and because he was an understanding man and knew how it was with two youngsters in love, he went down on the hurricane and smoked his pipe.

He heard the hot rush of steam from the 'scape valve, and it seemed to him the old *General Beauregard* was sighing, knowing there would be only another year or so until he could settle down in his bunker and gratefully give himself over to rust and relaxation: Not a bad idea, by gravy!

The Nice Tough Guys

THE Behemoths stood about, staring at Eddy. Even without pads, in this last practice session, they were giants. They were scarred and tough, and their belief in Eddy's words was childlike and complete. He said:

"We use their own variation of old K79 against them, and then we try to hold them. If we stop Carroll and Resnevich, we win. What more can I tell you?"

He sent them to the dressing-room, detaining only Bob Hudson. Eddy was careful with Bob, explaining what he wanted. He said: "You're the kid can do it. They'll be looking for Joey and Tom to run. You will cross them up."

The kid said: "I'll be in there, chum. I'll show you!"

He dashed off. He was big and solid, like a rock—only rocks can't run swift and hard the way Bob Hudson can. Maybe Eddy could, ten years ago, but right now Bob was the best fullback in the league. Eddy had made him, in one short season. Eddy was very proud of him. . . .

Eddy went into the private office he rated as coach of the Behemoths of the National Pro League. He grinned a bit ruefully at the craggy features which peered back from the spotty mirror. Maybe he had overdone it a little with Bob Hudson. He shrugged off his jersey, and did not think about that. He was still hard and fit, except for that knee. Nineteen years of football, and he still could go a little. He shook his head, innocently marveling at himself.

Steve Coth came in. Steve had grown gray owning the Behemoths, but he had enjoyed it in his frantic way. He had made a little money too, but this year the U. S. O. had taken the profits; and tomorrow against the Mastodons for the championship the Behemoths were short-enders. Steve said worriedly:

"Have we got a chance?"

"Well," said Eddy, "yes."

"But a little one," said Steve.

"Well," said Eddy, "you're right."

Steve walked up and down. He said: "I wish you would get excited.

"I could punt one right into your teeth, you big stupid cow!" she said to him. But—she changed her mind.

by JOEL REEVE

Eddy walked right in on them and said foolishly: "You two having fun?"

I wish you would get mad at somebody some day."

Eddy considered this. His blue eyes were as mild as violets upon a hillside. His nose was twisted slightly to the left, and he had a habit of running a thumb along its broken ridge. He said: "Why?"

"That Hudson kid!" exploded Steve. "I thought you and Jane—He's underfoot all the time. He and Jane, running to dances and movies. . . . You made that Hudson. You gave him your job and taught him how to play it. Now he's stealing Jane from you!"

Eddy said: "Hey! Lay off, Steve. You're a pal. You're great, see? But don't fret about Jane; she's all right."

"I don't like it!" Steve's hair stood on end when he was excited. It amused Eddy. "You put out for everyone and anyone, and they kick you around. Now you're going into the Navy and let that kid have Jane."

"He's entering the flying service," said Eddy gently. "Fine boy. I like that boy."

Steve flung wide his arms and gave up. After all, it was Eddy's genius as a coach to have the men all know that he believed in them. It had been a fine thing for the Behemoths these nine years that Eddy had been among them.

Steve said: "You're a nice guy, Eddy. But you're a first-class dope, sometimes!"

Eddy said, "Yep!" and took his shower, whistling while he washed.

AT the Coth apartment, which was practically home, Eddy walked right in on them. Jane Coth was in beige slacks, which became her, and a sweater which was even more so. Bob Hudson was kissing her.

Eddy said foolishly: "You two having fun?"

Bob went into a tap step and slammed Eddy on the shoulder, a blow which would have felled a lesser man. He said: "Maybe she'll marry me. She said *maybe!* How about that, chum? How about *that?*"

Eddy said: "That's just dandy. That's super. . . . You better get some sleep, Bob. It's eleven o'clock."

"Sleep? Who needs sleep? With a chance at Jane, I'll be murderous out there. I'll kill those Mastodons!"

"Sure," said Eddy. "But that sleep is the stuff." He was pleasant, but firm. He got Bob out of there. He was the best-natured coach in the world, but he believed in slumber before a game. It would be tough in there tomorrow, with Carroll and Resnevich pounding at the line.

Jane said: "Well, Mr. Eddy Britton?"

He looked down at her. She had skin like cream—only it wasn't really, Eddy knew. He had seen plenty of cream back home on the farm. Cream was yellowish. Her skin was—well, it was smooth and good to touch. Eddy was not a poet. He was a blocking fullback.

"Bob is a good one," said Eddy. "Solid. He's got that spark."

Jane was very tall, but she had to put back her head to stare into Eddy's broad face. She said: "I may marry him. He's cute. He takes me places. He talks about something besides football."

"Sure," said Eddy. "I know. Bob's fine."

Jane put her hands upon her slim hips and said coldly: "If they cut you open, they would find a football inside of you. You're a nice guy, Eddy. But sometimes you're the dumbest man in the world."

Eddy said: "Now wait, Jane. You know I love you. Ever since you were eleven years old, I have loved you. But I'm thirty-two. Bob's twenty-four. If you choose him, that's natural and right. When the war is over, he'll be a top man at whatever he wants to do."

"You love me!" said Jane. "I should set up housekeeping in the end zone, with a gasoline stove and a couple of sleeping-bags! Eddy, you're impossible. You never even get mad! I saw that Magoon punch you in the face three times, and you didn't even protest."

"Magoon was mad," Eddy pointed out. "Only dumb football-players get mad. Magoon is strong but stupid."

"That's not the point!" said Jane. "You're so—so placid. Bob is—" She stopped. She went on carefully, in a different tone: "I like Bob. But I didn't say I'd marry him. I said 'maybe.' He seems all right, but I scarcely know him."

Eddy rubbed his thumb along his nose. Some day he would have to let a doctor look at that nose. He said: "Bob's a great kid. I'm telling you."

Jane's eyes filled with tears. They spilled over and ran down her cheeks, just as they had when she was a little girl, when Eddy had first come with the Behemoths. He fumbled for a handkerchief, avoiding her gaze.

Then she was furious with him, and she said: "I could punt one right into your teeth, you big stupid cow!"

She ran into her bedroom and shut the door. Eddy could hear the key turn in the lock. He stood there, rubbing his nose like a silly fool. After a moment he left.

Down in the street, walking, he thought it all out: He thought about how he loved Jane, and his heart melted and ran all over inside him, and it hurt a lot. But on the other hand he thought about Bob Hudson's youth and good looks and cleanliness, and what could he do?

Eddy had the one thing to make him a great coach of football. He had love for his fellow-men. He had loyalty to his friends. Once Eddy took a man in, he stood not by him but before him, sheltering him with fierce devotion.

They all knew it, Cats Catimo, Joey Gans, Tom Peake, all the huskies of the line, even the least substitute. The success of the undermanned Behemoths was predicated upon the fact that Eddy's men would do better than lie down and die for him—they would get up and fight when there was little or nothing left with which to battle.

Bob Hudson had come unheralded, a husky boy with speed and dash. Eddy had liked him, had worked with him long hours alone, teaching him fullback lore. The kid had learned without effort. He could run the ball better than Eddy ever could; he could reverse and get away. On defense he was solid and sure. Of course Eddy had relieved him when the going got very tough. It was no use to kill the kid, first year. . . .

All right, Bob loved Jane. What could Eddy do—knock the boy to her? Bob was all right. Things would have to take their course. Eddy could not help it. . . .

He was walking too far. He hopped into a cab and went home. He put his trick knee into a baking-machine he kept privately so that the team would not worry about him. He let the heat penetrate the tissues of his leg, and determinedly thought about tomorrow and the Mastodons.

Somehow he could not concentrate. He shook his head miserably and gave up. He lay there thinking about Jane Coth.

Cats Catimo seemed to have something on his sharp mind. He came into the office and said: "Look, Eddy: Why don't you start? The boys all want you in there."

Eddy grinned, tying a lace with sure fingers. "Hudson will start. You know what to do, Cats."

"Nobody is arguing with you," said Cats. "Nobody has any ideas except yours. It's your club. But today will be tough."

"You call the plays, chum," said Eddy. "You're all right."

He picked Cats up and dumped him gently out into the dressing-room. The chatter stopped, and everyone looked at Eddy. Steve Coth was there, his hair every which way.

These were Eddy's men. He had nurtured them and bled with them and listened to their problems and played with their babies and flattered their wives. He had loaned them money and held their hands while stitches were taken in their anatomies. There was precious little sentiment in this gang, but there was something extra for Eddy when he asked for it.

He said: "What you looking at, you apes? Get on out there!"

They went out, stomping like a herd of buffalo. Bob Hudson was shining with enthusiasm, confident in his youth and strength. Steve plucked at Eddy's jersey and said:

"I took three to one and bet the bank-roll."

"Nice going!" said Eddy. "Three to one, eh? Nice!"

Steve said: "The bank-roll, Eddy! The works!"

"You always do," grinned Eddy. "Some fun, huh?"

Steve groaned and rushed away. Eddy went out and found Jane in the owner's box, right behind the bench. He went over, as always, and said: "You look wonderful, baby!"

She wore a perky hat and a fur cape. She said: "Is Bob going to start?"

"You watch him," said Eddy. "Watch him on that weak-side play I told you about."

She said: "Cats wanted you in there. He told me."

"Cats should have kittens," said Eddy. "Some joke, huh? See you later, baby."

Cats went out to call the toss, and the team clustered about Eddy. He said: "I guess we all know it's our last game. Until the war's over, anyway. But that's malarkey. Hell—you're all right! Get out there—Cats won the toss!"

He stalked back to the bench and huddled among the reserves. He was trembling a little, as usual, and he had to fight his emotion to keep his head clear and his eyes upon the Mastodons, to plot against them. It always did him that way, even after nineteen years. . . .

Magoon kicked off, but Cats ran it back to the twenty-five, and the bat-

tle was joined. The Mastodons had weight and knew how to use it. Cats had to kick.

Then the Behemoths showed some stuff and held for two downs, and the Mastodons kicked. It was pretty even right now, in the beginning. Later the Mastodon reserve strength would count. Eddy leaned forward, watching Cats.

The Behemoths went into the short punt to the left. Cats was pulling it! Eddy knew it, as sure as sunrise! The ball went to Cats, was faked, was handed to Hudson.

There went Bob, with the Mastodon secondary sucked over and the way clear. Eddy and the reserves came off the bench, howling like Comanches. Bob crisscrossed like a pony back, evading Carroll. He ran free and wide.

Cats got over and whammed Pete Haley. Magoon dived and missed by a hair. Bob ran strong, like a blooded horse. He hit the sidelines, picked up blocking. He went ahead, and all the Mastodons strung out behind—and there was a nice touchdown for the underdogs.

Eddy sat back and breathed deeply. His chest hurt. He had been holding his breath for moments. He watched Cats kick the goal, and his joy-cup ran over. They had stolen a march and gained that early lead.

Kid Munch, the second-string quarterback, chattered: "Did you invent this game, Eddy? Did you make up all the little rules and everything? How do you feel now, Mr. Football?"

"Fine," said Eddy. "But watch those Mastodons now!"

Mulleavy kicked to them. Flugel carried all the way to the thirty, and the Mastodons settled down to their business.

It was brutal business. Resnevich the Great Pole, and Carroll the Tough Celt, began to slug. They hit at the line, without deception. They bit off little chunks of dirt, just enough for first downs. They swarmed over midfield, battering and clawing.

It was slow work, and sometimes it bogged down, but when the pinch came, they put it over, and the Behemoths moved back. Eddy sent in a guard with instructions to play closer to center. He sent in a tackle to play wider of the guard. . . . The Mastodons came on.

Bob Hudson was backing up on the left side. He seemed to be in there, and he was taking a beating. Eddy watched him dive under the blockers as the ball stopped on the Behemoth twenty, and saw that Bob had missed his man, that Joey Gans made the play.

Over on the other side, big Mastodon reserves began warming up. Eddy said: "All right, we'll match them as long as we can."

He took seven men out there, leaving Cats and Joey and Tom and Mulleavy, the great end, on the field. He patted Bob on the shoulder and said: "Fine run, kid!"

"Tough guys! They want to play rough," Bob grumbled.

Eddy chuckled. "It's a rough game, kid." He pushed Bob toward the bench. It had been pretty brutal, he supposed. The Mastodons were uttering rude and threatening remarks. Eddy laughed at them. The Behemoths joined him. The Mastodons were not fooling; but then, no one had expected them to!

It was pay dirt, and Resnevich hurled himself at the tackle. Eddy shifted over. He picked up someone who was leading the blockers and threw the man back on the play. He followed in, diving. He hit Resnevich right smack center.

The Pole lay there a moment, and Eddy was afraid he had hurt him, but Resnevich got up and seemed all right. He had only made two yards. Eddy said: "Not enough! Come again."

Carroll came. Eddy analyzed the play and drifted in without fanfare. He charged among them, dropped Carroll in his tracks. Fists beat at him in the pile-up, proving that the Mastodons were annoyed. That big Magoon took an extra wallop, and Eddy said: "Tchk-tchk! Naughty boy." Magoon tore his hair in frenzy.

It was very amusing. They tried to run wide, but Mulleavy ran Flugel out of bounds. Then they tried to place-kick, and Mulleavy tore in and batted it away. Eddy hugged Mulleavy, and the Behemoths took the ball on the twenty.

The boys were all very happy. Cats ran it for luck, and when Eddy faked Magoon out of the hole, Cats slid through for a first down. The Behemoths took fire.

They made eight on a cross-buck. Cats called a signal. He took the ball and tucked it into Eddy's middle. Eddy did a quick step and a dive. He struck into flesh, and it gave. He made a first down.

It was lovely. More Mastodon subs came in. The Behemoths were hot. They went down to the thirty, the twenty. It was second and eight, down there, and Eddy knew the ballgame could be won right here. Another score for the Behemoths, and the spark would go out of the Mastodons and not all that slugging power would bring it back.

He called for time. He turned to the bench and started walking off. Bob Hudson was racing onto the field. Cats turned away to hide his chagrin, and Mulleavy cursed thoughtfully. Eddy wrapped himself in a blanket and waved at Jane.

She was sitting on the edge of her chair, her lower lip caught between her teeth. She did not see Eddy's gesture. She was watching the field—watching Bob, Eddy thought numbly.

He sat down, making himself look at the play, telling himself for the hundredth time that it was right. Bob looked poised, ready, out there. Cats was using the short punt; they would be looking for that same play.

Cats faked it pretty. It looked like a fake; the Mastodons knew it, and let Bob run to the short side, without the ball. Cats faded, abruptly.

Bob was in the flat, about on the ten. Nobody but Carroll was near him. It was perfect, and every spectator could see it coming. Cats drew back his arm and pegged the ball like a bullet. It led Bob by a step, right on to victory.

Carroll made a superhuman effort. He was almost there. He leaped, and

Eddy said: "It could have happened to anyone. Carroll elbowed him. Maybe you couldn't see it—"

Bob went up with him. The ball hit right into Bob's hands.

Then it made a little bow, all by itself, up in the air. Carroll snatched it. Carroll ran. The Mastodons were doing a splendid job of blocking the amazed and confounded Behemoths. Carroll ran ninety yards for a touchdown. In another moment the score was tied at seven all.

ON the bench there was complete silence. No one cursed Bob. Eddy sat and stared, not believing it.

The half dragged on and ended without incident, with the Behemoths battered by power and stubbornly refusing to give up. Eddy ran over for a word with Jane. He said:

"It could have happened to anyone. Carroll intercepted, that's all."

Jane said: "Yes?"

"Sure," said Eddy. "The kid's good. Carroll elbowed him, anyway. Maybe you couldn't see it—"

"I could see it," said Jane. "Go and wipe their noses and talk pretty to them." She seemed in a bad humor. Eddy went away.

The team was very silent when Eddy came in. There was something wrong. He went among them, talking against it. They had never been like this before. He told them all he had learned from the bench. He came to Bob Hudson and looked down at the kid with kindly eyes. "Play a little closer on the bucks, kid. They're tough, huh?"

Bob's dark eyes were stormy. "Carroll gave me the arm! I'd have eaten that pass if he hadn't elbowed me!"

The words rushed into a pool of silence, and Eddy knew the others had been awaiting them. He knew that Bob had put out the alibi to the club, before he came in. He knew what was the matter with them, now. Bob went on, as though unable to stop: "I had a clear field. If that umpire wasn't blind, he'd have given me that pass. And what was Carroll doing there? Whose man was he? If I can't get blocking—"

Eddy said hastily: "There's the whistle. Out on the field, you apes! Same starting line-up! Go on and take it!"

He made them hustle, and went on to the bench. He sat quietly on the hard seat among his silent reserves. The game began again; it went this way and it went that way; and Eddy sat without words, watching Hudson.

The Mastodons got a break and ran the ball to the Behemoth twenty. The power unleashed itself at the left flank, Carroll carrying. Eddy saw Hudson start into it. The kid seemed steady, sure.

Eddy took a deep breath and held it. The kid was all right, after all. He was taking it. He was young, and he would talk a lot, but that didn't matter. So long as he was sure of himself, so long as he had the stamina, the heart—

Magoon was there, using his hands illegally where the officials could not see. Magoon would do it every time. He belted Bob with a left hook.

Bob belted back. Bob belted fine, with a swinging full arm. He smeared Magoon in the dirt. But the hole was there, and Carroll bulled through, and Bob was out of it, and Cats flew through the air and just barely nipped the Irishman on the ten-yard line. The whistle sounded like a dirge in Eddy's burning ears.

HUDSON was bleeding. He was turning toward the referee, gesticulating with one hand, holding his nose with the other. The gore ran through his fingers. Magoon had not missed.

Eddy grabbed his headguard. Cats grabbed Hudson. Eddy ran onto the field, and Cats was hauling Bob away, not allowing him to protest to the officials, propelling him toward the sidelines; and the expression on Cats' face was not pretty.

Eddy said sharply: "Let him alone, Cats." He took Bob by the elbow and looked into the distorted, angry face. He said: "Go sit down, Bob. Cool off."

"He's been slugging me all afternoon, the dirty—"

"You've got to cool off," said Eddy. "This is for keeps, Bob. Jane is watching. Hold onto it, pal."

He saw Bob fight for control, saw that he had got through the film of rage. He patted the broad back and said: "That's it. Take a rest and wipe your nose, pal."

Cats had a cut over his eye. Mulleavy sported a mouse with brilliant hues. They gathered around Eddy. He said to them: "My fault, every bit. I expected the kid to take more than his share. I babied him, then left him in. Now let's see what can be done."

Time was in, and the Mastodons were coming. Magoon chose Eddy. Magoon was no respecter of persons. His fist swung, and Carroll was right behind him with the ball.

Eddy ducked under the fist and got a shoulder into Magoon's middle. He lifted and drove, and Carroll could not get by, and the three of them went down—and Eddy was on top of Magoon, just with his shoulder and the strength of him.

MAGOON did not arise. They brought in a big new tackle who looked skeptically at Eddy. Eddy spat on his hands and laughed some more, but bitterly.

The Pole crashed at Eddy's weakening line. They went to the five, with Eddy underneath. Cats was weeping a little in sheer futility. The boys got up slow.

The Mastodons were crushing them. They had ousted Bob Hudson, and they were beating down Eddy's slim forces. It was the last game, and the Behemoths had the brains and the courage; but their opponents had the strength.

Eddy stood up and looked. Resnevich was calling the signal. The Mastodons were very confident, swaggering into their formation to the right. Something exploded in Eddy.

They had hurt Bob Hudson, therefore Jane. They had pushed the Behemoths down to the wall, and now they were going to finish it. They had insulted his men and beaten them, and never would there be a chance for revenge.

Eddy pulled in close to the strong side. He pulled out his tackle, moved him back. He went up on the line and waited. Resnevich sent Carroll for the score.

Eddy's hands were iron claws. He got hold of the sub for Muldoon. He pitched him back. He went in, erect, like a warrior in armor. He batted a blocker like swatting flies. He nailed Carroll by the arm, swung him, pushed him to earth.

They had another chance. Eddy stood, and they all looked at him. Eddy's face was hard, like a granite boulder. Resnevich looked puzzled, elected to pass.

Eddy ran through. Men blocked him with their bodies, but he did not notice. He caught the Pole on the twenty-yard line, before Resnevich could throw the ball. He hit so hard that Resnevich shuddered and did not get up for a moment.

Cats was screaming in his ear. Cats was saying: "They're scared! You got them nuts, Eddy! Let's go."

It was Behemoth's ball, and Eddy had not even realized that the previous down was the last. For the first time in his life he had forgotten the detail of the play. Cats gave him the ball on the first plunge, and he carried mechanically into the guard.

Something gave. Eddy got through. He saw Carroll's pale face and put a fist into it. He ran, not swiftly, for there was no youthful spring in his legs, and his bad knee would not take too much pressure. He just ran, like a steam-roller, with dignity and authority. Resnevich and a guard dragged him down at midfield, from the rear.

Cats was very high. Cats howled, and again Eddy had the ball, somehow, scarcely knowing the hole, but going forward, with Tom and Joey and Cats belting away at hurtling Mastodons, always going forward, and the little fire inside him burning hot.

It was something new, something not connected with football, with a game to be played. It was retribution; it was justification for the tough boys who took punishment uncomplaining and stayed in there, waiting for Eddy. He slammed where there was no opening in the Mastodon line, crunching sweaty bodies beneath his driving surge.

Cats screamed: "The ten! We're there! Once more, Eddy!"

Eddy woke up. Eddy stared at the goal-posts, so near. He saw the sodden faces of the Mastodons, the awe upon their grimy features. He had them, and the victory was his, all his. He had smitten them, and he had prevailed.

The fire settled to a simmer. Eddy turned to the Behemoth bench. He waved his hand and walked away from the stunned Cats and the loyal men who had striven at his side.

Bob Hudson came slowly, pale-faced. He looked at Eddy, and there was worship in his gaze. They passed each other, Eddy reaching for the proffered blanket and obscurity, Bob going to where Cats called the signal for the short-side play.

Eddy turned, his head concealed beneath the blanket, watching. Hudson went perfectly to the right, stripped, his head high, the ball beneath his arm. Carroll dived at him. Bob presented a hip, then drew it away and sprinted like a startled jackrabbit for the corner where goal and sideline meet.

Resnevich was chasing, but the Pole had suffered under Eddy's onslaught and the speed was not within his legs and loins. Bob scampered and was over, standing up, untouched. He turned and faced the sideline and held the ball aloft, in silent salute, to Eddy. . . .

And that was all, except the frantic passes with which the Mastodons failed to tie the score again, with Bob Hudson brilliantly interposing himself, a new and better man for all to see and applaud.

IN Steve Coth's apartment it was quiet, and the air was strained and tense. Jane wore the beige slacks and the sweater, and her face was solemn. Bob Hudson sat straight upon a hard chair. Eddy came in and said:

"Hello, hello! Great game, Bob, huh? You sure pulled it out when I got pooped down there. You got the stuff, kid!"

Bob's voice came loud and hollow: "Eddy, I am not going to marry Jane. Even if she would have me, I would know enough now not to do it."

Eddy swallowed a lump and said brilliantly: "Huh?"

"She's for you," said Bob. "She loves you. And I know a better man when I see him. And I know you were not pooped down there, either, Eddy. I am not a complete dummy, Eddy."

He grabbed his hat and coat and rushed for the door. He came back and beat Eddy on the back, twice. Then he was gone.

Eddy said: "Now, what—"

Jane sort of flung herself at him. She was very quick. He held her tight and they said over and over again: "I love you!" in many different ways.

After a while Eddy said: "That kid—I was right about him. He's fine. He's—" Then he said: "Say! There was something fishy! Bob does not talk like making a speech!"

Jane said: "I love you, my big clever lummox!"

"You made him do it! You coached him!" Eddy sat down, and there was Jane in his lap. "I'll buy him a present, though. A nice watch, or something. Such a good kid!"

Jane said: "Yes. He responds so well to coaching!"

Eddy thought about Bob, then about Cats. He determined to buy them all wrist-watches—watches engraved: *"From Eddy."*

He kissed Jane almost absently—he was so busy thinking about all the nice tough guys.

ENCOUNTER IN STAMBOUL

AT four in the afternoon the converted Wellington bomber that was flying Jason Wyatt and Sunburn Sanderson from Cairo broke through a snow-squall and droned low over the minarets and domes of ancient Stamboul. Four Turkish fighter planes streaked up from the Istanbul airdrome across the Golden Horn, closed in beside them and escorted the huge air-liner across the Bosphorus to Uskudar.

Sunburn huddled down into his British "warm," for the unheated plane was bitterly cold.

"Turk planes not so hot," he observed critically; "the German Messerschmitts would raise hell with them."

Wyatt did not reply. The twenty hours since he had started this flight from Basel, Switzerland, seemed an eternity. He was wretched in mind and body, torn by anxiety, living in suspense until he could see Tellegan and get the facts. Sunburn saw the gray look on the young Diplomatic Secret Agent's face.

"Buck up, Handsome," he said gently; "nothing's ever as bad as it looks."

Wyatt smiled mechanically. . . . With suddenly muffled motors the plane nosed down to the landing.

There were, then, endless minutes of hard-faced Turkish police. Papers to sign. Even diplomatic passports did not prevent thorough suspicious search. The "cover" of the two Diplomatic Secret Agents as members of the American Lend-Lease Administration did not let them escape Turkish secret police inspection. Then at last Wyatt saw the blessed face of Major James Tellegan coming toward them.

"Marse Jim!" he cried in happy relief, and seized Tellegan's thin, beautifully-shaped hands. The Chief of the Diplomatic Secret Service beamed, his lean ascetic face lit with one of the infrequent glows of joy that made it so memorable and handsome.

"By the Lord," he said, "I'm mighty glad to see you and Sunburn."

Before he could say more, Wyatt interjected: "Any news of Susan and Bourke? Have they been—have they been found?"

Tellegan coughed in the raw, cold air. He never looked well; he seemed veritably ill now. Yet he drove himself brutally, because this secret war was vital, and he knew it.

"There are certain clues," the older man replied. "They've been abducted by the German Gestapo."

Wyatt's mouth twitched. Exactly what he had feared! Sunburn cursed.

"Hold it," said Tellegan with a sidelong, wary glance. "We're watched every instant. I'll explain on the boat."

The Turkish Government, it appeared, had supplied a special Diplomatic speed-boat to take them from Haidar Pasha to the pier of European Istanbul at the Galata Bridge. With the green flag and the star and crescent whipping in the bitter cold, the little boat plunged across the chop of the Bosporus into the Golden Horn. The three men stood at the stern, where no one could approach unseen.

"Well," said Wyatt tautly, "what happened? Why did you send Susan and Mike Bourke here, anyway?"

With the marvelous clarity that characterized all his speech, Tellegan explained. It was the most amazing story of murder, intrigue and treachery Wyatt had ever heard:

It began when two American B-17 planes, huge Flying Fortresses, took off from a secret airdrome in Syria to bomb the precious Rumanian oil-fields that kept the Nazi *Wehrmacht* moving. Those oil-fields comprised eighty per cent of the German oil reserve. If damaged, burned or destroyed, the Germans would be badly hurt. Hence any scheme to reach them by air was considered: the main obstacle was that even Flying Fortresses could not carry bomb load and fuel to fly to Ploesti and back.

YET the planes roared off one evening into the setting sun. The United States thrilled twenty-four hours later to hear that American bombers had smashed at the war-vital Ploesti fields. The people learned that the Fortresses had been forced down in Turkey by lack of fuel. The Turks announced the internment of the crews. Spectacular war action elsewhere crowded the news off page one, and it was forgotten—by all except American Military G-2, and the dreaded Nazi Gestapo. . . .

Fascinated, Wyatt said: "Of course, those Fortresses refueled in Nazi-controlled territory. But how?"

Tellegan raised his hand. "Wait," he said, and went on to relate what the two interned crews had told the American Air Attaché who had come up from Ankhara to see the flyers. First of all, the Air Attaché learned that the oil-fields at Ploesti had been camouflaged—so brilliantly, indeed, that the navigators thought at first their calculations were in complete error. Instead of derricks and pumps and storage-tanks, they had arrived at a bustling Rumanian town. In correcting their errors, presumably much fuel was wasted. By the time they had discovered how they were fooled, it was a case of either leaving at once with the target unbombed, or risk being forced down with empty tanks. They took the chance, dropped their bombs—and landed in Turkish territory.

"The navigators wanted to explain this trick to the Air Attaché," Tellegan said quietly, "so future bombing crews would not suffer the same fate. But before the Air Attaché got to them, they—died."

"Murdered?" gasped Wyatt.

"Yes, but it can't be proved. They came down, the Turks said, with bubonic plague—the black plague. They died in ten hours."

Wyatt nodded. Sunburn said: "So the Germans in Turkey slipped them a deck of bubonic germs to shut them up!"

"Yes," said Tellegan, his face bleak with cold fury. After a moment's silence he said: "Now I can tell you about the secret refueling."

He leaned forward and told of the refugee German, the member of the famed Nazi Gestapo who was in the American espionage service—the man who had got the gasoline drums to the remote meadows—the man who pretended to work for the Gestapo in Bucharest and Budapest, but who had struck savage blows at the Nazis.

"Freiherr Johan Von Manderfeul is his real name," said Tellegan. "The Nazis think the real Manderfeul dead in a concentration-camp. He works for the Black Front under the name of Kurt Stahlen. We have never seen him, don't know what he looks like. But it was necessary to find out—or get a real map—of the Ploesti fields. So he was asked to come to Istanbul and make contact with our secret agents. Mike Bourke and Susan were sent to meet him. Besides getting the information necessary to set up another bombing raid on Ploesti, they were to learn who murdered those interned American flyers, and how."

Wyatt nodded.

"And the Gestapo agents in Turkey grabbed them!" A cold chill struck his heart. "They—they are probably dead."

"I do not think so," said Tellegan, and then ceased to speak. The crossing had been made to the Galata Bridge, and now a Turkish staff car carried them up the steep Pera hill, along the Grande Rue de Pera to the famous Tokatlian Hotel. Anxious to

A story of American-secret agents at grips with a deadly enemy in underground Turkey.

by FREDERICK PAINTON

learn the rest of the problem before him, Wyatt waited impatiently while Tellegan checked at the desk.

"Geez," muttered Sunburn, "the place is crawling with secret agents! German, Italian, Jap, French spies—you takes your choice."

Wyatt nodded. He had been here before and knew the secret pulling and hauling that occupied diplomatic forces of all the Axis and Anti-Axis powers to get Turkey off of the neutrality fence.

NOW, as Tellegan rejoined them, his face was bleak and deadly.

"That cripple over there—that hunchback," he said bitterly, "is the German Gestapo chief in Turkey. Ritter von Gortz. He it is who murdered those young flyers of ours."

Wyatt stared. He thought he had never before seen such a horrible human as this Ausland Gestapo chief. Von Gortz was not over five feet tall, with storklike legs upholding a rotund spiderish body that seemed to carry eternally an ugly-shaped knapsack on the back. His head jutted forward on a turkey neck from this hump. And it was this head and face that pinned Wyatt's attention now:

It was the most beautiful face he had ever seen upon a man! The hair was jet-black and slightly wavy, curving back from a noble forehead. Deep-set eyes beneath raven eyebrows had the flash of aristocrat. A straight nose, full and unusually red lips, and cleft chin set in ivory skin. Looking at the face, you forgot the horrible body.

He wore no decorations, no uniform; and yet huge men, obviously German, seemed to tremble before him.

"The Gestapo man charged with holding the Middle East for Hitler," said Tellegan. "Mark him, for he is the most dangerous man alive, for us."

"And coming over now," said Sunburn.

The little spindle legs in the black broadcloth moved like a stork's. Then the huge head bobbed. The luminous deep eyes leveled at Wyatt—a sharp darting look as piercing as a scalpel. Then the hunchback clicked his heels to Tellegan.

"Major Tellegan!" His voice was low, deep, musical. "In Turkey at least, enemies may speak. And admirations be expressed. We of the Third Reich hold you in admiration."

Tellegan stared back as at a toad.

"Word has come —from him! You are to go to the house of Omar the Fat. Have a care!"

"Herr Von Gortz," he said icily, "I do not care to talk to you."

"Doubtless," said the Gestapo man; "but you will. I have an affair of business, a matter of exchange to discuss with you." Again the lightning glance took in Wyatt. "The death of a lovely lady is always to be regretted."

HE bowed. Wyatt found his fists clenched. Sunburn restrained him from an instinctive forward movement. Before any one could speak again, a tall shambling figure in full dress came to them. The man was thin and blond, with a tooth-brush yellow mustache. His eyes were watery blue, his mouth sulky.

"I say, sorry to barge in and all that," he said in a very broad Oxonian accent. "Important message, Herr Von Gortz. Cawn't wait, y'know."

"Very good, Captain," said Von Gortz with a gentle smile. "Major Tellegan, you have heard, of course, of Captain Percy Warham. A most valuable assistant to me."

"A most filthy English renegade and traitor," said Tellegan, "and I hope to see the day he weathers on a gallows."

Warham looked fishy-eyed.

"Hardly likely, old chap. Always choose the winning side, y'know."

Tellegan pushed on, and Wyatt and Sunburn followed.

"That Von Gortz is a black spider," said Sunburn.

"He has Susan—and Mike Bourke," said Wyatt softly. "By God, Marse Jim, you've got to play his game."

"Later. Wait."

Tellegan led the way to the suite he had reserved. Sunburn found the Scotch bottle (fifteen dollars a quart) and fixed highballs.

"Your job here," said Tellegan to Wyatt, "is not to find Susan and Bourke. We want you to find our man, Kurt Stahlen—the man Bourke and Susan came here to get in touch with."

Wyatt jumped up, caught the grim look in Tellegan's deep-sunk eyes and sank back. Agents were expendable. Only the *coup* counted, the facts.

"Yes," he said wearily. "What's the first step?"

"Selim," said Tellegan, "he's a *hamel*—that's a burden-carrier. He's the one Bourke saw, for this Selim is the man Kurt Stahlen used as go-between. You find him, say we must get in touch with Stahlen at once. Selim can be found in the Mosque of Haifa Sophia in Stamboul. The third carpet from the west door. Amber beads wound around his right hand. Those were Bourke's instructions—they'll do for you."

Wyatt nodded, tossed off his drink. Every fiber of him longed to look for Susan. His duty prevented. His only hope now was that in seeking Kurt Stahlen he might also help Susan.

"Come on, Sunburn," he muttered, rising. "Let's get a smell of old Stamboul."

Just before sundown Wyatt and Sunburn walked up the narrow smelly streets that lead to Seraglio Point and the old sultan's palace. The alleys were scarcely wider than Sunburn's shoulders. Not even a donkey could pass this way. And so there were human beasts of burden, *hamels,* who with a wooden frame on their backs could carry as high as two hundred and fifty pounds. These and the sellers of sweetmeats and purveyors of sweetened waters gave Oriental color to a city whose men now dressed in secondhand American clothes.

They walked on to the Place Haifa Sophia, strolling among Byzantine ruins of enormous antiquity, the Hippodrome of Constantine. Now before them rose the huge domes and pencil minarets of Haifa Sophia, first great Church of Christendom—now a mosque. As they stood there, a *meuzzin* appeared on one of the minarets. His quavering voice rang weirdly on the cold winter's dusk. It was more queer to see him in an old overcoat and a derby hat pressed well down on his ears. Yet his voice was clear, sweet, and sent chills down one's back as he cried the ancient call: *"Allah il Allah Akbar!* Come to prayers! Come to prayers! Come to salvation! God is great and there is no other God but God and Mohammed is his Prophet!"

OLD men and young men, ragged and dirty, came to wash hands and feet, leave shoes and enter for the prayer. Wyatt nudged Sunburn. "If any one speaks to you, play dumb. There'd be a riot if they knew two unbelievers were inside at prayers."

Mumbling in good Arabic, he had Sunburn leave both pairs of shoes,

Illustrated by Austin Briggs

and they went inside. Certainly enough, an old white-bearded man knelt on the third rug from the entrance, alone.

Wyatt and Sunburn knelt beside him. It was bitterly damp and cold, and the only sound in the vast incredibly beautiful edifice was the rustle of pigeon-wings as the birds flew in the lofty height of the dome. The man next to him had amber beads wound around his right hand.

"*Salaam aleikum!*" murmured Jason Wyatt.

To his amazement, the *hamel* replied in bad French:

"Word has come, m'sieur! From *him!* You are to go now—instantly—to the house of Omar the Fat, in the Row of the Janissaries! It is the second from the south. Have a care! They are armed. My master will get word to you later. Go now! The German who followed you is by the door. Be careful!"

Selim never lifted his head, never ceased to count his beads as if he were reciting verses from the Koran. Wyatt's heart thudded excitedly. Then the German traitor knew of his coming, and perhaps this was Susan he was to rescue. He nudged Sunburn and went out. Near the door he studied the fat full features of the man who had, apparently, followed them.

Outside, Wyatt found the snow falling, thickening by the minute. He headed for the age-blacked houses of the Janissaries—kept these many years by the State as mementoes of a bygone régime.

Near the Museum of the Janissaries toward Seraglio Point, Wyatt stopped.

"Is the moldy derby hat still following?" he asked.

"Yes," said Sunburn.

Wyatt walked to the group of trees in front of the Museum entrance. He hid behind one tree and Sunburn behind the next. No word was spoken.

The man came out of a thick snow-squall, head bent, watching the half-filled footprints. He saw them suddenly stop, go to the right. He sucked in his breath in alarm, jerked upright and started to turn. . . . Wyatt and Sunburn hit him together. Sunburn's automatic pistol rose and fell. The man's skull gave off a sickening sound. Sunburn's arm rose again.

"No," said Wyatt. "He's out cold. Grab his feet."

SUNBURN cursed softly but obeyed. "Some day, Handsome," he muttered, "you'll quit being chicken-hearted and learn to play this game for keeps. When the other side plays tough, you have to kick in the clinches too."

Wyatt didn't answer, and they dragged the limp body into the areaway of the Museum. Here Sunburn parked the moldy derby hat on the man's chest.

"He might freeze or get pneumonia," he said hopefully.

Wyatt had not replied. Already he was striding through the snow to the Street of the Janissaries.

The houses, Government-owned and unoccupied for many years, had suffered much neglect since the Young Turks established the Republic under Mustapha Kemal Ataturk. The windows were broken; the doors sagged; and some of the so-called porches were missing, dragged away by poor people who needed the firewood. The house of Omar the Fat seemed in better condition. As Wyatt stole around it, he thought he saw marks where footprints recently had been made in the snow. The rear door fitted loosely, and his heart leaped when it yielded before his pressure. He bent over. The snow that had drifted inside was slushy.

"Floor warm," he whispered to Sunburn. "The cellar."

"Take off," muttered Sunburn; "I'm covering you."

Wyatt risked a light then, a brief glow from a pencil-flashlight. There were also tracks in the snow on the floor. Going out! Beyond was a door that opened readily. Heat came up. He tested the treads, and worked down a yard a minute. Now the smell of charcoal braziers burning was in his nostrils.

Then he saw the cellar, lit by two candle stumps on the left. And in their pale saffron glow he saw Penman Mike Bourke. The ex-forger was naked to the waist and bent painfully backward over a rail, was bound there beneath the candles; as they burned, the hot drippings fell on his chest making quite a pyramid.

Wyatt's shock of hot fury made him jump. The ancient board of the tread gave a thin squeaking sound beneath

his feet. A man came out of the shadows, turning a pale gaunt face toward the stairs.

"*Wo ist?*" he spoke. "*Der Teufel—*"

Even as he spoke, his hand was coming up with a big thick-breeched Luger pistol in it. As it came up and he suddenly said, "*Gott verdammt! Sie sind—*" Sunburn Sanderson shot him—shot him over Wyatt's shoulder. Wyatt was nearly deafened by the sound, gagged by the sickening acrid odor of cordite. The man below, struck in the chest, seemed to be a marionette staggering on the end of twisted strings. He walked around in a circle twice, tangling over his feet, and his breathing was loud and terrible. He sat down and rocked back and forth with his hands to his chest. Then he fell over on his side, emitted several rattling sounds and straightened out in a tired lazy manner to a very relaxed position.

"Let's get a look at Bourke," Sunburn spoke hoarsely, his face terrible in its rage.

Wyatt made haste to release the bound man. The gunshot report had brought out no others. But Sunburn waited alertly. Wyatt could see that Bourke wasn't suffering from burns now. The candle-drippings landing on their own pile no longer seared. But the thin ravaged body was pitifully emaciated. The toothless gums, still torn where the teeth had been pulled out, were a bloody horror.

Bourke was close to death, but none of this had caused it. Sunburn silently brought out his whisky flask. Wyatt poured the liquid through the torn gums.

"Look around for Susan," he said. He waited for the liquor to take effect. The pulse beneath his finger was very thin. But Bourke coughed on the liquor, and presently the pulse quickened, was not so thready. He even opened his eyes. His tongue made words, but he could only eject them in a horrible whisper.

"Get me to a doctor, Wyatt. I need to talk straight. I got to have more than whisky."

Wyatt nodded. "Okay. Where's Susan?"

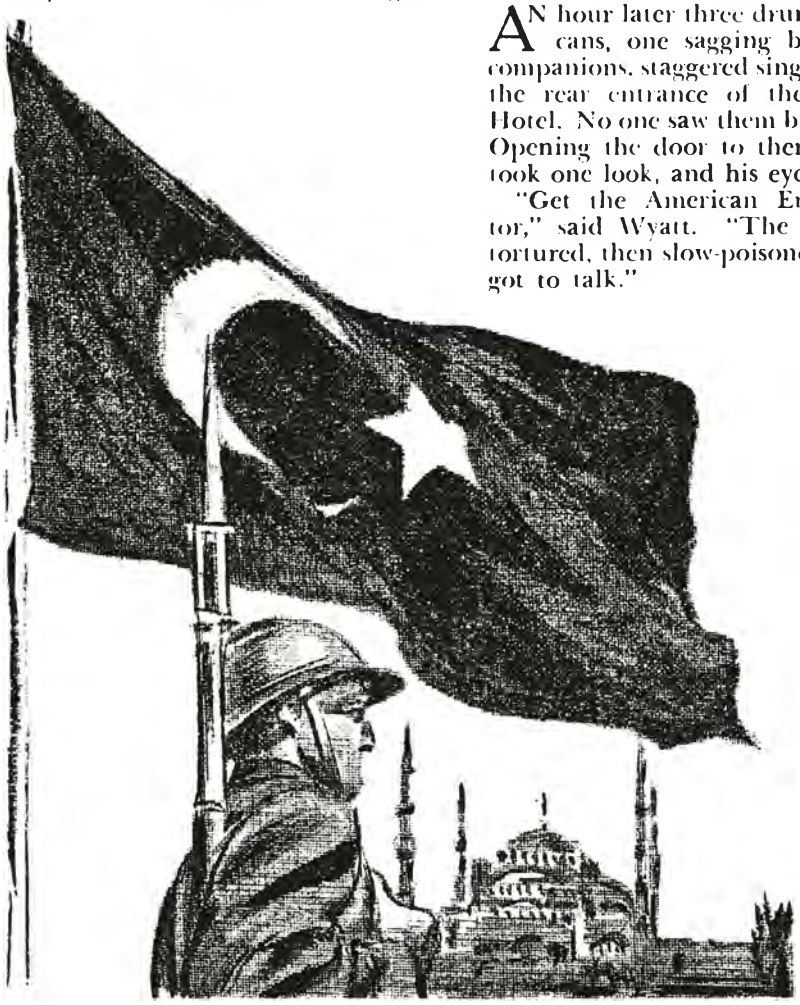
"Not here." The tongue moved against the lips. "I don't know where. Get me to a doctor."

The pulse seemed thready again.

"Poison," Bourke mouthed. "Slow poison! Doctor. Antidote needed. Liquor will kill me—must talk."

A moment later he was senseless again. Swiftly Wyatt wrapped the body in a dirty blanket from a pallet and called Sunburn.

"Grab his feet," he said thickly. "He goes into the Tokatlian if we have to shoot a path."



AN hour later three drunken Americans, one sagging between two companions, staggered singing through the rear entrance of the Tokatlian Hotel. No one saw them but a servant. Opening the door to them, Tellegan took one look, and his eyes went sick.

"Get the American Embassy doctor," said Wyatt. "The man's been tortured, then slow-poisoned. But he's got to talk."

Tellegan went to the telephone. When he returned: "Dr. Allen is coming," he said. "What happened?"

Wyatt told him. "The queer thing," he concluded, "is that the mysterious Kurt Stahlen knew where he was, wanted us to get him. What do you make of that?"

Tellegan shook his head. "Stahlen never worked for me. I don't know."

Sunburn held out a handful of paper, money, a tag.

"Got this off the stiff I shot," he said. "The guy was German—the Gestapo. Name of Gertig."

Wyatt sorted through the stuff. Nothing struck him as important until he came on an unsigned note written in German: "*We will make use of the Yereh Batan Serai as planned.*"

The words Yereh Batan Serai struck a familiar note in his mind, but he could not recollect where he had heard them before. While he was still trying to remember, the Embassy physician, Dr. Allen, entered. He and Tellegan talked briefly in low tones, then went to the bed. Wyatt could only wait now, at the window, watching the pelting snow.

At last Dr. Allen and Tellegan came out of the bedroom.

"Accumulative poison," said Allen grimly, "possibly arsenic; the man has suffered horribly and may die. The point I wish to make is this; I'll have to risk his almost certain death to administer a stimulant so that he can talk. By not giving a stimulant, I might save him. But in that case he cannot talk for days, possibly weeks."

Wyatt looked down at his hands. Sunburn coughed harshly. For a moment there was silence. Wyatt looked up, saw Tellegan's face a grimace of agony, looked down again.

"We have to know what Bourke learned—now—as soon as possible." Tellegan's voice was low but clear.

"Very well," said Dr. Allen. "I understand. But give me me at least an hour."

"Yes," replied Wyatt, swallowing. "Let's change and show ourselves at dinner, Marse Jim. We—we might need an alibi for the night."

Tellegan nodded; and as he turned, his shoulders slumped, and a rush of pity hit Wyatt and made his eyes sting. He took Tellegan's left hand, pressed it hard.

Twenty minutes later the three were making their way through the lobby.

Wyatt studied the intriguers and spies, agents and tricksters: Perfumed women in daring décolleté gowns. Men in full dress, many with red sashes across their shirt-fronts, and most of them with from four to twelve miniature medals on their coats. Again the anachronism of civilization bore on him. Youngsters filled with the breath and eagerness of life were fighting, dying all over the world at this

moment. Yet here men were polite, and smiling, and—and—

He broke off, for the hunchback, Ritter Von Gortz, was moving toward them.

"Pardon me, Herr Tellegan," he said. A brilliant smile lifted the somber dark beauty of his face. "I should like a word with you and your friends—may I?"

He gestured toward a table where a waiter watched alertly. "An *aperitif*, perhaps. You will join me before dinner?"

"We will listen to you," said Tellegan quietly, "but in America we only drink with friends—or those we respect."

"No offense taken," smiled the Gestapo man. He gestured. Waiters ran to hold chairs for the four men as they sat.

"Now, Herr Von Gortz?" said Tellegan.

"It is not my custom to fence," said the man, still smiling. "Particularly with those who take war seriously as you *Amerikaners*. War, *Herren*, is merely a continuation by armed force of a conflict that is always going on between peoples for ascendency. So why should you assume—"

"Herr Von Gortz," said Tellegan coldly, "we are not interested in a philosophical dissertation on war. Nor a Klausewitz diagram of how it is fought. You asked to speak to us. I think it is of importance. So get on with it."

The hunchback shrugged.

"Very well. You are right, of course—the American shirt-sleeve diplomacy, as it were. Well, then, I shall be blunt: I wish some information. I have a very valuable commodity to exchange for it. I believe you know what commodity I offer."

Wyatt fought down a sudden red fury. He knew, of course, that Ritter Von Gortz had somehow learned of Bourke's escape—perhaps, even, of Gertig's death. Perhaps the man who had trailed them had revived. How Von Gortz could know this, and so soon, he did not know. He only realized that Von Gortz, playing a deep game, was now calmly putting Susan Bourke on the block.

But what could Ritter Von Gortz want to know that had made him torture Bourke and now offer to exchange Susan for the facts?

Tellegan was saying: "We are willing to make certain exchanges at any time where there is advantage. What is it you seek?"

The beautiful face became slightly flushed. Von Gortz's eyes blazed.

"There is a German renegade working for you Americans," he said softly. "A man who worked for you in Bucharest—along the Danube, in Budapest for a time. His assumed name is Kurt Friederich Stahlen. You know where I can find him. Tell me that, and you may have the Fräulein unharmed."

He saw Wyatt's amazed look, and his lips twisted.

"We Germans loathe a traitor, Herr Wyatt," he said. "We take special pains that all are caught and all suffer. So we have only a few. This Stahlen aided you to bomb Ploesti. He knows the camouflage plans. I want him to kill in my own way, and I'll pay anything within reason to get him."

His voice and look were so venomous that Wyatt knew sudden fear for Susan. He wanted Tellegan to consent, to trade, to do anything to get Susan out of this viper's reach.

But Tellegan was saying icily: "The answer, Herr Von Gortz, is no. You do not offer enough."

"Really!" murmured Von Gortz, "And I was told you Americans were so stupidly sentimental that you would give anything to save a woman from—torture and death."

WYATT shuddered inwardly. Before he could speak, the renegade Englishman, Percy Warham, came to the table and bent over Von Gortz. What he said, no one heard. But Von Gortz rose. "Very well, Captain," he murmured. And to Tellegan: "Perhaps if I offer more in trade, you will listen. *Auf wiedersehen.*"

"Sorry and all that," said Captain Percy Warham.

Tellegan said bitterly to Von Gortz: "You bend heaven and earth to capture one of your own traitors, but you take that renegade Englishman Percy Warham, and use him as a spy and propagandist!"

The Gestapo chief smiled. "Herr Tellegan, the fact that the English do not destroy their traitors is one of the reasons they are decadent and doomed to oblivion. I will have a better offer to make you later."

Now a bellboy came up, bowing.

"Dr. Allen waits for the *messieurs* in their apartment."

Wyatt started up. Bourke could talk. Maybe he had the key to Susan's hiding-place. Maybe—

Tellegan was at his side, his face gray.

"Jason," he said painfully, "you understand. God help me, I could make no other decision."

Wyatt had known it all the time. He said: "Yes, Marse Jim, I know."

The three left their *aperitifs;* but before they had reached the elevators, the waiter came hurrying after them.

"One of the *messieurs* left this," he said, and held out a folded slip of paper. Wyatt took it, opened it.

Printed in pencil were the words: YEREH BATAN SERAI.

"The same as Gertig had on him," he muttered, aware again of memory trying to tell him something.

Susan cried: "Jason! Run!"

"We didn't leave that," said Sunburn, "but somebody else did."

Tellegan said: "Probably Von Gortz. And if he did, it was deliberate—a trap."

The elevator carried them up to the sixth floor. Dr. Allen met them.

"For the man's sake, Jim," he said hastily to Tellegan, "don't prolong it. There's a chance in fifty I can save him."

They filed into the bedroom. Bourke lay there, scarcely making a shadow on the white counterpane. His eyes opened.

"Tellegan," he said, "listen carefully: I can't repeat. Here is the game. Von Gortz is moving heaven and earth to capture and kill Kurt Stahlen. Stahlen came to Istanbul to get proof that Von Gortz administered the bubonic-plague germs to our American flyers and killed them. If Stahlen can prove that to the satisfaction of the Turkish Government, it is a clear case of violation of Turkish neutrality—and the proof would destroy all German influence built here by Franz von Papen, the Nazi Ambassador. . . .

"It might even bring Turkey into the war on our side—which is what Kurt Stahlen wants."

"Where is Susan?" Wyatt broke in.

"Jason," said Bourke tiredly, "she is in Von Gortz's hands. If she is not

dead. I hope she is. . . . The man is a monster."

"And what does Stahlen wish us to do?"

But Bourke did not reply. His body had relaxed. Dr. Allen said: "Don't force him. I tell you. He—"

The physician stopped speaking.

Bourke's lips moved. "*Yerch Batan Serai*," he mumbled twice, and then was silent. Dr. Allen shooed the three out of the room.

"That's what the paper on Gertig said," muttered Sunburn, "and the one the waiter brought. What does it mean, Handsome?"

WYATT did not reply. Instead, he went to Tellegan's suitcase and brought out the older man's Baedeker on Turkey. Tellegan had bought it because of the excellent modern maps. But Wyatt did not consult the maps now. He skimmed swiftly through the chapters on Stamboul.

Suddenly he exclaimed. "I knew it! I knew I'd heard it."

"What?" chorused Tellegan and Sunburn.

"It's the Arabic name for the old Byzantine cisterns," said Wyatt, "—a subterranean lake of water to care for the city when it was besieged. I've always thought of it by the Greek name, translated as the Basilica cistern—that's why it fooled me."

"But if it's a subterranean lake, why —how can the Gestapo use it?"

Wyatt paused a minute in thought. "I don't know," he said, "but it would make a marvelous hide-out."

"Or a marvelous trap," said Tellegan quietly. "Von Gortz promised to offer me more in exchange. He might offer me your life and Sunburn's too."

Wyatt had thought of that. "I know," he said; "but that message might also have been left by an agent of Kurt Stahlen's. He's been using us as tools. He may want us to go to the cisterns now."

"That's right," said Sunburn; "but how do we know?"

"We don't," said Wyatt. "We've got to take the risk." He walked to the window. The snow still pelted down. "The snow will cover us, keep us from being followed."

He turned to Tellegan. "If we aren't back by one A.M., get the Turkish police and search the cistern."

Tellegan nodded silently. His eyes followed them to the door; and when it had closed, he sank down and rested his face in his hands.

The entrance to the Yerch Batan Serai that Wyatt remembered was in the yard of an abandoned Turkish house off the Place Haifa Sophia. Here in the days of peace there were guides and boats to take tourists among the three hundred thirty-six marble columns with Corinthian capitals that upheld the roof of the gigantic subterranean lakes. There were old boats at the tiny dock now, but partly rotted and filled with water.

Even as his hand was coming up with a big Luger, Sunburn Sanderson shot him.

Wyatt and Sunburn crossed the courtyard in the driving snow and descended the ancient marble steps. The old door was rotten, the iron catch rusted off. Pushing through it, Wyatt found himself in utter darkness—darkness so black it rested on him with a physical weight. But even slight as was their noise in entering, they disturbed something. A slapping, hissing sound was heard.

Sunburn cursed softly and drew his gun. "What's that?"

"Bats!" said Wyatt. "The place is filled with them."

He ventured now the use of his small flashlight by holding it up his sleeve so that the overcoat cuff shielded any side-glow. The several boats rested as silent as painted craft on the mirror-like surface of the water. The best had at least two inches of water in the bottom. But that made no difference. Wyatt knew the sound of bailing would carry down here for incredible distances.

Sunburn found two broken oars.

"We'll paddle," he whispered, and stopped sharply, startled by the sound

of his whisper going out over that silent body of water.

Jason Wyatt climbed cautiously into the bow, wondering where to start looking. He had not visited this vast cistern since he had been a boy. He only knew vaguely of distance and shape. But there was no turning back now. They drove in the paddles, and the boat moved through the silent black water.

Quiet as they were, the noise seemed frightful. Every sound, every drip of water from the paddle echoed in this silent place. Even Sunburn's slightly grunting breathing as he dipped his paddle was loud. The whole place was a loud-speaker magnifying every sound a hundredfold. The hiding-place had been well-chosen against surprise—if hiding-place it was. The boat glided on along the side of the subterranean lake.

The fluted columns of Grecian marble came out of the blackness like sheeted ghosts. Every so often Wyatt risked the flashlight, but he saw no break in the side. The bats flapped and shot blackly past the stream of thin light. Their noise alone would apprise a wary guard of approaching danger.

Minutes passed in coasting silently along. The black water flowed behind them. Only the bats and the supporting columns swimming out of the blackness ahead gave life to the fantastic scene. Thus for an hour the blackness, the weird dreadful silence oppressed them.

Suddenly, however, Wyatt doused the flashlight. As the boat glided around a thick marble pillar, he had seen what appeared to be a small light. Only briefly—hardly a second's flash—and less than a hundred feet ahead!

"Put away the paddle," Wyatt whispered. "We'll work along the wall."

With their hands pressing the wall, the two secret agents kept the boat moving. And at last, as Wyatt put out his hand to thrust along, he struck emptiness. This was it. There was nothing but solid blackness, so he ventured a brief beam of his flashlight. Here were stairs, five of them, leading up from the water. There was a door with a rounded top. From beneath it a faint glow appeared.

The glow was what Wyatt had seen. He waited until Sunburn had stepped out, gave the boat a kick. It vanished silently in the blackness. Tensely, now, he tested the door. To his surprise, it not only gave readily before his thrust, but did so silently on well-oiled hinges. A tocsin of warning bonged in Wyatt's brain.

"You wait," he mouthed to Sunburn. "If I'm not back in five minutes, come prepared."

Sunburn cursed in disappointment but offered no objection. Wyatt tiptoed into the lighter, warmer cavern before him.

Entering the cavern ahead, Wyatt realized it was a cellar of some sort, a building that rested on the edge of the cistern. Hence it had another exit beside the cistern itself, an exit on the surface.

"That Nazi hunchback has brains," he thought.

He moved noiselessly to the door under the jamb of which the light glowed. The door was unlocked. He opened it noiselessly and entered.

THE first person he saw was Susan Bourke. She was neither tied nor gagged, but she sat in a chair, suffering from such utter terror that she was pale as flour. As she saw Wyatt, she seemed near to fainting. Then her lips worked. They seemed to say: *"Go back. Get away."*

Wyatt held his gun in his hand. He took a step forward. Susan cried: *"No,* Jason! Run! *Now! Back!"*

Even if Wyatt had had a chance to escape, it was too late now. He heard the metallic click of a loading-collar. Then he saw the light Spandau machine-gun's muzzle, and the cold blue eye behind it.

A squat apelike German appeared and said in tolerable English: "Please the gun put down, and your hands the up."

The gun could riddle him in a second's time.

"Sorry, Susan," said Wyatt, "but I've apparently been stupid."

She burst into tears, and he knew the strain on her had been terrible. He dropped the gun, and the apelike German picked it up. Then he searched Wyatt.

Now he said, "Sit down, *mein Herr!* We have been expecting you, *jawohl!*"

Wyatt felt like saying he had expected to be expected, but he only obeyed and sat down. Never had Susan seemed so beautiful to him.

"Hush," he said to her; "no use to cry."

She did not reply. The blue eye behind the machine-gun now appeared, and they belonged to the British renegade Captain Percy Warham.

"Deuced silly of you, old chap," Warham drawled. "Surely you were not stupid enough to come unprepared into the trap."

SOMEWHERE in Wyatt's brain a bell clanged loudly.

"I think help will get here in time," he said.

"Good! But not good enough, I fancy," said Warham. "Lovely girl! Shame she has to suffer. Why don't you tell Von Gortz what you know?"

A noise in an outer hallway prevented Wyatt from answering. The hunchback, casting a horrible shadow ahead of him, entered.

"*Teufel!*" he said on seeing Wyatt. "Only one? Where's the other?"

"Gone for the police," said Wyatt. "They're anxious to catch the murderer of those two American flyers."

"My dear fellow," said Von Gortz softly, "you can't trail bubonic-plague germs." He pulled out a small glass tube filled with a colorless liquid. "I can start with Fräulein Bourke."

Wyatt stared in mounting horror.

"You wouldn't dare," he cried.

"Oh, but I would," said Von Gortz cheerfully. "We play for results, Herr Wyatt, not for rules. I would poison all Istanbul and infect them with plague germs to learn the whereabouts of the arch-traitor who endangers all our oil reserves." With a quick glance at Wyatt, he suddenly walked to Susan.

"Shall I try?"

Wyatt sat there, torn to his very soul. He knew that Von Gortz's twisted brain would never hesitate. He knew, too, that he must not speak of Selim and the clue to Kurt Stahlen. He sat silent, tense, sweat bursting out on him.

God, would Sunburn come in time? He thought of something else, and looked at Percy Warham. He was in time to see the English renegade get squarely in the line of fire of the apelike German who was covering the scene. Wyatt tensed, shouted, and lunged forward as if shot from a catapult. He hit Warham and knocked him into the apelike German. Wyatt himself kept on going, and as the two men fell, he jumped four feet in the air and landed with a crash on their prostrate bodies.

In a flash he had the German's gun. He turned, kicked Warham in the stomach and was in time to see Von Gortz just leveling a Luger.

Wyatt had been a dead man in the next second had not Susan screamed and flung herself at Von Gortz. That deflected the bullet. And as the gun in Wyatt's hand roared, Von Gortz shrieked like a woman and collapsed, moaning and holding his hip. . . .

That was all. A second later Sunburn came bounding in. He took in the scene in a glance. He slugged Warham on the chin. Then he bashed his gun at the apelike German's skull.

"I damned near missed the party," he said. "Why didn't you yell sooner, Handsome?"

"Sunburn!" Susan rose, but now she practically fell into Wyatt's arms. "Oh, Jason, he was going to jab me with that needle in the cork. Really jab me."

"Get that gun turned around to cover the door," said Wyatt harshly. He gestured to Percy Warham. "Get on your feet."

"My word!" muttered the renegade. "My head's almost off."

"Get Von Gortz off the floor," said Wyatt, "and cork up those germs and give them to me."

"Right you are," said the renegade. "None of my doing, that, y'know. Hardly cricket, what?"

He moved Von Gortz's body to the pallet and fussed a second with the glass tube of deadly germs.

"Easy murder weapon," he said. "Watch yourself if you've a cut. Some spilled out. I've got them on my hand."

Wyatt gingerly took the tube.

"I'll pick up Emil," said the renegade. "He looks done for anyway."

Wyatt did not reply, did not see the renegade pick up the German. For at this juncture there was a shout from outside—toward the cistern. Ten seconds later Tellegan burst into view, followed by two Turkish policemen.

"I couldn't stand it, Jason," the older man cried. "Win or no, I couldn't let people I love take such risks."

The old man was close to sobbing. Wyatt went to him.

"It's all right, Marse Jim," he said gently. "I've got Susan here. We've got proof that Von Gortz murdered the two American flyers. It's all right."

So wrought up was he that it took Tellegan a full minute to realize the truth. By then Wyatt had explained to the Turkish police and given them the deadly tube of bubonic-plague germs. When they heard the truth, those two swarthy Moslems turned blue.

They handcuffed and tied the still senseless Von Gortz and the German Emil. They grabbed at the renegade Englishman.

This man ducked from them and came to Wyatt.

"I'm worth more to you than to them, guv'nor. Look—I can tell you more about this."

He handed Wyatt a piece of paper. Opening it, Wyatt read:

"Emil and Von Gortz both touched with bubonic-plague germs. Necessary—they might guess too much alive. I'm putting new map of Ploesti fields in your lefthand pocket. Get between me and those police. I'll make a break topside. Shoot—but not straight. Burn this. Kurt Stahlen."

Wyatt said softly: "I rather guessed that when you got into the line of fire."

He felt a hand fumble at his pocket. He called to Sunburn.

"Come over here and tie up this fellow."

Sunburn came up, caught Wyatt's queer look and stopped. At that instant Kurt Stahlen, alias Percy Warham, made a break for the passageway.

Wyatt yelled, drew his gun, fired high.

"Block off the cops, you jerk," he yelled to Sunburn in English. "That's the steel guy."

Wyatt and Sunburn yelled, rocked into the cops—dashed into the passageway and crouched. They stalled for five minutes. It was enough.

PRESENTLY the police took their two prisoners—doomed already to die of the plague—to prison; Wyatt, Sunburn, Tellegan and Susan went back to the Hotel Tokatlian. There was good news there. Penman Mike Bourke was better, and if he could be got hastily to the States, might live.

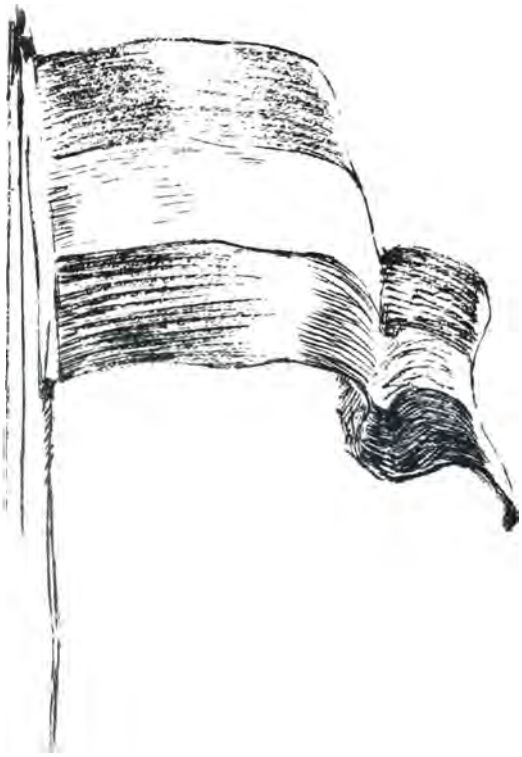
Tellegan went to arrange about a plane at the Embassy, and Susan went too.

Wyatt and Sunburn were alone now, and the big ex-pug slowly made two big whisky-and-sodas. He handed one to Wyatt, raised his in salutation.

"To a very right guy, Handsome," he said. "To this Kurt Stahlen."

"A very right guy indeed," said Wyatt; he clinked his glass and drank.

Another story of Jason Wyatt will appear in an early issue.



The Colors of Freemen

Flags of our Fathers—V

"WE came (and mark it well, dear brethren), we came from neither prince nor king to this new western earth; our standard boasted neither cross nor crown. We hoisted the colors of freemen, beggars of heaven—we of the young republic, the United Netherlands. Our freedom was bought with tears and anguished sweat, as it must be purchased over and over within this world. Unity, unity, unity—this we preached to all men, this we brought to the new horizon. Tolerance, forbearance and again unity, was the symbol of our flag, the message from above the stars. For in the beginning were words that voiced the law eternal; bear and forbear, give and take! And again unity, born of love and tolerance. Mark it well; herein lies destiny."

LOOK back with me down the years at a small sturdy ship, so small that she had only twenty men in her crew; she was rigged as a three-master, with courses, topsails, spritsail and a lateen mizzen, and she lay anchored on a hot September day in 1609 up the reaches of a great but unknown river. Her job was to explore this water for the Dutch East India Company, though not many of her crew were Dutchmen.

Old Robert Juet, the master's mate, wiped sweat from his forehead and pawed his gray beard, and spat over the rail reflectively, while the boy before him waited a reply. An old man, Robert Juet of Limehouse, but hard as nails when sober, and a bitter, unjust, diabolical fury when drunk.

"Blast the heat! Who ever heard of such heat in September?" he growled, and nodded ungraciously to the boy. "So the boat's ready, eh?

by H. BEDFORD-JONES

Then go along with the Dutchmen and catch us some fish, if ye've got the cabins cleaned out and the bunks made."

The boy, a motherless veteran of fifteen who for two years had sailed the known and unknown seas of the world, even into the Arctic, touched his forelock dutifully. He hated old Robert Juet, and for cause, but was too much of a man to show it.

"All done, sir," said he. "You'd best take a look at the two prisoners, though. They seem full of fight."

Juet cackled. He was a tough, horny-handed, horny-hearted old bird; Master Hudson had shipped him because he was a good seaman and could read and write, not for love of him.

"They'll be tamed before we see Amsterdam again," he said. "And, Master John, mind ye keep within sight! We want no more men killed by savage arrows, like poor John Colman back at Mana Hatta. Fish upstream and take soundings as ye go, and be back afore dark."

"Aye, sir," said John Hudson aloud, and to himself smothered an oath, as he ran forward.

He scooped the carefully tended lead-line from its beckets and dropped into the waiting boat, with a laughing word to the two men in it, Vrouman and Corlear. He had come up in a bitter hard school, his only home the ship his father happened to command at the moment; but the gospel of efficiency preached on shipboard was a stern one, and behind his boyish laughter was a shrewd and queerly adult personality.

"Musket loaded, slow-match burning?" he exclaimed, as the two men gave way on the oars. "Good! Stick to orders and we'll not get caught as Colman was."

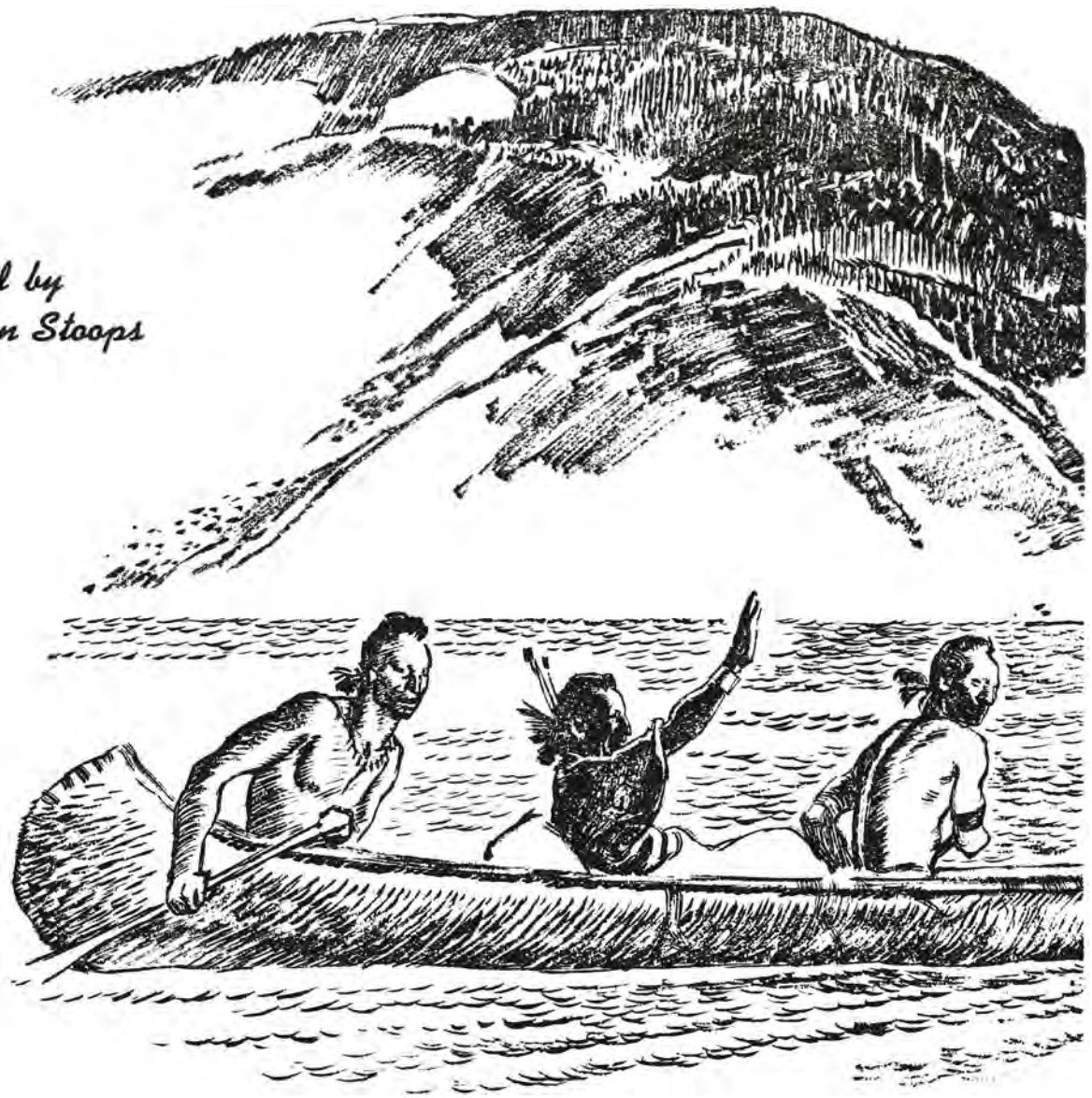
"It was rain put out his match, so he couldn't fire on the savages," said one of the two. "You're not going to take soundings?"

Hudson winked. "Aye, while Master Juet's watching us. Straight upstream, says he, and keep in sight; but we've found the best fishing's not in midstream. In another five minutes he'll be down in the cabin writing up his journal, same as my father."

The two men laughed. They obeyed him, not because they must, but because they liked him. When he had this eager twinkle in his eye and this gay thrust to his voice, there was a charm and a zest and a drive to him that marked him out for his father's son. But his father played no favorites and had placed him in Master Juet's watch. And old Robert Juet, who hated all youth, could turn the ship into a hell at times.

The crew, made up at Amsterdam, was only partly Dutch. Henry Hudson, master and pilot, had a goodly number of his old crew, with which he had been charting passages for the English Muscovy Company these past two years, aboard this cruise. He had sailed first into the Arctic, a weary voyage for the little *Half Moon,* up the Russian coasts to Nova Zembla, then back to the Faroes and clear across

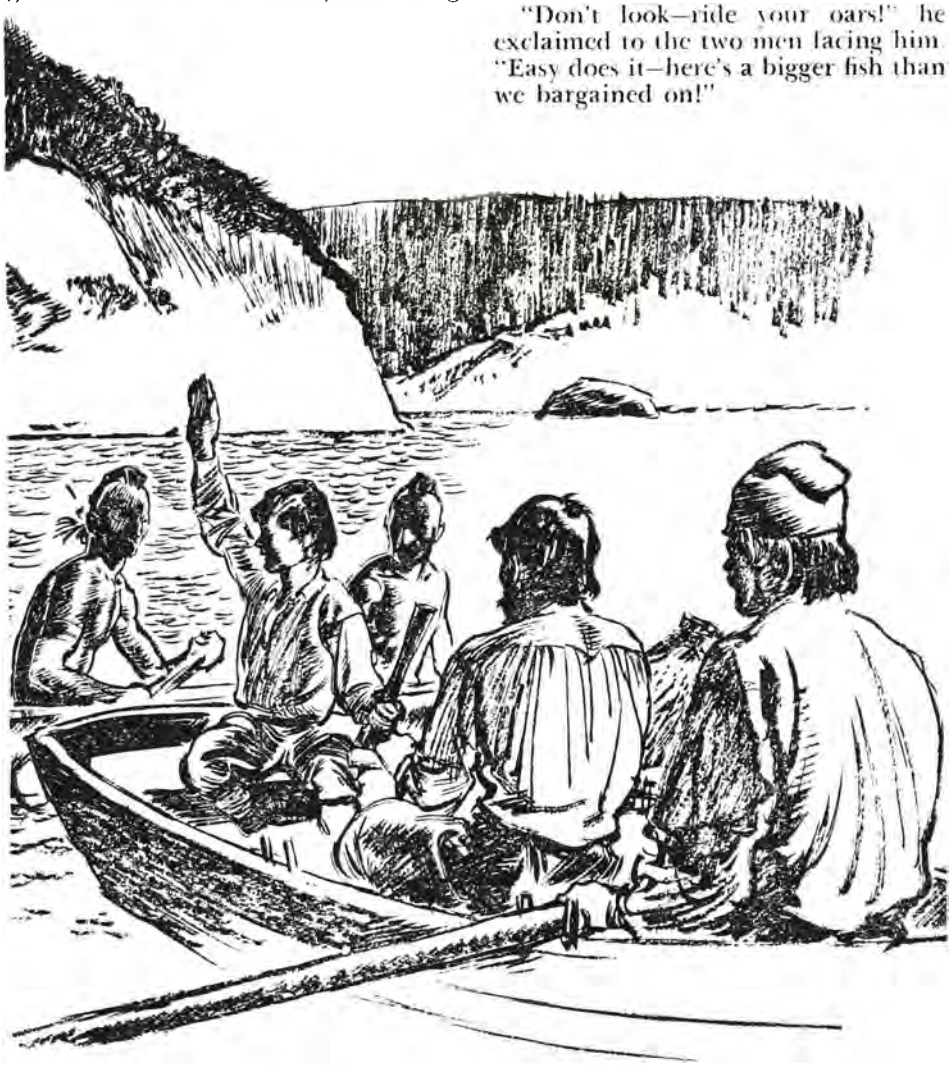
Illustrated by
Herbert Morton Stoops



the north Atlantic to the coasts of Virginia.

Not blindly; thanks to charts and letters from his old friend Captain John Smith, now in Virginia, Hudson had every hope that this Great River, as he called it, would form the northwest passage of rumor to Cathay and the Orient seas.

For John Hudson it was a hard, cruel voyage, but not a weary one. To him were opening the magic casements of the new world. On this Great River, with Indians friendly or hostile, with lordly shores russet and golden in late summer hues, with the glorious unknown each day unfolding itself anew, he was supremely happy. Here was new adventure on all sides, gayly beckoning, and not the least of it these bright-eyed, coppery savages. Two of them were now aboard, strictly confined; it was hoped to make friends of them.



The old chief lifted his hand in greeting; Hudson repeated the open-handed peace sign.

What everyone overlooked, what he himself had not yet discovered, was the significant fact that he was, indeed, his father's son.

The fish bit well, the little boat worked along between the shore and an island, and the ship was lost to sight. The Great River was a mile wide hereabouts, with a huge high headland visible far off to the northeast. A good fifteen miles off, said the master, viewing it through the tube Mynheer Lippershey of Middleberg had given him to test out on the voyage. He found the invention good, but Master Juet sneered at it perpetually.

The little boat nosed along the shore and turned into a tiny bay that was actually of some size. And there young Hudson caught his breath suddenly, and reached for the musket and the slow-match in the bottom of the boat.

"Don't look—ride your oars!" he exclaimed to the two men facing him. "Easy does it—here's a bigger fish than we bargained on!"

Not look? They could not help but look, and their hearts failed them. For here was a great canoe of savages that had been lying in wait, half a dozen men at the paddles, and amidships an old wrinkled chief with a feather in his hair. Yet the redskins made no move to catch up bows and arrows.

The old chief lifted a hand as though in greeting; young Hudson repeated the gesture, by sheer chance repeating the open-handed sign of peace as well.

A paddle-stroke, and the two craft came close, red men staring, white men startled and suspicious, young Hudson with the musket ready. Farther down the river, by the pleasant shores named Mana Hatta by the natives, had been treachery and bloodshed; finally two of the Indians who had come aboard to trade, were seized and kept in bonds.

INEXPLICABLY and suddenly, Hudson laid aside the match and gun. As he met the gaze of this wrinkled chief, borne in his frail craft like some great man, he knew there was nothing to fear. Those hawk-like old features were edged with power and cruelty and backed by dignity; but the eyes were all wisdom and honesty. Something passed from them to him, and he laughed, and a quick laugh in return split the leathery face of the chief. Then the other redskins laughed, and the two whites—a merriment of sheer friendliness that set suspicions to flight. Laughter, it is said, puts to flight the devils that roam the world.

The chief beckoned. He said a word to his paddlers and they struck in for the shore. Corlear and Vrouman looked inquiringly at Hudson, who calmly assented.

"Go ahead. We'll talk with him. You can stay in the boat and be ready to run for it, if you like."

This suited them, and they leaned on the oars, and the boat followed the huge canoe in upon the beach. The two men remained in their boat, but Hudson nimbly skipped ashore.

The redskins had landed. One of them took a pot ashore and opened the top to show fire; in a moment they kindled a tiny blaze of twigs. They laid beaver skins on the ground, and the old chief sat down, motioning Hudson, who joined him. He seemed both dignified and amused, and took from one of his men a big pipe of yellow copper.

This he lit with a twig from the fire, puffed at it, and handed it to Hudson. The latter, who had witnessed the talks and ceremonies downriver, took it and puffed four times, sending the smoke to the four quarters of the heavens, and returned it. Grunts broke from the Indians, and the old chief seemed pleased. He spoke, but Hudson shook his head blankly.

At sign-work they had better luck. Hudson was presented with a handsome beaver pelt, and in return he presented his knife to the chief, who received it with astonishment and evident pleasure. From the signs it was easy to gather his meaning; an invitation to visit him. Where? Upriver, where mountains lifted into the sky; two sleeps distant, a long way up.

He was no ordinary savage. His garments were decorated with porcu-

pine quills, with strings of shell, with beads cut from stone. To the invitation, Hudson nodded. They were bound upriver anyway; his father, he reflected, would be glad at finding friendly natives. The other redskins examined the knife with amazement. One tried it on his arm, and laughed when the blood ran, and handed it back to the chief.

They talked back and forth with eager gestures. Hudson openly admired the decorated moccasins of the old chief, who apparently promised him a pair of the same, upriver. There was much laughter. Hudson tried to get his new friends back to the ship, but they refused, and pointed to the distant mountains; they had to get home.

It was time to go. Hudson stood up, taught the chief to shake hands, and there was more laughter. An object fastened about the coppery throat on a leather thong, caught his eye; it was a round white shell inlaid with colored stones in the form of a cross. A cross, among these savage heathen! Hudson could not hide his astonishment and curiosity.

The chief touched the shell, then pointed to the south and repeated a word over and over. Hudson tried to get the name; an Indian tribal name, no doubt.

"Chenaqui? Chelakee? Cherokee?" he said, and the chief nodded, then touched his own breast, introducing himself. This was quite useless, until one of the redskins uttered a sharp word and pointed to the sky, where a heron floated over the river. So that was the chief's name: Heron, of some kind. White Heron, perhaps.

Another handshake; then the chief lifted the thong over his head and slipped it over that of Hudson, with the decorated shell. A gift, kindly made and evidently of value.

Sunset was at hand and all aboard the ship were gathered in anxiety when the boat came in with its fish. Here was Henry Hudson at the rail, anger in his stern long face with the grizzling beard; and Robert Juet, and others. John Hudson came over the side, holding his beaver-skin up eagerly. "We met some savages!" he exclaimed. "I smoked a pipe with them—"

"Lay that leadline in its place," broke in his father sternly. "Then go below. Ye were told not to leave sight of the ship."

"Much less talk wi' savages," put in Master Juet. "No supper and ten strokes o' the cat for disobedience and risking the ship's boat."

The boy caught his breath, and his hand lifted.

"This is no English ship, Master Juet!" he exclaimed.

"What mean ye?" demanded the master's mate, snarling in his gray beard.

"Punishment unheard, judgment given without defence—that's English custom. Look yonder!" John's hand lifted, pointing to the flag of the Dutch Republic at the jack-staff, above the bowsprit. "A Dutch ship this, and you'd best mind it! If there's punishment to be given, I can take a flogging with the next man, but only for just cause and sentence given; not unheard and at will. I've brought news that's well worth while—"

There was a mutter of assent from the men.

HENRY HUDSON looked at his son for a moment, then spoke curtly.

"Get below, as I bade."

The boy obeyed. As though nothing had happened, the master talked with Corlear about the redskins, surveyed the fish with satisfaction, and noted the report of the soundings taken, which varied from five to nine fathoms. Then, bidding Juet accompany him, he went below.

The defiant words of the boy had touched a vibrant chord of truth. Aboard English ships, the word of the master was law; Henry Hudson and Juet were both wont to rule with imperious hand. Not so here. The Dutch Republic had only lately won its freedom and guarded it jealously in all respects. Within its boundaries were freedom of speech, of the press, of personal action and opinion.

This freedom extended to a Dutch ship. While at Nova Zembla, Master Hudson had consulted with the whole crew before turning for America, to follow the map and hints given by his friend Captain John Smith. The flag of orange, white and blue, even when overlaid with the initials of the Dutch East India Company as in this case, was emphatically the banner of tyranny overthrown and liberty won at high cost. No Dutchman was going to let the world forget it, or the republic that backed it up.

Down in the main cabin where his son waited, Henry Hudson drew up a stool to the table and filled a clay pipe. He seemed rather amused, not sharing the scowling look of Juet, who likewise pulled up a stool. He directed a quizzical look at his son.

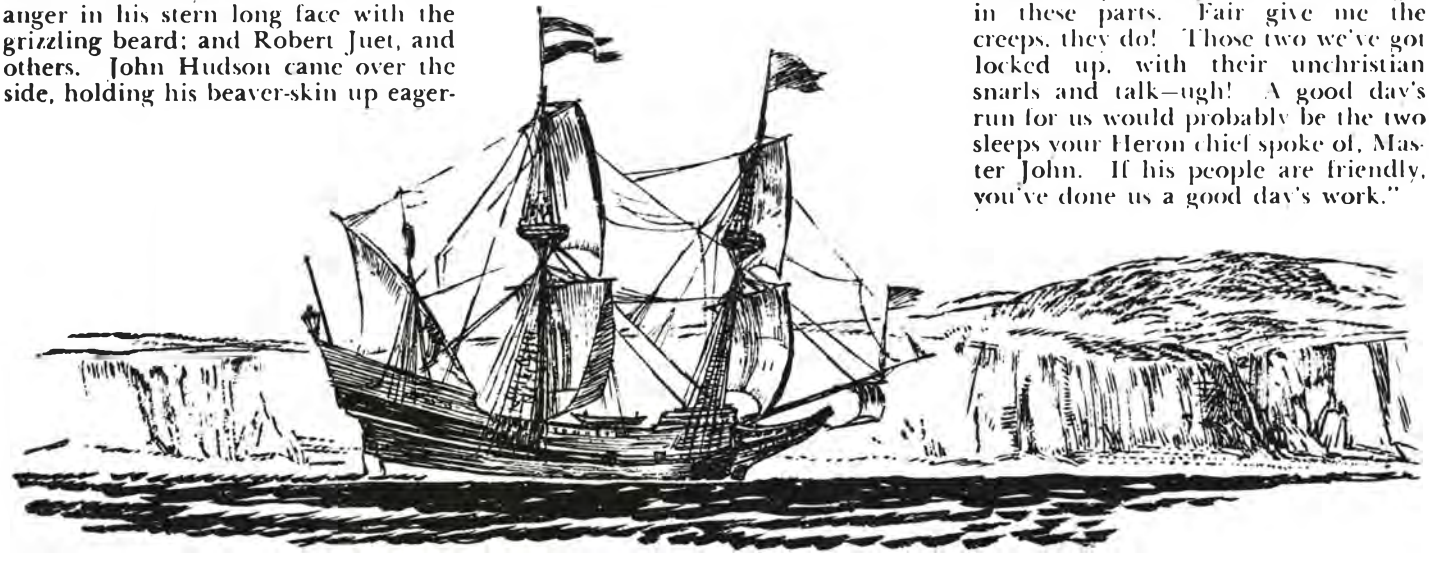
"You've a ready tongue and a sound mind for politics," he said dryly. "Try this tobacco of mine, Robert; it's some we got from those Mana Hatta savages. Out with your tale, John! You smoked a pipe with the country people—"

John Hudson poured out his story. The others listened, smoked, put in an occasional question. He handed over the beaver pelt, then the leather thong and inlaid shell; this they both examined and returned.

"Keep it," said the master. "What's the name of the tribe it came from to the south? A word like Cherokee, yes? Let me get out John Smith's map."

He got it from the chart-case and pored over it. Juet winked at the boy and assumed a friendly, wheedling air; his intent was to stand well with the master at all costs. There was no more talk of punishment.

"So your chief promised us friendly entertainment, eh?" old Juet observed. "Give us a fair wind tomorrow and we'll make fifty or sixty miles upriver and get away from the savages in these parts. Fair give me the creeps, they do! Those two we've got locked up, with their unchristian snarls and talk—ugh! A good day's run for us would probably be the two sleeps your Heron chief spoke of, Master John. If his people are friendly, you've done us a good day's work."



Henry Hudson laid aside Captain John Smith's map of Virginia, shaking his head.

"No trace of the name Cherokee, or any like it. An odd thing, this shell: it must come from far away. Your friends are from the mountains to the north; did they say nothing of a great sea beyond?"

"I didn't ask," replied John. "We were talking by signs, you will remember, sir."

"You should have had it in mind. . . . . Well, Robert, I have my own opinion of this Great River; now let me have your considered judgment. Quite aside from our hopes."

He resumed his pipe.

ROBERT JUET pawed his gray beard, scowled judicially, and delivered his mind on the subject.

"I've already writ it in my journal, Master Hudson. This Great River must be the overflow of some inland sea; who ever heard of a river a mile wide? But look at the tides. The sea-tides affect it mightily, and stronger by night than by day. So it's plain we've found something more than a mere river."

"Aye, but what?" ejaculated Master Hudson.

"May I never see Limehouse again, if it be not a passage to the South Sea, or mayhap Cathay! Aye, master, 'tis plain enough; the very thing we been seeking elsewhere, is here under our noses! If we follow this passage to those northern mountains, we'll find it opens out, most like switches around to the s'uthard, and so on to the South Sea."

"Then we more or less agree." Hudson scraped the dottle from his clay pipe, and looked at the boy; his affected sternness melted. "Son, you've done well, as Master Juet says. I dare not say as much before the hands, but a disobedience of orders sometimes works for the best. However, don't take that for liberty to disobey further. Given a fair wind, we'll weigh in the morning and go to look up your friend, the Heron chief. Perhaps he may have some effect upon reducing the savage nature of those two prisoners of ours."

A fond hope sadly doomed, this! Daybreak came up with a mist lying thickly on the river; although they had ascended it some seventy miles or more, it was still a mile from shore to shore. With the sun, however, the mist cleared away before a spanking wind from the south. All hands were called, the anchor was brought in, the canvas tumbled out, and finding that the channel had a good depth, the *Half Moon* held joyously northward.

Scarcely was she under way when a splash sounded astern, a yell went up, and John Hudson leaped to the quarter-rail to hear another splash below. Two heads appeared, a jeering yell sounded, and there went the savages. They had squirmed out of their bonds, squeezed through a port, and now struck out for shore, sending taunting cries after the ship.

Hudson puffed, sending the smoke to the four quarters of the heavens.

"Let them go," said Master Hudson, in high good humor at the wind and sun and tide. "They've learned a lesson, and we need them not; we'll be taking home better news than they could prove! Keep that lead going for'ard, master, and brail up the fores'l against too great speed, lest we strike a mudbank."

The channel proved open and good, however. The bluff-bowed little ship bowled along, and despite the heat of the day it was one of the most pleasant the Great River had given them. The highlands on either side passed into small mountains and then greater; the scenery was gloriously wild, and the men fishing from the rail caught a number of salmon.

As the leagues fell behind, John Hudson was by far the liveliest soul aboard. Here was adventure that put the arctic seas to shame. There is ever something about a river that draws keenly at the heart of a boy, and this was such a river as to dwarf even the Thames or the Texel, majestic in its naked distant grandeur of hills and tree-clad heights.

It was unknown, too, therefore mysterious. The high rock walls like palisades, the savages with their quantities of oysters and corn and pumpkins, their feather mantles and copper pipes and tobacco and furs—what more could any man ask?

"My river, my river!" thought young Hudson, lying on the rail in the bows and watching the river unfold its far reaches northward, new peaks ever rising against the hot sky. "Map it for Holland if ye will, but mine it is! And mine is the only redskin we've seen thus far who has the bearing of a chief and a gentleman."

The wind held steady, the afternoon remained hot; dreams filled his head as he went about his duties. Ahead grew mountains that went up sheer from the river's brim, and here it was determined to lie for the night, in a sheltered spot where numbers of native canoes had been fishing, until the ship's approach scattered them. So the anchor pitched down, the boat went out for fish—with John Hudson in it—and the other men aided the cooper in getting all the water casks on deck, ready for filling on the morrow.

"Twenty leagues, Master Juet made it," said John, as they put out nets and tried for fish, and discussed the day's run. "Sixty miles, and more mountains ahead, looks like! Here, put in closer to the shore—aren't those chestnut trees yonder?"

CHESTNUTS they were, ripe. Poor fishing but the trees promised better, and the boat put in to shore, at a venture—long enough to gather a few chestnuts and find them good; then out into the stream again and back to the ship in the sunset, with half a dozen canoes likewise heading out for the *Half Moon*, a few Indians in each.

There was stir and alarm, but all needless; the redskins were old men and women, and brought grapes and corn and other fruits of the soil as gifts. Some of them were permitted

on deck, where they gaped around yet showed a certain dignified restraint. John Hudson watched them; a man pointed to him, every eye went to him, and he realized it was because of the shell he wore about his neck. One of the old Indians touched it reverently.

"They know it," said Master Juet. "Mayhap it's a badge of office, like a lord mayor's gold jewel. They're right loving people, too."

VERY evident was the friendliness of the Indians, and their respect for John Hudson. One reason for this was the shell gorget; another, as their gestures made evident, was that he, like themselves, was beardless. With sunset they all cleared out, and the ship settled down for the night.

A hot night, boding heat on the morrow. Work done, young Hudson stretched out at the heel of the bowsprit, watching the starlight on the water. The river called to him in its dim distances; was this actually the famed South Sea passage? He knew what tremendous import lay in the answer to this question.

Upon it hung the future of commerce; to the merchants of London and Amsterdam it was vital. Did such a passage exist, the monopoly of Spain and Portugal would be broken overnight and the Dutch, no longer having to make the long course around the Cape of Good Hope, could flood into the Indies and Spice Islands. To them it meant much; to his father it meant far more, since it would be the climax of a great career.

"All dependent upon this rippling water," he thought, straining his eyes into the upriver obscurity. "The tide still runs here; there must be ocean ahead! And that old Limehouse rat will cheat us all out of the discovery if he can. Why in the fiend's name should I have to serve such a drunken rascal—"

Why should he, indeed? A vague thought, a memory, a possibility, struggled half-formed in his mind; he remembered that figure of the old chief in the great bark canoe with his half-dozen paddlers—

His thoughts went flying before the stamp of booted feet. His father and Robert Juet came pacing down the deck, unaware of the boy. At the rail they halted; they, too, remained staring into the starlit north. From Henry Hudson broke a sigh.

"If Mynheer Lippershey's tube told aright, we have islands and shoals and channels up ahead. That doesn't bode well, I fear."

"You can't trust that invention of a crazy Middleberg spectacle-maker," growled the master's mate. Evidently he had been at the ale again, thought John; liquor brought out all the poison and venom of his nature. "Telescope, he calls it! Why, I can see better with my naked eye than with his telescope!"

"Aye, but I can't," rejoined Hudson. "My eyes aren't what they used to be."

"Well, if we're to risk the ship amid shoals, I'll depend on my honest eyesight!"

"We'll not risk her," said the master. "There's naught to hurry us. The men are losing all trace of scurvy; here's good fresh water to fill our casks. If we find friendly savages in these parts, we can remain here and push the discovery by means of the boat. What a noble river on which to settle a colony! Our Amsterdam burghers might do worse than send one here."

"To perish among the savages?"

Hudson laughed. "No, no, Robert! The Dutch flag would bring brotherhood and peace and prosperity, or I miss my guess! Have you noted that these savages upriver seem of a high order, well acquainted with barter? They have copper, too; while in Virginia, says Captain John Smith, the redskins regard copper as a high curiosity. Another indication that we're on the track of the South Sea passage—"

The two men moved away. John Hudson, balanced on the wide rail to the slow dipping of the ship and the anchor-jerk, thought again of the old chief and the big canoe. This time his thoughts broke like a wave across his mind. He sat up in sudden excitement, a gasp on his lips.

"Of course I could! Why not?" he murmured. "The ship may be about these parts for a long while. And if I find the passage myself, all would be forgiven; and if not—why come back at all? I can take care of myself. This is a fine wonderful land, giving everything one needs, even friends! Why go back to the smelly cities of Holland or England?"

His coherent thought died away; but died upon a settled purpose.

Long ere sunrise, he was hard at work; Master Juet saw that he was never idle. This was work of his own, however. A spare shirt rolled about one of his father's flintlock pistols, a horn of powder, a pouch of balls; a knife, a firebag, half a dozen biscuits he had saved up and a silver locket that had belonged to his mother, with her picture in it. These were his treasures and worldly pelf, some his own, some not. He stored the bundle away in the smallboat with a bit of tarpaulin over it, and was prepared.

How his departure might affect his father—yes, that occurred to him; but Master Hudson was a man; he was a self-centered boy toughened into a man himself. The force of discovery that drove the one, now drove the other.

Sunrise saw the decks sluiced down for the day, the morning biscuit washed down with ale, cabin swept and bunks tended. Corlear, Vrouman and two other seamen tumbled into the boat with a net to spread for fish. Young Hudson followed, with Juet's grudging permission.

"Be back afore noon meat," the master's mate called down to them. He pointed to a headland a couple of miles upstream, where the channel curved. "Get the depth o' water off that point and find where the deepest channel lays between here and there."

"Aye, master," rejoined Corlear, and pushed off, the four men at the oars.

So it was accomplished! The boy thrilled to the fact; he looked back at the little ship he hated, at the man he hated. The flag was just being set on the jackstaff above the bowsprit; he would see it no more. Now he had only to get ashore with his bundle and get in touch with the Indians and find his friend the chief.

"I'm glad those two savages of ours got away!" he exclaimed bitterly, but thinking rather of himself. "After all, when strange ships land on the English coast and carry folk away, we call 'em pirates. Moors from Barbary, they usually are."

"And we'd be of the same stripe for carrying away these savage folk," said Corlear. "True enough, master; our Dutch republic rose from blood and torture and savage injustice into liberty, and we shouldn't hand out to others what we ourselves endured. Eh, mates?"

The others broke in vociferously as they rowed. These men had seen Holland come up out of misery and bloodshed; the struggle against tyranny was fresh in their minds, and they could voice talk of ideals and freedom from full hearts. To them the three-barred flag of their republic was a living thing, and patriotism was an ardent flame, not a quality to be taken for granted.

ALTHOUGH it was not his flag, Hudson kindled to their talk of battle and suffering. So, as they talked and cast the lead and rowed along, they came to the promontory and found the channel and took its depth. Then, passing on beyond the headland they sighted a number of Indian canoes fishing—and, suddenly, Hudson was aware of a great heart-leap. For there, coming down-river, was a canoe larger than these others, with a seated figure amidships; he knew it at once, and hailed it with a sharp joyous shout. His problem was solved—there was his friend the chief, no doubt coming to visit the ship!

"Look, Corlear!" he cried. "There he is!"

He fired, but not blindly. The Mohawk chief was knocked over.

Recognition was prompt, and the two craft headed for each other.

Hudson reached down and got his bundle, and looked at his four men defiantly.

"I'm off, and stop me if ye can!" he said. "No more Master Juet for me, no more ice and snow and snarling hatred—I'm away in that canoe of his, to find out for myself what lies up-river, with his men to paddle me!"

He turned from the thunderstruck men to greet the old chief in radiant eagerness, as the two craft drew alongside. In the boat was a box of trade-hatchets and knives, brought in case savages with furs to trade were encountered. Hudson seized one of these and presented it to the chief, then indulged in a series of gesticulations that would have been ludicrous but for his evident earnestness.

That White Heron comprehended what he wanted, was quite clear. The chief had brought along the body of a white heron, taking pains to explain that this was his name. It was also clear that he intended to visit the ship; his canoe was loaded with corn and pumpkins and beaver pelts. To turn over his bark craft and paddlers to Hudson was therefore not in his scheme of things, though he was amiable enough.

"If you want his boat," spoke up the worried Corlear, "then take it; though who's to account for your doings to Master Hudson, Lord only knows! Go with his savages and boat if you must, and we'll take him back as a hostage for your safety—"

"Splendid, Jan, splendid!" cried Hudson, and proceeded to put the idea into sign-talk.

The morning was hot and windless, and he was sweating from his eager work; but at length he made White Heron comprehend his intent, offering

"You've a ready tongue," he said dryly. "Out with your tale, John!"

to pay each of the redskin paddlers with a knife or hatchet. White Heron conferred with his men, and their agreement was evident.

Both craft now headed in for shore, where the load was transferred from canoe to boat. The four men were in helpless dismay over Hudson's departure, but he laughed at their fears and protests. Stripping a patch of bark from a white birch, he wrote on it with his knife-point and gave it to Corlear.

"This will absolve you from blame in my father's eyes," he said. "I've told them I want their canoe for one sleep; whether I come back tomorrow night or not, I don't know or care. I can manage for myself, and I'm going to see this new land and what lies in it, so get along back and make the best of it!"

"Then God take care of you, Master Hudson," was the response.

With White Heron enthroned in the sternsheets, the boat put off and away. Hudson got into the canoe; a wave of the hand, and the two craft separated. The die was cast and he was free, his own master, a new horizon ahead! Outrageous his action might be, but he cared not a whit.

Old longings had burst suddenly into flower; any thought of danger was far from his mind. He had been schooled amid perils, tracking unknown ways up the coasts of Greenland and Muscovy where death was always close aboard a little ship. In this school he had gained a poise, a shrewdly balanced sense of fitness, far beyond his years.

His six paddlers were taciturn, efficient, but kindly; they were not as old as White Heron but were men in the prime of life, muscles rippling under naked bronze skin. For arms they had flint knives, bows, flint-tipped arrows and ugly war-clubs edged with flint. If Hudson were frankly curious about them, they were equally curious about him, and with much mutual laughter and gestures they got away to an excellent start.

A FINE craft, this big canoe. It slipped through the water easily, opening the upper reaches of the Great River faster than the ship under sail. The hot hours fled, with new vistas ever opening to sight and each bend of the shore promising to widen into the South Sea beyond, but each promise was vain.

Other canoes saluted them with evident respect and handed over newly caught fish. About noon they landed, and these fish were cooked and eaten; then forward again. Hudson observed that they chiefly followed the eastern shore. When he, with adventure prodding, wanted to cross over to the other shore, the paddlers refused, touching their weapons as though to signify some danger, so he yielded to their grave gestures.

Thus the afternoon wore on. Estimating the distance traversed, from time to time, Hudson was astonished by the speed they made. Four men were always paddling at top form, and two resting. The sun was sinking when the only incident of the day took place. Another canoe, bound downstream with two Indians aboard, hailed them and drew alongside; the two men had faces painted with red and black designs.

There was lengthy talk, excited and profuse; to judge by the gestures, something had happened upriver, but Hudson could make nothing of it. The other canoe sped on its way. His paddlers now seemed unwilling to proceed upstream; upon his insistence, they conferred, then pointed ahead and by signs suggested a camp now and further advance in the morning. To this he agreed. After all, he must have come thirty miles from the ship, he figured, so the morrow might bring the great ocean beyond into view. Besides, the evening was as hot as the day, and he was eager for a swim.

Skirting the shore a space farther, they came upon an open space where canoes were drawn up and half a dozen dwellings of elm-bark appeared at the edge of the trees. Indians came down to meet them; old men, mostly, who stared in awe and curiosity at Hudson and did a lot of talking. A few women and children were visible among the houses or huts. The six

paddlers listened, talked, then pushed on a few hundred feet away from the canoes and made their own camp on the shore.

Making known his intent by gestures, Hudson walked on a space, well away from the camp; two of his Indians insisted on accompanying him. He laughed and stripped and plunged into the water, the red men inspecting his white body with open amusement and curiosity. When it came to supper, he shared their rations, somewhat to his dismay. Dried meat that was tough as leather, parched corn, and a handful of grapes; but his hoarded ship-biscuit eked out and stayed his hunger.

HIS six paddlers, who had worked hard that day, flung themselves down to sleep as soon as they had eaten. He, unwearied, sat loading his heavy pistol; he would use it in the morning, he thought, and astonish the savages. When it was charged he laid it aside, and in a glow of sheer happiness watched the sky and water deepen into starry night.

A pleasant land, a pleasant life, he thought contentedly; a friendly country if one met it aright, as he had done. Nothing to fear here if one had friends, and White Heron was evidently a person of high place and weight. What a difference between this old chief and Robert Juet of Limehouse, whose gray hairs only emphasized his sly venom and his evil heart! Well, his father found Juet of great use, and so could have him and welcome.

The sun had gone down red and angry, presaging a hot morrow. Up the shore lifted the vibrant whirr-whirr of locusts and the sharper legtrill of crickets piercing the heat and stillness. Watching the ripples in the starlight, he saw they were higher than ever before. Even here, then, the rise and fall of the tide was felt—what a wondrous, majestic, kindly thing, this Great River!

That one touch of the cool water made him long for more. Another dip, a swim over to the first islet and back, and he could sleep happily. None here to say him nay; he was a free man now and could follow any fancy that came to him. Upon the thought, he doffed shoes and doublet and shirt. Wearing only the inlaid shell on the thong around his neck, he took to the water, and the delicious feel of it thrilled him.

He could swim like a fish, and he struck out for the bare little islet that lay fifty yards distant. He stroked easily, unhurried; ah, this was the life! No more of the frozen seas, no more sea-drenched forecastle day and night, no more slave-work by deck and rigging with bleeding hands and bitter iced body!

The little island loomed up ahead. His feet touched ooze; a few steps and he stood knee-deep, enjoying the chill of the night air on wet skin.

A sound, a human voice, actually curdled his blood.

It lifted from the trees ashore; a wild, prolonged yell, so vibrant with ferocity and savage lust that keen sharp terror leaped in him at the very sound. From where he stood, the curve of shore with the Indian huts and canoes lay opposite. Before that first hideous yell had died, a dozen other voices joined it; then a frantic tumult burst out, shrieks of women and death-cries of men shrilling up. The starlit beach showed flitting figures. The embers of a fire were scattered and fanned alight and one of the bark houses began to burn.

Seized by horrible panic, Hudson plunged back into the water and swam for his own camp, belaboring the water like mad. What had happened, he could not tell; he had supposed that all these savages were one people. Far beyond his ken was the savage warfare that existed between this Mohican tribe of the Great River, and the terrible Kaniengehaga, the "stone people" or Mohawks who ruled down to the river hills.

But now, as he swam, he had sharp and bitter proof that his pleasant land was one more drenched in blood than was even Europe. The blaze mounted, bringing into frightful clarity the scene at the huts: old men, women, children being cut down by naked yelling warriors without pity.

And his own men, there ahead of him—ah! The rising flare showed that they, too, were in the fray, cut off from the big canoe and surrounded by leaping figures, but they were fighting with club and knife.

Scarce conscious that this hideous scene of blood involved him too, his one thought to reach his loaded pistol and clothes, Hudson touched bottom and waded ashore. Almost instantly, the glare revealed his white figure; a startled yell went up, then a chorus, from the Mohawks. He looked like a supernatural being as he splashed up the bank—to these men, who had seen no whites, he was something from another world.

Then, as Hudson crouched over his clothes, a Mohawk chief came leaping at him. A figure painted and unearthly, war-whoop rising high, stone-tipped ax swinging. Terrorized, the boy saw him coming, realized that this living horror was a savage foe, and snatched up his pistol.

He fired, but not blindly; despite his quivering panic, despite his horror and wild revulsion, he leveled the pistol ere he pulled trigger. Flame gushed, smoke rolled, and the recoil knocked the weapon out of his hand—he had far overloaded. But the Mohawk chief was knocked over by the ball. He leaped up, blood streaming from his body, to voice his death-yell and collapse. And the boy stood empty-handed—a pale demon who had come out of the river to help the Mohicans and cause roaring death of flame and smoke!

It was too much for the dreaded Stone People. A raiding party who had ventured into Mohican country, they were far from home; they could not fight devils! Hudson's paddlers, with a furious yell, attacked them, and they broke. They were gone, melting in among the trees, leaping shapes that crossed the glare of light and were gone.

There was blood and fire. And the boy, glazing-eyed with horror too deep for tears, saw the old men and squaws and the children, slashed with ax and tomahawk; he saw his own paddlers, two of them dead, the other four gashed and wounded. He saw one of them go to the Mohawk chief and with furious knife rip away the scalplock; the man brought it to him proudly and put the bleeding thing in his hand—

And that in turn was too much for him; his dream ended there, forever.

Next day, a blazing hot day too, the *Half Moon* was blundering upstream, making for anchorage near a Mohican village where White Heron had his headquarters. The old chief had been livened by a drink or two of brandy; in expansive mood, he insisted on Master Juet coming ashore with him to a feast, with some of the men.

THE man on watch hailed, and a chorus of shouts rippled down the deck. Henry Hudson jumped to the rail and looked; the canoe of White Heron was making for the ship, and his son was in it. Juet came and looked, and waved to the canoe.

"So he's back, Master Hudson. And not looking gay, either. I thought he was gone for good! A mistake, no doubt, on the part of the men."

"Gone, for good?" Henry shook his head. "Why, my boy would never do anything like that, Robert! He's had his fling; say no more about it, I charge you."

John Hudson was back, yes, and glad of it; but after all, he might better have followed his instinct and stayed. For it was only a year later that Robert Juet of Limehouse stood by and saw father and son set adrift in an open boat—sent to death by mutinous men—and pawed his gray beard and cackled to himself. But they were not under the flag of Holland then.

"Flag o' the Mayflower," the sixth story in this series, will be a feature of our forthcoming January issue.

The Idiosyncrasies of

Fearful and wonderful things can happen in a blackout—even if it's only a practice affair.

by NELSON BOND

I WAS making my routine weekly equipment check-up at our community shelter when Colonel Winterby—he's the Senior Warden of our post—came busting in like a Kansas twister on legs. His face was two shades pinker than a parson's puss at a strip-tease, and his nerves were so twidgety that his hands shook like six delicious flavors.

He hurled himself into the nearest chair and worried a worn tobacco pouch. He said: "Barlow, look at me! What do you see?"

I stared at him anxiously. This Air-raid Warden job is no pipe, of course, what with the endless amount of detail and the ever-present possibility of enemy reprisal raids here on the East Coast. But Colonel Winterby was the last guy you would expect to crack under the strain. He came by his title honestly—in the last war; and the veto of the Old Man with the Hourglass was the only thing which kept him out of active service in this.

I said soothingly: "Hot today, isn't it, sir? Well, rest quietly for a few minutes, and—"

"Stop simperin' like a damned fool, Barlow!" snorted the Old Man. "An' leggo that phone! I aint gone nuts—yet! I'm just askin' a simple question. What do you see?"

"Is this the sixty-four-buck question?" I asked him. "Or are you fishing for compliments? If it's facts you want, I see a white-haired, somewhat bulgy old fire-eater of fifty-odd, who's been through the mill, knows everything there is to be known about Civilian Defense tactics—"

"Wrong!" groaned Winterby. "No, what you see, is a broken man. A man gripped in the fell clutch of circumstance an' sadly harassed by Fate. Also by them addlepated nitwits in the O. C. D."

At last it made sense. I grinned at him.

"Comes," I said, "the dawn. You mean Jones?"

"Nobody else but. Now, I ask you, man-to-man—what did I ever do to deserve Jones?"

There wasn't any answer to that. It was just one of those things: When we organized our post, we selected the men from our neighborhood whom we considered the best for the Air Warden service. Then Doc Henderson, a pediatrician, had been called up—don't ask me why!—and the local authorities had appointed in his place a chap we hardly knew—a new neighbor named Bolivar Jones.

Jones was gawky. Jones was lanky and gangling. His build was approximately that of *Mr. Before* in the "I can make a Man of You!" ads. He had sand-colored hair, a sallow skin, and wistful, watery-blue eyes. His only outstanding physical characteristics—and I *do* mean outstanding—were a brace of oversized ears which jutted from his skull like Genoa jibs in a breeze, and an Adam's-apple which bobbed up and down in his scrawny throat like a half-swallowed billiard-ball.

I asked, "What's he done now, Colonel?"

"What hasn't he done?" moaned Winterby. "That's the real question! First crack out o' the box, he visited every house on his block an' told the housewives they should put a bucket of sand inside their doorways—"

"Not a bad idea," I said. "Sand's mighty useful for putting out incendiary bombs. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothin'," howled the boss, "except that my house is on his block. Martha got a bucket of sand an' put it like he told her. Only, she did it while I was out. When I come home at midnight an' opened the door—*bingo!*—there's me an' the sand strewed all over the floor like a breaded veal cutlet!

"An' that aint all. He also spent an evening goin' around cuttin' off people's gas an' electricity, just so he'd know how in an emergency. Suppers got ruint, an' the utility companies got sore, an' I caught you-know-what from the Chief Warden.

"Meanwhile, Jones was out prowlin' with a flashlight through back yards, like to scarin' everybody half to death."

I said placatingly: "Well, now, Colonel, that *wasn't* very brilliant of him, I'll agree. But it shows his heart is in his work, even if he *does* let his enthusiasm run away with him. After all, he's green at this job, you know."

"I don't give a hoot in Hades," stormed the Old Man, "*what* color he is; I don't want him for a warden on our post! It's bad enough he should mess up our routine with his wacky experiments; but when he starts mopin' around after Nora like a pup in a hamburg orchard—"

I started. "What! What's that? Nora?"

"You heard me. An' the worst part of it is that she don't seem to mind. Matter o' fact, she encourages him."

Well, that was a horse of a different collar. Up to this point I had been willing to ignore the idiosyncrasies of Bolivar Jones. But enough is too much. The chief's daughter was the gal I had chosen to burn *my* breakfast bacon. She was sugar and spice and everything nice, and that's what Barlow's dreams are made of. I scowled, and my viewpoint changed like a fat woman's diet after Lent.

I said: "Come to think of it, Colonel, you're right. Jones shouldn't be an Air Warden at all. Guys like him upset public morale. You'd better take him off that beat."

"If it was only me," fumed Winterby, "I'd unload him before you could say '*Leon Henderson.*' But he volunteered to the O. C. D., an' they appointed him. So we can't get rid of him unless he deliberately disobeys orders, or gets caught in what the rule-book calls 'flagrant dereliction of duty.'"

"Okay," I nodded. "So you can't can him. But there are more ways than one of skinning a catastrophe."

"Meaning," demanded the Colonel, "which?"

"Meaning you can consign him to sweet oblivion. Get him off the street—and out of your hair—by appointing him Post Warden in charge of this shelter. *That* should chill his ardor for public service."

"Not to mention," said the Old Man thoughtfully, "my daughter also. Barlow, I think you got something there. I'll try it. You got Jones' telephone-number handy?"

SO I had, and he dialed, and in no time at all Jones came galumphing into the shelter, arm-band on, identification-card jammed in his hat, lips peeled in a tremendous grin, and his liquescent larynx romping like a runaway elevator.

He snapped to a full salute when he saw the Old Man.

Bolivar Jones

"Jones was out prowlin' with a flashlight through back yards, scarin' everybody half to death."

"Air Warden Jones reporting for duty, sir!" he said.

Winterby sort of shuddered. But he said: "Sit down, Jones." Then gave him his new assignment.

Jones wasn't wild about it. He listened with slowly sagging jaw. When the chief had finished, he said: "But—but I was just beginning to get my beat in order, sir. I've made a list of all the water-hydrants and street-lamps. Tonight I was planning to test each and every one of them—"

"Nevertheless an' howsoever," said the Colonel, "you aint goin' to mess up—I mean, you won't have to fret about them things no more. From now, on this shelter is your post."

"But," protested B. Jones, "during an alert, this is *your* station, isn't it, sir? In that case, I don't quite see where I have any real responsibility—"

"You can have *all* the responsibility," raved the Old Man, losing his last tatter of patience, "an' see if I give a damn! Beginning now, I give you complete authority over this station—includin' the headaches. But stay off the streets! Them's orders!"

And he stomped off, boiling like a Brooklyn fan at a called strike on Ducky.

After he left, I tried to console Jones a little. I still didn't feel any too clubby with him, what with Nora and all that, but I felt sort of sorry for him. Even if he *was* a wingding, he meant well. So I pointed out the various pieces of equipment in the shelter: the masks and decontam suits and stirrup-pumps and so on, and I explained the telephone system to Civic Control Center, and how it worked; and I said:

"It's really a great responsibility, Jones. I don't quite understand why the Colonel was willing to allow one man to carry it all alone, but I suppose he had good reasons. He was greatly impressed with your outside work, you know."

"He—he was?" stammered Jones.

"Absolutely!" I assured him. "Why, he thinks you're tops. Just a couple of minutes before you came in, he said to me: 'Barlow, what did I ever do to deserve Jones?' "

Jones glowed like an overgrown sunbeam on legs. "He did? Colonel Winterby said that? Gosh—" His Adam's-apple bobbed convulsively. "I didn't realize he thought so much of me, Barlow. I—I'll have to buckle down and do a good job."

"That's right. You keep the place tidy, and—"

"Oh, I *will!* I'll make it the best shelter in town; see if I don't. I'll get everything organized—" He paused and glanced at me shyly. "This means more to me than you may think, Barlow. Perhaps I shouldn't mention this, but I—I'm sort of in love with Colonel Winterby's daughter. If I prove myself a good warden, maybe he'll think that I'd make an all right son-in-law too. What do you think of it."

"It isn't," I told him, glowering, "printable!" And I left too.

So that was that. Bolivar Jones went into exile, and I took over his post. Only, things didn't work out exactly as I had figured. Jones had spoiled the residents on that block—spoiled 'em rotten! When I strolled by to tell them I was their new watchdog, they stared at me as if I had just crawled out from under a damp rock.

One woman said: "That nice Mr. Jones—*gone?* What a shame! He was so pleasant and helpful. He helped us put our awnings up and repair that broken step and— Where did he go? He's not in the Army, is he? I'll have to knit him a—"

And, "New warden?" said another. "But we don't *want* a new warden. We were quite satisfied with Mr. Jones."

I said desperately: "The authorities felt that Jones was disturbing the neighbors too much with his investigations and experiments. That's why—"

"Tush!" said my parishioner. "You mean his prowling around our back yards, turning off lights, and such nonsense? Why, *that* didn't bother us. We knew he was just playing. He was just a great big boy. And he was *so* nice and neighborly. One night a week he used to come in and mind our baby so Jake and I could go to the movies. I don't suppose *you*—"

Handicapped by that precedent, what else could I do? One night a week I minded the Johnson baby. Life is just one damp thing after another.

The worst blow of all was the way Nora Winterby made herself conspicuous by her absence. I had had some idea that pacing this beat would offer me a golden opportunity to swing on ye olde garden gate. But the first time I called, she was out; the second time she was ditto, and the third, fourth and subsequent times were more of the same dose.

So I finally learned that she had voluntarily joined Jones in durance vile. Every night she went down to help him with his alleged duties at the shelter post!

When I told the Old Man this, his brow furrowed like a dinner-shirt at a hepcats' brawl.

"So *that's* where she's been going!" he howled. "For two cents, I'd turn her over my knee and—"

"Temper!" warned Mrs. Winterby soothingly. "Temper, Papa! Don't forget your high blood-pressure. Anyway, what's wrong with Nora's helping Bolivar?"

"Wrong! Why, that skinny excuse for a stringbean on stilts aint fitten to—"

"*I* think," said Mrs. Winterby primly, "Bolivar Jones is a *very* nice young man. And an *excellent* Air Warden."

I SIGHED. Whatever Jones had, womenfolks liked. My dreams of a Winterby-Barlow merger began fading. All I hoped now was that Mrs. Winterby was right—that Jones *was* doing a good job at the shelter. Because the brass hats had ordained a practice alert for tonight, and whatever showing our sector made depended largely upon the efficiency with which our post had been organized.

"And," continued Mrs. Winterby proudly, "he has good taste, too. That flowered chintz should look *most* attractive in the shelter. And those Godey prints I loaned him—"

The Colonel stiffened like the feature attraction at an autopsy. "Flowered chintz!" he gasped. "G-Godey prints!"

"Why, yes. Bolivar thought it would be cute to make the shelter pretty and livable. Such a *sweet* boy—"

The Old Man turned haggard eyes to me. "Migawd!" he moaned. "We got to get down there quick, Barlow! Come on!"

I was already on my way.

To show you how upset Colonel Winterby was, he's almost thirty years my senior, but he beat me to the shelter by two lengths. It's one of those steel-and-concrete structures built by the city, and it was just sheer luck the door wasn't closed tight, because the Old Man burst right through without even touching the knob.

Nora and Jones were inside. They whirled, startled, as we entered. Bolivar Jones disgorged a mouthful of carpet-tacks, saluted, and said, "Why, how do you do, Colonel Winterby! This is a surprise! Air Warden Jones on duty, sir!"

"Jones," rasped the Old Man hoarsely, "what on earth are you doing here?"

That was what is known as a rhetorical question. It was perfectly obvious what Jones had been doing. He had been going quietly mad, in an interior-decoratorishly way, and our shelter post had served as his victim.

Gone was the clean smooth functional efficiency of our pill-box. Its once bare concrete walls were now bedecked with pictures and prints and mottoes, its window-slits draped with dainty chintz, its floor carpeted with a woven rush mat. Some of the decorations pursued a patriotic motif; the Stars-and-Stripes blazoned proudly from one wall; another boasted a four-color portrait of General Douglas MacArthur; above the door were crossed two cavalry sabers.

Other embellishments were just plain silly. An ivy-bowl dangled near a figurine-laden whatnot; an ornate mirror hung near the doorway; the telephone was coyly concealed beneath one of those hoop-skirted dolls!

Bolivar Jones stammered: "W-why, I—I was just trying to make the post attractive, sir. I thought—"

"It's a lie!" stormed the Colonel. "You never had a thought in your life! Get them doolollies an' fiddle-faddles out o' here!" He began tearing blindly, recklessly, at slipcovers and curtains. "Don't you know we're having a practice blackout tonight? Do you want to make our post the laughingstock of the whole city? If the C. D. staff sees this—"

"Daddy!" moaned Nora. "Be careful! Those are Mamma's best curtains!"

"I don't care *whose* cur—" began the Old Man; then: "Oh, your mother's, eh? Well, in that case, *you* handle them. An' you, Jones—get goin'! The Red warnin' will sound about eight o'clock tonight—less than an hour from now; an' if I see one hunk of pretty-pretty in this shelter

when the sirens go off, so help me, I'll—"

Jones' pale eyes clouded, and his sensitive lips set tightly. "Yes sir," he said quietly. "Right away, sir."

And—somewhat sadly, I thought—he got busy on the dismantlement of his artistic masterpiece.

I'll give the guy this: he was a good worker. It was no snap assignment the Old Man had given him, cleaning up that mess in an hour, but he got it done. By five minutes to eight the shelter had been stripped of its glamour. We sat once more in a pill-box stark and severe as a mother-in-law's kiss.

Winterby, now that the zero hour neared, had settled into a grim, tense watchfulness. We had already received the two preliminary warnings, "Yellow" and "Blue"; now we awaited only the three-word telephone message, *"Air Warning: Red!"* to swing into action.

OUR post is located on a gentle rise overlooking the city proper. From where we sat we could see the shining neon and electric lights, the blinking-running-flickering bulbs of advertisements, the bright windows of homes and offices. The checkerboard of thoroughfares sparkled with the headlights of automobiles as anxious motorists burned up precious rubber in an attempt to get home before the siren halted them.

Colonel Winterby said: "You got everything straight, now, boys? The minute we get the Red signal—"

"I hit the street," I nodded, "and check my post for blackout, like the rest of the block wardens."

"And I," chimed in Jones, "stay right here to handle emergency calls. Barlow, be sure to inspect Mrs. O'Donegal's windows closely. She's using the kitchen as a blackout room, and sometimes she doesn't draw the shades all the way."

"You," advised the Old Man gruffly, "mind your post, an' let Barlow worry about his own. An' don't forget, either of you, the City Council has put up a prize for the post that turns in the best blackout record. That plaque'd look mighty nice hangin' on one of these walls. So—"

I said, "We're supposed to invent 'incidents'; isn't that right, Colonel?"

"That's right. Report imaginary bombings, accidents an' fires. That's so the Auxiliary firemen an' police can do their stuff too. All them emergency squads will be standin' by, waitin' for calls from us— Hey! What's that gadget?"

"That gadget" was a small electric-light bulb set in a desk-panel before us. Inconspicuous up to now, it had suddenly claimed our attention by lighting. Jones' jaw dropped; he rose, darted to the doorway, glanced out.

"Jones!" roared the Old Man. "Come back here! What is this thing-amajigger?"

"It's a—a signal," answered Bolivar Jones over his shoulder, "a magic-eye alarm I connected with the doorways of those buildings down the street there. There's no warden on that street, you know. So I—"

"There don't have to be!" bellowed Winterby irately. "They aint no

houses to black out on that street, you nitwit! Them buildings is the city's storage garages."

"There—there's a truck parked over there," said Bolivar Jones worriedly, "and men—"

"So what? Get back here at your desk. That phone's goin' to ring in two shakes of a— *Oh-oh!* There it goes now! Jones! Jones, come back here, you—"

But he was talking to an empty doorway. Bolivar had disappeared. And even as I picked up the phone to accept the expected signal, *"Air Warning: Red!"* the sirens rent the air with their uncanny wailing. The practice alert was on!

YOU can say what you want, blackouts are eerie, even though you *know* they're only practice and not the real thing. It's a weird sensation to go galloping down darkened avenues, armed with only a red-lensed pinpoint flashlight, listening to the banshee keen of unseen whistles, watching the familiar pattern of your home town flick into black oblivion from your hilltop vantage-point.

But I had no time to waste on wooing the weird. As I charged around my beat, noting with pardonable pride that all my houses had observed blackout regulations completely, I was trying to cook up some neat little imaginary "incident" which I could report when I returned to the post.

You realize, of course, that during a practice alert Life Goes On with bland disregard for the petty activities of little Mr. and Mrs. Joe McJerque. People fall down steps and wrench their gams; houses catch on fire; women have babies. So the Civilian Defense organization, which takes control of all protective facilities the instant the sirens blow, must treat every reported incident—true or fictional—as if it were a real emergency.

"Just what seems to be the difficulty, Colonel?" asked the City Councilor.

I finally decided to report a delayed-action bomb on the Old Man's premises—partly because it was a good joke on Winterby, and mostly because I'd be ordered back to that spot and maybe see Nora—and I went scurrying to the shelter.

Only, by the time I got there, the post was as busy as a moth in an all-wool suit. A half-dozen official autos were parked outside; the pill-box was jammed to the scuppers. Our post was being inspected by the staff of the O. C. D.

And inside was bedlam! The Old Man was hunched over the desk, vainly trying to hear himself think above the noise and confusion of buzzers buzzing, block wardens racing in and out with reports, the telephone jangling, brass hats offering advice and asking questions. . . .

I fought my way to Winterby's side, howled my report into his ear. He swiveled about and stared at me in horror.

"What! 201 Wellington! But that's *my* house—"

"Sure," I soothed, "but it's not a real bomb, Chief. Just a phony 'incident'—"

"I don't see," he glowered, "nothin funny about it! Oh, wait till I get my mitts on that Jones! Leavin' me alone in a crisis like this! I'll—did you see him, Barlow?"

Illustrated by
Charles Chickering

Any good Air Warden knows you should never fan an incendiary blaze.

I shook my head. "But the blackout's perfect in our sector, Colonel. Carry on, and we may win the trophy in spite of him. As for Jones—he deserted his post in time of need. This gives you the excuse for firing him you wanted."

Winterby's eyes brightened. "By gosh, you're right, Barlow! He won't dare stick his nose in here ever again—or—or will he?"

This last was a plaintive bleat. For at that moment the door burst open, a gangling figure, leaping across the room like an ostrich on stilts, grabbed the telephone from the Old Man.

"Excuse me, sir, but I'll take over now," stated Air Warden B. Jones.

Before either of us could stop him, Jones had eased himself into the Colonel's swivel and was dialing the private number which connects posts with the Civic Control Center. A dry voice clacked curt query, "*Report, please?*"—and Bolivar answered swiftly: "Sector IV, Post 3, reporting dwelling fire at the corner of Second and Willow Streets!"

Winterby gave a bellow of rage.

"Jones, get away from that phone! Haul yourself out of that chair an' leave this post immediately, if not sooner! There's work to be done—"

"I'm doing," said Jones succinctly, "important work! Hello, Control Center? Sector IV, Post 3. Unruly mob at the intersection of Third and Willow Streets. Send police!"

I seized his shoulder. I said: "Look, Jones—maybe the Old Man didn't make himself clear. You're *through* around here. Finished—washed up—not wanted. Now, git!"

He turned briefly, and though I'm taller than he and twenty pounds heavier, there was that in his voice which made me back down.

"Get your hand off my arm, Barlow. Please remember, I am in sole command of this post. Colonel Winterby invested me with complete responsibility—"

"Any authority I give you," howled the Old Man, "you surrendered when you skinned out o' here, you deserter!"

"Control Center?" asked Jones, ignoring the Colonel, "Sector IV, Post 3. Gas-bombs at Second and Laurel Streets—send Decontamination Squad immediately. Also reporting motor accident at corner of Third and Laurel. Send two ambulances. *Urgent!*"

By this time the big shots of the C. D. organization had awakened to the fact that something unusual was happening under their beaks. They clustered around us, and Prendergast Todd, City Councilor and staff commander, acted as spokesman for the group.

"Just what seems to be the difficulty, Colonel?"

Winterby explained, punctuating his words with moans of despair and groans of sheer anguish. By this time Bolivar Jones had called almost every other branch of the service you can think of: Messengers, Demolition Squad, Evacuation, First Aid Corps—the works!

Todd frowned. He asked: "Well, Warden?"

Jones glanced back at him abstractedly. "Eh? Oh—you mean my right to do this? Why, I'm in command here. The Colonel himself gave me complete authority over this post."

"Is that right, Colonel?"

"I did," howled the Old Man, "yes! But—"

"I'm afraid," commented the staff commander shortly, "you cannot so easily countermand an authority once delegated to another, sir. Warden Jones appears to be operating within his rights, and—hrrrumph!—most efficiently, too. It does seem, however, Warden, that you are going about your duties a little bit overenthusiastically—"

"Post 3," gasped Jones over the phone, "reports band of Fifth Columnists retreating down Melrose Boulevard. Place interceptor squadrons. . . . *There!*" He replaced the receiver and mopped his sweating forehead, leaned forward and jotted still another "X" on the wall map of our post, which hung before the desk. "*That* should do it!"

I saw, now, that there was coherence and form in the series of marks he had scribbled on the map. Each "X" represented a telephone-call made, an emergency band dispatched to a predetermined location. The series of marks formed a solid blockade, a barrier of men and machines, about one spot: the row of city storage garages down the street from us.

"Do," demanded Todd perplexedly, "what, Warden?"

"Keep them," explained Jones, "from getting away, of course. The scoundrels! Anybody who would take advantage of a practice blackout to do such a dastardly thing—"

"Nuts!" whispered the Old Man. "He's gone plumb off his button, that's what! An' to think my daughter—"

"Do what?" I yelled. "Who tried to do what, Jones?"

I had to yell, because the results of Jones' hectic dialing were now making themselves audible. From every part of town streams of vehicles were now flooding to congeal at our post. Ambulance sirens screamed; fire-engines chuffed, puffed and snorted; nightsticks rapped their crisp tattoo on the sidewalks. Above all, a clamor of voices, curious, indignant or angry, rose in strident query.

Then, adding its final touch to the confusion, across the city wailed the quavering blast of the "All-clear!" siren. And as suddenly as they had been doused, the lights came back on—street- and house-lights, business offices, stores, places of entertainment.

IT was with the brightening of these that there came a change in the tone of the baffled C. D. men gathered outside. Voices lifted in sharp surprise, excitement. A truck's motor roared briefly, then stopped. There came the sound of something like a scuffle, cries of anger. Then footsteps pounded toward our shelter. Jones smiled.

"It worked!" he said happily. "I thought it would."

"W-worked?" husked the Old Man feebly.

A big jasper, wearing the arm-band of an Auxiliary policeman, burst into

the pill-box, glanced about him uncertainly, and spoke to Colonel Winterby.

"We got 'em, sir! Nabbed 'em red-handed—thanks to you."

"Th-that's fine!" croaked the Colonel. "Only, would somebody mind tellin' me who the hell got who?"

"Why, the tire-thieves, sir," said the civilian cop politely. "The crooks who had loaded their truck with every spare tire in the storage garage. Surely you knew, sir!"

"Of course," smiled Bolivar Jones. "Of course he knew, officer. You mustn't mind Colonel Winterby. He's just a little excited. You see, our post has just won the Council plaque for the most efficient blackout practice—isn't that right, Mr. Todd?"

The O. C. D. commandant snapped his fallen jaw shut, and came to with a start.

"Gad!" he said. "Plaque? Oh, Gad, yes! Amazing!"

So all's well that ends swell. Only later, when our visitors had departed, the rest of our post wardens had gone home, and there remained only four of us in the shelter—the Old Man, Jones, myself and Nora, who had been summoned to the scene of the crime with her Motor Auxiliary Corps—I turned to Jones.

I said: "Okay, Bolly; you win. Pick up the marbles. Only, come clean to an old pal and fellow-warden. What gave you the brilliant inspiration to hook up an electric-eye with those garage doors, anyhow? If it hadn't been for that—"

Jones shifted modestly from foot to foot, his incredible Adam's-apple exceeding all previous performances.

"Well, Barlow—it was just a matter of lucky logic, I guess. It seemed more than likely that crooks would select a practice blackout as an ideal time to pull a job. In the darkness they could load their truck unseen; then, when the blackout was over, they could simply roll off. And since rubber is just about the most stealable thing there is, nowadays, and since the city garages were unguarded—"

"That," I told him severely, "is where the foul odor assails my nostrils. What do you mean, 'unguarded'? Do you mean to tell me this town's chug-buggy stables don't have a night watchman?"

"Oh, no! Of course there's a night watchman. But—"

"Then where was he? Why wasn't he on hand to give the alarm?"

JONES' sallow cheeks colored slowly, like a thermometer over a steam-kettle.

"W-why, you see," he confessed guiltily, "*I'm* the night watchman at the garages. I—I didn't dare tell anyone that, or they wouldn't have let me become an Air Warden. And I did *so* want to be—" He gulped. "Besides, I—I was afraid maybe Colonel Winterby wouldn't approve of his daughter marrying a night watchman. I mean, the pay isn't much—"

Nora Winterby placed her arm firmly, defiantly, through his. "As if," she sniffed, "a little thing like money makes any difference! Of course Daddy doesn't mind, Bolivar. And if he has any snobbish objections to your work, why, I'm sure he can find you a job at his office. Can't you, Daddy? Bolivar would be glad to start at the bottom and work up. Say as a fourth vice-president or something?"

"What!" blasted the Old Man. "I'll do nothing of the—" Then he stopped, seeing the way those two clung to each other, seeing the look in Jones' eyes, and the answering look in Nora's. In a gentler voice, "Well," he conceded, "maybe. We'll talk it over—later. Meanwhile, Barlow, wasn't there something you wanted to discuss with me—outside?"

"Who, me? Why, no, Chief. I don't—"

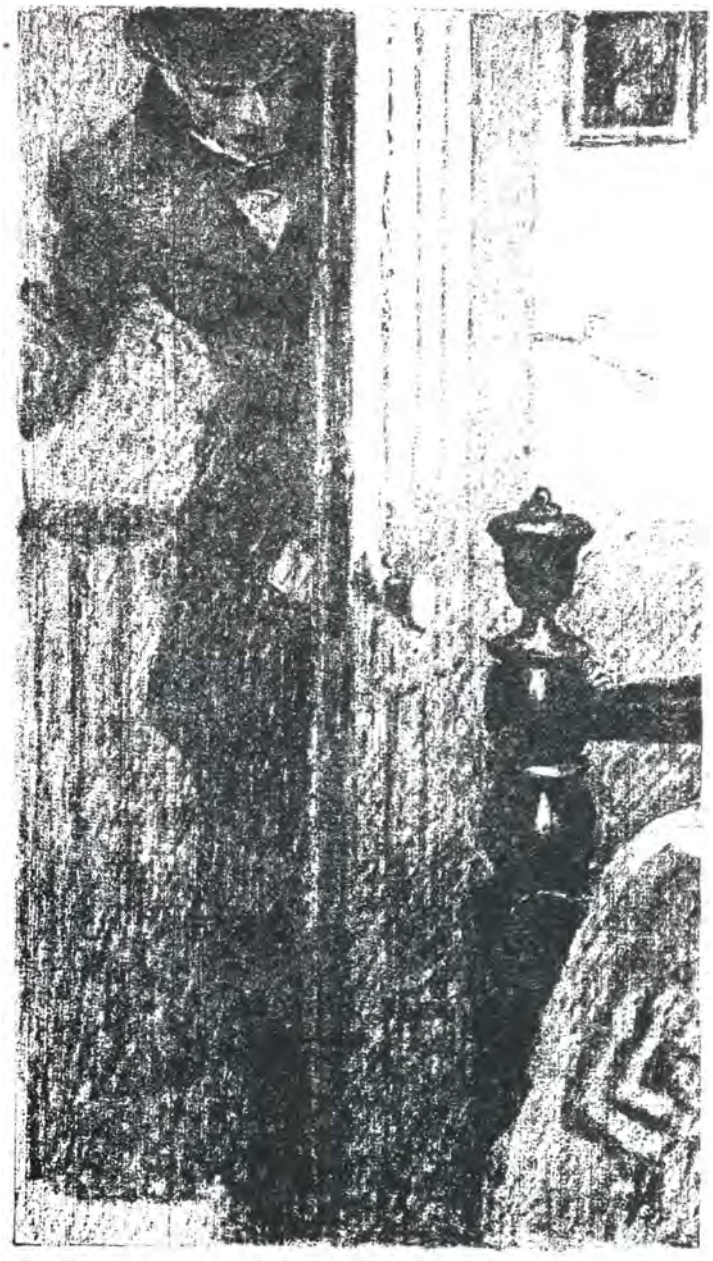
Then I caught the hint, along with the jab in the ribs. I sighed, and followed him from the shelter. The last I saw of Jones, his ears were flapping contentedly over an upturned golden head.

Which was contrary to all the rules. Any good Air Warden knows you should never fan an incendiary blaze.

"Report imaginary accidents and fires—Hey! What's that gadget?"

A novel of wagon-freighting days

by John T. McIntyre



The Story So Far:

"FROM back in Pennsylvania. Wagoning into the West, over the mountains," explained the young man to mine host of the Horse and Bridle Tavern. "You would know the firm of Moreau, Descoings and Abernathy, I suppose?"

"Oh, very well," replied the innkeeper. "They are the oldest Amboy people in the trade—a prosperous house!"

"Maybe you'd be acquainted with Simon Abernathy?"

"Indeed I am. In his time he was an able man—but quite old now—only the shadow of what he has been."

The young man thought again of the letter in his pocket: *"Denis, Owen is dead, I know. But you, now a man grown, are still strong and alive; and I'm calling to you. . . . I ask you to come immediately to my help."*

Denis Abernathy found his grandfather living at the house of the all-too-affable Mr. Dacre in Philadelphia. And the old man told him how he had been eased out of active participation in the firm's management by the Descoings—father and son; and of the unaccountable shrinkage in the wagon freighting, which had been his share of the business. Old Simon told also of four attempts upon his life which had been made in recent months. . . .

From other sources Denis had confirmation of the strange state of affairs in the old transportation company: from lovely Lois Moreau and her young cousin Gerard Monselet, who had come up from New Orleans to find out what had become of their usual dividends from the firm; from old Simon's lawyer Counselor Thistlewate, who did not doubt that the attacks had been genuine: from an apparently chance acquaintance the horse-surgeon Kipper, who went out of his way to warn Denis of an unprovoked attack by a rowdy known as Mule Shapely, in time for Denis to beat the attacker to the punch.

And then—the whole weird business came into tragic focus when Denis, calling to see Simon one evening, found the old man lying strangled on the bed in his ransacked bedroom. Investigation did not disclose the murderer; but for Denis events moved swiftly. He sent for family records proving his rights as heir to old Simon's share in the firm; but the Descoings were not disposed to allow his claim. The subtle opposition set up by old Henri Descoings—whom Denis met first at the home of Lois Moreau's hosts, the Sigourneys—took open and violent form in the person of his arrogant and ill-tempered son, Louis.

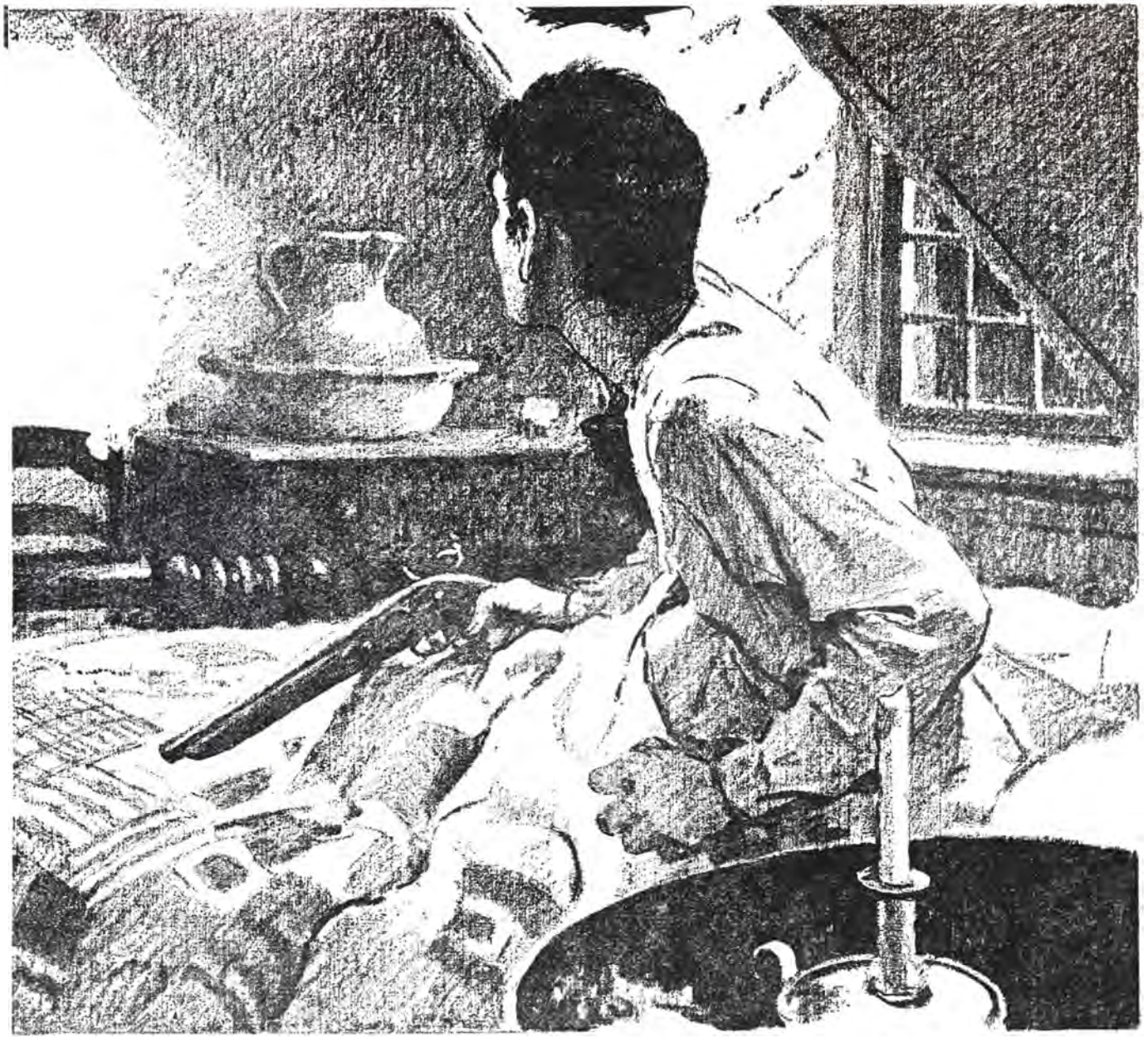
Lois, at first suspicious of Denis, and impressed by the suave explanations of old Henri, became less confident of her own judgment when she heard of Simon Abernathy's death, and on her departure from Perth Amboy westward to meet her father, she bade an amicable farewell to Denis. The young man, after some investigations, himself left town, for an unannounced destination. Stopping in Philadelphia, he heard through a friend there of one Garvey Pursell, who was starting a new teaming business—backed, possibly, by the Descoings. Resuming his journey, Denis found himself a few hours in the wake of Pursell and Louis Descoings, who seemed to be following the road taken by Lois Moreau and young Monselet. Also, to Denis' surprise, he came upon Kipper, at the States Arms Tavern. Kipper, volunteering no explanation of his own presence, warned Denis against danger in this lonely stretch of road. Cryptically he added: "Trust no one you're not sure of. . . . More—don't be too sure of *anyone!*" *(The story continues in detail:)*

AS Denis ate his supper that evening, he frowned and cogitated over each mouthful. The fare at the States Arms was very good: A beefsteak pie with leeks and parsnips; and with it a sweet hard-baked bread that gave the bitter ale a pleasant tang. And there was the marrow pudding which the cook at the States Arms knew so well how to make.

But it wasn't the food that occupied Denis. It was the train of thought that the conversation of Kipper had started in his mind. The lonely road! The bearer of bad tidings! The horse surgeon had dwelt on those. The road was lonely, as Denis well knew. Also dangerous. And Lois Moreau was the bearer of bad tidings—tidings that would shock her father, and perhaps put the Descoings in an ugly light. She was traveling this road. And Louis Descoings was traveling it in her wake!

Kipper had mentioned the advisability of being armed; of trusting no one. To be sure, Monselet was with Lois, but was this good-tempered, and confiding young man the sort of escort who'd show best in a trying moment? Denis didn't think so. A person of the arrogant quality of Louis Descoings would bear him down in a moment.

So, as Denis sat at his supper, he frowned and shook his head. He could not help thinking he was wasting his time; at that moment he should be on his feet, calling for



Hauling West

his horse. The fact that Lois and Monselet must by now have reached Lancaster was the only thing that held him in check. For Lancaster was a safe and orderly place; and the Swan Tavern there was an excellent hostelry.

The young man, his napkin tucked inside his collar, was engaged with the marrow pudding when he noticed a person whose back was to him, seated at a table some little distance away; then the man moved, and Denis recognized him. It was Evans Dacre. The man was still at the table when Denis, having finished, paused beside him.

"How do you do, Mr. Dacre?" he said.

The kindly face of the man turned toward him, and a smile lighted it.

"Well, Mr. Abernathy!" he said. "This *is* a surprise! Will you sit down?"

Denis did so; he crossed one knee over the other and rested back in his chair.

"I've heard," the young man said, "that Louis Descoings is traveling along the road, some distance ahead."

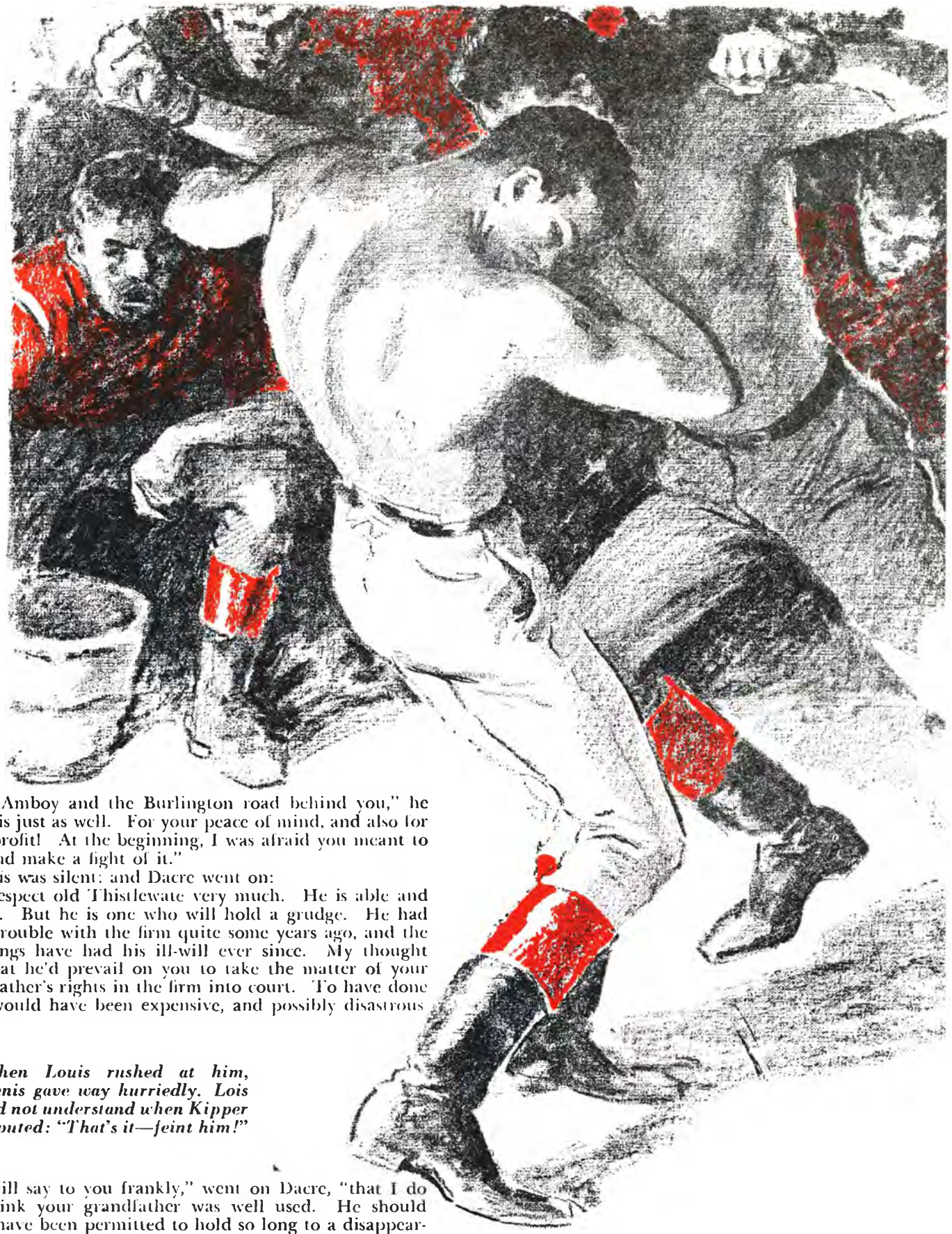
"Yes, so he is." Mr. Dacre laughed, amusement in his fine eyes. "And in spite of all I can do, that distance seems to grow greater and greater."

"You are trying to overtake him, then?"

"Since about mid-morning," said the man. "That is, I started with that idea. I seem to be losing ground instead of gaining it."

There was a deep earthenware dish upon the table, filled with tobacco—also some long-stemmed clay pipes. Dacre filled one of the pipes and lighted it.

"I hadn't seen you for some days at Amboy," he said, "and I thought you might have left. Though,"—with a smile—"I hadn't remembered that this would be your way home. Otherwise I wouldn't have been so surprised at meeting you." He smoked placidly. "Your putting



Perth Amboy and the Burlington road behind you," he said, "is just as well. For your peace of mind, and also for your profit! At the beginning, I was afraid you meant to stay and make a fight of it."

Denis was silent; and Dacre went on:

"I respect old Thistlewate very much. He is able and honest. But he is one who will hold a grudge. He had some trouble with the firm quite some years ago, and the Descoings have had his ill-will ever since. My thought was that he'd prevail on you to take the matter of your grandfather's rights in the firm into court. To have done that, would have been expensive, and possibly disastrous

When Louis rushed at him, Denis gave way hurriedly. Lois did not understand when Kipper shouted: "That's it—feint him!"

"I will say to you frankly," went on Dacre, "that I do not think your grandfather was well used. He should never have been permitted to hold so long to a disappearing portion of the business. Some of it was his own fault, no doubt, for he had a strong will and would not be gainsaid. But I think if things had been carried on in a milder way, he might have been won over."

Dacre once more said he was pleased that Denis had not made a struggle of the case. This showed, he said, that the young man had good sense.

"I never knew your father," he said, "but I am told he was much easier to deal with than the old man. And you, I suppose, take after him. If things had been more reasonably handled on both sides, you might at this time have been stepping into the firm as some sort of partner."

"I might do that one day, as it is," said Denis.

Dacre seemed surprised. But he nodded and smiled.

Illustrated by Maurice Bower

"If it could be done, I'm sure nothing would please me more," he said. "For I feel you might be a good influence. As things are, I'm not too well satisfied. Louis is a difficult person to get along with; and Henri's methods—Henri being quite old—do not always suit him. A new mind in the affairs of the firm could be of help, if it were supported by a steady hand. Though"—and there was regret in the kindly face—"I'm not persuaded that you can take a place in our conferences under peaceful conditions."

Denis talked with Dacre for some time. The man mentioned Lois Moreau once or twice. He also spoke of her father. He said he'd been grieved about the increasing weakness of the Moreau branch of the business. It had fared badly, he said, both in ships and trade. He hoped the thing could be adjusted in some way, but he was afraid the family was too deeply settled in the old, leisurely way of doing things ever to change.

"Trade," said Dacre, "has taken on a swifter pace." He shook his handsome head. "And I'm afraid only the newer and harder people will be able to keep up with it."

Denis finally bade the man good night, and got the key to his room and a candle from the landlord.

"I hope," the host said, "you'll not be disturbed by any of the sounds from the yard. You are on that side of the house, you see. The stablemen are told to go about their business as quietly as they can; but there are noises, for all that."

"I'm a sound sleeper," said Denis, "and once I've dozed off, I'm not likely to be aroused."

But Denis, as he went down the passage on the floor above, lighted candle in hand, was aware of an odd feeling of disquiet. His meeting with Kipper, and the things the man had said, kept with him. He opened his door, went in, closed and locked it. The window opened upon the inn yard as the host had said; he could see a light at the side of the stable; a groom was dressing the horses of a traveler who had lately arrived.

The young man turned down the coverings of his bed, and kicked off his boots. As he was undressing, he heard voices from the yard. A second stableman had appeared.

"I'm going to get some sleep," he told the other one. "I've got to be up to feed and saddle a horse by four o'clock. The road'll be moving up and down all night by and by!" he grumbled. "Then we'll get no rest at all."

Denis blew out the candle and got into bed. Then, in the sudden dark, he thought of what Kipper had said about going armed on the road. Now, the States Arms was an honest place; but then, one never knew what sort of people an inn's guests might be. So Denis got up, took one of his holster pistols out of its covering and placed it on a stand at his bedside.

Back in bed, he drew the blankets up under his chin. Darkness! Well, what of it? He'd had long nights of it

"You have a method of fighting we don't know about, further East," said Pursell.

on the turnpike, on the rocky roads, or up over the mountain-tops with nothing but some distant stars to light his way. He'd had no thought of loaded pistols then.

But in spite of this self-criticism, the unquiet about the dark kept with him. He saw the whole countryside covered by the night; he saw the roads winding their way through it, lonely and probably fearsome ways to those not accustomed to them. And Lois Moreau was not accustomed to it. She probably had never before seen any country like that of the Appalachian foothills—so rugged, so wild. However, she'd not yet reached that region. And even if she had, there were good stage inns every now and then along the way that were perfectly safe. . . .

At last he slept. Not a deep sleep, for his uneasy state of mind kept with him. There were still the dark roads; there was still the carriage struggling along. There was a ghostly moon. And there was Lois—quiet, but frightened.

He awoke a number of times; and when he fell asleep once more, the same disturbing visions returned to plague him. But finally he started up, this time with his mind fully clear. He knew he was in his bed in the States Arms, and— But wait! Making its way through the stillness came a sound—small and hard, the sound of two metallic objects coming together. It was at the door. He waited. There it was again. A key had been put into the lock. The last sound was made by its turning. His hand reached out; he took up the pistol and cocked it. The door creaked slightly as it opened.

He saw a shadowy form, and called out:

"Who's that?"

Instantly the door closed. Pistol in hand, Denis leaped up; he threw the door open. No one was there. At the far end of the passage was the stairs, guarded by a rail. Through this rail, as he turned his gaze in that direction, he saw a tall beaver hat, set at a jaunty angle, just disappearing below the level of the floor.

ABOUT an hour before daylight Denis was astir again. And he handed an iron key to the landlord who had stopped to speak to him as he attacked his breakfast hungrily.

"That," said the young man, "I found in my door at a very early hour this morning."

"It is the spare key to your room," said the landlord, in surprise. "We never give those to guests."

"I found it in the keyhole, on the outside of my door. I had locked the door with the key you gave me, and left it in the lock. Someone must have pushed it out, for I found it on the floor sometime later. Whoever was there unlocked the door with the spare key."

"Unlocked your door!" said the landlord, aghast. "In the night—while you were there?"

"They had pushed the door open when I called out," said Denis. "Possibly I shouldn't have done that. It might have been best if I'd fired at them."

Much disturbed, the landlord went to his desk at the end of the bar; here, fixed to the wall, was a smooth painted board with some rows of small hooks.

"The key is gone, sure enough," he said, looking over his shoulder at Denis. "Someone took it—some thief!" he said, his face now red with anger. "I shall look into this. No one shall give my house a bad name!"

"It was probably some prowler," said Denis. "But you should be more careful of your keys. As they are now, anyone could slip their pick of them off the rack when your back was turned."

As Denis was going on with breakfast, one of the stablemen passed through, carrying a pail of steaming water from the kitchen. The young man stopped him.

"Has Mr. Kipper gone, do you know?" Denis asked.

"Mr. Kipper?" said the man. "Is that somebody stopping in the house?"

"He was in the stable last night when I was there. I think he'd been talking with you."

"Oh, yes," said the man. "I remember him. He afterward got talking with you. He didn't stop here overnight; he was just a person passing by; he said he meant to just look around."

The gray horse had been harnessed to the cart and was brought around to the front of the tavern when Denis was ready to depart. The man in charge of the horse was the same man to whom Denis had spoken in the bar a short time before.

"Mr. Abernathy," said the man when Denis was in his seat and had taken the reins, "I mentioned this Mr. Kipper to George, one of the men in the stable with me. And he told me a queer thing."

"What was that?" asked Denis.

"I'd told him what Mr. Kipper looked like; and George, who had his turn watching around the stable during the night, said he saw him somewhere about two o'clock."

"Where?"

"George says he saw him standing on the porch. A moment before, there had been the sound of one of the doors closing, and that made George look that way. He says Mr. Kipper was standing in a dim light from one of the bar windows; he had a pistol in his hand and was letting down the hammer. And then he put it in his breast pocket and walked away."

Thoughts of the night's happenings filled Denis' mind during the morning's drive. The whole matter of Kipper made him restless. From the very beginning there had been a mysterious something about the man. His way of handling any subject of which he might be talking had seemed peculiar to Denis. He had a knowledge of affairs, also an interest in them that did not seem warranted.

His appearance the night before had surprised Denis. And then there had been his warnings, his obscure talk of peril. His suggestion that it would be well to keep a loaded pistol ready at hand. The fact that he was not a lodger at the inn; that he had, so to speak, secreted his team somewhere, were both peculiar things. And that he should be inside the tavern during the small hours of the morning, that Denis should see him disappearing down a stairway a few moments after someone had secretly opened his bedroom door, had given the young man a shock. And he'd been seen on the porch, uncocking a pistol, at what must have been only a few moments afterward!

TOWARD noon the young man halted at Slaymaker's Tavern, about ten miles farther on his way. He had some beer and bread and cheese while his horse was resting and being fed. And he inquired of a porter of who might have passed on the road. A carriage-and-four with two passengers and a driver had paused early on the day before. On this day Evans Dacre had passed—in a breathless hurry, it seemed. The tavern people did not know his name; but they'd seen him before and their description had been quite accurate. Kipper had also passed some hours since. The mule team and the tall beaver hat were not to be mistaken.

A few hours later, at another stage stand, Denis had a report of the carriage: there were also a few freight-wagons, but that was all. At Lancaster, Denis put up at the Swan, for night had already drawn on. He talked with the hale, hearty-mannered landlord, whom he knew very well. Louis Descoings had been there the night before; with him had been another man whom Denis recognized as Pursell. When they halted, they said they were not sure if they would stay overnight or not.

"In the end they did not," said the landlord. "After more than an hour spent over their supper, a rider arrived who asked for them. He carried a message of some sort; when they heard it, they asked to have fresh horses put into their spring wagon, and away they went in a hurry."

"What direction did they take?"

"The way to the west," said the landlord.

Denis ate his supper and had a small flask of wine; but this meal was as troubled as his breakfast had been. These people, awaiting a message and being unsure of their movements until it came, bothered him a good deal; and their leaping up, demanding fresh horses and rushing away added to this. Also, their direction had been to the westward; which was in the wake of the carriage carrying Lois Moreau and Monselet.

By the time he'd finished his food, he'd made up his mind. He had a swift-looking bay horse put into his cart, and leaving instructions to have the gray well cared for, started off along the dark road, his mind full of suspicion and fear. Here and there on the way he made inquiries at wagon or drovers' stands if anything had been seen of the carriage. Toward ten o'clock he approached a place he knew quite well—a sprawling range of buildings used as a stopping-place for both wagoners and drovers. This was called the Ox Bow, and was kept by a hard-bitten little man known as Shawney Jobs. There were a dozen laden Conestoga wagons drawn up at the side of the road; in a fenced space at a little distance was a huge herd of resting cattle. A fire was burning near the wagons, and a group of men, detailed to watch the loads, were gathered around it. As Denis drew in his horse, a voice hailed him, and as he stepped from the cart, several of his own men came forward.

"Had no idee you were anywhere around," said one.

Denis learned that two of his wagons were standing in the rank along the road, and a dozen of his horses were in the stable.

"We started out from Lancaster at about four this morning. Carrying stuff for Mr. Foster, at Pittsburgh. Hadn't expected to get this far; but the road's good for the time of year, and we made the Ox Bow while there was still daylight."

Denis asked about passing travelers during the day. But the men had seen none in a four-horsed carriage.

"The only carriage I've seen in the last few days," said one of the men, "is the one that's laid up here in the tavern yard."

"Laid up?"

"It met with some kind of an accident yesterday. And it's been here ever since."

The travelers were a girl and a young man. Shawney Jobs had been heard talking about them. But none of the men had seen them.

Leaving his trap in the care of the men, Denis entered the Ox Bow. The huge, low-ceilinged public room was thick with smoke; and there was a dim light from the lamps fastened to the wall. There was a roar of laughing, arguing, singing; groups of wagoners stood at the bar or sat at tables drinking the cheap, fiery liquor sold along the turnpike.

The landlord of the tavern stood at one end of the bar. He was small, round-headed, and with a shrewd, battered face. He was English and had been a pugilist in his day, engaging in many battles on the turf as a lightweight. Shawney Jobs was known from one end of the Western road to the other; his deft handling of the roistering ruffians he had to contend with was a theme at every bar from the Delaware to the Alleghany. A keen little savage, whose only theme was money and the quickest way of getting it. He greeted Denis with a twisted smile.

"Glad to see you," he said, and Denis could see the denial of the words in his eyes as he spoke them. "You're kind of a stranger."

DENIS stood at the bar and talked with the man while he waited for bread, cold beef and beer which he'd ordered of a shock-headed boy in a long apron.

"The road keeps in good condition," he said. "Not much snow."

"No," said Shawney Jobs. "It's a clear winter, and the wagons haven't much trouble going through."

"I noticed a carriage in the yard. They tell me it had some kind of a mishap," said Denis, his hands on the bar and looking at the man with inquiring eyes.

"Yes, they got into difficulties. Very bad for the people too. No one to fix it, and no other carriage to take its place."

"I've also heard the passengers were a girl and a young man," said Denis.

"You've always been a great lad for having little talks, aint you?" Shawney Jobs looked at the young man jeeringly. "And you always get some news out of them, too."

"I was just wondering," said Denis, "what kind of a breakdown the carriage had. Also why, with old Foley's forge less than two miles away, it couldn't be fixed. Be-

sides that, George Kerr, at the Magpie, only an hour back on the road, has two or three spring wagons, any one of which would answer for travelers who really wanted to be on their way."

The smile was now gone from the tavern-keeper's face.

"I never ask people their business," he said. "And I always attend to my own. Both these things are good ones to imitate by people who stop at places. It keeps them out of trouble."

JOBS moved away; and a few minutes later food and drink was brought to Denis; he sat down and began his supper. As he ate, he considered what the situation at the Ox Bow might be. He was confident the travelers mentioned were Lois Moreau and young Monselet. Also, he viewed the matter of the carriage with complete suspicion. He was thinking over these things and trying to arrange a procedure when he became aware of a pair of mournful eyes fixed on him from the other side of the room. They belonged to a colored man, gray and subdued, who sat with his back to the wall. Instantly Denis guessed who he was, and beckoned to him. The man approached the table.

"You," said the young man, "are Miss Moreau's driver?"

"Yes suh," he said. "I done drive her an' Mista Monselet f'om Philadelphia."

"From Philadelphia," said Denis, "to this place. And then the accident happened." The Negro rolled his eyes and coughed behind his hand. Denis looked at him steadily. "If there's anything you'd like to say," said Denis, "say it. For I'm a friend of Miss Moreau's, and I want all the information I can get."

The man hesitated for a moment.

"I's mighty glad to heah that, suh," he finally said. "'Cause I thinks she needs someone now to he'p her. That accident to the ca'age was no accident a-tall. When I left it in the yahd, it was in good o'deh. An' when I see it nex' time, it's got an axle twisted, an' one of the wheels is broke."

"Did you do anything about it?"

"I spoke to the landlo'd, suh. I says to him what I just now says to you. An' he say to me to keep my mouf shut, an' if I didn't, he'd shet it fo' me."

"Where is Miss Moreau now?" asked Denis.

The driver indicated a door at the rear.

"She's talkin' inside wif 'em people."

"What people?"

"They's two men. They come a-drivin' up heah in a awful hurry some time ago. They knows huh, an' she knows 'em. But they ain' no frien's of huh's. She 'fraid of 'em."

"Where's Mr. Monselet?"

"I ain' seen 'at young man fo' mo'n two houahs. They's mighty dang'ous people heah, suh, an' I gets the shivahs ev'y time I think of what they maybe done to him."

Denis Abernathy knew the Ox Bow well; both its owner and its patrons, and also the various parts of the building. He considered for a few moments, and then he said:

"Outside, along the edge of the road, there is a line of wagons. Have you noticed them?"

"Yes suh; I seen 'em."

"There are some men watching them; they have a fire burning. Go out there and ask for Jeff Handler."

"Misto Jeff Handler; yes suh."

"Tell him I want him. And to come in, bringing his men with him. My name is Abernathy. Tell him that."

The Negro driver, with a glimmer of hope in his mournful face, edged his way through the crowded tavern. Denis kept his look upon him until he vanished through the entrance; then the young man opened the door at the rear and passed through the doorway. There was a passage here; opening from it were the kitchen and some rooms given up to the work of the tavern. Also there was one where it was customary to hold gambling parties, should there be any sporting persons in the place overnight who made more than the usual show of money and who desired privacy. The door of this was open; Denis passed along the hall and stopped beside it. There was a voice: the voice of Lois Moreau, and above it lifted that of Louis Descoings.

"I can't understand why you are afraid," Louis declared. "There is no reason for it."

"I am not afraid," said the girl, and Denis Abernathy smiled as he caught the tone. He could imagine her with her firm small chin thrust out, and her dark eyes full of fire. "Everything I do or say is pronounced by you to be caused by fear. It is not. I am not afraid of you. But I distrust you. I do not believe you."

Louis Descoings laughed loudly; Denis could hear the heels of his boots thumping on the floor.

"Pursell," said Descoings, "have you ever heard such plain talk? She distrusts me! She does not believe me! And tells me so to my face!" He laughed again, and then he said: "You are living up to your reputation for spirit. When I talked with you that day some weeks ago, I rather fancied you. Since then," he said, and young Abernathy's brows drew together at his tone, "that may have increased. I like women with plenty of pluck. You'd make your way with me very well if I saw more of you."

"In the future I shall see as little as possible of you," said the girl, contempt in her voice. "What I'm interested in just now is: what has become of Gerard Monselet?"

"I don't know anything about him," said young Descoings. "But why keep on that subject? Does he mean so much to you?"

"I am asking you what has become of him," said the girl coldly.

"How can I know?" said Louis. "He was about the tavern awhile ago. I haven't kept watch on him. He has probably grown tired of waiting, and has gone away somewhere to try and find another carriage."

"You have not explained what has happened to our carriage," said Lois Moreau. "It was damaged deliberately."

"Why should you expect me to explain that? How could I know? I was not here until after the damage was discovered; not, so I'm told, for some hours afterward."

"It was done so that I'd be delayed," said Lois.

"When did you begin to think that?" asked Descoings.

"As soon as you appeared," said the girl with a clear promptness that made both Pursell and Descoings laugh.

"I'd have thought the appearance of someone you knew, at a time of trouble, would have been welcome," said Descoings. "I've tried to be friendly, and you act as though I meant to do you harm."

Here the voice of the girl suddenly lifted; she talked rapidly; she accused and protested; all the repressed fears suddenly began to show. Denis knew the signs; after some hours of fighting to maintain control of herself, she was letting go. In a moment or two she'd break. The young man's jaw hardened; he stepped through the doorway.

THE alarmed voice of Lois was hushed. For a moment she looked at Denis as though bewildered; then there was a quick joy in her eyes. She held out her hands to him, and he was at her side in a moment.

"Steady," he said; he felt the trembling of her body as he put an arm around her. "It's all right now. There will be nothing more."

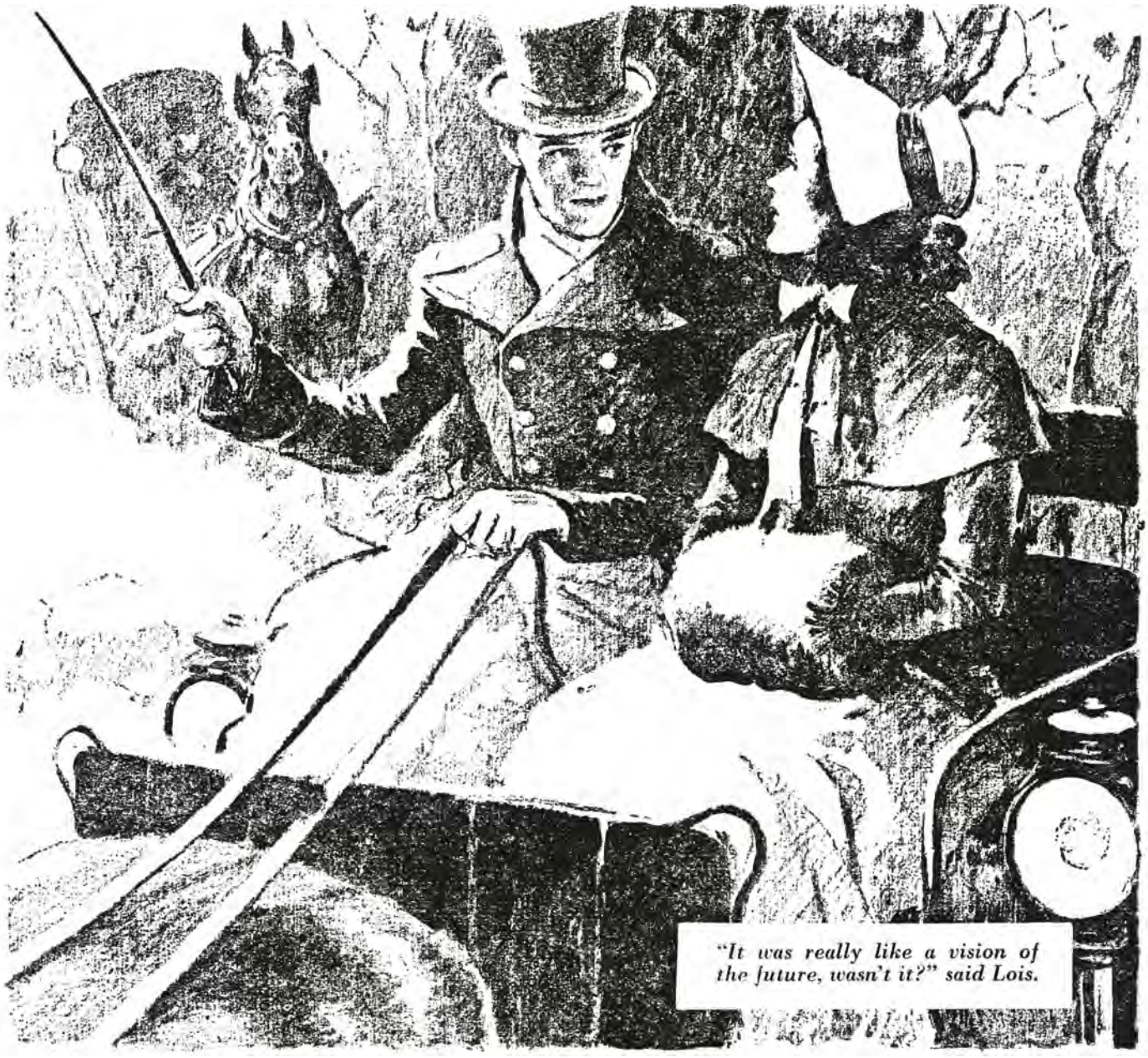
As he soothed her, the two men looked at each other.

"It's young Abernathy," said Louis.

"Old Simon's grandson?" Pursell studied Denis with glinting eyes. "He has the Abernathy look." He pulled at his trimmed beard, and through it came the dry smile of a hard nature. "And I also notice he seems to be more favored than you."

Denis put Lois Moreau into a chair.

"Keep still; don't be frightened," he said. He patted her cheek as he might have done with a child. However,



"It was really like a vision of the future, wasn't it?" said Lois.

there was a new look on his face, and the sound of metal in his voice as he turned upon Louis Descoings.

"And now," he said, "suppose we three have an understanding. We'll take up Monselet first, if you don't mind."

"I know nothing of Monselet," said Louis, a bitter look in his face. "I don't know where he is; and I don't care."

"Very well. We'll take that up later," said Denis. "Just now you might rather talk about the carriage?"

Louis Descoings, in a sudden fury, took a step toward Denis, but Pursell stopped him.

"We know nothing about the carriage," said Pursell. "That's been explained to Miss Moreau several times. It was damaged, no doubt, somewhere along the road."

"The driver says it was damaged after it reached here."

"We did not get here," said Pursell, "until quite some hours after the trouble had been noticed. All we know is what we've been told."

"Maybe," said Denis, and the metallic sound in his voice was more pronounced than before, "there was something wrong with the information given me tonight at the Swan Tavern in Lancaster." His eyes were on young Descoings as he continued: "You stopped there tonight—for a space. You were not sure if you'd remain or no. You seemed to be waiting for word of some sort. And," he said, his cold eyes fixed upon the furious ones of Louis, "sure enough, it came. A rider, bearing a message—for Mr. Louis Descoings. At once you ordered horses put into your wagon, and you started off westward with a good deal of speed." There was a pause, and then he added: "I'm wondering if that message wasn't from this place, and if it did not tell you a certain carriage had been tampered with and that certain travelers had been delayed."

Louis Descoings tore himself from the grip of Pursell.

"By God," he said, his face twisted with passion, "I'll listen to no more of this!" He stripped off his coat. "You've finally put yourself in the way of something. I've been wanting a chance like this, and here it is."

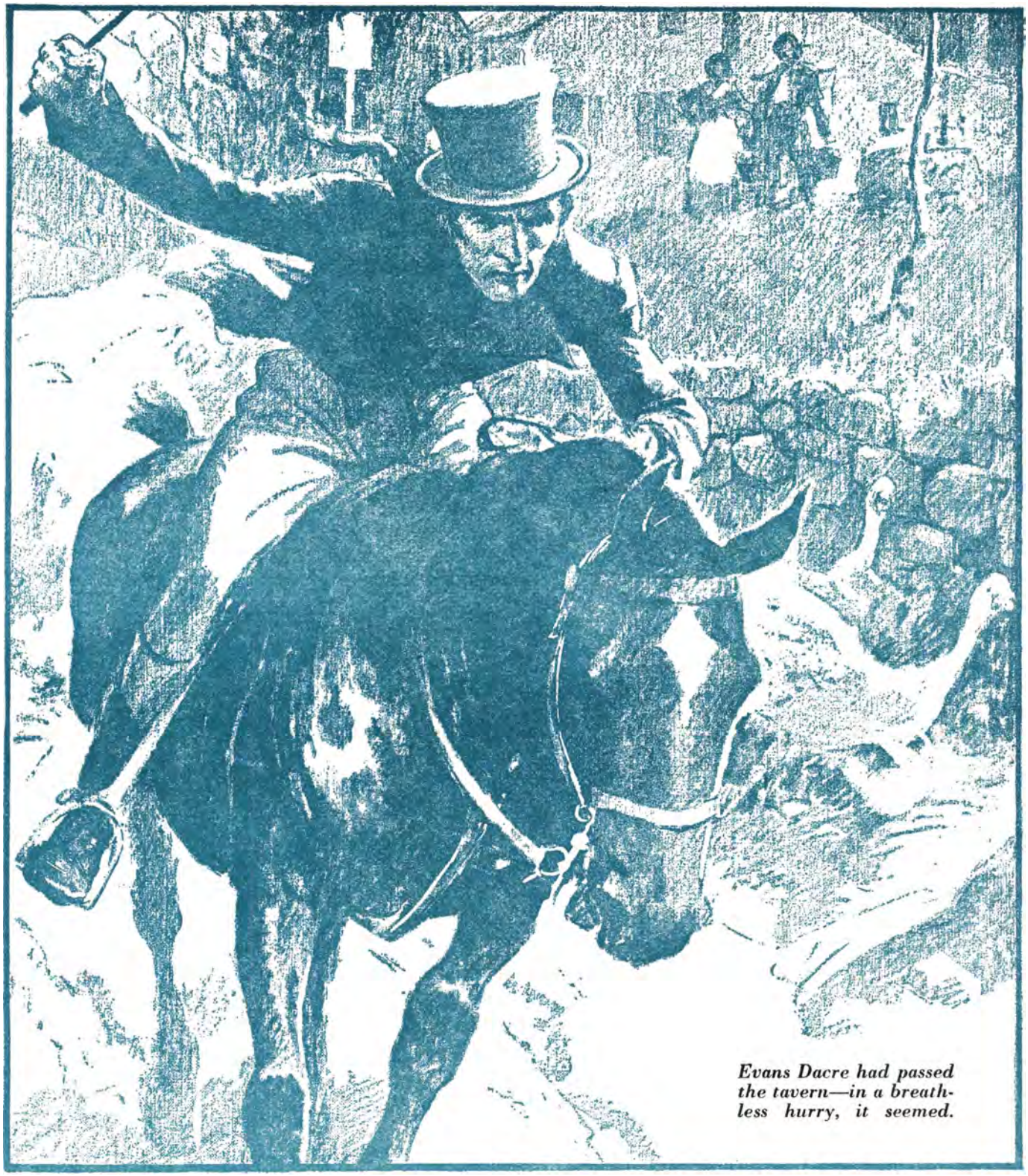
But now the voice of the tavernkeeper, Shawney Jobs, was heard in the room.

"No disturbance, maties!" said the ex-pugilist, coming between the two young men. "I'm not against a little milling, d'ye understand, for it's a pleasant thing to see. But you'll need more room for it. Outdoors is the place, me coveys. On the turf where you'll have a foothold, and where you can step around."

Pursell laughed at this.

"A regularly set-up battle," he said. "With rules! With a ring, with handlers! It's an idea!"—turning to young Descoings. "What do you say?"

"Any way at all," said Louis. "What I want is to have him in front of me. I'll settle with him then."



Evans Dacre had passed the tavern—in a breathless hurry, it seemed.

"Well said, me jolly boy," spoke Shawney Jobs, with a joviality not native to him. "Very well said." He looked at Denis, malice in his small eyes. "And how is it with you, Mr. Abernathy?"

"Quite all right," said Denis. "I'll not mind." He felt a hand upon his arm. It was Lois; she was standing at his side, anxiety in her wide-open eyes. "Don't let this bother you," he told her. "It'll not be anything much."

But as she looked at him, she could not drive from her mind the doubts she'd always had of him. He was young; he was strong and handsome. He had a spirited way of holding his head; his voice had a ring to it that reassured one. But what had taken place that night at the President Monroe had impressed her deeply. She had not thought ever to see youth, strength, and what seemed to be fire, so meek in the presence of insult.

But he was now very quiet and steady. He was watching Louis Descoings, but at the same time speaking to her.

"There are some of my men here," he told her. "They will take care of you. No matter what happens, you need not be afraid." He looked about the room. "It may be best if you remained here. I could have a man stand outside the door."

"I shall not stay here. I'll go with you."

"I'd rather you'd not. Louis Descoings looks like a strong man, and he has little reputation for mercy."

"Denis!"

She looked at him, startled. This, to her, seemed like the saying of a man who knew he was beaten before he began. Was it possible that his heart was really so faint? He looked at her soberly.

"What's going to happen will not be pretty to see," he told her. "And you are not accustomed to such things."

"No matter what it's like, I'll go with you," she said.

Outside the room door, Shawney Jobs was standing: he wagged his small round head at sight of them.

"They're waiting for you," he told Denis.

"That'll do them no harm," the young man said.

"Don't forget, I warned you," said the ex-pugilist with a narrow smile. "I said it'd be best if you kept yourself to yourself, and not go boring into other people's affairs."

"And now I'm paying the penalty, am I?"

Jobs grinned. "I've heard say this young blood is a tough one. A sparkler at infighting and wrestling. So take care. He'll do you in if he can."

The bar of the Ox Bow was all but empty; there was a continuous roar of voices from outside; a blaze of light shone through the windows.

"It don't take the boys long to get things ready when there's a little skylarking promised them," said Jobs. "As soon as they heard of it, they were outside, and in the snap of your fingers they had bonfires going so you'd have plenty light."

There was a man sitting in a chair near the front entrance; his chair was tipped back against the wall, and the heels of his half-boots were hooked in the rounds. And as Denis' eyes rested on him, he knew it was Kipper.

The horse surgeon got up.

"Here I am, and waiting," he said briskly. "As soon as I heard your name, I knew I'd work to do," he added as they stood in the open doorway. "I have two talents: one is horses, the other is fighting-men."

BONFIRES were blazing in the tavern yard; a space had been cleared and was now being swept. Groups of men stood on the edge of cleared space.

"Young Descoings is very eager," said Kipper. "He's off with his shirt like a lad that's used to this kind of thing. And he is; I've seen him in a few turn-ups with some likely boys. And he knows his work. And—see, there's Pursell talking with him. What Louis doesn't know, Pursell can tell him, for he's been a desperate mauler in his day; he fought his way up and down the turnpike much as Mule Shapely's done. Only, he had more brains than the Mule, and more tricks. He'd churn the insides out of anyone who'd fight him in close. I've watched him often in times past."

Shawney Jobs was overseeing the laying out of the battleground. A circle was marked; stable buckets with water were brought forward; also carriage sponges, and stools from the bar. The landlord of the Ox Bow warned the score or so of wagoners to keep well away from the edge of the ring.

"No joking, me coveys," he said. "No putting the foot out to trip someone up; and no hard words for either of the men because you don't like him. I'll have me eyes on you, so mind what I'm saying to you." He looked about, and continued: "All's ready, gentlemen. Let the principals and their seconds come forward. Keep the fires going," he said to the stablemen. "Give the bully boys plenty of light for their work."

In the meantime Jeff Handler, Denis' wagon-boss, had appeared with three of his men. And Denis said to him:

"Jeff, there have been things happening. This is Miss Moreau, who arrived here in the carriage you were telling me about awhile ago. As I expect to be busy for the next little while, I want you to have a couple of the boys see to it that nothing happens to her."

"Might there be something, gaffer?" said Jeff, surprised.

"Some things have happened already."

"Tom," said Handler, turning to one of the wagoners, "that's your evening's work. And you, Frenchy," to another of them, "you've heard what the gaffer's said?"

"Right, Jeff," said Frenchy.

"We'll never take an eye from her, gaffer," said Tom to Denis. "Don't worry."

"These are two boys I've had with me a long time," said Denis to Lois. "And both of them tough and true."

LOUIS DESCOINGS, stripped to the waist in the biting air, the leaping firelight playing upon the massive contour of his body, stood in his corner with Pursell beside him. Shawney Jobs signaled to Denis.

"Make ready, Sir Abernathy," he called, a note of derision in his voice. "And this is the way to the playground."

"I'll need you, Jeff," said Denis to Handler. "Between rounds. You'll be of help to me."

"Look!" said Kipper, who, during this, had stood close by. "Do you see what's going to happen to you?" he said to Denis. "Jobs has set himself up as referee. And between the two of us, he's as filthy a little cheat as you'd meet in a year's travel on the turnpike."

Denis by this time was moving toward the ring, pulling off his coat; and he said:

"What difference does it make?"

"All the difference between right and wrong," said the horse surgeon, keeping at his side. "I don't know how much you've seen of ring fighting, but it's a thing with the most rascally possibilities. A slippery referee can do more dishonest things in the course of ten or twenty rounds than the outsider ever heard of."

Jeff Handler looked troubled.

"I've been thinking of that," he said. "Shawney Jobs is rat enough for anything. And you ought to have somebody behind you, gaffer, who knows more than I do."

"Pay attention," said Kipper. He unbuttoned Denis' shirt and pulled it over his head. "I've sponged and bottled some of the best in the land in my time. And the tricks these thick-headed ruffians are masters of are not hard to see through if you've had that much experience. Let your man here give you a knee, or help pick up if you're thrown, and let me do the rest."

Denis looked at him for a moment. And then he said:

"Very well."

Kipper looked pleased. He nodded to Jeff Handler; he whistled a brisk little air and passed a hand over Denis' chest and shoulders and back.

"Fine chest for a fighting man," he said. "Lots of lung space. Shoulders grand and sloping; and arms that are slung to them for hitting."

Shawney Jobs stepped forward like a gamecock; he was in his element. With him were a pair of stablemen.

"Well, we seem to be getting on," he said. "A little slow in the beginning, but that can always be made up by a brisk finish." He looked at Kipper and then at Jeff Handler. "Now," he said, "we'll have these two earnest fellows step back, and a couple of smart lads will take charge of you. You'll need good advice in the milling you're going to get," he said with a grin, "and the best care will be none too good."

"The corner is already in operation," said Kipper. He dipped a sponge in a pail of water, squeezed it out and passed it over the white, powerful torso of Denis. "Makes you gasp a little, doesn't it? But that'll be all right. It's tonic. It'll sharpen you up. Draw in a deep breath or two." Then he looked at Jobs. "Your boys'll not be needed," he said.

The ex-pugilist regarded the horse surgeon from under drawn brows.

"See here, me covey," he said, "this is going to be a match that'll take everything the men have. There's a bit of feeling in it. They don't fancy each other. And so, as landlord here, I'm trying to show me good will and—"

But Kipper interrupted him.

"Who's to be the referee?" he asked.

"I have agreed to serve," said Jobs. "As an outside party, having nothing to—"

But Kipper stopped him once more.

"You're a friend of Descoings'," the horse surgeon said. "And we don't care to have you. We must insist upon another person, if you don't mind."

"Aren't you putting your beak a little deep in this, Kipper?" demanded Jobs, an ugly look in his eyes. "You walk in and at once begin to manage matters."

"I'm seconding this gentleman," Kipper told him, letting out Denis' belt a hole. "Give you a little more breathing-room," he said to the young man. And then he added to Jobs: "When a man's seconding a principal in a thing like this, he's manager of his affairs. If he doesn't care for the referee, he says so."

Shawney Jobs grinned at him.

"Who else is here who knows the rules?" he asked. "Unless"—a swift hope in his shifty eyes—"it's Pursell."

"Also a friend to Descoings," said Kipper.

Jobs laughed.

"In the end it'll be me or nobody," he said.

"Let it be no one," said Denis.

There was a look of sudden exultation in Jobs' face.

"What does your fancy handler have to say to that?" he asked, looking at Kipper.

"I'm agreeable," nodded the horse surgeon, returning the look out of the corner of his eye.

"Right enough, fellah-me-lad," said the ex-pugilist briskly. "But first we'll see what my man has to say."

KIPPER was close behind him as he went to Descoings' corner. Louis Descoings said, when the matter was explained to him:

"Rules, but no referee. How can that be?"

Kipper, alert and watchful, saw the wink and the dirty smirk of Jobs as he replied:

"Abernathy wants it that way. And I think,"—with a laugh,—"as the only other thing he's going to get is a licking, we might as well give him this."

Kipper rubbed his nose with the side of his thumb. He was looking at Descoings' hands.

"What's the idea of the gloves?" he asked.

Louis was pulling on a pair of leather gloves, the sort wagoners used, heavy and with overlapping seams.

"His hands are poor." It was Pursell who spoke. "The skin splits easily. We thought he'd better wear these. Of course," he added, "they'll take a good bit from the power of his blows; but we'll chance that."

Kipper nodded and turned away; and the others followed him with mocking eyes. The horse surgeon crossed the yard to where his mule team, still harnessed to the cart, was standing. He took a pair of gloves from under the seat, then returned to Denis and handed them to him.

"Put these on," he said.

The young man looked at the gloves. There were four rows of heavy stitching running up the backs of them, stitching made with thick waxed thread.

"Surely not to fight with!" said Denis. "They'd cut like knives."

"Make no complaint," directed Kipper. "Louis Descoings is wearing a pair that're a good deal worse. I've just been looking at them. Put them on. And use them."

Denis, with set face, pulled on the gloves.

"You're to fight, London rules," Kipper told him. "And, as you know, there'll be no referee."

"It will start like a roadside brawl," said Denis. "And will quite likely turn into anything you might think of."

"Maybe that's what they're expecting. So, while you're out there, watch every move. The idea is to meet every bit of foul work with something fouler." Denis looked at the man, distaste in his expression. "Don't hesitate," said Kipper. "These people are out to maim you; common sense says you must do what you can to prevent it."

The crowd of wagoners, in spite of Shawney Jobs' warning, pressed to the edge of the ring. Lois Moreau, looking white and large-eyed, was at Denis' side; and now as young Descoings moved forward, accompanied by Pursell, Denis said to her:

"You'd better stand back a little. Don't try to see too much. The least I can say is that it'll not be pleasant."

So, with the horse surgeon at his side, he advanced to meet Descoings. Kipper saw Pursell's eyes go to the gloves Denis was wearing, and grinned.

"Seeing that some of the power of your principal's blows'll be lost because of his gloves," said Kipper, "I've put a pair on my man, too. It's never nice to take advantage." Pursell looked blackly at him but said nothing.

"All ready?" asked Kipper.

"Ready," said Pursell.

"Set to," said Kipper.

Then, as the seconds moved out of the ring, Lois Moreau saw the two young men face each other. The aspect of young Descoings frightened her; she had always thought he must be immensely strong; any time she'd met him, she'd never failed to see a threat in his face, and a sort of ferocity in his manner. But now, partly stripped as he was, his great muscles swollen and tense, his neck thick with the mounting pressure of his blood, his expression sneering and exultant, his powerful arms held out, he was a picture of a primordial one might find in a book.

He was moving forward, as she'd expected him to do; and each of his motions made her throat close more and more tightly. She looked at Denis. He was giving way! And she grew sick as the thought came to her that this was what she'd expected of him; she cried out in protest.

"Easy!" said Frenchy, who stood, with the other wagoner, directly behind her. "No harm done yet."

But she didn't hear him. She heard nothing except a mocking voice in her mind which told her Denis was afraid. There were tears in her eyes as she looked at him. He seemed white and slim; there was a boylike quality she'd not noticed before. He still gave way. Once, when Louis lurched suddenly at him, Denis stepped aside. He did it swiftly; to her he was like a person who dreaded to be hurt. Once he was about to strike; but he thought better of it; and when Louis rushed at him, he gave way hurriedly. She did not understand when Kipper and Jeff Handler laughed, greatly pleased.

"That's it—feint him!" shouted the horse surgeon. "You'll get him in a little while."

LOIS MOREAU was grateful for this one encouraging voice. But the wagoners were not so kindly. They grumbled and swore. Some of them shouted jeeringly, reminding Denis that he was in the ring as a fighting man, not as a dancing-master.

The girl's fears turned to hot anger at this; anger not only directed at the jeerers, but at Denis himself. He still gave back before Descoings' blows; he was quiet and easy enough, to be sure, but he had no spirit. When blows came in storms, he showed no sign of the rage she felt would be natural at the moment. Though she detested the furious nature of Louis Descoings, she wished during those moments that Denis had some of it. He retreated. He stepped aside. Again and again he seemed about to strike, but did not.

Brutal, determined, young Descoings lunged after the retreating Denis; then suddenly he won a place close to him and grasped him about the body. Denis seemed helpless in that grinding grip; he made what looked to the girl like a frantic struggle to tear himself free; then he went limp and was thrown to the ground.

Lois pressed her hands to her heart as Kipper and Jeff Handler ran forward and picked him up. They led him to his corner, and Kipper passed a damp sponge over his body. Denis, she noticed, sat easily upright; he was quiet and composed. He had not been hurt! And now, mingled

"In my bag," said Denis in a low voice, "is one of my pistols. Keep it with you."

with the anger that had filled her mind, there was a tinge of contempt. He had not fought back when Louis Descoings grappled with him; he'd given up without a struggle!

Kipper was saying in a soothing tone:

"Good fighting! You know how to take care of yourself. You feinted him nicely; but most of all"—and here Lois felt the man managed to get a note of admiration into his voice—"you went down easily. Like falling into a featherbed."

In what was but a few moments, Denis was on his feet once more, and advancing to meet young Descoings. Louis plunged at him with lowered head and flailing arms, but Denis stepped away. He held his hands high, as though crouching in fear behind them. She watched him with aching heart. If he'd refused to engage in this brutal affair she'd have understood, but now that he was in the ring, with a hundred eyes fixed upon him, why did he not make an effort? In shame and resentment, her view of the affair had suddenly changed. She'd rather see him lying battered and bloody and helpless upon the ground than standing timorously before a man she felt he should hate.

"Horses are always kind to me," the boy said. "I'll walk beside him."

Young Descoings was crowding in furiously; his thick arms were ceaselessly swinging; his head was down. To Lois he seemed like a half-mad beast. Denis had not yet struck a blow. She saw his swift step take him out of danger; she watched the defensive arms held high.

And now there was a sudden flurry; Denis had been driven back beyond the limits of the ring; the spectators gave way before the fighting men. Louis Descoings struck and struck again. The hurrying feet of Denis were unable to save him here. Lois, as she watched, saw his face suddenly mashed with blood. She sickened at the sight and put her hand over her eyes. An instant later there was a shout. And now she saw Louis Descoings turn contemptuously away; she saw Denis upon the ground, with Kipper and Jeff Handler helping him to his feet.

In his corner, one stroke of the sponge wiped away the blood; she heard Kipper say:

"He didn't manage that one properly; it only lifted the skin. You bleed freely, I see. But I'll stop it in a jiffy."

While the horse surgeon worked on the cut, Jeff Handler said:

"He tried to get your eyes, gaffer; he missed with the right hand; then he tried the left. But you'd turned your head a little and the glove slipped along the surface."

"Watch for that, and keep circling," said Kipper. "Don't let him get you backed up against the crowd." By this time Denis was on his feet once more. "And another thing: you've got gloves yourself. He's using his, so don't hesitate."

Denis was facing young Descoings once more; there was still a tiny trickle of blood down his cheek, and Lois Moreau looked at it fearfully. Descoings plunged at Denis again, his powerful arms driving in before him; again Denis stepped away, his guard high and his eyes intent.

"Lois!" said a voice at her side. She turned and saw Monselet.

"Gerard!" There was a great relief in her voice. "Oh, where have you been?"

"Don't let's talk about that now. I'm all right." But for all he said this, she saw he was quite unlike his usual self. He was rumpled and soiled-looking, and there was a bruise under one of his eyes. "There have been things happened," he said. "But we'll forget them. Just now we've got Abernathy to think about."

"This has happened because he wanted to help me. And it's barbarous and cruel. I'm feeling terribly about it. And I hate myself as much as I do these others."

"Why?"

"Because of the things I've been thinking. Denis Abernathy is not the sort of a person for a struggle like this, and I've been angry and impatient because he is not. I feel I've been as contemptuous as the people who've been jeering him."

"Pay no attention to what's being said," Monselet told her, his eyes on the fighting men. "These wagoners don't know anything but mauling. And Abernathy is not a mauler. He has a skill they don't appreciate."

"Gerard!" she said incredulously.

"While I was at Oxford," said the young Creole, "I saw a good deal of ring work; indeed"—with some pride—"I boxed some myself. And I tell you Abernathy's doing quite well. His tactics are sound; his feinting is very clever, and he steps in and out and to one side as well as anyone I've ever seen. Whoever taught him knew both theory and practice, and also knew how to hand it on."

The girl's eyes were fixed upon Denis; she saw him falling back before the plunges of young Descoings, still sheltering himself behind his high-held arms.

"He's frightened," she said. "He has been since the beginning. As I've watched him, I've almost cried with shame."

"What are you saying?" protested Monselet. "Look at Descoings, panting. In another few minutes he'll be ripe for the finish; at the present moment he has only breath enough left to keep him on his feet. He's showing himself to be no more than a jolterhead, with his thick-witted battering—and Abernathy's making a fool of him." As Lois was about to reply to this there came a sudden shout from the crowd. Her eyes went again to the fighting men. "Look there!" said Monselet.

Startled, the girl held fast to him. She saw Denis once more masked with blood; she saw Descoings still plunging at him. But Denis was no longer falling back. Almost in an instant he had changed; he was meeting the rushes of Louis with tremendous driving blows. His smeared young face was set and merciless. Breathless and gasping, his almost spent adversary came to a stand, his mouth open, his eyes glaring. Denis stood close to him and struck short, shocking blows; the corded ridges of the gloves he wore sliced murderously. In little more than an instant, Louis Descoings was a disfigured, bleeding image; his great chest was heaving; he still endeavored to strike, but the power of his knotted arms seemed gone.

The girl, dazed and bewildered, tried to grasp this sudden transformation; the roaring of the excited wagoners was in her ears; she saw Kipper and Jeff Handler bobbing up and down like corks; she saw Pursell and Shawney Jobs gesticulating frenziedly and heard fragments of their shouted advice. She herself was crying out words of encouragement to Denis; her heart was pounding. And in the bedlam of sound, Louis Descoings fell.

SOME little time later, Denis Abernathy was bathing his face and bruised body at the pump in the inn yard when the square, powerful Pursell appeared in a doorway and after a few moments, spoke.

"You have a method of fighting in this region we don't know about, further East," he said.

"Meaning what?" asked the young man, blotting the water from himself with a towel.

"Foul work!" said Pursell bitterly. "Planned, deliberate foul work!"

"Let me see that cut," said Monselet, who stood beside Denis with a glass receptacle holding a healing ointment. "It's no more than an abrasion"—examining the red welt across the young man's brow—"but at the same time a little of this will do it no harm."

While he applied the ointment, Denis spoke to Pursell.

"Just what do you mean?" he asked quietly.

"Those gloves!" said Pursell. "You might as well have had an ax-bit in each hand. They tore the flesh from Descoings' face."

"The use of gloves," said Denis, "was your idea. You said Descoings was going to wear a pair to save his hands. Then Kipper," and he smiled, "brought a pair for me; if you remember, he said he didn't want me to have any advantage."

"I'd be interested," said Monselet, still engaged with the red stripe across Denis' forehead, "to see the gloves Descoings wore. I had a glimpse of them when Shawney Jobs stripped them off his hands. And they looked to me like pieces of dangerous workmanship. Also," said Monselet, "Descoings was urgently advised to put their dangerous qualities into use. This"—and he indicated the wound—"was done by one of them. But," he added, "Descoings overshot his mark. I stood within a yard of Jobs when it was delivered, and I heard him advising his man what to do. 'The eyes,' he kept saying. 'Let him have it in the eyes.' A nasty idea," Monselet told Pursell. "Not sportsmanlike at all."

Pursell looked from one to the other of them in silence, his square, hard face full of cold rage.

"There," said Monselet to Denis, "I think that'll do very well until you can do better. But I'd advise you to do without a hat for a day or two; pulling it down over the hurt may aggravate it."

DENIS drew on his shirt, and said to Pursell: "This matter between Descoings and myself, as you probably know, didn't begin tonight. But the one between you and myself has. You had it in your mind tonight to do Lois Moreau an injury. A few moments ago you spoke of planned, deliberate foul work. That pretty well describes the thing I found you in the midst of when I arrived at this place."

"Well, suppose it were so," said Pursell. "What would you like to make of it?"

There was a cold brutality in the man's face as he said this; and Denis replied to it instantly by pulling the shirt from his body once more.

"I'd like to have you in Descoings' place," he said. "Now."

"That," said Pursell, "can be managed. Man to man," he said, "with nothing barred. What do you say?"

"Done!" said Denis, and at once began moving toward the fighting-ground.

But just then Kipper stepped into view.

"A minute!" he said, his hand against Denis' chest. "Do nothing without thinking. You finished a bruising twenty minutes only a bit ago."

"You were always a spoil-sport, Kipper," said Shawney Jobs, who'd also appeared, attracted by the loud talk. "What harm will it do? Abernathy's a handy young covey, and a little more milling will do no more than stir his blood. Pursell's half again his age"—with a wink at that gentleman. "Surely you'll not have him show the white feather now."

Monselet had joined his voice with that of Kipper.

"Another time," he said to Denis. "You're too tightly strung just now. Take some time, and relax."

"That thing across your brow is more than a furrow," said the horse surgeon. "Its effects are not much now, but you'd not go far in a second battle before it'd begin to take its toll."

Shawney Jobs jeered at him.

"You do go on chattering, don't you? I'm telling you, Kipper, there'd not be a bit of diversion left on the turnpike if the old grannies like you had the managing of it."

"You know this man," said Kipper, and nodded toward Pursell, "for you know every fighting man within a hundred or two miles in any direction. And you know his ways. A gouger," said the horse surgeon, "a gentleman who'll put his knee in your vitals when he has you on the ground; who'll stamp on your face if he gets you underfoot." He looked at Pursell. "Do you deny it?" he asked.

Pursell laughed.

"Everyone has his own way," he said. "But I call attention: I'm not deceiving anyone. I'm not saying I'll do one thing, and then do another. I said I'd fight, nothing barred."

"Suppose we leave it for another time," Denis said to Pursell. "We'll be meeting again. Maybe by then you'll have gone further in the sort of work you've tried today; and I may be in the humor to meet you on your own ground."

"It may be," said the man, "what you say is just as well. But, carry this in your mind: I've been told you are of the interfering sort, that you have ideas about what you think your rights and make quite a noise about them. The future is open, and anything can happen; so let me warn you that I'm not one to tolerate interference of any kind."

"You talk enough like Louis Descoings to be his twin," said Denis. "He has one or two warnings ready every time I meet him. And they are usually made up of things that will happen to me if I step in his way. But," quietly, "nothing serious has overtaken me so far." Pursell, with a gesture, was turning away. "A moment more," said Denis. And as the man paused, he proceeded. "There are certain things I believe are mine; and I mean to stand solidly in the road leading to them. Threats are things I'll pay very little attention to: whether they come from the Descoings or from you, or from anyone else. If you have anything in your mind you think will conflict with my affairs, get ahead with it. Don't waste your breath telling what will happen to me if I show I don't like it."

Pursell stood for a space looking at him; then, without a word, he turned away.

"I would say that's a very dangerous person," said Monselet. "I had an experience with him myself early this afternoon. He took me aside, offered me a saddle-horse and invited me to leave. While I was telling him what I thought of his suggestion, he struck me; I was unconscious and was locked in a tool shed. If it hadn't been for our friend Kipper, here, I'd probably be there still."

"As I've said before, when I stop at a tavern I always ask a few questions," the horse surgeon said. "Being carefully selected questions they almost always lead to something not named in them. I heard of a damaged carriage, of a black coachman, of four horses standing in the stable. Also of a young man and a young woman who were delayed here. The young man, I found, was not on view and had not been for some hours; the young lady had been inquiring about him, but had been given no satisfactory answers. So," said Kipper, with a grin, "I set to work on the matter. And I found him."

A LITTLE later, Denis found Lois Moreau in one of the rear rooms of the Ox Bow, with George Hickory and Frenchy standing outside her door.

"I know I'm safe," she said to him, "but I'm afraid of this place. If we could only leave it! Now! If I stay here through the night, I'll be ill."

"I've thought of that," Denis said, "and I think we'll be able to leave within an hour."

He told her he'd sent Jeff Handler back along the road to get another carriage, or a spring wagon. Monselet came in a few moments later and they talked about the situation hopefully. They went over the happenings of the night; they ate and drank a little; the young men smoked. They learned that a horseman had been sent to a distant town for a surgeon to patch up the beaten Louis Descoings. They also heard that Pursell was in the bar, drinking heavily. That he had a face like stone. That he spoke to no one.

Some time later, Jeff Handler appeared. He'd managed to get a chaise at the Magpie, some dozen miles away. Denis directed that one of the carriage horses be put into this; also that his own horse be harnessed to the cart once more.

"Take the other horses with you when you leave in the morning," said Denis to Handler. "And fix the carriage up somehow, so you can get it to Foley's Forge. Tell Foley to make a job of it, and that it will be called for in due course."

They looked about the tavern and the yard and stables for Kipper; but no one had seen him.

"Likely he's gone," said one of the stablemen. "He often does that. He's here one minute, and gone the next."

"He stops here sometimes, then?" said Denis.

"Now and then. But not often. Tonight's the first time I've seen him in a year."

Denis paid the score to Shawney Jobs, who took the money with a scowl.

"I'll tell you plain," said the ex-pugilist, "that in all the time I've been seeing you along this road, I've never liked you. And tonight I've liked you less than ever."

Denis took the two bit-pieces that were put down as his change and stowed them in his pocket; and he smiled.

"Well, that's something, anyway," he said.

"You've gave that young man a beating," said Jobs, "but you've not heard the last of it. Pursell has you marked. I've been knowing him off and on for a long time, and when he marks anyone, he marks them deep."

"I'll probably meet him again, as I told him," said Denis. "I find I'm objecting to him a good deal, and maybe a second meeting will come to something."

MONSELET was not skillful in his management of horses, so he got into the chaise with the coachman; Lois Moreau sat beside Denis in the cart. The side lamps were lighted, and they started. From Carlisle westward, the road was a hard one; it was through heavily timbered country and the grade was steep. Denis knew this portion of the road perfectly; he had traveled it, day and night, many times. Pittsburgh was still something like two hundred miles away; the roads being what they were, that meant almost a week of traveling.

After about two hours on the way, they drew up before a small inn at the top of a long ascent.

"I think," said young Abernathy, "we'd better stop here until morning. I know this house. They're decent people, and the place is wholesome."

The tavern was dark; Denis was knocking on the door when the chaise drew up; and Monselet joined him.

"I thought we were to continue on," said Monselet. "Or is Lois giving way?"

"She needs rest," said Denis. "She's gone through a good deal: and now that she's well away from the Ox Bow and the people in it, she's anxious to have some sleep."

"I've been thinking about that," said Monselet. "I feel none too vigorous myself; and as she's taken everything much harder than I have, she must be pretty well worn down."

Denis had continued knocking; and now a window went up.

"Now, you, sir!" came a squeaky voice. "What's all this fuss about?"

"Good night to you, Mr. Hornaby," said Denis. "Very sorry to disturb you at this hour."

"What's that?" said Hornaby. "Is that young Abernathy?"

"None other, landlord. With some friends; and wanting lodging for ourselves and horses."

"In a minute," said the landlord. "I'll be down. And while I'm on the way you might knock on the stable door and rouse up old Dan to take care of your animals."

Old Dan, having heard the thumping on the house door, was already astir, with a lantern in his hand.

"Two beasts," he said, looking at the horses. "Will you want 'em fed, gentlemen?"

"A little hay. And a very little water. But plenty of bedding," Denis told him.

The beds at the Hilltop Tavern were clean and good; the service and cooking were excellent; it was almost noon of the next day that the travelers took up their journey.

"My father always liked that little place," said Denis as the horse trotted along the stony road. "And he always tried to fix it so he could stop there when he was on this stretch of his journey."

Lois had heard Denis speak of his father to the landlord of the Hilltop Tavern. And now, when she asked about him, Denis explained he'd always called his father Owen; and his mother had been Ann. He'd always felt, somehow, that he was a younger brother to them both.

Lois smiled at this. It was interesting; she felt it was a way of living together that could have many good results. Denis told her something of the Abernathys; of the old wilderness peddler who had been Simon's father; of Simon himself, and the way he'd won his way through life. She listened, absorbed, to their histories: Owen's boyhood under the relentless will of his father, his marriage to a coasting skipper's daughter, his break with his father, his years of weary tramping at the side of a freight wagon among these same hills.

Denis, as he went on with his story, took the veils, one by one, from the dream that had so occupied his father's mind. He told how Owen would stand on a hill crest and see great roads seaming the mountains; he'd look into the mists, eastward, and see thousands of strong horses, with brave harness and chiming bells; he'd see thousands of the great wagons he'd always called land ships, laden with needed things. And after these would come the setting down of iron rails, the mighty steam boiler on wheels, dragging more and still more materials over the hills and back into a region that was slowly opening to human habitation. Or he'd sit by the riverside and watch the rafts, or the flatboats on their slow, heavy way downstream. Steam-driven craft would replace these—mighty vessels filled with power and laden in a way the Western waters had not yet seen.

"It sounds thrilling and wonderful!" said Lois. "It was really like a vision of the future, wasn't it? And I can see that it's a good deal like what my father has been thinking. Only there is nothing of the dreamer about his ideas!" with a sudden shadow in her face. "We are people who need a good deal of money; we now haven't much, and he feels he must lay hands upon more of it one way or another."

She admired Owen. But Ann Craufurd she loved.

"Since you've told me of her," said the girl, "a number of things are plainer to me. You must be much like her."

"I hope so," said Denis. "Haven't you found that there are memories so strong and binding that all other memories live only by revolving around them? My memory of Ann is like that. She was kind and strong. Everything else of the past—even Owen—is dependent on her."

Chapter Fourteen

THEY plodded through the wild mountains, day after day. On the evening of the fifth day they arrived at a stage stand known as the Swingletree, whose proprietor was well known to Denis.

"I've been expecting you," said the landlord. "I've been told you were on the road, and coming this way." Denis looked surprised, and the host laughed. He was short, had a jolly red face and an engaging way. "We're out of the way here, but we get the news," he said. "But let's get your things in; let me give you all a small dram of good brandy. Then we'll stow you away in your rooms; and after that we'll have some time for conversation."

The Swingletree was small, but well taken care of. Its rooms were cheerful; its bar and sitting-room were bright with the lights of early evening. The landlord's wife was a cheery soul who personally saw to the needs and comfort of Lois.

A short time after their arrival, Denis talked with the landlord in his private corner at the end of the bar.

"Don't think I'm making a mystery out of this," said the man, "but I was advised to be as private as possible with it."

He took a folded paper from a cubbyhole behind the bar.

"This morning, fairly early, a man appeared. How he got here," said the landlord, "I don't know, for he seemed to be on foot. He asked if I'd seen you, and I said I had not. He told me I would in the next little while, and then he gave me this paper, warning me to let no one see it, and give it only to you."

Denis opened the paper and read the few lines of writing; he refolded it and put it in a coat pocket.

"What sort of man was this?" he asked.

"A medium-sized, middle-aged fellow," said the landlord. "And seemed to have his wits about him."

"How was he dressed?"

"He had on a pair of half-boots. I noticed them particularly because we don't often see them in this part of the country."

"He didn't wear a tall beaver hat?"

"He did," said the landlord. "And one that must have cost a good sum of money in its day. Also—and I noticed this as he left—he limped a little with his off foot."

DENIS thanked the landlord and sat down by the bar fire. He took out the paper and re-read it; then he sat pondering. By and by Monselet came into the room and Denis arose and said to him:

"I've just had news that I don't like; and I think I'd better see to it at once."

Monselet looked at him in surprise; he'd caught the haste in Denis' manner and the trouble in his voice.

"What would seeing to it be like?" he asked.

"I've got to have a horse saddled, and face a long stretch of road."

"Isn't it rather a queer time for that? When you've finished your supper it'll be all of nine o'clock. A long stretch of road after that would run you well into morning."

"I'm starting at once. Speak to Lois for me. I'll be back as soon as possible; but don't be surprised if I'm delayed. I may be gone as long as noon or later. But wait for me. The people of this inn are absolutely dependable; Lois will be safe. Also, Jeff Handler and his boys should be along by evening with their wagons. If I'm not here when they arrive, say to them they are to wait until they see me."

Monselet looked much concerned.

"All this sounds out of the way," he said. "As though something had gone wrong."

Denis put a hand on the young Creole's arm.

"I'm sorry. But this is a thing that's not to be told. Not just yet, at any rate." He went to the bar and spoke to the landlord. "Can you get a horse ready for me, Andrews? I'm starting on a little journey."

But Andrews shook his head.

"There's not a horse in the stable except those of your own, and one that's half dead through over-riding. A man stopped here in mid-afternoon, and," said the landlord indignantly, "the horse he rode was white with sweat; it stood there in front of the house with its head hanging and its legs all spraddled out to keep it from falling. It had been all but ridden to death. The man is a person you'd not think the kind that'd treat a beast that way; but then you never can go much by looks."

"Well," said Denis, "have a saddle put on the horse I've been driving. I know he's had a long day of it, but I'll work him as gently as I can."

Andrews called the stableman, and in a short time the horse was ready. Monselet went out with Denis, the stableman held a lantern while the young man mounted.

"It's pretty dark," said Monselet. "I hope you can go on all right. But riding in the night along steep, stony roads is no pleasant thing."

Denis smiled through the dim light of the lantern.

"I'll do very well," he said, as he gave the horse the rein. "Look for me tomorrow, sometime." He checked the animal, and bent down in the saddle. "In my bag," he said in a low voice, "is one of my pistols. I'm taking the other one with me. Get the second one and keep it with you. I don't expect anything to happen, but no matter what does, you can trust Andrews."

After the darkness had swallowed up man and horse, Monselet went into the bar of the Swingletree.

"What the devil has happened?" said the young Creole to Andrews. "One moment he's settled and satisfied to stay here until morning; the next he's riding along, looking hasty and worried."

The landlord shook his head.

"Things are always happening. And we can never tell when they'll appear."

LOIS came down shortly after: she was startled when told that Denis had gone, and she questioned Monselet. "It's odd," she told him. "But I suppose there was a need of his going; and we'll wait here as he asked."

The Swingletree served them a good meal: as they were finishing, they heard a quiet but rather surprised voice:

"Miss Moreau! Mr. Monselet! And in such an out-of-the-way place!"

It was Evans Dacre. He was smiling and pleased; his handsome figure was held erect, his kindly eyes went from one to the other of them.

"How do you do, Mr. Dacre," said Monselet, as he arose. "I suppose we've all a reason for surprise. One doesn't often meet acquaintances on a lonely road like this."

"I've often said," and Dacre's fine face wore an amused look, "that a seasoned traveler shouldn't be astonished at anything he encounters on a journey."

"Do sit down," invited Monselet. "I don't think we've met since one night when you came to the Sigourneys with Henri Descoings."

"And then only for a few minutes," smiled Dacre, as he seated himself. "Though I've thought more than once that it would be pleasant if I had another opportunity of seeing you." He looked at Lois. "You must find it very trying, traveling on a badly made road like this."

"Pittsburgh is a long way from Philadelphia," said Lois. "And if we are to get there at all, we must go this way."

There was a coldness in the girl's voice that caught Monselet's attention. He had known Lois since childhood and was well versed in her ways and her expression. He saw she did not like Dacre.

The man talked pleasantly and well. His rich voice sounded well-smoothed periods; his stately head nodded engagingly from one to the other of them as he proceeded. The road was bad, to be sure; but it was much better than it had been. Also, it was the road to the West, and that alone made up for many of its shortcomings. The East, with its shore facing the sea, with its ships, its steady, carefully managed trade, had been operating on a recognized level for many years. Its goods were staples; there were few, if any, surprises. Manufactured stuffs, raw stuffs, all usual and customary. The seaboard trade had become a commonplace. Those were some of the things he said.

But the West! That was very different. It was new; it had the shining possibilities of a freshly dug treasure. It was limitless! Some day, when the ways were opened, it would rush like a torrent; the ebb and flow of the East's sea-borne traffic would seem pallid and dim in comparison.

Monselet was charmed by the rhythm and confidence of Dacre's talk. He agreed with every word that was said. The West, he told Dacre, had always been an object of admiration to him. He had sensed its riches; he'd somehow known that a good deal of the country's future was bound up in it. He'd spoken more than once about it to François Moreau, Lois' father. The West, he'd said at such times, was a section to be observed. Roads should be opened into it; it should be encouraged to produce. There were the rivers, for example. There seemed to be no end to the service they could give.

Lois listened to what Dacre had to say in reply to these things. And she watched him as he spoke. His hands were large and smooth; he gestured quietly with them, and the movements carried a sort of conviction. The deep, schooled voice impressed one: the broad brow and gentle eyes fixed the impression and made it permanent.

Still, Lois did not like Dacre. There was a thing deep in her mind, for which she was not altogether able to account, that protested against him.

She'd seen him at the countinghouse of Moreau, Descoings & Abernathy. He'd been gentle-mannered and persuasive; she'd noted the marked nobility of his bearing.

During the day-long journeys from Hilltop Tavern to the Swingletree, Denis had mentioned many things and many people. He'd told her of his visit to his grandfather on the day he'd arrived at Perth Amboy. It was during that visit he'd first heard of Dacre. His grandfather had mentioned the man's name, the girl recalled.

It was in Dacre's house, in the still of the night. The old man had awakened suddenly, crying out for Owen. And Dacre opened the bedroom door and came in. He'd stood by the bedside of the old man, holding a lighted candle above his head; and he'd smilingly said Owen was dead.

As Denis told of this, the girl saw he realized the drama of the situation, but nothing more. To her, the thing was shocking; it filled her with panic and cold horror as she thought of it. And afterward: Still in Dacre's house. When Denis had gone there, asking for his grandfather. There was the dimly lighted passage and stairway. There was Dacre knocking upon the bedroom door. And then, there he was descending and saying there'd been no reply. Lois had a vision of the finely featured face as the man said this to Denis in the lower passage. And she heard his quiet voice. He'd knocked twice, he'd said. But there had been no answer. And when Denis had gone up he'd found a darkened room crowded with the chill of death.

DACRE was proceeding with his conversation, when a man came into the bar. He looked like a ranger, and carried a long rifle under his arm. He seemed to know the landlord quite well, and as he drank his hot whisky he told of his day upon the road.

"Old Lucy aint as for'ard-actin' as she once was," he said. "I have to give her her own way sometimes; and then she just dawdles along. But these last couple of days I've been in no hurry. All I had to do was move along, looking out for a carriage."

"Something stolen?" asked Andrews.

"There's a New Orleans man of the name of Moreau up at Flangler's Mills," said the state officer, "and it seems he's got a daughter traveling this way, by carriage. And it was her I wanted to meet with."

"Well," said Andrews, "you've stepped into luck. Miss Moreau's right here."

He nodded his head toward the group at the table; Monselet spoke to the ranger.

"Have you any sort of word from Mr. Moreau?"

The ranger took off his coonskin cap, and approached.

"Yes sir-ee," he said. "He knew I was moving along the road in this direction, and he said if I met a carriage I was to ask after Miss Moreau. What he wanted to have told you, miss"—to Lois—"was that he'd left Pittsburgh and was now at Flangler's Mills. You are to stop there; and afterwards he'll go on East with you."

"Can you see anyone, Joddy?" breathed the girl. Then she felt a grip upon her arm; Joddy's voice said in a frightened whisper: "Look! Look!"

"Flangler's Mills?" said Monselet, and looked at the landlord.

"I've heard of it," said Andrews. "About a two days' ride from here, aint it, Lemuels?"

"I took two for it, but it can be done in one," said Lemuels. "I came along mighty slow. It's about ten miles this side of Pittsburgh, and about a half dozen more back in the woods."

"Sounds like a mighty hard place to find," said the landlord.

"Not so much so if you know the p'ints of it," Lemuels said. "Right at the turn is the place old Fort Judson once stood. A kind of blockhouse," he explained to the party at the table; "it was burnt down many years ago by the Injuns. You turn there to the right into a wagon way; and you travel, as I've said, back into the country about a half dozen miles. The Mills is a timber cuttin'; it stands on the bank of a stream, and they float the logs down to the Allegheny River."

Lemuels gave them careful directions. And when he left the tavern to see to his horse for the night, Monselet said to Lois:

"Your father's idea about steamboats seems to be growing. His going to Flangler's Mills must mean that some one's thinking of getting out timber for an operation."

"There has been a good deal of enterprise lately in river projects," said Dacre.

"Abernathy thinks the whole of the next half century is tied up in fresh-water traffic. To hear him talk about it, you'd be almost convinced we were done with Europe altogether in a commercial way."

Dacre smiled.

"It requires enthusiasm just like that to open the way for a new thing," he said. "But we are not done with Europe; we never shall be. Of course we will not be altogether dependent on overseas places in the future; but, don't forget, they'll be dependent on us in many ways. And that'll keep the bond knotted as tightly as before."

They talked for some time about the future of the West and the prospects for trade along both river and road; Monselet and Dacre were still talking when Lois went to her room. . . .

The early sun was slitting through rifts of gray clouds when the girl came down next morning. Monselet, it seemed, had not yet appeared.

"You are the early one, except for Lemuels; he was up and away two hours since," said Mrs. Andrews, coming to her kitchen door.

"I had a poor night, and awoke very early," said Lois. "I hope the bed wasn't uncomfortable."

"Oh, no," said the girl. "I suppose I was over-tired by the day on the road."

"It sometimes is that way," Mrs. Andrews told her sympathetically; "though the men never seem to mind it." Just then Andrews himself appeared from the tavern yard. "Miss Moreau had a poor night," his wife informed him. "She was awake quite early. It might be that Lemuels was clattering around on the stones before he went, and disturbed her."

But Andrews said no to this.

"Lemuels goes about his work as softly as a cat. And his old horse, too. They were both trained in the same school," with a laugh. "But if there was any noise in the yard at an early hour it was made by Mr. Dacre. He'd a good deal of trouble with his horse; the poor beast wasn't at all fit for travel."

Mrs. Andrews was much surprised.

"What!" she said. "Has Mr. Dacre gone?"

"Since some time before daylight."

"Why, I thought he was to stay until you got another horse for him."

"I thought so, too. But he seemed to have changed his mind. He had a cold bite, and ordered the poor beast out.

Bob told him the horse wasn't fit, that it could hardly stand on its legs. Indeed, he made quite a noise about it, for"—to Lois—"Bob is very fond of horses and doesn't like to see them mishandled."

"What was the sense of taking the road with a horse as poor as that?" said Mrs. Andrews. "It'll break down somewhere, and there the man will be, maybe miles from anywhere."

"His idea was that it'd carry him to another tavern, where he'd be able to get another and better one."

The tavern people were still discussing the matter when Monselet appeared; and as he and Lois ate their breakfast of eggs and bacon and hot bread, Monselet also expressed his surprise at the sudden departure of Dacre.

"He doesn't seem like a person given to whims," said the young Creole. "But, then, as Andrews said, you never can tell about people."

LOIS said little. She'd lain awake for hours, restless, her mind troubled; and the feeling was still with her. Indeed, it had increased. There was a picture in her mind of a man lashing a broken-winded horse along a mountain road; of that same man, in the dark of an early morning, calling for the shattered beast once more, and riding away. He had not intended to go; the inn people said so. He'd made up his mind very suddenly. It was as though he'd received unexpected news; something that had stirred him to immediate action. If there had been any message arrived for him at that tiny inn on the wilderness road, the people of the place would know of it. But they did not know. They were surprised at his sudden departure. There had been no message for him; but there had been one for her. From her father!

The ranger, Lemuels, had given her that message in the presence of Dacre. Her father was at Flangler's Mills; he'd been there for some days.

Searching through her mind the night before, seeking a reason for her distrust of Dacre, the girl had found—fear. She was afraid of him. Denis had told her many things during the days since they'd left Hilltop Tavern. And the later episodes dealing with old Simon had impressed her most. The ghastly attempts upon his life, by a shadowy person whom no one ever saw. And then how he'd been persuaded to leave his own house as being too dangerous, and take up lodgings at Dacre's. She felt a cold shudder in her blood as she thought of that. There, he was told, he'd be safe. He'd be in the house of a friend. And it was in that house he'd met his death!

Yes, she was afraid of Dacre! Handsome, mild, of gentle speech: but she was afraid of him. She remembered that he'd been at the States Arms Tavern, farther back on the road, when the door to Denis' room had been opened in the night. And when Denis told her of this, a thought had formed in her mind. If old Simon had been killed because of his insistence upon his rights in the house of Moreau, Descoings & Abernathy, what reason was there to suppose an attempt might not be made upon Denis, who had inherited these rights? Also—and she felt her breath catch and her heart stop as the thought leaped up in her mind—her father, having the same sort of claim upon the house, what reason was there to suppose that—

She had gone white; she was trembling. And Monselet noticed it.

"Lois!" he said, leaning toward her. "Are you ill?"

She said she was not; she assured him she was quite well.

"You are as white as a ghost," he told her. "You are shaking."

Lois steadied herself.

"No; I'm quite all right. I had a very restless night. I suppose that's what's the matter."

Monselet studied her anxiously.

"You have been through a good deal in the last week," he said. "And now, I suppose, when you've had a chance to relax, you're feeling the effects of it."

"If I were out in the air," said the girl, "I'd shake it off, whatever it is." She paused for a moment. "I think I'll go for a ride."

"But we can't do that," said Monselet. "We have only one horse, and the place seems to be without any of its own."

"I'll have them put a saddle on the chaise horse," said Lois. "There is sure to be one of those."

"But," protested the young man, "you can't go riding alone. Not in this wild region."

"I'll not go far," said Lois. "Ask the landlord if he has a side-saddle."

Monselet knew the look she wore. It was Lois at her most determined. He spoke to Andrews at the bar. Yes, they had a lady's saddle; and they'd have the stableman get the horse ready immediately. The young Creole, while Lois was in her room preparing for the ride, walked up and down the tavern yard, watching the saddle being adjusted, and shaking his head. When she came down he looked at her with a good deal of concern.

"I've asked Andrews about another horse, but he says their only animals are away with the tavern's wagon, across the mountains, for supplies."

"Please don't be fussy, Gerard," she said. "I shall be quite all right. I've ridden out alone many a time, down on the plantation."

"Well, that's a different kind of a place. This is wilderness country, really. The houses are miles apart." He helped her to mount, and then as she gathered up the reins, he said to her: "There's a pocket in that saddle; just wait a moment, I'll give you something to put in it." He hurried into the tavern, and in a few moments returned with a long-barreled dragoon pistol. "This belongs to Abernathy," he told her. "He spoke about it last night before he left. Take it with you. Don't be stubborn," as she was about to refuse. "I tell you plainly, I don't like your going alone like this. I'll feel disturbed all the time you're away; and your having this will give me a little ease at least."

She put the pistol into the deep saddle pocket.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll be all right."

Monselet still wore a look of concern.

"Don't be too long. Abernathy is likely to return at any hour. And he may want to be moving."

She waved her hand to him, and rode away westward along the deeply rutted highway.

DURING the days of travel through the mountains, Lois Moreau had learned the country was lonely. But now, as she rode along on the back of the cantering horse, she felt depressed by the dreary prospect that surrounded her on every side. The leafless trees, the stark gray skeletons of the roadside brush, the dull-looking rocks all served to add to her anxiety of mind.

Now and then there would be a freight wagon on its way east; sometimes a cart or farm wagon with a driver who gazed at her in surprise. Sometimes she'd see a thin curl of smoke in the distance which told her of a homestead. But she'd been on the road for more than three hours before she came to a tavern. A stableboy took her horse, and she went inside. She ate some bread and cheese, and drank a small measure of ale.

"It'll be full night before you get to Pittsburgh, if it's there you're headin'," said the landlord, a small old man with a quavering voice.

"I'm going to Flangler's Mills," said Lois.

"Hard place to find unless you're accustomed to the way!"

"I turn to the right when I get to Fort Judson; there's a wagon track back into the woods, and that will take me to the mills," said the girl confidently.

The old man smiled.

"You might ride past Fort Judson a half dozen times in the dark," he told her. "And that track through the woods is a hard one to follow."

"Is there any chance of my reaching the fort while there's some daylight?" asked Lois.

"If your horse is a good one, you will. But you'd have to keep him down to his work." There was a short silence while the girl ate her bread and cheese. And then the landlord spoke again. "Is there anything going on at the Mills?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Lois.

"I thought there might be. There wouldn't be one person in six months ask after it; but you're the second one that's stopped today and mentioned something that had to do with it."

"Who was the other?" asked the girl.

"It was the man who came along more than an hour ago. He'd got this far in Mose Silver's wagon. And he seemed in a great hurry. He bought a horse from me," said the old man cheerfully, "and gave me a good price for it. He spoke of the Mills as if he knew the place very well. A scholarly-looking man," said the landlord. "And dressed like a person of means."

IT was Dacre! Lois, as she rode away from the inn shortly after, knew he was ahead of her. She looked at the long shining barrel of the dragoon pistol in the open saddle pocket, and thought gratefully of Gerard Monselet. She'd not be afraid, she told herself. She'd go on: no one should stop her. She'd reach Flangler's Mills. She'd warn her father. She'd tell him all that had happened at Perth Amboy; also what had happened on the road. He'd have friends at the mills; and, being warned, he'd be safe.

She rode carefully and steadily. The horse was not a good saddle animal, but he was honest and had deep, sound lungs. He covered as much ground in an hour as many a flashy mount would have done. She stopped at several wayside places, and at each had word of Dacre. He was still on ahead, and riding cruelly.

"Some people aint got no traveling sense," complained a groom at one of the inns. "Many a man would cover as much ground as him and still have their horses in good condition. But I could see he was the kind that lashed his beast through all the soft places, and speeded him up all the grades."

The sky began to gray, and finally deep shadows fell across the road as Lois moved along. Darkness was drawing on; she was not, according to the people she'd talked with in the last hour or so, far from the spot where Lemuels said one had to turn to reach Flangler's Mills. But she feared she might pass it in the growing darkness.

Then a thin white moon appeared over the crest of a hill; she saw some stars in the sky which spoke plainly of night; and, finally, in the increasing dimness, she saw, back from the road, a vine-grown ruin overshadowed by trees, and she drew in her horse and studied it. It was very old; its timbers had been massive, and there was plain evidence of an ancient fire. It was the remains of Fort Judson; and her spirits lifted gladly as she saw an open track bearing away to the right. She urged the horse into this: it was narrow, and deeply cut, and her heart sank as she saw how it led away into the complete darkness of the forest.

But this was no time for fright or hesitation; she must go on without delay. It was dark, to be sure, but it would grow darker. So she spoke to the horse and shook the reins; the animal, with sober reluctance, moved along the shadowed and narrow way.

The earth was soft, and in places wet; the boughs of the trees hung low. There were long stretches where the sky was blotted out; no light penetrated, and she was compelled to trust to the instincts of her horse alone.

The pace was slow; sometimes the animal stopped as though he'd go no farther, but sight, scent, or whatever it is that leads beasts through the dark, came to its aid, and it would go on.

It was during one of these pauses that Lois realized they'd left the road and were straying among the trees. The horse stood quite still and sniffed the air. Lois heard a sound. It came from some distance away. She listened. There were hoofs striking the soft earth; there was the swishing of branches as a horse and rider swept them aside in their progress.

She felt her horse lift its head, and was afraid it would neigh. She put her hand quietly upon its neck, and it was silent. The invisible rider passed on; the dulled sounds of the hoofs in the soft ground became fainter. The girl sat motionless. There was a sudden feeling of panic in her mind. The horseman was Dacre! She felt sure of it. He had been delayed in some way on the road; or in the gathering night he'd ridden past the ruined fort and had to return. But she fought back her fear. This was no time for nerves. She must be steady and clear-minded.

But when she thought of the dark, narrow track, she shuddered. If it was Dacre on ahead he might hear her. And then— She considered for a moment or two. Had she the courage to continue? Or should she turn back? Would it be best or safest to retrace her way?

No, she couldn't do that! It was weak and cowardly; and she'd never been either of these things. She reached down to the saddle pocket and drew out the dragoon pistol; and somehow she was immediately reassured. She felt of the long smooth barrel, of the powerful lock, the solid, weighty grip, and steadiness seemed to flow from them. She gave a look about her, no longer sure of the direction of the road; for in the last few moments her horse had been fretting and stamping and turning. For an instant, so it seemed to her, there was a faint glimmer of light. Then she could see nothing. But there! She saw it again. It was plain among the trees. A light, and burning steadily.

There might be a clearing near at hand, with a house and a small farm. Denis had told her of such places all through the hills: the homes of poor people who got a frugal living out of bits of stony ground.

Lois spoke to the horse, and turned it in the direction of the light. She rode carefully, most of the time to avoid the low-hanging branches, bending so far forward that the rim of her hat touched the animal's neck. In a little while a clearing opened out before her. There was the loom of a log house on a hillside; and a light shone at a small square window.

THE girl hesitated for a moment, then rode forward and knocked upon the door with the barrel of the pistol. There was a pause; she saw a woman's face at the window. It was a haggard face, with unkempt hair hanging about it; the eyes were wide and full of alarm. Lois rode to the window so that the poor light fell upon her; the pistol was hidden in the folds of her skirt. She waved her hand and smiled. The woman still stared, but gradually the fear left her eyes; wonder, surprise, took its place. Then she disappeared and a few moments later the door opened; a beam of light lay across the dark ground.

"Who is it?" she asked. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I've lost my way, I think," said Lois. "And I saw the light in your window."

"Lost your way! Where could a girl be going by night, and in a lonely place like this?"

"I was on my way to Flangler's Mills. I got off the track in the dark."

The woman looked at her, astonished. She pushed back the hair from her face.

"Flangler's Mills! Are you a friend of Mrs. Seeley?"

"There is someone there I must see," said Lois. "I must see him very soon, or it may be too late. Is there anyone here who could show me the way?"

The woman looked at her attentively.

"I could do it, but my hip's bad from a fall. And there's no one here but my boy, Joddy. He knows the way; but he likes to set and look at the fire of an evening. I'm not sure he'd go."

"Could I speak to him?" asked Lois.

"Yes, but it's not likely it'll do any good. He's a hard one to call back when his mind gets to wanderin'." She turned her head. "Joddy," she said, "there's someone wants to speak to you."

IN a few moments a boy appeared; he was about fourteen, tall and thin and with a blank, dreamy face. "The lady wants to go to Flangler's Mills," said the woman. "Will you go with her, Joddy, and show her the way?"

"Flangler's Mills is the place where they cut down the trees," said the boy in a toneless voice.

"He don't like to see the trees cut," said the woman.

"There were pine trees and oak," said the boy. "I used to talk with them."

"Could you find your way to the Mills in the dark?" asked Lois.

"Oh, yes," said the boy. "The dark don't stop me. I like it. There were locusts and sycamores," he told her tonelessly. "They were cut down, too."

"Could you give him a light?" asked Lois of the woman. "To show him the path."

"No," said the boy. "I don't want a light. It makes shadows, and I'm afraid of shadows. We will go in the dark. I'll walk beside the horse. Horses are kind to me. And they do not hurt the trees. The spruce trees were cut down," he told Lois. "And the hemlocks. I saw them lying on the ground."

"Are the Mills far from here?" Lois asked the woman. "Will he know the way back home?"

"It's only a mile to Flangler's; maybe less. And no one need ever worry about Joddy getting home. He'll always do that, day or night."

The boy came to the side of the horse.

"He's strong," he said. "Horses are always kind to me. I'll walk beside him."

Lois thanked the woman, and then they started off through the clearing.

"I don't like the Mills," said Joddy, in the darkness. "Trees I used to sit under and talk to are cut down. I saw them. They were all dead."

He followed the track closely in the darkness, keeping beside the horse. And as he jogged along, he talked:

God made the trees. He did not want them to die. They reached high upward to the sky, thanking Him for their lives. In the winter they stood in the deep snow, and it did them no harm. Through the cold night they'd stand and make no sounds. Trees are always silent in winter weather. But in the spring they sing. The woods are full of their voices. They are glad. But at Flangler's Mills they'd killed the trees. Seeley brought men in the winter while the trees were all asleep, and killed them.

"Is Seeley the man who has the camp?" asked Lois.

"Yes; he has a house there. The men live in the big cabin. I'm afraid of them. They laugh at me."

In a little while, Lois saw a light on ahead.

"That's old Seeley's house. He has lamps lighted," said the boy. "But often it's dark."

They had approached within what might have been fifty yards of the house when the girl drew in the horse. She slipped from its back, and tied it to a tree some distance from the track.

She gave the boy some coins and told him to keep them safe and give them to his mother when he got home. She expected him to go at once, but he did not.

"There's another horse," he whispered. "It's a little piece ahead." He looked intently toward the house, and then he added: "And there's a man. Just now he was looking in at the window."

Lois again slipped the long pistol out of the saddle pocket, and held it in her hand.

"I don't see anyone," she said.

The boy, who evidently had vision and hearing like those of the small wild creatures of the woods, replied:

"He's gone away. I heard him. He's gone around to the other side of the house. But he can't see anyone there; there aint no windows."

Lois moved toward the house. There were two windows brightly lighted; she saw people inside, some seated, some moving about. She was not near enough to see them plainly; she went forward in the darkness, the boy at her side. Not far distant, a horse whinnied, and they paused.

"It's the man's horse," whispered Joddy. "He hears us."

Lois stood quite still, waiting. In a few moments there were low sounds. Cautious, stealthy. There were pauses. Then the sounds would begin again.

"Can you see anyone, Joddy?" breathed the girl.

"No." His voice was very low. "It's a man. But not the same one. The footsteps are different."

Now as Lois watched, one of the men in the lighted room arose, and then another one. The two approached the window as though removing themselves from the others for a side conference. The girl could now see them plainly. The first of them was her father; the other was Denis Abernathy! She stood with her hand to her mouth as though to keep back a cry of surprise.

Then she felt a grip upon her arm: Joddy's voice said in a frightened whisper:

"Look! *Look!*"

Someone had arisen out of the middle darkness, and stood silhouetted against the light. A hand was lifted, holding a pistol aimed at the figures in the window. Helpless with fear, the girl stood staring. And then from one side, and not far from her, there came a shattering shot. The silhouetted figure disappeared; there was the sound of someone running through the brush. The door of the house opened, and men appeared, calling out to know what was wrong. Then came the sound of a horse being ridden recklessly away along the forest path. After that, Lois heard Joddy shouting.

Also she remembered voices answering; she remembered people hurrying from the lighted doorway.

BUT after that there must have been a blank and things happened of which she had no knowledge. Then there was a lighted room with a cheerful fire crackling on the hearth. She saw a little woman sitting in a rocker beside the fire, knitting.

Then Lois drifted away again. But by and by she seemed to return to the verge of consciousness. She heard low voices. This was her father speaking; there was anxiety in his voice; his arms were around her. She tried to answer him; she tried to smile. And then there was Denis. She fancied he also was speaking to her. But she knew it could not be. Denis was not there; she was imagining things. Denis had ridden away on some unknown and hurried business. But she seemed to see him plainly; as he stood looking down at her, he seemed to tower, very strong and big, and with a wonderful kindness in his eyes.

And afterward the old woman was beside the bear-skin-covered couch, and speaking to her. The lights in the room were now out; sunlight was streaming through the windows.

"And now, dearie," the woman was saying, "you must be well rested. You've slept hours and hours."

The concluding installment of this novel of the old freighting days will appear in the next—the January—issue.

YEAR of the WILD BOAR

An illuminating first-hand report on the Japanese and how they got that way.

by Helen Mears

I NOW had a definition for the Japanese Way. It was a civilization based on an economy of scarcity. It was an integrated system that controlled the individual by religion, social pressure, education and habit even more than coercion. It seemed to be stable. Nevertheless, the leaders of this civilization were hysterical with anxiety.

I had come upon evidences of this hysteria all over the country in the form of an over-insistence upon Japanese culture, and an over-emphasis on mythology and Emperor worship. Everywhere and insistently in dozens of ways, the people were being reminded that their culture was "unrivaled and unique," derived from the gods, enormously superior to the Way of any other nation. When I asked the reason for this incessant propaganda, I was told, "Because of the crisis."

"Because of the crisis," was a phrase I often heard; I saw daily references to it in the newspapers, yet it was difficult for an American to understand its seriousness, because so many of the evidences seemed so trivial. "Because of the crisis," a prefectural governor told the people that they must find new ways of supplementing their incomes, and suggested that they raise "crickets with pleasant chirps." "Because of the crisis," a famous geisha proposed to organize the geisha of Tokyo into a "Woman's National Defense Association" to collect funds to buy motorcycles for the Kwantung Army. "Because of the crisis," the government organized "Musical Weeks" so that "politics might be cleansed by means of music." There was less frivolous evidence: everywhere I saw schoolboys drilling with wooden guns under the direction of army officers, or even staging mock battles with papier-mâché tanks, but their manner was so lackadaisical, so self-conscious, so almost shamefaced, that it was hard to believe that it was meant with seriousness.

More serious seemed the constant small changes in the educational system to cut down on the teaching of foreign languages; to increase the patriotic content of the history courses; and even entirely to rewrite historical facts to give them a nationalistic slant. More serious still seemed the national tensions as demonstrated by activities in the Diet, for a statesman had been recently impeached for having said in a debate that "the crisis was a bugbear." The crisis, his impeachers said, could not be a "bugbear" since it had been declared by the Emperor in an Imperial Rescript. Most serious of all was the current trial reported in the newspapers, of a group of superpatriots who had, in 1933, attempted to bomb government buildings and assassinate certain government officials with the intention of overthrowing the Parliamentary form of government, abolishing the political parties, and establishing a National Cabinet.

On the surface, Japan seemed to be progressing steadily toward a conscious goal with all of the gears of her complicated Way meshing smoothly—yet this nation had been in a declared "State of Crisis" since 1933, and long before that had been in a highly critical state, if it was at all possible to judge by the long record of political assassinations and abortive revolutions which had been a spectacular feature of Japan's modern political life. Here was another paradox of this paradoxical country—that she could show to the world a picture of incredible national unity and steady progress, while behind the scenes, political Japan was riddled with dissension.

I knew by now that the "crisis" referred to Japan's international relations, and referred also to some critical political situation inside Japan, and I knew that the two were interrelated.

It had not been difficult to learn the Japanese point of view on the international aspect of the crisis. The specific "State of Crisis" was the acknowledgment of Japan's fear that her international relations might darken into war. It had been announced by Imperial Rescript when, in 1933, Japan declared her intention of withdrawing from the League of Nations, following the League's failure to recognize the legality of Japan's invasion of Manchuria and the setting up there of the puppet-state, Manchukuo.

This action of the Military greatly alarmed the civilian members of the government. They were convinced that in reprisal Britain and the U.S.A. and perhaps Russia would actively intervene—probably in the form of a boycott or blockade—although bombers from Vladivostok were not ruled out as a possibility. The announcement by the Emperor warned the people to be loyal to the Japanese Way and to expect the worst.

THERE were . . . no reprisals against Japan, and the Military, greatly strengthened by the unexpectedly easy success of their maneuver, had continued steadily to penetrate southward, crossing the Great Wall into China Proper to set up an independent puppet regime in East Hopei Province just northeast of Peiping. From this strategic position, they had been negotiating with the generals, who governed the northern provinces of China under the titular rule of the national government in Nanking, attempting to persuade them to break connection with Nanking and set up an independent North China to have close financial, economic and political relations with Manchukuo and Japan. The international crisis involved the problem of how far Japan could go with such a project without arousing open and violent opposition from the Western Powers, including the U.S.S.R.

I had discussed this international crisis with everyone who would discuss it. My most coherent informant had been Mr. Toko, of the Home Office, who had arranged my factory expeditions. From the Japanese point of

view, Mr. Toko explained, the situation in Manchuria and China was merely a problem in power-politics between the British Empire and the Japanese Empire—complicated by the revolutionary situation in China and the problematic position of Russia. Chiang Kai-shek's "national" government, the British, and the Japanese were all equally alarmed by the success of the Chinese Red armies who—despite Chiang Kai-shek's best efforts—had survived and had the support of great masses of the Chinese peasantry. These Red armies were a revolutionary force in China opposed equally to Japanese penetration, British penetration and the exploitation by Chinese landowners and bankers. The Japanese could usually get concessions from both the Chinese and British ruling classes by stressing the Red menace.

CHIANG KAI-SHEK had been fighting the Reds since 1927, and continued to fight them instead of the Japanese during the period when Japan was taking Manchuria and encroaching on North China. Both Chiang and the British were not unwilling to have the Japanese in Manchuria as a buffer against possible penetration by Russia. So far, the U.S.S.R. had remained aloof from the situation. Japan's penetration into North China, however, changed the picture. The Reds were violently anti-Japanese and if Japan's project for detaching North China seemed about to be successful, there was a possibility that the Reds might persuade the U.S.S.R. to intervene. Moreover, Japan's encroachment on North China also threatened the heavy British interests there. Therefore, Britain was expected to intervene. And in fact, Britain had already intervened to the extent of sending to China Sir Frederick Leith-Ross, chief financial expert, whose job, according to Mr. Toko, was to work out some financial deal to stiffen Chiang Kai-shek against Japan. "Naturally," said Mr. Toko, "we cannot compete financially with the British. We have neither wealth enough, nor financial experience enough. It is partly this fact that so enrages our Military."

He went on to say that the Japanese had a strong ally in China's national government in the person of Wang Ching-wei who was Foreign Minister and President of the Executive Yuan. Wang was anti-British, and was using the Japanese to fight the pro-British element in the national government. This, Mr. Toko said, was, in a sense, bad for Japan since it greatly encouraged the Military who could say that the Chinese wished Japanese help in freeing China from white Imperialism. From the point of view of Japan's prosperity it was much better if Japan could compromise with Chiang Kai-shek and Britain, for Japan was completely dependent for raw materials and markets on the good-will of Britain and the United States. The Military, however, did not understand this, and they did not understand diplomacy. They believed that force was all the Western Powers respected. They insisted therefore on a constant show of force and boasting of power. "Some day," Mr. Toko said, "they will go too far, too fast, and involve us in a serious war." Mr. Toko shook his head in good-tempered despair. "The Military mind!" he added, and shrugged.

This account by Mr. Toko had suggested not only the extreme complexity of international politics in the Far East; but suggested also that within Japan there was a sharp cleavage among the ruling cliques as to how the international situation should be handled. I had been gradually collecting data on Japan's political structure, but had found it extremely confusing, like everything else in Japan, because of the superficial resemblances to England and America. Politically, Japan appeared to be governed by a Prime Minister assisted by his Cabinet plus the Heads of the Armed Services, responsible to the Emperor. There was a Diet of two houses which roughly corresponded to the British Parliament. The members of the Lower House were elected by popular vote of males of twenty-five and over. There were two main political parties which elected all but a handful of members. Except for the semi-hereditary character of the Upper House, and the power of the Military, this looked, superficially, not unlike America.

That it was not at all like America, however, had been called to my attention during my first week in Japan. Visiting an official of the Y.M.C.A., I had, while waiting for him, been entertained by his Japanese secretary, who had given me a long lecture on how to get along in his country. Rule Number One was: "Do not attempt to discuss politics, or ask questions about Manchuria." Modern Japan, this Japanese told me, was greatly confused. The political situation was complicated. All I need know was the political parties were owned outright by the two most important Big Families who at election time bid against each other, paying money for votes, so that whichever paid the most got the majority in the Diet, and so power to appoint the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and so controlled the government. Today, however, this Japanese said, neither of the Big Families had complete power, because of the Nationalists' groups led by certain army, navy and civilian patriots. These groups could not get power through the Parliamentary system, since that was controlled by Big Business. So whenever the government passed laws or refused to pass laws which the "patriots" considered necessary for the national safety, they merely assassinated some of the Big Business Men and the statesmen who represented their interests in the government. Since this internal split in policy between the Business Men leaders and the Nationalists concerned their attitude toward the Western nations and Westernization, it was necessary for the foreigner in Japan to be extremely careful not to arouse suspicion or resentment from the super-patriotic Japanese. . . .

In mid-autumn, however, I had such an experience, apparently trivial, on the surface, rather absurd, and yet deadly serious in Japan. Yoso Minamoto had asked permission to come to dinner and bring a college friend. They wanted the experience of dining in a foreign home, and they thought, too, this would be a good chance to practice their English. The Minamoto family were among Dee's oldest Japanese friends. She had at one time tutored Yoso in English, and we had exchanged visits a number of times with Yoso's mother. Yoso had accompanied us on various excursions and had taken us to meet his English-speaking university friends. We all felt very much at ease with one another and were delighted to have Yoso visit us with his friend.

THE young men came, both . . . self-conscious in their Western-style uniforms. We chatted easily enough through dinner of the usual matters, and after dinner we went into our Japanese-style room so that the young men could be comfortable. The neighborhood radio was going full blast, as usual, and as we sat down we all recognized the music, for it was the "Tokyo Ondo," the most popular tune that was used for the folk-dancing. I had been so delighted with the effect of this dancing when I had first seen it that I had bought the record with this very tune, and with the help of the illustrations that came with the record, had learned the routine. Now, as Yoso began laughingly to hum the melody, it occurred to me that we might practice the dance. I made the suggestion, and since no one vetoed it, got up and put on the record. As it turned out, the young men did not know the steps very well, and were self-conscious, and yet it amused them too, and soon we were all dancing around in a circle, waving our arms, bending to touch our toes, advancing and retreating, looking silly, and yet enjoying ourselves. Upon this scene of mild revelry, Akiko suddenly burst, sliding open the panel-door with no ceremony, and with great excitement.

Dee shut off the record with a long, rasping scratch. The young men

looked blank and sat down quickly. Dee left the room with Akiko.

"What's the matter?" I asked Yoso.

He seemed not to hear me. Instead, he said that he would have for me soon the list he had promised of modern Japanese novels that he felt were interesting enough to be translated into English.

DEE came back immediately, and as she came through the door, the young men arose. "I think it time we go now," Yoso said.

They left at once. As we stood at the door bowing them away, I saw standing in the alley two policemen. When they saw me looking at them they bowed politely. Then, as the young men walked down the alley, they followed slowly. While we had been dancing, they had come to the house and told Akiko to tell us we must stop. There was a law against dancing in private homes, they reminded her. The proper places to dance were in the temple courtyards, the parks, or the few licensed dance-halls, but not in the home. "Because of the crisis," they said, the law must be rigorously enforced.

All I knew of the crisis did not make this episode comprehensible. Mr. Sato was my most satisfactory tutor in political matters and I sent him a note asking him to call.

When Sato came, we settled ourselves on the mats, hugging the charcoal brazier for warmth, with a pot of tea for comfort. I told him of the episode with the students, and asked him why it was against the law to dance in homes. And why should it be especially wrong because of the crisis.

"When times are critical," Sato said, "the stability of the people is our most important internal problem. Our nationalists feel that dancing in the home endangers national stability."

I made no comment and he went on.

"It is against the law," he said, "because it is not Japanese *shukan*. It implies a kind of social life, a kind of informality between the sexes that is contrary to our Family System. Should our young men become accustomed to such informal relations with women who are not professional entertainers, they might get the 'dangerous thought' in their heads that it would be better to choose their own wives, better to be free and independent of their family. Since the Family System is the central core of stability in my country, anything that threatens to disturb, in the smallest way, its hold on our young people, threatens the stability of our system.

"In this particular case," Sato went on, "there is another problem. Intimacy today between Japanese and foreigners is being strongly discouraged—especially intimacy between university students and foreigners. This is because the students, who study foreign languages, are in a position to read foreign books and so be influenced by 'dangerous thoughts.' In school such influences can be somewhat counteracted by our propaganda courses. Because of this background, however, when they associate with foreigners outside of their classes, they are much more susceptible to the influence of foreign ideas."

Sato paused, and I asked him what particular foreign ideas the Japanese leaders feared most.

"They fear," he said, "the idea that the individual should be well paid for his work and should be able to afford things that cost money. They fear the idea that the individual should be independent of the family and the State, should own whatever he earns, and spend it as he chooses. They fear the idea that young men and women should have casual social relations with each other, and should if they so desire marry the person of their own choice. These are the 'dangerous thoughts' they might learn from America. And then, too, there are the even more 'dangerous thoughts' of Communism. Actually, any thoughts at all that are not one hundred percent Japanese *shukan* threaten the stability of my country.

"Such an exaggerated fear of change," Sato continued, "seems strange to an American; yet, unfortunately, our nationalists can make a good case for their side. Modern Japan has been based on a paradox. When we brought in Western machines, industrial and financial techniques, and Western institutions, we set up within our country an alien civilization. That civilization helped us to develop from a little group of islands into a Great Power in fifty years; simultaneously, it threatens to destroy our ancient civilization on the survival of which the modern nation depends. Our imported Western civilization helped us become a Great Power; it also destroyed our national security. These two paradoxes have been all-important in shaping the policies of our leaders.

"You must realize," Sato went on, "that because of our special conditions, our lack of space and wealth, we cannot afford either the things you Americans have, or your freedom. It is impossible for us to build here in our crowded small islands a genuinely American-style civilization with its emphasis on space, material things and individualism. At best we can only contrive a partial, pseudo-Westernization that destroys our own customs and our own values, makes our people uncomfortable and discontented. We could, of course, improve conditions within the frame of our own system, by raising industrial wages and giving the farmer more for his rice. It is, however, unfortunately a fact, that to do this we must either raise the price of our exports or give up our military machine. If we raise our prices, we lose our markets and we starve. If we surrender our military machine, we cease to be a Great Power. And if we cease to be a Great Power, it is not at all improbable that we would shortly cease to be an independent sovereign nation. We have survived and grown because our military exploits have fitted in with the balance-of-power requirements of the Western nations. If we lose this value, if we cease to be able to defend ourselves, we would become a bone of contention between rival Western imperialisms.

"To understand our crisis, you must remember that Westernization came to us wholesale, ready-made, escorted by gunboats. You must remember that we were at that time a 'backward' people—ignorant of science and machines—with no army in the Western sense, and no navy. We were, moreover, a colored race—one of the peoples who, all over the globe, had been dominated by industrialized white races. To survive as an independent nation, we had to develop an industrial power and a military power. We had to Westernize enough to convince the Western Powers we were a modern nation: we had to industrialize enough to be efficient; we had simultaneously to retain our ancient habits of economy and our social controls. We had to conciliate the Western Powers; we also had to be strong enough to secure and maintain our independence. And we must, of necessity, have close relations with neighboring Asia. These paradoxes and these problems have been basic throughout our modern period.

"OUR crisis . . . is the result of these paradoxes and problems. It has been expressed politically in terms of a tug-of-war between two cliques of rulers, who have constantly contended against each other for control of national wealth and policy. These cliques represent our new industrial power and our new military power. One clique is dominated by the biggest industrial-financial Family-Corporations—the Big Monopolists of which the Mitsui and Mitsubishi are the most important. They control absolutely the economic life of the country. The other clique is dominated by the so-called 'Young-Officers' group of the Military. These leaders, who are not necessarily young, and not necessarily on active duty (since the reserve-officers organizations have been a powerful force behind the scenes), represent the 'new' army conscripted largely from the peasants; and naval officers, also largely of peasant origin. Both of these cliques cut across all

classes—there are Admirals and Generals in the Big-Monopolist clique and business men in the Young-Officers clique. They are determined not by class, but by policy. The Big-Monopolist clique believes in the 'conciliatory policy.' They have knowledge of the Western Powers. They realize how dependent we are for markets and raw materials. They believe that they can hold their own with the West in the realm of financial and economic competition in China and elsewhere. Therefore, they wish to conciliate the Western Powers, and keep the army inconspicuous and inactive—only ready to show force if necessary.

"THE Young-Officers clique is opposed to Westernization . . . and in foreign relations stands for the 'positive policy.' They do not trust the Big Monopolists. They say that they are trying to bring Westernization into our country too fast and are, therefore, destroying our national customs and our national stability. They say that the Monopolists use the Diet merely as a technique for increasing their wealth and ensuring their control of taxes and budgets. They say that we cannot compete successfully with the Western Powers by economic and financial techniques; that there we will always be outfoxed. They say that we have become a Great Power by force, and can only remain a Great Power by a constant show of force.

"Moreover, they have behind them a mass pressure. Within my country are certain groups and classes who are discontented. They are the classes that have been crowded out of our system and have not been able to get a secure foothold in the new. They are composed of certain fringes of our industrial workers, certain groups of peasants, certain professionals, students, small business men and bigger business men who find it increasingly difficult to compete with the Big Monopolists. These restless groups began to appear in our society during the rapid expansion of the World War and the depression that followed. They began to form clubs of one sort and another—some religious, some communistic, some nationalistic, and so on—all separate, yet all united by one emotion—a distrust and fear of the Western ways that were changing the system they were used to, and a distrust and fear of the Western Powers. The Military, aware of these restless, discontented groups, realizing how dangerous they were to the stability of our country, and realizing how useful they might be as pressure groups, began to deluge them with propaganda. The propaganda gave them something definite to focus their grievances around. The Nazis used the Jews for this purpose. Our Military used the Big-Business-Men leaders. The propaganda said that these Big Monopolists had ceased to be Japanese; that they were lining their own pockets at the expense of national security; that they were bringing into Japan Western ideas and institutions that were destroying the Way of the Gods. In the Japanese System, the propaganda stated, everybody had enough, and nobody had too much. Today, it said, the Big Monopolists had too much, and many of the people had not the necessary minimum. They devised a very clever slogan—'The Showa Restoration.'"

"Showa Restoration," of course, referred to the reign of the present Emperor. The Japanese designate their historical periods by naming them for the reigns of their Emperors. The period immediately after the "opening of the door" was known as the Meiji Era (the reign of enlightened government). The present Emperor Hirohito had chosen for his era the name Showa (the reign of peace through justice).

"The slogan, Showa Restoration," Sato went on, "recalled the fact that in feudal Japan the Emperor had been deprived of his real power by certain clan leaders, and the Meiji Restoration restored him to power. Now, they say, in the process of creating modern Japan, the Emperor has been robbed once again—this time by the Big Monopolists. The Showa Restoration means: Turn the scoundrels out! Restore our land to the Emperor! In practical terms this means: Abolish the Diet, which is merely a tool of the Big Monopolists; expropriate the Family Corporations; nationalize basic industries; use the wealth of the country to provide relief for the discontented classes; and to keep the military power strong enough so that it would seem invincible and so make the political conquest of North China easier. This slogan not only has great popular appeal, because of mass veneration for the Emperor, but it ties the hands of the Big Monopolists' government, since an act committed in the name of the Emperor is patriotic and righteous.

"Between these cliques there has been open war since 1929. The Big Monopolists control the wealth and the Diet. The Military control these revolutionary groups. And whenever the Big Monopolists cause the Diet to pass laws or refuse to pass laws that the Military feel are necessary they shout 'Showa Restoration!' and some of their patriotic societies assassinate some Business Man or some representative of Business interests in the government. The Manchurian Incident was part of this tug-of-war. The Big Monopolists began to cut down on the army budgets; they had been juggling the gold standard and in the process cleaned up millions, simultaneously forcing more of the smaller Big Business Men out of business; they refused to face the fact of mass unrest in certain rural sections and among certain urban groups. The Army, by going into Manchuria, created a critical international situation that made it easy to turn the mass-unrest into active patriotism, and forced the Big Monopolists to provide money both for bigger military budgets and for relief for the depressed areas."

Sato paused to light a cigarette. The more I learned about Japan, the more remarkable it seemed. . . .

"Do you see our dilemma?" Sato asked finally. "We have started an industrial process, and we cannot stop. Our Before-Perry civilization was so self-sufficient that we could cut ourselves off, almost entirely, from the outside world for two and a half centuries. Today we are a modern Great Power, but we have lost control of our own destiny. We are completely dependent for our national existence on the foreign powers who supply our raw materials and buy our manufactured goods. In the past fifty years our population has more than doubled. Much of our land has been taken from cultivation and put into factory sites and dwellings for city workers. We even import cereal—our essential food. We cannot wholly Westernize our country—there is neither space enough nor wealth enough. Our overflow industry must find an outlet somewhere if our economy is to continue to expand. And it must expand, or it will stall."

I SAID, "Your conciliatory-policy group are the wisest of your leaders. You must go slowly enough to avoid the disaster of war. That much is certain."

Sato shrugged. "How slow is slowly enough? Already our goods are being excluded from the British Empire Bloc by tariffs and quotas. Rayon is cutting into our silk industry. The Western Powers were everywhere in the Far East before us, and they resent our competition everywhere. We are excluded as citizens from most countries. Moreover, it is true that the people have been under very great pressure all through this modern period. Our society has been stable. Our people seem calm and disciplined. But you must remember that everything in our training has taught us to be calm and disciplined. When the calmness goes, there is violence—usually, however, the violence of despair against the self, rather than against an oppressor. Suicide, as you know, is very common among us. Much of our propaganda is an effort to bolster our national morale by instilling a feeling of superiority—pride in our native culture, pride in our military invincibil-

ity, pride in our Divine Emperor, descendant of the gods. It is hoped that our propaganda can transform the individual despair and discontent into national aggressiveness."

Sato was silent for a moment . . . then went on: "This is the Year of the Wild Boar. It is the end of a cycle . . . a cycle of crisis for my country. No thinking Japanese but must tremble for what the next cycle may bring."

AS he paused with obvious emotion, I repeated after him, "Year of the Wild Boar," thinking that if I wished one word that would express a fundamental difference between Oriental and modern Occidental civilization, that word would be "dramatic" with the emphasis not on the drama of human relations, but on a poetic literary sort of drama by which events were complicated beyond their obvious significance, by the overtones of symbolic associations. He was referring, I knew, to the fact that Before-Perry Japan, like China, had recorded time—years, months, days and hours—by using the signs of the Chinese zodiac—the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, cock, dog, wild boar. These signs were still widely used in the Orient for the purposes of marking familiar annual festivals and habitual occasions. Twelve years, each named for a symbol, made a cycle. This year—a wild boar year—ended such a cycle.

Sato was going on, "Look at the record. During this cycle we have created the puppet-state of Manchukuo; resigned from the League of Nations; demanded naval parity with Britain and the U.S.A., and when we were refused it our Premier who signed the agreement was murdered; our Military have talked incessantly of our Divine Mission to create a Pan-Asia. During this cycle two Premiers, a Finance Minister, a leading financier of the House of Mitsui were assassinated. There have been purges of Communists. There have been attempts at revolution. For two years we have been in a declared State of Crisis. Now as the cycle swings to a close, tensions are everywhere increasing within our country, and in our relations to China and to the Western Powers.

"Every zodiacal sign," Sato went on, "has, as you know, its own legends and superstitions, accumulated through the thousands of years of Oriental history. The wild boar is a dangerous symbol . . . Usa Hachiman, god of war, rides on his back. Mothers on the day of the boar, at the hour of the boar, offer gifts to their patron saints with the prayer that they may be favored, as is the wild boar, with many offspring of reckless courage. My country will need reckless courage for what I see ahead for her in the next cycle. For how can we stop now? We have begun a course for which there is no end but disaster. Blind and hysterical with ignorance and pride, with frustration and fear, made powerful with Western machines, driven by the momentum of these years of change, we will go on to inevitable disaster."

I tried to speak, but Sato stopped me. "Do not criticize us," he said sharply. "You Westerners, at every step of the way, have encouraged our aggressions. Our nation Before-Perry had a record for minding its own business unmatched by any other Great Power. Study our history and you will see how essentially unaggressive we are as a people. Even a very unaggressive man, however, if frightened enough, and armed with a machine-gun, a tank, or a dive-bomber, can be dangerous. In war, as in industry, we have but one great resource—our homogeneity, and our deep conviction that these matters are for us matters of life and death. The patriotism you find here now is fanatical: it is based on years of concentrated propaganda that has told our people that we are encircled by enemies; that we must be prepared for any eventuality. If war comes, the people will not be surprised. They have been warned. And they have been told that their national life is involved in the outcome." Sato smiled grimly. "Our propaganda has more weight than similar propaganda elsewhere because there is so much truth in it.

"Throughout our modern period," he went on, "our aggressive moves have not only not been genuinely opposed by anyone, but have been encouraged both directly and indirectly by everyone—by the weakness of China, torn by internal dissension, and hampered in her free movement by the restrictions imposed by the Western Powers; encouraged by alliances with Britain, who for her own purposes backed our first war with China and our war with Russia; armed and equipped by you Westerners who have made our guns and our planes and our ships for us, have taught us how to make them, selling us the materials to make them with. And through all this, while you have encouraged and helped our aggressiveness, you have discriminated against us as a 'colored race'; you have been amused by our mistakes with Western culture, you have called us a quaint little people. Every slight you have given us our revolutionary propagandists have used to infect our army and navy with distrust and hatred of the Western Powers; to infect them with the conviction that no 'colored race' in this world can be free without a constant show of force; and every weapon and institution you have given us we will use against you.

"I cannot blame the Western Powers for what they have done. They, too, have been trapped by the overwhelming power of the machine-civilization, and have not understood its potentialities for destruction—destruction of security first; and then destruction of peoples and civilizations. There must be in the world, generally among all men, wider understanding of the problems of all people; more sincere effort to solve national problems on an international scale. There must be some assurance to the colored peoples that they can take part in world affairs—not as colonials, but as equals. . . .

"What we are doing in China is a great tragedy. Could we have led the way in peace toward the growth of independence and dignity for the Asiatic peoples, we might have genuinely pointed the way toward a free association of free peoples everywhere. But how foolish that sounds as I say it. We Japanese, alone of the colored races, have complete national sovereignty and independence. And we won this from you Westerners by our military activities. To beat you on your own ground—in industry and war—was our only chance of preserving our sovereignty. And in so doing, we will destroy ourselves."

"THEN," I said, "you think there will be war between your country and China; between your country and the Western Powers?"

"*Sodesu,* of course, there will be war. How can you start an avalanche and stop it in mid-flight?" He was silent for a moment, then added, "Our Military have for some time been doping themselves on mythology and incantations. They keep saying, 'We are gods . . . we inhabit the Land of the Gods, our Sun Goddess will preserve us. . . .' That mythology and our fear, and our love of country are all we have to oppose your genuine wealth and power. Do not, however, underestimate the force of such mythology, such fear and love. When our soldiers bow at the Yasakuni Shrine, they bow to themselves, deified, soldiers who will be killed in battle. For them there is no alternative that they know about. Their minds are full of what they have been taught, and they are taught that, for the Japanese, his Divine Mission is to die proving that there is one colored race that will not be subservient to the whites—dying for a dream of Pan-Asia: a united Buddhist world, ruled by the Sun Goddess. There is an exaltation in such a death—better than being merely smothered in our little islands." Sato stabbed out his cigarette in the ashes of the brazier. "There is a poem often quoted by our Military:

> In days of illness,
> I often dream of death,
> And that is sweet to me,
> As when I dream of love."

The

The story of a wicked

IT was hot and dry right through September that year. Heat lightning flickered around the skyline, with no rumble of thunder or smell of rain. Grain was stunted and scanty. Hay was a light crop, mostly marsh broadleaf. Berries were wizened. It was a tough summer for everybody; and the ground, baked hard and dusty, made the settlers wait for rain before starting their fall plowing—all but young Nathan Pickett, from Stonington, Connecticut.

He had worked hard for two years in this Nova Scotia settlement, and no man had watched the drought more anxiously. Often, before dawn, he had stepped outdoors barefoot to feel the air. All day he watched the sky. The last thing at night he looked at it, and he concluded finally that when the weather changed it would stay changed. So he plowed. He yoked his oxen at daybreak each morning, and plowed until the sun was hot. The dew helped lay the dust, he said, and he had too much work ahead of him to be idle.

The morning he finished plowing was the last day of the month, and the hottest. He let his tired oxen head for their fly-shelter in the pasture, dug a hill of potatoes for his dinner, then left them in an Indian basket at the end of the field, spraddled over a pitchpole fence and crossed a clearing where Zeb Nevers had had his cabin. There was only a patch of gray ashes now, and the stone chimney, misshapen, rough and solitary. Dry roof and logs and pine floor burn to nothing when there is a breeze to fan the flames.

Beyond the clearing a brook pooled deep through an alder growth, then eddied over gravelly shallows. Its gurgling met his ears pleasantly and he stripped naked among the bushes, dropping his shirt and trousers on a broken stem. He plunged in with vigor, exhilarated by the cooling slash of the water on his body, the clean transparency of it. He lunged deeply, submerging head and shoulders, cleansing himself of grime and dried perspiration. Then, blowing and puffing, he found footing and stood, clearing his eyes and ears. Robins in the alders had flown away, shrilling loud alarm.

He rubbed his arms, gazing about him and turning slowly. All at once he stilled, while a tingle ran up his spine and widened over his scalp. A bear was creeping along the thicket, a huge, sinister beast, its ears flattened against its head, its nose and flanks rust-tinted. It reared, its wrinkled snout savoring the light airs, then padded on without hesitancy.

Nathan bent his knees and sank until only his head was above water. The bear swerved to where a partridge had been dusting, snuffed hurriedly and went outside the alders.

At that instant the rank smell of the animal reached the youth's nostrils,

Powder Horn

bear and a stubborn pioneer, by Will Bird

seeming to break his caution. He rose up, and wading out of the water, grasped his trousers and ran with them in his hand, sprinting with the short strides of those muscled by heavy field work.

The bear, surprised by the sprinter's appearance, crouched and glanced around, then plunged across a shallow part of the brook and pursued the fugitive, running with an awkward, shambling gait.

Nathan had guessed the stone chimney Zeb Nevers had built stood about two hundred yards from the alders; and that if he were chased, he could reach it when the bear was no more than halfway across. But a glance showed him that the brute had deceptive speed and he threw his trousers high in the air and over his head so that they fell, windmilling, behind him.

He ducked inside the wide stone opening and leaped as high as he could to rough ledges inside the chimney; then, panting with his exertion, scrambled to the top and looked down. The bear, finished with investigating the trousers, saw him and growled, a vicious sound that made Nathan's skin prickle.

The chimney was built of big stone and strongly mortared. Nathan, one leg inside and the other outside, had to use his strength to wrench clear a boulder bigger than his head. From the top he watched as the bear came into the chimney bottom, noisy and slavering. He let the stone drop.

It struck the bear's neck, driving the brute backward; then it bounded outside. Nathan dropped a second stone hurriedly, and missed; but the third one, a huge boulder, crashed with terrific force, striking just between the bear's ears as it attempted to rear. The animal sprawled, kicking, on its side, and a fourth stone broke in halves on its head. Then Nathan lowered himself as far as he could outside the chimney, and dropped to the ground.

He snatched up his trousers as he ran, but he didn't stop to put them on until he was in his cabin and had got his heavy splitting-ax. Then he hurried back to the chimney and reached it as the bear began to twitch its legs and show signs of life. He struck once with the ax, crunching the broad skull, then looked up at the chimney-top and drew a deep breath. Presently he got his skinning-knife and set to work.

A thick-set man with a bushy beard arrived as Nathan was hanging the bear hams in his smoke-shed as if killing bears were a regular morning chore.

"What's to do?" he asked, looking at the soot on Nathan's broad shoulders, and Nathan explained.

Gideon Beading of the bushy beard had been a champion hunter and was Nathan's nearest neighbor, accepted

Nathan grasped his trousers and ran

as a leader in the settlement. He tugged his grizzled whiskers as he listened, and allowed that Nathan had done quite a chore.

They talked about the dry weather and Gideon turned to leave.

"There's a cabin-raising for Shubad Knapp, after eatin'," he announced. "You come. Judy'll be there for the walk home. I'll see to that."

AS Nathan ate potatoes and bear steak, he glanced with pride at the interior of his new cabin, at its roof of rived boards, the neat floor, the window with real glass panes. Every timber in the building was green; it would not burn easily. And when the timbers had dried, he hoped to have a wife to attend his home. Zeb Nevers had been a bachelor, and his cabin had caught fire while he was away in the fields.

Nathan thought of the twenty acres he had cleared, all rich loam, three feet deep, perhaps. A man who worked hard could make his way, Gideon had said when Zeb Nevers quit the settlement; but no man should do it alone. It was against religion, even, not to marry.

Nathan thought of Gideon's words as he started for the cabin frolic. He looked over his raw furrows, and at the yellow stubble in Gideon's field. The cart-road skirted it and ended at Gideon's long cabin, which had a chimney at each end. There were often social gatherings in its big living-room, but he had not attended many. He was still regarded as an outsider, and he never found time to join in the organized bear- and moose-hunts. Hunting seemed a necessity, however, and he had gone so far as to get himself a musket.

Gideon and his wife were on the cart-road, basket-laden; and ahead of them walked their daughter, Unity, and Judy, their niece, an orphan.

Judy looked back at him, smiling. She was a pretty girl with fluffy yellow hair, and blue eyes that could be both coaxing and provocative. She was slim-waisted, and proud of her lily-white hands that had never held a cow's teat. She had been to Boston, and she could sing and dance better than any other girl in the settlement.

"Did you get the soot rubbed off?" she teased. "Uncle says you were playing hide-and-seek with a bear."

Unity laughed with hearty humor. She was tall and strong, with dark eyes and hair, and color in her cheeks. She was as capable as her mother with a spinning-wheel or needle, and there had been plenty of fighting over her favor until it had narrowed down to Brian Scurr and Tristram Geldart, cousins who had whipped off all others; and between them she could not choose.

"Unity's claimed," Gideon had said when he introduced Nathan. "She'll marry either Brian or Tristram."

Nathan had nodded his understanding of the situation, but there had been that in Unity's dark eyes as she faced him which set him wondering.

"You finished your plowing, but the sod won't lay good," Gideon broke in.

"No," Nathan admitted. "It was too dry."

"Never mind," said Mrs. Beading. "You'll be good as any farmer, give you time."

"Thank you, ma'am," Nathan said gravely.

"I hope," said Judy, "there'll be time for fun afterward."

"There will be, girl," Gideon told her. "The Scriptures tell us there is a time to mourn and a time to dance, so content yourself."

THE cabin-raising was in a new clearing, and there was great good humor when Shubad Knapp, a cod-fisherman turned land-hungry, produced a ship's compass and laid the first logs due north and south, square to the earth itself. Nathan was regarded as the best corner-man at a raising, and he enjoyed handling the new smoothed timbers. Then there was a grand feast that the women had spread, shad chowder made with salt pork and rye bread, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, caraway cakes and blueberry turnover.

After that, Shubad hung an old ship's lantern which lighted the new walls and cabin floor, and the games started. He caught Judy in a corner and kissed her, and she slapped him; and Gideon shouted that you couldn't blame either of them for what they had done, and there was hearty cheering. Then Shubad made music with a squeaky fiddle, and the younger folk grabbed partners.

It was Brian Scurr who got Unity; so Tristram Geldart, a hulking young Yorkshireman, seized Judy and whisked her away over the floor in a scamperdown. Nathan stood in the door and looked on. Tristram saw him there, and his shout arose:

"How fast can a bear run, Nathan, if a man hasn't got his pants on?"

There was a loud laugh then, for the story of Nathan atop the chimney and dripping wet from the brook had gone the rounds.

Nathan grinned and made no answer, watched his chance and caught Unity for the dance. It would have ended in fun if Tristram could have stopped without bantering Nathan to wrestle, but missing Unity had irked the young giant.

"Come outside," he yelled when the fiddle was still, "and I'll throw any man who wants to try a Yorkshire brace."

Lank Derry tried it and was thrown easily, and no other took up the challenge. "Come along, Connecticut," Tristram shouted, "or you'll think there's another bear come out of the woods."

His shout stirred Nathan. He went forward and stood in the firelight, not as tall as Tristram, but barrel-chested, solid and rugged, and quicker with his thinking.

The fire had been built outside for those not dancing, but now everyone gathered about it.

"Take any hold you fancy," Tristram hooted, "and say the word." He was gleefully confident.

Nathan gave the "ready" signal, and Tristram tried to back-heel him, but was yanked off balance. Nathan had dodged the trip. He ducked, and had the taller man by the knees and threw him "head over teacup" so that it appeared easily done.

Some women by the fire said, "*Oh!*"

Tristram leaped to his feet, raging. He charged in furiously. There was a whirl of arms and legs, and he went flying over Nathan's hip. He dropped with a terrific thud, hitting his head on a sod, and they had to burn a feather under his nose to bring him to.

"That will do," Gideon Beading thundered. "Nathan, you come along home with me."

IT began raining when Nathan finished digging his potatoes, and there was never another fine day in October. Instead of the golden autumn sunlight thick upon the tree-tops like light through amber glasses, there were clouds that hid the sun, and driving rains until the fields were a sea of mud. No one but Nathan had his plowing done, and on other farms potatoes rotted in their hills.

Nathan lived days on a string without seeing another person, but he was busy building himself a table and benches and a chest of drawers. Then he went to Gideon's cabin for an evening of entertainment. Brian and Tristram were there, and Lank Derry and Jonathan Fallydown. Judy acted as if she had to think of things to say to amuse Nathan; her thoughts seemed filled with a dread of the winter.

The others saw to it that he hadn't much chance of conversation with Unity; and after a time Gideon, getting him aside, hinted that Judy would make any settler a good wife. . . .

There was no improvement in the weather. Day after day the wind held the chill of a jackass breeze; and fog, slow and penetrating, wormed its way over the settlement, feeding its clamminess into every building. Wives looked anxiously at their meal-barrels, and began to say that the family must live on its fat until spring came.

In the middle of the winter Shubad Knapp's wife died in their new cabin; and they found the wishbones of her three hens, which she had killed to make soup, lying on the window-sill, placed there as if she dared not make a wish after peering outside. Every daybreak seemed to come cold and harsh, trailing slow streaks across the sky, and always hinting of snow.

"Meat's our main food, according to the Scriptures," Gideon said, "but we'll see poverty if we kill more of our cattle. We must go into the woods and hunt, never mind the weather."

The men hunted, but moose seemed to have vanished from their usual feeding grounds, and even rabbit-tracks were scarce. It snowed heavily for two days, and then a high wind cleared spruce boughs of their white loads and whined through the hardwood limbs. Snowbirds came in flocks to yellowed spots by stable doors, and Nathan scattered chaff from his haymow for their feeding. A new snow began to fall when the wind went down—a cold driving storm of dry hard flakes, and outbuildings were laced to cabins by snowshoe trails.

Nathan went more often to Gideon's cabin. He divided with him a barrel of salt shad he had dragged with his oxen from the Bay head.

Gideon was outspoken about Judy. "No woman wants to wither on a virgin bush," he said. "You make your move, or you'll speak too late."

But Brian Scurr was with Judy each time Nathan called, getting her to sing whenever he could. Rumor said that Tristram was spending his evenings with Patience Fallydown; and so, naturally enough, Nathan talked with Unity and her mother, and sometimes took back to his cabin a treat of Yorkshire parkin Unity had made. He snared a pair of rabbits, and Unity cooked him a rabbit-cake and carried it over herself, looking a boy in her woolen blouse and knitted cap.

He showed her his chairs and table, and she admired them so that he glowed with pleasure. When she was leaving, she looked over to the dark silhouette of Zeb Nevers' chimney, and asked Nathan if the bear had really chased him. She put her question as if she had carried it at the back of her mind.

NATHAN nodded. "The brute was on the other side of the brook, but it chased when I run."

"You mean, it didn't see you till then?"

Again he nodded.

"It was headed over to them raspberry bushes, and I saw you go there picking that morning. I kind of cal'lated to head it some other way."

She said no more, but her eyes filled; and two days after, she brought him a new powder-horn. It was neatly trimmed, with a red wool covering for the plug.

"I was making it for Brian," she said, "but I'd sooner it was yours." Then she left him hurriedly, as if she were afraid of saying too much. . . .

It was the last week in February when Gideon asked Nathan to go on the big moose-hunt.

There would be himself, Gideon said, and Brian and Tristram, and Lank Derry and Jacob Fallydown. He could not take a musket himself, but would provide a hand sled, and they would take his last smoked ham and enough food to last three or four days, for they must find moose.

"Unity will look after your cattle," Gideon finished. "She's good as a man with stock."

From the top of the chimney, Nathan watched as the bear came into the bottom, noisy and slavering.

Nathan laced his feet into Indian larrigans and dressed warmly. He looked at his musket and bullet-pouch, rolled a heavy blanket and made sure he carried his skinning-knife. At the last moment he left behind the small powder-horn he had made when he purchased his musket, and took instead the one Unity had given him. He traveled at the rear of the party, and helped draw Gideon's sled with broad runners made for hauling tubs of maple sap over spring-rotted snows.

THE drifts were deeper than he had ever seen, Gideon said; the wind was as keen as a knife. Before night the cold had worked into every man like porcupine quills, and they built a shelter in a tangle of blow-downs and lighted a fire. They had not seen a sign of game, and one of Lank Derry's cheeks was frost-bitten. The limbs of the blow-downs were brittle as glass, and Gideon reckoned it was twenty below.

They started again early in the morning, and the ground steepened after they left swamp land. The wind whipped harsh snow particles that cut their faces, and traveling was slow, for windfalls and snow-hidden pits made every mile an hour long.

"This is the best feeding-ground there is," Brian growled at noon; "but there aint a moose sign, swamp or hill."

A light snow began falling in the afternoon, and Tristram declared they had lost direction. Lank Derry agreed with him, but Brian argued that they were wrong. It ended with Gideon persuading them to make camp until the storm was over, and they built another brush shelter. They huddled by their fire, turning first one way and then another to the blaze, their thinking dulled beyond food and warmth; and at daylight Tristram and Fallydown announced that the trip was a failure and they were going back.

"Give another day," said Gideon. "The Lord will provide."

But Tristram shook his head, and Gideon was roused.

"You go without my say," he roared, "and you'll never marry Unity."

Tristram shrugged. "I don't want her," he told the old man defiantly. "I've got a girl promised me already."

He went his way without looking back, and Fallydown trudged behind him.

Brian led the way after that, but by noon he began complaining. They had searched every good chance, he said, and it would take them two days to get back.

"What say?" Gideon appealed to Nathan. He seemed to have aged overnight. "Will we keep on, or go back?"

Nathan glanced at woods beyond the ridge. "There's heavy timber," he pointed. "The thickest I've seen. Let's look there first."

"Not me," Brian snorted. "You're no hunter. There's no feed in that woods."

"I never hunted before," Nathan said steadily; "but I cal'late that in a winter like this, moose will go where there's cover."

Brian laughed scornfully. "What do you know? I'm going back; and if you get lost, it's your own doing."

He had the best musket in the party, and there would be but Nathan's weapon if Brian and Lank Derry left them.

"I'm bidding you to come with us," Gideon said in a strange voice. "The settlement is starved for meat, and you know it."

"Bid what you like." Brian had become ugly in the cold. "No one is going to listen to you any more, and you needn't drag that girl of yours into the matter."

Nathan stepped forward. "That will be enough," he said, "from the like of you."

Brian struck before Nathan could move, and knocked him flat on his back in the snow, his head swimming.

"You rassled Tristram," Brian gritted. "I'll even up for him."

Nathan shook his head, rose to his knees, staggered upright and swung at Brian.

In the rough horseplay of the settlement Brian was adept at sparring. He sidestepped Nathan easily, and knocked him back into a drift.

"Keep back," he ordered Gideon, "or you'll go down."

BUT the last fall had cleared Nathan's head. He lay, pretending to be bewildered, and pondered how to get at Brian. There was deep snow beside them. He couldn't move quickly, but if Brian couldn't, either. . . . He got to his feet again, and suddenly attacked.

Brian, surprised, stepped backward into deep snow and was trapped there. Nathan crowded in and struck with both hands. He missed with his left, but his right thudded under Brian's heart. Agony contorted Brian's swarthy features. His knees sagged and he tried to clinch. But Nathan sensed the move. He put his weight into a straight right that smacked solidly against Brian's jaw, and Brian slid down in a crumpled heap, completely beaten. Gideon had to give him the last drop of rum in his flask to bring him around.

"Now," said Nathan, "you get for your home! You're no good here."

Brian slunk away without a reply and Lank Derry followed after him, so it was only Nathan and old Gideon who went on, with the one musket, the sled to drag, and not much more than the bone of the ham in their grub-bag.

Illustrated by Merritt Berger

Nathan put his weight into a right that smacked solidly. . . . Brian went down.

It took an hour of hard traveling to reach the woods. It was mostly old growth, as Brian had predicted, but there was a sprinkling of young birch, and Gideon pounded his frosty mittens.

"I believe you've cal'lated right," he declared. "We ought to have come here in the first place."

Snowflakes drifted between the trees, and soon it was snowing steadily. They did not speak, each plodding as if from habit, and with the pain of the cold in his middle. They blundered into each other and stumbled too often. That meant they were getting weak, and a man could only stand so much, Gideon had said the night before. Nathan stopped to build a fire.

GIDEON, in snow to his thighs, stood still, staring.

"*Moose!*" he gasped.

Nathan plunged to join him, and almost fell into the trodden mooseyard. It had been traveled that morning; there was frozen dung barely covered with snow. They had reached their goal!

Shaking with chill and excitement, they scooped a hollow in the snow and got a heap of twigs blazing. A pot of hot soup made from snow-water, with a little salt and the ham bone, would put sap in their legs. But daylight was fading, and everything under the trees had become indistinct before they had made their hot meal. Snow was sifting down incessantly and made tiny sizzlings in their fire.

Gideon gathered brush for a bed. He seemed too beaten to attempt any further action.

Nathan sat for a while, thinking, then examined his musket.

"Keep a good fire going," he said. "I'll have a look along the path. I might get close up to a moose while it's snowing."

"No," Gideon tried to stop him. "A bull's dangerous in a yard. It's too much risk for you."

"You keep the fire going," Nathan said, and left him.

The yard was an intricate labyrinth of paths leading to every spot of browse and nook or cover and had been trodden almost to a man's depth as the snow increased. At the last gray light each path seemed a black ditch, and Nathan groped and felt his way along as fast as he could move.

It was difficult to keep the long-barreled musket from gouging into the banked snow, but Nathan took great pains to see that it did not happen. He had never fired the weapon, and he dreaded making a mistake; he simply had to find a moose and kill it.

The path circled a giant windfall, and he rested there. And still again he rested. And still again he went on. The night had become an abyss of murk, and he had to feel his way with

Tristram tried to back-heel him, but was yanked off balance. Nathan had dodged the trip.

his hands. Then faintly, but surely, he smelled animals, and stood without moving a muscle, listening; he knew they must have smelled him.

There was no sound other than the hushed snowfall. He fumbled, chilling his fingers, to make sure of the musket's priming. Then he went forward, two steps, three steps, and paused. There had been a muffled stamping in the distance; and near him, a faint sound pitched his every sense to its utmost. The sound was like a husky cough. It might have been made by a load of snow spilling from a bough, but it had not been. Nathan did not move. He had been told that a bull would fight to defend his yard. He knew he was very near something that was breathing.

With utmost care he raised the musket to what he considered the proper height and to the center of the path. He recalled stories Gideon had told him of the battering hoofs of an ugly bull, but he went a few steps more. He had to be very near. A tread as soft as his own touched the path in front of him, and stilled.

Mouth open, Nathan breathed inaudibly, and a chill ran up his spine. The suspense was too great. He took yet another step. From the blackness came a terrific snort, and his finger jerked the trigger. The report was deafening. Through it he heard scrambling hoofs, a pounding in the distance. He thrust against the snowbank, burrowing himself into it.

There was stillness, utter, complete. He staggered into the path and went forward, his knife ready, groping, and fell headlong, sprawled on the still warm body of a moose pitched there, dead. His shot had been lucky. . . .

He wanted to shout to Gideon, but the carcass was stiffening, and he knew it would freeze like iron. So he slit the hide with his knife and carved meat from under it, and the steam from it was an aroma to his nostrils. Then he ran, stumbling and tripping, back to the fire-glow he could see, faintly, through the falling snow.

WHEN they found the river, the going was much easier, for they had a level roadway to travel, without brush to bother the sled. The storm was over, but Nathan knew by the rime frozen on their clothing that the cold was deepening. They had half the moose tied on their sled, and this was their third day on the back-trail.

"We've left a plain blaze back to the yard," Gideon said, stroking icicles out of his beard. "There'll be plenty meat, now, till spring. Praise God you cal'lated where to find moose."

"I just cal'lated," Nathan protested. "I didn't know."

"You're always cal'lating," Gideon retorted; "and generally you're right."

Nathan drew the load. It was all Gideon could do to break track, but his will was strong, and they rested often. Weariness had ground into Nathan's bones until they ached.

After an hour they could see, in the distance, smoke-spirals over the tree-tops, and soon they had reached a road used in hauling wood.

Gideon grew weak again, but he reached his cabin door and entered. Nathan dragged the sled beside the steps and looked up as Unity came outside.

"Father's told us," she said, and her eyes were shining.

She was close to him, and her eyes were soft and her lips a little parted; he was not thinking clearly, and he had been a long time waiting such a chance, so he kissed her.

For a moment she leaned against him, her body warm and yielding in his arms, while her lips responded to his. Then she pushed him reluctantly away; and he saw that Gideon and his wife had come to the door.

"Brian took Judy over to the preacher's at the Forks, and married her," Unity whispered.

Nathan was uncertain of what he should say, but there was an almost physical pressure in Gideon's gaze.

"If Unity's agreed, and you're willing," he said carefully, "I'd like to have her for my wife."

Unity put her hand in his.

"I think," Nathan spoke again, "that Unity's willing."

A great weariness lined Gideon's features, but he put his hand out.

"A good man obtaineth favor of the Lord," he said shakily. "May He bless you both."

"Amen!" quavered Mrs. Beading. Then she added, "Come in, soon as you can, and we'll eat."

Nathan watched them turn from the door; then he kissed Unity again.

"You might have been killed." She shuddered as she pressed tightly against him. "Don't ever do it again."

"I don't ever cal'late to," he said. "But I had only the one load in the musket, and if I waited till daylight, likely I'd missed. I had to be sure."

"Sure!" she echoed.

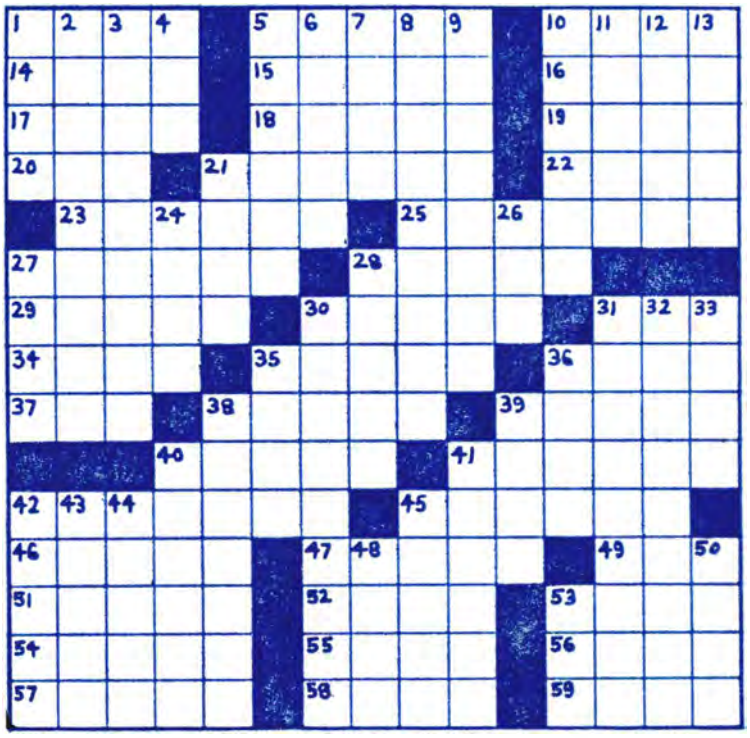
"You see," he explained, "I took along the powder-horn you give me, but forgot to put powder in it. That one shot was all we had, and I cal'lated you wouldn't want to be married to a man the settlement would laugh at for going moose-hunting without powder."

Nathan couldn't understand why Unity cried a little, then; but they went into the cabin; and when Unity had a chance she put powder into the horn so that no one would ever know of the mistake he had made.

A NEW TYPE OF CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Edited by **Albert H. Morehead**

Here Mr. Morehead provides you with an exercise for the imagination rather than a test of your vocabulary. That is to say, the difficulty is not in the words themselves, but in the definitions. The main types used are the anagram, the enigma, the hidden word and—for variety and to keep you guessing—some straight dictionary definitions. (Solution on page 121.)



ACROSS

1 "In —— in Abruzzo, a small town . . ." *(Tales of a Wayside Inn)*
5 Openings to bet a million
10 German cheese mixed with Japanese wine
14 Uncle Remus's friend the rabbit
15 Leona is without a date
16 An urge to drop in
17 Fifth letters come with no trouble
18 You are exposed to heat, O Tsar
19 Amo, candlenut trees, amat
20 Explosive power is tainted without an idea
21 The recognition is in direct
22 Of cabbage and king
23 Bless a mixture of furs
25 Braille rendition, presented by the generous
27 Spring up from a medley of Proust
28 Roads for Leaping Lenas
29 1,000 c.c.'s
30 Ed leaves a description of the Raggedy Man
31 Duce and Mikado have a common end
34 Article and era come back out of space
35 Grants the decease without Poet Russell
36 Ambassador increased in stature
37 Furniture hidden in drab edifice
38 Certain Celts change nothing in British jails
39 Adolf in our State Dept.
40 Arrange properly as a rule
41 Weer
42 Daily operation caused anguish when cry were one
45 Papers, also for 37 Across
46 Stories can be state
47 Moving on the stair
49 ——, du lieber Augustin
51 Open act of a voter
52 Hide the tackle when George arrives
53 Have mixed oats under the portico
54 Subject of prosody
55 Devours four-fifths of Shelley's Adonais
56 Queer pike worn by a soldier
57 I put in to become entire
58 The test is, can you let it stand
59 French river-battle, all in Ypres

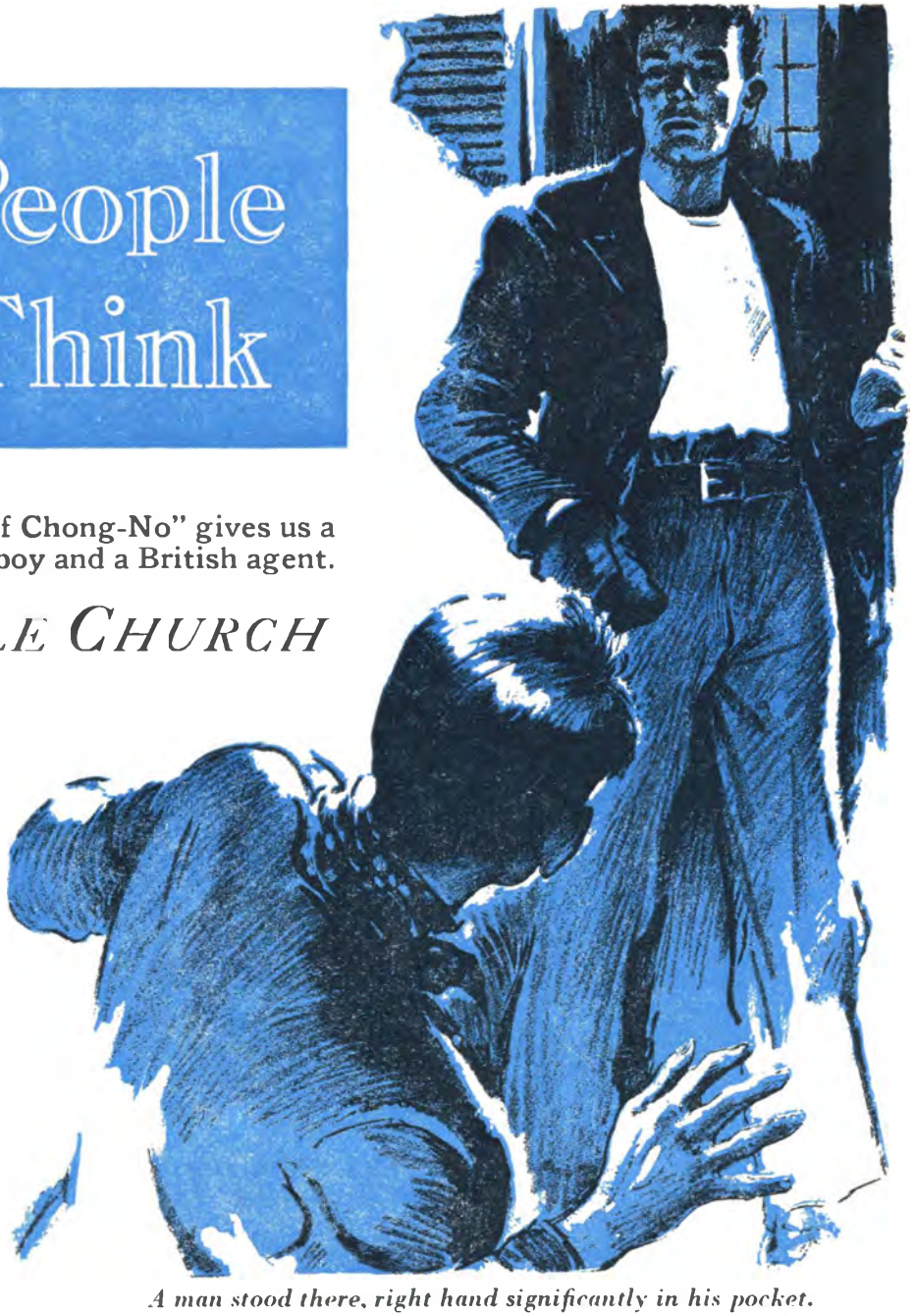
DOWN

1 Get help from a Greek letter
2 Partners, I arranged for this to happen
3 Began again to have T. arrested
4 Hidden fire provokes anger
5 Found a garter in the topmost room
6 What Alan owes is a bitter dose
7 Amphibian must have toes
8 Elsie sang of stored fodder
9 Backgrounds for eggs?
10 In France these follow the spring openings
11 Protective coating
12 Marsupial, not really a bear
13 I leave the diesel for Mr. Ford
21 Take a hint from Mrs. Luce
24 Adriatic wind lies away from borealis
26 Cry of a dog rules Tunis
27 Flat piece of priests' vestments
28 Dull end to a dipper
30 Takes back a mess of green sage
31 Rita tries and is trying
32 Select Poe for an optical aid
33 The end of a borrower is to be a debtor
35 Personification of fratricide
36 No Eu precedes this heritable element
38 All isn't gold that does
39 Assorted cheese in a coffin
40 Unwilling to make a poem
41 Want a drink?
42 The range is burst in
43 New ——, Conn.; Winter ——, Fla.; Grand ——, Mich.
44 Bright now and confused later
45 A situation is a matter of taste
48 A site in disguise attracts attention
50 Shear it and set out
53 Fly high

The People Can Think

The author of "The Bell of Chong-No" gives us a stirring story of a French boy and a British agent.

by GRANVILLE CHURCH



A man stood there, right hand significantly in his pocket.

SO you're in Dijon; you favor Free France and hate the Vichy *salauds*, and you want to do something about it all. It will be dangerous! Occupied France is thick with spies and *agents provocateurs*. . . . Oh, you know all that and still want to risk your neck?

Very well!

Seek out the Place François-Rude. This is in the old city, where the streets are narrow and far from straight and lined with two- or three- or four-story buildings of every description, with steep roofs and dormer windows and chimney-pots galore. Here there is a circular fountain surrounded by a low iron fence and sidewalk, an island in the center of this small square. From the heart of the fountain rises a statue, four streams of water spouting from its pedestal. Put yourself and the statue back to back. A narrow street now opens up before you, a little to the left.

Follow your nose into that opening, and soon you pass a circular mews. If you're still of the same mind as at first, count off four gates, and ring the bell at the fifth. Then, if you know the right word,—and it must be the right one,—a doddering old man will admit you to the narrow brick walk of a small barren courtyard. Three steps lead down to a door at the rear of the brick house. You follow the bent old figure into the narrow, dark hallway. At the far end is another door—baize-covered this time, by the feel of it. Up a flight of stairs, and you reach a better-lighted corridor. You go down this, around a corner, and are finally ushered into a small room hardly larger than a closet, where you may wait five minutes or an hour.

Getting nervous? It's too late now! You look around. The four walls are bare. The floor has a thin piece of carpet, and there is a cot and one chair, but not room enough to take a full stride. No bedroom, this, despite the cot. A tiny window too high to reach gives the only light. There's an electric bulb hanging from the ceiling, but no switch to turn it on—that must be outside the door. Why, it's like a cell! Your first impression—that it's hardly larger than a closet—comes back to mind, and as your eyes become accustomed to the dimness, you realize that's exactly what it was once, for you discover the marks where shelving and hooks have been removed.

But the sense of being closed in, of walls squeezing you, gets in its work. Your nerves tighten up. Well, you were warned! Oh, you're not complaining? It's only that the walls—

At length there comes to you the most charming old lady you ever saw, white hair in ringlets, hands a-flutter. She reminds you of a china doll come to life—but her eyes are sharp on you, and her expression far from vapid. She sees her old servant has surlily left the tiny room dark, so she turns the switch outside the door. The light isn't so bright as to hurt the eyes.

She asks you a question, which you will answer with the right words—if you want to leave this house on your feet—and then you may state your errand. And this errand had better do with the delivery of France from the hands of traitors like Laval and Darlan. And Petain!

But if she keeps you waiting, this little old lady—in that room with its four bare walls closing in on you—

The lad who now sat on the cot was squirming. Part of this was physical discomfort, for the cot was too close to the floor for good sitting. He was tall, with wide shoulders, and pitifully slender if not exactly a skeleton. He had a mop of fair hair and honest brown eyes, and he stretched his legs till they hit the wall, and crossed and uncrossed his big feet.

BUT his fidgeting was from nervousness, for the room was so tiny, and he was used to open fields. Seventeen, he might have been, discounting the lines about his mouth and eyes that made him seem older. Yet not too young to strike a blow for France!

The door opened. He sprang to his feet and seized the chair, but his jaw slackened as this little old lady rustled in, arranging the lace shawl about her shoulders with her doll-like hands.

She looked at him sternly a long moment, and said:

"The sun shines—"

He stuttered before his hands on the chair relaxed and he found his voice. *"—and the wind is free,"* he answered.

At this she smiled faintly, and seated herself, arranging the gray dress neatly over her knees. She motioned that he should sit, then waited for him to speak.

"You are Mme. Redeaux?"

A nod. *"Oui, monsieur."*

"I am Denis Brisson, of Langres."

Not enough. Only a half smile on the lips facing him.

"My father is Prosper-Louis Brisson, now a prisoner of the Nazis. My grandmother is Mathilde Brisson. She says you know her."

Still the half smile, but also another little nod.

"I—I—asked for a meeting with a British agent," Denis went on, not knowing exactly how to go about this job. "Will I see him here?"

"Did you expect to?"

"I—I—don't know."

"How did you come to make such a request? By what means?"

"Before the war, madame, I had much pleasure with a short-wave station. A small one I made myself. *Grand'mère* has always been very good to me, and she gave me money for the parts. I had friends then among other amateur stations, one in England. When we went to war, I had to stop, of course. By Government decree, that was. But I was then building another set which was not yet registered. Thus when the Nazis came and I had to surrender my equipment, I was able to deceive them. They got only the old set, and I can still talk by air!"

"Serait-il possible!" murmured the old lady politely. "And—"

"My friend in England still operates, madame. For his government, now, as a gossip station to keep contact in occupied territories. I have still called him on rare occasions, madame. It is dangerous—but very—and difficult to stretch the antenna in the dark of night, so I cannot do it regularly nor often. But I called my English friend a week ago and told him it was urgent I talk with a British agent."

"Comment! And without revealing yourself?" murmured Mme. Redeaux. "Surely he must need to know who asked, and surely you dare not give your name by air."

"We have our nicknames, madame." The boy flushed to the roots of his hair. "When we became acquainted by air, madame, before the war, we also wrote letters and sent pictures. He—he called me 'Skinny,' after he saw my picture."

Madame's smile deepened. "How simply done!" she said admiringly, to ease the boy's embarrassment. "You told your nickname, and he knew who you were, and where. But then?"

"Then I waited, madame. And one day word was whispered to my grandmother over the counter at the café by one who paid his check. He looked German, that one, and I was afraid. But *Grand'mère* said no, he could not be German, for no German spy would have the subtlety to seem German. The word was to come to Dijon, and to do thus and so, and to come here and ask for you, and what to say for the password."

"Ah." Still the half-smile as the eyes across from him studied the boy.

"Grand'mère said if you doubted my identity, to remind you of a wedding party at the Chateau d'Arencourt when Mlle. Amélie married M. Henri de Brioude. She thought you would surely remember how the men played tricks to delay the music."

The lips parted wider. "I didn't really doubt you, my son," said Mme. Redeaux gently. "You have the eyes and the forehead of the Roland menfolks, and their height and shoulders. I think you have more from your grandmother than from your mother. On your return, take my warmest greetings to Mme. Brisson. It is too long since we have met; and who knows—we are getting so old. . . . But how did you come to Dijon?"

"By bicycle, madame."

"So far! You must be very tired. It will be a little while you must wait, so be as comfortable as you can."

She rose abruptly, bent and kissed the boy's forehead, and left. Denis sank back on the cot—he hadn't realized he was so weary until she reminded him of it—and the walls pressed in again. But not so dangerously now. He even fell into a half sleep while he waited.

The door opened again, swinging back without warning, and a man stood there framed in the opening,

Illustrated by Maurice Bower

right hand significantly in his pocket. It would be hard to call his age. He might have been thirty-five or forty-five—or fifty-five. His skin was clear and his eyes were clear, but one could no more tell what was behind those eyes than behind the blank walls. His lips were set pleasantly enough, but they told as little as the eyes.

He stood in the doorway as Denis sprang to his feet, hardly less defensively than the first time the door had opened on him. Each waited for the other to speak, but neither did. Then the older man took his hand from his pocket, entered the room, and closed the door.

"I wanted to see—" Denis said doubtfully. "Are you— I—"

No help here. "You don't look English." Denis began again. "I—"

"Tiens!" the other drawled. "One who wrote English in loud characters over his person would meet with short shrift in Dijon today."

DENIS flushed. "Of course—I hadn't thought. But I—" He stopped dead and clamped his lips together.

"Mme. Redeaux has just vouched for you to me," the man went on, in excellent French. He had a cool voice, and rather dry, but friendly for all that. He sat, and motioned, and Denis sank back to the edge of the cot. "And since she sent me here, then the implication is she vouches for me to you. Is it not so? Can you not accept that?"

"I—I suppose so."

He got out of the city without trouble, being stopped but twice.

"But I respect you for being cautious. This is extremely wise. So you are Denis Brisson? Of Langres? The operator of F-9-HM?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"Really! You seem so young—" The Englishman chuckled and held up his hand as the boy stiffened and color rose again to his cheeks. "No disgrace, my boy. Quite the contrary. Ah, Denis—I may call you that? I am sure my own generation took longer to break into things."

He held out a cigarette-case.

"I do not smoke, monsieur."

"You will not mind if I do?" The man lit a cigarette and blew the first puff luxuriously. His eyes meanwhile studied the boy. "You were naturally careful in coming here. Is it possible you could have been followed?"

"No, monsieur, I am sure of it."

"True, you are not known in Dijon," mused the other. He came more to attention. "I am M. Lauris. You will understand, of course, that is not my name. But you will not mind? And you have a matter of import to discuss with me."

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"Then let us get to business."

Here, however, a discreet knock sounded, and the old servant who had admitted Denis shuffled in with a foot-square table on which was a silver tray with a cut-glass decanter and small glasses.

"*Liqueur de cassis, messieurs,*" he said in a cracked voice. "Madame hopes you will like it. It is from our happiest year."

Dijon was famous for its black-currant brandy. The old man set the table down and went out, whereupon "M. Lauris" poured from the decanter and lifted his own glass to Denis in a casual toast. "Now, then, to business. Will you tell me why you wanted to talk with . . British agent?"

The liqueur warmed the boy's throat and loosened his tongue. His distrust vanished. He bent forward eagerly.

"Monsieur, on the plateau of Langres, about six kilometers north of the city, the Nazis have constructed a tank farm for reserve gasoline. For airplanes, monsieur. They have done this with French materials and the labor of French war prisoners, and with great secrecy. The tanks are not visible from the air, for they were dug under camouflage net, and no sooner completed than covered over and the ground planted."

He paused.

THE Englishman nodded. "We have had reports of this." At the disappointment surging to Denis' face, he chuckled again. "Only reports, Denis. Every authentic bit of information helps, if only to confirm; and usually there are new points to help fill out the picture. I am sure your information will do that. Go on."

"They have built nine tanks of sixty thousand liters each one, and they cover five acres of land."

"And you tell me this—why?"

"Because we want the British to destroy them! They are now all filled or nearly filled."

"You mean by bombing, of course. It would be extremely difficult to spot the area from the air, buried as the tanks are. In fact, impossible."

"But there I have a plan, monsieur! I have thought it all out very carefully, and I have told it to my grandmother, and she approves very highly! And if you knew my grandmother—"

"I do know Mme. Brisson, Denis! A very fine lady and one I am proud to know. But alas, we are not acquainted friends, for I know her only from the café where she sits and knits and receives customers and makes change. She would not recognize my name if I gave it to you. Therefore take to her the compliments of one who must remain M. Lauris. But your plan?"

Denis hitched forward eagerly.

"Monsieur, you have paper? A pencil?" Denis set the liqueur-tray on the cot beside him and pulled the tiny table close. "Here is Langres, the vicinity, you will understand. Here is Langeau—on the way from here to Langres, but close there. Here Bourg, here Brennes-le-bas. This is where my farm is," he said proudly.

"Here, north of the city,"—he drew a circle—"is the *verboten* territory where the tanks are sunk. All the surrounding area has been preëmpted by the Nazis. Poor old M. Tourné was one who was ejected. He had nowhere to go, so he lives at my farm now. Two other farms were taken over.

"The Nazis have erected high wire all about here, and patrols are established, but every day they make war prisoners do the work inside, so that from the air it will all look like occupied farms.

"The late wheat on M. Tourné's farm is ripe and will be scythed in a day or two. As always, it will be threshed on the field, and the straw gathered in bundles. They will stand these bundles at intervals to dry further. Mark that, monsieur. They will so stand for some days; and as the field extends beyond the fence, then these shocks will stand on both sides.

"Here, monsieur, is the old thatch-roofed farm building of La Famille Risson, which has been used for years for their goats and chickens. You will find so many thatch roofs nowadays in the Haute-Marne, monsieur, and therefore this building is a great blessing.

"And here is an orchard of apples and pears, and the trees stand in even rows. Mark, monsieur, in even rows, and on both sides of the *verboten* fence. *Bien!*

"The fourth corner of an exact eve[illegible] square surrounding these tanks, monsieur, is an old quarry. Much building stone once came from there, but the quarry has long been disused and is thickly overgrown. The brush and trees are quite dry now. That quarry, monsieur, is my province," the boy said fiercely, his eyes burning up into the older man's. "There is a reason."

There surely was. Not long past, his father, Prosper Brisson, captured in the fall of Sédan in May, 1940, and used by the Nazis in a slave battalion ever since, had been brought to the Haute-Marne for this very construction work that Denis was now intent on destroying. He had escaped, and while waiting to get word to his family, that they might come to him one at a time, had hidden out in just such an abandoned quarry as Denis now described. But he had been betrayed; the quarry surrounded and he was recaptured and sent no one knew where.

M. Lauris had followed the boy's words and his quick pencilings with absorption; and as Denis went on to reveal his plan, the Englishman's eyes lit up. He began to study the picture. Perhaps it could be done. Perhaps there was something in this plan.

"But it will be so difficult to locate Langres itself, Denis. Our planes must fly high, you know. Had you thought of that?"

"Monsieur, note well. You will find them on any map. Here are three towns which form a rough kind of V pointed somewhat toward England, with Langres placed at the open top. Le-Haut-du-Sec and Montigny-le-Roi form the two top points, and Arc-en-Barrois the lower point. Langres is here. For this formation of cities your flyers can look, and they can hover aloft just between Le-Haut and Montigny and north of Langres, and we will hear them. We will be ready, monsieur, *en vérité*."

It took little more discussion before M. Lauris was won. The two drank a standing toast in the good *cassis de Dijon*.

"And how does it happen, Denis, that you are at liberty to come to Dijon?"

"A short time ago, monsieur, one M. Jarnier met death." (Aye—he met death. And Denis himself could tell how and why!) "A traitor, monsieur. He was a farmer who supplied the markets of Dijon twice each week with green produce and rabbits and squabs. At his death, was it not right that someone should take his place?"

"It is quite a distance. How did you get here?"

"By bicycle cart, monsieur."

"*Tiens!* Sixty-five or seventy kilometers, forty miles or more. Did it take you long?"

"The Route Nationale 74 is very good, monsieur, if one stays high upon it."

"One thing more, Denis," said the Britisher. "You have given this much thought. You know if it succeeds, or even if we try and fail, that it will mean many, many arrests. Perhaps, even, summary execution of completely innocent hostages. You know that, of course."

The boy's voice faltered for the first time. "We have thought of that, monsieur."

"Then it is settled. And how shall we communicate?" The Englishman smiled. "Had you thought of that too?"

"*Oui, monsieur.* We have a hidden radio at the café. We listen every night as the café closes, to the American station WRUL, monsieur. You can get word to them to notify us?"

"Perfect! They will gladly cooperate. What will the word be? Let me think. . . . The orchard, apples—that will come well from New England, where station WRUL is located. The night before we strike, they will announce about apples in New England. They will speak the word *apples* three times in what they say. Then on the following night we will fill the skies above you at exactly 22 hours. Do your part well."

WITH one hand on the knob of the door, the Britisher threw his other arm about the French lad and pulled the boy to him in a strong hug.

"Be of cheer, Denis," he said. "I have a son at home almost as old as you. If he becomes as clear-headed and strong of will as you are, I shall be proud of him indeed. And when this horrible nightmare is finished, perhaps a visit, to acquaint ourselves properly. . . . God go with you, Denis."

In the lower hall Denis met Mme. Redeaux again. She handed him a package.

"For Mme. Brisson, *mon ami*. It is a rose sparkling Burgundy, neither white nor red, bottled for my house in better times. It is of a ripeness that will bring back memories." And she added, practically: "You must have evidence of a social call, just in case you are stopped."

DENIS had brought to Dijon a load of farm products for marketing. Usually the Brisson farm produced only for use at the café, and now the café would have to skimp for a few days—if they could skimp further! He'd used a light cart mounted on a pair of bicycle wheels, drawn by himself. The trip from the farm had taken strength. Now, with the cart empty, he should have been able to fly along, but his legs were weary and pushed the pedals of his bicycle with effort.

He got out of the city without trouble, being stopped but twice, and counting himself lucky that the one Nazi soldier who thought it necessary to look into his package had let him continue with it.

But he was out in the country now. His thoughts raced with the wheels, and his scowl deepened. Over and over his plans he went, and could find no weak spot. If only M. Lauris did his part. . . .

So had other Frenchmen plotted and planned in other periods when the land was dark. There had always been flames to light such darkness. Indeed, the darker the night the brighter these flames, with each one kindling others until day had come again. It had happened before; it was happening again.

The French could still fight! For life, for light, for freedom, for the right to security and happiness. The oppressive measures dealt by the invaders proved this, the terroristic lengths to which these Nazis, brave with bristling guns and grenades, had to go to kill the seeds of revolt before they could germinate.

The people can think! The French had always been able to think. They have always had men of philosophy and letters who could reach into their hearts and minds. There had been Voltaire, and Rousseau, and—

A flash of white caught Denis' eyes. It was a fresh V cut whitely into the trunk of a poplar. He'd noted, a distance back, a rough V built of field stones just off the highway. And even now he came upon a thorn-bush denuded of leaves and small branches, leaving a stark V for all the world to see—until cut down by the enraged Boche.

Even so had other generations had their symbols. There was the tricolor of the revolution, even cockades of green leaves snatched from the trees of the Avenue des Champs Elysées as the mob raged in the wake of Desmoulins.

Denis' thoughts went back to Voltaire and Rousseau—those two men so different, yet so French—and to one other of their times, a man whose first name also was Denis. Ah, that he could have lived today, thought Denis Brisson, pedaling his way home from Dijon—this man Denis Diderot, son of Langres, citizen of the world.

Denis reached Longeau and pedaled on without stop. His legs were numb by now. He'd have to rub them well tonight before he went to bed. But there was one ray of comfort. He wouldn't have to go all the way in to Langres. He could turn off soon and reach the farm by way of Bourg and Brennes-le-bas. Darkness fell as he pedaled on, and at length he reached home, to fall from his bicycle into the arms of M. Tourné, the dispossessed, and Jean-Paul, his farmer helper.

Time took to leaden wings after Denis' return from Dijon. This despite the fact he had so much to do, and more than ever now, what with a certain amount of commiserating with M. Tourné, which seemed necessary to keep the man on his feet, and driving the Risson boys to train and train and practice their archery.

This wasn't easy, for arrows are weapons, and weapons were denied the people of France, so that it was a risky business even to be done secretly. But there was good reason for taking the risk. Those boys had to be able to place their arrows. There must be no failure; they had to be good! And Denis kept them at it and at it.

Guillaume Risson was thirteen; Maurice was twelve. When the Risson farm was seized by the Nazis to clear the territory surrounding their new storage-tanks, the mother and father and the boys' sister Pauline had gone to relatives in Neuilly-l'Evêque, some kilometers away. But until space could be provided, the two boys had to be left with friends.

So Denis had taken them in hand. Every day they "reported" to him at his farm, and practiced, sworn to silence, with the bows and arrows Denis made for them. He couldn't tell them why they were doing this. He didn't need to, anyway, for the air of conspiracy he created was meat to the hearts of these boys.

A week so passed. Ten days. The boys were getting really good now. Denis patted their shoulders and gave them the praise they deserved.

"Tomorrow night you shall take supper here with us," he declared. "In celebration! Tell your good friends this, that they will not worry. A real supper, too! Tomorrow night."

A new moon was rising as Denis pedaled his load in to the café that evening, but it was not bright enough to light the sky appreciably. He reached the café somewhat after eight, as usual, and sat down in the kitchen to some of his mother's excellent cooking while she unloaded his big bicycle basket. They didn't talk much, Denis and his mother. Denis had less in common with her, or with his sister Emilie, than with his old grandmother, Mathilde Brisson. Very close in their hearts were these two, the very young and the very old.

Mme. Brisson—Mama to most of her old friends—was past seventy now. Every night, save Sundays, year after year, had she sat in her high stool-chair behind the counter at one end of the café, knitting, and peering over her steel-rimmed spectacles at customers as they entered, and greeting her friends with a smile—only, there'd been little enough of smiling since the fall of France!

Beside the counter was a round-topped glass case of Louis XIV ormolu gilt, tarnished black with age. It once had held candies and tobaccos, but now displayed only empty cartons in ghostly memory.

At her elbow was a cash register. This was an ancient relic of a machine which sounded like a stamping mill in that low-ceilinged room.

And behind her—behind her stood the tall glass-doored shelving, fixed to the wall, which once had stored such delicacies as some of her customers called for from time to time—*marrons glacés*, *patés* from Strasbourg for old M. Marvain, figs in syrup from Smyrna, caviar for the d'Alliers, truffles, anchovies, almond nougat from Valencia, capers from Sardinia. And of course her own famous Café d'Onfroi conserve, made of pears and quinces and barberries, and put up in jars and pots. Now there was nothing on these shelves but a dozen jars of conserve, and these were not for sale but for use in the café. There were, however, many rows of empty pots against another season when sugar could be had. And behind some of these pots—

PROMPTLY as Emilie shot the bolt on the front door, Denis and his mother joined Mathilde Brisson behind the counter. The blackout curtains were drawn; not a crack remained for seeing in or seeing out. Blackout regulations had been in effect all along, even though Langres would scarcely draw British bombs, but especially had the German *Kommandant* been strict about this since the "secret" construction north of the city.

Emilie remained to listen, too, and Mama Brisson swiveled in her high chair toward the glass-doored cabinet behind the counter.

Quickly he climbed; the old building was blazing furiously.

Denis reached in back of a row of empty conserve pots on a high shelf and with a little maneuvering slid open a panel. He poked his fingers through the opening into the very wall of the building. This was his own installation, and so cleverly concealed was it that the Nazis could search the house over and over and find nothing more "vicious" than the small fixed-station radio kept on the bookcase against the rear wall of the café.

This hidden radio was a battery set and took no time to warm up. A voice in Norwegian was ending the hour. Then came the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and a new voice spoke in French:

"America Speaks to France! This is Station WRUL—"

The feeling Denis had been building up all day now flooded his whole body. He began to tremble. His grandmother reached out her hand to his shoulder, and he leaned back against the counter to stop his shaking.

So they had listened regularly, these four, to word from Outside ever since French stations no longer gave them the truth. Denis had been bringing supplies to the café in the evening, not only because daylight hours were so precious on the farm, but because it wasn't safe to listen to the forbidden foreign broadcasts until after the café could be legitimately locked up for the night.

He'd been coming in every other evening, but only he and his grandmother knew why since his return from Dijon he'd made it every night. There'd been no point in letting his mother and sister—timid creatures both—into the secret, so it meant nothing to them when after some news items came a bit of nostalgia from the French speaker:

"I have been very homesick for my home in Normandy. We had there apple trees behind the house, and this is the season the apples are ripe. I have here, behind the little house I rent near the seashore, an apple tree just like those at home, and it is groaning with fruit. What has happened to my old home this year? I can only conjecture—"

Denis started trembling again, and seized the counter behind him for support. Mama Brisson was the practical one now. Taking charge of things swiftly, she sent Lucille and Emilie to the kitchen to clean up. Denis turned off the radio, replaced the panel and shut the glass door, and turned to face his grandmother.

"It has come," she whispered, and put her hands on both his shoulders to pull him closer. "I almost wish this moment I could stop it. But it's too late for that. We must go through with it now."

"Of course we'll go through with it," Denis exclaimed, his eyes shining. "Why, *vous me faites honte, Grand'mère.* Think what a loss it will be to them, the lifeblood of their army!"

"Yes, yes," she nodded sadly, and her voice quavered. "And what of the loss to me? Ah, *mon petit-fils,* you're my very life! What shall I do, with you gone? You're the only sunshine I have, and I shan't have you again for who knows how long? How long before it is safe for you to return?" She took a long breath to get hold of herself and continued in a forced matter-of-fact vein: "Everything is in readiness, Denis. I've had the letter from my brother for three days. You will take it to the authorities tomorrow and get your *Ausweis* for the trip. I think you will have no trouble. You will set out in the afternoon, and do not double back until well after dark. There will be time. And mind me, Denis, you will wear your winter underwear, and no foolishness with summer lengths—"

DENIS laughed. "I know all this, *Grand'mère.* I'm not a baby. We've been all over it, and I'll do everything you have said."

"And you'll stay with your *grand-oncle* until I write you it's safe to return. Take enough food, but not too big a bundle, or every Nazi will want to inspect it. And I have some chocolate for you. I have been saving it—"

"No, no chocolate, *Grandmère,*" said Denis firmly. "It might be found, and I should have to explain where I got it. I'll take only food from the farm."

"You are right," she sighed. "But here. I finished this new sweater for you today. It goes under your coat,

and you must wear it, whether or no; and — and — oh, Denis, Denis," she cried. "How can I let you go? What shall I do if anything happens to you? If I should lose you, I can only lie down and die—"

"Nothing will happen, *Grand'-mère*. I shall be most circumspect before all the Boches I meet. I shall be all right."

"Say good-by to your mother and sister now, and don't return here."

AS she hugged the boy to her, her withered cheeks were wet.

Denis procured his permit to travel, without too much trouble. He had to wait, and he had to tell his story to several, but the letter from his great-uncle told how ill the old man had been, and how he needed help; and after all, there was no reason the boy should not go to Belgium.

As soon as the matter of permission was concluded, he hastened back to the farm and gave Jean-Paul lengthy instructions for keeping up the farm and supplying the café in his absence.

He took M. Tourné into his confidence at last, and for the first time since his farm had been seized, the man came to life. To revenge himself for that seizure!

Guillaume and Maurice were down by the windbreak; there Denis joined them, to let them into the secret too, and to give them their full instructions. He knew he could trust them now; and in any case, they would not leave the farm today until dark. He went over every detail again and again until neither of the boys could be mistaken and the synchronization misfire.

"And instantly your work is finished, you will run, run, run! You will not wait to see a thing. You will join yourselves together and work your way wide around Langres to the other side as quickly as your legs will carry you. But keep to the deep shadows—do not be seen!

"And if tomorrow you are stopped, you will cry and be bewildered, and say the terrible noise frightened you, and you want your mother, who is at Neuilly l'Evêque. You are going to her, whether or no there is room for you. And be sure to cry and act afraid. *Be* afraid—do not be ashamed at this! Ah, *mes amis,* do this well!"

It was late afternoon when Denis made up his bundle, strapped it on his back, and took leave of them all. Then onto his bicycle, and he was off.

His route would take him first to Chaumont, then on to St. Dizier. But he didn't extend himself. When darkness fell, he was still not so many kilometers from home; and when night was sufficiently thick, he turned back and made quick time to the abandoned quarry he'd described to M. Lauris in Dijon.

He scouted the ground here carefully. He was quite alone. He ate sparingly—a big bun of coarse home-ground wheat, some goat-curd cheese —poor stuff; a swallow of dry wine from the straw-covered bottle. Then he settled himself to wait.

Tedious this, yet exciting, too. He had no watch; he couldn't tell the time. There was no danger of his falling asleep, however; his blood was too stirred for that. For an hour he eyed the heavens anxiously.

Then it came!

Thunder such as the plateau of Langres had never heard before!

A slow-rising thunder that filled the sky ever louder and louder, until the very flesh vibrated to the steady roar. Yet Denis could not see a thing above. The pale new moon had risen, and there were the stars, but nothing else; and the momentary blinking off of a star meant nothing. Stars were always winking on and off.

But ah, when many stars winked on and off in a straight path—a steadily advancing path! Still Denis could distinguish nothing, and doubts assailed him. Such tiny specks that he could not see them, so high, so far, how could they do the damage they were to do? How could they drop the eggs of destruction near a target?

But then came the signal for action and he had no time for further misgivings.

A shower of incendiaries dropped over a wide area and burst into dozens of sudden fierce fountains of flame. His cue. *Their* cue.

Swiftly Denis set his fires, prepared these long hours; and brush in the quarry-pit leaped into an island of flames—another island, another—and the islands into a sea.

Quickly he climbed to the top of the pit, mounting at the side in shadow, where movement would not show in that growing brilliance. Up, up to the top, where his bicycle was cached under some blackthorns. From here he could see over the countryside. There! M. Tourné had done his job. A kilometer or more away, the old thatch-roofed building of the Risson farm was blazing furiously.

Denis looked to the right, to the left. Ah, the good boys, that fine young Guillaume, that sturdy young Maurice! He would hug them when next he saw them, fit to break their bones. With their arrows wound in waste and dipped in oil and set ablaze, they'd shot them into the *verboten* enclosure to set afire two converging lines each. To the flyers above, there were two V's of flames aimed at the heart of the tank farm—one of blazing wheat-straw cocks, one of fruit trees set afire by the tall grass under them.

These pointing V's were theatrical dressing that the heart of Denis could not resist. But dangerous! If the Nazis discovered these formations of fire, it would prove sabotage beyond doubt, and then would the citizens of Langres suffer!

But ah, the good Britishers, the good flyers! They were fixing it now so that no such evidence would exist! Down came a veritable rainfall of small incendiaries over all that area of man-made fires. They surrounded the thatched hut, sprinkled the land where Denis now stood, and fell scatteringly over those two big V's, to spread the blaze and consolidate the burning letters into one field of flames.

Then came the heavy bombs!

The first explosion knocked Denis to his knees. It shocked his eardrums, and he remembered too late about stuffing his ears; he'd forgotten to warn the others of this. The ground shook under him, and there was the bomb's vivid burst of flame burgeoning in the night. But nothing more. It had fallen on open land. Denis remembered he might be seen in silhouette against the lightening countryside, and flung himself full length.

Other bombs came down. Big ones, high-explosive bombs exploding on impact. At last one found its mark. A tank was hit and the flaming gasoline shot high into the air in a gigantic fountain. The instant roar of the flames came loud to Denis' ears, deafened though they were, and set the very air to quivering; and soon the heat itself was felt even at this distance.

Other tanks were hit, and those which didn't suffer direct blows were cracked by concussion, and the leaking oil set ablaze until flames ate into the tanks themselves, and the ground exploded in huge bursts which sent flaming spume and earth hundreds of feet into the air.

WHATEVER Nazi soldiers had stood guard in that area were dead without a doubt. Not a living thing could have got away. Five acres of roaring hell, and more, the sea of leaping flames spreading and flowing. . . .

His job was done. Denis started to rise, and found that excitement had eaten his strength, there was no stiffening in muscles or bones. He gathered his thoughts for a moment, then crawled to his bicycle. He would keep to lanes and back roads until well on his way to Chaumont, and sleep the rest of the night—if he could!—in some protected spot off the path. He would be careful. He would be most circumspect, should he be halted. He would look at their knees and act loutish. . . .

Denis mounted his bicycle and pedaled northward into the night.

A KING

WHEN I was a boy, quite some years ago, I got to knowing an old cowboy by the nickname of "Slippers," knowing him very well. He wasn't so old, but the winds, stinging snows and scorching heat, while riding, had creased and tanned his lean face to leather and to make him look much older than he was. He didn't shave—none of the cowboys did, only after shipping was done and they wanted to see the town, once or twice a year and for only a few days at a time. Mostly only scissors was used while on the range, when such could be found, and a cowboy who could dig up clippers out of his warbag was a popular one at such times, for after a certain length the whiskers would curl back and begin to itch, like taking root for a double growth. Clippers was better than razors.

The reason of no shaving much was that some whiskers was protection against sun, winds and snows. Besides, there was nobody around to look at 'em but other cowboys, tough horses, and plenty of cattle.

HOW-COME Slippers got his nickname was when him and some other cowboys first come to Montana from Texas with a herd. The only pair of boots he had, had seen plenty of wear and tear, the stitching between bottom and top had wore apart and he'd kept sewing them with harness thread, buckskin and even thin strings of rawhide to hold them together, but as he rode on, with spurs at his heels and stirrups to the front steady a-wearing, the stitching kept a-breaking.

He kept on trying to keep the top and bottom together until finally there was no more place for the stitches to hold onto, the leather had all ripped, and then one rainy day as his boots got wet and stuck when he went to pull them off that night, the top ripped off and it looked like for good that time, for there was no sewing them together no more.

So he rode on with just the bottoms. The tops he used to cover the sides of his saddle blanket with, where the stirrup leathers rubbed and frazzled the edges.

When him and the other cowboys come to deliver the herd to the northern outfit, an outfit of men who, as was the custom of the country, never asked questions or for names, it was but a short time as it was noticed how Slippers was riding with only the bottom of his boots that he was soon dubbed that name Slippers. He of course bought new boots when he got the chance, but that nickname stuck to him throughout the northern states and with every outfit he rode for till he got to thinking he had no other name until he'd had to get his real name on the books of whatever outfit he'd be riding for and so they could make him out his check when time come. Sometimes Slippers would have to think for a spell before he could think of his real name, for checks wasn't handled very often, only when a rider quit or was let go, and at shipping time which was only once or twice a year, then Slippers would have to remember his real name again, when come time for him to endorse his check. But it was on the check.

While still growing up I went to riding for different outfits, and I'd every once in a while ride onto Slippers who'd be riding for the same. The average cowboy doesn't ride for one outfit for very long at a time. Six or eight months is quite a spell, for being there's about as much future with one outfit as there is with another, he's not a loser by drifting, not even if a foreman's job might be looming up. There'd be old cowboys who'd quit rambling, been on the same outfit for years and would be looking for such jobs.

The more restless kind who kept wanting to see other ranges was often mighty welcome by some outfits, maybe short-handed or wanting to let go of some "drags" (slow and lazy men) to replace for a cowboy who was one. Most of the drifting kind was good ones, knowing the game of handling horses and cattle in many different ways, which was learned while covering wide territories and riding for one outfit and another. Most every range state handle their stock a little different. That's on account of different climates and lay of the land.

I RODE onto Slippers again one time about a thousand miles from where I'd last seen him a couple of years before.

That country was to the south and good to winter in, not so cold nor so much snow, and as I sized up Slipper's clothes and rigging, I figured that's what he'd come south for, to get away from some of the cold. What thin, wore-out clothes covered his lean frame wouldn't have kept out the whisper of a breeze.

But what few he had, he kept clean and some evenings, after a long day's ride, he'd be by the creek or spring and washing them, and being he had so few that didn't take long. The following evening he'd be mending them, wherever it would be possible to mend. The tails of his two shirts had been cut off to do the patching and replaced by flour sacks which he'd got from the cook. His faded overalls was patched up from others the cowboys had throwed away.

His hat was wore through at the top from riding through the heavy brush; the rim was frazzled at the edges and held up from flopping over his eyes by a string of whang leather laced around it.

IN RAGS

by Will James

With this last story written and illustrated by Will James we include a few miniatures of the drawings which helped make his BLUE BOOK serial "Big Enough" so attractive.

Glancing at his boots, they was near in the same fix as the ones he'd been wearing when he got nicknamed "Slippers." Some of the boys of that outfit started to nickname him "Few Clothes." But that didn't stick. Slippers didn't exactly like that, and being he was such a good man on horse and with cattle which all was much admired, along with the quiet respect he inspired, that nickname soon fell flat, and "Slippers" still stuck.

I noticed that his saddle of once-thick leather was wore thru in some parts and mighty thin in some others. It takes considerable riding to wear out the kind of saddle he had and he said he'd only had it about three years, that meant many a thousand miles, day and night, and on many changes of horses, while riding for different outfits on different ranges.

Rawhide from fresh-killed beef at round-up camp came in handy to patch up the saddle and hold it together in some parts. The latigoes was also of grained rawhide (hair scraped off) which he kept greased and partly soft. His headstall he'd made out of a discarded chuck-wagon team neckyoke strap, and the bridle reins was of hard-twist rope, with one strand taken out to make them more pliable.

As to the bit, of short, steel shank, both upper and lower rings was near wore through—that also meant many changes of horses and many ranges covered.

Slippers wasn't so proud of his outfit and clothes, of course, but even at that he made up in other ways and he felt sort of proud that even with such a patched-up outfit and clothes as he had, he still didn't have to bow to any of the other cowboys when it come to riding, roping and the knowing of handling stock, rough or otherwise. He was a top hand.

ONE day, as he was roping heavy stuff, his saddle horn was jerked off, another cowboy got his rope back for him which he then tied around the fork of the old saddle tree and he went right on to roping. He rode and roped without a horn on his saddle until that outfit's work was done for that year and then, drawing his company check for many months' work, he rode on.

The outfit wanted to keep him in preference to some other riders and for what riding was still to be done but, as it was with him at them times, the far ridges got to looking bluer and he got to wanting to see what it looked like on the other side.

Slippers wanted me to ride along with him but I decided to stay with the outfit for a spell. They'd be paying me the same wages as during round-up work, and besides I'd ordered me a new saddle and more to go with it which I wanted to get before I rode on.

As the boys had noticed and knew I'd known Slippers long and many times before there come some questions my way as to about him. Not that they was really so curious, but more to make talk when a few of us would just gather by the fire after the day's ride.

None cared as to what Slippers might of been or went and done. He'd proved to be a good cowboy and that was all that was necessary.

But still, they couldn't help but sort of wonder at that patched-up outfit and clothes of his when they knew he'd been drawing top wages. His company check had been over three hundred dollars before he rode away after the last shipment. He'd spent only one night and part of the next day with the boys in town, drank a little and wasn't stingy in buying a few when his turn come. He went around to honkytonks and such places where the painted ladies done their trade, and the boys liked him as well there as they had while on the range. He was no wet blanket, just the same quiet Slippers, with always a grin for a joke, whether they was on himself or what.

What's more that was wondered about him, and I was asked, was why he didn't buy himself a new saddle, he could of got a dandy (at them times) for fifty dollars. And with new boots, clothes and what all he needed so bad wouldn't of cost over a hundred dollars.

But, as a cowboy seldom does, he passed by the saddle shop and he rode out after buying only a couple of cheap shirts and a pair of duck pants which he'd wore while in town. His old clothes, he'd tied in the back of his old saddle. "Sure not worth taking," grinned one of the boys. "Unless he wants to build a scare-devil."

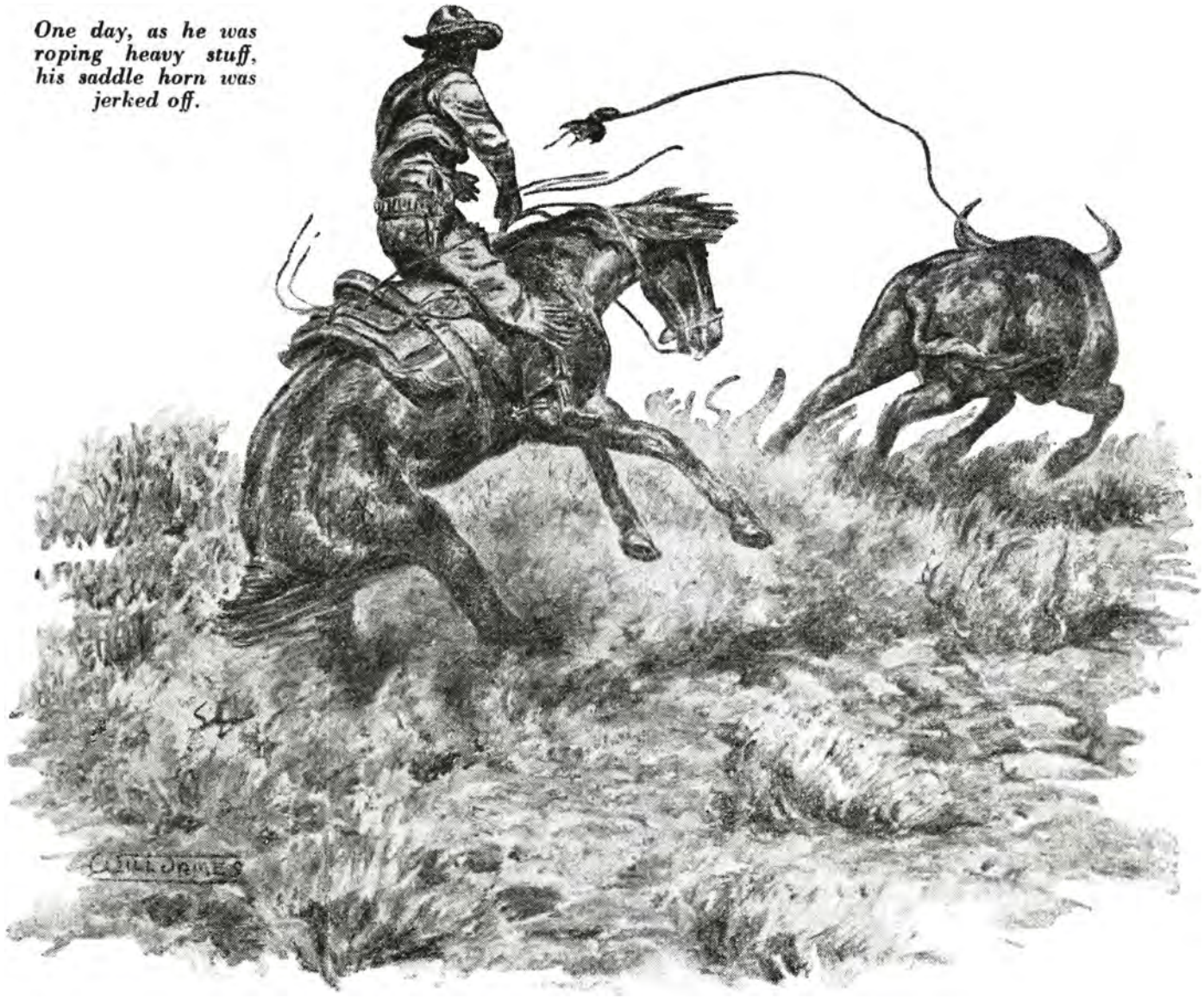
THE *one* question was, "What the Sam Hill did he do with his money?" I'd wondered some about that myself, for with the different times I'd been in towns with him after shipping, I'd never seen him spend any money much on himself or go gallivanting around.

I figured as most of the cowboys did where I rode with him that maybe he had a girl to the south, the north was paying higher wages, and he most likely was saving his money for some day to build a home, bring in the bride and start an outfit of his own. Or maybe, he already had a wife and was sending what money he could to her.

Whatever the reason was, there could be no inkling ever got from Slippers, nor from me either because I didn't know myself, and what sort of fooled me and the other boys, was that Slippers seemed plenty cheerful

at all times, whistling or humming as he rode and laughing with the rest of us in his quiet way.

He didn't seem to have a care in the world, and even though he was some close-mouthed at times, he'd usually join right in the talk, about different outfits him and some of the boys had rode for and most everything in general until it come time to "hit the soogans" (roll in bed). The only thing he was some touchy about was his patched-up outfit but he'd sometimes get to grinning at that too, the way the remarks was passed, like no one but a cowboy can, and he would sometimes admit that his outfit sure



One day, as he was roping heavy stuff, his saddle horn was jerked off.

wasn't much for show. "But there's one thing," he'd once added on, "I sure know every inch of it, and it won't talk."

The cow-country stretches some thousands of miles north and south and about a couple of thousand miles from the west coast east, but that's not such a big country for the roaming cowboy and it wasn't but two winters or so later when my horse rubbed nostrils with Slippers' horse again while we shook hands, many hundred miles from where we'd last seen one another and without looking for one another, but, as I've already said, the big stretches of the cow-country are not so big to the cowboy and he can cover it well on his horse where in most parts, the automobile and airplane are more than useless, especially in these times where the cowboy is crowded to the roughest of the range country by farming and irrigation. But, there's still plenty of it left and will always be even if most parts are mighty dry and rough.

Slippers, like with the other boys of the outfit he was riding for, was on circle (day's round-up). I rode with him on the circle he was out to cover and help him get the cattle out of the rough toward the round-up grounds where more cattle was being brought in by the other riders and from many directions.

AS the cattle we'd gathered high-tailed it down country and I rode alongside of Slippers once in a while, I noticed that he was riding another saddle from one he'd had when I last seen him a couple of years before. I could see he hadn't got the saddle new, it looked like just a poor excuse for one. Maybe he'd stole it from some lost sheepherder, and when I told him that he only grinned, remarking that he'd fixed it up so it was good and strong, anyway.

His boots wasn't so bad but I could see they was only hand-me-downs that can be got in any shoe-store, ready-made and handed down off the shelf. The cowboy who can afford it, wears shop-made, hand-made-to-order boots by tape measurements which he sends in. It takes about a month to get the order filled, the price is twice as much as the "shelf boots" but they usually wear twice as long, hold their shape, and a cowboy can feel good while he's wearing them, for they're made to fit his feet, and the stirrup.

But Slippers, as I'd noticed, always made his wear a long time, whether they got out of shape or not, and he wore them for as long as they stayed on his feet.

I turned my horses to rest and went to riding company horses for the same outfit as Slippers was. It was a good outfit, plenty of good horses for every rider, and the cowboys was good ones too. They liked Slippers, as all cowboys always did, and I wasn't in camp but a short while the first evening when I heard a remark that made me look and grin.

A cowboy, talking of the day's circle, spoke acrost the fire and straight to Slippers, but he didn't call him Slippers. It was "Patches" this time.

But I noticed that that new nickname wasn't at all meant as poking fun when it was spoken. I also noticed, too, that Slippers didn't seem to

mind. It was just a nickname as most all the cowboys had around that outfit, the same as was with most outfits.

I well remember of a cow foreman, a sort of stiff one, once calling me *William,* and somehow or other as I rode for that outfit, I got to disliking that foreman, the only one I ever did hate. A good, funny nickname would of went well but never *William,* and as the boys noticed that, they took every chance of calling me by that name. It stuck all the while I was with that outfit.

Slippers, as I'll always call him, drawed another big company check when shipping was done that year and, after a day or so in town, rode on his way. I rode on my own. We'd meet again.

WE did. That was some more years later and some more hundreds of miles from where we'd last rode together.

This time I hardly recognized him, not only on account of the aged look on his face, but by the clothes he was wearing and the saddle he was riding. The whole outfit was right up to snuff and of the best that could be got. It wasn't fancy nor flashy, just a mighty fine outfit for good hard work and of the kind any cowboy would admire. I sure did.

I noticed, too, that he was wearing neat-fitting shop-made boots, and as I went looking from there on up, the good-fitting Oregon pants, shirt without a patch on it, and a hat that well spoke for itself as to its high grade to cap off the whole outfit. I sure must of showed quite some surprise, for Slippers was grinning at me from under his hat brim.

I never was much for asking questions but this time, it blurted out without hardly my knowing. "What's come over you, Slippers?" I asks. "You've sure turned out to be a Jim Dandy from the last time I seen you."

I thought I seen a frown come over his face, and after a while, he just sort of mumbled that he'd just got tired of looking like a bum, being called "Few Clothes," "Patches," and such-like.

"From now on," he says, "my name is Jim Dwyer, and nothing else but."

"All right, Jim," I grinned at him. "But you'll always be good old Slippers to me."

As we rode on for another of the same outfit, I begin to notice that there'd come quite a change over him. He wasn't much for joining in a joke no more (the staff of the cowboy's only pleasures), and he seemed to've sort of lost some interest in being the cowboy I'd known him to be.

That struck me kind of queer, for now that he had such a fine outfit, the kind few cowboys could afford and wished they could, he now rode looking like an old wet hen, where, before and on his patched-up and ragged outfit, he was happy and cheerful-like even if he was always sort of quiet. . . . I couldn't figure it out.

Knowing Slippers as I did, bumping into him in about all parts of the cow country, I'd never seen him so dejected-looking, the while riding such a fine outfit as he had and when he should of been the most happy, at least as happy as he'd been while riding the dilapidated rigs and patched-up clothes as he had, sometimes about to freeze as he rode.

Sort of watching him, it bothered me until a few times I come near asking him what was eating on him, but figuring he wouldn't tell me anyhow, I let it ride.

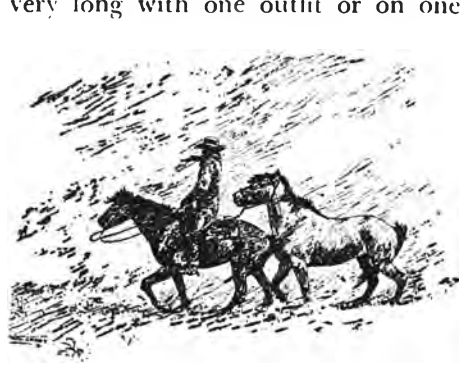
Then one day there rode a couple of strange cowboys into camp, they was strangers all excepting to Slippers, and at the sight of them, he sure seemed to come to life again.

As the outfit was a little short-handed at the time and the work being heavy, thousands of cattle to be handled, the two riders went to work for the same outfit. They was good men, especially good, I noticed in bringing Slippers back up to snuff, some, and near as to what he'd been.

It was as I was riding with one of them boys one day that him, knowing I'd been with Slippers for so long off and on, he limbered up and told me of Jim's (Slipper's) home troubles. Jim had left his mother and a near-grown brother there on a little ranch with some cattle. All was fine, then one day the boy got tangled up with too much steer, and with the mix-up with him, rope and half-broke horse, he wound up in a far-away hospital where he lingered for some long years, paralyzed, and then finally died. In the meantime, not being able to afford good help, the little ranch sort of went to pieces, cattle scattered, and all was about to be taken over for the mortgage on it when the mother died, a year or so after the boy had.

Slippers didn't get to know of any of these things. His mother's letters had always been cheerful and he didn't even know of his brother's long spell of helplessness and death until after his mother's own death, when he was notified.

But being that Slippers was never very long with one outfit or on one range, the word didn't get to him until some months afterwards. When it did finally reach him, he rushed back home to the little ranch but, of course, much too late. His mother and brother had passed away, and the little ranch and few stock that was left had been taken over to satisfy the mortgage on it.



The mortgage his mother had taken out in order to take care of the boy, the ranch, and hire another man in his place, which all Slippers didn't know anything about or he'd sure been home himself.

But he'd done better by sending practically all of his earnings home, which had been more than the little ranch could produce. "The two combined would do pretty well," he'd thought. Which did when all was going as it should.

So, Slippers had rode in patched-up rigs, plumb unawares for years, so's to send all he could home. He'd thought all was fine, and when he got the blow and got back to see the little ranch occupied by strangers, well, he didn't ride for a spell. He went to the little cowtown, the closest town to his home, and there he stuck around, spending his time pretty well between the sales stable and the saddle shop.

That's how-come that in about a month or so, he came out with a brand new outfit from head to foot, and a humdinger of a hand-made saddle. He had no one to spend his money onto now and he knew his mother would have been pleased with his outfit.

"Another thing," Slippers thought, "the new outfit might sort of give him a new lead and cheer him up some."

But as I seen him again that didn't seem to have no such effect on him. The two boys that rode up from his home country had been the best medicine for him and in a couple of weeks' time, with all the hard riding there was to be done, he gradually begin to be his old self again.

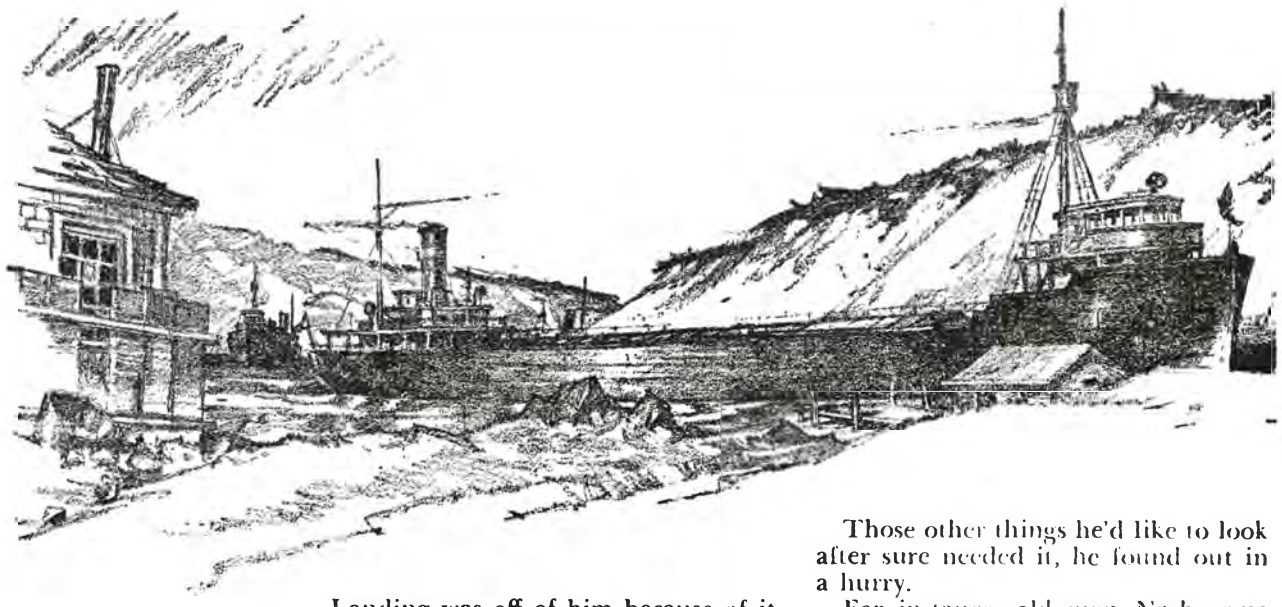
IT was more than ten years when after not seeing Slippers in all that time, I again rode up alongside of him. He looked happier than I'd ever seen him any time, and to my surprise, he was again wearing well-patched-up clothes and riding a saddle of the same. Like as he had when I first got to know him.

It wasn't long when I got to know some reason why of his going back to his old patched-up rigging. He'd got married. . . . He'd bought a good little ranch and had to ride hard and skimp to pay for it and stock it up to start his own outfit.

"But that wasn't all," he went on to say, and mighty proud. "I've got two of the finest kids in the world, too, a boy and a girl. They'll be going to school in another year or so."

Five Days' Leave

by HAROLD TITUS



WHEN you've only got five days leave from the old Navy, and when your station is two days from home; and when a job's waiting that's just got to be done, say nothing of three-four more you'd give a year's pay to do; and when you're afoot after the bus stop and get a sour look instead of a lift from a guy in a practically empty car—why, it'll chafe you some. It certainly chafed Ernie. This green sedan was only ambling along and the guy was alone but he looked at Ernie—standing there in his dress blue and jerking his thumb off—like Ernie had the plague, maybe, and never hesitated.

So Ernie wiped sweat out of his blue eyes and hiked on. It was hot, even if it was upper Michigan and only May and eight o'clock. He didn't fret over heat, though. His mind kept grinding about Aunt Em needing an operation and Uncle Nick's towing-job going sour. He'd hardly had their trouble out of his head since Uncle Nick wrote, except when something came up special.

He had plenty other things he might've thought about, too. Like how Stella never wrote even a postcard. And how Mr. Ericson still claimed he'd stolen that outboard motor. And how everybody at the Landing was off of him because of it, and how he'd like to change those things worst way. But, no sir; he only had time for Uncle Nick and Aunt Em, except when he got chafed or special things came up.

One of those special things was when he got his first look at the old St. Mary's River. It made him stop dead and hiccup.

"Boy!" he said out loud. "Boy, oh, boy, oh-boy-oh-boy-oh-*boy!*"

Wasn't the river itself, even if it was all winky in the sunshine. It wasn't Neebish Island, all softy green and pretty. Wasn't how the Ontario hills swooped up behind her all, either. When you've been gone eleven months you're generally hyped up just seeing home again, but that wasn't it.

What gave Ernie a bang was the traffic. Why, he'd never seen the like. Whole string of Great Lakes freighters going downstream this side of Neebish; where upbound and downbound channels met, both above and below the island, were *scads* of 'em. He'd bet he could see maybe twenty big fellows all at once!

"Boy, Mister, are they movin' ore!" he said to himself. "Boy, Mister, are they hittin' the ball!" he said and then hustled on because he only had about twenty-four hours for Aunt Em and Uncle Nick. . . .

Those other things he'd like to look after sure needed it, he found out in a hurry.

For instance, old man Nash came driving his truck up the hill; he stared at Ernie, and spit. Not even a nod. And at the feed mill—first thing you pass coming into the Landing—Ted Beauchamp was looking out and instead of saying, "Hi," or "How're you, Ernie," or something else friendly, he just said:

"My God, when'd they let *you* out?"

It certainly showed, and Ernie got a little tight inside.

Then, in front the post office, who should come out but Stella. Yeah. Stella. Bouncing out, sort of, in blue slacks and a doodad that showed her slick shoulders and most of her smooth back, and it was like trying to look into the sun.

"Why, *Ernie!*" she said, almost like she was glad. "Where'd *you* come from?" she said, her brown eyes getting bigger than ever.

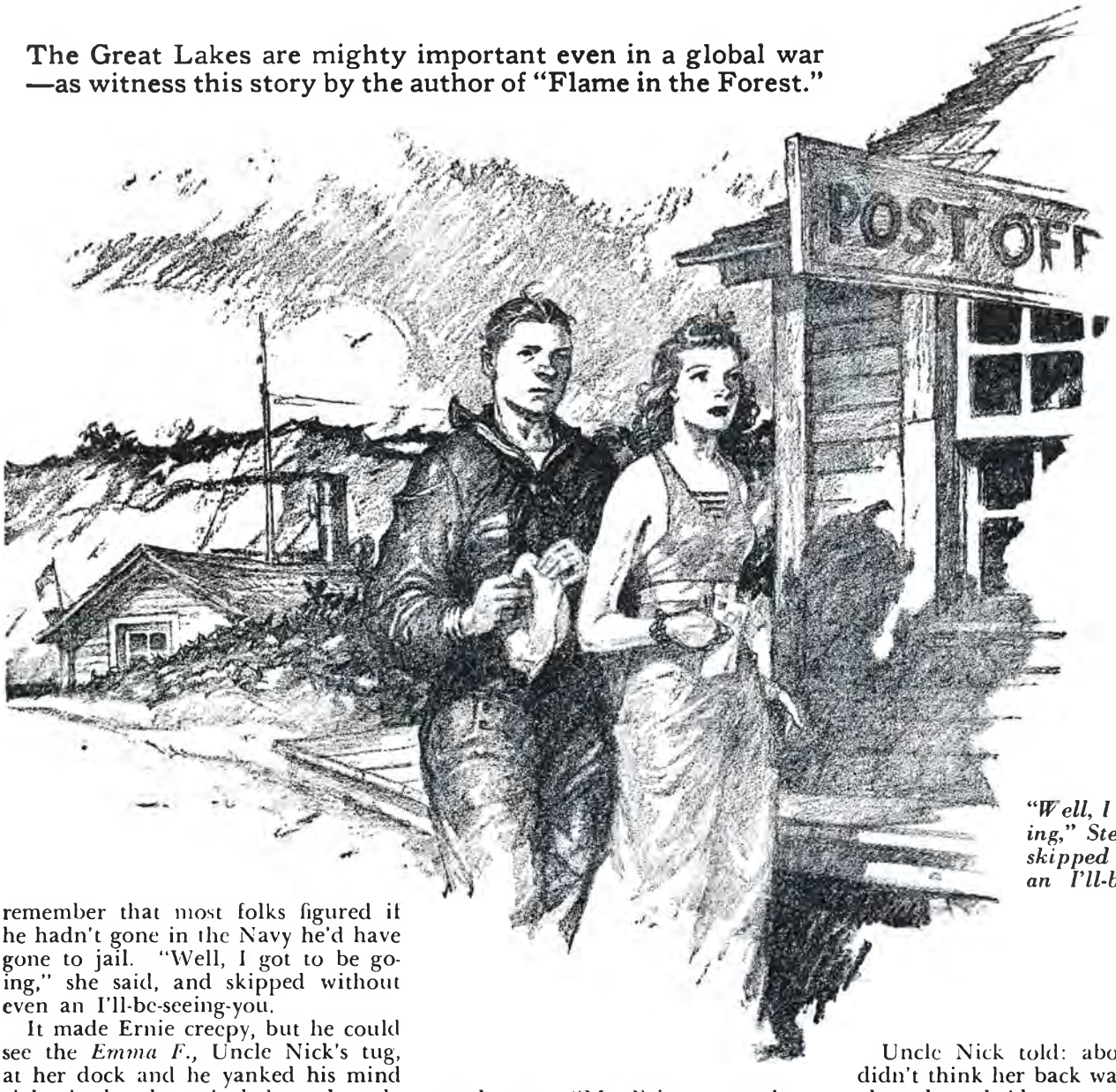
"Mine school," Ernie said, sounding away off because that was the way she used to look before Mr. Ericson got the town down on him.

"You going to work in a *mine?*" she said.

"Nah. Mines—to blow up ships." He made motions like something big and round. "About explosives and things."

"Oh," she said, almost absent, and patted her yellow hair behind, and got over her surprise and seemed to

The Great Lakes are mighty important even in a global war —as witness this story by the author of "Flame in the Forest."



"Well, I got to be going," Stella said, and skipped without even an I'll-be-seeing-you.

remember that most folks figured if he hadn't gone in the Navy he'd have gone to jail. "Well, I got to be going," she said, and skipped without even an I'll-be-seeing-you.

It made Ernie creepy, but he could see the *Emma F.*, Uncle Nick's tug, at her dock and he yanked his mind right back where it belonged, only half noticing that the old *Emory Blake* was tied up at Mr. Ericson's dock.

He headed for the *Emma* and passed where Uncle Nick's house had burned. The chimney stood up naked, and the willow tree was brown and it put a lump in his neck so big that he didn't care that Mrs. Fleming gawped at him off her stoop like he didn't have any right loose. Seeing where the house was, made him think how it must've hurt Aunt Em to fall downstairs trying to get things out; but when you've got something that's got to be done, you can't let yourself get all churning inside. He made such a stab at steadying down that he didn't get even a cold feeling when he came slam into Mr. Ericson by the gas-station. He glanced kind of casual at Ernie, and then looked back hard. His look had almost a sock to it. He was big and broad, and his light hair was cut short, and when his gray eyes took hold of Ernie, his head seemed to scrooch forward. Ernie had half a mind to say, "Mr. Ericson, you know blamed well I never stole that motor," but just then Uncle Nick came out on the *Emma F.'s* deck, and Ernie commenced to run. . . .

Uncle Nick's voice was all husky, and he hung onto Ernie's hand a long time after they sat down in the pilothouse, and wouldn't answer any questions until Ernie'd told about mine-school and all and Ernie had a time talking, because he kept remembering things! Like how Uncle Nick'd woke him up that morning to tell him his father's freighter'd been lost in Lake Superior with all hands. And like how Aunt Em hardly left his room for two weeks when he had scarlet fever. And how they'd both been better to him than most folks are to their own kids, and talked so much about his mother he got to know her good even if he couldn't remember seeing her. Remembering those things snarled him all up, and he was glad when he got to the end.

"And now," he finally said, "how about you and Aunt Em?"

Uncle Nick told about how they didn't think her back was bad at first; about how she'd gone to her sister's in Wisconsin to rest but got worse; about how a big doctor examined her and said it was a special spine complaint that only two-three doctors alive could cure. And how those doctors were real folks and wouldn't soak a poor man, but how the hospital and nurses and trimmings would be maybe seven hundred dollars.

"Seven *hun*dred!" Ernie squeaked. "Boy, Mister! *Seven* hundred?"

You see, Ernie'd figured he could get along on four-five dollars a month and leave over thirty for Uncle Nick. But Uncle Nick in his letters wouldn't listen, which was why Ernie'd had to get home. But now—what's thirty a month when you need seven hundred in a lump?

"Worst is," Uncle Nick went on, "I'm practically licked on the towing." Uncle Nick, understand, was towing pulp-bolts from Neebish Island shoals to deep water at the Landing and booming them there for the bolt-boat. Last year, it'd been a pretty good thing. "You see," he went on,

Illustrated by Raymond Sisley

"Listen!" Ernie kind of croaked. "I got to get a phone call through to the Coast Guard or somebody—" "Did you learn drinkin' in the Navy?" old man Nash said.

"they're using these channels like they never been used before. You see," he said, "without that iron-ore for ships and guns, we're licked—and ninety per cent of all we use comes down this river.

"They have to keep the channels right," he said. "They have to let the big fellows load deep. This spring, they found it'd silted in up yonder. They had to dredge in a hurry. So they made a new dumping-ground for scows over on the flats," he said, nodding toward Neebish. "It filled up my little natural channel into the shoals, which is the only place where the jobber can water his cut.

"I have to go three miles down, now," he said. "That means bucking the current to get back up here. The old *Emma,*" he said, stroking a worn wheel-spoke like you would an old dog, "has seen her best days." His voice was getting quiet, like it would when he was serious but Ernie'd never heard it that quiet. "Between waiting for the Coast Guard to let me through all that traffic, and bucking that current with a raft up to here—the only booming place in twenty miles—I'm lucky to pay my men, let alone saving a penny.

"The tug's mortgaged to her nameplate," he said. "Was I making good towing, I could raise money on my contract at the bank. But I aint, so I can't," he said, like that settled it.

Ernie didn't know how to go on from there. He just sat and stared at the ore-vessels going down until the green sedan that had passed him up drove down to Mr. Ericson's dock, and Mr. Ericson and the driver began carrying boxes aboard. Flour-sacks and celery showed in the boxes.

"What's Mr. Ericson doing with the old *Blake?*" Ernie said, figuring if he changed the subject a minute he might hatch an idea for arguing Uncle Nick into taking his pay.

"Didn't I write you?" Uncle Nick said. "He bought her last summer to freight pulp-wood from up above to a paper mill on Lake Michigan. She was built to carry logs, and he does well," he said, like he didn't want to admit it because what Mr. Ericson did to Ernie.

Now, Mr. Ericson, he'd showed up two years before. Just drove in like stray tourists would, and hired Ernie, who'd been guiding folks off and on in Uncle Nick's outboard boat ever since he was big enough. Ernie knew the places, too.

But Mr. Ericson was part fish, seemed like. He fished Ernie's places, and then found others nobody'd even guessed, by dragging to get the bottom growth and depths. He sure brought in the wall-eyes and bass and muskies, but when he got to rainbow trout. . . . Boy, Mister!

You see, in the rapids by the Sault locks the ore-boats use is the best rainbow fishing anywhere. When Mr. Ericson hit that, he got a cabin and fished every evening—which is the best time—and almost every evening he'd come up across the locks with a trout or two that'd attract as much attention from tourists as the boats locking through did. That was before the war, of course; now, nobody's allowed to fish those rapids, because the Government don't take chances.

AFTER Mr. Ericson had his fill of that, he came back to the Landing, bought a piece of river frontage and commenced building tourist cabins, which the place had needed a long time. He was so nuts about fishing, he said, that he had to live right on the river but had to have a business to keep him going.

Now, everybody was glad about that. He'd put some life in the place, and his business would help everybody's. Almost overnight Mr. Ericson got to be the Landing's big shot.

That made it duck soup for Ernie, he figured. Mr. Ericson had always been friendly as could be, and told stories about sailing on Swedish ships, and places Ernie'd learned about in geography that made his eyes stick out.

Ernie figured he'd get a job working steady for Mr. Ericson, and that would be plenty better than guiding what stray tourists found such an off-the-track place. Mr. Ericson said yes, he guessed he could use Ernie, which seemed to cinch it.

But Mr. Ericson hadn't figured how deep Ernie could dive into a job. Ernie was into everything, like the blueprints and lumber shipments and telephone calls. He was just sticking that red head of his everywhere. And on rainy days when carpenters couldn't work, and Mr. Ericson would go out on the river to experiment with baits and places so's he could give his customers their money's worth, there'd come Ernie. He'd be right after Mr. Ericson in Uncle Nick's boat, and watching and asking questions until Mr. Ericson ran out of time for him.

Ernie, now, had made such a hero of Mr. Ericson that he never woke up to being in bad until everybody else knew it. Then he was a good deal like a puppy you've been playing with and got tired of—and when you give him a boot to get rid of him, he's more surprised than hurt.

Of course, Ernie was practically in the Navy before Mr. Ericson gave him that boot—which was having him arrested. War was coming, anybody could see, and the Navy wanted men. First time Ernie got examined was on his seventeenth birthday. He was short, but not too short by an inch maybe, but he was six pounds underweight, and they put him off. It made him a little ashamed, so he didn't say anything at the Landing about trying to enlist. Anyhow, by then folks were thinking it was a shame for a nosey kid to bother an important man like Mr. Ericson. They were sure down on Ernie, but he didn't notice it much because he was all wrapped up in getting heavier by laying into Aunt Em's baked goods between meals. He did, and got his notice to report right after breakfast—and was arrested just before dinner.

You see, Mr. Ericson had missed an outboard motor. It showed up in the Sault, and the guy who had it claimed he bought it from a kid who drove up at night in a Model A. His description fitted Ernie and Uncle Nick's old car.

Now, most honest kids would've been upset, but not Ernie. He was too excited about the Navy to get upset. He'd been in the Sault the night the guy said, all right, but as for stealing something and selling it— Oh, no!

He told the judge all about it before court got going, even, and said how he could account for every minute of his time that night by folks who saw him, but he didn't want to take the time because the Navy was waiting for him.

The judge, he only saw a wide-eyed and frank-talking kid. He wasn't prejudiced the way folks at the Landing were because of the way Ernie had bothered Mr. Ericson. So he asked Mr. Ericson, what was the use? It didn't look like a strong case, and he had his motor back, and why send a boy into the Navy with even a little mark against him? Mr. Ericson said he thought he had a case, all right, but maybe it was better to let it drop, so that's how it was.

Ernie didn't give it hardly another thought until he got in the Navy. When the first excitement was over, though, it began to gnaw on him. He remembered how the case being dropped hadn't seemed to impress folks at the Landing much. None of them, he realized, had even said goodby very hearty. And his last night home, Stella had gone to the Sault to a movie with Mr. Ericson, who was twice as old—and after Ernie'd said he'd be over. And she never answered his letters; and between the lines of Uncle Nick's and Aunt Em's he could read plenty plain that Mr. Ericson had the whole town down on Ernie.

SO while Uncle Nick told about Mr. Ericson's pulp-job, Ernie watched them load groceries and lived it all over again.

"He must make long trips," he finally said. "Boy, Mister, they're takin' on a slew of supplies. How big a crew's he got?"

"Six," said Uncle Nick. "Three are in the Sault, I guess. The rest of 'em have been workin' on the winch a couple of days."

"They run all last season?"

"Steady. And he's made four trips this spring."

"Steady last year? With the tourist business good as you wrote?"

"Yes. I reckon Ericson sort of flits around."

Ernie puckered up his forehead. That wasn't how he'd had Mr. Ericson figured. One thing Ernie'd always figured about Mr. Ericson: he stuck *to* things. Ernie let Uncle Nick amble on while he watched Mr. Ericson and his cook—the guy with the green sedan was the cook—carry all those cartons down into the hold. Then he kind of shook himself and came back to Uncle Nick and Aunt Em, and the jam they were in.

"How bad did the dumping plug your channel?" he asked.

"Full," said Uncle Nick. "See it from here." He pointed. "We used to come out just below that buoy, remember? Well, it stands a couple feet above the surface, now."

"Couldn't you get a hole through with a drag-line?" Ernie said. "Or blast it out?"

"Cost a fortune with a drag-line," Uncle Nick said, and shook his head, hopeless. "And as for blasting—why, the Army's so particular about dynamite, account the locks, you can hardly get a stick to lift a stump out nowadays. No, Ernie, looks like I'm high and dry," he said.

That made Ernie feel so desperate he just had to move around. He walked along toward Mr. Ericson's dock. The green car was gone, and the engineer was putting a new block on a davit at the stern. The lifeboat was in the water, and Ernie thought to himself that while it was a nice, trim boat, all right, it wouldn't be much good in a sea.

He walked up by the store just as Mr. Ericson came along. His arms and shoulders were good and brown against his clean athletic top; a good-looking guy, all right, who'd make two of Ernie. No wonder, Ernie thought to himself, that Stella went for him. Old man Nash came out and asked Mr. Ericson when he was leaving, and Mr. Ericson said tomorrow night, and gave Ernie a look.

Ernie headed back toward Uncle Nick, scowling a little from thinking things. He'd bet his pants Mr. Ericson never believed he'd steal. Why, then, did Mr. Ericson have him arrested? Why'd it been, last spring, that Mr. Ericson seemed to strain himself to put Ernie in bad?

Uncle Nick had to go to the Sault after a shaft-bearing for the *Emma* that was being repaired and asked Ernie to go but Ernie said he guessed not. No telling when he'd see the river again, he said, and he'd stay here and watch the traffic. That was what he told Uncle Nick, but the fact was that he had a lot of things batting around in his head that he wanted to add up. Now he came to think of it, things hadn't been quite natural about him and Mr. Ericson and the Landing for a long time. Two and two just didn't make four and that wasn't right.

He watched the shipping go by, all right, but he watched the green sedan come down with another load of supplies, too. And after that Stella came along, and Mr. Ericson talked to her and they went into the ice-cream parlor, with Mr. Ericson kind of hovering over her when he opened the screen door; and that hit Ernie so hard he commenced to hiccup. Either seeing Stella and Mr. Ericson together, or else finding that two plus two can even get up to five!

After a while he laid back on the locker and tried so hard to add right that he didn't realize weather was making, and at the first clap of thunder, he lit on his feet as if he'd been shot at and jawed at himself for getting so jumpy.

He snugged things up to wait it out, but it wasn't going to be over in any hurry, he saw. The thunder and

lightning stopped, but the rain kept coming.

Uncle Nick should have been back a long time before, so Ernie put on a slicker and went up to the store to call the Sault and see if the rain had wet the wiring in the old Model A and made trouble, which it generally would. But the line was out, dead.

There were six-eight guys in the store who'd known him since he was so high, but nobody seemed to notice him. They just went on talking as if he wasn't on earth. He didn't mind it much, though, because he had things on his mind that made him almost forget Aunt Em, and that was going some. He sure wished Uncle Nick would get back. He was going to have to talk to somebody before long, or bust, he'd tell the world!

Well, it got dark, and still the rain came, and still no Uncle Nick. Ernie was so jittery he didn't even think about supper. He just sat in the tug's pilothouse and watched and thought. He only had about twelve hours left, and he hadn't done *one* of the things he'd figured there was to be done—and now along came this other. It was only a suspicion, sure; but it was an old he-one!

He quit his guessing when a little glimmer of light showed in the sky. He was pretty sure, then. The light wasn't in the sky, really. It was just above the stack of the old *Blake*. That was funny. There hadn't been any fire in the boiler today, and Mr. Ericson had said they weren't going out until tomorrow night. But they had a fire now, and the rain had caught a touch of light from the stack.

When Ernie stepped outside, he didn't wear the slicker, so he was wet to the skin in the bat of an eye. He went through the horsetail reeds over toward Mr. Ericson's dock and walked out on it slow and careful, with his heart whanging his ribs fit to spring them out.

No sign of anybody. No sound, nothing moving. No light, except that halo, sort of, around the stack-top. And then there was a light, for'ard on the deck; or not just on the deck, either, and only for a wink of a second.

He looked all around, and slipped over the rail and scrooched there a minute in case anybody was watching. Then he skittered and scuttled up for'ard. You see, that old *Blake* was about a hundred-and-twenty-footer. The upper works were all aft: pilothouse, galley, quarters and all. For'd was only a little fo'castle deck, maybe six feet deep and as high as that above the main deck. The light he'd seen had come through an opening down into the forepeak.

It was still there, all right, only faint. It was coming through a hawsepipe, he saw. Funny place for a hawse-pipe, but you'll find funny things on those old tubs that chore around the Lakes. And when Ernie got up close, he could look through it down into that chain-locker. Mr. Ericson was there, half shielding the flashlight with one hand. And the cook was there too.

Mr. Ericson was talking, but Ernie couldn't make out the words. He stretched flat and put his ear to the opening. It wasn't English. It wasn't Swedish or Polish or Finnish, either, because Ernie'd gone to school with a lot of those kids. It was—

"Boy, oh, Mister!" he whispered to himself—because it was *German!*

Something came through the hawsepipe and Ernie ducked back. The opening was full of light, like an end of a light line. Then words came, in English that time:

"I stick the fuse here, with tape. So!" The light wabbled and dimmed, but he could see fingers plastering the fuse against the opening with electrician's tape. "You light your cigarette as we nose past the gate and touch the fuse. You drop it back and come aft. We have seven minutes to get clear. In twenty minutes from now," he said, "we will have steam up and be gone."

The light in the opening faded to a glow. Ernie began to hiccup. He wriggled closer and looked down, and had to slap both hands over his mouth to hold back screeches. He was looking at row on row, pile on pile, of those squat little cylinders in silk sacks that the lieutenant had told them about in mine school!

YOU better believe old man Nash looked funny when Ernie got him up in his shirt-tail by banging and kicking on the door.

"Listen!" Ernie kind of croaked. "I got to get a phone call through to the Coast Guard at the locks or somebody—"

"What ails you, boy?" old man Nash said good and sharp, getting over his scare from Ernie's racket.

"Mr. Ericson—" Ernie waved his arms. "He's goin' to blow the locks to hellangone! He's got that chain-locker full of T.N.T.!" he gasped, grabbing the door-casing, he was so dizzy. "He's puttin' out—"

"Boy, you must be crazy! Or did you learn drinkin' in the Navy?" old man Nash said.

"I tell you, it's *so!*" Ernie panted. "They're puttin' out now! Come see for yourself, or let me at a phone!"

"Phone? It's dead," said old man Nash, eying Ernie good and skeptical. "Besides, spreadin' lies like that ag'in' Mr. Ericson! Shame on you, boy! Tryin' to git back at him for havin' you arr—"

Ernie gave up. He began to run, making funny noises in his throat. He had to have help. Just *had* to!

Most the houses were dark, but in Beauchamps' a light showed, and he skittered through the gate, but grabbed a picket and stopped himself because just then he heard the faint buzz of an electric bell, and by the time he'd stopped, he caught the starting snort of a steam engine. Right there he lost his head. . . .

The stern had swung out maybe six feet, time he got there. He saw somebody run for'ard on deck. He never hesitated, but dived for it and threw out his arms and hooked them over the rail and like to died trying not to grunt when he hit and the breath was beat out of him.

He hung there maybe two-three minutes, his knees on the sheer-strake. The bow line was let go, he figured. When he could breathe, he wriggled across and went down to the deck like a sack of potatoes, head first.

He stayed sprawled there, realizing he'd done probably the worst thing he could've done. If he'd stayed ashore, he'd have found somebody who'd drive him to the Sault. He could have told the Coast Guard, and they'd have had a whole flock of patrol-boats looking for the old *Blake* in a holy minute. Course, if a patrol had hailed him, Mr. Ericson probably would have touched off his T.N.T. wherever he was, and that would've plugged a channel for a good many days, but the locks would have been safe. As it was—

"Boy, Mister!" Ernie whispered to himself, and commenced to hiccup because Mr. Ericson's scheme was going to work now for sure, with nobody ashore suspecting anything except old Nash, and him skeptical, or worse.

The patrols and guards all knew the *Blake;* Mr. Ericson had worked it pretty slick. She'd nose into the lock, and the cook would spit the fuse, and the three of 'em would fall into that smart little boat and go away from there. (Oh, they wouldn't get away for keeps, but their job would be done.) The guards would know something was up, all right, all right, with an old tub abandoned and her engine turning over. And they'd go piling aboard and start looking for trouble, but before they could find it—

Ernie got all goose pimples, but not from being scared. He was one against three, and if they found him—why a tunk on the head and getting dumped down into that forepeak would certainly settle him! Nobody'd ever guess where he'd gone, and none of the things that needed doing at the Landing would get done.

All of a sudden he could see somebody standing beside the pilothouse, just kind of a darker patch in that stack-of-black-cats dark. That would be the cook who'd handled the lines.

"Up in the bow, now!" Mr. Ericson's voice said. "I'll show running

lights in a minute." The darker patch disappeared.

Ernie backed around the cabin on his hands and knees. He stood up, and his shoulder bumped the boat hanging from davits. It was partly lowered, all ready. He fumbled around and found a big outboard motor, all mounted and covered with a tarp. His hand touched loose metal, and he picked up three-four links of heavy chain. He stood there, hefting that chain and telling himself that, boy, Mister, he had made one bad move tonight, and unless he made a good one now, the Sault wouldn't have any locks by daybreak!

He untied his shoes and kicked out of them and pulled off one sock. He slipped the chain into that sock and edged toward the pilothouse, holding his breath, his mind saying over and over that it was up to him, up to him.

THE door was open. In the binnacle glow he could see Mr. Ericson's face bent over the wheel. A big revolver lay on the ledge under the windows.

Mr. Ericson started to turn his head as Ernie eased inside, and so the sock full of chain caught him on the temple instead of the back of the head, but that didn't matter. He went down like a beef.

Kind of funny, the way your mind'll work in a pinch. Ernie put his knee against the wheel so she'd hold steady and the cook wouldn't get suspicious. Then he looked around and saw a length of light line coiled on a hook. It was simple, tying Mr. Ericson's hands behind his back. That made it only two to one.

A downbound freighter dead ahead in the channel was blasting away with his fog signal, but the rain was slacking a little because Ernie could see his lights. He checked the course and lashed the wheel. He knew he was still a quarter-mile from the channel. He hadn't grown up on that old river for nothing. He had a few minutes before he had to think about tangling with other vessels.

He picked up Mr. Ericson's gun and slipped down to the deck. He was halfway for'ard before he could make out the cook. Then he saw him, just a blob at the starboard bow.

"Stick up your dukes!" Ernie said, jamming the gun into the cook's ribs. "Navy's aboard, Jack!" he said. "Take it easy!"

The cook kind of gargled and squirmed, but Ernie just jabbed him harder with the gun.

"Rest of you boys are taken good care of," he said, figuring a little lying wouldn't hurt. "Just you hold it, and we won't get too tough!"

He ran his free hand over the man. A pistol was in his pants pocket. Ernie flipped it overboard.

That blast let go. . . . It like to flattened them out. It knocked Ernie over, but he bounced up again, still hanging on to the revolver.

"Okay, now!" he said. "We'll go to the pilothouse. Take it easy—with the dukes a little higher, please!"

The cook didn't say a word. Not a word! Ernie could feel him tremble while he walked, though, and when he got to the pilothouse and made out Mr. Ericson stretched there, he kind of whimpered.

"Up in there and take the wheel," Ernie said, "and one move toward them engine-room signals, and you're a plugged coot. Steady as she goes," he said, and reached for the whistle lanyard and blew three blasts, because he was pretty close to the channel.

The rain was lifting still more. Away upstream Ernie could see another vessel coming. But it was a long ways off. Buoys blinked and gleamed all up and down the channel, and—funny thing, Ernie seemed to hear Uncle Nick talking, telling where the scows had dumped what the dredge brought up.

Up to that minute he hadn't had a plan. He'd figured on turning around and heading back to dock. But suppose something went wrong? Suppose the engineer got suspicious and came up? Suppose the old *Blake* got out of control or hit something they couldn't see close up to the Landing? Why, there just wouldn't be any Landing left! But those buoys, and kind of hearing Uncle Nick's voice, gave him an idea.

"Starboard a point," he said, and jabbed the cook with his gun and watched her come up. "Starboard a point!" he said again, squinting at that one buoy. "Steady as she goes!" he said, and felt all relaxed.

He rang for full speed as the cook finally got words out.

"You're alone!" the cook said, like it was a crime.

"But you got a gun in your ribs," Ernie said. "That makes it about even, I'd say!"

HE leaned forward, watching the buoy, figuring how far off the bank he was.

"Okay!" he snapped, and he poked the cook's ribs hard. "Let her go! For'ard, now, and on the jump!"

He had a crimp in the cook, and no mistake. They went down the deck at a trot. Ernie made the cook stand against the break of the fo'castle deck while he frisked him again. He found his cigarette-lighter in a shirt pocket. He told the cook to stand there and pray. He backed over to the hawsepipe, gun on the cook every second, and groped for the fuse. He got it. He snapped on the lighter and touched it to the fuse just as they struck.

She didn't strike hard—not in that mud. She just sighed up into it, and took a list to port, and commenced to swing around as Ernie took the cook aft at a gallop.

Well, they were right at the engine-room companionway with the cook lying down on his face when the engineer came up and took a look into Ernie's gun.

"You boys got about six minutes," he said, "to get your boss into the boat and go yonder. Make it lively—and one crooked move and you'll all three be here when them groceries of yours start to pop!"

It was as simple as that. Those two were plenty tough babies—had to be, to take on the job they had. But between that fuse sputtering in the forepeak and that gun in Ernie's hand, they moved good and spry. They heaved Mr. Ericson into the boat and got in themselves, and lowered away; and by the time that blast let go, they were quite a ways off.

Not far enough off, of course. It like to flattened them out. It was the dangdest gust of wind you ever heard about. It knocked Ernie over on his back in the bow, but he bounced up again before the others did, still hanging to Mr. Ericson's revolver.

Of course, the Landing was turned out, even to babies. There wasn't a pane of glass left in town. When they saw Ernie with a gun and Mr. Ericson tied up and just starting to wiggle, they certainly gawped. But they all did what Ernie said, and by the time a patrol boat swung in and a Coast Guard lieutenant stepped ashore, there must have been a dozen-fifteen duck guns and rifles on those dudes.

"Boy, Mister, are they movin' ore!" Ernie said to himself.

The Lieutenant took Ernie aboard the patrol boat, and Ernie told it all, what he'd seen and guessed and found.

"It just kind of come to me," he said, "that Mr. Ericson was an important kind of man, for a fact. He looked it and acted it," he said. "He spent two years finding out about this river, makin' out it was just for fish and tourists. I was plenty nosey, all right—but why was he so interested in gettin' rid of me and having the town down on me besides? He even stole my girl," he said.

"Then there was too many groceries for a crew of six," he said. "And my Uncle Nick, he said you couldn't get hold of enough dynamite to blow up a stump here. And that lifeboat was built for speed, not safety. And—well, you see, Lieutenant, I just got adding two plus two until they made about nine."

THE Lieutenant looked over Ernie's shoulder.

"Come in, bosun," he said.

The bosun from another patrol boat came in.

"Sir," he said, "there's a hole in that new dike they made dumping from the dredge you could turn a battleship around in! It didn't hurt the main channel a bit, but there's another one now, right up onto the Neebish shoals. That blast wouldn't've left even a *part* of a lock if it'd let go up above!"

That made Ernie feel all right, because Uncle Nick could get out with his rafts now, and Aunt Em could have her operation, and he was just thinking about some other things he'd like to clean up, when the lieutenant began to grin and took him by the arm.

"Come on outside," he said. "The home folks have been waiting for a look at you."

It seemed like they had, all right. Old man Nash yelled, "Here he comes!" and waved his hat, and Ted Beauchamp, who'd insulted him yesterday morning, grabbed his hand; Uncle Nick, with tears in his eyes, as Ernie could see because it was good dawn by then, put his arm around Ernie's shoulders, without speaking, and hugged him hard.

Ernie was so fussed by it he wanted to get away. They all knew he hadn't stolen any motor; they weren't off of him any more. But he didn't like being made a fuss over and wanted to get away.

He wasn't the only one, either. Stella was running away—her head tilted back and one wrist against her mouth like she was holding back crying about things she was sorry for.

"Just a minute," Ernie said to Uncle Nick. "I'll be back in just a minute," he said. "Maybe five or ten," he said. "I had one more thing to do," he said, "and it looks like a cinch!" Then he started hellatylarrup after Stella.

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A story from leisurely old days before radio and income taxes and modern world wars had altered our lives.

Wild Wine-Waters

by

ALVAH MILTON KERR

JADED and restless, John Marsh got up from the sumptuous bed. He sat on the edge of it a few moments listening, an impatient scowl on his gaunt face. From the ballroom, somewhere above him in the big hotel, came the music of an orchestra and the faint, satiny shuffling of feet sliding rhythmically to and fro upon a polished floor. He looked at his watch. It was but eleven and the music and dancing would continue yet for a long time.

He craved sleep as the starving crave food. For weeks it had come to him only fitfully, and sometimes through whole nights not at all. In him the implacable acid of insomnia worked, unwearied weariness, the wage of sinful strain and toil. With a grimace he arose and pushed an electric button and sat down in the rosy flare of a pink-shaded lamp. He closed his eyes, rolling his strong head slowly from side to side upon the cushioned back of the chair. He had come to Thermal Springs for the baths, treatment heralded as magic for many ills and balm for those who starved for sleep. And the management gave a noisy ball twice in each week! It was insufferable. He picked up a periodical from the table and began turning the leaves. Upon an inner page his eye caught a peculiar caption: "The Virtues of Wild Waters." It had an alluring sound and he began to read:

> Here through the leafy shadows glides an amber-brown brook, a brook stained by the vegetable juices of deep swamps and filtering layers of forest mold. Dip up some of the water in a glass, and it is like clear old wine, whose last lees settled to the bottom half a century ago. Even when the sun breaks through screening boughs and turns the brook to transparent gold, you may kneel and look in vain for any floating particles of impurity. Drink of it with delight and without fear. It is the tonic wild water of the woods; there is virtue in every drop.

Marsh lifted his dark eyes with a deepening luster in them; he stirred in the easy chair as if touched by unaccustomed pleasure. For a moment he had visions of a deep green forest in Wisconsin as he knew it when a child; the very smells of it seemed to rise to his nostrils.

He again eagerly dropped his eyes to the printed page.

> How often have I fled thither, panting like the hart for the water-brooks, thirsting for a taste of this primitive medicine distilled in the ancient laboratory of the forest! I have come, choked with unwholesome accumulations of the so-called civilized community, cloyed with too abundant food, poisoned with luxury; I have come with a body heavy and inert, with brain fagged and weary, and plunged my lips deep in this wild wine-water and renewed myself as from the fountain of eternal youth. When a man has drunk copiously of this elixir for a week, food will begin to have once more the old ambrosial flavor it had in the days of his youth, and sleep will again fold him in the seamless mantle that she threw about him in his childhood.

Marsh sat for a few moments, his eyes still dwelling upon the printed page, but the letters fused together and the page faded away. He was again in the swampy woods back of the "big field" on his father's farm, and the satiny shuffling of feet in the ballroom became whispering winds, and the orchestra's strains were bird-songs.

"Pshaw! I am going crazy!" he burst out. "That stuff is simply poetic nonsense!" He threw the periodical aside and went to an open window and looked out. From the height upon which the hotel stood he looked westward across the roofs of lesser buildings to the tumbled world of the Big Hills, dim and vague in the moonlight as domes of fading smoke. His forehead wrinkled. "I wonder if there might not be such streams of water, there in the woods?" he reflected. "Pah! the stuff is humbuggery! Still, there might be some virtue in drinking a lot of pure water, and benefit in hunting for it." He looked up. How indescribably clear and large were the stars! How different from the pale drizzle of stars that sometimes glinted brokenly through the pall of smoke that hung over Chicago! He had come from ten years of struggle in that smoke. He thought with sickening revulsion of the rattle and roar of the loop district, of the bellowing clamor of the wheat and stock pits, of the feverous turmoil that had been his life. And he used to glory in it! Now the very thought of it rasped across his nerves like a blatant discord.

"The fight is certainly all out of me," he muttered, and turned back to the lamp. He sat down and brushed his unsteady fingers across his face in indecision. It was not his wont to vacillate. There was a look of push and dominance in his square chin and strong nose, but his body was flaccid, his mind worn. Besides, he was cynical; he did not believe much in anything or anyone. In him was an accretion of distrust, that tragedy of doubt which gathers and hardens in one long an intimate part of a business the secret marrow of which is cruelty, with its outer aspect an alluring disguise. The declared virtues of "wild water" left his doubt unmastered, but the spirit of the flowery clauses clung in his mind like perfume. What would life be like out in the Big Hills? He thought of a conversation that had fallen between himself and a rheumatic guest that evening, down in the lobby of the hotel.

"I once worked this section of the Ozarks as a canvasser," the distempered young man had said. "Sold Bibles and revolvers to the natives, principally west of here. It is a big, breezy, rugged clutter of natural things out there; odd folks and odd ways. In the fall, piles of Ben Davis apples come down from that region. There's a family named Buckthorn in among the hills there, man and wife and daughter, who are distinct human

beings. They are the biggest, freest sort of things! A good deal like the hills. Every stick of timber in their house is cedar; the whole thing smelled as nice as a cedar chest. And how that woman could fry chicken! I hung around there for three days. The girl was shy, but strong! I'll bet she could throw Frank Gotch! There is a lake in the woods near Buckthorn's. Say, if you like fishing you ought to go out there; it is only twenty or twenty-five miles. The bass in that lake are so tame and hungry they come right out of the water and rummage in your pockets for bait."

Marsh had lifted his hands in laughing protest as he walked away. The young fellow's talk barely interested him then; now it worked alluring fancies. A dwelling of cedar and smelling like a fragrant chest, and down in the deep woods somewhere a stream of brown-gold water that would bring sleep!

He got up quickly, threw off his silk sleeping-clothes and dressed himself in a plain gray suit, and with a heavy walking-stick in his hand, went out. If he did not return that night he would send someone to the hotel for what he might need. He was going to find the cedar house and the wine-water! If he remained in his room no doubt he would lie awake all night. He would walk; he would tire his body in the open air. That or a sedative was his only hope. Night after night in Chicago, during the winter that had just passed, he had walked from his Auditorium apartments half way to Jackson Park and back, courting the drowsiness that follows the buffeting of cold winds and tired body.

BY midnight he was in the fringe of the Big Hills beyond the limits of the little town, walking steadily westward on the main road. In him began to stir a pleasurable exhilaration, the hunter's expectancy, the explorer's mental warmth. Mystery whispered in the night-world about him; adventure lay ahead. He began to forget his ills.

Before starting, he had talked of the way with a hotel stable boy, a youth who knew the Hills as Marsh knew La Salle Street and the Board of Trade. Buckthorn's was "Jest a shade short of twenty mile, on the right-hand side of the road 'bout two mile past the Hosea Meetin'-house. Buckthorn's barn-gate is hinged t' the biggest elm tree yeh ever saw, an' there's twenty acres of orchard below the house." That was a part of the garrulous talk of the boy, and Marsh went forward with the pictures it engendered floating vaguely in his mind. He felt no anxiety; in the morning, or sometime on the morrow, he would find the place. He would have the night to himself under the stars; if he grew tired enough he would lie down in some dry spot on a hillside and sleep. The fragrance and balm of young spring weather was in the air, a fresh and delicious coolness bathed him.

He found himself inwardly expressing amazement that heaven and earth could be so beautiful at night. He was surprised at the number of songs and cries to which the darkness gave voice. He never knew before that frogs sang, nor that their voices were like bells, nor that great choirs of them sang together in the swamps at night. He began to perceive that musical tone is the basis of almost all sound. The very hoot of owls had a mellow vibration.

As he followed the road onward, he became greatly interested in this phenomenon, not aware that for the first time in years he was really awake to nature and listening deeply. Again and again he found himself pausing to listen to the dulcet mumbling of water slipping over logs or stones under some small bridge or down some gullied bank by the roadside, noting how full of velvet vowels was the speech of running water. He wondered if at least one among the streams calling to him that night might not be a golden rill, the precious wine-water. But the finest physical thing in all that long strange walk was the perfume of blossoming wild crab-trees and white plum bushes in the low, dark places, and now and again the breath of an apple orchard blown down from some slope over a vine-wound fence. In the damp, starlit darkness the world of bloom seemed to ooze impalpable honey. By times he sat down and listened and looked about him, wondering why men did not walk oftener at night, and why they ever cared to live in the inferno of the loop district. He felt no inclination to sleep, the night-world was so strange, the heavens so fearfully beautiful.

At length the dawn began to break. The east took fire, and through a half hour grew to an indescribable conflagration. Streamers of rose extended entirely across the heavens. He looked up into a dome beside the magnificence of which all the paintings and creations of man that he could remember seemed trivial. He saw how to south and west and north the Big Hills rolled their enormous green heaps into the sky, wondrous with the shimmer of the dawn's glow on millions of young leaves. Again he questioned why he had buried himself so long in confusion and ugliness and smoke.

It was five o'clock in the morning when he came to Hosea Meeting-house, a weather-beaten building by the roadside. An hour later he approached a house upon a slope that bent southward. It was a wide, squat affair with a long wing at the rear, and as brown as a chestnut. Below the house on the slope stretched a big orchard, a snowstorm of white blossoms, and below the orchard were wooded bottomlands, and in the midst of these a little lake that seemed to gleam and roll upon its bed like a gigantic globule of quicksilver. The sight filled Marsh with fresh and pleasurable interest. The lake must be the one described as harboring the voracious bass, and the strange-looking dwelling must be Buckthorn's house.

HE felt it indelicate to call at the house while the hour was yet so early. He climbed over a low fence and sat down under an apple-tree to wait. Across the road from him lay a wood-pasture in which was a small herd of cattle. As he sat there, he heard cocks crowing and hens singing queer but peculiarly cheerful hymns to the morning sun, and the high-keyed, strophic calling of guinea fowls. The place seemed very peaceful, and he began to drowse. But a moment later an angry, defiant roar across the way aroused him. He arose and leaned upon the fence, looking across the road at the cattle.

From a sparse clump of trees at the farther edge of the pasture he saw a red bull approaching the herd. The animal was bellowing a battle song, a hoarse bravura rumble that rose at times to a kind of boisterous trumpeting. The evident master of the herd, a huge black bull, shook its bulky head and, snorting and slavering, advanced to the combat. The red bull knelt upon its knees and tore the ground with its horns, bellowing defiance; the black animal also knelt and ripped its horns through the dirt, grinding sand and dust into the matted hair of its forehead; then, after maneuvering in circles for a time, they suddenly came together and the battle was on.

Marsh held his breath by times, and his eyes glowed as he watched the combat. "The world-old brute battle for possession of the female," he reflected. "With man the same; fists and stones as weapons long ago; then spears and knives; then guns; now—money."

At that moment a girl approached along the road going toward the house. She was of well-rounded, willowy figure, but a head taller than the average woman, and moved with a quite indescribable air of physical power and vigor. Her gown was a cheap blue muslin and in her left hand she swung a white sunbonnet. In her right she carried a stone, as if in readiness to throw it at any fitting object that might present. Her face was radiant with mischief, health and the glory of the morning. When her eyes fell upon the battle in the pasture she stopped still and watched it with an

"You weaklin', you quitter!" she exclaimed. "Why did you give up?"

interest so absorbing as to amount to a kind of ecstasy. She was not a hundred feet distant from Marsh, yet neither saw the other as they watched the struggle for leadership of the herd.

Back and forth the two powerful brutes hurled each other across the open ground, their joined skulls grinding together, their horns thumping and hammering. Some of the cows looked at them with a mild kind of wonder, while others began cropping the short grass indifferently.

Almost from the first shock of the encounter the red bull was beaten back by the greater weight and strength of its black antagonist, yet stuck with savage madness to the fight. With muscles quivering and bulging, with tendons and joints audibly straining and cracking, the enraged beasts battered across the open ground toward the farther clump of trees and back again almost to the road. There the red bull with twisting neck went down upon its knees and suddenly gave way with a bellowed cry of defeat, but was hurled into the fence by its charging foe. There was a crashing instant, a bawling roar of pain, and the red bull was crushed through the splintered fence, rolling over in the dust of the road.

The black victor, extricating itself from the broken rails, shook its head and walked toward the cows, while the vanquished beast got to its feet and started eastward along the road, passing Marsh with outstretched, bloody muzzle and red eyes fixed agonizingly on the distance.

"You lost," he said half sadly. "Somehow I hoped you might win, but you were attacking the sacred rights of property—and that, you know, is dangerous business." His eyes turned to follow the defeated bull and fell upon the young woman. She stepped aside as the animal passed, looking at it with mingled scorn and commiseration.

"You weaklin', you quitter!" she exclaimed. "Why'd you give up? Why didn't you die fightin'? I would!"

SHE looked after the retreating brute, and when it was a few rods distant lifted her arm and threw the stone that she held in her hand. The missile struck the creature with a dull thump, but the defeated one seemed not to know or care and fled onward dumbly. The young woman turned about and looked at the hulking victor. She studied the animal a moment.

"Pah! You big black tyrant! I don't like you neither!" she broke out, and began casting about the road for a stone to throw. At that she saw Marsh. His unexpected presence, the utter strangeness of the pale, thin-cheeked, hollow-eyed face looking toward her, sent a gleam of fright and wonder across her countenance. For a little she stared blankly; then her face turned scarlet.

Marsh was smiling. He took off his hat and climbed over the fence and stood by the road, but the girl thrust on her sunbonnet and started quickly toward the house. As she passed him he inquired respectfully if the place were Mr. Buckthorn's. She did not lift her hidden face nor speak, but nodded her head as she almost ran. He saw that she was laughing, and he himself chuckled pleasurably as he watched the willowy swaying of her splendid figure. Now he was wide awake; curiosity, interest, the odd elation he had felt under the night's spell, came back to him. Here too was a glimpse of something natural, to his eyes a new sort of woman and a new sort of beauty. He followed her slowly toward the house. She did not look back until entering the door; then her face turned toward him for an instant and was gone.

When he had come nearer, he saw that a great elm rose beyond the house, where a gate led to a group of sheds and log stables, and that maple

trees shaded the yard of the dwelling. As he entered the yard, a huge man, bare-headed, bare-footed and clad only in denim trousers and a "hickory" shirt, came out upon the porch of the structure. He looked at Marsh solemnly and with distinct hostility. Marsh glanced at the ponderous person on the porch, hesitated, then stepped forward, a smile lighting up his pale features.

"Good morning, sir," he said, in a tone diplomatically engaging. The big man stared at him a moment keenly, then leveled a commanding finger at him, much as one might point a pistol.

"Stop there, right there into your tracks!" he roared. "We aint a-needin' any lightnin' rods, ner patent churns, ner fannin'-mills, ner subscription books! You don't need to come any furder!"

Marsh stopped as he was bidden but laughed despite himself. "My dear sir," he said, "I have absolutely nothing to sell; neither am I a detective, or insurance agent, or a horse-thief. Possibly you may doubt the latter statement, as I am a member of the Chicago Board of Trade. I'm from Thermal Springs—been taking the treatment; seems to be doing me no good. Can't sleep nights and my digestion is on a strike. When I can't sleep I walk. Been walking all night and, for the first time in a month, I'm hungry."

The forbidding giant lowered the pistol-like finger. "You hev been out all night, an' y'r hongry? Well, you walk right square up onto this here porch an' shake hands with me! I'm purty tol'able brash sometimes, but the hongry air always welcome." His voice was a sort of mellow thunder; his big face was suddenly aglow with good will. He thrust a great warm hand down to Marsh, but when the younger man had taken it the giant held him back a few moments, scrutinizing his face. As Marsh smilingly returned the look he saw that his host's cheeks were red as apples, and that he had but one eye, a luminous green orb. "I want to ast one furder question afore you come in, suh," said the hill-man. "I want to make sure y'r not a-foolin' me. You don't happen to be a preacher, now?"

"No, oh, no indeed!" laughed Marsh. "I haven't that distinction! I'm just a common sinner."

The big man sighed with relief and began shaking Marsh's hand vigorously. "Well, I like a p'int-blank confession like that. I'm fairly religious myself, but not in paramount good standin' on account of my heterojenus beliefs. Onct in a while a preacher gits in here an' pesters me with argyments an' gits me all het up. I throwed one of 'em out a while back an' that hurt Mary's feelin's. Come right up on the porch, suh, an' set. Hev this cheer." His great voice rolled out pantingly as he drew Marsh up the steps and placed a chair for him. "Don't mind if I talk purty loud," he went on. "Mary's a leetle deef an' I git used to bellerin' at folks. A feller told me onct to practice whisperin' when I wasn't talkin' and it would likely tone my voice down. I tried it, but it got round among the Hills that I was under conviction an' prayin' silent all the time, so I stopped it. Now, what might the name be?"

"John Marsh," was the reply. "I presume you are Colonel Buckthorn?"

The big man fixed him with his clear eye for a moment. "The *Buckthorn* air proper an' straight, suh, but not the *Colonel*. Excuse me, suh, while I call Mary. She's the real boss of the place, o' course."

He turned and entered the door, filling it almost entirely as he passed through. Marsh sat rocking and smiling. He heard the giant's mellow thunder back in the direction of, he fancied, the kitchen. "Mary! Mary! You, Judith! Say, we've got a hongry man out here! Put on a extra plate!"

Marsh looked about him. The walls of the house were of squared cedar logs; the porch and all other parts of it also seemed made of cedar. "This place would bring a fortune at a lead-pencil factory," he laughed. "It does smell nice." An old yellow dog came haltingly up the steps, sniffed at his knees, and, apparently finding him acceptable, lay down at his feet. Across the yard moved a turkey-gobbler, harrowing the ground with the down-driven points of its wings, its carriage kingly.

The giant came out the door. His feet were now encased in high-topped boots. "Hate to wear 'em," he said, glancing down, "—make me feel smothered, but it's Mary's orders when we hev company. She'll be ready in a minnet; her an' Judith's fixin' up a bit—leetle early for visitors, I reckon. Yes, suh, you oughter go barefooted; gives a man a fundimentolous feelin' of liberty. Nothin' ever tastes better than the feelin' of new plowed ground to the bare bottoms of y'r feet when the soil is warm an' mealy in the spring. There's Mary comin'. Here, leetle gal!"

MARSH arose, hat in hand, as Mrs. Buckthorn came to the door. The "leetle gal" was almost as large as Buckthorn himself. She had her work-stained hands rolled up in her apron, but her face was as trusting and motherly as love itself. She looked at Marsh a moment over her glasses and smiled. "Why, come right in, suh, come right in an' be at home," she said. "Adam says y'r not overly well, an' I'm shore y'r welcome. Breakfus' will be ready in a minnet."

Marsh thanked her sincerely, with a sudden agreeable feeling of warmth. He followed her in, Buckthorn going off to the stables. Marsh entered a large room which contained a fireplace at one side, now filled with plum-blossom sprays, a round rag-carpet rug in the center of the floor, chairs and a huge cedar chest against one of the walls. He found later that there were a dining-room, two bedrooms and a kitchen in the rear. The whole house was ceiled with cedar, and much of the furniture looked to have been made by some carpenter of the region after Buckthorn's designs. Everything was big and natural and rough, but the place was so clean and smelled so finely that its charm began to steal upon Marsh agreeably. A grateful odor, too, of frying bacon and boiling coffee touched his nostrils.

Presently Buckthorn came tramping in, his great voice a trumpet of good cheer. They went into the dining-room, and as they were about to sit at table, Buckthorn turned and rummaged an instant in a tall, plain cupboard and brought forth a brown bottle.

"I don't know if you air in the notion of drinkin', Mr. Marsh, but in these spring months I frequent take a mouthful of whisky in the mornin' afore I eat, always with a leetle tansy or wild churry bark in the licker, but aint done so yit this spring. Shall I pour you a sup into a cup?"

"No, I thank you very much, but whisky doesn't agree with me," said Marsh.

"I approve y'r decision," returned the big man, placing the bottle in the cupboard. "I used to guzzle a right smart of it in them rantankerous days when I lost my off-side eye a-fightin', but I quit. It on'y serves to work a man furder into hell."

Marsh expressed agreement with his views and they fell to eating. Mrs. Buckthorn did not sit with them but waited upon them with motherly solicitude. Marsh found there was delicious fried chicken with the bacon, and eggs and hot corn-pone and coffee that was really coffee. He could not remember when he had enjoyed food so much. He glanced around at the room; everything was honestly, openly crude, yet clean as rock-candy. He felt steal over him a curiously sweet consciousness of ease, of welcome and contentment. All the time down at the bottom of his mind there was curiosity and wonder about the daughter of the house. It seemed odd that she did not appear.

"What might y'r age be, Mr. Marsh?" asked Buckthorn, looking up suddenly.

"Thirty-two," Marsh replied.

"Married?"

Marsh smilingly shook his head.

"Any children?"

Marsh laughed outright, and Mrs. Buckthorn with a gasp exclaimed, "Why, Enoch Buckthorn!"

The big man, perceiving the *faux pas*, flushed scarlet. "Excuse me, suh, excuse me!" he stammered. "Excuse the blunder; I make a heap of 'em. My women folks hev to watch me all the time." He turned to Mrs. Buckthorn. "Where's Judith? Aint she comin' to breakfus'?" he asked.

"She got breakfus' over to Peevey's afore she come home. Janey made her," was Mrs. Buckthorn's reply.

"Oh," assented the husband, but when his wife had gone to the kitchen he turned his keen eye to Marsh. "That daughter of ourn aint afeered of wil'cats or the devil," he confided, "but it bothers her to meet strangers, special a—a city man. I bet she's gone off somewheres by herse'f." He chuckled.

"I saw her on the road," said Marsh soberly. "She is a fine-looking young woman."

"None likelier nowhar'," declared the father with fond enthusiasm.

Concluding the meal, they went out and sat under the maples in the yard. Marsh found the big hill-man a diverting paradox, naïve and innocent as a child in some directions and oddly keen and knowing in others. He propounded his homely philosophy of life with a rambling flourish of phrases, but asked personal questions with the appalling directness of a small boy.

"Air you a rich man, Mr. Marsh?" he asked.

"No, not as the term 'rich man' is understood in this country," Marsh replied. "One must possess some millions in order to be termed rich in the United States, you know. I am worth possibly a hundred thousand, not more. I'm one of the extremely little fellows. I'm really poor."

Buckthorn held up his hands and blew a great breath, shaking his head in wonder and despair. "What er state of mind! What er condition of things!"

"Yes," assented Marsh, "it's a disease. I've been worth half a million twice, and several times I've stood to win millions, but the other fellows got me."

"An' you was tryin' to get them?"

"Surely."

"An' you got them blue rings 'round y'r eyes, an' y'r holler cheeks an' trimbly fingers, a-tryin' to git more'n a hundred thousand?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I vum!" the big man gasped. "Mr. Marsh, excuse me, suh, but to look square at you one wouldn't know you was a fool."

"But I am," laughed Marsh.

"Certainly you air," agreed his host solemnly.

"Yes, I was a fool in losing my health," went on Marsh agreeably, "and I'm a fool about getting it back. For instance, listen to this." And, whimsically, he found a kind of delight in telling the astonished hill-man all about the virtues of the wild wine-waters of which he was in search.

"Bog waters? Water that runs out through rotten roots an' dead leaves?" exclaimed Buckthorn. "Did the feller who writ the piece actually say that kind of water was good to drink?"

"Well, not bog water, or stagnant water, of course, but running water, yellow with the gathered juices of decaying plant life. That is about what he said."

TO Buckthorn the conception seemed beyond the pale of expressible derision. He was silent a little, his one green eye dwelling on Marsh pityingly. "Well," he said, "I wouldn't doubt none but you could find er branch of this yaller water in these parts, for I've seen 'em that looked about like maple syrup, an' undoubtedly they'd either kill or cure you, pervidin' you wanted to tempt God by drinkin' that kind of pizen. But I've got er spring down in the orchard, there across the road. You better stay 'round here er while an' drink of that, if y'r keerin' for real water. I've been drinkin' it for thirty years, and as er biverage it don't seem to be onhealthy, considerin' me as er specermin." He beamed on Marsh convincingly.

Marsh looked at him wistfully, half laughingly. "I believe, Mr. Buckthorn, that I really would like to stay here awhile and drink the water of your spring. I believe I might learn again how to sleep, here among these quiet hills. I am a very weary man, weary of the world, out yonder. I am tired of selfishness and insincerity. You and your wife rest me; I can't tell why, but you rest me."

Buckthorn's eye softened. "Y'r welcome, Mr. Marsh, to stay jus' as long as it pleases yeh. Mary will make yeh comfor'ble. What y've been a-needin', to my mind, is er wife an' er mother, especial er mother. I sort o' reckon yourn is dead or you wouldn't be here an' in the fix y'r in."

Marsh nodded. "Of course, I'll pay you well, Mr. Buckthorn," he said after a moment.

"No, suh, if you was bound to pay us we wouldn't keep you. We don't hev folks 'round us that way," said the big man almost severely. "You can hev any hoss we got an' ride or walk, an' hunt yaller water to suit yourself, but don't drink it. Mary likes to 'tend funerals, but I don't." He shook with laughter.

"I'll make return in some way," said Marsh. "I'm a stranger to you; I couldn't sponge in that way."

"Aw, now, y'r a sick man, aint yer? Don't be er fool, suh!" protested Buckthorn. "Say," he went on more softly, "yeh might be a sort of teacher to my leetle gal Judith, now! She's er wild sort of creeter, never had much schoolin', an' you could help her mind a heap by jus' readin' to her an' tellin' her ever'thing 'bout the world out yonder. What do you say, now?"

Marsh laughed, then grew sober. "I would be glad to do that, if you liked to have me. Perhaps it would entertain her, perhaps be beneficial—I don't know. I'll send down to Thermal and get some of my things and some books."

"Good!" said Buckthorn explosively. "It's er bargain. Jus' make y'rse'f at home—but don't drink bog water, now!"

"Oh, that's humbug, I suppose, but I am going to hunt for the sort of water the fellow wrote about. The hunting will do me good, at least," said Marsh.

"Suttenly; that's right; huntin' for er thing is mostly worth more then the thing itse'f," laughed the hill-man. "Now, I'll tell you how to get er nap. Go down in the orchard an' lay down under a appletree, an' look up at the bees ermongst the blossoms; jus' keep lookin' up at the bees an' listenin' to their dronin', an' the fust thing yeh know y'll drop ersleep. Try it."

Marsh did, and in his exhaustion slept for hours. When he awoke he could not realize for a little space to what region he had drifted. He looked about and saw the Big Hills, wide-based and wallowing in forests, and below him the valley with its woods and wild meadows, and the distant waters of the lake curling in the sun like silver shavings. He got up, stretched himself luxuriously and went down through the great orchard. Beyond it, he found a path that led toward the lake. Soothed and rested, he followed the path. Shadows of elm and oak and basswood fell about him like veils of quivering lace; a bluebird crossed in front of him like a winged violet; squirrels scolded; a cuckoo's call went wandering before him; the trees whispered together.

As he proceeded, the path threaded a way among bayous, glassy tongues of water thrust deep into the verdure as if the lake were tasting the fresh greenery of the land. Then he heard a human voice singing. He stood still and listened. It seemed to him he had never laid his ear against notes more soft and liquid. The song was a common, worn-out air, one that had been sung and whistled when he was a lad until the public had adjudged it a pestilential thing. Now, weaving itself with the hum of insects and the calling and caroling of birds, to Marsh it sounded oddly sweet. He closed his eyes, and, standing there in the odor-

He only saw a bloody, red-eyed face pushing toward him.

ous reek of the watery lowlands, listened like one slipping into a dream. It was a region of wild, shy, hiding things, but the musical cry of passion and mating was everywhere. With all the rest, was this human song a mating call? He went toward it listening, and came to the lake's marge eagerly.

In the midst of a swaying fleet of pond lilies he saw the singer, Judith Buckthorn. She was upon her knees in an old rowboat, and with her sleeves rolled to her armpits, was pulling up snaky lily stalks from the ooze of the lake's bed. With a glance he saw how large and white and beautifully fashioned were her arms as she thrust them into the water. Piles of the lilies and other swamp flowers were in the boat, but still she went on gathering the big golden-hearted cups, singing as she worked. Marsh tiptoed away, but still watched. Finally she sank almost flat among the flowers and closed her eyes and was still.

The man stood in silence, except that his heart shook him as it beat. There was a breeze from the south, which, with the sun's help, stirred those silver shavings out in the lake. By slow degrees it brought the boat almost to his feet. The girl's eyes were still closed, her face rapt. "She is trying some sort of love spell," he thought. At that, her eyes opened wide and looked up to his. With a cry she leaped up, all but overturning the boat. Marsh snatched off his cap and bowed low, himself frightened and tumbling out quick, jumbled phrases of apology.

"I'm Mr. Marsh, Mr. John Marsh, your father's boarder! I'm to be your teacher! I—I am looking for some golden wine-water, and I didn't expect to find you this way and frighten you! I—I—" He stood bowing and at a dead loss what further to say.

THROUGH a few breaths the girl stood panting and staring at him; then her face and neck crimsoned and she seized the oars as if to drive the boat away.

"Don't do that!" he cried. "I'll go! No, I won't; I'll wade out and capture you!" He began to laugh.

The girl paused and with half-hung head laughed in return. She pushed her heavy brown hair back from her face with her moist hands, and blushingly drew down the sleeves over her arms. "I reckon I oughtn't been frightened, but I wasn't 'spectin' to see no strangers, an' I was jus' rummagin' 'round," she began.

Her speech, though hurried, had a drawling, musical cadence. As she spoke, she swept her eyes over him swiftly, timidly. She saw that he was above the medium in height, of good frame, but thin, his features regular, his hair brown and parted near the middle and his purple-ringed eyes dazzling. She sank down on the boat's seat and again her eyelids fluttered up.

"I heard you singing," he said. "It was superb. It's a new world to me down here; I don't blame you for 'rummaging 'round.'" There were some splendid flowering stocks near the water's edge. He took out his knife and cut some of them. "I'd like to give these to you—just add a blossom or two to your flowery nest," he said, laughing again. She hesitated, then pushed the boat nearer to him, and he sat on the prow and extended the flowers toward her. "I don't know what they are called, but they have a fine perfume," he added.

"Folks call 'em white-flag 'round here. I'm—I'm obliged." Her breath caught and her mouth twisted excitedly. "I don't know much about bein' perlite. Had I ought to shake hands with you if we air goin' to be acquainted?" Her eyelids fluttered and the color in her rose-stained cheeks deepened.

"Certainly," smiled Marsh, reaching his hand to her. "You honor me, indeed."

He felt an influence sweep through him from her strong hand as he clasped it, a warming, pleasurable wave of something dynamic and vital. As for the girl, when her hand dropped away from his she confusedly pushed back the hair from her low forehead, and her fingers crackled as they crossed her hair. A faint flush came into Marsh's thin cheeks and the

eager light of his eyes flowed over her admiringly.

He saw that her eyes were round and wide apart and in color a kind of golden gray, the thin striations of amber penetrating the pupils being heavier in one eye than the other, producing a vaguely quizzical expression; that her neck was strong and round and milk-white, her nose short and straight, her lips moist and red, her chin square and slightly cleft. But that which swept most strongly upon him was something felt rather than seen, the vivid glow of her bodily health, the undefinable charm of a perfect organic chemistry. For a little he was at a loss for words; then he thought of the yellow brooks.

"I expect you wonder what I am doing in these parts," he began. "Well, it's nothing less foolish than looking for streams of brown-colored water. I read that such water is good for one's health. I doubt it, but I wanted to get away from the Thermal Hotel; I wanted to get into the woods; I'm worn out with city life, you see. In 'rummaging 'round,' did you ever ever happen to notice any little streams that looked—oh, sort of stained honey color by the dead leaves and the moss?" He ended laughingly.

The girl pushed one of the oars back and forth through the water, watching the bubbles it made and puckering her brows above her short nose. She began to smile. "It's a funny kind of notion," she ventured. "I never heard of such a idee, but I reckon I know most every crick an' branch 'mong the hills here. They's a little branch 'cross the lake, over yonder, that is kind of brown and brassy colored. It comes from a spring back in a holler a mile or so. It's clear at the spring but where it runs into the lake it's 'bout the color of lye out of a ash-hopper. Looks like it would kill anybody t' drink it." They laughed together, looking at each other more openly.

"Oh, I don't know; I don't think I'd be afraid," he said. "Anyway, I'd like to see it. Now, if you'd loan me the boat—"

"No, I'll take you to it, if you'd like to hev me. It's jus' fun for me to row." She paused. "Would it be right—you bein' a stranger? Would city girls do things like that?"

"If they did nothing worse! I guess you never saw the tango or—" He broke off sharply. "I make it a rule never to talk about women; most of them are nice and good." He climbed into the boat. "Let me have the oars, won't you? I used to do a bit of rowing in my college days." He flung his cap into the bottom of the boat and rolled up his sleeves. Somewhat abashed by his commanding air, she sat down in the stern among the flowers.

"But you don't know the direction or nothin'," she began.

"Well, you are captain of the expedition; just sing out larboard or starboard, to right or left, and I'll obey. I'm the crew, you know." He drove the boat outward. "Seems good to get oars in my hands again," he chuckled.

"To'ards y'r right," came her mellow drawl; and a little later, "To'ards y'r left." He bowed and obeyed, his eyes shining.

"I wish you'd sing; people on the water always ought to sing," he said.

She shook her head, blushing and twisting her mouth. "I couldn't," she stammered.

"If you were trained, you would be a great singer," he asserted.

Again she shook her head, but the gold of her eyes seemed to burn.

HIS stroke slackened; he was panting and felt suddenly weak. The water glittered and the sun shone hot on his bare head. He was all unused to heat and labor. She glanced at his thin arms and corded neck.

"You aint overly big and you look awful peaked. You better let me do that," she said. "Most ever'body 'round here is big. They are Tennessee folks, Pap says, an' 'most always tall." Suddenly conscious that her words might seem offensive, she added naïvely, "But I bet you could throw 'most any of 'em, if you was only real well."

Marsh laughed aloud. "I hope I won't have to try," he commented, brushing the moisture from his brow.

"Oh, of course, you could never throw Gideon; he's 'most strong enough to pull up a tree," she said, half musingly.

He let the boat drift and looked at her directly. "Who is Gideon?" he demanded.

"Why, Gideon Peevey. He's Janey's brother. I was over there last night. They live 'bout a half mile this side Hosea Meetin'-house. Gideon has a blacksmith shop. Sometimes when he shoes hosses, an' they act up bad, he throws 'em an' nails the shoes on when they're down."

"That must have been the shop I passed at dawn," Marsh commented dryly. He pulled onward slowly, waveringly. In his weakness and in the presence of this superb creature, the thought of anyone being strong enough to "'bout pull up a tree" seemed a thing desirable beyond limitless quantities of gold. Besides, somehow, the statement, coming from her, nettled him. He stopped rowing again. "This Gideon, who is so strong, he is your—well, your very special friend?"

She had pinned the big blossoms that he had given her across her breast, and now she pushed them up about her chin, blushing red. "Him an' me hev knowed each other ever since we was little. I'm so used to him, I don't know; he thinks he knows, but I don't. I reckon, though, I like him." She spoke hesitatingly, yet with obvious honesty.

"One thing I'm sure of," he laughed, "you are not a flirt."

"Mebbe I'd like t' be, but I don't know how."

"Don't ever learn."

"You said Pap told you t' teach me things."

"Not that."

"To'ards the right," came her voice, throaty with smothered laughter. "The branch comes in the lake at the bend, there, right 'mong them crab-trees."

He sent the boat's prow into the grassy bank with all his remaining strength and stepped out. His head was swimming, but he extended his hand to her. She touched his hand with her fingers, but leaped out and ran laughing in among the crab-trees, calling back: "Yes, it looks like lye; it's too thin for honey!"

He went where she was and together they bent over the little stream, gazing. "Hurrah!" he panted. "It's yellow, the golden wine-water of the forest!" He crouched down low, and forming a bowl of his joined hands, dipped up some of the water and drank it. "Cool but not cold; tastes exactly like—water!" he spluttered, glancing up at her.

"It looks more like medicine," she laughed.

"Oh, I don't know; it don't look so bad." He leaned over and plowed his hot hands through the brownish fluid. "Feels as if it were strong and had real body to it. Say, I bet it would put zip in a fellow to bathe in it regular. Let's go up the stream and see what we find."

She made no reply, and as he arose, he lifted his nose toward the crab blossoms, sniffing the pungent perfume with dilated nostrils. "Spicewood and violets, with a hint of roses!" he exclaimed. For reply, the girl swept a lot of the flowering twigs together in her arms and pressed her face among them, her bosom swelling with long-drawn inhalations.

They turned and started up-stream, breaking their way through tall weeds and bramble, and presently entered a grassy opening. Here a massive swamp elm, undermined by the stream, lay prone, its tangle of earth-encrusted roots exposed and damming the stream. Beyond the fallen elm, the obstructed stream had plowed at high water a wide and deep excavation, in which the stream turned slowly in long golden coils. It was much like an enormous topaz, crystalline to the bottom, and they stood for a little time looking at it.

"Something about this water makes me think of your eyes," he said, turning and looking at her. "It's the amber in the pupils, I see." She flushed a deeper rose. "Never mind," he went on, hastily, "I'm not trying to flatter you. I'd be a dog to do that. Something about things out here makes one naturally open and honest, it seems to me. In many ways you are the handsomest woman I ever saw. I have the right to say that once, at least, if I say it honestly—haven't I?"

"I reckon so." Her eyes fluttered and the corners of her red mouth lifted in soft laughter. "Anyhow, I like to hear you say it." She pulled up some long spears of swamp-grass and seating herself, began to plait them together. He threw himself down near her and silently watched the slowly coiling whorls of golden water. He tried to fancy himself in Chicago, but the clamor of the stock pit and the roar of the loop district seemed very far away.

"It's funny, but seems like I've knowed you a long time," came her voice.

He roused himself. "Yes, I feel the same way about you. It is funny. Say, I'm coming over here every morning and take a plunge in this hole. It ought to do me good."

She laughed again. "I reckon it might, but don't drink it; you might get the ager or malaria."

"All right; I guess your advice is good. Say, that big pile of driftwood, across the pool, looks like a rick of dry bones, don't it? Some evening we will row over here and set it on fire. It would make one first-class bonfire, wouldn't it now?"

"'Twould, sure." She was silent a few moments, hesitating. "When do you count on to begin teachin' me?"

"Well, that's so! I ought to be attending to my job. Oh, pshaw! I can't talk about city life or books or Europe, or things of that sort! I don't know anything about them today!" He got to his feet and looked at his watch. "Why, it's long after noon! What will your folks say?"

She arose. "If y'r hungry, we ought to go."

"Oh, let's be a couple of kids and play hooky! Let's go farther up the stream!"

She shook her head. "Not this time. I'll tell you what t' do; we'll gether a lot of things an' hev a picnic here. We'll picnic on sprouts!"

He blinked uncomprehendingly. "Oh, yes, I know," he broke out. "I haven't eaten anything like that for twenty years! Come on!"

Laughing and rosy, she went with him, and after searching about for a time they returned, each with an armful of wild raspberry, blackberry and grape shoots. Some of these they peeled, and with great pretense of enjoyment, munched the succulent pith. At times their eyes met and they laughed giddily. Now and again they heard the long drum-roll of the ruffled grouse, beating his breast in ecstasy of love, the searching *peent, peent* of woodcocks, and the strange, weird calling of far-off bitterns. The air was full of warmth and song and winnowed by many wings; the very ground seemed athrill with feeling.

IN whatever time or place they might have met, doubtless each would have found the other in some degree alluring. Now, close to nature and moved upon by the mysterious all-pervading creative spirit, they saw each other as through an atmosphere of beautifying light. Such charms as she possessed, and they were many, in actual fact increased, while the worn and jaded look died out of Marsh's face. As they went back toward the boat he began to sing with the abandon of an intoxicated troubadour, while she broke away from his side and ran and leaped into the little craft and possessed herself of the oars, laughing immoderately. When he was seated in the stern she turned the boat and sent it outward with long, easy strokes, her bared head a-glimmer in the sunshine, her eyes lustrous, her splendid body swaying to and fro. He watched her with undisguised admiration. When they reached the cedar house it was nearly sunset, and each carried an armful of flowers.

That was the first of many rambles, the searching for golden brooks, long hours of fishing in the lake, the climbing of mountainous hills—a man and a woman roaming a wild paradise. Marsh had a small tent brought out from Thermal and pitched it in the big orchard not far from the spring. It covered him at night, and he began to sleep like a boy and eat like a young ostrich. Every day with the break of dawn he hurried down into the lowlands, rowed across the lake and plunged in the cool waters of the golden pool. His hands ceased trembling; the purple rings faded from about his eyes; he stepped solidly and began to lean back when he walked. Buckthorn took stock of him by times, searching him critically with his one green eye, for the most part approvingly. Judith, too, now and again felt herself pierced by that eye questioningly, and once in reply laid her hand on the giant father's arm and said, "Don't be afeered, Pap; he treats me square." As for Mrs. Buckthorn, she mothered every creature that came in her way.

But on the third evening after the arrival of Marsh the towering figure of Gideon Peevey came in at the Buckthorn gate, and that which was lyric inevitably became epic. Swinging gorilla-like arms, he came with long, slow steps, bearing a smallish head on the hulking shoulders of a Hercules. There was a cruel look about his mouth and sharp nose, but his small hazel eyes were alive with health and bantering fun. Primarily he was an extraordinary fighting animal, secondarily a lover of anything at which one might laugh. That he could throw down unruly horses and nail the iron shoes on them seemed not beyond him.

Marsh looked upon him with a thrill, half admiration, half fear, and a prescient inner sense of battles to come. Though conscious of instinctive recoil from the hateful things rising before him, he felt his heartstrings tighten and his whole nature stiffen with purpose. For John Marsh, even so early as upon this third day of his life among the Big Hills, had begun to plan and dream, and Judith and a vast apple orchard were the heart and fabric of the dream. . . .

A thousand acres of this land, five hundred acres of orchard, and broad meadows with herds of quiet cattle; then a house, big but very simple; and Judith, the superb, with some big, natural boys and girls. Something like that had begun to gather and float in his mind. He looked at Peevey, a daunting shape blocking the way. He had fought men with millions in seeking financial dominance—his old dream: would he retreat before this single figure, powerful though it looked to be? He did not know; nothing was yet definite, except that curious stiffening and tightening of the cords and fiber of him.

As for Gideon Peevey, the truth of the situation dawned only slowly in his mind. That the city man, entering the field from an entirely different plane of life, could be his rival at first seemed impossible. He doubted and watched, but finally began to breed the sullen inner fury of the jealous. At the end of a week, he waylaid Marsh and fiercely bade him quit the country. Marsh whitened, but looked the menacing hill-man squarely in the face and refused.

"I've bucked bigger obstacles than you are, Mr. Peevey," he said. "I like it here. I shall stay."

Later, Judith and Marsh sat one afternoon under a basswood on a hillside, looking down upon the great valley. A tender film of heat quivered upon the marshes; wrinkles of silver ran after puffs of wind across the waters; the blossoming basswood droned above them like a beehive. Marsh told her of his dream. For a little space she was as a part of the quivering heat, the racing silver, the humming bees—a thing of ecstasy. Then she was a frightened, troubled woman.

"But," she said, looking out with clouded eyes, "you'll hev to whip

Gideon—mebbe you'll hev to kill him."

Marsh's nervous fingers gripped together. "I'll do one or the other—if I have to."

She looked at him. "You can't do the first. You can't never," she said. "An' the other—you mustn't do that. I couldn't never live with you then. I like him—some. I've always expected to marry him. But I don't want to now—'less he makes me."

Marsh was silent. "Well, I'll simply take you and go away," he broke out. "No, I don't do business that way. I'm going to live here. I'm going to cover these hillsides with orchards; I'm going to drain these marshes and have droves of cattle in them, and I'm going to have you."

Her eyes were lustrous; then again they clouded. She shook her head slowly. "But—Gideon!" she whispered.

That evening they went down into the valley, rowed across the lake and made their way to the golden pool. They sat for a time watching the day die wonderfully in the water; then as the blue dusk deepened, Marsh set the broad rick of driftwood on fire, and they stood together before the leaping flames as before an altar.

Then, like turmoil incarnate, Gideon Peevey came crashing through the thickets into the radiance of the burning rick. He was hatless, barefooted and clad only in shirt and trousers, and these, dripping water, clung to the great muscles of his figure like glistening ripples. Moisture from his wet hair trickled down his red face and thick neck, and over the ridges of his wide chest where his shirt hung open. His small eyes burned red in the flare.

"I follered yeh and swum the lake t' git t' yeh!" he panted hoarsely. "I've stood enough of this; you an' me is goin' t' settle!"

JUDITH, her round eyes large with horror of what was to come, threw herself against Peevey, grasping his arms. "Don't, Gideon! Don't yeh strike him! He's been sick an' he aint all well yet!" she implored.

The young giant threw her off. "I'm runnin' this thing! You keep outen it! I'll 'tend t' y'r case later!" he snarled.

The hill-girl drew back, twisting her hands together and looking in yearning terror at Marsh. The latter had not yet spoken. He glanced about him, at the reflected flames dabbling the pool with crimson, at the wider starlit pool of purple overhead, at the light dancing against the trees; and for the moment there was fear in his eyes. The task before him daunted him; he shrank from the pain and almost sure defeat that lay in it; but when he looked at Judith's face, fear ended, civilization's veneer slipped from him; he was a primitive fighting animal. With a leap he caught a heavy stick of wood from the burning rick and turned toward Peevey. The billet was blazing at one end; he paused and looked at it, then flung it into the pool, where it sank hissing in a puff of steam. Instantly Peevey sprang at him, but was met halfway by Judith, who clutched him desperately. As she struggled with him and was flung back, Marsh spoke for the first time.

"Better keep out of it, Miss Buckthorn. He and I have got to settle it. There's no other way." He was in his shirt-sleeves and was tightening his belt. "If he kills me, take him; it's a law as old as the world."

A bawling, raucous roar burst from Peevey as Judith's hold loosened and he flung himself forward. Marsh met him halfway, blind and deaf to all things save the primary impulse to keep his life and beat back the flailing human fury before him. He felt blows that seemed to crash to the bottom of his being; he felt himself beaten down and dashed to the earth; he felt himself upon his feet again, and knew dimly that he was fighting now without any regard for life, only to satisfy the boiling lava that filled his veins.

He had boxed when at college; he had fought now and again before that time, for he was not of milk and water stuff, but he had never opposed aught like this towering embodiment of fury and strength. Was this creature in the physical world as the man with millions in the realms of finance? He did not care; he would win or lose all, and he bored in insanely. He did not consciously see anything about him—the still vault of purple overhead, the tongues of crimson lapping the pool, Judith swaying and writhing as she watched the battle—only a bloody, red-eyed face shifting but ever pushing toward him. Try as he might, he could not beat it back. Then it came closer and closer, and suddenly grew monstrously large; and his brain crashed with noise and pain, and darkness closed upon him.

The young giant walked over to the woman by the fire and put his arm about her. He stood panting and wiping his sleeve across his bloody face and looking down upon her, but she only twisted her fingers together and stared at the silent man lying upon the ground.

"You've killed him, Gideon!" she whispered huskily.

But Marsh stirred and slowly rose to his elbows. He held a hand to his throat and looked toward them and about the place. He swayed dizzily for a moment, then dragged himself to the pool, drank of it and bathed his head and face. He lay still through a few breaths while they watched him, then got to his feet. He came directly to them and looked Peevey in the eyes. Something daunting and awful looked out of Marsh's battered face.

"You didn't know when you began that you would have to kill me—did you?" came from his swollen lips.

Peevey stared at him. "I—I don't want t' go as fur as that!" he stammered.

"Well, that is your job: you have got that to do if you take this woman!" And Marsh struck again with all the power in his tottering frame.

Peevey gasped and recoiled with the blow; his voice rose in a snarling cry of rage, while Judith reached her hands toward Marsh, her eyes aglow with mingled joy and dread.

"He fights till he dies!" she cried, and clutched at Peevey. "He fights till he dies!"

BUT Peevey's great fist shot out and Marsh went down. He struggled to his knees but could rise no farther. Peevey lunged forward to crush him, but in that moment the terrible, saving thing came. It flashed out from among the lower logs of the burning rick, oily, coffin-headed, crimson-eyed, its forked tongue flickering before it. Judith's scream stopped Peevey.

"Look! The rattler! The fire has chased it out!" she cried, springing back.

The hideous thing, mad with fright, slid across Peevey's bare feet as it turned, and he leaped as if leaping out of flames. Forty feet away he stopped and looked back, his mouth open, his eyes bulging.

Marsh was trying to get to his feet, blindly groping, vaguely wondering when the next blow would fall, when the serpent came before him. Dimly he saw something turning in a coil within reach of his hand, something yellowish, not unlike the brown wild-water he had come to seek. But to Judith it was a thing vivid as lightning. As it coiled its loathsome body and threw back its awful head to strike, she screamed again and leaped upon it. She seemed to envelop it as her gown sank about it, but when she rose she held it gripped about the neck. With a shuddering cry of disgust and horror she swung it round her like a whiplash and flung it among the leaping flames of the rick. For a moment she watched it writhing and tossing in the fire; then she turned and took Marsh's bleeding head upon her breast. Peevey came back toward them open-mouthed. She looked at him.

"You ken go," she said. "I don't want yeh, never! I've saved his life, an' it's mine, mine! Don't yeh ever come nigh it ner bother it, for it's mine, an' yeh see the kind of things I can do!" And as Peevey slunk away through the darkness, she pressed her lips to Marsh's bruised face, crooning tenderly.

The authors of "Hell and High Air" give us the stirring story of an ultra-hazardous attack on the enemy capital.

BERLIN

In Action, September, 1940.

THE Great Adventure! "Berlin or Bust!"

We're going over in four waves of four machines each. The Gang will make up the first wave. We're to fly at eighteen thousand feet, the succeeding waves to be staggered down to five thousand feet. Butch is in *C for Charley;* Angus in *O for Orange;* Peter Piper in *R for Robert.* I'm leading in *O. G. II.* In order to remain constantly in touch with one another, we've devised a simple means of R/T communication which will minimize the risk of enemy stations picking us up.

Everything has been planned down to the last detail. We're to attack from the north and from the west. Butch has a one-thousand-pounder on board, and I've got incendiaries, parachute flares and some smaller explosives.

It's a fine night—starlit, with an unlimited ceiling. The moon's halfway between first quarter and full, which is ideal. It isn't up yet, but by the time we're over Berlin, it will be riding high.

Jingo's seeing us off again. He's still flare-path officer. I can hardly believe it's only two months ago that he sent me away on my first flip as commander. So much has happened since then. I feel, now, like a veteran of veterans. . . .

Three minutes to zero hour. Shadwell's ready; Little Tich is ready; Croydon's ready; Bits is ready; I'm ready. R'arin' to go! This last three minutes seems an age. . . .

We're taxying up now. We're waiting. . . . Two minutes. . . .

"*G-George calling flare-path. G-George calling flare-path. May I taxi out and take-off? May I taxi out and take-off? Over to you. Over.*"

Back comes the green light, and Jingo's voice through the earphones:

"*Path calling G-George. Path calling G-George. Yes, you may taxi out and take-off. Yes, you may taxi out and take-off. Good luck, Sieve, old boy, and give the blighters bloody hell from me. So long. Over.*"

By Jove, that's funny. First time Jingo's ever made an unofficial crack over the wireless. "Adversity makes the whole world kin"—yes, and Jingo, *human!*

Since the wind's favorable, we can get on course straight away. Shadwell gives it to me at once. We'll keep down until we reach the coast. We know this route so well now. It'll be a long hike over the North Sea, over Denmark, and across the Baltic, but we'll avoid flak that way. Western Germany is the very devil—a solid wall of flak from Calais to Spandau.

I tell the crew: "Am going up to ten thousand feet, speed one eighty."

O. G. soars upwards like a bird. . . .

Weather is grand. Not a bump. No wind. Like sailing on a magic carpet. . . .

Here's the coast. Shadwell pinpoints his position, and tells me we're dead on course. . . .

Even in this semi-darkness, the sea looks beautiful—a huge black opal, iridescent under the light of the stars.

Butch and Angus and Peter Piper are with us now. We have a short conversation over the R/T. They're in formation. We'll keep that formation until we reach the target; then we'll fan out.

All of us are still hopping mad. We can't even joke much. This is business with a capital *B*. It's the first time we've left on a bombing raid with murder in our hearts. Before, it's been a, "Well, they've asked for it; I suppose we'll have to give it to them" attitude—the way you feel when you bop your best friend to prevent him doing something silly. Now, as Butch says: "No quarter, you guys, no quarter. Killin's too good for 'em."

Well, we're not really out to kill—we're out to *hurt:* to smash their most-prized possessions, as they've smashed ours. It'll be worse than death. Because we've been through it; *we know.*

Silence now, except for the muffled roar of the engines. Shadwell has made his bombs "live," and now he's working out his course by the stars and by directional radio. No land is in sight. We're well out to sea, making more than two hundred m.p.h.

Four hundred miles to Denmark from base, then another hundred to Lubeck Bay, then a hundred and fifty miles to Berlin.

Six hundred and fifty miles. Almost as far as Italy, but there are no Alps to cross. Still, it'll take us three hours at least, and we're scheduled to arrive over our target at midnight. We'll make it. We're already a little ahead.

I'm not thinking of extraneous things this trip. Too mad, I guess. You can't think about extraneous things when you're mad—you just burn up inside, and save everything you've got for the knockout blow.

I still hate bombing, but not bombing Berlin. As Butch says: "No quarter, you guys, no quarter." Hitler's turning us all into gangsters, even us peace-loving democrats. And you can learn to like being one! I never thought *I* would. But now, at this very moment, approaching Denmark at ten thousand feet, with the brilliant stars above me, and the placid sea below, I'm as jubilant at the thought of dropping bombs on Berlin as I would be if I were going on a long leave.

Shadwell says: "Approaching the Frisian Islands, Skip. Dead on course."

Good. We're more than halfway there. And no flak to be seen. Later, we'll probably get some, but I'll keep north and avoid it as long as possible.

"Going up to eighteen thousand feet," I tell the crew over the intercomm.

Might as well make our height now, and be prepared. I examined those oxygen masks pretty thoroughly before we left. I didn't want any more trouble such as poor old Croydon experienced over the Alps.

Fourteen thousand feet. Since our supply of oxygen is limited, we have to conserve it. Whilst we're over Berlin and making our run in at a lower altitude, we can dispense with masks.

MEANWHILE, we don't talk much. To relieve the monotony, we'd like to. But talking takes breath, and breath takes oxygen. Without our masks, we'd soon be laboring—as though we'd just walked up a long, steep hill. So we speak only when it's absolutely necessary.

Sixteen thousand feet. Still no sign of flak, but the moon is rising in front of us over the Baltic Sea. It's a beautiful sight, and a great comfort. Though the earth and everything on it might be destroyed, neither the Nazis nor ourselves can destroy the sun or the moon or the sea. I can almost imagine the moon shaking his emotionless head at us, but whether out of pity, or of contempt, or of sadness, I am unable to decide. Certainly he must think we are beyond redemption. But he pops up just the same to take a look at us, as he's done for the past million years or more.

"Past Sonderburg, Skip, on Alsen Island," says Shadwell. "Course 135° 10′ will bring us in over Kiel Bay, Oldenburg, Lubeck Bay, and Muritz See—two hundred and fifty kilometers. I can get a 'fix' at Muritz See in the moonlight. It's about fifty miles nor'-west of Berlin."

"Okay, Shadwell. Course 135° 10′."

I tell Croydon to instruct the rest of the flight. From Muritz See it'll

or BUST!

As told to Michael Ventura
by MICHAEL SEAVEN

take us fifteen minutes to reach Spandau—that's an hour altogether from now. We're not likely to meet up with much opposition over Mecklenburg. . . .

Over we go, *O. G.* A gentle turn to starboard, from 90° 15′ to 135° 10′.

EIGHTEEN thousand feet. The moon's to our left, now. It's beginning to cast its reflection on the water. A silvery gleam below, almost ripple-less. It follows us steadfastly. We can't overtake it; we can't follow it. Like our shadow, it's always with us. Behind it, if I could see past its brilliance, lies the southern tip of Sweden, and beyond that again, Lithuania, and Soviet Russia. It's shining there too, and in Africa, and in Borneo, and in the United States of America. Everywhere at once. . . .

Eighteen thousand, five hundred feet.

Three and a half miles up. *We* feel almost omniscient too. We can see so much of the world. Ahead, the coast of Germany; behind, all of Jutland; to the left, Sweden; to the right, the North Sea and the Netherlands.

Blackouts are useless on a moonlight night. Rather than hinder the attackers, they help them. The Elbe and the Spree will show up like Neon strips. All we have to do is to follow the Spree, and it'll take us direct to the Thiergarten. The Berlin-Spandau Canal, too, will guide us, across the Jungfern to the heart of the city. Lights would merely dazzle us. We already know that Tegeler Lake is exactly six and one-half miles S. E. by E. from Unter den Linden, on the other side of the Canal.

I've never been to Berlin before, but I've so much information about it, and I've seen so many maps and close-up lantern-slides of it, that I feel I know it as well as I know London. We've been studying it for the last three or four days—every building, every intersection, every gun emplacement, every searchlight battery, every known airdrome.

There is, for instance, an artillery shooting-ground in the Jungfern—or there *was*. Now it'll be bristling with ack-ack guns. So we avoid it as far as possible—keep slightly north. It's to be the city proper or nothing at all. Hitler says Berlin's immune from air raids. We'll show him.

"Past Lubeck Bay, Skip. Approaching Mecklenburg coast. Hundred kilometers to Muritz See—twenty minutes' flying time."

Kilometers again. That's—sixty-five miles. . . . And still no flak. . . . .

"Take your reciprocal course, Shadwell. If it's hot to the west and north of Berlin, we'll return via Stettin."

"I've already worked that out, Skip. We follow the Finow Canal and the Oder River to Stettiner Haff, then turn west over Stralsund and the Baltic. There aint no wind to bother us, and who cares for flak?"

Shadowy, the land looks after that wide stretch of bay. Unreal. The moon casts shadows around all the humps and bumps down below. A dark patch here, a light patch there. Way over to the right, there's a gleam that looks like an elongated silver dollar. It must be Schweriner See, with Schwerin on its west bank. We haven't bombed Schwerin—apparently there's nothing there of military importance.

Now we're getting nearer. I can see more water ahead. That must be Muritz. Shadwell was right almost to the second.

Eighteen minutes since we crossed the coast. Another two minutes, and we'll be directly over the southern tip of Muritz See. There's little else by which to go—no big towns, no rivers, no mountains.

"Muritz See, Skip." says Shadwell, and then, after a slight pause, "Course 157° 30′ direct to Spandau."

Again I bank *O. G.* to starboard. Again she dips her right wing—smoothly, until the compass needle indicates the right direction, almost exactly S.S.E.

"On the home stretch, Sieve," comes Bits' hollow voice through the intercomm. "Attaboy!"

Then Butch: "One more river to Jordan, Mike! Gee whiz, I just can't wait—"

And Peter Piper: "By Jove, old boy—show me the way to go home—to the Brandenburger Gate! Look out, Haw-Haw—the Gang's all here!"

Oxygen or no oxygen, we have to let off steam.

This near-approach to your target is always a tense moment. When that target is Berlin, which has been the one thought in your mind for more than twelve months, the moment is more than tense—as Butch says, it's "Dynamite!"

Calm as I'm trying to be, my heart is thumping. Already I have that queer little ache in the small of my back, and I'm afraid my hands are none too steady.

I glance across at Bits, grin through my mask. He can't see it, but he winks back at me. I slide my hands up to the top of the crosspiece of the control column, as you slide your hands up to the top of the steering-wheel of a car when you want to relax. I *must* keep calm. A slip-up now, at the eleventh hour, would be too much. Everybody on board is depending on me—and everybody on board *C-Charley*, and *O-Orange*, and *R-Robert*, too—nineteen men and myself keyed up to the breaking-point.

This is the supreme moment. Nothing in the last war can compare with it.

"Passing Nauen. Twenty-five miles from Berlin. Course 106° 45′," says Shadwell.

Twenty-five miles from Berlin!

No wonder my heart thumps and my hands are a little unsteady. But there's barely any need for Shadwell to tell me where we are. The ack-ack guns speak for themselves.

ALL around us, now, flak is bursting viciously, but we're too high for it to do us much harm. The night is so perfect, we don't need to drop down. Just ahead, I can see Spandau, and the long, narrow stretch of water upon which it is situated. Beyond that again, winds the Spree, shining brightly in the moonlight.

"It's got a 'come-hither' look in its tail, Sieve," says Bits.

It has, a silent Fifth Columnist. The Spree is on our side, just as the Thames is on the Heinies'.

That flak is the fiercest yet. A dazzling, giddy network of rust-colored streaks and garish-hued pom-poms. *O. G.* doesn't like it. She bucks wildly. And the searchlights have picked us up, adding their tinsel silver shafts to the general mêlée. They're blinding, like the undimmed headlight beams of an approaching car. I have to shade my eyes from the glare of them.

I look at the luminous hands of the clock. They point to exactly 23.55. Perfect timing.

Now for the last minute round-up. In our pre-arranged code, I tell the Gang: "Gliding attack. Hang around until you see my parachute flares. Then follow me in—west to east on the first run; north to south on the

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second; southeast to northeast on the third. It'll confuse 'em. All set?"

"Aye, aye!"

"You betcha!"

"Hoch, aye!"

We're over Tegeler Lake now, coming in via the northwest Bahnhof. Flak is so thick it's no longer like a network now; it resembles close-woven matting.

But that is unimportant. *Berlin is below, at our mercy.* "One crowded hour of glorious life."

Shadwell's forward, in the bomb-aiming position. Croydon's ready to release his flares. I'm "jinking," with *O. G.'s* Merlins desynchronized—*Brrrr—Brrrr—Brrrr* they go, instead of one long uninterrupted purr. This "flare run" will be a direct attack, maintaining height.

"Okay, Skip," says Shadwell.

Croydon releases his flares—one, two, three, four, five. . . .

Down they go. The parachutes open. We are across Berlin now. A couple of minutes on course, and climbing slightly, I turn north.

Flak everywhere. A jungle of flak.

Over the northern outskirts, across the Panke River, down to the Berlin-Spandau Canal, and—we're ready. All twenty of us. In the distance, the baleful yellow glow of the flares lights up the city spectacularly.

But there is a ground haze. It will probably hamper our aim. Shadwell will have to work almost entirely on his sights.

O. G., C-Charley, R-Robert, O-Orange, in that order. A gliding attack. Since, despite the haze, I can see my target, I don't need to ask if it's time to turn in. I announce, in a voice that is hard to keep steady: "Opening bomb doors."

Shadwell repeats. He's in charge now. He has to tell me how to steer.

Again my heart pounds; again my spine tingles; again I notice that dull ache in the small of my back. In a few seconds now—

"Left, left," says Shadwell. I turn left.

"Right," says Shadwell.

Static is bad, but I know what Shadwell is saying, because *two* words always mean *"left,"* and one word always means *"right."*

I turn right. A minute passes.

Shadwell says, "Steady."

THEN, suddenly, I feel a cold wave of anger sweep through me—of anger and bitter hatred.

The bombs are about to be released.

My hands and feet are like rocks on the controls. More than mathematical accuracy on the bomb-sights, steadiness in flight counts now. There mustn't be a deviation of as much as half a degree from our course.

Every two hundred feet, I announce our height:

"Eighteen thousand five hundred—three hundred—one hundred—"

Except for the faint swishing of her propellors, and the almost inaudible whistle of her slipstream, there is no sound from *O. G.* In order to do as much widespread damage as possible, Shadwell will release his bombs in an "open" stick—one by one. This is a *punitive* raid, not a raid on a specific military target.

Little Tich slams away with his rear guns. Flak has let up. There must be some Messerschmitts around. I don't worry. I know I can depend on Little Tich to give a good account of himself. . . . .

"Seventeen thousand nine hundred—seven hundred—five hundred—"

O. G. jumps a little in the air—bounds, almost. Shadwell announces: "Bombs gone."

I FEEL a wave of excitement. We have bombed Berlin. *We have bombed Berlin!*

Little Tich says: "Got 'im, sir—got 'im. Smack in 'is ruddy dial!"

I don't know quite what that means, but Shadwell elucidates: "Incendiaries on the Pariser Platz—near the Wilhelmstrasse."

So I got my objective! It's difficult to tell exactly, but Shadwell's usually accurate in determining where his bombs fall.

Little Tich says the others are following on behind and doing their stuff one after another.

Now, we'll turn to port and make our second run in from the north.

For some minutes I continue to glide. Then I open the throttle and close the bomb doors. Controls are so arranged that the bomb doors cannot be closed until the throttle is opened.

Another turn to port, and again we get ready to make our run in. We're back at eighteen thousand five hundred feet now. Shadwell guides me. I hear one "Right," and one "Left, left," and the final "Steady." Another gliding attack. This time Shadwell will drop a "close" stick—several bombs simultaneously.

As we glide silently earthward, I see through the haze and the searchlights and the ack-ack shells and the bomb flashes, a peculiar blue smoke trail down below. The city stands out so plainly in relief that I am positive I can distinguish the street as the Unter den Linden. I can see the Stettiner Station burning. Lying at the end of the Invaliden Strasse, it is easy to recognize. The entire panorama below—the Reich capital, I think, with a gleam in my eye—reminds me of the contour models I saw at Wembley Exhibition, and the New York Fair, and the Golden Gate Exposition. Every detail of the city can be picked out with accuracy.

Again *O. G.* jumps. Again I hear those electrifying words, "Bombs gone." Again, so that the sound locators will be unable to pick up the throb of my motors, I continue to glide.

Then, when I hear Little Tich report that the rest of the flight have completed their runs, I open the throttle and close the bomb doors.

I speak to Croydon: "Okay, Croydon."

Croydon does his stuff. He passes on that "Okay" to *C-Charley, O-Orange* and *R-Robert.* They know what it means. We have arranged it beforehand.

We get into formation in line abreast. We "jink," and race southward, engines at three-quarter throttle, noses down.

For three minutes by the clock we keep this up. Then, fifteen miles from the center of the city, we turn. Still with our noses down, we fly for one full minute east. Again we turn. . . . We roar back toward Berlin.

By now we have lost several thousand feet of height. Shadwell is forward at the front guns. Little Tich keeps watch at the rear. None of us cares about flak, or attacking fighter planes, or balloon barrages. We're a solid team of four machines and twenty men, working as one. We're determined to knock out all we can with our last remaining weapons—machine-guns.

We're so low now, that we seem to cut through the searchlight beams almost at their roots. Flak bursts far above us. Pompom shells explode right in front of us, and behind us, and to either side of us. We ignore them. If they get us, that's that. If they don't get us, that's also that. Either way, we're indifferent. But we pray that we'll be allowed to do our damage first.

I keep my eye on the clock. *O. G.* is steady, but her engines scream defiance. She is doing well over three hundred m.p.h. Temporarily she is a dive-bomber. I feel certain she will stand up to the strain. She has stood up to so much.

Twenty seconds to go. . . . Ten seconds. . . . Five seconds. . . .

"Okay, Shadwell," I shout through the intercomm.

And then our guns bark—all our guns: eight of them simultaneously: from *C-Charley, O-Orange, R-Robert, G-George.* It is an exhilarating, exultant moment. It is the moment for which we have all planned and longed these many months. *Machine-gunning Berlin!*

Grrrrrrrrr go our stout Brownings. Tracers leap out, and incendiaries. Every fifth round is a tracer. By the streak of pink phosphorescent light they leave behind them, I follow the tracers easily.

Into the streets of Berlin we pour everything we've got. We don't know how much damage we're doing, but our object is to destroy searchlights and ack-ack batteries, and anything else that lies in our path—to *terrorize*.

OUR dive lasts less than sixty seconds, but in that time I notice several searchlights flicker out. I can only hope that we have had the same success with the batteries and the sound-detectors.

Again by the clock, we pull out. Our guns cease fire.

It is all over. Our job is done. Berlin has felt a little of the pain she has inflicted on us.

But—if only we could have had five hundred planes, instead of sixteen!

As I pull out of my dive, my heart seems to stand still. *O. G.* climbs, but I go into a blackout. An opaque curtain descends over my eyes. I can see nothing. Although I retain all my other faculties, for a few seconds I am totally blind. The instrument board fades—the control column, the greenhouse, the bright lights. I do not lose my senses, but I feel as though I have fainted without actually passing out. Sickly. I have had it before, so I know that it won't last long. But it is a deathly sensation.

Within seven or eight seconds the curtain rises. I can see again. I am back to normal, headachy but alert. . . . . Where are we?

"Course 39° 15′," chants Shadwell. "Over Weissensee."

Until I am well clear of the city and its outer defenses, I continue to "jink" as I climb. Then I get on course.

I feel limp, now—limp, and a little depressed. The excitement is over. We have done so little—so very, very little. But the highlight of the war has come and gone. No future raids on Berlin will mean the same to me as this one.

Shadwell says we dropped bombs on the Reichstag Building, the Brandenburger Gate, the Stettiner Station, the Pariser Platz and the Wilhelmstrasse. On my second run in, I could distinctly see fires everywhere—red glows in between flak and the searchlight beams, and billows of smoke.

Butch and Angus and Peter Piper will report later, but Shadwell already knows that they got their objectives. The rest of the flight—three more groups of four—were coming in as we pulled out of our dive.

Even now, from his vantage-point in the rear gun turret, Little Tich reports seeing explosion after explosion, and the dull red glow from innumerable fires. From the pulpit I can see nothing—nothing but the reflection of the waning moon, and gun-flashes in the distance past the Finow Canal.

When we reach the Oder River, I'll hand the controls over to Bits, and stretch myself. A walk to the rear gun turret and back, a talk with Croydon, a word of praise for Shadwell.

Already I'm beginning to feel sleepy. It seems as though it is always after a sleepless night that I go on a long flip. Well, I can rest now. Unless we're attacked, there's nothing more for me to do, and anyway, Bits is as capable as I am.

"Bring her down to ten thousand," I tell Bits. "Oxygen's running low."

BITS takes over. I stagger out of my seat. I can barely stand. My knees seem to be permanently fixed in the sitting position. They ache. My back aches.

Oh, well, three hours, and we'll be in England. . . .

I lurch down to the rear gun-turret. Looking astern through the glass dome, I see Peter Piper and Angus and Butch, flying steadily in formation. Little Tich points to them and grins. I stick my thumb up. Tired though I am, I want to shout. I wish those three stout fellows could see me and hear me. But I know they're thinking the same as I'm thinking:

"We've bombed Berlin. We've bombed Berlin.

"And thank you, God—*the Gang's all here.*"

WILD PIG

Attacked by a wild boar in Hawaii, a surveyor is saved by a Korean's jackknife.

By Frederick K. Learman

WHEN the Hawaiian Archipelago was less populated and less civilized than it is now, not many years ago, I was doing some survey work on the island of Oahu. My job sent me into the rugged mountain ranges of the interior. These areas were made up of forest reserves not accessible to the general public.

Because there was always so much surveying equipment to carry, we never went armed. Besides, everyone knew that Hawaii had none of the jungle beasts and reptiles which usually infest tropical regions.

On this job our task was to locate the azimuth bearings of previously established landmarks. A clever Korean boy named Chung, who is now in China, served as my helper. He had to carry the miscellaneous paraphernalia—a bundle of stakes, a fifty-foot chain, and the transit tripod.

At that time no roads had been built into this wild section of the Waianai Mountains. We rode horseback from the town of Mokuleia to the foothills. Here the trail became virtually impassible. Even sure-footed mules were known to have stumbled on these tortuous paths and gone hurtling into the rock-strewn ravines below.

Picketing the horses, we continued on our way afoot. As you probably know, a surveyor's instrument consists of a wooden tripod on which a combination telescope-compass is mounted. Most instruments, or transits, are delicate, expensive mechanisms which must be handled with care. Consequently I carried the transit-box and three or four field notebooks for computing my bearings.

Chung started up the trail ahead of me. As I was to notice later, he wore a common jackknife strapped to his belt. Simple as this weapon was, it practically saved my life.

The terrain grew rougher and steeper. The floors of the gulches which yawned on both sides of us were ribbed with ridges of volcanic rock, eroded to needlelike sharpness. We did not waste any breath as we climbed; our heavy equipment and the steepness of the path took too much effort. Finally we clambered to a small flat-topped mound commanding an excellent view of the surrounding country.

Chung set his bundle of stakes on a large boulder and continued along the trail to clear the branches which interfered with my line of vision through the telescope. I remained behind to set the transit on the tripod and level my instrument. Neither of us had the slightest idea of any vicious animals in the Waianai Mountains. We were looking forward to a peaceful day of hard work.

The Korean boy must have set the stakes on the rock unevenly, for they tumbled over backward, making a loud clatter. My first impulse was to go behind the rock and pick them up, but I had to stay by the telescope and make sure that Chung cut down the obstructing bushes.

At that moment Chung was facing me, waiting for my signal to cut right or left. Although he stood about three hundred yards away, I could see his face clearly through the telescope.

He shouted once or twice when the stakes fell down. With a look of almost comical surprise he gestured in my direction. It took me a second to fathom that he was pointing behind me. Before I could turn around, something grazed my leg and sent me reeling. It was a wild pig, a big fellow who later tipped the scales at two hundred fifty pounds.

I scrambled for the nearest tree. The momentum of the boar's charge carried him across the mound and into the brush beyond. Once safely perched in the koa tree, I noticed that my leg was bleeding profusely where the tusk had ripped the flesh.

Both Chung and myself had heard rumors of wild pigs in the mountains, descendants of livestock which escaped from the early missionaries and explorers; but only a wounded or cornered boar was supposed to be dangerous. The old Hawaiian hunters said the pigs always ran from any noise or disturbance.

This boar proved to be different. It is possible that he didn't hear us because we came up the trail so quietly. Even so, he had no provocation to charge. Either he was an unusually vicious animal or he had been startled into charging by the clatter of the stakes.

I should have stayed in the tree. The boar had scented my blood and he was thoroughly aroused. But the surveying instrument I had set up in the clearing was an imported model worth five hundred dollars. I visualized the boar getting angry at the tripod because he smelled my scent on it. He'd probably kick the whole works to kingdom come.

He had that idea too. Emerging from the thicket, the boar approached the transit warily. He sniffed at my footprints and began rooting the ground where I had stood. Closer and closer his snout came to the outspread legs of the instrument. Before I could do anything to attract his attention, the boar nudged the tripod off balance. It swayed uncertainly for a moment, then crashed into the bushes. Luckily they were so thick that they broke the force of the fall. None of the delicate parts were touching the ground as yet.

The collapse of the tripod annoyed the boar momentarily. He jumped back, weaving his head from side to side. Now and then he gave a sudden upthrust of those gleaming tusks. At last he snorted and pawed the earth preliminary to another charge. This blow would knock the precious transit off the mound and into the deep ravine on the other side. And I would be out five hundred dollars.

IN desperation I jumped from my perch in the tree, yelling at the top of my voice. My leg was throbbing painfully but I wanted to get the pig to come my way.

He came—with the speed of an express train. I hopped behind the tree and he rushed past.

In the meantime Chung appeared in the clearing. After a quick glance at my leg, he motioned me back up the tree. This time, however, the boar wasn't hesitating. He saw Chung waving his arms and decided that here was a more attractive victim.

The Korean lad jumped up and down, brandishing his little jackknife, undecided whether to attack or retreat. The boar did the deciding. With another great snort he headed straight for the dancing boy. When the pig was almost to him, Chung sidestepped neatly like a bullfighter, plunging his knife into the animal's back between the shoulder-blades. He tried to pull the knife out but it stuck stubbornly.

Unwilling to release his hold on our only weapon, Chung found himself astraddle the pig clinging grimly to the handle. Under the added weight the huge tusker slowed down a bit. By that time Chung managed to get a grip on the knife with both hands. I saw him jerk it out and stab the pig again, until even the hilt disappeared in the flesh. This blow must have punctured heart and lungs, for when I was able to hobble to the scene, the boar lay dead.

After a while we inspected the instrument. As we found out later, no serious damage occurred. It had been jarred out of precision but that could be easily adjusted. Chung told me that he had never been pig hunting and that his kill was more luck than skill. Nevertheless he came back some time afterward, carted the pig to Mokuleia, and had his Hawaiian friends prepare a *luau*, or native feast, from the succulent flesh. That pig tasted better to me than any I have ever eaten—but I still bear the scar of his tusks on my leg.

Dog-gone Passes

The dogs in Newfoundland like our soldiers—but they got this man into trouble . . . As told to—

HARRY FRANCIS CAMPBELL

THAT trip across the Bay of St. Lawrence was weird enough to have prepared us for anything. As soon as we left North Sydney, Nova Scotia, the captain blacked out our puffing, ice-breaking ferry. Nature had already blacked out the bay.

The trip was accented by a series of spine jarring jolts as the armored bow of that boat rode up onto the scattered, floating ice, and crashed through with a hollow splash. By comparison, a heavy tank was a pleasure car.

We landed at last in blacked out Port à Basque, Newfoundland, and boarded a train which to this day I believe had been salvaged from some Canadian museum. The shuddering wooden coaches were of the vintage of the gay nineties, even to the smoking oil lamps, which supplied an uncertain illumination. It wasn't any alcoholic haze which enveloped most of us, either. I rode on that train again, and sober. But we hadn't seen anything yet.

It was next morning that we first saw the real wonder of the island. If you look in your encyclopedia under the heading of *Newfoundland Dog*, you will find a masterpiece of understatement to the effect that it is: "A large breed of dog. Broad-backed, deep-chested, it has a massive, well covered tail. Essentially a large retriever, it is especially trained to rescue drowning persons."

All of which is very well as far as it goes, but whoever wrote this had never been to Newfoundland. He makes no mention of the astounding numbers of these affectionate, loyal, stubborn beasts. They run wild all over the island, much as cattle roam the range in our Western United States. They forage for themselves, wading into the ocean and snapping up fish with remarkable efficiency and skill. Fish is their only animal food.

Unlike any other dog I ever saw, a Newfoundland on his native heath will not eat meat. The only exception to this was one which had been raised from a pup by the druggist in St. Johns. Meat was a part of Major's balanced ration.

There must be some good reason why dogs attach themselves to soldiers. In this respect the Newfoundland is no exception, even if his dietary habits are those of a cat. It was not at all unusual to see a dog pulling a milk-cart do a sudden about-face and trot down the atrocious road after a column of soldiers, followed by the ignored commands of his frenzied French owner.

Sentries attempting to walk their posts in the prescribed "military man-

ner" resembled drunks on the end of a conga line, as they zigzagged along, trying to avoid tripping over their entourages of dogs. The glowing pot-bellied stove attracted them to my hut; and every night I had to throw a couple of amiable dogs off of my bunk before I could turn in. The morning generally found one asleep across my feet, and a couple snoring underneath my bunk.

The druggist's giant dog Major ironically attached himself to our Colonel, who did not care for dogs. Nevertheless Major accompanied us on all marches, and was at the throat of any other dog who attempted to approach his idol.

Now, all this has a definite bearing on why our company didn't get a week-end pass about one month later.

It actually wasn't the fault of the quartermaster Captain that the refrigerating equipment on the supply ship went haywire, to the detriment of our cargo of meat. It didn't take any laboratory test to tell you that meat had gone definitely West. Your nose knew.

We wouldn't have eaten it under any conditions. But if our tempers hadn't been frayed by the enforced inactivity and a fear we would be stuck in Newfoundland for the duration, we wouldn't have staged that riot in the mess-hall.

The dogs seemed to enjoy the din and excitement. The little fat bespectacled Captain didn't. He tried ineffectually to quiet the men. The noise increased. Just then the door slammed open, and our Colonel waded in through the dogs. Suddenly the mess-hall was ominously quiet.

The Colonel bellowed: "What's going on here!"

"Sir," the Captain sputtered, "the men won't eat their ration."

"What's this? Why not?" the Colonel snapped.

It was at this point I decided to gamble that the Colonel didn't know Newfoundland dogs don't eat meat. Apprehensive inwardly, but with a fine show of indignation, I said:

"Sir, that meat's rotten. That's why we won't eat it. Why, even a dog won't eat it. Look here!"

I tossed two chunks of meat onto the floor. Two dogs trotted over, and sniffed it. I'll take my oath they sneered as they stalked away.

The Colonel watched this performance in silence, but the red was coloring his stiff, disapproving neck.

If you have ever been in the army, you know that one officer doesn't reprimand another before enlisted men. But he shouted:

"Give each of these men dinner money and a pass, and let them go to St. Johns and get a meal."

It was all very funny to my buddies then. I was the hero and smart guy who had chiseled a pass, and dinner money they didn't rate, for them. Four weeks later, in England, I was something else. The entire company was due for a week-end pass. Except, there were no passes. The Sergeant-major explained, succinctly:

"The old man just learned that Newfoundland dogs don't eat meat."

I spent that week-end dodging raiding parties made up of my former pals who blamed me for the loss of their dog-gone passes. Just imagine!

The Emerald Pit

A South American adventure.

by PETER RAINIER

(With things at the mine going well, Mr. Rainier sent for his family, and went to Bogotá to meet them:)

AFTER only two days in Bogotá, we left for Chivor. I must be there when that emeral pit-bottomed. With only one man to watch the mine, some of those hard-won emeralds would stick between the toes of my rascally miners for certain.

I had, before my departure, arranged with Marco for quite a band of Indians to meet us. None of the children had ever ridden as yet, and the two long days in the saddle would be too abrupt an introduction to the most natural method of travel, I had felt. Therefore I had instructed Marco to arrange for them to travel in cages on the backs of Indians. Light wooden cages he had contrived—perfect for the two smaller children, but cramped for the hefty girl Marge had become in the two years since I had seen her. In front of my saddle on Moro she rode, for the first day at least.

The Indians surged around us as we alighted from the bus in Choconta. Shrill Indian yells arose—wild ululations of a barbaric welcome. Lank black hair flapped on ragged shoulders, and long *penilla* bush-knives swung from leather belts as they stormed the boot behind the bus to get at our baggage. The scent of their unwashed bodies lay heavy on the air.

Marge drew close to me. "Why do they smell like that, Daddy?" she whispered discreetly.

But Peter struck up a friendship with old Epaminondas at once. I think the old ruffian's red sash caught the child's eye. Anyway, it was Epaminondas who carried the boy throughout the two-day journey, refusing to be relieved, although Marco had provided two Indians for each child, so that the carriers might have relief.

On the first day's ride all went well—except for a tendency toward the end for Margaret to ride standing in the stirrups because the saddle felt hot—until just before we reached the outskirts of Guateque, where we planned to spend the night. Then poor Moro trod on a nail and lamed himself. With some difficulty I drew the long spike from his foot. He could still walk, haltingly. But when I began to lead him into town, the game old devil nudged my side with his nose as he had a habit of doing when he thought I had traveled dismounted too long on a journey and he wanted me to mount. But there would be no mounting Moro for weeks until his foot was cured—hard enough on him that he must limp unridden to distant Chivor on the morrow.

"I need a mount for tomorrow," I announced to Don Miguel, the hotel proprietor, as he prepared to usher our party into the bougainvillia-shaded veranda of his *posada*.

"A mount. *Valgame Dios!* What a pity I did not know before." Don Miguel rumpled his bushy black beard with his stubby fingers and rolled his eyes. "There is not a mount to be had in Guateque—nor will be till the Government expedition to the *llanos* returns those they hired yesterday. Combed the town they did—as though they were riding to the Orinoco instead to the edge of the foothills."

"But I must have something to ride, Don Miguel. My Moro is lame."

Don Miguel clucked his tongue sympathetically. The black hairs on his chin stuck out between his fingers like lichen growing through cracks in a wall. He picked up Moro's foot and examined the hole the spike had made.

"I can hire a *macho* to the Meester." The voice came from a slender Indian youth lounging against the doorpost of the courtyard.

I turned to him hopefully. "Where is your he-mule?"

With a wave of his hand he indicated a black mule engaged in vacuum-cleaning the corners of a manger for the odd bits of grain the last feeder there had missed. A well-turned little beast, but wearing a pack-saddle.

"Will he carry a rider?"

The youth flashed white teeth behind the promise of a black mustache.

"*Si, señor.* If he can carry a pack, he can carry a man."

"But has he ever been bitted? Has anyone ever ridden him?"

The young Indian shook his head. "I tried once, and he threw me; but then, I am no horseman."

I shook my head. I was in the process of taking my family sedately home—not looking for Broncho Bill stunts.

"Better take him, Meester," the youth argued. "If you ride him to Chivor, I will charge no hire because he will then be to the saddle broken. The Meester will have to ride some pack-mule anyway, because there is not one riding-animal in town. Better to ride a pack-mule that is wild than one so broken by heavy loads that it plods like an ox."

The *macho* stood steady as a rock while we saddled him next morning, but it took four strong men to hold him while I pried his mouth open for the bit. Normally I should have bitted the tender unbroken mouth for a week before mounting him, but there was no time for gentling methods now. Within an hour I must be leaving with my family on the long day's ride.

Day had just broken, and the bell of the great white church was tolling for mass. But the mass was being neglected for once. People were running to line the edges of the plaza. There was an *amansado* in prospect—a horsebreaking. The Meester was going to back young Ansaldo's *macho,* the black *macho* that had once thrown Ansaldo himself and had also bitten Ansaldo's brother in the leg when he had tried to mount him. Bets began to wing their way across the plaza.

One more sharp jerk at the girth and I was ready. A wicked little brute to break he looked—active as a cat, and no withers. I'd once seen a pony of that build buck the saddle clear over his head without breaking the girth. He rolled the whites of his eyes at me.

With a spring I vaulted into the saddle and sat down tight.

The *macho* shivered, and his long ears lowered themselves back onto his neck like the arms of a semaphore, but he made no further move.

But as soon as I tightened the rein, he galvanized—reared high on his hind legs, so high that he would have fallen back on top of me had I not smitten him between the ears with my clenched fist. That brought him down on all fours again, shaking his head, but hardly had his forefeet touched the ground when his wide-open mouth menaced my leg with great yellow teeth.

A swift kick in the nose countered that one. Then I rammed into his belly the spurs I had borrowed from Don Miguel.

Almost the *macho* shot out from under me, so quickly did he move from zero to full gallop. Straight across the cobbled plaza, wide-open mouth braying his discordant rage. I dragged on the reins to check him, but the only effect was to drag back his head till I thought his neck would break and his long ears were tickling my face.

The full round of the plaza we clattered. Once the *macho* tried to dive down a side alley, but one of the spectators heroically turned him back by waving a *ruana* in his face. Twice round, braying like an air-raid siren. On his third round the *macho* again tried to escape the arena, this time by making a dive for the church. Still braying, he scampered up the shallow flight of steps, straight for the black opening of the church door. Desperately I sawed at his mouth—unavailingly—and thanked Heaven that the door looked high enough to clear my head.

Inside the church was blackness after the sudden transition from bright daylight outside. The *macho* stopped dead, hoofs slithering on the smooth tiled floor. He stood trembling; then, even as I shook one foot free from the stirrup to dismount and lead him from that sacred place, something white dashed at us from the shadows screeching. The *cura* it was—screaming mad at our profanation of his church. He charged at us as though we were the Beast from the Pit in person, come to wrest souls from him. At that moment I would have given my best shirt to get away from there, so embarrassed did I feel. The mule apparently felt the same—the priest had exorcised him, all right. With a wild snort of terror he backed frantically through the doorway he had just entered, spun around like a polo pony and stampeded down the steps.

Once back in the plaza he showed signs of flagging and it became my turn now. Round and round I spurred him, gaining more control of his head with every round. Finally I rode him quietly into the hotel *patio,* broken to the bit—if not thoroughly, at least well enough to assure me of a reasonably decorous day's journey.

Then I sent him to the stable for a rest and a feed while I went to make my peace with Mother Church.

EACH emerald pit sunk on Chivor was a gambler's throw. On each pit I bet the cost of many men for many months—to say nothing of a good slice of my own reputation—against the haphazard, untidy methods nature uses when she deposits her minerals. The more valuable the mineral, the more haphazard its deposition seems. Common minerals like iron and copper occur in masses, and the problem lies less in finding the mineral than in its removal and treatment.

Gold is more difficult. The gold values run unevenly in the vein of gold-bearing quartz bounded by the wall rocks that enclose it—sometimes rich and sometimes poor. But even in gold you have the vein to follow—a milky white streak of rock, usually several feet thick, running through other rocks of totally different texture. Somewhere in that vein the little yellow particles are concealed. Crush the quartz to powder, treat it properly and you will recover most of the values in it, even though they have been invisible to the eye until separated from their matrix.

But emeralds—the most valuable of all the minerals of my acquaintance. The emerald vein is but a tiny crack in the rock, seldom wider than a finger's breadth. Furthermore, the rock in which the insignificant crack lies is usually several hundred feet below the surface, and covered by barren rock formations which give no clue to what may be below them. Therefore mining the emerald is incomparably more difficult than mining gold. The elusiveness of the emerald would fill a volume of romance if the history of emerald mining in Colombia could be written.

Now in the middle of my fourth year on Chivor I was prospecting—hunting new emerald formations. Not that there was any urgent reason for a change of mine policy. Each year since I had been on the mine, it had shown a handsome profit, although we had never found anything really spectacular in the half dozen pits we had bottomed since old Epaminondas had picked up with his toes that first gem of value, the one Margaret now wore on her breast on the rare occasions when we had visitors at the mine. And yet I had a feeling that I was not getting the best out of the property. Somewhere in that stratum of yellow rock hundreds of feet below the surface there must be concentrations of the green hexagonal crystals which would make Cleopatra squirm in her grave.

I was clambering down the precipitous sides of Chivor peak—hardly one square yard of that stark upthrusting peak failed to feel the impress of my foot during the years I ran the mine. Along the face of a yellow semi-precipitous face of rock I was making a traverse like an Alpine climber, feeling for hand-holds. Emerald formation that yellow rock face was composed of, and I was looking for a streak of green in it—even a speck of green, something to give me logical grounds for a decision. With the geologist's pick from my belt I was chipping off pieces here and there along the face—carefully, because there was a nasty drop between me and where the next patch of forest clung precariously to the slope, its strong gnarled roots wrapping themselves round the very bones of the mountain for support.

Mineralized that face was, undoubtedly—tiny seams of a white saltlike

mineral: albite, which is often associated with the emerald but not always. Then there was plenty of talcum—that was what gave the silky texture to the emerald-bearing rocks. But not a speck of green. However, as I worked along I turned into a sort of natural bay in the straight face of the cliff. A ledge here, easy to walk, although just ahead of me the ledge was covered with débris, crumbled rock upon which creepers grew. In places the face of the cliff seemed to have crumbled un-naturally. I examined the nearest of these places. *The top of it was roughly circular!* A tunnel filled with débris from the fallen roof. The others were tunnels too. Scores of them I noticed as I continued my search. Placed so close together that the rock between them had barely sufficed to hold up the mountain above. The old Spaniards had mined this spot, mined it intensively! It must have been a good producer for them so to have concentrated on it; otherwise they would have contented themselves with a mere tunnel or two for exploration.

I went at once for Marco, and together we scrambled down to the scene of my find.

His eyes danced as his fingers caressed the silky texture of the rock. Then, leaning over carefully, he peered into the void below. "*Caracas! Que tonga!* What a fall! When we turn the water on to clear the spoil, we won't even notice where it went. Very good."

Then upward he gazed to where, hundreds of feet above us, some overhanging tree limbs denoted the top of the slope. His teeth bared in his concentration as he estimated the height. "*Carajo!* If we open a pit here, it will be the deepest we have dug."

But he shook his head when he noted the number of tunnels with which the rock face was studded. "Those *diablos* of Spaniards have mined it already. The emeralds are gone."

"Plenty of emeralds left, Marco. The Spaniards must have got some of them, or they wouldn't have driven so many tunnels. But there's plenty of ground left to produce, and the tunnels may not be driven deep."

He shrugged his big shoulders. "*Quien sabe?*"

"Give me your opinion, Marco."

Again he shrugged. "Who knows what is in the bowels of a mountain? But what is outside the mountain I can tell you." He picked up a bit of rock. "This is good formation." He pitched the rock outward and watched it disappear after bounding down the mountain slope. "The *tonga* is good. The spoil we wash away will clear itself and not block the channel as it sometimes does. On the other hand, here the formation is very deep and the pit will be costly. Only the good God knows what we shall find in the pit if we dig it."

I made my decision. "We will open a pit here. Put every man we've got on it. Dig like blazes, and trust to luck."

His face cleared as I took the load. "*Bueno, señor.* Tomorrow the dirt will be flying into the river below."

MANY months later I sat on the edge of the new pit, watching those antlike figures in its bottom striking and prying with their bars in the yellow emerald formation which was beginning to appear. The crisis was approaching. If I had guessed right, all would be well. But if I had guessed wrong—well, I would have to do a lot of explaining in my annual report, with half a year wasted on unproductive work. But we would find emeralds when that new pit bottomed, if my years of experience on the mine counted for anything. Not far to go now, I felt certain. It is always the hope of the miner. The next stroke of the pick may uncover the big nugget. The next emerald pit may bottom onto a mass of green valuable enough to swamp the world's market. If miners ever cease to hope, the mining industry will cease and most of the world's industries with it.

Margaret and I had a strong personal interest in that pit too. Much depended on it. The land was still unbought which a year ago we had decided to buy. Our capital was as yet too slender to make the venture. But if that new pit should be lucky! God! The resultant bonus would give us all capital we needed.

Slowly the pit deepened. Steadily the appearance of the rock formation improved. And yet not one sign of emeralds, not one tiny speck of green to bolster my courage. . . . Damn the beautiful, elusive green things, how they racked a man's fortitude! Marco and the veteran miners were shaking their heads secretly, I knew. "Those 'Meesters!' Pig-headed. Clever people in their way, but apt to take the bit in their teeth when they had been in the country a year or two. How could a "Meester" know as much about emerald mining as men that were born in emerald country? Any man could see that the old Spaniards had mined all the emeralds in that pit.

Still the bottom of the pit lowered itself into the bowels of the mountain. Slowly, in spite of the exertions of three hundred men. A few inches daily was the most their utmost could encompass. Still the favorable formation persisted, and still there were no signs of green in the yellow rock strata.

And then we found a cavity—just an opening in the rock with one end of it opened to daylight by a stroke of a miner's bar. Lying flat, I peered into it. A ray of sunlight shone past my head and flooded with light that small cavity which had never seen light before. When the Andean range was being built, long eons before, a nodule of iron ore had occupied that cavity. Then acid had been loosed by the long process of decomposition. The acid had consumed the iron and left the cavity all but empty of its original contents. Only loose red iron dust was in it, as dry as dry could be. Not a hint of green about it, and yet I remembered that always the most prolific of my previous finds had lain loose in dusty-looking iron oxide.

With the pick from my belt I enlarged the hole till I could insert my hand and forearm. My fingers raked the loose-lying iron particles inside—blindly, because my forearm filled the hole to the exclusion of my vision. . . . There were hard things lying loose in the soft dust, long things with angular sides. My fingers explored them. Hexagons. Emeralds, by the miners' God! They must be emeralds, although they had shown no glint of green when I had looked into the hole.

My finger-tips selected one, and my fingers closed on it. Out into the sunlight I drew it. A good-sized hexagonal crystal that might be a valuable emerald, or might be—flawed, colorless, opaque, white-hearted, without brilliance or any several of a dozen terrible things. During this my greatest gamble on Chivor, nature kept me guessing till the last. One hundred thousand dollars, roughly, had that emerald pit cost to sink. Hundreds of men had toiled for many months at it. Now I held a sample of our reward in my hands, and could not tell whether it was what we hoped for or barely worth the effort of throwing it away, because the hexagon in my hand was coated with a hard layer of red iron solution, dried.

Still lying prone, my hand went to my trouser pocket for my penknife. The movement of my body brought my gaze to bear over my shoulder. Work had apparently stopped all over

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Solution to Crossword Puzzle on page 86

A	T	R	I	■	G	A	T	E	S	■	S	A	K	E
B	R	E	R	■	A	L	O	N	E	■	P	R	O	D
E	A	S	E	■	R	O	A	S	T	■	A	M	A	S
T	N	T	■	C	R	E	D	I	T	■	C	O	L	E
■	S	A	B	L	E	S	■	L	I	B	E	R	A	L
S	P	R	O	U	T	■	L	A	N	E	S	■	■	■
L	I	T	R	E	■	R	A	G	G	Y	■	I	T	O
A	R	E	A	■	C	E	D	E	S	■	G	R	E	W
B	E	D	■	G	A	E	L	S	■	B	E	R	L	E
■	■	■	A	L	I	N	E	■	T	I	N	I	E	R
S	H	A	V	I	N	G	■	S	H	E	E	T	S	■
T	A	L	E	S	■	A	S	T	I	R	■	A	C	H
O	V	E	R	T	■	G	E	A	R	■	S	T	O	A
V	E	R	S	E	■	E	A	T	S	■	K	E	P	I
E	N	T	E	R	■	S	T	E	T	■	Y	S	E	R

the pit, I noticed, and hundreds of Indian miners were clustered behind me, tense. Hundreds of eyes were fixed on that small hole and on the object which I extracted from it.

"*Que lastima.* What a pity! Spoiled emerald." Old Epaminondas shook his head sadly.

This remark of the veteran miner brought me sharply to a realization of the situation. The emerald obviously appeared to the miners worthless. What a chance to keep its value secret, if I should really have my hand on a valuable pocket! True, I had already had at times valuable parcels of emeralds in the mine safe, and as yet no one had tried to hold the mine up for them. A really valuable find might stimulate some of the more daring of the local bandit fraternity to take a chance and hold the mine up.

AFFECTING a nonchalance I was far from feeling, I tossed the hexagon to Epaminondas. "*Mala surete.* Bad luck," I agreed.

From hand to hand the miners passed it, clucking their tongues and shaking their heads. Then one took out his knife and made as though to scrape the paintlike covering from it.

"Stop that," I cried. "You'll break it. I want to put it in acid to clean the muck off it. Bits of it may be worth saving."

As I slipped the hexagon back into my pocket, I caught sight of Marco's grim countenance above the heads of the crowd.

"Get me a sack and a shovel," I ordered. "We'll shovel up all that loose dust with the emeralds in it. I'll work over it in my office, and see what we can save."

Marco shouldered his way to me through the press, bent down and peered into the cavity—straightened again, shaking his head in sympathy.

My back to the rest of them, I winked at him, saw his jaw set suddenly till little lumps of muscle jumped into sight along his lean jowl. Quick on the uptake as always, he knew my play now.

"*Si, señor,*" he agreed, quite calmly although his eyes danced. "You are right. Some of the bits may be worth saving—under that red paint, who can tell? May the Virgin grant we get enough out of them to pay the cost of this great pit."

As soon as I could get clear, I scrambled up the side of that emerald-pit like a cat with a dog on its tail. I wanted to be alone with that little hexagon that was burning a hole in my pocket. Once out of sight of the miners, I whipped out my pocketknife and began to scrape feverishly at the rusty covering. Hard it was, as though it had been melted on. It took me several minutes to work a small spot clear on one side. That told me there was an emerald under the paint, but I knew that already. What kind of emerald was the question! Frantically I began to scrape a corresponding little window on the opposite side. I must see through the damned thing, let the light shine through it to determine the color.

At last I held it up to the light with a hand that trembled so violently that I had to look several times to make sure. A green ray shone through the little object between my finger and thumb. *Dark green!* A hint of fire. Not for some seconds did the realization dawn on me that I was holding a first-grade emerald in my hand, and that there were dozens more emeralds in the hole that one had come from. They would all be of the same color . . . emeralds run like that. One might almost parody a proverb and say "gems of a color flock together." I had outguessed nature in spite of the many times the damned jade had flirted her skirt at me. A fortune for the company and a bonus for me which should be big enough to carry our land development to a triumphant conclusion; for that one cavity would not be the end of it—there would be others.

And so it proved. In the ensuing weeks, hardly had we exhausted one pocket when another was discovered—like a miniature set of caves they were. Those weeks were heavy ones for me. By days I supervised the shoveling up of the rusty-looking substance into sacks which were dumped on the floor of my office. By nights I worked on them, cleaning, grading and locking them in the safe before I went to bed. What a find that was! Before that series of pockets had been worked out, the high-grade emeralds alone had filled the capacious mine safe, and the less valuable gems had been relegated to the less distinguished accommodation of an old tin trunk of mine.

At last the pit had bottomed—worked out. Time to carry my emeralds to Bogotá. The strain of that journey still makes me shudder. By daylight, because the sheer bulk of my findings precluded the usual night-flying tactics which had brought me safely through so many previous journeys with valuable cargo. This time only the very pick of the gems could be carried in my saddle-bags. It took a mule to carry the rest. A slow plodding mule, whereas I longed to gallop Moro through the danger zone at night and get clear quickly, as I had done so many times before.

That was the one journey on which I took an escort with me—two Indians armed with shotguns. But I made them walk ahead of me, one before the mule and one behind it, while I took care that Moro did not outstrip them. . . . I didn't want two armed Indians walking behind me while I was in charge of a mule-load of green fire.

Slowly we plodded through the forest-shrouded trail—a mere tunnel in the almost solid vegetation which climbed slowly to the Sauchi Pass. One eye on the Indians ahead of me and the other roving the thick green walls on either side, alert for the movement which would tell of a hidden sniper beside our path. But mile after mile passed without untoward happening, except that the mule-pack slipped—mule-packs always do slip at the wrong moment—at the spot most likely for a hold-up, and I had to wait fifteen minutes in badly simulated patience while the load was adjusted. But either I had hidden effectively the value of my find, or the local light-fingered gentry had shirked the issue. As for my Indian escort, they thought they were carrying only my baggage, or at least I comforted myself with that hope.

I breathed lighter once we were over the pass and plunging downward into more settled country. Risk there still was, but much less chance of a hold-up among smiling farmlands than there had been in the grim forest-shrouded slopes on the Chivor side of the range. Even so, that night in Guateque village I feigned sickness as an excuse to keep the room where I had shoved my precious mule-packs under my bed. I slept with one eye open, my revolver under my pillow.

ON the second night I slept in Bogotá, with the more valuable and less bulky part of my cargo locked in the safe of the Europa Hotel.

On the third day I accompanied the mule-packs in a taxi to the office of our agent, and felt ten years younger when he gave me a receipt for the table-load of sealed canvas bags.

On the last lap of my homeward journey, I once more rode down the right bank of the Guavio River, through those forested terraces down which clear mountain torrents leaped in white foam. With the bonus due me on that last emerald shipment we could now buy that coveted tract of land and still have ample capital left over for its development.

Triumphant I felt. Four years had I fought for this hour. I had waged a long campaign against Joaquin the Bandit, that the life of the mine should not be bled from it. All those years I had, almost unaided, imposed my will on the unruly Indians of the Chivor region. Nowadays I held that wild and beautiful Chivor country in the grip of one hand while, with the other, I wrested its treasure from it. Yes, I had earned that bonus, I felt; earned also the peace and security which the ultimate development of our estate would bring.

The Great Mogul Murders

A complete novel of the Western mining country.

by Frederick Bechdolt

I WAS standing at the counter in the rear of the store when this girl came up behind me. She must have come on tiptoe, for I didn't know she was there until I felt her hands upon my shoulders. She slipped her arms around me and kissed me back of my right ear. She said:

"Darling! Isn't it wonderful!"

I shouldn't have turned then, but she had caught me flat-footed and I lost my head. I had a glimpse of her in the dimness. It lived up to the promise of her warm lips: a glimpse of dark hair and eyes, of rich coloring, of a slim body and bare, sun-tanned arms, of dull blue slacks and sleeveless jacket. I said:

"It sure is wonderful!"—and I meant it.

She gasped. "Oh, I *am* sorry." The horror in her eyes showed that she spoke from her heart. She was halfway to the front door before I realized that she had fled.

There is a sign on the top of the store; it runs the length of the ridgepole; it says: DESERT SCOUT'S TRADING POST.

That old liar Windy Blake had put it up a year or two after the Las-Vegas-to-Tonopah road was surfaced. He baited the place for tourist trade with ox-yokes and other junk which he had picked up from abandoned borax camps all over the Armgosa desert. He kept this stuff in the front where the light was better and moved his regular stock of goods into the back. It was nearly the middle of the afternoon and the sun was working overtime outside. It left you blinded when you came into this man-trap. Unless you took it slowly you wouldn't know your best friend when you reached the counter where I was standing. I was still punch-drunk but I had figured out this much by the time Windy Blake returned from the telephone in the back room.

He was about my build, six feet and slim, straight backed. His hair is white and mine is light; we were both bareheaded. It wasn't comforting to think that she had taken me for this old fraud, but there wasn't anyone else around. I had to swallow it. He said:

"That phone call was from Beulah's Tavern, Ben. They been ringin' every service station this side of Las Vegas to catch yo'. They want yo' to stop off there."

He opened the showcase and fished out the package of cigarettes which I had ordered just before the call took him away. His eyes were blue. He was as straight as an arrow; his long white mustache drooped below his chin. His deep, quiet voice went with the picture and that phony Texas accent of his was good enough for the folks from back East. Once they fell for the ox-yokes and stopped off to listen to the line which he handed them, they were hooked. There wasn't any harm in that but I was grudging him the intention of the kiss which had been misplaced upon my neck and I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

I gave him a bill and had to wait for change. He took his time in getting it and while he was fumbling in the till he talked.

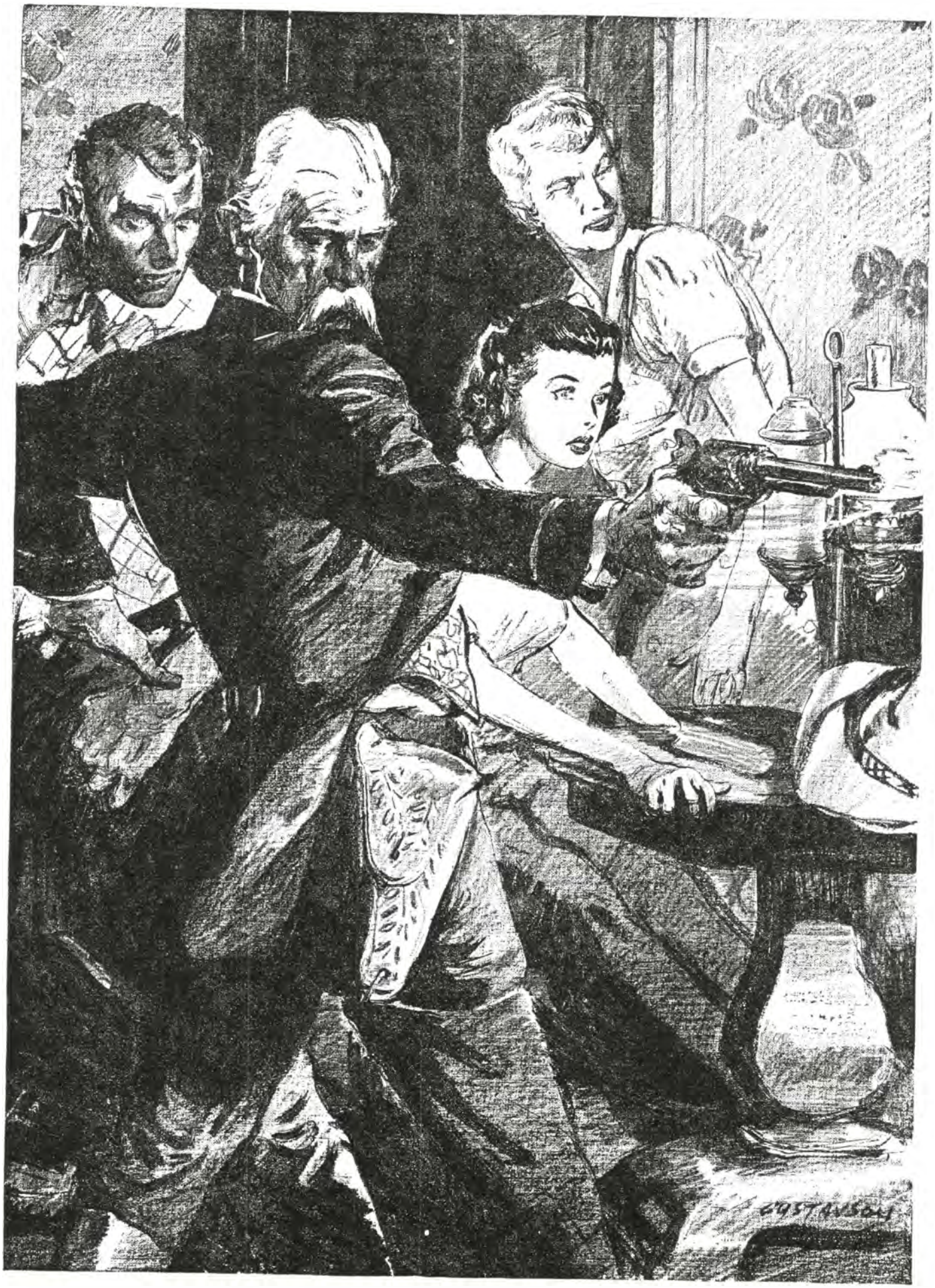
"They tell me Uncle Sam done snagged yo', Ben." I buttoned up my lip and let that one go by, but he rambled on:

"They'll ship yo' down to Australia for MacArthur." He came back to the counter with the change and laid it down. I made a pass for it but he kept his hand on it. "I was in the Philippines with Mac's ol' man. Fact is, I done saved his life one time. That was in 1900 when we was in the hill country and the' was a bunch of Moros—"

He slipped up then, he raised his hand to make a gesture and I snatched the money. I wanted to remind him how he had told me, the last time I was in the place, that 1900 was the year when he helped Wyatt Earp make the gun-play at Cape Nome which Rex Beach described in "The Spoilers." But I kept right on going and left him lying to the empty air.

The girl was standing near the front door and when I went by she suddenly became interested in a rack of picture postal cards. There were two cars outside. I saw Beulah Smith's man of all work, Blacky, fooling around the rear of one. He was part Indian and he had done five years in Carson City penitentiary for hitting a man over the head with a steel drill in a drunken fight. He caught sight of me and walked away. There was something in the way he'd looked at me that gave me the idea he wasn't anxious for me to recognize him.

I was going on to my own car when I noticed Joe. His last name I can't remember; it has four or five syllables and it makes you think of an All-American backfield. He was a big, thick-chested man, with lots of jaw and a pair of arms that hung down to his knees. He was standing at the rear of the building, looking around the corner,



Windy fired five shots. . . . He said: "I reckon I winged him, Ben!"

watching Blacky. And this was what you might call intriguing, because Joe had been on the receiving end when Blacky had swung that length of steel.

There was a big thunderhead piling up above the ragged little range of mountains in the east. I had cause to remember it and Joe and Blacky later on. But I wasn't bothering my head with any of them then; I was thinking of the girl who had kissed me and I was wishing it hadn't been a mistake.

I had been managing a mining property over Death Valley way, and I'd seen what was coming soon as the radio flashed the first bulletins of the Pearl Harbor blow-off. I'd figured I might as well beat the draft board to it and I'd enlisted in aviation. I never did like to walk to work. These last two days I'd spent in Los Angeles winding up the mining business for the duration. Driving back home, I'd run afoul of two Army outfits, and it seemed good now to be on a highway that wasn't full of jeeps and armored trucks. It was thirty-five miles from Windy Blake's tourist-trap to Beulah's Tavern, and I wasn't worrying about my rubber under the circumstances. I made the distance in half an hour.

BEULAH'S place is at a crossroads and there is a little auto camp behind the eating-house. With ore trucks from several mines and the regular tourist trade, the tavern always got a good play, but priorities had put an end to that. There was only one car in sight when I pulled up, a big eight-cylinder sedan, parked near the back of the building. Its owner was sitting at the lunch counter, and Steve, who handles the business, was telling him about the Balkan situation. Steve was a Turk before he took out his papers and he is a wise old bird. He looked around when I came in and jerked his thumb toward the door to Beulah's sitting-room. He said:

"She'll be back in a minute, Ben. Go right on in." I didn't waste any time about it, for I had recognized his customer. It was Sam Brand. He lived in Reno and he called himself a mining broker. I know several words that would peg him a whole lot closer but they won't bear repeating in mixed company. I slid behind his back and got through the door without his seeing me.

That sitting-room of Beulah Smith's is about the last thing you'd expect to find in the Armgosa desert. You would think you were in some little upstate New York village and the year was 1880. It always made me feel peaceable as soon as I got my feet on the Brussels carpet and saw the wall paper with its pattern of pink roses. There was one of those walnut contraptions that your grandmother used to call a whatnot in a corner; there was a marble-topped center-table with a big Bible and a family album on it. I sat down in a rocking-chair and happened to look out through the side window. I said to myself:

"It's just as well for Beulah that Sam Brand is falling for the line that Steve is handing him."

The scene outside the window wasn't meant for me but I kept on looking. It was what you would call extraordinary if you wanted to put it mildly: About sixteen hundred square miles of sagebrush flat leading off to a row of sawtooth mountains which looked as if someone had spilled a lot of red and orange paint on them—and Brand's big sedan was right downstage. Beulah was sabotaging the left rear tire.

Beulah was going strong in Nevada when Goldfield was called Grandpa, which adds up to somewhere in her sixties if she had to tell her age. Once every week she drives down to Las Vegas and they give her the works in a beauty parlor—everything but hair dye. Her marcel couldn't have been more than a day old; the war paint and lipstick were as gaudy as those of a frustrated divorcée on the loose in a Reno night-club. She was wearing her long jade ear drops and a sports dress with short sleeves.

She was holding a knitting-needle in one hand, one of those thin steel needles which date back about forty years. She was driving it into Brand's left rear tire with a chunk of rock. It took her some time to pull it out; she had to wrap it in her handkerchief and brace her feet to do it. Then she shifted operations to the right tire.

There were several ore specimens lying on the center table between the big Bible and the family album. I was studying one of them when she came in by the back door; it was heavy stuff, lead color. I said:

"That's stibnite, Beulah. With antimony the price it's getting now—and it'll go up still higher before this war is over—it looks like somebody's got nice pickings. Where'd it come from?"

She said, "You'd be surprised." She was a little out of breath. I couldn't tell where the rouge ended and the natural color began.

"You oughtn't to overdo like that out in the sun," I told her.

She gave the window one quick look and me another, but it was all the rise I got out of her. She shoved the knitting-needle into a ball of yarn in her work-basket, and sat down in her favorite rocker. She picked up the only palm-leaf fan I ever saw and started cooling off.

I said: "Far as I'm concerned, I never did like Brand. Not since the time he horned into George Morrow's Pinos Altos property. That smelled so bad that when the court handed down the decision he said the grubstake law ought to be changed."

She stretched her legs; they are good-looking legs—there are plenty of girls in their twenties who would be glad to trade with her—and she had on silk stockings. She said:

"The Sheriff told me you were on the road. I thought I'd never lay hold of you, and I didn't know whether Windy Blake would get the message to you when I caught up with you. He was as liable as not to lie about it, just for practise. So I told Steve to keep an eye out for your car and flag you down; but Brand came along—"

AND Steve, I told myself, was needed inside to hold Brand's attention while she did her sabotage. Well, that was all right by me. I repeated what Windy had said about MacArthur, and she laughed.

"I remember the time he confessed to me that he was Dad Jackson who rode with Sam Bass—which would make him about ninety-eight years old now." She laughed again, and it seemed forced. She was worried over something, I could see that, and it wasn't Sam Brand's tires. A little thing like setting a man afoot in the desert with the thermometer at 110 in the shade, would never bother Beulah. It gave me an uneasy feeling that I was in for something rough. That hunch was a faint underestimation.

I said: "I was on my way to turn in my star."

She smiled. "You're going to need it this afternoon," she informed me. "The regular deputies are all out with some F.B.I. men, looking for Japs, and you're the only one I could get hold of."

I cut her short: "The reason I got that buzzer was to guard gold shipments. I never made an arrest in my life."

"It isn't an arrest," she explained. "It's serving papers. A civil suit. I want to tie up some property, and I've got to do it quick."

"And," I went on, "I never served a paper. I wouldn't know how."

She got up from her rocker and put on her hat. It belonged with that sports-dress: it had a wide, limber straw rim with a wreath of little pink rosebuds scattered over it. If she had been forty years younger it would have gone well with her, but at that it wasn't so bad. There was something about Beulah which made you forget the years and the little lines the Nevada sun had etched; and you didn't mind the rouge or lipstick or earrings or the hat.

I looked out of the window. Brand was getting into his car. I did some mental figuring. The rubber would close

in around those needle-holes and stay shut until he put on speed. He might go twenty miles, or only ten, depending on how hard he hit it up. I heard Beulah's voice. Usually it is as soft as velvet, and rich; it had a hard edge now.

"I'm going with you," she announced. "I'll show you how to serve them." I saw there wasn't any use in arguing and I gave up. She rummaged in her work-box and brought a sheaf of legal papers from under the knitting. She handed them to me and I shoved them into a hip pocket without reading the name of the party I was to serve them on. It wouldn't have meant anything to me then, anyhow.

When we went out of the door, I was fretting a little over the delay this errand was going to cost me. Otherwise, I hadn't a care on my mind. I suppose that, in the good old days of the crimps, more than one sailor felt as I did just before they slipped him his knockout-drops and shanghaied him for a voyage around the Horn.

Chapter Two

I GOT into my car and Beulah settled down beside me. She said, "Head back south and step on it."

She opened her handbag while I was starting the motor and rummaged around for her cigarettes. It was an expensive affair, nearly large enough to hold a change of clothes, dolled up with a white metal monogram, and I had noticed her stowing something away in it before we left the tavern. I was shifting into reverse to make the turn into the highway but I managed to get a look at its contents before she snapped it shut. There was the usual assorted junk: lipstick, mirror, compact, keys, cigarette-case, a wad of bills—and a leather blackjack as big as a bologna sausage. It looked as if I wasn't going to have to wait for the Japs to furnish me with excitement. She lighted up and asked:

"How much is this hearse good for, Ben?"

Just by way of answer I slammed my foot down as soon as I'd lined out on the pavement and the needle was reaching for seventy before she recovered her balance. With that bludgeon in her handbag to go on, I was doing some scientific deduction and I remembered her man-of-all work dodging between the cars in front of Windy Blake's.

"It's none of my business, of course," I remarked, "but that little keepsake from your ex-convict henchman is liable to get you into trouble if you aren't careful when you open up your handbag. There's a law against packing those life-preservers." I should have known better; Blacky was a sore point with her—now the battle was on.

"There ought to be a statute for folks to mind their own business," she snapped. "And as for Blacky, the only crime he committed was not having five hundred dollars to hire a good lawyer."

I managed to get in a word: "Hitting a man over the head with a four-foot length of steel doesn't count, or am I wrong?"

She came right back at me: "It was a fair fight. Blacky happened to lay hold of that steel before the Bohunk did. You might as well come clean, Ben. The real reason you won't lay off of him is because he's done a little high-grading."

"*Little* is good!" I retorted. "Bill Crouch, that used to be shift boss in the 'Queen of Sheba,' tells me he was standing at the shaft collar one afternoon when the cage came up. Blacky tripped as he was getting out, and fell on the platform. Bill said it sounded like a load of ore rattling down the chute into the car."

"So what!" She was on edge, all right. "You start drawing the line at high-graders, and you'll be sort of lonely in Nevada."

I don't know how far it would have gone if we hadn't sighted Brand's car just then. It was a long ways ahead. It looked about the size of a lunch-bucket beside the road and Brand looked like a spot edging out into the middle of the macadam. I glanced at Beulah from the tail of my eye; I was beginning to ease off on the throttle already. She shook her head but I kept on lifting my foot and it was just as well I used my own judgment. Brand was swinging his arm up and down like a pump-handle, and didn't give an inch until we were almost on top of him.

I had to swerve two wheels off on the graveled shoulder or I'd have hit him. It kept me busy fighting out of the skid but I got one swift glimpse of him jumping backward. His Panama hat had fallen off, his tight bald head was glittering like a new-laid egg in the hot sunshine. He was wearing one of those Palm Beach suits and there was a sweat stain on the back of his white linen coat as big as a dinner plate. I didn't like him a little bit but I couldn't help feeling sorry for him. Beulah was looking like the cat that swallowed the canary.

We were tooling down one of those long tangents across a dried lake flat, and Windy Blake's ox-yoke emporium cased up above the skyline a few moments later. That put me in mind of the misdirected kiss which I had received. There wasn't any object in discussing the kiss, but the girl had been in and out of my thoughts ever since I'd left the place and there was no harm in finding out about her. I asked Beulah if she'd seen a young thing in dark blue slacks around these parts lately, and she rose to it. She wanted to know where and when and why and what the girl looked like. I saw her watching me while I went into particulars, so I managed to subdue my natural impulses and of course I didn't mention the buss I'd gotten.

"From you," Beulah remarked dryly after I'd finished, "the description could mean any she-stuff under fifty! Chances are she's some Iowa farmer's daughter passing through."

She might have been passing through all right, for it did seem as if she hadn't been in the country long enough to get really acquainted—providing, of course, that kiss had been intended for old Windy. I dropped the subject and Beulah seemed to be busy with some problem of her own. There wasn't any more conversation until we'd left the Desert Scout's Trading Post behind us and were going into the long curve which the highway takes to leave an east and west spur of the mountains to the left. The old dirt road used to take a straight line and cross by a steep pass and the forks are at Blake's store. You may as well keep that in mind. I got a look at the thunderclouds which I had noticed earlier in the afternoon; they had spread above the main range and the spur and they were turning black along the skyline.

I said: "Just as well we're not heading for the hills, or we'd be in for weather."

"What makes you think we're not heading for 'em?" Beulah asked.

I reminded her that I didn't have the slightest idea where we were going, and added that I didn't give a hoot as long as we got there sometime—which gave her an opening for a slam on the time we were making. As a natural consequence we were hitting it up at a scandalous speed a few minutes later when she shouted:

"Whoa! Hold everything."

We overshot the side road for more than a quarter of a mile, and I lost quite a bit of time backing and filling to turn around in a narrow cut. The lateral into which we took off was one of the worst I ever negotiated in a car. It had been made by such little northbound travel as headed toward our destination.

"Which," Beulah enlightened me while we were jolting in and out of chuckholes, "is Great Mogul Mine."

I had heard of it once or twice, but I hadn't an idea where it was. The dirt roads hereabouts were all new to me, for my travels in this section had been confined to the

main stem. I did remember someone saying the Great Mogul had been a rich producer in its day. There are hundreds of propositions like that in the desert country. Some of them date back before the Goldfield bonanza and a good many were discovered at that time. With a few exceptions the veins have petered out now.

The car had been tossing like a ship in a heavy seaway and the dust was stifling when a green triangle at the mouth of a cañon ahead of us resolved itself into some big cottonwoods with a patch of rye grass under them. We had made the turn up the hill into the cut-off from Windy's store of which I spoke a while ago, and we were climbing the grade toward the cañon mouth in low, with the motor boiling, when I saw a large two-story house in the middle of the grove. It was exactly square, and there was a cupola in the center of the roof. There were some dilapidated outbuildings two hundred feet or so behind it. Most of the windows were boarded up.

Just as I stopped the car there was a peal of thunder and I glanced at the sky. It was dead black and the light was going fast. The wind began to stir the cottonwoods. The mountains were like a dark wall. There was a gallows frame and a waste dump and an old ore-mill hanging to the side of the cañon about a mile away.

Beulah was climbing out of the car. She ran to the front door of the house and hammered on it with a brass knocker. The thunder cracked and I saw a big raindrop splash on the windshield. She was back a moment later and I set the motor going again. She stood with one foot on the running-board, and she had to raise her voice to make it heard above the rushing of the wind among the cottonwoods.

"Nobody home." It was curious, but she looked as if she were pleased.

"Better climb in," I shouted, "or you're going to get wet."

She smiled and shook her head. "I'm sticking here. You're driving down the road." She pointed to the cut-off which led across the flat to the forks at Windy Blake's store. "You'll find your party somewhere between here and the highway."

The thunder cracked again, and as soon as I could make myself heard, I asked: "Who is this party, anyhow?"

"Name is Helen Lester." She had to shriek and she didn't like that. "All you've got to do is stop her when you meet her. Put the papers in her hand. And don't you dare let her get by until you've done it."

The upper half of the mountains was extinguished; you could hear the rain marching down upon us. There wasn't any time to waste. It was a case of do or don't. I only waited long enough to tell her she'd better get under cover if she didn't want to drown. I saw her opening the front door.

There was a nasty flick of lightning at that moment. It made the whole front of the house glow. The windows on the right of the door were boarded over; one of the boards was missing. I thought I saw a face behind the open space. Even if I'd been certain of it, I wouldn't have stopped. I was pretty sure that Beulah was holding out on me, but I didn't begin to suspect what was awaiting me in that old house.

There was one other thing I saw, but it was just a glimpse: an old jalopy that was in one of the carriage sheds behind the house. I wasn't sure—the rain hid it almost as soon as I caught sight of it—but it looked a lot like the second-hand heap that Beulah's man Blacky had bought last week for fifty dollars—ten down and five a month. By the time I'd gone a hundred yards, the rain was right on top of me: half a dozen drops that sounded like pistol shots when they hit the roof, and then it was a solid mass of water.

I had plenty of other matters beside that deluge to think about but I didn't have a chance to give them the least attention. A Nevada cloudburst is no joke and this was the real thing. It lasted less than half an hour, and as soon as the water slackened up the hail began. I saw stones as big as eggs bouncing around out in the rabbit brush. I wouldn't have remembered the name which Beulah had shouted if I hadn't kept repeating it to myself, while I was wrestling with the steering-wheel, following the twists of a dirt road across a level flat, which had already turned into a shallow lake. I drove on, cursing the luck which had gotten me shanghaied into this expedition. And then I saw someone coming toward me on foot.

My car was slewing badly and I had to keep my eye on the road. Every few moments there would be a burst of hail which hid the figure completely; it would be followed by an interval of rain and I would get another glimpse.

The rear wheels slid off into the ditch just as an unusually vicious hail squall erased everything in front of me. I was thinking that I was stalled for keeps and I was using language, when the car found traction. It came back like a shot out of a gun and I barely managed to hold it from overleaping the road. When I looked up again, the sun was shining.

I could hear the storm roaring behind me in the mountains, but it had stopped down here as suddenly as if someone had turned it off. The whole flat was a glittering lake, with a few little islands where hailstones had drifted a foot deep in the rabbit brush. A cold wind was blowing. I saw a stalled car nearly a mile away. I saw the party who was coming toward me. It was the girl who had kissed me in Windy Blake's store. She wasn't fifty yards ahead of me now.

The water rose to her knees. She was soaked through and through. Her dark-blue slacks were clinging to her like tissue paper. She tried to say something when I pulled up beside her but her teeth were chattering so badly that I couldn't understand a word. I opened the right-hand door and hauled her in. Then I had one of those hunches that leave a man with a sick feeling.

I said: "You're Helen Lester." And she nodded.

Chapter Three

THERE was a pint flask of whisky in the glove compartment. A hotel man had given it to me in Winnemucca when I was passing through last month, and it had been there ever since for I don't happen to go strong on firewater. I didn't lose any time opening it and I administered an allopathic dose which left her choking. Evidently she hadn't cultivated an immunity to hard liquor, for the color was beginning to come back into her cheeks by the time I'd helped her on with the sheepskin coat which I usually keep in the back of the car just in case the Nevada weather gets to cutting up.

"Now what on earth," I asked, "set you afoot?"

She didn't seem to hear the question. She said: "Please! I've got to get back home at once."

She was leaning forward in the seat, gripping the cushion with both hands. I could see that she was keyed up pretty tightly, trying to pull herself together, but bearing down too hard. I gave those papers in my hip pocket one fleeting thought and I gave Beulah another. There were several things about this mixup which I did not like and I made up my mind that the Law would have to wait until I learned a little more about them.

"As soon as I find some high ground where we can turn around," I told her, "we'll be on our way. Try and relax."

I let off the hand-brake and let in the clutch. We eased along in second. I was searching for a spot where I could back and fill without bogging down, and I was trying to figure out the affair. Beyond the fact that I had my choice of double-crossing Beulah or reaching into my hip pocket and shoving a calamity under this girl's nose, I couldn't

make any sense of the whole business. The water was sloshing around the running-boards, the car was weaving from one side of the road to the other, and I was feeling like a heel.

We passed her stalled sedan just before we came to the first stretch of dry land—and not so dry at that. It wasn't a good spot to turn in but it was the only one in sight. I took a long chance and after a few sick moments while the rear wheels were spinning, the radiator was pointing back toward the mountains. Then I repeated the question which I had asked her when she came aboard.

"The gas tank's empty," she said. "I can't understand it. I filled up at the store."

"Might have been the feed-line," I suggested.

She shook her head. "I looked it over," she told me. "There's a do-hickey on the bottom of the tank. Somehow or other it came unscrewed."

That, I figured, would be the petcock. A rock might possibly have caused it, but there wasn't a stone the size of a robin's egg on the entire flat. I left the motor running and climbed out. I had to wade through water above my knees to reach the sedan and the trip was worth it. The petcock was wide open; the fresh marks upon it couldn't have been left by anything except a wrench or a pair of pliers. I remembered how I had seen Blacky prowling around the rear end of this car when I came out of Windy's store. I remembered how he gave me the dog eye when he caught me looking at him. And I couldn't forget Beulah telling me to step on it all the way down the road from her tavern. I wasn't feeling very jovial when I returned, for I always did like Beulah—but I couldn't see any pay-off in letting this girl in on my troubles.

I said, "Okay. We're on our way," and thanked my stars that she let it go at that.

IT was raining hard between us and the mountains. The storm looked just like an enormous gray backdrop; it hid the cañon mouth and the cottonwood grove where the old house stood. A number of things were waiting for us behind that curtain. When they began to happen, they came fast, and one of them was fear. There isn't anything like it to bring people close together. I don't remember just how long it was before we began calling each other by our first names but it wasn't long. I told her mine before we had traveled half a mile and the remark that made me introduce myself caught me as flat-footed as the kiss she'd given me in Windy's store.

She said: "Maybe it's you."

"Maybe who is me?" I asked. It must have been the look in my face which told her she had mistaken me for someone else again.

"Then you're not—" She thought better of it and closed her lips tightly as if she was afraid the name would come out. "The man I was to meet," she added.

"I'm Ben Edwards," I told her. "I happened to be driving through this way." Partly to prevent her from doing any thinking which might have proved awkward under the circumstances, and partly to throw out a feeler on my own account, I asked:

"How come you live at the Great Mogul Mine? I thought it was shut down."

"It is," she said, "but not for long."

I dropped another piece of bait then.

"Priorities?" She rose to it right away and by the time we were nearing the edge of the flat I had the story—what she knew of it, that is to say.

Her father had owned the property and she had lived in the old house among the cottonwoods while she was a little kid. The ore was high grade, and her old man was one of those fellows who like to keep their money moving. So they had gone to Reno, where her mother had died, and he had spread his investments so thin that last year, when he was killed in an air-liner crash, there wasn't any pay-off, not even life insurance. I gathered, from the way she told it, that the Great Mogul would have gone with the rest of the assets if it had looked worth taking. It seems the vein hadn't pinched out but the values had.

"Of course," she said, "I didn't know a thing about mining, but I didn't know anything else that was useful either. I made up my mind to have a try at it."

So she had come out here on the desert to a one-horse proposition where a half a dozen old shellbacks were getting enough ore to meet the payroll and leave her some for groceries. And after this had been going on nearly a year the War Production Board had slapped down priorities. With profitable gold producers folding up, she had to follow suit. And, as was to be expected, she hung on longer than she should. She was in hock with everyone who would give her credit, including Windy Blake.

"He was wonderful," she said. "He told me I needn't worry."

But she did worry, and just as she was in despair, Santa Claus showed up. A few days ago she had gotten a letter from a man who said he'd known her father well and that he'd heard of her predicament. He proposed to give her five thousand dollars for a half interest in the Great Mogul, saying he'd wait for duration, and as soon as the country got back to normal again, he would finance operations.

"It seemed too good to be true," she said, and I was disposed to agree with her, although such things do happen in the West occasionally. She hadn't told Windy anything about the letter, she wanted to wait until she made sure. So she had written to her benefactor and today she'd gotten a wire saying he was on his way with a certified check. Then she let Windy in on the good news. That kiss which I had received was by way of a sequel.

"And he's due at the house now," she ended.

We were near the edge of the flat. There was a big head of water rushing down the cañon; it split into several streams here, like the ribs of a fan. One of these had cut through the road a few yards ahead of us. It was running strong and deep, the bank was so steep that there wasn't a chance to ease the car down into it. I shut off the ignition, put the pint flask into the hip pocket where I was carrying those attachment papers, and climbed out of the car.

"You do as I tell you," I bade her. "I'll ferry you across."

She did without a word of argument, and even if she had known what I did about that coffee-colored flood, I am sure she would have done it anyway. She was like that. I ordered her out on the running-board. I took her on my shoulders, pickaback. And, before we got through the boiling mess of water and loose quicksand, I was thankful for my long legs. If we had arrived half an hour later, we would never have made it. I was so badly winded when I climbed the opposite bank and let her down, that I had to lie there a few minutes. I remember thinking, as I got to my feet, that we were out of danger. That was a laugh.

We reached the foot of the grade where the road which Beulah and I had taken joins this cut-off, and I noticed fresh tire tracks in the mud. Santa Claus, I told myself, had come, but I did not mention my discovery for fear it might turn out to be a mistake. A few moments later, I couldn't have told her if I had wanted to, for we walked through that gray backdrop and the rain came down in sheets. We staggered up the hill, clinging to each other like two drunken people.

AFTERWARD I learned of one who watched us from the old house as we came through the cottonwoods, and at that later time I realized the fear which must have gripped the heart of the watcher. It seemed hard even then to believe that the sight of so bedraggled a pair could have frightened anyone.

We passed within ten yards of the car whose wheels had left those fresh marks, but our heads were bent against

the driving rain and all I got was a bare glimpse of it; the girl didn't even know it was there. I remember the relief I felt a few moments later when I seized the knob of the front door.

I swung the big door open. I was wondering how Beulah was going to take it when she learned that I hadn't served those papers. This trifling matter passed from my mind as soon as I stepped across the threshold. The doorway was wide. Helen was on my left; she was clinging to my arm with both hands. The wind blew the heavy door shut behind us, and the hall where we were standing was nearly as dark as night.

Something was on the floor beside me. . . . Something large and heavy and it yielded to the touch of my right foot. There was that in the feeling of it which made me know that death had entered the old house ahead of us.

Chapter Four

SANTA CLAUS had come, but he hadn't lasted long. That was the first thought which crossed my mind, and, as it turned out afterward, I had guessed right. Two or three others came racing after it; they weren't pleasant thoughts but they were insistent. They were the ugly sort of questions which a man doesn't like even to try to answer. And I hadn't any time to bother with them anyhow. The idea was to get Helen Lester into the clear somewhere. Then I could find out who this thing had been, which I had touched.

I was standing stockstill and she had gone on ahead of me; while I was puzzling over the proposition of getting her stowed away, she opened a door on the right side of the hallway. It swung inward and it opened wide and a wedge of yellow light fell on the hall's bare hardwood floor. It spread about me and melted off into the darkness; there was just enough to show a man's foot beside me, a well-shod foot resting on its heel with its toe pointing toward the ceiling. My heart jumped into my throat; I was trying to figure out what I would do or say if she got sight of it, when she went on into the room and I began breathing again.

I heard her exclaim, "Someone's been here."

I hurried after her, and before I took a look around, I shut the door behind me. It was a large room and there was a heavy moulding with little cherubs and clusters of grapes around the edge of the high ceiling. The wall paper had been golden once and the design of flowers had been deep red, but there were discolored patches on it now. There was a thick carpet on the floor; there were two old upholstered chairs, a small new roll-top desk in a corner, half a dozen suitcases and bags beside the door, a mahogany center-table with Beulah's open handbag lying upon it beside an old-fashioned student lamp. And a little Franklin stove where a coal fire was dying.

It was from this the light had come. Helen was standing in front of it, frowning at the glowing coals. She looked around at me and suddenly the frown disappeared, her eyes lighted up. I got the idea at once; I could have told her who had made that fire. It wasn't the one she was hoping for. It was Beulah Smith.

I said: "You're going to dry off. And get into some other clothes. Then we'll find out who's here and where they've gone."

This was sound advice; the water was running from both of us faster than the thick carpet could soak it up. There was a brass coal-scuttle standing beside the little stove with a brass shovel in it. I picked it up and asked her where I could fill it. She told me that I'd find fuel in the room across the hallway. I left her standing there with that look of hope in her eyes.

"And," I instructed her, "don't stir from here while I'm gone. You're soaked through and chilled." I took good care to see that the door latched when I closed it after me. I started reaching for a match and realized what I was going to find before I got my fingers on it. The paper box was pulp. I let my investigation wait and went on after the coal.

I might as well tell you about the first floor of that house now; it will make things simpler. The hallway ran its entire length, with the broad front door at one end and a blind wall at the other. On either side of it three rooms. And near the entrance, there was a stairway leading to the second story. When Helen had come here all the downstairs windows were boarded up; she had someone remove the boards from the rooms on the right, where she made her quarters.

So, when I crossed the corridor and opened the opposite door I walked into darkness deeper than that which lay outside the threshold. It was only half-past three o'clock in the afternoon but the gloom was so thick that a missing board at a front window let in a slanting shaft of dim twilight which made a faint gray oblong on the bare floor.

I had a curious feeling the moment I stepped into the place. The air was dead and it had that unpleasant smell which you always notice in deserted buildings. The rain was not roaring now, but it had the same deep rushing sound you hear sometimes when you stand beside a swollen river. There wasn't a room in the whole house where you didn't hear this and it kept up almost to the end of the affair.

But it wasn't the musty smell, or the sound of the rain that bothered me. It was a feeling. It was exactly as if I could hear, or see, or smell, with the back of my neck. As if there was some new sense there which told me of another who was in the room. I stood there for a second or so. I tried to look into the darkness, and it didn't do me any good. Except for the rushing of the rain outside there wasn't a sound that I could hear.

I took another step, and trod upon a lump of coal. I dropped upon one knee and groped around until I found a heap. I scooped up the first shovelful and the noise it made when it fell into the scuttle was astonishing. The nasty feeling in the back of my neck made me turn my head. I saw something moving across the patch of gray light upon the floor. I didn't know what it was like. I only knew that it was within arm's reach. I was getting to my feet when I saw the blow coming. I threw my arm up to ward it off; then I was lying on my back with a whole flock of blue and red stars milling around above me.

Those stars were old acquaintances, I'd seen them twice before: once when a big drill-runner laid me out with a loading stick and once when a chunk of rock clipped me alongside the head as I was going down a raise. I didn't lie there more than ten seconds. I got up fighting and found there wasn't anyone to fight. I made the open doorway in two steps and if I hadn't held to the jamb, I would have fallen. It was perhaps half a minute before my head quit spinning. My left arm was still numb. If I hadn't raised it just in time, I wouldn't be here now.

EXCEPT for the rain there wasn't a sound in the hallway, and there hadn't been any in the room. My head was aching as if it was going to pop wide open. I raised my hand to my forehead and felt a big hot lump. I pulled myself together and tried to look composed; I crossed the hall and flung the door open. Helen Lester was standing where I had left her. She took one look at me and exclaimed:

"You've hurt yourself!" I would have liked to make more of it than I did; there was that in her face which showed me I was passing up a golden opportunity, but I told her I'd run against a door and that I wasn't suffering. I asked her if there were any candles in the place. She hurried out to the next room and brought me an old-fashioned glass hand lamp; she found some matches, and while I was lighting up, she said:

"It's a nasty lump. You should do something for it right away." It was the first time the breaks had come my way since I had gone to Beulah's Tavern, and I had to walk out on her. I told her to go back to the stove and I waited until she'd obeyed orders before I opened the door again.

I stepped into the hallway and the first thing on which my eyes rested was Sam Brand's bald head. He was lying on his back beside the front door. He was as dead as Julius Cæsar.

Chapter Five

I REACHED down and touched the upturned face. It was still warm. Sam Brand hadn't been dead ten minutes. Someone had struck him on the temple and the blow had crushed his skull without breaking the skin. Well, I wanted to do some fast thinking and I didn't want to be interrupted. If I lingered here too long, Helen was going to believe something had gone wrong. I was pretty sure she hadn't swallowed that lie about the door, and if she got to worrying she might come out to see what was delaying me. I went across the hallway to get the coal.

The desert wind had been at work during the years while the room had been unused and the floor was thickly coated with fine dust. There was a well-beaten track to the coal heap. There were four sets of tracks between the doorway and the window where the board was missing. These prints had been left by a man in his stocking feet. Two sets coming in, two going out. I got quite a kick from one of the latter, for it didn't lead straight to the threshold. It detoured abruptly from the lighted window and circled the place where I had been kneeling when I took that clout on my forehead. There was another bit of evidence, more interesting than tracks—it was Beulah's blackjack, lying on the floor beside the spot where I had fallen.

I set down the hand lamp, picked up the blackjack, stuffed it into my hip pocket and proceeded to fill the scuttle. I hurried back to the room across the hall. Helen was trying to warm herself in front of the stove. Beulah's handbag was lying on the center-table, apparently undisturbed. I had a wild idea of slipping it behind my back. A professional shoplifter couldn't have gotten away with that. I saw that I was going to mess things up worse than they were if I let such screwy impulses get hold of me and I snapped out of it. I started replenishing the fire.

"Best thing you can do," I told her, "is to get into those dry clothes as quickly as possible."

"You'll stay near by?" she asked. I looked around at her. She was all tightened up again, as she had been when I met her on the flat. Only this time it was different; she had been eager then; she was frightened now.

"You're holding out on me," I said. "What's happened?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. This house is full of queer noises and I'm chilled."

There wasn't any doubt about that last assertion; she was shivering when she made it and her face was colorless. But I was satisfied that she hadn't told me everything. I wanted to ask her about those noises and I'd have done it if it hadn't been for other things which needed figuring out at once. I tried to look as casual as I could and remarked that she'd be feeling a whole lot better when she got rid of the wet clothes. I promised her that I would stay right outside the door.

"And," I added brightly, "another little drink won't do you any harm." I pulled the flask from my hip pocket and laid it on the table; I put out the hand lamp and I left the room. I had made two blunders which I was going to hear from later on, but I'm willing to bet that *Nero Wolfe* himself wouldn't have batted a thousand with the breaks coming the way they did that afternoon.

The darkness in the hallway made the rain sound louder than it had before, and as I stood there trying to sort out the things which had happened since I'd gotten that kiss, it seemed as if the old house was—as she had said—full of little noises. Once I would have sworn that I heard footsteps on the upper floor and the closing of a door. If I had been on my own, I would have taken the stairs then, three at a time, but I couldn't very well leave a badly frightened girl alone down there with a murderer prowling around the place.

I kept my promise and stayed beside the door, but it was some time before I was able to get my mind to work. And the further I went into the mess, the less I liked it. When I finally had the facts arranged, two of them stuck out like a pair of sore thumbs. One was the Great Mogul mine: Helen Lester owned it. Beulah Smith wanted to clap a plaster on it. And Sam Brand was trying to get hold of it when someone killed him.

The other was the fact that Brand and I had been struck by the same weapon, for only a limber blackjack could have left those marks without breaking the skin. This meant that the murderer was in the house now.

I didn't waste much thought on Sam Brand. His reputation was as wide as the state of Nevada. That talk about his having known Helen's father and wanting to help her out of a bad fix was just the line of hooey one would expect from him. But it had a meaning. The Great Mogul was not worthless. Brand wasn't putting up five thousand dollars unless there was rich ore in sight.

I didn't spend much time over Blacky either. I didn't need to. He had put himself right on the spot. The fact that he was an ex-convict didn't count by itself. He had done time for hitting a man over the head and Brand had been killed in the same manner, but the two things didn't necessarily tie up. Not until you remember that old heap which I'd seen in the carriage shed behind the house. And the way Blacky had tried to avoid me in front of Windy Blake's store.

This latter incident had another angle, which looked pretty hot. It dovetailed very snugly with the open petcock on the gas tank of Helen's car. I hadn't actually caught Blacky doing this, but the look he'd given me made me certain he had been up to something. When I got that far I began to wish I could duck this job of sleuthing.

FOR now I came to Beulah. I'd known her going on three years. We'd disagreed on almost everything which people argue over, including the New Deal, priorities and the moral turpitude of high-graders. We had staged a good many battles in her quiet little sitting-room behind the tavern, and there's nothing like that to make you really understand a person.

Her case-history was what you might call an open book, and there wasn't an old-timer in this part of the State who didn't know it. It went back to the early days of the Tonopah boom and the twenty-mule teams; it included three husbands, half a dozen mining rushes, and covered every desert camp between Rye Patch and the eastern Sierra foothills. She'd gone broke on two wildcat propositions before she'd learned that ore in place is the only thing that counts. The dough she had put out staking prospectors would have started a country-town bank. She had grown hard-headed enough to hold onto some when the excitements died down and many of the big shots were going into tailspins. But even in these latter days, while she was taking it easy in her little back parlor with the family album and the Bible and the crocheted tidies and the rocking-chairs, she was willing to take a long chance.

I would have sworn by Beulah before this afternoon. I would swear by her now. But I had to look the facts over just the same.

In the order that I had run afoul of them, they began with Beulah hammering a steel knitting-needle into Sam Brand's tires. Next came the demand on me to serve

those attachment papers; then the blackjack in her handbag, the way she kept me crowding on speed to the mine, her look of satisfaction when she found that Helen hadn't reached the house before our arrival, her determination that I must serve the attachment as soon as I met the girl down on the flat.

I added up these items at least a half a dozen times, like a school kid going over a column of figures on a blackboard; but the kid never gets the same answer twice and I couldn't have missed the one I got, no matter how much I wanted to. It always came out with Beulah delaying Sam Brand and her Man Friday delaying Helen, while Beulah and I burned up the road in order to put a plaster on the mine.

I had been in this business long enough to know the way rich ore gets you. If Beulah saw a shyster trying to muscle in on something big, and thought she had a right to it herself, she might get rough. But I did not see her going as strong as murder. And anyhow, those tracks in the room across the hall had been made by a man. Which, to my way of thinking, put Blacky right into the picture.

THE murder must have been committed just about the time Helen and I started climbing the hill, for the body was still warm. It could have been Beulah and Blacky waiting in the front room when Sam Brand knocked at the door. It could have worked out a dozen different ways, all to the same end—which was Blacky laying hold of that life-preserver and growing too enthusiastic with it. If this was the case, Beulah would cover up for Blacky, and a little thing like facing a Nevada jury on a murder rap wouldn't stop her.

In all my life I never wanted to see anyone as badly as I did Beulah. And I never was as determined to stick close to anyone as I was to Helen.

There was another element in this affair. It was the metal badge which I had intended to turn in this afternoon. When the Sheriff gave me that buzzer, I had stuck up my hand and taken an oath. I had not thought much about it at the time but I was thinking of it now. I was an officer, sworn to enforce the statutes, and this was murder. The fact that I'd have been willing to pin a rose on the party who had rubbed out Sam Brand didn't make any difference either. I couldn't sidestep now!

The hallway was as dark as the inside of a cow, the house was filled with the growling of the rain. I had been imagining all sorts of other sounds, but I neither heard nor saw the person who came within thirty feet of where I was standing. If it hadn't been for what we discovered later on, I wouldn't have known anyone had been near. I have often speculated as to how things would have turned out if I had taken that hand lamp with me. As it was, I was standing there in blissful ignorance of any other's presence, when Helen called to me.

She had changed into another pair of dark blue slacks and a sleeveless jacket, and those straw sandals with holes for the big toes which girls wear when they are bare-legged She was standing by the center-table with her hands behind her, and the moment I saw her face, something told me I was due to get bad news.

"Now," she said, "I've got to know what all this is about."

I made a strong play at looking jaunty. It didn't impress her in the least.

"Who struck you?" she asked.

"It was a—" I didn't go on.

She nodded toward the mahogany center-table. And when she spoke her voice was brittle.

"Beulah always carries a mirror in that handbag. Better have a look at your bruise. No door could have made that."

She was correct. The bruise was a good three inches long and it lay right across my forehead. I pulled myself together, and I said:

"All right. It was John Doe. And that's the truth. I didn't get a look at him." I returned to the table and replaced the mirror in the handbag. She wasn't saying a word but her eyes never left my face. "Beulah," I went on, "came here with me. I'd give a lot to know where she is now."

Helen withdrew her hands from behind her back, and when I saw what one of them was holding, I cursed my carelessness. The papers must have fallen out when I pulled the flask from my hip pocket. They were sodden, the ink had run, but the typewriting was still legible on the summons which I had been dragooned to serve. I shook my head.

"I wish to heaven," I told her, "this was the worst news I have to bring you."

She looked me in the eyes; she was holding her chin up; she was trying hard to smile.

She said: "I can take it."

It wasn't the first time I'd felt like a heel, this afternoon. I wanted to explain that, as for those papers, I was an innocent bystander, and I had to hand her this instead. I remembered an old Chinese saying that I'd read somewhere or other: "Thank God the worst has happened. Now things will be better." I was consoling myself with that when I started talking. It might have been true in China when Confucius was holding forth, but it wasn't working in Esmeralda County, Nevada, that afternoon of 1942.

The news that Santa Claus had been rubbed out didn't affect her as I had expected. You think you have another person pegged, then you find they don't run true to form. It isn't because your dope was wrong; it's because you passed up some angle in the game. She looked dismayed, but the look was gone before I finished, and it was the only sign she gave of realizing that her air castles had been torn down. She was silent for a moment and then asked:

"Why did Beulah sue me?"

I realized how deep the hurt must be. I said, "I'm sorry, kid. I wouldn't know. You two were friends?"

"Good friends." She shook her head. "And this isn't like Beulah. The last time I saw her, we rowed a bit, but we often did that." She snapped out of it suddenly; the frightened look was in her eyes once more. She laid her hand on my arm and her voice sank almost to a whisper: "The man who struck you was the man who murdered Brand. I should have told you this before. There's someone in the next room."

CHAPTER SIX

THERE are some things which take a week to happen, but you can tell them in a dozen words. This mix-up wasn't one of them. It figures to eight or ten minutes from the time when Helen and I entered the house to the moment when I pulled Beulah's blackjack from my hip pocket and started for the next room. The door wasn't more than fifteen feet away, and I wasn't loafing; but the things which were going on inside of me while I took those few steps would give a psycho-analyst a day's work and several hours overtime.

I was so scared when I laid hold of the door-knob that my fingers were sweating. And it wasn't dread of meeting the man who had laid me out while I was getting the coal. I had a pretty definite idea who he was, but he wasn't troubling me at all just then. A red-handed murderer would have been as welcome as the flowers of May. That sick feeling came because I was expecting to find Beulah.

I had been as near to praying for a meeting with her as a man can come who doesn't work at his religion, and I was more anxious than ever now to get a showdown. But not behind this door! Things looked bad enough for her without that.

I turned the knob and pulled the door open, and faced an empty room. It wasn't as large as the one I'd left: a girl's bedroom, plainly furnished. There was a daintiness in the flowered window curtains and the little fixings on the dresser which made me feel about as much at home here as a Percheron horse. I poked around a bit; I even went as far as looking under the bed. Then I went on.

The next room was the kitchen, and one corner had been screened off for a breakfast-nook. I gave it the once-over and drew another blank. I came out from behind the old-fashioned Chinese screen which she had used for a partition, and found that Helen had been following me. I asked:

"Just what was it that you heard? And when?"

"It was a moment or two before I called you back from the hall," she told me. "It was the creaking of a floor-board. There's one in my bedroom which does that whenever you step on it. I didn't hear it very plainly because of the rain, and I had been imagining all sorts of queer noises ever since I saw that bruise on your forehead; but this time I knew it wasn't imagination. I had heard the sound too often before to be mistaken.

"I was thinking of the handbag on the table and those papers I'd just found on the floor, and I took it for granted that it would be Beulah. So I went to the door and opened it. I didn't see anyone. I was puzzled then: I was standing in the doorway trying to convince myself that my nerves were getting the best of me, and that I hadn't heard anything at all, when another door went shut. You know the way some of these old knobs are when they need oiling. There's one such on the door that leads from the kitchen into the hall; it has a rasp that sets your teeth on edge, and I could hear it through the noise of the rain."

She was holding her chin up, but she wasn't taking it as a joke. She said:

"There's another thing: I noticed it while you were behind the screen. There was a hank of clothesline on the shelf early this afternoon when I left the house to drive down to Windy Blake's store. It isn't there now."

I HAD a feeling that time was wasting, but the vanished clothesline worried me. There were a number of other things I wanted to figure out. That was the worst feature of this affair—the loose ends that needed following; and you couldn't figure which of them to go after first. According to her timing, someone had left the kitchen and gone out into the hall while I was asleep at the switch a few yards away. I couldn't figure why Sam Brand's murderer should hang around, eavesdropping and committing petty larceny. I said:

"You're dead sure of the time when you heard the board creak?"

"Positive. It was just before I called you. I only waited long enough to pick up those papers and hold them behind my back."

"Okay," I told her. "I'm going to search the two rear rooms across the hall."

She said: "They're both locked. The old furniture is stored there."

"And you're sure he didn't leave the house by the back door?" It was my last bet, and when I laid it down, I knew it was a loser. She shook her head. She went to the back door and swung it open. There wasn't any sound except the rain. She stepped to the hallway door and repeated. The screech of the latch was all the answer that I needed.

There was no getting away from the fact that this eavesdropper had slipped into the hall; he had got next to my presence out there, and had waited until Helen called me; then he had gone on his way. It didn't seem to me that rain would keep a murderer inside the house when he had the opportunity of a clean get-away, unless there was some urgent reason for his sticking around. The more I thought about it, the less I liked it. I said:

"Looks as if he's gone upstairs, or into the front room where you keep the coal." I felt Helen's hand on my arm. I looked around; her face was drawn, the fear was in her eyes again.

"Where is Beulah, Ben?" I had been asking myself the same question. I had been hoping for one answer: If Blacky was the murderer, maybe Beulah was helping him to cover up. This wasn't so hot, but it was the only out for her that I could figure. I shook my head.

Then Helen said: "There are a good many things in this that I don't understand, but I'll swear by Beulah."

THAT jolted me. I thought of how I'd turned my mind to solving this mystery while I was out in the hallway, and had shut my ears to what was going on within a few yards of me. I told myself, the hell with this deduction stuff from now on! It isn't down my alley anyhow. I said:

"I'm stringing with her too, kid. Let's go. I'll need that lamp again."

She was on her way to the front room before I'd finished. I did a little more thinking after she was gone. There was a whole lot going on here which I couldn't get the hang of, but I did know that a murderer was on the loose, with two women in the house—and one of them unaccounted for. I hot-footed after Helen to the front room. She was lighting the glass lamp, and I noticed that her hand was steady. I took a look at the two doors; there was a key in the one that led into her bedroom; the old-fashioned latch of the other had a little catch to hold the knob from turning. I locked the bedroom door and picked up the lamp.

"You throw that catch," I bade her, "as soon as I go out. And don't let anyone in until I'm back."

She said: "I'm going with you." But I stood pat, and she gave in after considerable argument. Just as I was about to leave, she asked:

"Did Beulah tell you to serve those papers on me when you met me, Ben?" I couldn't see any sense in sidestepping that one; she was bound to find out the truth sooner or later. I nodded and went on my way, wondering why she had asked it.

The room across the hallway had not been entered since I had left it; the tracks in the dust made me certain on that point. The rain was coming down harder than ever when I stepped out of it. The lamplight fell in a little circle which included Sam Brand's upturned feet and the two lowest stair-treads. Outside of this, the darkness seemed deeper than it really was. I made up my mind that there wasn't any pay-off in advertising my presence like a torchlight procession: I blew out the lamp and set it down at the foot of the flight. If I had taken it with me, I would have seen the narrow stairway that led from the second floor to the cupola, but the chances are that wouldn't have done any good. I stole up on tiptoe, and what little sound I made was drowned by the noise of the rain. It was so loud when I reached the top landing that I could have been on horseback without anyone getting wise to my presence.

The windows on this floor were boarded up. It was as dark here as it was in the lower hallway, and I had to feel my way along the wall. As I was to find out presently, the lay of the land was very much the same as on the floor below, with two exceptions: the railed-in stair-well at the top landing was about one-third down the hall; and a few feet farther on toward the rear of the house a steep narrow flight led to the cupola. On each side of the hall there were three rooms. They were connected with one another. Just keep these facts in mind—and don't forget the rain or the darkness. A dozen men could have been prowling around that old house for all I could hear or see.

For some moments, I stood there at the upper landing. I figured that this game of hide-and-seek was going to wind up according to which party had the jump on the other;

and then—I got my first lead. It consisted of three tiny specks of white light on the floor. One of them was within ten feet of the spot where I was standing; the other two were farther down the hallway. I followed them toward the front of the house, and when I drew near the end of the hall, I found another on the doorknob at my left. It was larger than those on the floor, and it wasn't as bright. They made me think of the fox fire you sometimes see on old stumps at night in a swamp. It looked as if someone had walked down the hallway leaving little specks of fire behind him. I balanced myself on the balls of my feet as I turned the knob with my left hand—and I held Beulah's blackjack ready to swing and eased the door open.

I was all set to go when I stepped across the threshold. Half a second later I was back on my heels. For I had seen a hand. It seemed to be floating in the darkness; the tips of the fingers were spots of white fire; it wasn't a steady glow, but brightened and faded like the beating of a man's pulse; it showed the hand reaching toward me. Then—hell broke loose.

It didn't last long, but it was fast action. When a man is fighting for his life, he doesn't waste any time; he just keeps boring in, and he doesn't let anything cramp his style, either. That set-to would have made the Marquis of Queensberry turn over in his grave. And from the moment when it started until just before the end, there wasn't a sound you could have heard through the roaring of the rain, if you had been standing out there in the hallway.

The hand snatched hold of my shirt and jerked me forward. It threw me back against the wall with a jolt that knocked the breath from me. I struck with the blackjack, but the blow went wild. I hooked my left in the direction I thought there should be a chin waiting for it, and it felt as if I had driven the knuckles back into my wrist. . . .

An arm was sliding around my body. I braced myself for what was coming, and I went to work with the blackjack again while we were rocking back and forth. I was working fast, but I couldn't see what I was doing, and the blows that did land had about as much effect as if I was beating upon a steel girder.

I felt a red-hot streak—it was as if a branding-iron had been drawn across my throat. I heard something thump into the wall beside my head. I heard a grunt—like the "*huh*" which you hear when a mucker drives his pick full force into a heap of broken rock. I kicked out with my right foot, and the two of us went down together. It was the only noise we made during the entire fight.

This was one time when I was able to appreciate the benefits of higher education, for I had got a block letter as Conference champion in wrestling during my senior year. I managed to hang onto the blackjack while I was maneuvering for a nice hammerlock. That was as far as I got. I think I took his knee. It was as if a mule had kicked me in the belly. I must have gone limp during the instant which followed. When I was able to move, my stomach was doing some fancy acrobatics, and I was alone on the floor.

I got to my feet, weaving like a miner in town on payday night. I couldn't hear a sound except the rain. I felt my way along the wall and found an open door. It led into the middle room. I hoped I was walking into another ambush, for I wasn't in a pleasant frame of mind: this was the second time that I had been on the receiving end, and I'm not used to that. I was sore at myself and looking for more trouble, not giving a hoot what it was as long as it came.

BUT nothing happened. I stood inside the doorway, with my stomach doing flip-flops for a moment. Then I went on, holding my hands before me like a man walking in his sleep in the motion pictures. I fetched up against another door and flung it open.

The room I was facing was the last one in the rear. It was a good-sized room, and most of the boards had been removed from a back window. The light seemed much brighter than it was, by contrast to the darkness I had left. A miner's carbide lamp was burning on the floor. The jet of flame was waving in the draft.

Beulah was standing before the open window. She was holding a new clothesline in both hands. The line passed out across the sill, and it was as taut as a fiddlestring. She was lowering away, and the weight on the other end was evidently heavy, for she was leaning back against it. I called her name. She dropped the rope, and it whipped out of sight.

Chapter Seven

"WHERE'S Blacky?" I said. Beulah didn't answer. She was rubbing the palms of her hands together, and she was using strong language. I know a number of nice girls who think they can swear, but they are only putting on an act; they lack the real sincerity. And that clothesline had blistered! Then she turned to me.

"Did you serve those papers, Ben?" she asked.

The light that seeped in through the window was much better than in the rear of the room where I had halted. I saw a wary look in her eyes, but otherwise she seemed as unconcerned as if she had sent me to the grocery store for a dozen eggs. And that burned me up. Until then I hadn't realized how badly I had been worrying about her; how, ever since I had come into the house, it had been on my mind that if she wasn't mixed up with Blacky in this murder, she must be in real danger of her life—maybe she'd been killed. Now here she was, safe and sound; and aside from the welts which that rope had left the only thing that bothered her was whether or not I'd slapped a plaster on the Great Mogul Mine. I said:

"The hell with the papers! Where did Blacky go?"

She shook her head. "I wouldn't know." Her eyes had grown harder. "I hope you didn't sidestep when you met Helen. Business is business."

I was trying hard to keep my temper, but I wasn't making a good job of it. That "business is business" was too much for me. I said:

"You're the one who's sidestepping, Beulah. Blacky came into this room less than half a minute ago. He was on the lam, and I was after him." I added a little strong language of my own.

"Don't blow your top," she bade me. "He didn't come this way. Why are you looking for him? And I would like to know about those papers." She was coming toward me while she spoke. Her head snapped back. She said: "Why, that's my blackjack!"

"It was," I informed her coldly. "It belongs to the Sheriff now. I'm holding it for evidence."

It didn't get the slightest rise from her; she didn't even seem to hear it. She was looking worried. She laid her hand upon my shirt, took it away and stared at her fingers. It was the first time I realized that I'd been bleeding.

"Who gave you the working-over?" Her voice had lost its snap; it was gentle, and her eyes were frightened.

"I figure on your pet ex-convict," I answered.

"You figure wrong," she said. "Blacky wouldn't use a knife."

"Maybe he'd have preferred a length of steel," I acknowledged, "but there wasn't any lying around in the front room where we tangled. So he did the best he could to cut my throat. Didn't you hear us?"

"All I heard was rain." The wary look had come back into her eyes. "I've been in this room for the last ten minutes."

"And he didn't come through?" I demanded.

"You asked me that once before," she reminded me. She was worried about me, all right; that was genuine: she was fussing over the cut; she had lifted her skirt, and she

was ruining a sports-suit that must have set her back at least seventy-five dollars, trying to wipe away the blood. But she was worried about Blacky too. I was surer than ever that she was covering up for him.

I told her that the cut on my neck wasn't making me any trouble, and I didn't mention the wallop I'd taken amidships. My innards were beginning to grow a little more peaceable, although the old breadbasket wasn't back to normalcy by any means. I said:

"We may as well get down to business, Beulah. Murder is no joke."

"Murder!" she exclaimed. "Who's been murdered?"

She stepped back a pace and looked me in the eyes. If she was putting on an act, it was a good one, and that wasn't Beulah's style. She had never been one for the fancy footwork; she always liked to come in swinging. Still, you couldn't tell. If Blacky got into a jam, she would try anything to ease him out of it. I cursed the day when I had let the Sheriff pin that hardware on my chest, and I watched her face closely while I told her:

"It was Sam Brand. Somebody rubbed him out in this house a few minutes ago."

"Sam Brand!" She shook her head, and then she smiled. "What could be sweeter! And you're trying to pin the rap on Blacky! If I thought he did it, I'd double his wages."

"Personally," I agreed, "I'm stringing with you as far as Sam Brand is concerned; but it happens that I'm an officer, and so all bets are off. Besides, there's a lot more to this, Beulah. Sam Brand was laid stiff with a leather blackjack. The party who did it clouted me over the head a few minutes later. It was in the dark, and I never got a look at him, but he left this behind him. Exhibit Number One." I held up her blackjack. "It will look fine on the District Attorney's table next term of court."

She said: "Quit shoving that thing under my nose, Ben. Where's Helen?"

"Downstairs," I told her. "She's locked herself up in the front room."

"That's sensible." She looked relieved. "And so you figure that I'm on the spot along with Blacky?"

"I've got reasons," I said. "I'll tell you later what they are. I'm in a hurry now."

"Whoever this is you're after," she reminded me, "he's had plenty of time to get into the clear. And I'd like to hear just how it happened. I'm not so dumb. Might be I could help a bit. You're using a lot of new muscles in this brain-work, you know."

It sounded like a good bet. I was thinking that if she was on the up and up, she might discover some angle I had muffed; and if she was backstopping for her ex-convict friend, the chances were I wouldn't be able to tell her anything about the goings-on in this house which she didn't know already. I believed—heaven help me!—that Helen was safe in that locked room. I said:

"Okay. I'll shoot the works. Sam Brand got his as soon as he stepped inside the front door. I know that Blacky was about the place then, for I saw his car in the carriage shed just before I drove away to find Helen—"

"Helen?" Beulah raised her eyebrows. "My, my! We do get acquainted fast."

I told her to cut the wise-cracks, and I went on:

"You were here too. But that isn't all by a long shot. I'll go back to the beginning."

SO I told her I had seen Blacky prowling around Helen's car in front of Windy Blake's store; I reminded her I'd seen her puncturing Sam Brand's rear tires, and of her haste to get out here and put a plaster on the mine. I described my meeting with Helen, including the open petcock on the gas-tank. I repeated her story of Sam Brand's letter.

Beulah heard me through in silence; when I was done, she said: "So what?"

"Figure it for yourself," I said. "I may be thick-headed, but I'm not simple. You want to get hold of the Great Mogul Mine. So did Sam Brand. You did your damnedest to delay him on his way out here. Someone—and it looks like your hired man Blacky—tried to prevent Helen from getting home for her appointment with Brand. But Brand managed to make it, though he was late. You and Blacky were in the house when he came. You knew that I was due back here with Helen at any minute. It looks as plain as a row of four-story brick buildings, but that's nothing to the build-up the District Attorney would make before a jury. Then there's that stolen clothesline—"

"I took it, Ben," she said.

"What for?" I asked.

"That," she replied, "is my own business. We needn't waste time on it." Which was either the truth, or it was a lie. I let it ride. I recited the saga of the front-room battle.

"It's your turn now," I told her.

"YOU'RE right about the mine," she said. "I wanted to get possession. I had my reasons for that. I wanted to hold Sam Brand up, for fear he'd beat me to it. But if you think I got Blacky to open that petcock, you're crazy. If you have an idea that I hired Blacky to kill Brand, you're a bigger dope than I take you for."

"Might be Blacky got enthusiastic," I suggested. "Might be he tried to stop Brand from coming in or something—"

"Skip it." She was disturbed, all right; she didn't like the way things were shaping up, a little bit. I could see that plainly. She said: "I didn't know Brand was killed until you told me, Ben. I did know Blacky was somewhere around the place. I'd seen his car. And it was on my mind when I came into the house. Then this cloudburst turned loose. I kindled up a fire in the front room and sat down to wait for you. My guess is that I'd been sitting there more than half a hour before I thought I heard someone upstairs. I had an idea it might be Blacky—don't ask me why, because I wouldn't tell you if I knew—and I nosed around until I found this carbide lamp in the kitchen. By good luck it happened to be loaded. So I lit up and started out. And there wasn't any corpse by the front door then. Oh, yes. . . . I left my handbag on the table. The blackjack was in it, and it was open."

"Find Blacky?" I shot that one at her fast. She clamped her lips tight and shook her head. I could take it for denial, but I didn't. I took it for clamming up.

"All right," I said. "And you picked up that clothesline because you wanted to hang yourself. Or maybe you were shark-fishing when I came in here. I wouldn't know. The hell with it! Let's go. You take the lamp; I'll go ahead and stop the punches. I'm getting good at that."

We went into the hall. Beulah was holding the lamp high, letting the light go over my shoulder. The first thing I saw was a match. I stooped and picked it up. It was unlighted, and the head was so wet that it crumbled in my fingers; it left a strong smell of phosphorus, and a faint glow. I had solved the mystery of that luminous hand and the specks of light on the floor.

We went down the hall toward the front of the house, and we passed the narrow stairs which led to the cupola. I took a look at the hole at their head; it was the space where a trapdoor should be, but it was open. I was thinking that Blacky might be hiding up there now. I was more convinced than ever that he was the man whom I was looking for. It was just plain arithmetic: Either Blacky or Beulah or Helen or me. I made up my mind that if he was holed up in the cupola, he would keep, and I went on without glancing at the stair-treads. As I have intimated, I wasn't so hot on the skull work that afternoon. But it didn't matter. The discovery that was awaiting us up there wouldn't have hastened the wind-up of this business if we had made it then.

We stopped off in the room where I had my battle, and we found a bone-handled sheath-knife. It had been driven into the wall so deeply that I had to use all my strength to pull it out.

I said, "For my collection!" and I stuffed it into my hip pocket. We went on across the hall and drew a perfect score: three rooms, three blanks. I remembered the cupola stairway, and I was about to mention it when Beulah said:

"Ben, I want to go downstairs."

I glanced at her. I was thinking she might be stalling. It would be a smart idea, provided Blacky was up there in the cupola and she wanted to get him out of the house. But the glance was enough for me. If she had been Sarah Bernhardt and trying to two-time me, she couldn't have put on that worried look. I remembered Helen then.

My first feeling was a mixture of guilt and shame. I must have been Sherlocking here with Beulah for several minutes, and the time seemed much longer than it really was. I reminded myself that one door of the front room was locked, and the latch on the other was caught. It didn't make me any easier. I swore under my breath. We started down the stairs. The two of us were neck and neck when we reached the bottom landing. I don't know how Beulah did it, but I am sure that my feet didn't touch more than three times.

It was quieter down here than it had been upstairs. Sam Brand's body was lying on its back, and the light of the miner's lamp played queer tricks with his bald head. It crossed my mind that if Blacky was the murderer, I ought to wish him all the luck in the world, and forgive the two work-overs he had given me—provided Helen was all right!

I stepped to the door and called her name. There wasn't any answer. I turned the knob, and to my dismay, the door swung open. The fresh coal had got going in the little Franklin stove. Beulah's handbag was lying on the table, and the soggy attachment papers were beside it. As comfortable a scene as one could ask on a cold rainy afternoon, if only Helen had been there. I heard Beulah saying:

"I'll never forgive myself. Never!"

Chapter Eight

I KNEW how Beulah felt. I was not feeling very good myself. I'd never thought I was an intellectual giant, but the knowledge that I had been standing in that upstairs room trying to give Beulah the third degree while Helen was alone down here, in heaven knows what danger, made me realize that I was nothing but a big false alarm.

I had a queer sensation then. It was as if I was a blind man standing on a corner, with all sorts of traffic going by, and all sorts of people passing me on the sidewalk; and I couldn't see one of them. Ever since I'd been in this old house, things had been happening right under my nose; but I could have been a thousand miles away, for all I knew of what was going on. Other things were happening now. Maybe Helen was being murdered. The carbide lamp that Beulah was holding threw some light into the hallway; beyond that, there was blackness. And I didn't even have a blind man's acute sense of hearing.

Now that I look back on it, it doesn't seem so unreasonable. Here we were, several people, moving around, ignorant of one another's presence. But the walls of these old rooms were thick, and the darkness was black, and the noise of the rain was in our ears. I wanted to go and I didn't know which way to turn. The murderer had slipped down the stairs while I was doing my third-degree stuff. He had managed to get into the front room somehow. Or maybe Helen had come into the hallway and he had run across her. It didn't matter which. All I could do was hope she was alive, and try to find her.

I heard myself saying: "I'm going up to search that cupola. Give me that lamp."

Beulah was as near to crying as I ever saw her. And it was one of the few times she ever looked afraid. She snapped out of it, and her jaw was set. She said:

"Easy, Ben. I know just how you feel. But we've got to watch our step now. We ought to take the downstairs first; then we'll make sure we don't leave anything behind us as we go."

HER reasoning was good; yet I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I should be climbing the stairs. It hung with me while the two of us were searching the bedroom and the kitchen. It was the same old story: no soap. And I was growing sick of drawing blanks.

"We'll take the coal-room now," I said. Beulah had been following me up to this time, but she dropped behind as we went into the hallway. I had reason to remember that later, though I didn't give it a thought then. As soon as we entered the door of the coal-room, I saw new tracks. They were like the ones which I had noticed just before I was laid out; the tracks of a man in his stocking feet. They led straight to the door of the next room—one of the rooms which Helen had said were locked. I didn't mention my discovery. I left Beulah standing in the middle of the coal-room, and I went on with the miner's lamp.

I don't know whether it was then that Beulah left me, or whether she waited until I was out of sight. I wasn't thinking of her then. I walked up to the door and turned the knob. The door swung open to my pull, and the lamp went out. I might have known that someone had used it in the mine. It was a wonder the carbide had lasted as long as it did.

But that was the least of my troubles. I was hot then, and I knew it. If there had been a dozen men in the room, it would have been the same. I was as certain that Helen was here as I would have been if I had seen her, and I wasn't stopping even if I was afraid of the dark.

There came a big hail squall. The pounding of the stones was like deep thunder. It lasted for perhaps thirty seconds. Then it ended. The storm was over, but the clouds hung on for a minute or two longer, and it was still dark in here.

I had slid away from the doorway, keeping my back to the wall. I was standing there listening when the hail quit pounding. And I heard a sound that made the hair rise on the back of my neck. I had heard something like it before once, when I was standing by watching a surgeon put a man under the anesthetic after a mine accident. As nearly as I could tell, it came from across the room. I started toward it.

I wasn't making any more noise than I could help. There wasn't any telling whether there were two of us in here, or three. I had a feeling that three was the answer. It was exactly as it had been before, when I was kneeling beside the coal-pile, and I'm passing it on to you for what it's worth. Maybe my nerves were strung too tight and I was imagining things both times. Or maybe a man has some means of hearing or smelling which doesn't register as it used to do before we got civilized. I wouldn't know. I was as sure as I'd been before, that someone was near by, and he wasn't where the breathing was coming from. I felt my heart jump, and my fingers were tingling. I had never been as anxious for a fight as I was then, but I was going to do the dealing out myself this time; I wasn't going to walk into it blind. I stopped and stood there listening.

Someone else was listening too, standing stockstill like me. Except for the breathing there wasn't a sound for several seconds. Then I caught something. It came between the gasps across the room, when everything should

have been silent; it was very faint; it was hardly louder than the rubbing of a hand across a smooth board. But almost as soon as I got it, there was another drone of indrawn breath to drown it out. I was turning my head from side to side to listen, but the result was always the same. It was as if the room was full of invisible shapes, and no matter which way I faced, I would hear someone in his stocking feet gliding across the bare floor.

Then a chair moved. There isn't any mistaking the noise that the legs make when that happens in an uncarpeted room. It came from behind me. It was as startling as a gunshot. I whirled on my toes, and I left my feet in a flying tackle. My timing was nice; if I had only seen what I was after, I would have made it. As it was, I barely missed: the fingers of one hand touched a leg—clamped around an ankle just as I crashed to the floor. I did the best I could, I wasn't able to hang on, however.

I didn't lose any time in getting to my feet, but I wasn't quick enough. I saw the flicker of dim light as the door came open. I was springing toward it as it went shut. I lost a precious moment fumbling for the knob, and I heard a key slide into the lock. I heard the rasping of the lock when the key was turned.

I backed off a couple of paces and made a rush. It was an old-fashioned door, and the panels were of heavy oak; the lock held firm. The only result I got was a bruised shoulder.

Little streams of light were seeping through the cracks between the boards before the windows; I saw the dust-motes dancing in them. I saw the leg of a mahogany chair where one of the shafts spread as it neared the floor, and the marble top of an old-fashioned table. I saw a little foot in a straw sandal, and part of an ankle where the sunlight rested. There was a brown cord wrapped around the ankle; it was the loosely twisted tarred rope that is still used sometimes for tying heavy packages. I saw the lower portion of a leg of blue slacks—the part where it flares around a girl's foot—and it was bunched tight beneath the rope. I remembered the blue slacks Helen had changed to, and the straw sandals she was wearing when I had last seen her. I wanted to go to her, but I knew I couldn't help her yet. I had to break out of this place and find Beulah.

I slammed against the door the second time, and it gave a bit; the timbers hadn't even cracked but the lock was loosening. I made another rush, and I barely caught my footing as I half fell into the coal-room. The light was better here. Aside from myself, the room was empty. I got to the hall door in time to see Beulah running down the stairs.

Chapter Nine

BEULAH said: "Don't stand there gaping, Ben. Where is she?" I didn't answer. I turned around and led the way.

It was several minutes later when I was able to call my soul my own again. I was standing in the doorway from the living-room into the hall. Sunlight was streaming through the front windows. Shadows were moving around outside under the cottonwoods, and bright patches were shifting back and forth between them in the rye grass. Little clouds of steam were rising from the water on the flats. I saw these things from the side of my eye, but I wasn't paying any particular attention to them. I was watching the top landing of the stairway, and the flight beyond, which led to the cupola. I was keeping my ears cocked for sounds from Helen's bedroom. What was going on in there was none of my business; I had been told so in plain language.

Ever since the moment when I had seen Beulah running down the stairs, I had been on the jump, and she had been giving the orders. Once or twice at the beginning, for I had learned first aid on a mine rescue crew, I had started to make a suggestion. But I hadn't got to first base; I hadn't even been allowed to finish. A dog in good repute would have rated as high as I did. So I had kept my mouth shut and my eyes open during those few minutes, while I was fetching and carrying and being given to understand that I had the I. Q. rating of a ten-year-old kid. I had learned something new about women then, and I had got it the hard way. Whenever two of them get together, such small matters as slapping an attachment on one another's property don't count; business isn't business; and the best man in the world is a rank outsider. The discovery wasn't troubling me at all now. Helen was not seriously hurt; that was the only thing which mattered.

She was lying on her bed. Beulah and I had carried her there after I had cut away a bandage which covered the lower part of her face, and had removed a gag from her mouth. The bandage and the gag were made of burlap torn from the wrappings of the old furniture in the room where I had found her. The gag had been stuffed into her mouth so violently that it had worked back into her throat, and the chances are she would have suffocated if I hadn't come along when I did. There was a dark blue mark on her chin, and she was completely out for some time after we laid her on the bed. But she was all right now. I could hear her voice coming through the open doorway of the bedroom.

Now that I wasn't being pushed around any more, I was beginning to do some thinking for myself. And the top landing of the stairway seemed worth watching. It occurred to me that the cupola was the only place I hadn't searched up there, and I hadn't forgotten how Beulah had headed in that direction the moment I turned my back on her in the coal-room. In more ways than one, her little *pasear* was what you might call intriguing. There was the possibility that she had thought Blacky was hiding there. And there was another bet; it didn't look like a long shot, either: If Blacky was the man who had locked me into the furniture-room with Helen, he could have run upstairs and passed Beulah while she was looking for him. Considering the way she had acted after I had caught her with the clothesline, it seemed likely that she might have let him go on by, and kept her mouth shut afterward.

While I was pondering over these things, Beulah appeared in the bedroom door. She said:

"You may come in now, Ben. Helen wants to talk with you."

"And you," I told her, "may stand by. I want to ask you a few questions later on and I don't want you rambling around in the meantime."

She gave me one of her quick looks. She said: "I know what you're thinking, Ben—"

"Never mind what I'm thinking," I bade her. "Just stick around." I went on in. She was badly frightened, there wasn't any doubt of it.

Helen was lying on the bed. She was propped up on two pillows. When we had brought her in here, her face had been flushed, dark red. It was a little paler than usual now and the bruise on her chin looked uglier than it had before. I sat down on the edge of the bed. I took her hand and patted it. I told her she'd be hitting on all eight within half an hour. She said:

"Thanks to you and Beulah, Ben. She's a dear, isn't she?"

That should have knocked me for a loop, considering those attachment papers on the front-room table, but I had seen these two wrapping their arms around each other before I had been shooed out of the bedroom, and I was prepared for it. I agreed that Beulah was a dear, and I hoped against hope that perhaps, when this business was unraveled, she might be out of jail. I said:

"How did this happen, Helen?"

And she answered: "I don't know."

"Did you see the man who knocked you out?" I asked. She shook her head to that one; I had expected it and I put another:

"Where were you when he came across you?"

"I was in the hallway." She must have seen what I was thinking, for she went on quickly. "I should have minded you, Ben, but I was frightened. I had heard something. It was a heavy thud; it was on the floor of the room above me. I didn't stop to think until I was standing by the door with my hand on the catch. Then I remembered what you'd told me and my promise. I don't know how long I waited there. My imagination was making me hear all sorts of things again, just as it had before: people seemed to be moving all over the house. Once I thought someone was in the hallway and I was very near to screaming. I just couldn't stand it any longer and I opened the door; I ran to the stairs; I was at the foot of the flight with my hand on the banister—"

"You mean to say," I interrupted, "that you were intending to go upstairs?"

"I was afraid." She hesitated. I didn't get it yet.

"But why go up?" I asked.

"You were up there," she said. "You were in danger."

I NEVER was troubled with an interiority complex, but I couldn't believe her fear had been for me. I sat there staring at her.

"You were pretty nice to me this afternoon," she went on quietly. "You didn't need to be. I couldn't let you down, you know."

So that was it. I remembered how she had asked me whether Beulah had told me to serve those papers. This casting your bread on the waters wasn't such a bad idea.

"You're a good kid," I told her. I wanted to return that misplaced kiss then, but I didn't. I only said:

"You were standing there at the foot of the stairs when he socked you?" And she went on:

"I didn't see him. I didn't hear anything either. Until he was within arm's reach of me. I started to cry out and then I felt a blow. That's all I remember, until I was lying here with Beulah bending over me and you standing behind her."

So someone had knocked her out; then he had taken her into the room which was supposed to be locked up. Well, that part of it wasn't so hard to understand. Those old-fashioned locks are all alike. All you need to open one of them is a key with a thin tongue and these are for sale in every hardware store. Lots of men carry them. But why the gag and the rope? If he didn't want to kill her, he must have been pretty sure she hadn't seen him. Certainly it wasn't any reluctance at manhandling a woman. And all he had to do after he had knocked her out was to go on, there was no one down here to hinder him. But he had run the risk of wasting precious time on a Boris Karloff stunt. It looked screwy to me. I made up my mind to forget it.

I said, "You and Beulah seem to have patched up your troubles, Helen."

"There wasn't any patching," she told me. "We didn't mention the lawsuit. We were too busy making up."

"And that quarrel last week?" I asked.

"I had forgotten it," she answered slowly. "It doesn't matter now anyway. You know how Beulah is, and I was stubborn; I didn't want her meddling in my business. I'd told her about Brand's letter and she asked me who had written it. I said he had asked me not to mention his name. She tried to get it out of me and I wouldn't tell. She warned me that he might be a swindler, and she intimated that I wasn't able to look out for myself. It made me angry."

I had got what I was after. I could have let her know that Beulah had guessed right concerning Santa Claus' intentions, but I didn't see any use in piling that on. So I patted her hand again and went on my way.

Beulah was in the front room; she was standing in the doorway which led into the hall and her back was toward me. She was looking up the stairs.

"See anything of Blacky?" I asked.

"I haven't seen anyone."

"Sit down," I bade her, "and I'll stand guard here while we're talking."

She went to the chair before the Franklin stove, she turned it around so that she was facing me before she seated herself. She didn't look meek,—that was quite beyond her,—but she was near it. I knew there wasn't any use in trying to crowd her. I went to her handbag and got a cigarette; I offered it to her; she shook her head again. I lighted it and took a couple of puffs.

"When did you get out those attachment papers, Beulah?" She hadn't expected that one; her eyes grew narrow and her lips went tight, but she answered readily enough.

"Yesterday afternoon. I drove to Las Vegas and my lawyer drew them up. Why do you want to know?"

"My good woman," I said, "you don't seem to realize that you are on the spot and I am trying to find some way to put you in the clear."

"Do you realize," she asked coldly, "that if you want to make a woman mad, you want to call her good? And I'm not needing any help from you, my lad."

"Put it this way then," I said. "Maybe you'll like it better. I'm going to give the Sheriff such facts as I've picked up and before I pass the dope on to him, I'm going to let you in on it, hoping you'll see where you are at in time to get out from under.

"Last week you and Helen had a row. It was about a letter which Sam Brand had written, offering to finance the Great Mogul Mine. You wanted to know who the writer was and she wouldn't tell. After she went away you went to work to find out for yourself. You have forgotten more about this mining game than most men in this part of the country know, and you were reasonably certain that someone was trying to muscle in. Which meant, of course, that there was rich ore here. You learned that Sam Brand was playing Santa Claus and your suspicions were confirmed."

"I told you," she said, "that I tried to prevent Brand from coming here before I got hold of the property."

"YOU didn't tell me about Blacky," I came back at her. "You sent him out here to nose around, and he brought back that stibnite I saw on your center-table this afternoon. Stibnite means antimony—that means big money, now that we're at war and foreign markets are cut off. You and I have gotten pretty well acquainted during the last two years and I am not so dumb that I'd be thinking you were after that dough. You were looking out for Helen's interests; you were going to clap that plaster on the mine in order to prevent Brand from taking her for a ride."

"Well," she said, "suppose I was. There isn't any law against that, is there?"

"We won't," I told her wearily, "go over the murder again, and the things I'd have to swear to if the District Attorney put me on the stand. All I'm hoping is that it won't be necessary. It will be, however, if you keep on covering up for Blacky. There isn't a jury in the State of Nevada that won't believe you were trying to grab the property. They'd figure that Blacky would do anything for you because you've stood up for him, and that he blackjacked Brand while you were standing by. Why don't you come clean?"

"All you need," Beulah said, "is a three-foot length of rubber hose." She smiled but the worried look was in her eyes again. "Supposing Blacky wasn't in the house at all?"

"Okay," I said. "Supposing. But why did you slip upstairs when I was in the coal-room?"

"That," she answered quickly, "hasn't anything to do with Sam Brand's murder."

"Nuts!" I said. "I'm going up there now. And when I drag Blacky out of the cupola, the beans are spilled."

"Don't go, Ben." She was on her feet and she was coming toward me. She took my arm in both hands and I could feel her fingers sinking in. I shook her off. I said:

"Get back into the bedroom. And lock both doors. It's bad enough already without having you or Helen in danger."

She was clasping her hands before her—she wasn't exactly wringing them, but it was very near to that. I turned away and ran up the stairs.

It was dim in the upper hallway, but there was light enough to show the footprints on the narrow flight which led to the cupola. There were quite a number of them and they were clear, for the dust was thick here. I didn't waste any time examining them. Some of them had been made by a man in his stocking feet.

The only thought I had when I ran up that narrow flight, was to keep to one side as much as possible in order not to smudge those prints. I wasn't particularly caring about what awaited me at the top. I was too anxious to get this business over with. I saw a narrow triangle of light above me. And then I stuck my head and shoulders into the cupola.

It was a little room, glassed in on all four sides by wide windows. I stood there for a moment, blinking, with the smell of old dust in my nostrils. Then I saw Blacky. He was lying within a yard of me, right in the middle of the floor, beside the trap door. He was on his back, exactly like Sam Brand, and just as dead.

Chapter Ten

A FLASHLAMP lay on the cupola floor. It was within arm's-reach of me. It was one of those long torches which desert drivers carry in their cars, and it was turned on. When Beulah and I passed the little stairway, I had glanced up at the open trap, and the cupola was dark then. It didn't take a course in the F. B. I. school to show what that meant. Someone had been here since.

I was getting sick of this deduction business. I had tried it in the lower hallway when there was only one murder to figure on, and all I had got out of it was a bum steer. Now, with two murders to solve, the best I could hope for was a headache. And the fact that the killer was still hanging around the house, after he had plenty of chances to get away, did not look so good to me. I wondered whether Beulah had followed orders and locked herself in with Helen. It was ten to one she had not. She wasn't strong on taking orders at any time, and she had good reasons for wanting to know what was going on up here. I was in a sweat to get back to those two before something else happened.

I picked up the flashlight, and I didn't use a handkerchief. What with the soaking I had got, mine was out of commission anyhow, and I had other things on my mind than fingerprints. I took a look around the cupola. It was a little room, not more than ten feet square, with windows on all four sides. If they had not been boarded over, I would have had a fine view, including about half of Esmeralda County; but it was a gloomy hole now. The dust on the floor was deeper than it was in the coal-room. Blacky's body lay beside the trap where I was standing. It was lying flat on its back, as I have said; but this was not the way Blacky had fallen. There was a plain trail in the dust where the murderer had dragged him away from the head of the stairs.

There was a whole flock of footprints. One set made the round trip between the top of the stairs and the opposite side of the little room. They were the tracks of a man in hob-nailed shoes. The upturned soles beside me were studded with such nails. Evidently Blacky had come here, and departed, before he climbed the narrow stairway to his death. The rest of the prints had been left by my stocking-footed friend who had slugged me in the coal-room and dropped Beulah's blackjack beside me. There was a smudged patch of them beside the trap. He must have been standing there for some time. Then he had stepped toward the head of the stairs. That would be when Blacky poked his head into the room.

The murder had been committed with the famous blunt instrument, and there was plenty of evidence to show that the murderer had been dead set on making a thorough job of it. But there wasn't any sign of the weapon.

I turned off the flashlight, and took it with me when I went downstairs. I found things just as I had expected. Beulah was standing in the doorway of the front room. I could see her face when I was halfway down the flight, but she couldn't see much of me because I was in a deep shadow. She was trying hard to get a look at me; she was leaning forward, with one hand clenched at her breast. I remembered how she had taken Blacky in after he had finished that jolt in Carson City, how she had fed him and stood up for him, and I was sorry that I had been so rough with her a little while ago. She must have read bad news in my face when I came out of the dim hallway, for she said:

"All right, Ben. Tell me."

I could have stalled around to break it gently, but I knew Beulah. The flat facts were easier for her. I gave them to her, and she didn't even quiver. The only sign of emotion she showed was a little trembling of her lower lip, and once she blew her nose. I slipped my arm around her waist then.

She said: "You are a good egg, Ben. I'd better tell you now what I was doing up there. I'd have told you before, but it looked to me as if Blacky might be put on the spot. With his record, he needed all the help that I could give him. And, you know, you never liked him—"

I cut in on her then. "I wasn't strong for Blacky, I'll admit, but most of that talk I used to hand you was just a rib. I always liked to get a rise out of you."

"I'm easy that way about my friends," she said, and it was the only time I ever heard her acknowledge that she wasn't hard-boiled. I realized she must be feeling pretty badly, but she snapped out of it right away.

"I was worried about Blacky this afternoon. I had a suspicion why he was here as soon as I saw his car. He used to work in the Great Mogul before he took that rap and went to Carson. There was a lot of high-grading going on here in those days. Lester was living in Reno, and the man who was managing the property wasn't so hot. The miners had a saying that any ore which showed less than a thousand dollars a ton belonged to the owner, and I don't reckon they were too particular in sorting out his share, either.

"Blacky always talked freely with me. He told me a lot of stories about high-grading that he'd done. Most of them were lies, of course. To hear him tell it, you'd figure he should be retired with a bungalow in California, but his biggest worry was for fear he'd die on a park bench or in a two-bit flop-house. You know how some of these miners are. He had carried a little rich stuff across the shaft-collar in his time, and he had got only a small cut from crooked buyers. Since he'd come back from the pen, he had made several trips out here. I had run across him twice myself when I was on the road.

"So I put two and two together while I was sitting by the fire after you went away. I remembered how the house had been vacant before he was put away, and now it was occupied. It occurred to me that maybe he had a plant here, and wanted to get to it. You had told me that

he was hanging around Windy's store this afternoon, and I thought perhaps there might be something in that pet-cock business. That's why I went upstairs.

"And when I got to the top landing, here was Blacky backing down out of the cupola with a sack of high-grade on his shoulder.

"I gave him a combing-over, not as good as I wanted to, for I was afraid you'd be back with Helen at any minute, and I wanted to get him away from the house as soon as possible. He was scared himself. He said he had heard someone come into the front door soon after he had arrived, and he'd been lying low ever since. I took it for granted that I was the one he'd heard, but now I think it might have been the man who killed him and Sam Brand."

"It might, at that," I said.

"Anyhow," she went on, "Blacky was in as much of a hurry as I was. He had figured on the likelihood of an interruption from the start. He had taken a hank of clothesline from the kitchen—I was lying when I told you that I'd lifted it, by the way. He had laid it in the side room, and he had kicked off some of the window-boards in order to lower his sack down to the ground. I followed him in there, and he went back to the cupola to get his flashlight. That's the last I saw of him. I was waiting for him to return. I was growing impatient, for I'd been there a long time, and I was about to go and see what on earth was keeping him. Then I thought I might as well get rid of that ore while the going was good, and I was doing it when you happened along."

"Didn't you hear Helen and me when we came?" I asked.

She shook her head. She said:

"In that rain I wouldn't have heard a ten-ton truck come through the door."

I said: "Okay. We start from scratch. Not counting Sam Brand, there were five of us in the house. And maybe there are that many now." I showed her the flashlamp.

"It's Blacky's," she told me.

"It was lighted when I went up there," I said. "But it wasn't when you and I went past the cupola stairs. According to the rules of common sense, the party who killed Blacky, killed Brand, and slugged Helen. And he must have met Helen before you and I came out of the back room, for if we had been in the upper hallway when he knocked her out, we would have heard it in spite of the rain. She started to call for help, and she must have fallen when he struck her. And that isn't all. He carried her into the room where I found her, and he was still with her when I came in."

"I think I see what you're getting at," Beulah said. "If he had gone upstairs after he locked you in, I would have seen him. . . . I wouldn't bother with that, Ben. All it comes to is this: he stayed in the house and slipped upstairs later while we were busy with Helen. Might be, he'd left something there and went back after it. How was Blacky killed?"

"Same as Sam Brand," I said, "Only it wasn't a blackjack, and the murderer packed the weapon away with him."

"The more I think of this," she told me thoughtfully, "the more I'm convinced that you were on the right track with your theorizing, Ben. Only trouble was, you had the wrong pig by the ear. The man who did this was laying for Brand. For why, I wouldn't say. Lord knows that shyster had it coming to him, from a lot of people. This particular person arrived soon after Blacky—before you and I came. Remember Blacky thought he'd heard someone moving around downstairs."

"Which," I chimed in, "brings up something that had slipped my mind." And I described the face I'd seen at the front window just before I drove away to serve those papers.

"It was that infernal rain," Beulah said. "That and the darkness. Even now it's as black as a cellar out in the hallway. He was rampaging around in his stocking feet and he didn't make a sound. He killed Brand while I was up there with Blacky. Then he dodged into the coal-room when you and Helen came in the front door. After he blackjacked you, he slipped upstairs. He was hiding in the cupola when Blacky showed up, looking for the flashlight."

"And," I added, "he had got sight of your handbag lying open on the table in the front room after you'd gone to hunt for Blacky. He saw the blackjack, and he figured on a nice out for himself by leaving it somewhere near the scene of the crime."

"As far as we're concerned just now," Beulah said, "all it adds up to is this: either he is in the house or he is outside."

"Stick here," I told her, "And I'll find which it is."

The first room I visited was the cupola. I worked down from there and I didn't lose any time. I was back within three minutes.

"Now that we know he isn't inside," I announced, "we'll make sure he stays out. The way things look down there on the flat, the water won't be a foot deep where it cut through the road, in an hour from now, and we can wade over to my car. We might as well make our minds easy while we're waiting. Let the Sheriff do the worrying when he takes hold."

There was a big brass key in the front door. I turned it and gave it to Beulah. I went to the kitchen door and I was about to lock it when I happened to think of the ore sack. I don't know why it was, but I opened the door to have a look at it. There was a tangle of clothesline beneath the window where Beulah had been lowering away. There was no sign of any sack.

I shut the door and locked it. I went back to Beulah. I told her of my discovery.

"Forget it," she advised me. "You're an amateur, Ben, and so am I. The only edge I have on you is the fact that I'm not trying to scab on the professionals. Matter of fact, I'd just as soon no one ever found that high-grade, as long as it doesn't hinder the Sheriff from catching the murderer."

I was willing to string along with her, for I had my fill of detective work. I proposed that we should go in and cheer up Helen.

"Fallen for her?" Beulah asked.

"In a big way," I said, and I started to tell her about the kiss I'd received in Windy Blake's store. I was right in the middle of it when someone knocked on the front door.

Chapter Eleven

THE big brass knocker sounded like the crack of doom. The din went through the whole house and it seemed to fill the empty halls with echoes. This was, of course, partly my own imagination. I hadn't realized how thoroughly on edge I was until Beulah gripped my arm and I jumped. It was about four-thirty o'clock in the afternoon. We two were standing there with bright sunshine streaming upon us and we were like a pair of scared children in the dark. It was my first case of jitters and I wasn't proud of it; I was wondering what sort of a wing-ding I was going to throw when the Japs showed me the real thing if I let a little racket like this put me out of gear completely.

I was starting for the door when Beulah squeezed my arm again. She pointed to the window, and I nodded. After what had happened during the last hour there wasn't any telling who might be trying to get in. I went on tiptoe to the window and looked out. What I beheld there was a perfect example of anti-climax.

It was Windy Blake. He was dolled up in his regular business suit. Outside of Death Valley Scotty there wasn't anything to match him in the entire West. He looked

exactly like the Sheriff in a Class B motion picture. His pants were tucked into high-heeled boots with white stars on their red tops; there was a rattlesnake-skin band on his ten gallon hat, and the butt of his trusty single-action six-shooter stuck out of a leather holster beside his lean thigh. He was a sight to soothe the eyes of any tourist who was speeding over the great wide open spaces, searching the service stations and motels for a genuine he Westerner. I returned to Beulah and imparted the news. She gave me a dismayed look; she said:

"I thought we had been through enough this afternoon!" The knocker began thundering again. I managed to make myself heard through the uproar and I told her, for Heaven's sake, to slip me the key so that I could let him in before he broke down the door. I knew what was awaiting us and I didn't like it any better than she did.

He made a nice entrance: straight-backed and silent, a single long stride into the hall. He stood there, stroking his drooping mustache with his left hand, the right arm crooked so that hand rested on his hip. Bill Hart couldn't have done better in the old days of the silents. He said:

"Howdy, Ben." His deep frontier voice was quiet: it was as if someone had struck a bass drum lightly. I didn't answer him; I was waiting to hear what he would say when he saw the late unlamented. I wanted to make the best of a bad matter and I knew that Windy wouldn't let that chance go by without putting on a good act. But he was looking toward the doorway of the living-room.

"And Beulah!" He swept off his hat. "Howdy, ma'am. Where's Helen?"

Helen was on her way. The color was back in her cheeks again. She was smiling at Windy—it was a smile which I would have given a good deal to get, and it made me sore at things in general. I had time to speculate as to why on earth it was that the Windy Blakes could always take the smiles. Then our visitor lowered his eyes.

His face didn't move a muscle but it became stern. His eyes were two blue slits. And when he spoke, you would have felt—as I did not—that, now at last, everything was under control.

"How did this happen, Ben?" Man to man—just like that! But I was not thrilled. I only said:

"Let's go in and sit down. No use in standing here. It's a long story." And just by way of a teaser—"There's more upstairs." His shaggy white brows drew together at that and his blue eyes met mine; he nodded.

The four of us filed into the living-room and I went last. Beulah dallied long enough to whisper in my ear:

"What will it be, Ben—Pat Garrett or J. Edgar Hoover? And are you going to shoot the works?" I shook my head. I knew what she was getting at. If I were to drop a hint about that stibnite, the news would be all over western Nevada and eastern California within a week.

"Windy is as leaky as an old sieve," I said. "And there isn't any pay-off in a stampede here."

OUR guest of honor took the chair by the stove, but before he seated himself, he caught sight of the bruise on Helen's chin and demanded to know how come. I told him that the information in hand would indicate Brand's murderer had done it. He let himself out then. He said, no matter who that man was, or where he went, he would be brought to justice. He said he—Windy—would attend to this himself.

"As God is my judge!" he murmured, and then he added quietly: "Whar I come from, we have our own way of handlin' these heah reptyles."

He went over to Helen and laid his hand on her shoulder. He declared, "This is the las' day yo' stay out here alone. I should of put a stop to it befo'."

This was going some, considering the fact that heretofore no one except himself had ever thought it necessary to carry any weapon larger than a jackknife in these parts—and I was gratified to see Helen wasn't impressed.

"Really," she reminded him, "I've been looked after pretty well. You couldn't have done any better than Ben did yourself. He nearly got killed, protecting me, too."

I got enough encouragement from this to find a seat on the arm of the easy-chair which she had taken. I felt her hand resting on mine. I thought I might as well improve my opportunity, and I took hold of the hand.

WINDY had gone back to his chair by the stove and he was sounding off again. "Ben's a good boy," he said, "when it comes to the rough work. But yo' need somebody to look after yo', honey."

I wasn't paying much attention to him; I hadn't a worry on my mind just then, and I was willing to let him go on as long as he pleased, provided I didn't have to move. But Beulah snapped him up.

"Somebody to look after her!" she said. "Now just how do you figure you qualify? If you'd had any sense, she wouldn't be out here now. You knew she was going to meet Sam Brand. She told you so herself. You knew what a cold-blooded shark Brand was. And you were dumb enough to let her meet him on a mining deal."

I was draped over the arm of Helen's chair. I was conscious of the pressure of her shoulder and the softness of her hand against my palm. I was as relaxed as a basking cat when Windy said:

"I didn't let her go. I done my level best to stop her. I done tol' her she ort to lay off'n Sam Brand. I done tried to induce her to leave Brand to me or else write to her lawyer. But she's high-strung, Beulah; yo've seen her yo'se'f when she gets her back up. So I done tuk the law in my own hands. I slipped out of the Tradin' Post jes' befo' she druv off an' I opened the petcock of her gas-tank. That's how come I'm here now. I'd got to frettin' fo' fear the cloudburst had cotched her."

He said some more but I don't know what it was. I was trying to readjust myself to this new development. I looked at Beulah and she looked at me; I suppose she was thinking, as I did, about Sam Brand's rear tires—and this long-legged false alarm doing, as he had said, his level best to help make the mess worse than it was already. There was a little silence; then Helen murmured:

"Why, Windy!" And after that more silence. For the life of me, I couldn't think of any words which would be fitting. Then Beulah shrugged.

"You might as well go on and tell him what happened here," she bade me.

I recited the tale of the afternoon's events, with certain expurgations which included the presence of antimony and Beulah's lawless activities. I wasn't paying much attention to what I was saying. I kept thinking of that old fool setting a girl afoot on a desert flat on a July afternoon. And, as soon as I had done, he proceeded to steal the picture again.

As I have already hinted, I was expecting him to put on one of his acts, and so was Beulah. But he fooled us both. He started off by throwing J. Edgar Hoover and all the rest of the master minds into the discard. He was, for once, himself, and he was dead serious. The only stage prop he hung onto was that Deep in the Heart of Texas accent and I don't think he could have shed that if he had tried; it had grown onto him.

"I don't admire this-heah theory-spinnin'," he said. "It sounds nice when the detectives tell it afterward. Way I look at it, most of them fellows lay holt of the man fust an' find out how he done it later on. But I would like to have a look at them there tracks, if yo' don't mind, Ben."

I told him that I was glad to oblige which wasn't exactly true, but it was no more than civil, and I conducted him over the various scenes of our adventures. We started at the room where the coal was kept and the furniture room was next. I thought he was going to spread himself there but he didn't indulge in any theatricals; he just swore quietly when I described how I had found Helen.

It was the same upstairs, and I was a little disappointed when he didn't produce the magnifying glass, which he carries like every man in a gold-mining district, and drop on his knees beside the body. We hadn't been gone five minutes before we were back in the living-room and he was in his chair again. He put the tips of his fingers together and he closed his eyes. I said to myself:

"Oh, oh! It's coming now."

"I reckon yo've missed up on them tracks," he murmured.

"It wouldn't be the first one I've muffed this afternoon," I told him, and he nodded with exasperating placidity before he went on:

"More likely, the man we air lookin' for is wearin' tennis-shoes." He opened his eyes briefly and looked around the room. Then he went back into his trance. "A man in tennis-shoes. And how do we know he was after Brand? Couldn't it of been Blacky he was seekin', and Brand got slugged, same as yo' did, becuz he was in the way? Only thing we're really sure of is that the killer is loose and he aint fur off."

"How do you make that out?" I thought I had him there.

"Only road he could get away by," Windy answered calmly, "is the side-hill road which yo' an' Beulah tuk. I druv out on it an' I didn't meet up with nobody."

He rose from his chair and he started for the front window. His eyes fell on the center-table. He went to it and picked up the soggy legal papers. He said:

"What's this?" And Beulah answered him:

"It's an attachment on the Great Mogul Mine."

He was frowning at the papers.

"Mean to say," he demanded, "yo' was aiming to sue this girl?" He was burned up all right.

"Not only aiming,"—Beulah's voice was hard,—"I've sued her. Ben brought the papers in here, and she took them. That makes it stick. Business is business, and I'm not trusting anybody's intentions."

There was what the stories call a frozen silence. Helen was staring at Beulah. I was taken aback myself. I thought that plaster had gone into the discard. Windy's voice cut in on the stillness. He said:

"Madam—"

And that was all he said. I put a stop to what might have been a wordy battle by throwing both arms before my face and leaping through the side window.

Chapter Twelve

BEULAH said afterward that it looked like a stunt, and the fact is that I wasn't sure just what it was, myself. There was no time to make certain. I had to take a long chance or pass it up.

At the moment when I interrupted proceedings, Windy Blake was standing by the Franklin stove; Beulah and Helen were at that end of the room too, and I was near the front. I was looking through the side window, and my view was on a slant. It included a little of the old carriage shed at the rear of the house, and about half of Blacky's car. The edge of the sash cut off the rest. It seemed to me that the radiator cap was trembling.

You probably know how it is with some window-panes when you do not face them directly and when the outside light strikes them obliquely. The glass is blurred and it leaves objects hazy. So I was not sure, but it did seem as if the old jalopy's motor was running.

That sash was not break-away stuff. And although I weigh a little better than one hundred and eighty stripped, and had my head tucked down behind my arms, I took some punishment when I went through it. I carried a lot of splintered glass with me and I was bleeding in half a dozen places when I got to my feet.

There was no doubt about the motor now. The car was edging slowly out of the shed. I started for it on the run and the engine let out a salvo of backfiring; then it picked up suddenly and the car shot forward. It reached a bit of downgrade between the carriage-shed and the front of the house; it took on speed there, and swung straight toward me. I got a glimpse of the man at the steering-wheel—a big man in his shirt-sleeves.

There wasn't any mistaking his intention, and the realization that he was figuring on running me down frightened me. It was the sort of fear that makes a man mad. I was swearing under my breath, and I was more set on getting my hands on that fellow than I was on saving my own skin. I sidestepped just in time; one of the dented old fenders ticked my leg as it went by. There was a short running-board under the cab; the driver's window was open. I had a sick feeling when I leaped for it; I didn't think I was going to make it, but I did get a hold on the edge of the window and the next thing I was aware of was a big fist hammering my hands, while my feet were sliding out from under me.

THE man's face was so close I caught a reek of garlic on his breath. There was a smear of lubricating oil on the running-board, and the road was rough. I was due to lose my footing in another second. I let go one hand and hooked him on the chin. I hadn't been able to get a good look at him yet—things were moving too fast for that; but I recognized the jar which I got when I socked that concrete chin. The blow would have knocked an ordinary man out; all it did to him was to snap his head back a little. This was enough—by the time he had recovered himself, the car was swerving toward the house. I don't think it was hitting over twenty-five miles an hour when it struck, but it was coming on at an angle, and the front wheel started to climb the wall. The old heap turned over on its side.

I was in the inner side of the angle, between the cab and the wall. But I was far enough behind the front wheel to be thrown clear somehow. The car was lying on its right side and two wheels were still spinning. The cab door had flown open, and the driver was lying within a yard of me. He had got on his hands and knees by the time I reached him. I was pretty badly shaken up, but I wasn't in the dark now, and I could see what I was doing. I had him pinned down on the ground, and I was hammering his head against a boulder when Windy came around the corner of the house.

Windy was coming on a run and he was pulling his six-shooter; before I realized what he was up to, he had it cocked. I was opening my mouth to put a stop to this Old West stuff when he halted beside us and pulled the trigger. Those old-fashioned single-action forty-fives make a lot of noise and this one had gone off within a yard of my ear. I forgot all about my prisoner then; I jumped to my feet and grabbed the old fraud by the wrist while he was thumbing back the hammer for a second shot. I said:

"You let down that hammer, and you put that cannon back where it belongs or I'll take it away from you and wrap the barrel around your worthless neck."

My head was still roaring with the noise of the shot; I was pretty well mussed up anyhow, and I wasn't feeling very pleasant. He gave me a savage look, and I knew he never would forgive me for that crack. I kept an eye on him while he was stowing away his artillery. He said:

"Whar I come from—" I had heard that one already, and I didn't want an encore. I told him that it was a good thing that they didn't teach a man to shoot straight where he had come from, or he'd be out of luck. I said:

"Take a look in the back of that car and see what you find there, while I'm getting this fellow into the house."

My prisoner was sitting up already. He should have been ready for a slab, but the breed runs to bone in some of those little mountain countries of southeastern Europe,

and although my hammering had nicked the boulder in several places it didn't seem to have done any damage to his skull. He was holding his head in both hands and he was shaking it as if he wanted to make sure it was all there. I asked him if he was able to get up.

"Sure t'ing I can get op," he said, and made good without my help. I looked him over for the first time. When I hung that left hook on him, I had recognized him as my assailant in the second-story room. Now I discovered that this wasn't the second time I had run across him today; it was the third. He was the man whom I had seen spying on Blacky at Windy Blake's store. And I understood why Blacky, who had a strong arm and a length of steel and a skinful of bad whisky, hadn't gone to trial for a killing five years before.

"Well, Joe," I demanded, "what are you doing here?"

He wasn't paying any attention to me; he was scowling at Windy—who was, at the moment, crawling into the back end of the old car.

"W'ere's 'ees aut'ority?" he growled.

I didn't bother with answering. I hustled him into the house, and when we made our entrance to the front room, he didn't look any worse for wear than I did. I pointed to a chair but he preferred the floor; he slumped down like a dog and he was sitting there when Windy came in with the news that he had found a sack of high-grade ore in Blacky's car. Whereat Joe covered his face with his two hands and wept. Windy said:

"Yo' ort to of let me kill him, Ben." I told him to be his age and reminded him that he didn't belong to the Gestapo. I noticed Beulah then. She was standing beside the big armchair where Helen was sitting, and her lips were a straight line, her eyes were hard. I wondered whether the two of them had been staging another battle, but I saw her lay a hand on Helen's shoulder and I began to speculate as to whether maybe the same thing was ailing her that had been in the back of my mind for the past few minutes.

"Yo' should of let me fill him full of laid," Windy reiterated. "It'd've saved the taxpayers a heap of money."

I made some remark about a man's rights. He waved that old stuff away with a contemptuous gesture.

"This fellow don't need a jury," he growled. "He's guilty as hell. It was like I done tol' you', Ben. The hull business started with Blacky. Sam Brand was jest an accident. Do yo' recollect how the play come up five years ago, when Blacky went to prison?"

"I wasn't here at the time," I said. "But I've heard the story. It was a drunken fight and Blacky hit Joe over the head with a drill steel."

"Whisky," Windy announced, "didn't have anything to do with it."

"What did?" I asked. Not that I was particularly interested. There were other things which I wanted to think over and I have one of those single-track minds.

"High-grade," Windy answered.

Beulah was looking at me. Her face was tight and her eyes were hard. I had an idea she was worrying over that sack of ore and I didn't blame her. I would have worried myself if I had been in her position.

"It never come out in co't," Windy said, "but it is a fact. Them two *hombres* was workin' in the Great Mogul. They was packin' out high-grade ore and Blacky was sellin' it. He was holdin' out on Joe when it came to dividin' up the money. So what do we have?"

"You're sure of that?" I interrupted.

He took time out to roll a cigarette. He lighted it and sat down.

"If I wasn't dead sure I wouldn't say so. They was disputin' over the pay for stolen ore."

"How about it, Joe?" I demanded. But Joe didn't answer; he was still wrapped in grief. I glanced at Beulah. She nodded. It wasn't merely acquiescence; she seemed to be trying to convey some message to me.

Windy didn't pay any attention to us. He said:

"We have a sack of high-grade. Material evidence: that's what the law sharks call it. We know that Blacky drove out here this afternoon. We know that Joe was here too. When we learn the hull truth about this matter we will find that Blacky had laid that ore in the cupola and came after it. We will find that Joe follered him. Might be, he stowed away in the back of Blacky's car.

"After they arrived, Blacky went into the house and Joe stayed outside. He was waitin' for Blacky to come out with the high-grade. He was waitin'"—Windy raised his voice—"with murder in his heart." Joe moaned; Windy continued, "He was waitin' there a long time and you kin figger for yo'se'f what black thoughts was in his mind. He was thinkin' of the money that Blacky had gypped him out of. And, when he couldn't stand it any longer, he stole in by the back door."

He rose and prodded the prisoner with the toe of his boot. Joe looked up; there was terror in his eyes.

"It was dark in the house." Windy's voice was harsh now. "Joe was searchin' fo' Blacky but he couldn't see his own hand befo' his face. An' when he run acrost Sam Brand, he thought he'd found his man. They tangled. Joe struck Brand down."

He went back to his chair and relaxed. He closed his eyes again. But his voice remained hard. I had to hand it to him, it was as nice a build-up as the District Attorney could have made.

"Suddenly this man finds out that he hadn't got his intended victim, and he flees from the spot. He goes up to the cupola—" Windy turned to me and smiled indulgently. "Look at them shoes, Ben. There's where yo'r tracks come from."

I hadn't needed that. I had noticed the prisoner's footwear already—a pair of sodden tennis-shoes. I said:

"Okay. I guess you win."

Beulah said: "Look out, Ben!"

She was too late. It wasn't the first time I had been caught flat-footed that afternoon, but I wasn't the only one this time. Joe made his exit just as I had made mine a few moments before, and he didn't have a window sash to hinder him; the hole which I had left was large enough for him and to spare. He lighted running, and for a muscle-bound miner, he was making fast time.

Windy bounded to the window like a rubber ball. His six-shooter was out. He fired five shots and thrust it back into the holster. He said:

"I reckon I winged him, Ben."

"If he owns wings and was using them, you might have," I growled. "But not unless. You ought to learn to pull your head down."

Beulah said, "Well, that's that. I reckon we might as well call it a day. No use trying to catch him now."

"And if we did," I reminded her, "we'd probably let him go again."

I wasn't feeling very bad about it anyway. I made a little bet with myself; I said: "If you folks will excuse me, I'll be back in a minute."

I left them staring after me, and I went out.

Chapter Thirteen

I WENT out to the kitchen. The stove was a wood-burner, and when I lifted up the first section of pipe I found what I had hoped. I got a tea cup from one of the shelves and filled it with soft soot. I took a carving-knife and used the handle for a pestle. I ground the soot until it was as fine as powdered graphite.

When I returned to the living-room, all hands were watching me with considerable interest.

"Got any unlined writing-paper around the place, Helen?" I asked.

She nodded and went to the desk. She brought back an unruled tablet. My luck was staying with me; it was typewriter size.

"That," I told her, "will be large enough." I tore off half a dozen sheets.

"What air yo' aimin' to do, Ben?" Windy demanded. It was just the opening I was hoping for.

"So far," I replied, "none of us seems to have gotten to first base. Trouble is, we don't synchronize. I'm pretty fair when it comes to the rough stuff, but I fall down on the brain work. You're not so bad when it comes to the gray matter, Windy. Fact is, you've surprised me. I've got to hand it to you on that, and, if you weren't such a rotten shot, this case would be in the bag."

"Hell," Windy said, "Joe won't get fur. The Sheriff will lay holt of him inside of twenty-fo' hours."

"That," I told him, "is what I'm heading for. We'll leave it to the Sheriff and he'll clean up all right. But there's evidence in this house and we're clearing out in a few minutes. The murderer is loose. I'm not going to give him a chance to destroy it after we've gone."

"I get yo'." Windy was stroking his long mustache. "It's them footprints."

"You have caught up with me," I acknowledged. "I'm going to sift this soot into the tracks. I'll lay the paper over it then and get some nice impressions. And, just to make sure that they don't rub out, I'll trace a line around every one with a pencil. With you three for witnesses, that ought to stand up in any court."

"I wouldn't go to take a woman up there, with that body layin' on the floor," Windy said.

"We'll leave them down here," I told him. "We'll bring back the impressions and they'll watch me while I do the pencil work. I'll want you along to hold the flash. There won't be light enough without it, to see what I'm doing."

Beulah spoke up. She said: "You're not half as dumb as you act, Ben."

"Jest the same," Windy said, "there is one thing I do not like. We cain't leave these two alone. There's no tellin' what might happen to 'em with us up there in the cupola if Joe tuk a notion to come back."

I glanced at Helen; she was trying to look unconcerned but she wasn't getting away with it. I knew that Windy's idea was far-fetched, but I said:

"No use in taking any chances. Let them lock themselves up in the bedroom while we're gone."

They did so and we went upstairs. Windy was carrying the flashlight, I had the writing-paper and the cup of soot. When we reached the top of the narrow flight which led into the cupola I warned him to be careful not to mess up the footprints and we made a wide detour to avoid them. The body was lying on the set of prints which the murderer had left on his way from the trap to the place where he had taken his stand, and the tracks at the latter point were pretty badly mixed up; there were none of them which didn't overlap somewhere. I said:

"We'll take these two which he made when he stepped forward. They're clear and they'll go fine before a jury after the District Attorney has identified them with the foot they belong to. The prints of the murderer while he was coming on his victim to strike the fatal blow! They'll send him to the gas chamber all right."

"By Godfrey, Ben, we have got him!" Windy was all steamed up; it was genuine too—he wasn't doing any faking now.

I laid the paper down upon the floor. I dropped on one knee and began sifting the powdered soot into one of the prints. Up to this point, I had been dead sure. But there was a little thing which I hadn't been able to figure out exactly. I had been reasonably certain how it would go but an inch or two of error would make all the difference between failure and success.

And, at the best, this bet which I had made with myself, was a both-ends-against-the-middle gamble. If I lost I was going to feel like a fool. And if I won, I was sticking my neck away out. The whole issue depended on the angle of my vision.

I was on one knee, and bending over the footprint; but I was not paying any attention to it. I was shifting my eyes for a sidelong view of Windy's legs. I could see them clearly up to a few inches above the knees. After that, the details were not so plain, but they included one hand: his right hand, beside his thigh. And they included part of the flashlight, which he was holding in that hand.

I saw the flashlight moving as it passed from hand to hand. His right hand disappeared. I waited while I counted fast: one, two, three. I jerked my head to one side as I straightened up. I threw the cupful of soot into his face. I couldn't have timed it much better if I had been watching what he was doing. I was just a fraction of a second too late for perfection. The heavy barrel of the old forty-five single-action revolver smashed down on my bad shoulder—the one which had hit the storeroom door when I was a human battering-ram.

If Windy's blow had gone home, I would have passed out as permanently as Blacky. As it was, if Windy had been able to put up a good fight, I might have had considerable trouble with him then, for that arm was useless. But the soot had blinded him and he was as helpless as a ten-year-old kid. I wrenched the gun away from him and I took him by the coat collar. He was a little reluctant and I had to use some persuasion in getting him down the cupola stairs. Beulah was waiting for us at the foot of the flight, carrying her blackjack. She said:

"If he makes you any more trouble, I'll lay him cold." Her face had lost its tightness; she looked pleased with herself. It crossed my mind then that if I had been born about forty years earlier and had run across her in the Goldfield days, I would have fallen for her—and in a big way. I asked her where she had learned to pick pockets. She laughed.

"It dropped on the floor when you were leaving the front room. It must have been working out of your pocket after you had your wrestling match with Joe. I was worrying because I thought maybe you'd figured on using it up there. So I just tagged along as soon as you two were out of sight."

I said, "You are a honey, Beulah. Maybe you'd better go ahead and break the news to Helen now."

"I've an idea," she told me, "that Helen is wise to the situation already. Didn't you notice the way she's been acting this last quarter of an hour? But I'll go and talk with her. The chances are, she'll need some bracing up. After all, it will be a hard jolt for her. She thought a lot of this old reptile."

Chapter Fourteen

BEULAH was right. Helen had been as quick as either of us to suspect that Windy was the murderer. She had lost faith in him when he confessed that he had turned on that petcock. It had come to her then: how he couldn't help knowing he had marooned her in the middle of the flat during the cloudburst. And yet he had—according to his story—allowed her to stay there without any help near, while he remained in the trading post for the better part of an hour.

She is like Beulah, that way. If she is for you, she will string with you no matter how things look. But once she is off of you, she goes the route. As soon as Windy spilled the beans, he lost out with her entirely. And from then on, she had been watching everything he did; she hadn't overlooked a bet.

So she was pretty well prepared for what was coming. Of course she wasn't passing it up as a joke. You can't laugh it off when one whom you've looked on as an old

friend turns out to be a double murderer and tries to frame a woman for the crime. To say nothing of attempting to pin the rap on Joe afterward.

She was looking a little peaked when I showed up with the prisoner. She insisted on hearing the most of the details that evening, but we sidestepped as many of them as possible. We waited until she was tucked away in bed in one of Beulah's cabins before we talked the whole case over. I kissed her goodnight at the door; she perked up a bit then; she was more responsive than I had expected.

"Well, anyhow, I've got you, Ben," she said.

She had. And how! I was hearing wedding-bells when I walked back to the tavern where Beulah was waiting for me. The Sheriff had come and had taken Windy away.

THE first question I asked Beulah was why she had made the remark about the attachment on the mine holding good. I said:

"You know, that crack put you in danger. If Windy had carried out his intentions regarding me, you'd've been next on his list."

"Sure, I know it," she replied. "I figured on it when I dropped my bombshell. I hadn't any idea you were going to pull anything then. I realized that Windy was playing it the same as Sam Brand, that he'd got next to the antimony in the ore and he was going to muscle in on the mine. You heard what he said about looking after Helen. Well, I hadn't missed that one. And it meant he had to keep her safe in order to get away with it. So he couldn't do anything to me as long as I was with her. I was putting out that *Shylock* stuff as bait. I was hoping that he would make his try for me tonight, when I was home and supposed to be asleep. And I would be heeled for him with something better than a blackjack."

"What made you suspect him first?" I asked.

"Same thing that made Helen. He was—according to his story—too slow in coming out there to the house. He was so cold-blooded that he never saw the discrepancy himself. I don't suppose he's gotten it into his head yet that any man who wasn't unnatural would have burned up the road as soon as the cloudburst came. As soon as I saw that, I remembered he should have made believe to drive out by the cut-off, which was the route he would have taken if he was worried about her."

"It's funny," I said. "All three of us got wise at the same time. But I didn't really wake up to what was bothering me until Windy took the shot at Joe just after the car turned over. There wasn't any object in that unless he wanted to keep Joe from talking."

"When a man starts lying," Beulah asserted, "he lays himself wide open sooner or later. Windy did it sooner because he's so used to spinning wild yarns—making them up as he goes along. It's grown to be second nature with him. Once I began keeping cases on him I kept getting more leads. And one of them was when he sandwiched in a bit of truth. It was that story of the row between Blacky and Joe over the high-grade. It made me remember rumors which I heard a few years ago, that Windy was buying hot ore from the Great Mogul miners, while Helen's father was alive. If I had only thought of that before I would have known that he was as bad medicine as Sam Brand, and I would have played my cards differently from the start. By the way, that was a nice act he put on for poor old Joe in the living-room."

"He had to get Joe out of the way somehow or other," I reminded her. "Joe probably had seen him around the house this afternoon."

It had been a heavy day. I wanted a hot bath and a bed. I got a bottle of arnica from Beulah and she showed me to a cabin with a tub. I looked after my lacerations and contusions and combed a saucerful of glass out of my hair before I turned in.

Usually in these cases, so the Sheriff tells me, it is as Windy had maintained: you get your man and then you get your evidence. One way and another he gathered more facts between the time of the arrest and the trial. Some of these came from Joe. He was the State's star witness. He had been hiding in the carriage shed behind Blacky's car and he had seen Windy coming out of the back door just after I had missed my tackle in the room where the furniture was stored. But the tracks were the real clinchers; they fitted Windy's stocking feet very nicely.

Some of my surmises had been correct: Blacky was first in the house. Windy came next. Antimony was his motive, of course. He had turned on the petcock in the gas tank to delay Helen and he was laying for Sam Brand when Beulah and I happened along. It was his face that I had seen behind the window with the missing board. He had deposited his high-heeled boots and ten-gallon sombrero somewhere downstairs and he would have gotten away with everything very nicely if I had not returned with Helen before he had time to get hold of them and slip out of the house. That balled everything up for him, and if it hadn't been for the noise of the rain and the darkness in the rooms with the boarded-over windows, he wouldn't have lasted five minutes without a showdown.

So he had belted me with Beulah's blackjack and left it beside me for evidence, and he had stolen away upstairs. He was hiding in the cupola when Blacky came after the flashlight. To get a chance to gather up his hat and boots a few minutes later—after he had locked the storeroom door on me—he had gagged Helen.

And in the meantime Joe was searching for Blacky, just as Windy had maintained. He was after that high-grade and I wouldn't be surprised if he had an idea of mayhem or murder also. Anyhow, I came upstairs in search of Blacky too, and tangled with Joe in the darkness. Joe thought he had his man then and didn't realize his mistake—so he said on the stand—until we were wrestling on the floor. It seems I had let go some strong language, and my voice made him discover his error.

Along about that stage of proceedings, things had happened fast. Windy slipped down out of the cupola during the wrestling-match and encountered Helen. Joe ran up the narrow stairs into the cupola to hide. He didn't hear Beulah and me when we went by a few minutes later; that was the rain again. After we went downstairs he found the flashlight and turned it on.

His luck was with him. In the first place, his footprints were all mixed up with Windy's. And when he fled from the cupola he surely would have come to grief if Beulah and I hadn't been busy over Helen in the storeroom, for he was scared to death just then. . . .

The trial only lasted three days, which is fast time for any murder case. I was on furlough as a witness and I was in uniform. There is something about a uniform in wartime that gets them, all right. And Helen was beginning to believe that I was a hero anyhow. I could have reminded her of several boners which I had pulled that rainy afternoon—but I didn't.

BEULAH was standing on the courthouse steps on the afternoon before the jury brought in its verdict and I was looking for Helen when I ran across her.

"Reckon you'll be shoving off tomorrow," she said. I told her that I would be on my way to the big time then.

"How's Helen going to take it?" she asked.

"Like a soldier's wife should," I answered. It didn't get a rise out of her; she merely lifted her eyebrows. "Helen thinks it would be nice if we got married this evening, and I haven't the heart to refuse her."

"You're slow, Ben," Beulah said. "Most men in your position would have made the grade before this."

"Slow but sure," I told her. "That's me."

Alan Swinton will contribute our next complete novel—the story of an American's weird wartime adventure down the Danube to Stamboul.

Readers' Forum*

(Continued from page 1)

AN ORDINARY FAMILY?

May a late-comer to the BLUE BOOK *family regret the many years of missed* BLUE BOOK *reading? Or do you want only old-timers—even though I have become as thorough an addict as any of the readers whose letters appear?*

I have found authors with whom I am familiar. Achmed Abdullah with his picturesque daredevil, glorious adventurous tales of the Orient—I almost felt as though I were the fortunate maiden loved by Omar the Red. *Marvelous sensation for a humdrum housekeeper! H. Bedford-Jones, another favorite, bring history to life.*

We're a very ordinary family, but BLUE BOOK *permits us to lead extraordinary and colorful lives. That's why we like it!*

Mrs. Harry Propson,
Chicago, Illinois.

FACT FOLLOWS FICTION

Nowadays, when fiction can't hope to compete with reality for exciting adventure, it is almost as if all BLUE BOOK *fiction were based on fact. For the stories about men in the world-wide struggle are thrillingly alive and twice as real because we know such things* do *take place. Fiction readers of a few years back could be forgiven their skepticism of deeds of derring-do.*

The September issue seems particularly keyed up to wartime pitch. Except for the out-and-out romanticism of Achmed Abdullah, the history of Bedford-Jones and the good humor of Atkey, everything in the book is as gripping as stuff in the daily papers, with the added polish of fiction, and the savor of detail, the loving care of an author.

Particularly impressive for style, imperative content and a picture of France's problem were both Surdez's "The Captain Knows the Book," and Mowery's "Devil's Islander." Also in passing, very pleased to see a puzzle in the book—one that is presented with the assumption that the reader has a little gray matter and can possibly use it. They are certainly challenging little contraptions.

Hoping to see further expositions of action on land, sea and in the air, and in all corners of the globe, I wish you luck in finding this sort of stuff.

Jack Luzzatto,
New York City.

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