

Five Novels

FEBRUARY

20¢

Monthly

FLAMING GUN BARRIERS

A Western Action Novel

By Lee Bond

5

NOVELS for
FEBRUARY

MYSTERY JUMPER

Skiing Romance

By Philip L. Scruggs

THE SEA WARRIORS

Deep-Sea Adventure

By David Allan Ross

SABERS FOR THE KING

A Colorful Romance

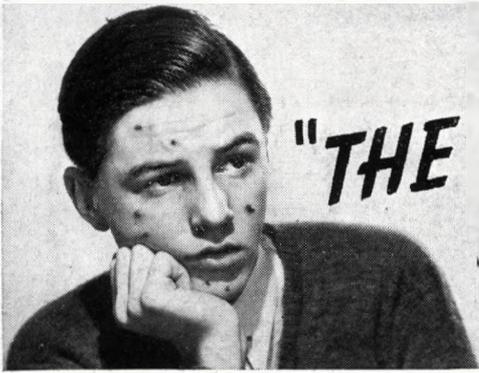
By John Murray Reynolds

MURDER WITHOUT CORPSES

A Gripping Mystery

By William E. Barrett





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FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST DID THAT? SAY, LEAD ME TO IT!



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FIVE NOVELS Monthly

F. A. McCHESNEY, Editor

VOLUME 33

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NUMBER 2

~ CONTENTS ~

- Sea Warriors** David Allan Ross 8
Trouble hung black over Captain Toby's boats—enemies threatened to wipe him out—but Captain Toby was an old sea warrior, fearless, ready for battle at sea
- Murder Without Corpses** William E. Barrett 38
Thirteen men vanished, never to be seen again, and the murderers ran free—for without a corpse, how can murder be proved?
- Sabers for the King** John Murray Reynolds 68
Paul Reisling finds the thrill of romantic adventure in fighting for the glory of the country his ancestors had defended for many centuries
- Flaming Gun Barriers** Lee Bond 102
Cal Brady, threatened with loss of his ranch, flings a barrier of gun-flame and courage across the road of his enemies
- In the Next Issue** 127
- Mystery Jumper** Philip L. Scruggs 128
"Yellow!" the crowd jeered when Martin Sturm junked a difficult ski jump—and after that Martin was afraid. Suppose he failed again? Suppose at heart he was yellow?
- What Do You Think?** 161

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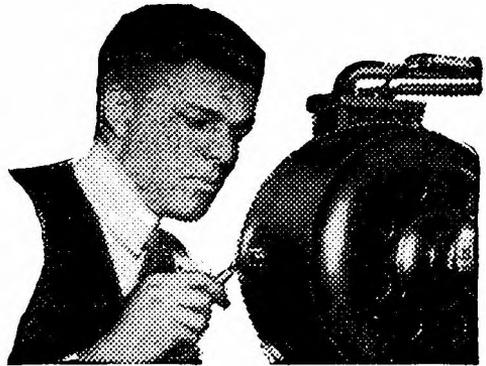
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SEA WARRIORS



by
**DAVID
ALLAN ROSS**

Daring, skill, seamanship—would these win the fishermen's battle—or would they go down in defeat, victims of the gods whose thunderbolt is money?

A Traitor in the Field

THE moment Bob Randolph entered the private office of Captain Toby Harcourt he sensed the tense atmosphere. In the battery of eyes turned silently on him he read hostility and suspicion.

A brick lay on the floor of the office. A shattered window told the story of its coming. Bob glanced at the tall, slim, tanned girl who stood by the window looking out over the harbor, as he slipped wordlessly to a seat. There was no wel-

come for him in the eyes of the five grim, hardy sailors who sat around the smoky room—no welcome for him who was blood of their blood, whose father and grandfather they had known. Even Toby Harcourt, the Old Man, most famous of the Banks fishermen, looked at him with cold distrust in those level eyes; eyes as gray as the drifting mists of the Nantucket shoals he loved.

The Old Man stood up, studying those before him with something of doubt: the skippers of his little fleet, the Harcourt Steam Trawling Company; Bob, the son

He heard Hafner scream with terror. The clawing fingers relaxed; the man's weight fell away.



of his oldest and dearest friend. . . Their eyes met for a moment. Bob's defiant, the Old Man's hard and questioning. Then he glanced at Lenore, his daughter, and his set lips softened. Lastly he looked down at the piece of brick on the floor, and the watchers saw his fists clench until the knuckles showed white.

"I got you all here to give you a chance

to back out before this next trip," the Old Man said suddenly. "I'm goin' myself. I believe we'll have a hell of a fight before we get back, but I won't ask any of ye to come along unless it's of your own free will.

"You've all sailed with me for a long spell. We know each other. I've always been proud of you—figured I had about

the finest bunch o' deep-sea fishermen 'tween here and Georges Bank. That's why I'm going to be honest with you. You'll risk your lives on this trip, and at the end it may be for nothing.

"The Harcourt Steam Trawling Company is through, unless a miracle happens. We've had four of the worst fishing years I've known—and I've known the Banks for fifty years. We've had to buck falling prices and demand, and we've had to buck the big companies. Well, we did it. Maybe we still could. But those buzzards have smelled us out, and now it's our turn to go the way Captain McLaren went, and Commodore Walker, and Billy Hollister. If we get what they got, we're through. And it looks like we're going to get it."

He glanced down at the brick again, and at the jagged hole in the window-glass.

"You know what we're up against," he went on. "The Northern Fisheries Company, headed by Ernst and Haffner, has ruined three of the oldest private fleets on the coast. Now they're after us. You know how they work. They ain't fishermen, they're gunmen, crooks, the lowest, rottenest scum of the gutters. They've unlimited money behind 'em. They raise wages so that crews desert to them. They cut prices to nothing, so that our catch rots on the dock. They bribe men to wreck trawlers and fishing gear. They bring in these so-called 'unions,' and then claim the trouble is on account of labor trouble. We know Haffner's men heaved that brick through the window just now, but we couldn't prove it. They'd say it was the Union. You never can prove anything against them, even murder. They're too slick. But *we* know."

THE listeners nodded. They knew well enough, as did every fisherman from Cape Cod to Cape Race. There was nothing Sam Ernst and his gangster "seamen" had not done to force private fleets into bankruptcy and buy them out for nothing. But they were never caught.

"Now," Toby went on, and his voice took edge, "we got this threat. A warning not to go to sea, for fear of 'labor' trouble. We got this brick through the

window. Last night someone took a shot at Lenny while she was in her own room. It means that if we do go to sea, we'll fight Haffner every fathom of the way, and for every cod we bring up. And he fights with bullets and trickery.

"We're going with old gear, 'cause I can't afford to buy new. We're going out loaded with debt, 'cause I had to borrow to the hilt to get money to finance us. And unless we come back with the biggest catch we ever had, in the shortest time we ever got it, and get a first-rate price for our catch, there won't be any Harcourt Steam Fishing Company when we tie up again. So if any of ye want to pull out before we start, I won't blame you. As for me, I'm going if I have to go alone, and if I go to hell, I swear by holy Neptune's cat I'll take Haffner along with me!"

CAPTAIN CARTER, master of the *Seal* and senior skipper of the little fleet, heaved himself out of his chair, spat accurately at the cuspidor, and dug a crumpled piece of paper out of the pocket of his stained peajacket.

"This was shoved under the door of my house this morning," he said laconically. "It says, 'Warning! It won't be safe for you or your family if you take your ship to sea. This is final. Signed: The Salt-water Union.'"

He stared around at the others and added grimly, "I sent my family visiting to my wife's sister's in Boston this morning, where they'll be safe. I'll take the *Seal* to hell and back, if the Old Man says so!"

Captain Dawson, of the *Spray*, produced a package, extracted two yellow bars about a foot long, and laid them gingerly on the table.

"My engineer found these fixed under the crankshaft on the *Spray*," he growled. "They're dynamite. He says the first turn of the shaft would have blasted her guts out. I got one of those notes, too. I reckon we all did."

The others, Landon of the *Shark*, Filmore of the *Sealion*, Ransome of the *Sea-foam*, nodded agreement.

Lenore Harcourt walked over to her

father and stood at his side with clenched fists. Like a schooner alongside a frigate, Bob thought. Lord, she was lovely! The Old Man put his hand on her shoulder proudly.

"Well," he said, "I reckon that settles it. You know the risk you're taking. You know this is a fight between us and that Northern bunch, and that we can't go hollering to the law courts if anything goes wrong. Hollister did that, and you know what happened to him and those of his fleet who went to court, witnessing. It means a man-to-man fight, and by God I'll fight till my ship falls apart under me!"

One by one his captains stood up and shook hands. All but Bob. And Dawson, seeing him sitting there, snarled, "Well, Mister Pink-Tea and Brass-Buttons sailor-man, what're *you* going to do about it?"

Bob flushed angrily as the eyes of the others turned on him and he saw again the accusation and hostility in them.

"When I applied for a command," he said defiantly, "Captain Harcourt took me on. I'm skipper of the *Spindrift*, and I'll take my orders and carry 'em out like the rest of you. Ever since I returned to Bayport last week I've been cold-shouldered. If anyone has any objections to me, I'd like to hear 'em!"

Dawson grinned, and his grin was not pleasant. "We've no objections," he said, "we're just curious, that's all."

The others nodded. The Old Man and Lenore, standing apart, watched him intently. Dawson came close to Bob, jaw outthrust.

"We're anxious to know," he said gratingly, "why the fine young *gentleman* who once called us fishermen 'stinking cod wallopers'—although your own Dad was one of us—suddenly decided he wanted to be a stinking cod wallopers himself, instead of a Mister Brass-Buttons on the bridge of a liner, see?"

"We'd like to know what business you had with Sam Ernst the day you arrived here, when you'd been away for two years and hadn't ever met him or the rest of his blasted crew. We'd like to know what was in the letter you got from the Brandon

Marine Corporation in New York, that being the outfit that controls the Northern Fisheries Company. There's a hell of a lot we'd like to know about you, my lad, and we don't like you any better because you came straight to us from the China Line, which is also owned by Brandon. In fact, mister, you stink far too much of Brandon, and that's a brand of perfume that ain't too popular around here!"

Bob, his fists knotted, retorted, "I'm responsible to Captain Harcourt, not to you. As far as you're concerned, Dawson, there was only one reason why I came back and joined the Harcourt fleet. My father, just before he died, wrote to me and asked me to come back. It was his last wish, and here I am."

"Seems kind of queer," Landon sneered, "that you all at once developed such a keen sense o' filial duty. You near broke your dad's heart before, acting so high and mighty, and no one ever noticed that you were very worried."

CAPTAIN TOBY, the Old Man, nodded. "He never said, Bob, but he always wanted you here. And now you've come, I'm glad to give you a berth. Your dad and I were kind of like brothers. I was pretty fond of him."

He hesitated, looking at Bob doubtfully. There was appeal in his voice when he said, "Just the same, lad, for your own sake maybe you could answer Dawson's questions?"

There was a growl of assent, and it was not friendly.

Carter said, "Seems kind of queer to me you were the only one that didn't get a threatening note this morning."

For the first time Lenore spoke. She said quietly, "You see, Bob, we're pretty desperate. Maybe you don't understand the situation fully. We've got our backs to the wall. We can't risk a—a traitor among us, and we believe there is one. During the last few days—since you came back, in fact—Ernst and Haffner seem to have known every move we've made, and all our plans for sailing."

Tensely Bob faced them, feeling the hostility mounting.

"I'd like to speak to you alone, sir," he said to the Old Man.

Captain Toby answered curtly, "What you have to say is for all of us. Go ahead."

"Very well. Why don't you agree to Brandon's original terms—negotiate with him? You'd be better off if you joined up with them. That's what I've been thinking ever since I came back."

There was a sudden cold silence. Lenny drew her breath sharply. Slowly Dawson's powerful fists clenched.

"You blasted rotten spy!" he spat, and crouched as though he would spring.

"How do you know what terms were offered?" Bob demanded. The hard-faced group closed in on him. He ignored them, appealing to the Old Man. "It's for your own good, sir. You wouldn't shove your ship at a rock if it was in your way. You'd go around it. But you're shoving the whole fleet at a rock when you try to buck an outfit like Northern, with all the resources of the Brandon Marine Corporation behind it. You can't lick them. And if you joined them, you'd have all their facilities. They own chemical plants to make fish oil and manure. They own packing plants, railroads, steamship lines all over the world, export houses, distributing warehouses all over the country. It takes an outfit like that to market fish profitably these days. You're broke. You have nothing but your ships. For your own sake, sir—yours and Lenny's—don't fight them!"

Bob had never seen anyone so passionately angry as the Old Man in that moment. Captain Toby seemed to grow taller. He towered, fists clenched, eyes blazing.

"Bob Randolph," he said hoarsely, "I don't know what game you're playing. If you're a spy for Brandon and Ernst and I get proof, God help you, that's all. I loved your dad, who was killed by Ernst's men. But I can't stand anyone who plays traitor to his own kind. I'll relieve you now of your command. You're through. Get out!"

His face was purple. He took a step forward.

"GET OUT!" he roared.

Dawson sprang forward. "Wait!" he

snapped. "Why kick him out? We need a skipper. Let him have *Spindrift*. Leave someone on board we can trust, to watch him. Then if anything does go wrong, we'll know who's responsible!"

The others nodded.

"Ay," Filmore growled, "and if anything *does* go wrong, Mr. Brass-Buttons, God have pity on you, because we won't!"

A Fight—Real or Faked?

THE six ships of the Harcourt fleet lay patiently alongside the quay. They were sailing in an hour, and already cables were singled, and brown rifts of smoke drifted from the thin tall funnels.

To a landsman they might look like dirty, shabby, down-at-heel scavengers. A sailor would recognize them for what they were—staunch, sturdy vessels, powerful for their size and first-class sea-boats, able to face any sort of weather within reason.

In their day they had been among the finest steam trawlers afloat, these six. One hundred thirty feet long, three hundred tons, with a speed of ten knots, they were still thoroughly sound, but modern design and engineering had improved, and there were many trawlers afloat now, especially those owned by large corporations, more efficient than the Harcourt fleet.

Seal, the oldest, had been launched in 1910. *Spray* and *Spindrift* were built in 1922, and they were the last, and the only ships in the fleet fitted with wireless. *Spray* was the flagship, commanded by Captain Dawson, and on this voyage Captain Toby Harcourt planned to sail aboard her. In his heart he knew that it would be the last voyage of his beloved fleet.

Standing on the quay, watching the last stores going aboard *Spindrift*, Bob Randolph wondered why he, the junior skipper, and certainly the most unpopular at this moment, had been given the *Spindrift*. She was faster than the others, a steadier sea boat, with newer gear, larger and more comfortable quarters—in every way the best ship.

He glanced across the small basin that formed Bayport's harbor, and looked once

more with admiration at the vessels tied up at the opposite quay, near a new wooden building which carried the legend "Northern Fisheries Company, Bayport Division," and under that, in smaller letters, "Subsidiary of the Brandon Marine Corporation." These ships were all off the ways less than a year. Fast, sleek, larger than the Harcourt vessels. They carried their own refrigeration. Their trawling speed was ten knots to the Harcourt ships' seven. In gear, equipment, sea qualities, they had everything.

Bob noticed that they also were preparing to get under way. Men were taking gear aboard, and he watched them carry three cases aboard *Arcturus*, the flagship. His eyebrows went up as he recognized the cases, and he whistled silently. He had once seen similar cases unloaded at Callao. And he had seen those same cases elsewhere—and quite recently.

On the hill behind Northern's new office was a large warehouse with a spur track to the railroad. Men were at work here removing a sign which said "Eldred Coal & Ice Company, Inc.," and putting up a new sign announcing "Northern Fishing Company—Coal and Ice Department." That was, Bob knew, another blow for Captain Toby. It meant that henceforth he must buy his coal and ice for the ships from Ernst, and pay Ernst's price—cash.

TWO men came out of Northern's office. They stood for a while, talking, then walked toward Bob. One was short and enormously fat, with the great paunch and flaccid, greasy skin of one who loves food and hates exercise. He was entirely bald, and his head was round and pink, without any neck. It looked obscenely naked, Bob thought, with the sagging chins, the great loose lips and pig-eyes. That was Sam Ernst, fisheries superintendent for the Brandon Marine Corporation, who had charge of the establishing of new offices, and the "elimination" of competition.

The other man was a giant, two or three inches above six feet, with great, powerful shoulders and the long arms of a professional fighter. There was a scar on his right temple that made the right side of

his face twist downward, giving him an almost diabolically sneering expression. This was Haffner, called manager of the Bayport Office of Northern, but who knew less than nothing about ships or fishing, and was, by profession, a gangster, with an extremely unsavory record, and—after the fashion of those who have able mouthpieces—almost no convictions, a fact that had bred in him a complete contempt for the forces of law and order, and an enormous arrogance and faith in himself.

These two approached Bob, glancing casually at the Harcourt ships as they passed. Bob could see the slight bulge of a pistol under Haffner's jacket. Behind the two he noticed another pair, shuffling along with hands thrust in their pockets. Even in this peaceful fishing village Haffner did not feel properly dressed for a stroll without his bodyguard.

"Morning, Captain," Ernst said affably. "Getting ready to sail, I see." He grinned greasily, showing several gold teeth, hardly more yellow than the natural ones. Bob nodded. "Well, I wish you a good voyage and a big catch—though it will not, I fear, be a profitable one."

"We're not looking for any trouble," Bob said curtly, looking straight at Haffner, who grinned his twisted grin and said laconically, "You never can tell what you'll find, buddy. You never can tell."

"I said we're not *looking* for trouble. If we happen to find it, I guess maybe we'll be able to handle it well enough," Bob retorted, and added: "I see you've got a new way of fishing."

"What do you mean?" Ernst asked, and Bob answered easily:

"Why, I saw three machine-guns going aboard *Arcturus*. I suppose you're going to put the fish on the spot, Haffner?"

There was a deadly gleam in Haffner's eyes. His hand slid toward the bulge under his jacket. Ernst's fat, gold-ringed hand touched Haffner's arm.

"Of course you're mistaken, Captain," he said softly. "I'm sure you will realize that you are mistaken. You didn't see machine-guns going aboard *Arcturus*." His cold, fishy eyes said, "You'd *better* realize—or else!"

"I hear you're going to new grounds this trip," he added.

"I understand Captain Harcourt has learned of a very fine ground off Newfoundland."

"You seem to hear a good deal," Bob said dryly, and added, thinking it would do no harm to try a little threatening of his own: "In fact, you hear too much, Ernst."

The man flushed with anger. Bob went on imperturbably:

"For your own good, I suggest that you stay clear of Captain Harcourt. If you try any of the raw stuff like you pulled to ruin those other fleets, it will be the last crooked business you and your little playmates here do. Is that clear?"

BEFORE the others could answer, Lenny Harcourt came out of her father's office and walked across the quay to them. She was dressed in flannel slacks and a jaunty red and white striped sweater that set off the firm curves of her slim, athletic body. Haffner's eyes flickered greedily. He stared at her appraisingly, his insolent eyes sliding over her slowly.

Lenny ignored him and Ernst, who was doing a bit of looking on his own in a manner that made Bob want to push his face in. To Bob, Lenny said, contempt flaring in her gray eyes, "When you get through talking to your *friends*, Captain, send a man over to the office to get my gear and have it taken aboard *Spindrift*."

"*Spindrift!*" Bob gasped. "You mean—"

"I mean I'm sailing with you," she answered shortly, and he remembered that a spy was to go along with him—with the traitor. Lenny turned on her heel to walk away. Haffner's hand shot out and grabbed her arm.

"Hey, wait a minute, baby!" he said. "Where you going in such a hurry? Stick around and be sociable for a while!"

White with anger, she snatched her arm away, but Haffner, secure in the presence of his two armed guards, who lolled against a bollard and watched with sardonic amusement, grabbed her again and held her.

"Listen, baby!" he snarled. "When I want a frail I get her, see? Maybe not now. But some time. If you know what's

good for you and your pa, you'll be nice to me, see? I'm the big shot around here, get me?"

He stuck his chest out and leered insolently. Looking into his eyes she knew that, puffed with arrogant conceit, contemptuous of society and law from long experience of immunity to its penalties, he meant and believed what he said, incredible as it seemed. She was suddenly afraid, and struggled to break loose. Haffner opened his mouth to say something else. It shut with a click when Bob's fist connected.

Haffner staggered back, snatching for his gun. Bob flung himself at the man's legs, tackling, and the two crashed to the ground, each struggling desperately for the gun. Blind with fury, Bob had forgotten the two bodyguards. They ran forward with guns drawn; hesitated, unable to fire without the danger of hitting Haffner.

Bob was strong, he was young and in good condition; but Haffner had the power of a bull, and he was a trained fighter—he had been a professional boxer in earlier days. Bob took three smashing blows to the ribs that left him gasping. He lost his grip and rolled away. Haffner fell on him, gouging. With a desperate effort, Bob got a hold and heaved. Both of them rolled over and fell against the stringpiece of the pier.

Haffner's hands were set at Bob's throat; Bob could not breathe. He felt himself slipping. Dimly, through the pounding of blood in his ears, he heard Haffner scream with terror. The clawing fingers relaxed; the man's weight fell away. Bob struggled to his feet, gasping for breath and tearing at his collar, to discover that both of them had been hanging over the water, and were within an inch of toppling in between the pier and *Spindrift's* side. Haffner, green with fear, was backing away. Bob, rocking dizzily, clenched his fists and went for him again, to find himself immediately between the two bodyguards, a gun to his ribs.

Ernst caught Haffner's arm angrily and dragged him away. He was still trembling with his strange fear, and Bob wondered what had happened to frighten him. He did not look like the sort of man who would give way to such terror very easily. Pres-

ently the gunmen, having seen their boss safely down the pier, slipped their guns into their pockets and wandered after Haffner.

The thing had happened—and ended—so suddenly that men were still running toward them, the Old Man among them. Bob surprised a strange expression in Lenny's eyes. Of thanks, perhaps, or of—of what? He wiped blood from his mouth and grinned. Her eyes were suddenly hard.

"It was a good show, Captain Randolph," she said coldly, "but it was not quite convincing enough."

"You mean you think that fight was faked?"

"I'm aware that you'd like to make us think you're not in with those two rats," she retorted, "and a faked fight might be as good a way as any. But a man like Haffner doesn't suddenly holler and quit without any reason, especially when he's on top—unless the fight was planned that way."

She swung on her heel and strode away. Among those who had come running was Dawson, who was going aboard the *Spray* with some personal gear. He took Lenny's arm and escorted her back to the office. He was carrying a small square package. Bob noticed a curious little sound that seemed to come from the package. He wondered what it was.

Pursuit Through the Fog

TWO hours later the little fleet had cleared the headland and was standing eastward on the first leg of the run for the Banks. It was a clear day,

vivid with sunlight. The sharp wind flicked the caps off the long rollers and flung handfuls of spray playfully at the bluff stubborn bows of the little vessels, which curtsied grave acknowledgment.

As he stood beside Miller, the helmsman, sniffing the tangy wind, Bob drew a deep breath and smiled a little. It was good to be at sea again, away from the stuffy mess of shore folks' affairs.

A great liner slid past, a mile to starboard, her slender masts and four funnels gracefully raked. Bob nodded to her as to an old friend.

"There goes the *Mauretania*," he said to Miller, and the two watched the beautiful sleek vessel until she was hull down.

"Some day, when I get tired of the sea, I'll ship aboard one of them," Miller said with a touch of malice. Behind his back all of his crew called Bob "Mister Brass-Buttons" and thought of him as a liner's man, rather than as a deep-sea sailor like themselves, and it amused Miller to get in his little dig. He told the tale afterward to the watch below amid roars of laughter.

Bob, however, grinned amiably. He was a good enough sport not to mind such chaff as that. It was the suspicion that he hated. His eyes followed the *Mauretania* in her majestic, sweeping progress.

Not long ago he would have been on the bridge of such a vessel, streaking for Cherbourg, perhaps. He would stroll to the bridge wing and glance at the bobbing little flotilla of trawlers with amused scorn. Cod walloppers! Mucking around in the slime of the sea bottom, while he swept on at a contemptuous twenty knots. When the fish-

*You're bucking
the odds*



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ing fleet was well astern, he would glance meditatively aft along the boat deck below, picking out the girls with whom he would dance at the fancy dress ball that would be given on the third night out. From among them, he would select the one he'd show around the ship.

Spindrift plunged in the liner's wash, and Bob smiled grimly. A line of Kipling's came to mind:

*Now all that's shoved be'ind me
Long ago and far away. . . .*

Well, he had learned his lesson. He had learned to respect the deep-sea fisherman; to respect and admire him.

LENNY came out of her cabin and joined him in the wheel-house. She was wearing dungarees and a sweater, and her close-cropped brown hair clung to her lovely head in little curls. As she came out of her cabin her eyes swept ship and sea with that instinctive look-see of the sailor. Lenny was used to sea voyages.

She balanced easily against the pitching of the trawler and drew a deep breath. She was carrying a pair of binoculars, and for some moments she studied a smudge of smoke astern.

"I see your—friends—are following us," she said in an even, impersonal voice.

"The Northern fleet. I know. They sailed an hour after we did," Bob answered, ignoring her tone. "Ernst and Haffner know we're going to a new ground. Probably they'll try to keep us in sight, to find out where it is."

"How do they know about the new ground?"

He shrugged. "If you mean I told them, you're wrong."

Lenny flushed under her tan. "I can't help it, Bob," she said unhappily. "You don't seem to understand what all this means to us. It wouldn't hurt so much to go under if it was a question of being licked in fair competition. But this isn't fair. We know what's happened to the other fleets. When Ernst bought out Captain McLaren's fleet almost for a song and left the old man bankrupt, it broke his heart, and he killed himself. They used

every dirty trick they knew to ruin him. No one really knows how far they did go, for no one dared to testify in court against them. Can you blame Dad for swearing that no matter what happens, Ernst will never get hold of our fleet? He said he'd rather sink his own ships and go down with them. Can you blame him?"

Bob shook his head. "No. But suppose Ernst is actually playing a lone hand? Suppose the real heads of the Brandon Marine Corporation don't know what he's doing?"

Lenny's eyes blazed. "Why do you defend them?" she cried passionately. "Don't you understand? They're crooks and murderers, all of them! How can you blame us for being suspicious of you, when you take that attitude in spite of all the evidence against them? When you visit Ernst, and get letters from Brandon, and spoke to Brandon by phone just before we sailed—I *know* you did—and won't tell us why?"

Bob was woodenly silent.

"And when they killed your father!" she added, watching him.

"Bob—have you actually had dealings with the Brandon outfit? With Ernst?"

"Yes," he said evenly, and heard her gasp as though he had struck her.

"I never actually believed it, in my heart," she whispered. "Oh, but you're low! You'd betray us, betray your dead father, ruin my Dad, ruin me—whom you once said you loved! Isn't there anything decent in you?"

There was a terrible longing in him to explain, yet he dare not do so. It might be fatal to his plans. But if he could only get that hatred, that contempt, out of her eyes—

"Lenny," he said gravely, "suppose I told you that, though I did have dealings with them, and still have, I'm not a traitor, and that I'm doing it for your father's sake, but that I can't explain just now—would you believe me?"

She stared deep into his eyes. In her own there were tears.

"I—I can't," she whispered, and fled.

ORDINARILY, a fishing fleet proceeding to the grounds does not sail in any particular formation, since each cap-

tain knows the position he is to reach. On this occasion, only Captain Toby Harcourt knew where they were going, and so the six ships steamed in line ahead, like a destroyer flotilla.

For several years Captain Toby had felt that the usual haphazard methods of trawling were wasteful. He had been studying the frequently issued government information on fisheries; the breeding habits of the fish; drifts and currents which constantly changed over the banks. He had worked out a chart which led him to believe that he could forecast the probable location of the greatest number of fish, enabling him to fill his ships more rapidly and certainly. The location was far north of the Nantucket shoals he was accustomed to fish, and was, in fact, in the banks which lie along the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador. He had hesitated to take the gamble of sending his small ships so far north on pure speculation, but now that he felt in his heart that he was through, he had decided to take the chance, having nothing, now, to lose.

Many times during the following three days Captain Toby glanced anxiously and angrily astern at the smudge of smoke which marked the presence of the Northern fleet.

He had hoped, when he first saw them, that they would not follow him, but would presently sheer off to the usual grounds. That they did not, and since they had an edge of three knots or more in speed, it was a simple matter for them to keep the Harcourt fleet in sight.

"Think they'll make trouble?" he asked Dawson.

Dawson shrugged. "You know what they did to the others—plenty. They haven't had a chance to do much damage to us yet, but they certainly will have both the nerve and the chance, where we're going—wherever it is. We're already way beyond American territorial waters, which makes it much safer for Haffner to pull some rough stuff than it would be in harbor."

The Old Man nodded at a haze ahead of them; a dark frown across the face of the water.

"Comin' to fog," he said, "and for the first time in my life I'll welcome it. Signal the other ships to stand by. As soon as we're in the fog we'll head up, steam for thirty minutes at slow speed, then heave to. No sirens or bells. They may suspect what we're doing, but they'll never find us, so it won't matter anyway."

"Pretty dangerous, drifting around silent in that fog," Dawson muttered, but the Old Man snapped: "It ain't so dangerous as having Haffner and his blasted pirates scullin' around when we're trawling."

The trick worked, though the crews of Harcourt's fleet spent an agonizing hour drifting in the thick fog, and once a large freight ship blundered so close on *Spindrift* that its condenser exhaust spattered her deck.

Early in the afternoon watch the fleet steamed slowly into clear water. Far on the western horizon, land made a dark slit between sea and sky. Northward a schooner plowed sluggishly in the light air, and off to starboard a British trampship plodded her patient way toward Halifax or New York. The Northern fleet was nowhere in sight. A few hours later *Spray* signaled to stand by for trawling.

To Have Guts and Honor Enough —

LEAVING the mate in charge, Bob went to the chart house. Because of the fog, he had been unable to take a noon sight, but he was able to check his position accurately enough from dead reckoning.

Marking a little cross on the chart, he was surprised to note how close they were to the southern boundary of the French fisheries, which run roughly northeast from Cape St. John, Newfoundland, at the 50th parallel, and north of which, because of an old agreement with the British, the French have exclusive fishing rights.

The Harcourt fleet was now far beyond American territorial waters, and must, Bob estimated, be pretty close to the grounds the Old Man planned to fish, for westward lay Newfoundland, eastward the banks sloped off to depths too great for

their trawls, and north lay the French line.

He noted the position on a scrap of paper and started out. At the door he paused and looked at the photograph of a man who resembled himself in the strong, athletic build, the square jaw and level eyes. But this man was older, with a weathered face, and crinkles of humor about the eyes and lips. This was his father, who had been killed by the sudden parting of a steel line that had whipped back murderously, crushing his skull.

It had been thought to be an accident—until they noticed that the line had been partly severed by a file or saw.

Bob smiled grimly. "I haven't forgotten, Dad," he said softly. He went aft to the little cubbyhole that was the wireless room. He had known Selden, the youthful operator, for a long time, and Selden was at this moment the only man in the fleet he dared to trust. Bob gave him the slip of paper bearing the fleet's position.

"You know what to do," he said, and waited while Selden made his key dance, pausing now and then to listen for a reply. Bob began to feel worried.

"What's the matter?" he said.

Selden shrugged. "Can't raise 'em."

"Keep on till you do," Bob snapped. "Think there's any chance of the *Spray's* operator picking it up?"

"Doubt it. He doesn't keep regular watch, and I know he's usually off at this time."

After fifteen minutes he said, "No results. Shall I keep on?"

Bob nodded. "Better send out the position anyway, on the chance they'll pick it up. And don't quit till you do raise them, because if you don't, we're in a spot and we won't get out of it with whole skins."

An hour later the fleet spread out. The *Spray* had been taking soundings, and got twenty fathoms. The Old Man assigned a position to each ship, placing *Spindrift* inshore on the Western flank.

Presently the nets were shot. Each vessel, as the lines were paid out from the fore and aft gallows, slowed and steamed

in a wide circle to prevent the lines from fouling the propeller. The nets, dragging along the bottom, trailed out on the ship's quarter and considerably astern, held by lines made fast through the two gallows forward and aft.

Everyone knew that the Harcourt Steam Trawling Company was through unless this trip was successful. The crews were tense as, with trawls paid out, the vessels began to move ahead at seven knots. Would the big nets soon come up bulging with fish? In good ground it took from thirty minutes to an hour to get a full bag.

In poor ground it might take much longer. They might trawl for two hours and bring up a net half full of "catties" and other worthless fish.

The older men shook their heads, sceptical. It was all very well for the Old Man to work out all this scientific theory, but it was a crazy stunt, and they were surprised at him for trying it. No good would come of deserting the old grounds. For themselves, they had fished the Nantucket shoals these many years, and to take small, poorly equipped ships junketing up toward the Arctic on a mere gamble, even if the fishing nearer home was poor—well, the Old Man was crazy. This business with Northern had made him batty.

LESS than thirty minutes after she had shot her nets, *Spray* began the slow turn signifying that she was bringing the nets up. One after another the rest of the fleet followed. Full trawls in twenty minutes! It must, Bob thought, be a record.

It took fifteen minutes to get the overflowing bag up to the gallows on *Spindrift*. Ten minutes more and it hung above the forward deck, the line was slipped and a great cataract of silver fish poured into the wooden troughs. Immediately, while the nets were shot again, every available hand began sorting and gutting the catch. Even the cook turned out, for only by doing so could he qualify for his poundage—a proportionate share of the profits of the trip.

Bob, watching from the wheel-house, saw Selden doing his share. He called him out and said sharply, "Did you raise him?"

"No. Thought I'd try later. Couldn't get a peep."

"Get back to your radio," Bob snapped angrily, "and glue those headphones to your ears till you do raise him. Good Lord, man, don't you realize there'll be hell to pay if we can't reach him?"

He was more nervous than he cared to admit. He had planned carefully, but as the poet Burns discovered a long time ago, plans go wrong. If his went wrong—if Haffner ruined this expensive and desperate trip—the Old Man would be through, and it would be Bob's fault.

Lenny came up to the wheel-house. She had been down in the hold helping the mate ice and pack the gutted fish, for she didn't intend to be a passenger. Her rough clothes reeked of fish, and there were bright scales stuck to her hands and cheeks, but her eyes shone.

"Isn't it splendid!" she cried. "The mate says we'll be full and headed for home in less than three days!"

Bob nodded. His quietness and stolid expression caught her attention. She was suddenly silent. Then she came close and put her hand on his arm.

"Bob," she said softly, "you didn't mean what you said about wanting Ernst and his gang to win? I can't believe, in spite of what I know and what everyone is saying, that you are a traitor. That you'd deliberately help to ruin Dad and me, for—for whatever reason it might be."

"The old order changeth'," Bob quoted woodenly.

"But Bob! Our traditions! All the years, and the generations of fishermen whose blood is in us! Doesn't that mean anything? Can you sell it so lightly to a crew of crooks and gangsters, the murderers of your own father?"

"Traditions don't pay dividends. It isn't what I like or what you like, it's the fact that in the end the man with the money and the organization will win. It's like politics, Lenny. A man may have high ideals and a fine platform, but he

can't buck an organized political machine and win. The only thing he can do is to work with the machine and try to influence it for the best. It's a compromise between being annihilated and being able to do at least a little good. But your father won't see that."

She drew away. He felt her contempt, and dare not look at her.

"Compromise is the coward's excuse for saving his skin," she answered bitterly, "the philosophy of the man who would rather be a live slave kissing someone's feet than a dead hero. You needn't explain any more. I understand. Thank God I have guts and honor enough to stick to my kind, and to take a chance on going down with my colors flying rather than go over to the enemy—no matter how much of a bribe might be offered!"

That hurt, that she should think he had been bribed to betray her. If only he could explain! Bitterly hurt by the contempt of the girl who meant so much to him, he cast caution to the winds and turned to her impulsively, to explain the whole truth—and saw her face suddenly freeze.

"Look!" she breathed, staring aft. Following her gaze, he saw the Northern fleet steaming toward them.

Tangled Nets

THE Harcourt fleet was spread out roughly in line abreast, the long trawls trailing far astern of each ship. Northern's fleet, coming up from the east at a fast clip, whitewater boiling at their blunt bows, swung to pass eastward of the trawling ships.

Watching through the glasses, Bob could see Haffner leaning over the rail on *Arcturus*, smoking a cigar, and could not suppress a smile when he saw that the man was dressed in a tight-fitting, double-breasted suit, a yellow silk shirt, and white spats.

Leaning out of the door of the wheel-house was the skipper, a hard-bitten seaman. Bob wondered uneasily whether they really intended to trawl, or if they were just looking for a chance to injure

Toby Harcourt. He noticed, however, that they were preparing to shoot their nets, and was surprised to see that—although she was making a good thirteen knots—*Arcturus* already appeared to have her nets over. At least, he could see cables trailing tautly from the gallows, but they trailed dead astern, instead of on the beam, a fact he could not see from his position.

He stiffened suddenly. *Arcturus* was coming about, water boiling under her counter as she swung. He glanced at the other ships, but they held their course, and were spreading out for trawling.

Arcturus, traveling almost twice as fast as the trawling ships of the Harcourt fleet, passed close astern of the *Spray*. White-lipped, sensing disaster, Bob waited, glasses glued to his eyes. Though *Spray* held her course, a quick glance showed him that everyone on deck was watching *Arcturus*, and he could see the Old Man outside the wheel-house, shaking his fist at Haffner, who still lounged lazily over the bulwarks.

Yet nothing happened. Though *Arcturus* passed close to *Spray*, she was not close enough to foul the net lines. She shifted course to pass astern of the *Shark*, next in line. Puzzled, Bob lowered his glasses to rub the aching muscles at the back of his neck, and heard a gasp of amazement from Lenny.

"Oh, look at *Spray's* lines!" she breathed. Bob snatched his glasses again. The two steel cables that towed *Spray's* net seemed to have come suddenly to life. They were writhing and twisting, dragging across *Spray's* counter. He saw one of them suddenly leap, snap clear of the water and whip back across the poop. He saw a man flung into the air, arms and legs flying wildly, then plunge into the water and disappear. He saw another man fling up his arms, saw his wide open mouth and heard—or imagined—his scream as the cable crushed his ribs.

Already, though the whole thing had taken only a few moments, *Spray* was coming about in a desperate effort to escape, but it was too late. Bob groaned as he saw the foam die under her counter. The

lashing, dragging cables had fouled her propeller.

Even as he watched, *Shark's* cables writhed, twisted, parted. He saw a man appear suddenly outside her wheel-house with a rifle.

"No!" he yelled futilely, for *Shark* was at least three quarters of a mile away. "No! You fool! You—oh, God!" He heard the crack of the rifle. Instantly he heard what he knew he would hear—the petulant chatter of a machine-gun. The rifleman spun around and pitched over the rail to the deck below. Another man, who came running on deck, suddenly stopped, reached toward his stomach with clawing hands, then dropped back into the companionway.

Then Bob came to life. Dashing out of the wheel-house he yelled, "Bring in that net! Bring her up, Wilson! Full speed! Lenny—get below!"

He clutched the rail till his knuckles showed white, staring, fascinated, at *Arcturus*. *Seafoam* had only just shot her net, and he saw them bring it in again. It was short enough then so that *Arcturus's* trailing grapnel, whatever it was they were dragging across the trawl lines, did not harm it. *Sea-Lion* already had her net up, full, and was bringing it overside, suspended by a singing cable from the derrick boom on her mainmast. Just as the bag was being swung inboard there came again the vicious chatter of the machine-gun. The cable snapped as a bullet struck, and the heavy bag plunged into the sea, dragging two men with it to death.

And then, as *Arcturus* approached *Spindrift*, whose trawl was still well out despite their frantic efforts to bring it up, she swung about and headed back to her own fleet. As she did so, Haffner waved his hand affably at Bob. He saw Lenny and blew her a kiss.

There was no question of more fishing. Three ships, *Spray*, *Shark* and *Sea-Lion*, had lost their starboard trawls, and *Spray's* propeller was hopelessly fouled. The ships carried nets for both sides, as do all trawlers, but with Haffner ready to drag his murderous grapnel, there was no sense in risking other gear.

The six ships anchored. Haffner's fleet was busy trawling now. Bob had watched *Arcturus* take in the lines she had been towing, and had seen the wicked, sickle-shaped hooks with sharp, saw-tooth edges, with which they were armed.

He ordered out the dinghy and rowed himself and Lenny to the *Spray*, where the other skippers had assembled for a council of war.

THEY were a hard-faced crowd, those who faced Bob as he entered the officers' messroom. Lenny sprang to her father's side.

"Dad!" she cried anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said shortly, "I'm all right. But five of my men are dead. One overboard from my ship. Two shot. Two lost when *Sea-Lion's* bag was shot away. And another poor devil with his ribs bashed in. Someone's going to pay for it! Haffner's going to if I have to kill him with my bare hands. And anyone else who had anything to do with it—"

Eyes were turned on Bob. There was accusation in all of them. Captain Carter got up, his face working with hate and anger.

"We can start right now, I reckon," he snarled. "There's one right here we can settle accounts with, and I'm gonna be the one to do it!"

With murderous hate in his eyes he leaped, and Bob sprang to his feet, fists clenched.

There was hate in his own eyes, too. The Old Man flung himself at Carter, caught his arms and dragged him back.

"Wait!" he snapped. "That ain't the way. We don't know Bob's had anything to do with it." With amazing strength for his age, he flung the furious man aside and pushed Bob back in his chair. "But we aim to find out," he added savagely. "This matter has gone far enough. The Harcourt Steam Trawling Company's through now.

"There's nothing left for us but to go back, and when we get to Bayport the sheriff'll be waiting for us. But we have business to attend to before we go. We'll at-

tend to it right here. If that devil Haffner can attack us on the high seas, I reckon there's not much to stop us from doing the same thing. Anyone got any objections?"

Feeling that he was taking his life in his hands, Bob said quietly, "Yes—I have."

"Oh! Perhaps you don't want us to hurt your boy friends?" Ransome snarled, while the others stirred ominously.

White-lipped, Bob retorted, "There can be plenty of hurting done. When the time comes I'm planning to do some of it myself, but to follow Haffner's tactics now is simply to play into his hands. You know as well as I do that if we go ashore over this and make a legal fight out of it, we'll be helpless. It's the word of Haffner's outfit against ours. They'd have the smartest bunch of lawyers in the country to help them. They could claim that *Arcturus* drifted across our lines by accident. And as for the shooting, that was our worst mistake. Someone on board the *Shark* fired first, and you can bet your sea-boots Haffner was careful to make it so. He wanted you to take a shot at him, so that he could turn his guns loose and claim it was self-defense. He had no right to have machine-guns, but I haven't any doubt he's got that all fixed up with the lawyers. And remember that, with their money and their lawyers, they can drag lawsuits through court after court, which means that we'd all be in our graves before a final decision was rendered.

"That's what they figure on—they aren't fools. They wouldn't dare pull this sort of thing unless they knew they could edge out of it somehow. We're outside American waters. They could run us around in the courts for a year, simply disputing the jurisdiction of any court we took it to."

He could see conviction stubbornly winning in their faces, but it did not banish the smoldering hate.

"You seem to know a lot about it," Filmore sneered. "Got it all figured out, haven't you?"

Bob shrugged. "Someone had to figure it out. You'd run your necks into Haffner's noose in ten minutes. He's a gangster,

and the law doesn't mean a damn thing to him, he's cheated it too often. That's the only reason I'm telling you to wait."

"Wait for what?" Lenny demanded furiously. "For your friends to shoot down a few more of the men, or wreck the rest of our gear?" There were tears of helpless anger in her eyes.

Bob turned to the Old Man. "You said you wanted to get Haffner," he said. "Well, believe it or not, I want to get him too. That's what I came along for. But you can't do it your way."

HE faced them all, suddenly bitterly angry, almost hating them, remembering the things he had had to bear since he came home; the insults, the sneers, the implications that he was traitor to his own flesh and blood.

"You fools!" he shouted. "Don't you think I want to get Haffner? Don't you think I want to get the man who killed my own father? What the hell do you suppose I came back to Bayport for? What do you suppose I've put up with your sneers and taunts all this time for? But I want to get Haffner where he can't wriggle out of it, and I'm going to. When I've done it, then maybe I'll explain to you. And until then you can think what you damn please, and to hell with the bunch of you!"

There was a strange silence. He saw the Old Man looking at him wonderingly. He saw doubt on the faces of the others. He saw the flush of savage hate on Dawson's face. Then Lenny sprang forward and thrust at him a piece of paper.

"Explain that, then!" she cried passionately. "I searched your cabin in the fog and found that letter! It's a letter from Julius Brandon, and Brandon owns the Brandon Marine Corporation, which owns Northern! Look at it—it damns you to your face! Read it! I'll read it *for* you!"

Savagely she swung on the others. "Listen to this! Subject: Acquisition of Harcourt Steam Trawling Company. Robert M. Randolph, Esq., Bayport, Mass. Dear Sir: With reference to our conversation of yesterday's date on the above subject, I

have given your proposals careful consideration. You are authorized to proceed according to your plans as outlined to me, and I shall await prompt reports from you. I presume that before going further you will call on Mr. Ernst, our manager in Bayport, and I need not add that your connection with this office will be held in the strictest confidence. Yours very truly, Julius Brandon."

"Well?" Toby Harcourt said. "Can you explain that?"

"And while you're about it," Landon snarled, "explain why nothing has happened to *Spindrift* since you've had her, and why *Arcturus* sheered off without harming your nets, why Haffner waved his hand to you, and what it was you said to Brandon before we sailed, when you phoned him!"

Winters, *Spray's* radio operator, said quietly, "You might also tell us who you've been trying to get in touch with ever since we reached the grounds, and why you radioed our position to someone!"

THERE was a growl of rage from the others. Dawson cried, "So that's how the Northern outfit found us! What's the use of all this gab? We don't need any more proof! If he was on the level he'd explain all this. The reason he doesn't is because he can't—or doesn't dare!"

Carter sprang up, eyes blazing. "I agree!" he roared. "There's been too much talk all along the line, and not enough action. For me, I'm not going to sit here while that crew of cutthroats murders my men and wrecks my ship under me! If Randolph's honest, he's had chance enough to explain. I'm going aboard *Arcturus* and rip the guts out of Haffner, but before I go I'm going to do this!"

He leaped at Bob, and his fist crashed against his jaw. Taken off guard, Bob sprawled backward, crashing against the bulkhead with stunning force. Instantly the others were on him like a pack of snarling dogs. He heard faintly the Old Man's shout, Lenny's scream. A seaboot struck him in the stomach, doubling him up. Someone caught him by his collar and dragged him to his feet. Fists ham-

mered at him, boots battered. He was helpless to defend himself, dazed as he was, though he struck out blindly with what little strength was left to him.

He felt hot blood running down his face, salty on his lips. He fought desperately. As the Old Man and Lenny fought their way into the infuriated group and managed to drag them off, Bob pitched to the floor and felt himself plunging into a bottomless sea of blackness. . . .

Death in the Fog

ALIGHT mist had blown in with the night, blurring the riding lights of the little fleet as it rode at anchor.

Through the mist Lenny rowed Bob back to his ship. As she rowed she noticed a misty blur of lights half a mile to the north, and knew that Bull Haffner's fleet had anchored also. She wondered at that. A fleet on the fishing grounds works night and day, and there was not enough fog to prevent trawling, though she noticed that it was thickening.

Were they planning more devilry? She doubted it. Surely they had done enough! They had put the Harcourt fleet out of commission, for there was no sense in risking the rest of their gear as long as Haffner was around. There was little more Haffner could do to harm them, save out of sheer vindictiveness.

Her firm jaw set savagely, and her eyes flashed. Some day, somehow, fate and justice would catch up with Ernst and Haffner. She prayed that she might be in at the death.

Bob was still unconscious. She had washed and bandaged ugly gashes in his jaw and scalp, and applied liniment to bruised ribs and legs. She hoped no bones were broken, and that he was not injured internally. He looked so white and still! She ought not to pity him. She could not doubt any longer that he had conspired to ruin her and her father, but she did not hate him. She had loved him with the quiet, strong affection of her kind for so long. She still loved him. But when they returned to Bayport, she would ask him to go away. Back to his fleet

liners and smart passengers. Back to the man for whom he had, for some dark reason, worked to ruin Toby Harcourt.

She pulled steadily at the oars. Her lithe body was strong, and the light dinghy surged ahead, passing close under the bows of the *Shark*, which lay next to the *Spindrift*. Questions hammered in her mind. What could be done to trap Haffner? Was there no way at all that he could be trapped so effectively that all the alibis and all the lawyers and gunmen in the world couldn't rescue him? She doubted it. He and Ernst were too smart, and what Bob had told the others was true. He could not have dared to go as far as he had without being sure of his legal defenses.

Abruptly she stopped rowing and cocked her head, listening. She peered around in the dark, wondering if it had been her imagination or if she had really heard the sound of oars, muffled in the fog. Water lapped against the side of her dinghy and dripped from the oars with a sinister whisper. The fog was thickening, drifting across the oily black water in gray, weird shapes. For a moment she thought she made out the shape of a boat near the stern of the *Shark*. Then fog blotted it out. She hesitated, shivering. Everything was deathly still. It was like being in the middle of a phantom fleet, over which some intangible shape of evil hung.

Then, sharply, came the strokes of a bell. Seven bells. She heard the strokes repeated from the other ships, and recognized the tone of *Spindrift's* bell dead ahead and quite close. From Haffner's fleet the bells were repeated, a thin tinkle through the fog. Reassured, she rowed on. It must have been imagination.

A dozen strokes brought her alongside the *Spindrift*. She hailed it and saw the white blur of the mate's face above her.

"Drop me a line and give me a hand," she said. "Captain Randolph's been hurt."

"Pity he ain't kilt," she heard the mate mutter as the line snaked down to her.

TWO bells of the first watch had gone. Bob, moaning, sat up and pressed his hands to his head. He had a blurred, un-

went out on deck, and the cool, damp air revived him, though he staggered a little. He could not see the other ships, but noticed that the fog was writhing in a curious fashion, and decided that it would not last long, and that a breeze was coming up. If the Old Man planned an attack,



He wrenched the door, leaped into the cabin and snarled, "Back up, you rats! The game's up!"

certain memory of the past hour: of Lenny talking to him, touching his head with deft, cool fingers. He poured himself a stiff drink, wondering where she had gone. Peering out of a porthole, he saw fog swirling thickly. He felt his body gingerly, and decided that he was still all in one piece.

He frowned, remembering the meeting on board the *Spray*. Those fools had been planning to attack Haffner which he was sure was exactly what Haffner wanted. He

he would do best to start before the fog cleared, otherwise he would have no chance against Haffner's machine-guns.

He stumbled down the ladder and went aft to the wireless room. Selden was asleep over his instruments, coffee cups and cigarette butts all around him. Bob kicked him awake.

"Hell, man, this ain't the time to sleep!" he snarled. "Did you raise 'em yet?"

"No," Selden muttered, still half asleep. He had been on duty constantly for nearly thirty-six hours.

"Keep at it," Bob urged desperately. "Keep at it, understand? It's our only chance. Afterward you can sleep all you want, but God help us if you don't get in touch with—"

The mist ripped apart like a gray curtain opening on hell. A blossom of orange-colored flame bulged, burst and shot long streamers skyward, ripping the fog to shreds. A stunning explosion made the ship quiver. Instantly the mist closed in again and the glare went. Something came screaming at them through the fog, smashed against the radio panel, reducing it to scrap. Selden sagged across the table, his head a bloody pulp.

Wreckage rained in the sea and on the deck. Someone up forward yelled, "It's the *Shark!*" Off in the fog, as Bob dashed on deck, he could hear confused noises. A scream repeated over and over, sickening in its terrible, mortal agony. Shouting. The screech of tackle as a boat was lowered. The roar of escaping steam.

"Boat!" he roared. "Boat away, there!"

Someone bumped into him and cursed. His head was still spinning and he felt sick. He saw the *Spindrift's* boat away and ran up to the wheel-house. He looked at blood on his arms and hands, and wondered where he was hurt. Selden's blood.

They were helpless in the fog. He could only hope *Shark's* crew would get away in their boat before she foundered. There was a dull explosion and the shriek of steam. Her boilers had gone. Even as he listened there was a dreadful soughing noise as air rushed out of her ventilators; then a long gurgling, and he knew she was gone.

Then silence, save for the splash of oars, and a faint hail. Soon his boat appeared. Even as she came alongside, a light breeze came up, ripping at the fog so that dark patches of clear water appeared.

"All but two got away," the mate reported. "They were killed in the explosion. Must have been a time bomb. Blew her stern to pieces. We nearly got swamped in the wash when she foundered."

There was a hail off to starboard. "*Spindrift* ahoy!" A boat appeared, with Captain Toby standing in her stern sheets, a gun strapped to his waist.

"Randolph, we're going after those devils!" he shouted as the boat came alongside. "We're going to board *Arcturus* before the fog lifts. We're going to take the *Seafoam*. I'm taking ten men from each ship. Pick out the toughest of yours and have 'em on board *Seafoam* in fifteen minutes. In the meantime you're under arrest. You'll be taken care of when we get ashore. Your job for the present is to stay aboard your ship and guard Lenny. Understand?"

The mate, standing beside Bob, said, "Lenny! She went back to the *Spray* an hour ago! Shoved off in the dinghy alone and said she was going to join you!"

Night Attack

THE fog was drifting northward on a light air. Stars shone distantly. Northward a half mile Haffner's fleet lay hidden, enigmatic, silent, sinister in the fog, which still hung about it as though it would befriend evil with its clammy cloak.

In his cabin aboard *Spindrift* Bob Randolph had stripped and was hastily daubing his body with grease, wincing when his hands touched the bruises and scars of his beating. Through the porthole he could see the boats heading for the *Seafoam* after a futile search for Lenny or for some sign that would tell of tragedy. Searchlights still flickered over the water, their questing fingers probing every suspicious bit of flotsam. Bob's eyes were narrow and hard, and his mouth was a

grim slit above his outthrust jaw. He wrapped a .38 automatic in a greasy rag and strapped it to his waist. Around his neck he strung an ugly, razor-sharp knife on a lanyard.

Silent as a ghost he slid down the ladder, ducked overside, and without a splash slipped into the water. He swam under water as far as he could, cursing the questioning searchlights. Then, clear of them, he set off with powerful strokes toward the rolling, fading fog bank, and *Arcturus*. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the search had been given up. He had heard Captain Landon call out that if Lenny was anywhere above water she must have fallen into Haffner's hands, and that the only thing to do would be to attack before the fog cleared altogether. He could see men from the last boat going aboard *Seafoam*. In five or ten minutes she would be under way.

He swam faster, although he wanted to conserve his strength. He had no doubt where Lenny was. He knew that she was an experienced hand in a rowboat, and would never get lost or capsized, especially in a sea almost pond-smooth. Either the boat that had set the bomb under *Shark's* stern had captured her, or she had deliberately rowed over to Haffner's fleet for some purpose of her own, and been caught. Otherwise she would not have stayed away so long, knowing that her absence would alarm the entire fleet. Haffner knew no laws of God, man or decency. And Lenny, in his hands, helpless. . . . Bob's stroke quickened.

He was in the mist now. The skittish breeze had dropped again, and fog lay heavy and sullen on the water. Presently he saw a dark shape ahead. Swimming under the stern he made out the name, *Pleiades*. He swam past her, toward a dim, blurred light. It was *Arcturus*.

A rope ladder hung overside at her waist, with two boats made fast. One was *Arcturus'* boat. The other was *Spindrift's* dinghy! There were two men leaning over the bulwark above the ladder, talking. A deck light behind them cast grotesque shadows on the water. Bob dove and swam under water, feeling his way along

the side of the sleek, dark, Northern ship.

He felt the taut links of a chain—the anchor cable! There seemed to be no one for'ard. Resting for a moment, he thanked the designers of trawlers, who have put all the living quarters aft, with hold and forepeak taking up the entire forward half of the ship, instead of having fo'c'sle quarters forward for the crew. The stiff, sloping chain made a convenient ladder for his bare feet. He slid aboard like a drift of mist and crouched in the shadow of the capstan, studying the terrain. He unwrapped his gun, snapped the breech and freed his knife.

The two men were still leaning over the port rail. He could hear their voices faintly and see the red glow of a cigar one of them smoked. There were lights shining through the three portholes of the for'ard bulkhead of the deckhouse, below the wheel-house, and he guessed this to be the officers' messroom, stretching the width of the house.

He slipped down, keeping under the shadow of the low bulwark, his bare feet making no sound on the steel deck. In the lee of the deckhouse he paused for another look-see. He could hear voices aft, and the cook rattling pans in the galley. From the after companionway came other voices, and a man was singing a vulgar song. Immediately beside him was a door with a grid ventilator. He could hear voices through it. He heard Lenny's voice, low and deadly, say sharply, "Keep away from me, you wharf rat!" and Haffner's jeering laugh.

THE galley door opened suddenly, throwing a strip of light across the deck. Bob leaped back to shelter as the cook came out with a can of slush and dumped it overside. He paused, whistling "The Man on the Flying Trapeze." He lighted a cigarette and moved toward Bob, who tensed, clutching his knife. The cook paused, spat overside, muttered, "By hell, this damn fog," and went back to the galley, slamming the door in the fog's face.

Bob started. He thought he had caught the faint beat of a propeller. *Seafoam* would be along any moment. He tight-

ened his grip on the knife and gun, and crept to the door. A pencil of light came through the ventilator. He squinted through it and made out dark, curly hair which he recognized all too well. Then it was gone, and while he tried to see more, and to learn how many were in the place, he heard her sharp cry, "Don't! Keep your hands off me, you swine!" and Haffner's jeering "Or what, baby? Come on, now. Be nice or I'll wreck your old man's ship and him with it, see?"

In that moment all the hatred and rage that had been poisoning him since he had learned of the manner of his father's death burst out in Bob. There was a red mist before his eyes, and blood sang in his ears. Blindly, maddened with rage, he wrenched the door open, leaped into the cabin, and snarled, "Back up, you rat! Reach for the deck! The game's up!"

With a vicious oath Haffner flung Lenny aside and lunged. Even in that instant Bob had time to note the sudden glad light that came to her eyes as she saw him. Then Haffner was on him, and the two crashed to the floor.

He did not dare to use his gun. He threw it toward Lenny, and tried to work his knife arm free, but Haffner had caught it. Lenny snatched at the gun, but as she picked it up a man ran in, shouted and flung his arms around her, tearing it out of her hand. Like a wildcat she turned on him, battling tooth and nail to stop him from using the gun on Bob. He cursed and struck at her. She ducked and smashed the toe of her seaboot against his shin, making him yelp.

Haffner and Bob rolled on the floor, fighting desperately for possession of the knife. Slowly, weak though he was, Bob worked his way around so that he was on top of the snarling gunman. So blind was his fury that if he could free his arm and use the knife, he would plunge it again and again into the body of the man beneath him. With a desperate twist he jerked his wrist free, raised his arm. Lenny screamed. The newcomer, unable to free himself from her, had flung the gun at Bob. It caught him a glancing blow. He reeled, and in that instant Haffner

broke free, threw him over and leaped up.

Bob staggered to his feet, blood running down from a gash on his temple. Dimly he could see Lenny struggling desperately with her captor. Others came in, crowding into the little cabin. He heard shouts on deck. Someone tackled him from behind, then three or four were on him, and had thrown him to the deck. Haffner kicked at him. Pinpoints of light danced before his eyes. He went limp, trying to fight off the overwhelming wave of darkness and nausea that tried to drown his brain. He must not give in! He *must* protect Lenny, somehow. . . .

They were dragging him to his feet, holding him against the bulkhead. Haffner was facing him, a leer on his face, gun raised. By a desperate effort Bob cleared his head, but could not shake off his captors.

"Well, Captain," Haffner jeered, "kinda nice of you to come visiting. Just being sociable, hey? Remember what I told you on the quay back at Bayport? I said you were getting too nose-y, see? I said you were on the spot. Well, I'm gonna rub you out now and dump you overboard. I'll attend to your girl friend later."

"You wouldn't dare to harm her!" Bob gasped. "Captain Harcourt would kill you. You've gone too far, Haffner, you won't escape the chair this time, no matter what you do to me!"

He was stalling for time, praying for the coming of the *Seafoam*. She should have been here before now. Suppose they had decided not to attack?

"Yeah?" Haffner said. "No one's got anything on me, see? No one even knew you were coming here, judging by the way you look, so what blame is it of mine if you take it into your head to go swimmin' and don't come back for your seven o'clock tea, hey? And suppose I cut the throat of your girl friend and dump her overboard to keep you company, and her father finds her boat adrift without oars in the morning—can I help it if she fell overboard while she was rowin' around and got drowned?"

He grinned with satisfaction and raised his gun. Black murder looked from his

pig-eyes. Bob called, trying to steady his voice, "So long, kid."

It was the way they had always said goodbye, for both of them scorned what they called mush. Lenny answered, and her voice choked, "So long, kid—so long. . . ."

As Haffner's gun spat, Bob felt the ship lurch, heard dimly the rattle of machine-guns and shouts of alarm outside.

The Battle of the Banks

THERE was cold, deadly murder in the heart of Captain Harcourt as he stood in the wheel-house of the *Seafoam* and conned her into the clinging mist that hid Haffner's fleet. The ship was sailing without lights, and no sound came from the hardy men who crowded her forward deck, armed with knives, guns, or anything that came to hand. Like a wraith the ship slipped into the fog on her errand of vengeance.

Captain Toby had noticed the position of the *Arcturus* before sundown, when Northern's fleet anchored. If his judgment was good, she ought to be dead ahead. He had stopped the engines, speaking through the tube so that the telegraph gong would not sound, and *Seafoam* barely had steerage way as he swung the wheel over and brought her up. A dark blur appeared. If his judgment was good, this was *Arcturus*. If not—

It was difficult to judge distance in the fog. *Seafoam* fetched up alongside the other ship with a bump that sent her heeling, and as the fenders ground against her side, Captain Toby heard shouts and a shot. At the same moment there was a startled cry, "What ship is that?"

Captain Toby's answer was to switch the searchlight on and focus the blue-white beam on the other ship. He saw her name on a ring buoy—*Arcturus*.

"Boarders away!" he roared, and leaped recklessly down the ladder and across the narrow space to *Arcturus'* deck.

Already men forward and aft had swarmed over, carrying lines with which they made the two ships fast together. So sudden had been the attack that Captain

Toby was halfway to the wheel-house when he heard the snarling stutter of a machine-gun. It stopped abruptly.

A man appeared before him, wild-eyed, running, a gun in his hand. Captain Toby's gun snapped. The man coughed, fell against the bulwark and pitched overboard. Guns cracked. He heard the thud of clubs on flesh. Screams of pain. Then he heard Lenny screaming.

The sound came from an open door for'ard. He bolted for it. A man dropped from the deckhouse roof and fell on him. A fist smashed against his neck and fingers clawed at his eyes. He jerked his arm free, pressed his gun against flesh and fired. The fingers fell away.

"Lenny!" he bellowed. "Hold on, Lenny—I'm coming!"

Others of his own men joined him. Wilcox, mate of the *Seafoam*, panted, "She's ours! We got their blasted machine-guns and drove 'em down the hatchway. We've got 'em bottled up!"

"C'mon!" Captain Toby snapped. "She's up for'ard there."

As Captain Toby dashed for the open door Haffner appeared. Their guns barked together, but Captain Toby tripped over a motionless form. His bullet knocked splinters from the rail. Wilcox gurgled horribly and fell forward, clutching at his throat, trying hopelessly to stem the spouting blood.

Haffner bolted back into the cabin and tried to slam the door, but Captain Toby flung himself at it.

"Some of you over to the other side and block it!" he shouted, and hurled himself recklessly into the cabin.

"Dad! Look out!" Lenny screamed. He ducked, feeling a bullet sing past his ear. As he did so, he saw Bob Randolph leap from the floor and with a single swing knock Haffner cold.

"Grab Haffner, two of you," the Old Man snapped. "Lenny! Are you all right?"

There was no time for explanations. "Lend a hand there!" he called, assured that the girl was safe and sound. "Get Captain Randolph on board. Lenny, get on board and go below!"

He blew three sharp blasts on his pocket whistle, the signal for retreat, and waited, a grim figure in his torn suit, his white hair blowing fantastically and blood smeared on his face and shirt, while his men returned to *Seafoam*, bearing Haffner and Bob with them. Then he raced for her.

"Cast off!" he yelled. All need for silence was gone. The only need now was to get clear before any of the other ships could send help. He slammed the telegraph handle to full speed ahead, and felt the ship quiver as her engines began to turn and the screw beat the water into a swirling surge. The two ships sailed apart. In five minutes *Seafoam* was heading full speed for her own anchorage.

DAWN was breaking when she again swung at anchor. The captains of the fleet were gathered in the mess room. Lenny was there, pale but undaunted. Bob, white and shaken, weak from the effects of the night, sat on the settee, smoking.

Haffner was brought in.

"What's the meaning of this?" he stormed.

"That's what we're going to find out," Captain Toby replied.

"Yeah? You'll find out all right. The whole gang of you'll go to jail for this!"

"If we do, you'll go too—provided you escape the chair," Captain Toby returned calmly. "We're going to get a full confession out of you, Haffner, if we have to torture you to get it. I swore I'd send you to hell when I started on this trip, and by heaven I'll do it, and damn the consequences!"

There was a shout on deck. Glancing out of a porthole, Bob saw the Northern fleet steaming toward them at full speed.

"They're coming," he said grimly.

"Well, they'll get a run for their money," Carter said viciously. "We've got two machine-guns, now!"

The ships were closing in on *Seafoam* as the men ran on deck. There was a burst of machine-gun fire from *Arcturus*, and Bob saw the gun had been placed behind a steel plate up in her bows.

"Under cover, all of you!" Captain Toby yelled, but the warning was not necessary. Every man on deck had gone to ground like a rabbit scenting a fox when that machine-gun started its wicked chatter. Bob, flat on the deck, saw a man frantically trying to work one of the captured machine-guns, but he was not accustomed to it, and it had jammed. The other gun was up forward in the bows. That one also was silent. The man who should have been working it was sprawled over it, gazing serenely up at the sky with one good eye and a jagged red hole for the other.

There would be no opposition to *Arcturus'* crew coming aboard if that deadly machine-gun was not silenced, and no rifle or revolver could penetrate the steel shield. Bob knew that Haffner had only three guns, of which they had captured two. If he could silence that other one, *Seafoam* could be defended against the whole fleet.

He dodged forward in the shelter of the bulwarks. Someone yelled, "Come back, you fool!" He ducked around the winch and flung himself at the gun, sprawling as a hail of bullets rattled at the deck where he had been an instant before.

He dragged the dead man off the gun. As long as he lay flat, the bulwark protected him. He dragged the gun back beside the capstan. Now he had a little shelter when he knelt. He raised his head. The other gun jabbered. His cap spun off his head and sailed overboard. "Damn!" he thought. "That was Dawson's cap I borrowed. I'll have to buy him a new one now."

He pressed the trigger. His bullets hammered harmlessly against the steel plate. When he stopped a head appeared over the shield for a photographic instant, fingers wagging derisively at its nose, and Bob chuckled, loosing another burst, to which the other replied promptly.

He raised his fire a little and raked *Arcturus'* wheelhouse. He could not see the effect, but as dead hands slipped from her wheel, the ship suddenly began to swing off course and yawed away from him. When her bow fell off it uncovered her gunner. Bob brought his fire down

again. The other suddenly clasped his hands across his stomach, ran aft a few steps in a curious, stooped-over fashion and collapsed, kicking spasmodically.

At that instant there was a heavy *boom* to windward. A gray spout of water leaped up fifty feet in front of *Scafoam's* bow.

Retribution

IN the excitement of the duel, no one aboard either ship had noticed the slender gray ship with the four funnels and the wicked-looking guns, that was racing up from the south. The firing of the warning shot was the first indication of her presence.

Haffner's ships immediately veered off and anchored. In a few minutes, with every eye on her, the destroyer hove to a hundred yards off *Seafoam*, and ten minutes later Captain Toby, Bob, Lenny and Haffner were aboard her, facing Commander Lewis, U. S. Coastguards, who made no secret of the fact that they were all under guard from the moment they stepped aboard the ship.

"Well, gentlemen," Lewis said, "this looks to me like the nearest thing to a major naval engagement since Jutland. I'm ready to hear your explanations, if any, before I escort both fleets to Boston for regular examination of the case. I'll hear you first, Mr. Haffner."

"I ain't here to make explanations," Haffner growled. "The Northern Fisheries Company fleet came up here to fish. We hove to on account of fog. Next thing we know, these guys are aboard us, shootin' down my men and hijacking me. I'm here to charge Captain Harcourt and Captain Randolph with murder, piracy on the high seas, assault and abduction, and I demand their immediate arrest."

Lewis frowned. "All right. Stand aside. Let's hear your story, Captain Harcourt."

When Captain Toby had finished, omitting no details of the trip, Lewis turned to Haffner again. "What have you to say to these charges?"

Haffner grinned. "Easy. It was a frame-up, Admiral."

"Commander," Lewis corrected sharply. "What about your fouling their trawls? That seems to have started the trouble."

Haffner shrugged elaborately. "An accident, see? Our steering gear went wrong."

"But you could have stopped when you saw you were bearing down on their trawls."

"We'd have had to put our engines astern, and we'd probably have fouled our propeller if we had. We did stop our engines, but the ship had too much way on and drifted over their gear before we could get the steering gear working again," Haffner said glibly.

"You didn't stop your engines," Lenny flared, "and your ship was under control every moment!"

"The log shows you're wrong," Haffner retorted.

Lewis nodded. "It sounds reasonable," he said. "And you admit, Captain Harcourt, that one of your men fired on *Arc-turus* first? That they fired back in self-defense?"

Captain Toby nodded. "If you call it self-defense," he muttered.

"How about the bomb that sank the *Shark*?" Lewis asked Haffner.

Again he shrugged. "What would we do a thing like that for? Seems to me much more likely that an outfit that's bankrupt might do that itself to collect the insurance, and try to pass the buck to someone else. It's what I told you, Chief. The whole thing's a dirty frame-up."

"You did bomb the *Shark*!" Captain Toby snapped, and Haffner, grinning, said: "Got any proof?"

Captain Toby was silent.

"**Y**OU understand, Captain," Lewis **I** said, "that you can't make a charge like that without evidence of some sort to back it up. Suspicions aren't proof, you know. Now, Haffner, you seem to have a logical enough answer to those two charges. But what about the abduction of Miss Harcourt?"

"Abduction!" Haffner said in a pained voice. "Why, Admiral—"

"Commander!"

"O. K., Commander. Listen, Commander, can't you see it's what I said? It's a frame-up from beginning to end! We were anchored in the fog like I told you, and we hear a cry for help. It's this dame. She's adrift in a little boat. She's lost her oars and her way. So we take her aboard and look after her, figuring on sending her back to her own ship when the fog lifts. So next thing I know she begins hollerin'. This guy Randolph must have sneaked aboard, see? As soon as she hollers he comes busting in with a gun and a knife and starts to beat me up. So I call in my men to help. Then the girl starts in, grabbing his gun and trying to shoot me. So while we're tryin' to defend ourselves, and our attention's all taken up, the *Seafoam* lays aboard us, shoots us up and kidnaps me, after knocking me cold. You can see for yourself the whole thing was planned. First the girl comes, then Randolph, then the ship."

"Every word's a lie!" Lenny stormed. "I was rowing back to the *Spray* after putting Captain Randolph aboard the *Spindrift*. I had thought I'd seen a boat in the fog near *Shark*, and on the way back I stopped to investigate. The other boat pulled up alongside of me suddenly, and a blanket was thrown over my head. Then I was taken on board the *Arcturus*. You know the rest."

"You can't *prove* that," Haffner leered. "What would we be rowin' around in the fog for, anyway?"

"No one ever did prove anything against you or Ernst," Captain Toby said wearily. "You're too slimy. You think so crookedly that honest folk can't keep up with you."

Never had Bob felt more pity for a man than he did for the Old Man at that moment. He looked utterly weary and defeated, for it was not hard to see that Lewis, though he obviously disliked Haffner, believed his story.

"It amounts to this, then," Lewis said after a moment's thought: "You, Captain Harcourt, admit firing on Haffner's ship when she fouled your nets. You admit attacking him in the fog, killing some of his crew and abducting him. You admit

that you have absolutely no evidence to substantiate the charges you have made against him and against the Northern Fisheries Company. At the same time, you state that, partly as a result of the competition of his other company, you are virtually bankrupt. I'm afraid that any court would feel that your chief motive was revenge, and that you hoped by framing Haffner to eliminate competition from his fleet.

"I don't say these things are so, I'm not a judge. I'm just trying to get at the facts, and others will do the judging. But I must say that every argument seems to be in Haffner's favor, while you have no defense at all."

He hesitated, looking at them gravely, then went on. "Under the circumstances, I have no alternative but to put you, Miss Harcourt and Captain Randolph under arrest, and to escort your fleet into Boston, where the authorities will take charge of the matter. You, Mr. Haffner, will also have to go to Boston, both to answer any questions and to make your charges. I take it that you will also have damage claims to make."

"Will I!" Haffner said, grinning.

Captain Toby shrugged. "It makes no difference now," he said heavily.

BOB stood up. "Commander Lewis," he said, "may I make a statement before you come to a decision?"

Lewis nodded.

"To begin at the beginning," Bob said, "I am Robert Randolph, master of the *Spindrift*. Before that I was second officer in the Brandon lines. My father was a skipper in this fleet. He and I quarreled. He wanted me to follow his footsteps and become a deep-sea fisherman, but I did what I wanted.

"Not long ago, my father was killed. It was—an accident."

His eyes, steel-hard, flickered for an instant to Haffner. He went on, "A line parted and killed him."

Lewis nodded. He had seen taut cables part before.

"This line had been cut half through." Again the glance at Haffner.

"I'd been on the Coast, serving in the Brandon-China fleet, when that happened. I knew nothing, then, about what was happening to the fishing fleets up here, and cared less. But at Manila I got a letter from my father. It was the first time he had written to me since we quarreled. He told me what had happened to some of the private fleets on the coast, and how they had been deliberately bankrupted. He reminded me that Northern is a subsidiary of Brandon's, and said that the whole outfit, from Brandon down, was a gang of crooks and cutthroats. He said, in this letter, that they were about to establish a fleet at Bayport. That meant the ruin—the deliberate ruin—of the Harcourt Steam Trawling Company. He said that if I had any red blood in me, I would come home and fight for my own people.

"Well, I didn't believe what he said. I thought that the little fleets were no doubt going under in the natural course of events. They had done their time and served their purpose, and now they must give way to the big organizations. I believed that these charges of murder and sabotage were merely spite charges. Then when I got to 'Frisco, I learned that my father was dead. Had been murdered, in fact."

It was not easy for Bob to say this. The listeners were tense, sensing the personal tragedy under his level tones. He dared to glance at Lenny. She smiled at him, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Thinking it over," he went on, "I doubted if Mr. Brandon actually knew what Ernst and Haffner were doing. The Brandon is an enormous organization, and Northern Fisheries is only a little part of it, over which Ernst has full control. It would be possible for Ernst to run things his own way without Brandon knowing about it. He could, for example, break competition and buy out small fleets for almost nothing, the way he has done, and then sell them to his own company, making Brandon pay a fancy price, and pocketing the difference. If he could use gunmen to terrorize people into silence—which he did, and still does—he could get away with that indefinitely.

"I had two other reasons for doubting that the entire Brandon organization was rotten. Ronald Brandon, Mr. Brandon's son, is an officer in the Brandon-China Line, and one of my best friends. And I had met Julius Brandon himself once. He didn't look like a crook to me."

"The slickest crooks sometimes look like parsons," Captain Toby grunted.

"Perhaps," Bob said. "Anyway, I took the bull by the horns. I went straight to Mr. Brandon, showed him my father's letter, told him of his death, and put the thing right up to him. He denied knowing anything about Ernst's movements. I believed him. He showed me records where the corporation had paid fair prices for the fleets they had acquired. These sums were paid to Ernst, to be paid by him to the sellers. Mr. Brandon admitted that if Ernst were dishonest he might pocket a lot of this without Brandon's knowledge. I got his permission to investigate, and his promise to support me if I found any evidence against Ernst.

"At Bayport, I called on Ernst and talked to him casually. I hinted that there were a lot of phony things going on in the Brandon-China Line and that I had quit because I was not allowed a cut, and had come back to see if I couldn't do better at home. I said I had heard that Northern would soon control a big slice of the fishing on this coast, and I'd like to cut in if I could. I guess I'm not a very good actor. He was suspicious of me. While I was there I met Haffner, and I saw three cases stacked in Ernst's private office which I recognized. They were machine-guns. I checked up on Haffner. He has a police record as long as your arm—but very few convictions."

"That's a lie!" Haffner snarled.

"Sit down and shut up!" Lewis snapped. "Carry on, Captain."

"WELL, I'd learned enough to know that those two were as crooked as a ship's wake when her helmsman's drunk. I'd hoped to get a job with Ernst and do some spying, but as I say, he didn't fall for my yarn. So I went to Captain Harcourt, and because of my father, he



"What I will do is shoot through the bottom of this boat. She'd fill in two minutes. Can you swim, Haffner?"

gave me a berth. But in a day or so he began to suspect that I was in with Ernst.

"It was known that I'd got a letter from the Brandon Marine Corporation. I'd been seen talking to Ernst. I had wired Mr. Brandon, and spoken to him by phone. These things soon get around in a small village. When I was asked to explain, I refused, so of course they suspected me all the more."

"Why didn't you explain?" Lewis asked.

"Because I was sure there was a spy in the Harcourt fleet. Ernst knew our plans. And deliberate efforts were made to throw suspicion on me. When the others got threatening notes, I didn't. Other ships were damaged. Mine wasn't. Lots of little things. Ernst and Haffner

And my plans depended upon Haffner's carrying out any moves he intended to make, so that he could be trapped red-handed. If they discovered that Captain Harcourt, in spite of all the 'evidence' against me, trusted me, they would have been suspicious of a trap, and it would have failed."

"But this 'trap' you speak of *has* failed, as far as I can see," Lewis pointed out, somewhat puzzled.

Bob nodded. "Yes," he admitted heavily. "And it failed because Captain Harcourt is right, and I'm wrong. Brandon himself must be working with them, in spite of what I believed. Instead of me trapping Haffner, we got trapped ourselves."

"What was the trap, then?"

"It was this. It seemed obvious that Ernst and Haffner would stop at nothing to make this trip a failure. If it failed, Captain Harcourt would be bankrupt. Also, Haffner would deliberately incite Captain Harcourt and his fleet to attack him, and the plan succeeded.

"Now Haffner has damage claims against Captain Harcourt, which means that he can seize the Harcourt fleet in payment. But last time I communicated with Brandon he told me to go ahead and let whatever happened happen. He said he was going on a cruise to St. John's, to attend some business. I was to radio him our position at the grounds, which I didn't know when we started, and he would come up there. Then if Haffner had pulled anything rough, he would be on the spot and handle it himself. In other words, Haffner would betray himself. But when I tried to get in touch with Brandon's yacht, I couldn't. So—well, there's nothing to think but that Brandon deliberately led me into it, that he was working with Haffner, and that he never intended to come up here."

"How did Haffner learn our position?" Captain Toby asked.

Bob shrugged. "I'm not sure, sir, and I'd rather not answer—yet."

"Who is the traitor?"

"That also I can't answer."

"Of course he can't," Haffner sneered, "because the whole yarn's a lie. Mr. Brandon knows what his own outfit's doing, and he's backing us to the limit."

Bob turned to Lewis. "Commander, may I have a word with you alone? And with Lenny?"

Lewis hesitated, then nodded. Bob and Lenny followed him to his own cabin.

"I want to ask you this, sir," Bob said. "The evidence, if any, may seem to be on Haffner's side. But do you honestly believe he isn't a crook?"

"No, I don't," Lewis said frankly. "I distrust him completely. But you can't prove a thing you charge him with, and I'm afraid, Captain, that you and Captain Harcourt are in a pretty bad spot."

"I know. But there's one thing I'd like

to do. I'll need your cooperation. Will you give me a chance?"

"Within reason," Lewis agreed. "Let's hear it."

TEN minutes later the three returned to the wardroom, Bob and Lenny looking very downcast.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Lewis said, "but what you say doesn't alter the facts. Captain Harcourt, you will remain aboard the destroyer, and both fleets will proceed at once to Boston. I am going aboard *Seafoam* and *Arcturus* to inspect them, with Captain Randolph and Miss Harcourt. I shall be glad to put you aboard your ship, Mr. Haffner."

"Thanks, Ad—Commander," Haffner said, grinning at Captain Toby. There were tears in Lenny's eyes as she kissed her father.

"Cheer up, darling," she said, "we'll pull through."

"It's you I'm thinking of," he muttered, looking suddenly old and defeated. "You'll be penniless, now."

They went down to the dinghy. Haffner climbed in gingerly and seated himself in the sternsheets, with Lewis beside him. Bob took the oars, and Lenny perched up forward.

"All right, Captain," Lewis said, "give way."

They were halfway to the *Seafoam*. Bob shipped the oars and pulled out an automatic.

"Haffner," he said levelly, "you're through. Come across!"

Haffner started. He gaped at Bob, then at Lewis, who watched him coldly and said nothing.

"You're nuts, guy!" he snapped.

"Make a full confession in the presence of Commander Lewis, and you'll get off lightly. Otherwise—"

"So what?" Haffner jeered. The man was not without his courage, and did not flinch when Bob raised the gun. "You can't bluff me, Randolph. Anyway, I ain't got anything to confess. Put that gat down. You can't scare me."

"Oh, I wouldn't shoot you," Bob said mildly. "What I will do is to shoot a

clip of cartridges through the bottom of this boat. She'd fill in two minutes. Can you swim, Haffner?"

The man went suddenly green. "Don't!" he said sharply.

"Why not?"

"We'd all drown."

"Oh, no. Commander Lewis, Lenny and I are all very good swimmers. Of course I don't know about you."

Haffner licked his lips. For the first time there was terror in his eyes. He glanced at the water, and at the two ships, *Seaspray* and the destroyer, which seemed very far away at this moment.

"Hell!" he said hoarsely. "You're bluffing. You can't scare me!"

For answer, Bob fired once. The bullet punched a jagged hole in the bottom planks near Haffner's foot. Green water spouted up and wet his ankles.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "My God, stop it! I can't swim!"

All control deserted him. He tried to scramble up in the sternsheets, staring with terrified eyes at the gurgling little fountain, and clung to Lewis, trembling. Bob reached under the forward thwart and produced a lifebelt. Hope gleamed in Haffner's eyes. He lunged for it, clutching desperately, but Lewis dragged him back. He fought like a maniac for a moment, until Bob made the motion of pitching the belt overside. Then he moaned and fell back in his seat.

"Say! Give it to me, give it to me, I'll drown!" he gasped, his teeth chattering.

"You can have it when you have made a true statement to Commander Lewis," Bob said calmly. The water was washing around their ankles now. Haffner glared around like a hunted animal. Then he got a grip on himself.

"No!" he whispered, white-lipped. "You're bluffing! To hell with you!"

Bob aimed the gun down. "The whole clip this time," he warned. "She'll go like a stone. I'll exchange this belt for your confession. This is your last chance."

THERE was a tense silence, broken only by the hungry sucking and lapping of the water as it gurgled into the

boat. With a sob of terror Haffner moaned, "Give it to me! I'll talk! Give it to me!"

"Hurry!" Bob commanded. He stuffed a rag into the hole, stopping most of the inflow. Abjectly, his eyes fixed hungrily on the belt, Haffner blurted the whole story, confessing everything in his deadly fear, while Lenny took it down in shorthand and Commander Lewis listened grimly to the hellish story of treachery and murder on the high seas.

The man finished his story in a wild gabble, for the water was still rising slowly. He lurched forward then to snatch the belt. He moved too fast. His lunge shoved the waterlogged boat's stern under and she went down like a stone.

The lifebelt was jerked out of Bob's grasp and drifted away. It was all the three of them could do to keep the fear-maddened gangster afloat until the destroyer's cutter reached them and took them aboard.

"Back to the destroyer," Lewis said, and jerked the cringing Haffner contemptuously to the thwart beside him.

"Did you get it all, Miss?" he asked, and Lenny nodded.

"Every word. It's wet, but safe."

"Well," Bob said, "that finishes Ernst and Haffner."

There was a sharp crack. Haffner started to his feet, clawing at a red patch over his heart, and toppled overboard.

"Good Lord!" Lenny gasped, "who did that?"

Bob answered her gravely, "You'll probably find that it was Captain Dawson. I didn't want to accuse him directly, but he has done it himself. He took a carrier pigeon aboard with him when we sailed. He must have released it after we reached the grounds. I suppose it flew to some prearranged shore station, and the position was wireless to Haffner."

"But why—?" Lenny asked, bewildered.

"One of the things I saw when I called on Ernst," Bob said gravely, "was a check his secretary brought in for him to sign. It was made out to Dawson. He has always hated me, too, and he did his best, you remember, to throw suspicion on me."

"Why did he hate you?" Lenny asked, and lowered her eyes when he looked at her and said:

"Perhaps because he knows that I love you."

"He did propose. Several times," Lenny admitted reluctantly, "and he did say things about you. But I didn't think—"

"How did you know that Haffner was so terrified of water?" Lewis asked curiously. "It seemed a crazy stunt when you suggested it, but I was willing to give you all the breaks I could."

"I wasn't sure, I guessed. The day we sailed I had a fight with him, on the quay. We rolled to the edge of the pier, and he suddenly screamed and jumped away from me. I couldn't figure it out at all at first. But I know there are people who have an irrational horror of drowning, just as there are people who have a terror of being shut up in a room. 'Phobias,' they call 'em. I decided Haffner's was fear of water."

BACK in the destroyer's wardroom, Lewis said, "Well, Captain Harcourt, you're no longer under arrest. I have sent a boat over to the *Seafoam* to arrest Captain Dawson. I suppose he must have feared Haffner would talk too much, when he saw that he was making a confession. As far as I am concerned, you are cleared completely, and were perfectly justified in what you did. You'll have to go to Boston with me, but I'm confident the authorities will take the same view. But before you go, I want you to meet someone."

He pressed a bellpush. The door opened, and a tall man with gray, crinkly hair, and steel-blue eyes under shaggy brows, came in.

"Mr. Brandon," Lewis said, smiling a little.

With a roar of rage Captain Toby leaped at him. Lewis caught him and held him back.

"So Haffner confessed?" Brandon said. "Good work!"

"Then you did get my messages, sir?" Bob asked, puzzled, and Brandon nodded.

"It was a close call," he said. "The yacht was disabled. We put into St.

John's, but I had your message. I didn't answer, because I didn't want to warn either fleet. I wanted to take you both by surprise and get to the bottom of this business. I wirelessed Washington, and they detailed this destroyer, which was close by, to bring me up here. We came as fast as we could.

"When I saw you were having such a battle, I thought I'd keep under cover and listen while Commander Lewis tried to straighten things out. I admit I didn't believe my own men were such crooks as you claimed them to be, young man, and I wanted to hear both sides before I took a hand."

"Well, that's settled then," Lewis said. "We'll get under way at once, if you please, Captain. I shall have to escort both fleets to Boston."

"One other thing," Brandon said. "Commander, this is a very fine ship, but she's too nervous. I'm used to steadier ones. Captain Harcourt, will you give me passage back aboard your vessel?"

Captain Toby hesitated, then, sullenly, "All right. But by the Lord Harry you'll pay for it! I wouldn't give you free passage if you were drowning!"

An hour later the fleet was under way, a naval rating aboard *Spindrift* and *Arc-turus*, whose flags were at half mast for the dead they carried. *Spray*, her propeller fouled, was in tow of *Seafoam*. And aboard *Spindrift*, which had been made the flagship, Julius Brandon and Toby Harcourt sat in the messroom and glared at each other, arguing furiously.

"Well, you scum," Captain Toby growled, "you've licked me. Haffner and Ernst may be through, but I'm licked. I'm bankrupt. I can't even stand a court fight to get damages out of you. But by the Lord and all the little fishes, if there was any justice in the world, you'd be in irons along with Dawson right now!"

"But I tell you, you old fossil," Brandon shouted, exasperated, "I didn't know what they were doing! Northern Fisheries is only a small part of my affairs. Ernst ran the whole thing!"

He paused, and went on more quietly. "I trusted him. It's the first time I've

made a mistake about a man. Haffner I had never set eyes on, and didn't even know about. As for you, Captain, I offer two things. My hand in apology, and my bank account to repay you for the damage we've done. You don't have to fight me to get that. You can name your own figure."

"Keep your hand," Captain Toby answered bitterly. "Can you bring good men back to life, or quiet the grief of widows?"

"No, old-timer," Brandon said quietly, "but that wasn't my fault. And we made you a fair offer in the first place. We didn't know, of course, that Ernst misrepresented it to you, and neither did you. But the offer stands. It would pay you to join us."

"Surrender my fleet?" Captain Toby roared. "Turn it over to a crew of chair-warming New York landlubbers? Never!"

Brandon smiled. "Toby," he said, "remember old Isaac? 'Cap' Isaac?"

The Old Man started. "Cap Isaac? Why, he was second father to me. The grandest old fisherman that ever lived! Why—my Lord, Isaac—Isaac *Brandon!* But—"

Julius Brandon nodded. "I'm his son. Left Bayport years ago. You wouldn't remember me, I suppose. But I'm not such a chair-warmer as you think. And I reckon," he added softly, "the tang of the Banks is sort of in my blood."

The two stared at each other, the one amazed, the other whimsical.

"I've been thinking, lately," Brandon said, "even before all this business, that I'm not as young as I was. My son's getting ready to take things over. And I've had it in my mind to build a house

near Bayport, and maybe make a trip or two with the fishing fleet."

He grew suddenly businesslike again, and the softness went from his eyes.

"I don't want you to surrender your fleet, Toby," he went on. "All I want is you should come in with us. Work with us under contract, but as master of your own fleet. We'll merge Northern with your fleet, and you can run the whole thing. We'd pay you more for your fish. You get coal and ice and salt and dockyard service cheaper. You'd have a great organization behind you, that would insure you always having a good market. The day of small, independent fleets is over, Toby. In your heart you know that. Come in with us. Make the Harcourt Steam Trawling Company the finest on the Banks, and work with us. That's all I want you to do."

The Old Man puffed. He went red in the face. "Why, you—you tow-headed, chair-warmin' *pirate!*" he said. "I—damn it, Julius, here's my hand. And I take back what I said of you, you old buzzard! Cap Isaac's son! Well, I'll be— Wait till I tell Lenny about this!"

They went out on deck, arm in arm.

"Oho!" Brandon chuckled, looking up at the wheel-house. Bob had sent the helmsman away. He was holding the wheel with one hand, Lenny with the other. As the older men watched, her arms went about him, and their lips met. The ship's head fell off ten points.

Brandon poked Captain Toby in the ribs. "Come on, you old skinflint," he chuckled, "how about breaking out a bottle to celebrate?"

(*The End.*)

Mystery Contest Winners

will be published

In The Next Issue!

Murder



Life in the City Room came to a stop at the moment that the squeaky wheels ceased to turn.

The Thirteenth Cast

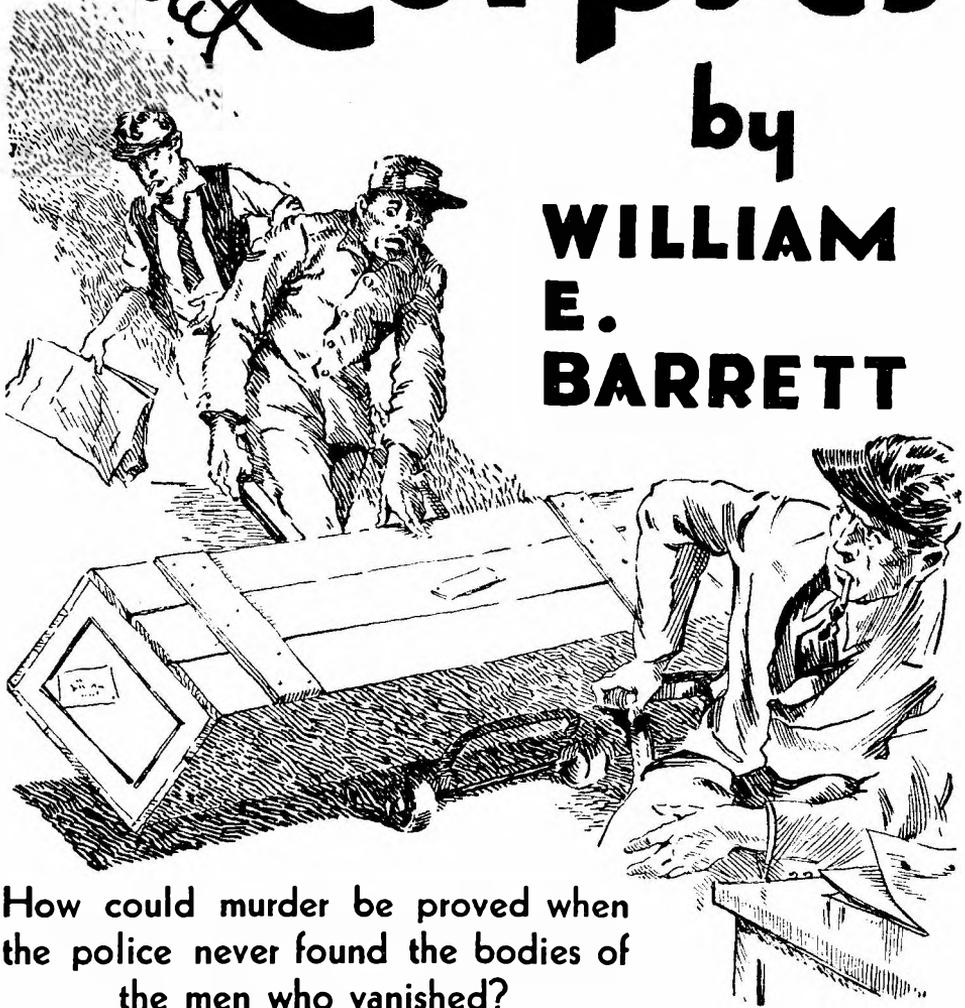
THE *Post Courier* was limping to press. Not only was the paper coming out for the second time without the red-hot numbers racket exposé that had set the city on edge, but it was coming out for the second time without the

guiding touch of Iron Mike Mercer at the City Desk.

Iron Mike had simply put on his hat and gone out for a beer. With him had gone the inside story on the lottery graft and the name of the informer who had kept him supplied with names, addresses, amounts and other data pertinent to a journalistic ten-strike. The night had swallowed Mike Mercer, and the police had not turned up one clue to his fate.

without Corpses

by
**WILLIAM
E.
BARRETT**



How could murder be proved when the police never found the bodies of the men who vanished?

Jake Hammond was holding down the desk now. He wasn't kidding himself that he was a Mike Mercer, but he was putting out a paper. At a scarred desk in a corner of the big bull pen, Grover Remington was shadow boxing a numbers story to fill.

Remington wasn't kidding himself either. His story had only a slight relationship to the sensational stuff that had gone before; it was merely a gap-stopper, a re-hash of what had been published, plus

a few shrewd guesses that did not have to be too specific. Like Jake Hammond, Grover Remington was putting out a paper.

There was a bit of a hard laugh in that. Less than two years ago, Grover Remington had been America's number one magician, the master of magic. Newspapers in those days had been merely publicity for the Remington shows. The Ghost Trust had changed all that. When Remington went after the fraudulent mediums, the

world fell on him. He found himself bucking a ring that was better organized than even he had imagined. They'd discredited him, bankrupted him, made him a fugitive. In the obscurity of a news room, he was beating back; watching for the opening that would give him power again for a finish fight with the ring.

And Mike Mercer, who had known Remington's story and trusted him, was his own paper's biggest story now.

Hammond's bark broke suddenly through the symphony of typewriters and telegraph instruments in the big room. "Joyce, hop on this! Two Italians just found a corpse. No head. No hands."

Joyce, a long-legged youth, leaped for the row of booths where rewrite men took the phoned stories. Remington snapped a call for a copy boy and slapped three more fast words on the paper in his machine before jerking it out. There was a gleam of interest in his eyes as he sauntered across to the City Desk.

"Where was it, Jake?"

"Carr Street. Almost on the levee." Hammond pushed his green eye-shade back. "Another case of no identity."

Remington frowned. "At least there's a corpse."

The sudden shock in Hammond's eyes made Remington turn. Ann Mercer was standing on the other side of the low railing that separated the City Room from the world. Her face was white, her brown eyes shadowed by dark circles. She sensed Remington's embarrassment and dismissed it with a quick gesture.

"That's all right, Grover, I'm not a child. I know what happened to the others." Her voice caught. "Dad was more dangerous than most of them."

Grover Remington's eyes shifted momentarily and he saw behind Hammond's mask of professional hard-boiledness the same fear that was in his own soul. This slim, courageous girl was going to be hurt—grievously hurt.

OUTSIDE in the main hall there was a clang of elevator doors, a thump and the protest of badly oiled wheels. Ann Mercer turned as the double doors of the

City Room swung back. A colored expressman was wheeling in a hand truck on which a tall packing case stood—a long, slender, coffin-like case. Remington took a deep breath.

"Take her away!" His lips and eyes flashed the message behind the girl's back. Hammond came to his feet. The Negro pushed a battered felt hat off his forehead.

"This here was left on Twelfth Street bridge. I got a phone call, Mister. This here writing on the case says it's for the City Editor."

The man's voice was thin, reedy, and he pronounced each word as though it was the last that he would ever utter. Life in the City Room had come to a stop at the moment that the squeaky wheels ceased to turn. Newspapermen sensed it, and the routine roar of the night became a low hum. Remington took the girl's arm.

"Let's go in the old man's office and phone McCall," he said. "Maybe he's heard something."

The girl's eyes were riveted on the mysterious case. She didn't turn her head. "Not now, Grover," she said.

Remington's lips flattened against his teeth hard. "But—"

"You're kind, Grover. But I'll stay here."

Remington looked at Hammond. Hammond's thin shoulders lifted. After all, Ann Mercer had ink in her veins, too. She would know, of course, what they all knew. Hammond singled out a cub.

"Get a hammer, Calhoun," he said, "and go to work on it."

He took the slip from the expressman and signed it mechanically, paying the charges out of his own pocket. The man's name and address were on the slip, but it was doubtful if it made any difference. The fellow wouldn't know a thing. Hammond waved him on his way.

"You, Joyce," he growled, "get Dave McCall on the phone and have somebody with a badge up here quick."

He didn't watch Joyce go. His eyes were on the packing case. Calhoun returned with two hammers. Remington took one of them and the nails shrieked as

he bore down under the lid. Calhoun swung into action on the other side. Ann Mercer, a small handkerchief balled up in her hand, stood motionless.

There was a tense crowd around the box by the time the last nail gave. Calhoun rocked back on his heels without attempting to lift the boards, his eyes raised to Hammond's. The sweat stood out in beads on Remington's forehead, but he didn't hesitate. With one deft twist, he threw back the lid.

Ann Mercer gave a choked cry that died against the back of her hand. Hammond swore and moved to her side. Remington stood with the board cover in his hands, his eyes on the opened case.

He was staring into the dead-white face of Mike Mercer.

UNDER the lights of the City Room that had been his empire, Mike Mercer lay in a couch of excelsior, his fearless eyes lidded in the long sleep. Remington dropped on one knee beside the box. He didn't look at the girl.

Ann Mercer's teeth were sunk in the back of her hand. Jake Hammond was shaking her roughly. "Ann, Ann! That isn't your father. It's like the rest. It's just—"

"I know." The girl's voice broke and she bent at the knees as she tried to reach the quiet form in the box. "I know what it is, Jake. But it's all I'll ever have of him—all that anyone ever—"

Remington was throwing handfuls of the excelsior out of the box. The body was not as white as the face; it had some of the color of life to it—but there were two bullet holes over the heart. Remington ran his thumbnail lightly across the chest and raised his head.

"Plastelina," he muttered. "The same as the rest of them."

He stepped across the box and took Ann Mercer from the awkward ministrations of Jake Hammond. "Hold it, kid," he said. "We don't know. This may be just a hoax; a new intimidation racket. No one can tell—"

He was voicing a hope that was months old in the city and he knew it, but he led

the girl toward the private office of Doc Fields, the paper's publisher. Ann had regained a measure of her grip; she was holding herself erect.

She knew, as the others knew, that the body in the case was not the body of her father; that it was not, in fact, a body at all. That was cold comfort. There had been similar deliveries, and the story was always the same. A man disappeared and was never seen again. In his place there came a cold replica made of the new casting wax, plastelina; a replica faithful even to the details of body wounds and blemishes, but lacking the authenticity which would make it stand up in court as proof of death.

Remington snapped the light on in the publisher's, sumptuously appointed office and Ann moved on to a leather-upholstered chair. She crossed her legs and lighted a cigarette. Her face was still pale, but she was keeping her powder dry. Remington watched her admiringly. You had to have ink in your veins to take it like that. Her eyes lifted to his.

"Do you honestly think, Grover, that there's any chance?"

Remington shook his head. "Not much, Ann."

It was a hard answer, but it would have been unfair not to match honesty with honesty—and Remington had handled too many of these death-cast cases to hold any false hopes. The people who made them, he was convinced, made their casts from dead bodies and, for perverse reasons of their own, wanted to let the world know that the victims were dead, without supplying any proof of death that could convict a murderer.

Ann had taken his answer without blinking, but her heel drummed nervously against the upholstery as she swung her right leg over her left knee. She pinched the cigarette hard between her fingers and the flame end fell off, unnoticed.

"Grover," she said abruptly, "do you know who or what is behind these murders?"

Remington's eyes met hers. "I've a very good idea," he said, "but I can't prove it."

Ann crouched forward in her chair, her

eyes narrowed, her whole body tense. "Whom do you suspect?"

It was a whisper, but to Remington it was the cry of a wounded tigress. The softness had fallen away from this girl who, just a few years ago, had been a wide-eyed child marveling at the silver dollars that he took from the braids in her hair. Tonight the girl of the pig-tails was a bereaved woman who wanted only to strike back at the thing that had hurt her. Remington shook his head.

"It's too soon, Ann," he said. "I couldn't tell you."

Her hands clenched and for the moment she was poised to argue with him. Then she seemed to feel the full strength of his resistance and her hands dropped. Her eyes, however, did not falter.

"I can find my own way," she said. "That man they arrested—he wasn't innocent. He knows."

"Vincent Frost?" Remington said thoughtfully. "He's just a hopped-up, gun-toting heel, Ann. He doesn't know a thing past what people tell him to do. Stay away from him."

THERE was a trace of bitterness in his voice. Apart from what Vincent Frost was, the man stood for something that stung and smarted in the memory of police, prosecutors and newspapermen.

Vincent Frost had come to trial on circumstantial evidence for the murder of Leo Duke, the fourth missing man to turn up as a plastelina cast. Abe Ginsman, the ace criminal lawyer, had let Frost come to trial and he had permitted the prosecutor to introduce the cast to establish the corpus delicti. Then, at a dramatic moment, Ginsman had had another plastelina cast wheeled into court; the cast of a body disfigured by a ghastly chest wound that no living creature could have survived.

It was a cast of Abe Ginsman himself.

Ann Mercer was staring straight ahead. She, too, was remembering that trial. "We can't take hope from the fact that casts can be made of living persons," she said. "And we can't prove death."

"Not yet."

The girl rose. "You're going to try to

find--them?" There was more than question in her eyes; there was appeal. Grover Remington looked down at her.

"I won't stop until I do, Ann."

She gripped the lapel of his coat. "If I wait for your call, you'll call me when I can help, can play a part?"

"Yes."

Ann closed her eyes wearily. "Thanks, Grover. Leave me for a while. Please."

"Good night, Ann." Remington left. He went out of the room quietly. He had more than his share of intuition. Somewhere—and God alone knew where—were the mortal remains of Iron Mike Mercer—a crushed body lying where none who cared might mourn over it. Outside in the other room there was a cast of Iron Mike's body that was probably exact down to the last mole—without being any more Iron Mike than a wax works exhibit chosen at random from a museum. In the publisher's office, alone with her memories, Ann Mercer could keep a vigil with her dead.

Softly, Grover Remington closed the door behind him. As he stepped into the other room, he was contemplating the grim fact that Iron Mike Mercer, who had handled a dozen of the corpseless murder cases over the City Desk, was the thirteenth cast.

Calhoun, the cub, jolted him out of his reverie. "I was coming after you," he said breathlessly. "There's an angle on the stiff that was picked up without any head or hands. A woman's identified him—a fortune teller."

Remington stiffened. "Yes?"

"You bet. And you'll never guess how. She identified him by his feet!"

The Dead Man's Feet

REMINGTON walked the six blocks to the morgue. It was snappy weather, and the cold air hitting his face was a cobweb eliminator for his brain. Long years of self-discipline had given him a poker face and an iron control over his emotions with which to back it up. The death of Iron Mike Mercer, however, had hit him hard. He could feel the impact down deep.

He accepted the fact of Mercer's death without question and, strangely enough, he

accepted the man's actual murderers in much the same way. They existed somewhere; a couple of cheap hoods in the Vincent Frost class, probably, who would die as they killed, violently and obscurely. A score of such men could be ground into clay and still leave Mike Mercer un-avenged. Behind the trigger fingers and the knives of paid killers, there was a brain that selected the victims.

It was the brain that killed.

Remington didn't know whose brain it was that made Mike Mercer a mark for murderer's bullets, but there was something as cold as death in his mind which told him that he was going to find out. He had told Ann Mercer that he had an idea, but that idea was not developed. To Remington, the Ghost Trust was something as real as any person; a slimy octopus that reached its tentacles into private lives through a nation-wide organization of prying, blackmailing, professional mediums—and wrapped those tentacles tight when a victim slipped into the toils.

There was no public outcry against the racket because there was no public consciousness of it. People consulted mediums and fortune tellers innocently, and there was no reason why they should know of the elaborate card-files maintained by those mediums and exchanged with other mediums all over the country through the central headquarters of the Trust. Many thousands of people, in fact, who had never patronized a medium or a fortune teller, would be astonished at the complete data on themselves to be found in local medium files through the past indiscretion of a relative. On such a system the ugly weeds of blackmail and extortion thrived. From the foul roots, scandal and suicide and murder grew.

Remington understood the Ghost Trust and the manner in which it operated. Mike Mercer was fighting the numbers lottery rackets when he dropped out, but Remington credited no mobster with the kind of brain it took to evolve the plastelina cast method of corpseless murder. Only one criminal organization in America had imagination enough for that—and that organization was the Ghost Trust.

But try to put that idea over with the public, or with their trusted servants, the police!

THE other newshounds were before him, but that didn't worry Remington. He would be handling a special angle; he was expected to.

Outside, the photographers formed a disconsolate group, barred from inside. They were like hounds on the scent of their own particular angle. Joe Caruso, ace lens-hound of the *Post*, gave a snort of relief when he saw Remington. He was a short, squat, untidy man. He waddled into Remington with a wide grin on his face.

"Keed," he said, "I'm much obliged to see you." He was fumbling in his pocket. "There's a love-nest angle, Keed," he said. "This gal, she identifies the stiff by his feet. By his feet, d'ye get it?"

He was fumbling a tiny object out of his pocket and he pressed it into Remington's hand. "Watch camera. Looks like a watch, acts like a camera. Get me a couple of this gal by the stiff. Just take 'em away from the light, not into it, and you get 'em through the stem. Turn the winder to a click and you've got a new film. Sweet, eh?"

Remington took the camera. He had no desire to play cameraman but he didn't like to argue in front of morgues.

The identification parlor was crowded, and despite the noisy living, it was the dead that dominated the room.

The mutilated body was on a tilted slab that faced the door; a gruesome exhibit which had been left in a dark street to mock the police, as the plastelina casts mocked them. With the head missing, the murderers must have figured that they had blocked direct identification, and with the hands gone, they eliminated the chance of fingerprints.

Backed into a corner of the room by a cluster of reporters, a heavy-set, red-headed woman was waxing wrothy.

"It's Slate Thurber," she said, "and I came down here because he had a hunch there'd be something happen to him. When I heard about this over the radio, the cards told me that Slate was right. I knew him

by his feet because he had the kind o' feet that you'd know. Now that's the whole of it, and I'm going home."

Remington's eyes kindled. He knew Big Kate Hanlon of old, and she was running true to form; a rough and ready harridan who had run a knack for tea-leaf reading and card-reading into a tidy fortune. One of a decided minority, she played the fortune-telling business on the square and believed in it herself. The thought of Joe Caruso and his love-nest angle brought a grim smile to his lips. Big Kate was just naturally not that kind of lady.

He made no attempt to reach her now, but he had a few questions for the future. There were a couple he would like to ask about that premonition of Slate Thurber's. One of the reporters was asking about that now, but he wasn't getting to first base. Remington moved over to the slab.

Kate had not exaggerated about those feet, and if Remington had seen the corpse before she did, he could have made the identification himself. Slate Thurber had been a medium with a speciality. He could permit himself to be trussed up, handcuffed or laced in a strait-jacket, and still cause bells to ring, writing to appear on slates, and all the other regular hocus-pocus. What any normal man could do with his fingers, Slate Thurber had been able to duplicate with his toes.

Those toes were long and thin, and there were bunches of muscle on them that made them appear deformed. Prominent muscle ridges distorted the shape of his feet, too. His calves were blue-lined and ropey.

A hand touched Remington's arm and he turned to meet the frosty eyes of Captain Dave McCall.

THERE was neither friendliness nor hostility in McCall's expression. He had declared a truce with Grover Remington on past clashes, but he still suspended judgment. So far as the suspension of that judgment went, McCall trusted him. His weather-dyed face was set in a grim mold tonight. He jerked his thumb toward the body on the slab.

"What do you think?" he said.

"The identification is okay."

McCall shrugged.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe not. As I see it, somebody got an idea from this cast business and tried to give us a no-corpus-delicti murder without the fancy touches."

"You don't figure it as connected with the Mercer murder?"

McCall's lips tightened. "I do not. That's too pat—and it gives you a chance to go into another dance about your mythical Ghost Trust."

Remington smiled. McCall was not nearly so sure about that "myth" business as he had once been, but a copper can't afford to believe the things that he can't prove. Remington nodded.

"I'm playing it like that," he said. He had an impulse to share with McCall; to give him the other connected idea that was buzzing in his brain, but he shrugged it off. McCall was too hard to convince, and the idea needed a little developing. It was Remington's baby, and it was up to him to develop it.

Kate Hanlon's voice stirred the echoes as she laid down the law to a reporter who was blocking her way. McCall looked up, annoyed. Remington's eyes didn't leave McCall's face.

"Are we working together on this, McCall, or do I have to watch out for you? I'm going after the killer of Mike Mercer." Remington's voice was low, but there was throbbing intensity in it. McCall's eyes switched back.

"Stay on the level and I'm with you," he said, "but when you bark about spook trusts, have something to show me. Mike Mercer was ripping the lid off the numbers racket when he got it—and that doesn't spell Ghost to me. That spells Carl Tanner." McCall's eyes were smoky. Bigger and brighter shields than McCall's had gone after Tanner.

As though he considered it unnecessary to say more, McCall moved toward the group around Big Kate. The buxom fortune teller with the chemically red hair and genuinely red-headed disposition had disappointed the news hounds and they were reluctant to let her get away with so many blank spaces in the story. Big Kate was on the point of becoming a one-woman

flying wedge, and that didn't go with McCall's ideas of morgue etiquette.

The little door behind the reporters opened suddenly and a group of four men stood there. Kate Hanlon saw them first, and her belligerence vanished. Her liberally padded body seemed to shrink. A veteran reporter cursed, and McCall stopped short, setting his body as though for an assault. The four men came in. Remington's eyes chilled.

In the forefront was Vincent Frost, a slim dark youth whose clothes were too expensive and fitted too tightly, a nervous-eyed youth whose thin legs were like springs upon which his skinny body swayed. Behind him came Ralph Berkin, short of stature and solid through the body; a man to reckon with, a man with sullen eyes, straight lips, heavy jaw. Abe Ginsman, the lawyer, would have been just another fat man, except for the shrewd eyes. Behind Ginsman was Tanner.

Carl Tanner had beaten the rap on everything from petty larceny to murder, but he didn't look it. Tall and thin and bald-headed, he walked with a slight stoop and looked at the world through tortoiseshell glasses. His nose was long and straight, its length accentuated by the high forehead, which continued up past the point where the hair should have set a boundary. Only his mouth seemed cruel. It was a mere slit, and drooped slightly at the edges.

The other three stepped aside and let Tanner take the spot on the spectacular entry.

TANNER let his eyes wander over the press group like a business man counting the house; then he brought a steady stare to bear on McCall.

"There's a rumor out," he said coldly, "that I've been mentioned in this Mercer thing."

McCall met his stare, the color rising slowly in his face. "I wouldn't know," he said. "Who mentioned you?"

Tanner shrugged. "It wouldn't matter. Being mentioned like that hurts my business. I don't like it. You cops sleuth too much in the newspapers, looking for guys

you don't want, just to keep the public happy. I'm not going to be the goat. If you want me for anything, I'm here—and I went to the trouble of looking for you when you weren't in your office."

Tanner's eyes flicked sidewise to the press group. The thing had been beautifully timed and—to Remington—the smug look on Abe Ginsman's face was the tip-off to the man who timed it. Dave McCall's eyes were smoldering.

"You're not impressing me, Tanner," he said. "When I want muggs like you, I have them brought in."

"Yes?" Tanner's thick-rimmed glasses gave him the appearance of an enraged owl. "Well, don't sidestep! Are you looking for me on the Mercer kill or aren't you? He was giving me hell in the paper when he got it, and I want to know."

It was no spot for a cop, and McCall couldn't go to bat on what he had. He shrugged. "I don't even know if Mike Mercer is dead," he said, "and the grandstand play doesn't get you a thing. I don't want you right now and I never said that I did."

"How about my boys? Are you going to horse around in the papers about them?"

McCall's eyes flicked indifferently over the faces of Vincent Frost and Ralph Berkin. "I never heard of either of them," he growled.

Tanner smiled without mirth and turned to the press group. "I hope all of you boys heard that," he said. "It helps to clean things up before they get in print."

Remington had his hands rammed in his pockets and he was standing clear of the main group. "While you're cleaning things up, Tanner," he said easily, "what about this lad on the slab?"

Tanner pivoted his head in Remington's direction, looked at and through him, then flicked a hasty glance in the direction of the headless corpse.

"I don't even know who it is," he said. "Why?"

"It's Slate Thurber." Remington took a stage pause and kept his eyes on Tanner's face. "And Thurber," he said, "was the lad who gave Mike Mercer all the dope on the numbers racket."

It was a shot in the dark and Remington was guessing, but it had never been any part of Grover Remington's game to let his public know when he was guessing. Carl Tanner didn't know it now, and the shot told.

McCall took a half step forward, a murmur rose from the press ranks, and Tanner stiffened, his hand fumbling for a handkerchief. Remington watched that handkerchief. Tanner did things with it before he dabbed at the sweat on his forehead. That square of linen talked to someone in the Tanner crowd who understood its language. The numbers king looked thoughtfully at Remington.

"I never heard of any Thurber," he said, "and I don't give a rap what anybody told Mercer." He pivoted his head on his thin neck. "Are you interested in this screwy angle, McCall?"

McCall shrugged. "I'm damned interested, but I'm still not looking for you."

Tanner didn't look again at Remington, but Remington felt the sullen eyes of Ralph Berkin fixed on him steadily. Ginsman was moving to the door. Tanner waved his hand to the reporters.

"I guess everybody's all fixed up. Right?"

He didn't wait for an answer. As he barged out the door with his two bodyguards dropping into step, McCall whirled to Remington.

"You would hold out on me!" he growled.

Remington smiled grimly. "Mac," he said, "there is such a thing as inspiration."

The House That Death Built

REMINGTON called Ann Mercer from his own apartment. There was a plan building up in his mind and he had promised her a part in it. It was an easy promise to fulfil, because he needed her. He wasted no time, however, on polite preliminaries.

"Ann? This is Remington. You still want to help? Great. There's a woman I want you to see. Tonight, if possible. It won't be easy. Her name's Kate Han-
ion."

He read the address out of a small black book in which he had listed the names and addresses of every medium and fortune teller in the city. The girl repeated it after him, an eager lift to her voice.

"That's right. She's tough outside, very tough. But she's Irish, and she's got a big heart. Don't try to outguess her. Get in some way. Use my name. Then tell her that you dreamed three nights straight about a man whose face you couldn't see and whose initials were S. T. Tell her it's worried you since the news about your father.

"This is hard, but get her sympathy, Ann. The lad with the initials is Slate Thurber. He's dead lately. Kate knew him, and I have a hunch he was tipping your father off. Get Kate's story—somehow—*anyhow!*"

"I'll get it." The voice was soft but there was something steel-hard behind it. Remington nodded his own secret satisfaction.

"Good girl," he said.

He cradled the receiver and waited. There should be a call for him shortly; a phony call that would be merely one of Tanner's hoods checking up to see if he was in, so that they could stage a professional call on him. That would be right in line. He liked to have his enemies coming to him. He dropped his eyes to the list that he had carried with him for months, a list that had grown amazingly. There were thirteen names on it now; thirteen men who existed no longer—except as plasteline casts.

<i>Geoffrey Lowden</i>	<i>manufacturer</i>
<i>Howard Kane</i>	<i>artist</i>
<i>James T. Maxwell</i>	<i>judge</i>
<i>Leo Duke</i>	<i>mobster</i>
<i>Louis Da Rigo</i>	<i>ex alki cooker</i>
<i>Pete Loftus</i>	<i>gunman</i>
<i>Oswald Pierce</i>	<i>broker</i>
<i>Clifford Ancell</i>	<i>drug manufacturer</i>
<i>Joseph Borden</i>	<i>theatrical producer</i>
<i>Vito Dominick</i>	<i>trance medium</i>
<i>Guiseppi Rillo</i>	<i>number agent</i>
<i>Dick Taintor</i>	<i>gambler</i>
<i>Mike Mercer</i>	<i>city editor</i>

That list had stopped many an amateur criminologist, many a precocious newspaper sleuth, and many a graybeard at H.Q.

Very few of those on the list had been acquainted with others on the list, and few of them had a common meeting ground upon which to meet a joint foe. The murder trademark had been the same in every case, but if numbers racketeers had killed Mike Mercer, where was the tie-up with retired millionaires, artists, brokers and the rest?

The phone broke in stridently upon Remington's thoughts. He smiled wryly. Instead of the expected hoarse voice spouting chewed English, however, the voice on the phone was well modulated, precise, and freighted with just a touch of fear.

"Mr. Remington? Are you alone? Good! This is Frederick Koler. Something has happened tonight that has upset you; something else that has happened was perhaps a greater upset to me. It is imperative that I see you—vital. Can you come up at once?"

Remington customarily made his decisions fast. Something told him that this call was genuine and that it was worth following, even at the cost of missing his expected guests.

"I'll be right up," he said.

"Good! Take care that you are not followed."

The receiver clicked and Remington whistled thoughtfully. Frederick Koler was a very frightened man, and he found that fact very interesting.

THERE was nothing small-time about Frederick Koler. He was one of the success stories that had survived 1929. The Koler Mortuary was one of the city's largest, but Koler did not rest his fame on it. He had been influential in politics since early in the prohibition era, and his rapid climb to wealth had been responsible for a lot of grim jokes about people drinking embalming fluid. Nobody had ever pinned any liquor scandal on him apart from the jokes, but he had conducted most of the big gangster funerals in the days before repeal. He had been on the climb for fifteen years. Before that, he had been merely an undertaker with a neighborhood business and no influence whatever.

Grover Remington stepped out of his

taxicab and looked up at the flood-lighted turrets atop the Koler Arms. If Koler was a success story, here was the monument to that story. Koler had managed to build it and finance it without losing control—ample proof that he was not merely a mortician. Remington grunted.

"The House That Death Built," he said grimly. "Well, we'll see what's in it."

Koler's apartment was 11-A and Koler himself was waiting; a man of medium height with nervous black eyes, a sandy mustache, and hair that was graying in streaks. He was rubbing his hands together as though he had just completed washing them and found them not quite dry.

"Mr. Remington," he said, "a man whom I trusted died violently tonight. I find myself faced with the necessity of trusting another man; trusting him to an even greater extent than the man who died."

"Slate Thurber?" Remington's eyes did not betray the interest that he felt. Frederick Koler hesitated; then nodded indifferently.

"I have to make a new alliance," he said. "Fast! My life depends on it. I believe you are the man I want."

"What kind of alliance?"

Koler shrugged. "The only kind worth mentioning; an alliance wherein one man gets something that he wants and needs in exchange for something that the other man wants and needs."

"What do I need from you?" Remington's tone was casual.

"Proof of death in the cases of thirteen men. I have it."

Remington stiffened. This was laying the cards on the table with a vengeance. There was no stalling about Koler. As though he sensed and relished the effect of his words, the mortician relaxed.

"How badly, Remington, do you want that proof?"

"Very badly." Remington didn't fence. "The police, however, could probably make a better deal."

Koler waved his hand. "That's out," he said. "There is only one way in which the police can get that proof. That is through you. There is only one way in which

you can get it—don't deceive yourself on that point. There is positively only *one* way."

"And that—?"

Koler smiled coldly. "There are three men who must die without fail within twenty-four hours — preferably within twelve hours. They must not be arrested or merely hurt; they must die."

Remington shook his head grimly. "Why me, then? There are scores of unemployed gunmen in town."

Koler laughed bitterly. "For sale and re-sale. Any one of them that I bought could make a better deal by going to the three men than by pulling the trigger. Rats may not have brains, but they do possess instincts."

Remington nodded. The idea of a murder deal didn't shock him, there were too many of them made. He knew, too, how men like Koler reasoned. Koler considered his life in danger. Any ordinary man facing a threat on his life would feel justified in using any weapon at hand. Koler merely used men with weapons, instead of the weapons themselves. That *he* should be picked for a killer, however, was something of a shock. Koler evidently subscribed to the Ghost Trust estimate of Grover Remington.

"What proof have I that you can deliver the proofs you promise?" Remington eyed the man thoughtfully. Koler didn't even blink.

"None whatever," he said. "I promise to give you the proofs of death in the thirteen so-called cast murders under the conditions that I specified."

"And the three men who are to die?"

"Tanner, Frost, and Berkin."

Remington had expected that. "Rather a big order for one man, isn't it?"

"It depends on the man. I couldn't do it myself. I am, unfortunately, not the type."

The hall phone rang. Koler went to answer it and his whisper carried clearly to Remington, who lay completely relaxed in his chair. "You what? . . . Since when did things like that happen without my okay? No, lay off her! You're going to monkey around a bunch of small fry once

too often and get burned. I'll see you later."

Koler was rubbing his hands again when he came back into the room. His manner was brusque.

"I've gone all the way with you, Remington," he said, "and that's a lot of trust to put in a comparative stranger. What's your answer?"

REMINGTON had undergone a change in the past few seconds, too. He could add facts to facts and arrive at conclusions; the principle was the same when he had only half facts to go on. His eyes were hard.

"If everything is as you represent it," he said grimly, "the three men die tonight."

Koler's manner underwent an immediate change. He stopped rubbing his hands and a peculiar gleam came into his eyes. "Excellent!" he said. "Where do you want them to be?"

"If everything is as you represent it, I said." Remington's voice was as cold as his eyes. "You haven't made your representations yet. Why must these three men die—and where do you fit in?"

Koler had gone too far without going far enough, and he saw it. For a moment he teetered back and forth, then he sat down and ran a hand through his thinning hair.

"You're hard," he said, "but I would probably be hard in your place. I've got to tell you. I told you that I lost a valued ally tonight. I did. I am alone, very much alone, and I'm looking into the face of death. It isn't pleasant, Remington."

"I agree so far."

"Then you'll agree the rest of the way. I am the man. Remington, who made those plasteline casts."

It was like a beaten fighter coming out of a crouch to hit hard. One moment Koler was a beaten, broken man who played for sympathy, the next he was a forthright individual laying hard facts on the line. Remington did not allow his thoughts to show in his face.

"You've got to talk a long way around that one," he said grimly.

Koler spread his hands wide. "I had no

choice. The law was using the process. I was a mortician and I had done business with gangsters. They muscled in on me. Fear! I'm not a courageous man, Remington. They brought the bodies and I made the casts. I am ashamed of it, but I feel no guilt. The men were dead before I saw them, and if I told what I knew to the cops, I wouldn't live until the cases came to trial."

He ran his hand rapidly through his hair. "You do not know, Remington, what it is to be the trapped tool of violent men. Now they suspect me of weakening—have proof, probably, that I betrayed them in a desperate effort to batter a way out of my cage."

"How betrayed them?"

"Through Slate Thurber. I helped him get the facts that he gave Mike Mercer."

The statement was snapped out. Koler's fist was clenched and his chin defiant. Remington looked at and through him. Koler slumped and spread his hands again.

"Thurber was mutilated. If he died slowly, he probably talked. Somebody dies tonight—my enemies or myself. That's why I have put myself in your hands. I have talked freely but, of course, you can prove nothing. If you take the time to try, it will be too late to do any good, and you will fail."

Remington nodded. "I grant all that, but I take no killer merely to save your skin. Your proof that you can deliver what I want!"

KOLER hesitated, then laughed shortly. "If you were any other way, you wouldn't be the kind of a man I want," he said. He stood up and walked around the library table. With his left hand he opened a drawer and flipped an envelope across the desk. His right hand slipped behind a humidor on the table-top and the blue nose of a revolver poked through an ingeniously concealed hole.

"There is the proof in a single case," he said crisply. "The gun may be impolite, but it is insurance against your possessing the proof before you have earned it. Your trust in me has hardly been simple and childlike, you know."

Remington rose and took the envelope in his hands. He shook it and a photographic print fell out. His fingers closed on the print, and he forgot the gun across the desk. He was looking at the picture of a corpse sprawled upon a gray flagged floor; sprawled in an attitude that took all the dignity from death and, at the same time, provided convincing proof that it was a corpse and *not* just the cast of one.

The muscles along his jaw tightened, and for the moment he seemed visibly shaken. The print slipped from his fingers as he sought to restore it to the envelope. He caught it and then dropped the envelope. He flipped it on the desk.

"Okay," he said hoarsely. "Your three men die."

Koler's dark eyes gleamed exultantly. "Where do you want them?"

Remington was looking at the watch he had taken from his pocket. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Twelve-fifteen."

"Okay. My apartment at two a.m.," he said.

Koler nodded. "If I can locate them in time." There was a little furrow between his eyes. "I'll see that it reaches them as a suggestion—but can you handle them if they come?"

Remington's eyes were ice. "Adequately," he said.

The corpse in the print was the corpse of Iron Mike Mercer. . . .

At Big Kate Hanlon's

KATE HANLON had seen too many people at the morgue and she wasn't seeing anybody now that she was home. It took Ann Mercer a full hour, with the paid intercession of various employees around the Curlew Apartments, to gain admittance to the Hanlon rooms. Big Kate was impatient.

"I never see clients without appointment," she said testily, "and I never give appointments this late. This is any decent body's bedtime, and if you're from some newspaper, you'd better look out for yourself!"

She was a bigger woman in a dressing

gown than she was in street clothes; a broad, big-bosomed woman with stout, freckled forearms. Her hair looked like something out of a futuristic painting, and there was a grim set to her jaw that gave point to her belligerent speech. Beside her, the slim girl in the tailored gray suit and small, smart hat looked frail. Ann Mercer made use of the contrast and—very reluctantly—of her private grief.

"I had to see you," she said. "My father was—murdered tonight."

Big Kate stiffened. For a moment her eyes narrowed suspiciously; then she softened, and her big body relaxed. "Take a chair, dearie," she said. "You must be—"

"Ann Mercer."

The last trace of belligerence vanished from Big Kate Hanlon. She seemed scarcely to move but, with a showman's instinct, she set the stage for an act that was to be. There was too much light, and with a deftness that called no attention to what she was doing, she extinguished a couple of lamps that shouldn't be burning and lighted one that should be. There was a warm, soft glow in the corner of the room when the lights were adjusted. She placed Ann there on a studio couch, sat beside her and took one of her hands.

"Tell me about it, dearie," she said softly, "and what made you come to Kate Hanlon."

There was something about her, a magnetism in her hands and a sympathy that flowed from her. Ann found it difficult to lie. The thought of Grover Remington, however, steeled her. He had trusted her with an assignment.

"My father disappeared," she said. "Tonight one of those casts—"

"I know about that." Big Kate patted her hand. "Don't talk about it if it hurts."

"It does." Ann swallowed hard. "I came to you because of the dreams that I had and because Grover Remington said you were the one to come to."

Kate Hanlon looked at her shrewdly. "You know Remington?"

"He was a very close friend of my father's."

"Ah, yes. Well, he was the friend to more than one. If he'd tended his own

affairs—but that's neither here nor there. About these dreams now?"

Ann sighed. "They were always the same," she said. "For the last three nights. There was a dark man swinging, swinging. He seemed to be hanging to a— a tree or something. His hands flopped kind of loose, as though he was trying to signal to me, but I couldn't see his face. All I could see—and I don't know how I saw it and can't remember just how it was—were two initials. I thought that they were his initials. In the dream I knew that they were, somehow, but they didn't mean anything."

BIG KATE was leaning forward. Her breathing had quickened. There was something professional in her concentrated attention—and something more. There was superstition, and a sort of fierce eagerness; the eagerness of the sincere charlatan who, knowing the trickery and the deceit of her own game, still seeks for the genuine amid a maze of fraud.

"The initials—what were they?"

Ann raised her head. "S.T.," she said.

Kate Hanlon didn't move, but her lips twitched. "S.T.? You're *sure* they were S.T.?"

"That's right."

Big Kate breathed deeply, then her body tensed again and she gripped the girl's hand until the pressure hurt. "Can you prove that you're Ann Mercer, and not someone workin' on me?"

"I—why, of course!"

It was a tense moment. Ann was very conscious of the short Detective model .38 that she had tucked in her bag. It was hardly the symbol of a peaceful mission, but some instinct had made her bring it from her father's varied assortment of weapons; weapons with which, to his eternal amusement, she had been more proficient than he. She turned the bag casually away from Big Kate as she opened it. She had personal calling cards there and an initialed compact. She proffered them timidly.

"If I'd known, I'd have brought letters."

Big Kate took the cards, leafed through them like a professional riffling a standard

deck, glanced at the compact and handed it back. The suspicion died out of her eyes and she was the mystic again, the fortune teller who wanted to believe in the thing that she practiced.

"It is a very queer dream, dearie," she said. "I know well the man you dreamed of, and he had dreams himself, poor soul!"

"Dreams? What kind of dreams?" Ann Mercer's eyes widened innocently.

"Death dreams. He saw death coming for him. But I doubt if it was all dreaming in his case."

"No? Why?"

Kate Hanlon waved one big hand. "It isn't for you to know, girl, nor for me to tell you. This dream of yours now; was there anything to put those two letters in your mind, do you recall?"

Ann felt the shrewd intentness of her eyes. She shook her head. "I never knew anyone with those initials. That was the first thing that I tried for an explanation—"

As her voice trailed away, she heard a faint click from the direction of the door to Kate Hanlon's reception room. Big Kate heard it, too. She stiffened, released the girl's hand and turned to the low desk which stood less than three feet from the studio couch. Her body partly shielded her movements, but Ann heard another faintly metallic click as the woman moved a bronze incense burner out of line. Big Kate held tense, then, in an attitude of listening. She straightened with an oath that would have done credit to a stevedore.

She waved Ann to silence. "Some scum is bustin' in on me," she growled. Her right hand fumbled in the desk drawer and came up with an old-fashioned Colt .44. She had taken only one stride toward the door when it was thrown back.

A SHORT, solid-looking man stood in the doorway with a dark automatic in his fist; a sullen-eyed man with straight hard lips. "Take it easy, Kate," he growled. "We just want a word with you."

"A fine way you took to get it. Breakin' in like a thief in the night, and with a cannon in your fist!"

"Next time we'll roll up like the cops do; with a siren screaming," the man

sneered, "but not this time. We weren't telling the world about this visit, Kate. Who's who?"

He nodded toward Ann. For the moment, Kate seemed to have forgotten her. She swore.

"It's a good client o' mine, you dope!" She turned to Ann. "The gentleman's name is Berkin," she said with fine sarcasm, "and don't you be frightened or upset—he'll do no harm. It's just that his mother let him play cowboy too much when he was a lad." She waved the .44 grimly, with fine disregard of the weapon in Berkin's hand. "I'll see you in private," she said. "March!"

Berkin smiled coldly and beckoned to somebody behind him. "Watch the customer, kid," he said.

A young man who wore flashy clothes pushed through the doorway, took one look at Ann and waved his hand. "Okay," he said.

He was thin and sallow, and his clothes fitted him too tightly, but there was a certain flair to him and his eyes were bold as he looked at Ann. Big Kate grunted.

"Mind that you stay on your own side of the room," she said, "or I'll pull your ugly head off."

At first glance, Ann had recognized the man she had seen swagger into court to stand trial for murder! Vincent (Jack) Frost. He had a leer on his face now that told her as plainly as words that he did not intend to stay on his own side of the room, but that he was content to wait for a short while and see if he couldn't get himself invited across the room before he came anyway. Ann moved to the desk and took a seat beside it. She reached out one hand in seemingly aimless fashion and moved the brass incense burner.

There was a faint, almost imperceptible glow beneath the heavy glass desk covering and voices came to her in thin whispers. She had a sense of the uncanny for a moment, until she remembered the business of Kate Hanlon. This, of course, was a natural. In the normal course of a day's business, there would be an assistant sitting in the anteroom who would ask seemingly innocent questions of the prospective client while Big Kate sat at the desk and took

notes with which to astonish the prospect. Or, perhaps, the client would fill out a slip and the assistant read it back, or give some clue that could be followed up later. Anyway, Ann could use it now herself, and it was bringing her the conversation of Big Kate and Ralph Berkin, lieutenant of Carl Tanner.

Vincent Frost was making wisecracks at her from across the room and she was answering him mechanically, while the voices came to her from the desk top.

"Kate, we've always let you alone, but you've got something that is going to take some straightening out and you better come clean. I want whatever Thurber left with you, and I want it quick."

"Oh, you do! And what if he didn't leave me a thing—and why should he?"

"He's pretty dead, but maybe he talked first."

"Maybe he didn't say anything like that either, ye filthy murderer."

"That's too much of that, too. You can believe it or not, but Slate Thurber wasn't murdered."

"What?"

"You heard me. He wasn't murdered. I ain't saying that he wouldn't have been. But he wasn't."

Big Kate's sniff came through the disc. "He did an awful clean job of cutting his head and hands off."

"He didn't have to do that. But you—you balled the deck! You got the dicks to looking for somebody on a murder rap, when they could have been just as busy trying to find out who's the corpse. And you wouldn't have been so busy if Thurber hadn't wised you up what to expect."

"So what?"

"So you'd rather wisecrack than play ball with us, and you're a murder rap witness on the loose. You've maybe got something that's more our business than yours. So you're coming with us awhile and—"

BIG KATE cursed, and Berkin laughed. "You're slow," he giped. There was a scuffling sound and a dull thud. Ann Mercer fought hard to keep her composure. She knew what that sound meant, and she had no more than seconds in which to act

for herself. Berkin's mirthless chuckle came from the glass and she heard him dialing a phone. That gave her a few seconds more. Frost had risen and was crossing the room to her.

She opened her bag and straightened up with the gun in her hand when Frost was still several feet away. He saw the ugly snout trained on his middle and his eyes fixed with horror upon the girl's finger, which was not merely resting on the trigger, but pressing it.

"Careful!" she whispered. "I'm nervous about these things. Once I start shooting, I keep pressing the trigger as long as the lead lasts."

Frost wet his lips. He was keeping his hands high and he still had his eyes on her finger. "What now, sister?" he said. He kept his voice pitched low and there was no hint of a threat in him. He was a gunman with a record, but he was also a coke head who worked when he was "high." He wasn't in working condition or mood now, and if he had been, he would have had to be awfully high to jump a gun that had the trigger under pressure. Ann pressed her lips tight. Her brain worked on lightning schedule.

"Your shoes," she said crisply. "Take them off!"

"Huh?"

"You heard me. Off!"

She moved the gun; not in a jiggling or up and down motion, but with a forward thrust that made Vincent Frost's eyebrows dance. He dropped to one knee and very gingerly unlaced his fancy oxford, shifted position and took off the other. He stepped away from them, puzzled. Ann was working against time, but determined not to show it. Frost would hope for interference from the other room, and he would hope more if she showed that she feared it.

"Move quietly to that window over there and drop them out," she said.

"Huh?"

"Right now. It's an air-shaft window. You won't hit anybody."

Frost picked the shoes up and went to the window. He hesitated for just a minute, but he did drop them out. There was

something awfully suggestive in the idea that anyone would shoot and then keep shooting as long as the lead lasted. He turned around.

"Now your trousers. Quick!"

Ann's face was grim, but Frost goggled at her unbelievably. She heard Berkin's voice over the whisper system on the desk and she knew from the tone of it that he was winding up his conversation. She punched the gun out.

"Fast, I said! Don't mind me—I've been to bathing beaches."

Frost gave a resigned sigh, threw a resentful glance toward the entry hall door and climbed out of his trousers with a curse. He was wearing shorts of pale blue silk, and the tails of his canary yellow shirt waved weirdly over the blue.

"Out the window! Out!" Ann's voice snapped grimly and she stepped around the desk. Her finger tightened another hairbreadth on the trigger and Vincent Frost could see the whiteness of her knuckle. The muzzle was lined up with the thickest part of his thin body. To his notion, girls were screwy at best; with guns in their hands, they were beyond all reason.

The pleated trousers fluttered from the window and Ann Mercer took the chance that she had avoided taking until she had her man tamed and humiliated.

"Your gun!" she said. "On the desk!"

THROUGH the disc under the glass came the click that announced the termination of Ralph Berkin's phone call. He would probably take a few seconds to make sure that Big Kate was still unconscious or to truss her against a sudden and noisy awakening. If he did, Ann had whatever time he took. Her eyes were narrowed on Vincent Frost's face and her brain was steadied by the thought that he was many times a murderer, a cheap gun for hire, a—The thought suddenly flashed to her that he might even be the man who had shot down her father.

Even the bare possibility was enough to tense her body and light flame in her eyes. Vincent Frost saw that tensing, that sudden hatred, and his skinny legs became rubbery. He took his gun out awkwardly

and with a prayer in his face; a desperate pleading for attention to the fact that he had no intention of using it. He laid it on the desk, and Ann picked it up.

Every instinct in the girl's body urged her to take those two guns and face this fight out to a finish. She had one of the two men licked already. She could stay here and lay a bead on Ralph Berkin when he came through the door, could shoot him, if necessary, for what he had done to Big Kate.

She shook her head and backed away from the desk. Something told her that Berkin was colder and trickier than Frost. Frost killed when he was primed for a killing and when his victim was on a spot for him, but he wasn't the type that meets emergencies—Berkin was. She knew, too, that holding a drop was hard and that tables turn very fast when they start turning. She was better on the loose, and with her foes at the disadvantage that she had planned a few seconds ago, than she would be in this room trying to dominate them.

She backed to the door that led off this one on the opposite side of the room from the reception hall door. Instinct told her that, in an apartment like this, there was bound to be a kitchen and a service door of some kind. It was the gamble that she had to take.

"I can't stop you from screaming when I leave," she said, "but what a figure you'll cut!"

She lowered her left hand, the one that held Vincent Frost's big gun, and her own gun was steady as she palmed the door open. Frost wouldn't yell. He'd take time to run across the room to the reception hall. She knew it. He'd get Berkin, not yell for him.

The knob turned and she went swiftly through the door.

Sirens of Trouble

THERE was another door out of the apartment of Big Kate Hanlon. Ann reached it on running feet. She had her bag looped over her arm and it was still open. She dropped the small gun into it as she hit the hallway and tucked the

heavier gun away in the belt band of her skirt, out of sight under the loose jacket.

The hall was clear and the stairs were only a dozen steps or so from the door. She ran those steps and she didn't look back. She was laying another bet. Either Frost would not get to Berkin fast enough to get the man out into the hall after her, or Berkin would be too cautious to go. After all, an apartment house was not a race track or a shooting gallery, and a man who attracted too much attention in a strange house might find it difficult to get out. Berkin was a free man, not because he was an innocent one, but because he didn't do things that could be proved on him, nor do the things he did in places where he could be connected up. As for Vincent Frost—he would hardly be running the halls right now.

Ann smiled a little at the thought. She skidded into the turn for the stairs and raced down to the floor below. She ran to the elevator and pressed the button viciously. She had to get out now, and she had to stir up some action before Berkin and Frost figured an out.

She had them in a spot. If she had not taken command of the situation, they could have trussed her up and left her for future reference in the apartment. Under the threat of death, they could probably have walked Big Kate out of there when she revived. Or they might have tortured whatever information they wanted out of her without leaving the apartment. Now they were in double jeopardy.

They couldn't take Kate Hanlon out of there because only one of them was in a position to make it. There was no male member of Kate Hanlon's firm, and no clothes therefore to pilfer. Even if Frost were a capable female impersonator, he'd be handicapped there, too. He didn't have the build for Big Kate's wardrobe. Men do not leave an apartment house without shoes and trousers. The occurrence would go into the records. The Hanlon apartment was on the seventh floor, and a slip-out would take doing.

The elevator came for her, and although the boy looked at her sharply, she was on her way out.

She wondered what the big brains upstairs were doing. They wouldn't know, of course, that she had any inkling of Big Kate's fate; but they would know now that she was not just an ordinary client of the fortune teller. They would have to figure the possibility of her sending the police in on them—and they'd have to provide an answer for that eventuality, too.

"I gave them something to keep them from becoming bored," she thought. "Now if only I can figure the next play right!"

The next move wasn't simple to figure. She put the apartment house behind her as swiftly as possible and paused in the dark street between the puddles of light from the street lamps to figure her way. She was not sure that it would be a smart play to call the police. The Tanner mob had always been able to wiggle out of spots with the aid of Ginsman, once an arrest was made. Big Kate could give the law a case that even Ginsman couldn't beat, but Ann wasn't sure that Big Kate would stand by her guns. People close enough to the fringe to know racketeers and gunmen can be intimidated.

ANN wanted to talk to Grover Remington. She turned and hurried up the block toward another big apartment house. There would be a telephone there.

Telephone? The thought made her glance back at the Curlew Apartments. She could see now that there *were* ways out of the trap she had set. Big Kate's phone was not switchboard connected; it was straight dial. Berkin could phone for help. Either Berkin or Frost could take a chance and go down to the basement, or whatever other part of the apartment house gave access to the bottom of the airshaft. If they wanted to gamble time, Frost's clothes could be retrieved.

She crossed the lobby of the nearest apartment house to a phone booth, hesitated, and then dialed, her lips tightening. She was not calling Remington just yet. She had put two men in a spot all by herself and she was going to keep them there. Instead of Remington, she dialed "Police."

She pitched her voice high when a curt police sergeant answered her. "This is Mrs.

James, a tenant in the Curlew Apartments," she said. "There are burglars at work on the seventh floor. They broke into the apartment next to mine. I heard a woman screaming, but they did something to her. . . . Come quick—please!"

She hung up before the questioning started. She had an idea that that move would cramp any recovery plans of Messrs. Berkin and Frost. Let them try to retrieve any clothes from airshafts now—or go prowling around half clad.

She felt pretty proud. She had taken her assignment further than Remington had dreamed of, and she felt she was really taking an active part in the apprehension of her father's murderers. Those men knew about the murder of Slate Thurber, and Remington believed that that murder was connected with her father's death. If the police caught them in a jam like that, Big Kate would have to talk before she could be threatened.

Ann called Remington then. He wasn't at the paper, and that was a let-down. She hung up and dialed again. She had run out of nickels and had to use a dime for this call, but she found that it would work. She got Remington's apartment and her heart sank as the ring sound came over the wire interminably—then, at last, he answered.

"I just got in," he said. "What have you got?"

Her words tumbled over one another. She slurred the interview with Big Kate and the conversation between Kate and Berkin, but he slowed her down to it with sharp questions. He applauded her for her courage, but wasn't as enthusiastic as she'd expected him to be.

"You're sure that Berkin said Thurber wasn't murdered?" he insisted.

"Of course I'm sure!"

"And from the conversation, he doesn't seem to have talked to these men? They were guessing with Kate?"

"It seemed that way to me." Ann was impatient. She heard the shriek of sirens and opened the booth door slightly to hear better. They certainly were sirens.

"But what about what I did to those two men?" she asked. "I've got them

trapped tight, and with Kate to talk and—"

Remington's voice was soft, sympathetic. "Don't bank on that," he said. "You did a magnificent job, but I can think of a dozen ways out of that fix they're in, and you played in danger staying around the neighborhood to make phone calls. You'd have spiked them better if you reported to the clerk on duty and the elevator boy."

"But—?" Ann sputtered. It was too much that Remington should dismiss her perfect play with a gesture! He was exaggerating. There weren't a dozen ways out of the fix the two men were in. She couldn't think of one. There had only been two ways, and she had spiked those. She could see all kinds of flaws in the simple, prosaic stunt that Remington suggested. His voice broke in on her indignation.

"Aren't those fire sirens going by?"

She was aware suddenly that she had kept the booth door open and that there were too many sirens for just a police answer to a burglary call.

"Why, yes!" Her voice had lost some of its confidence.

"Well, that's one way." Remington's tone was suddenly hard. "There are fire alarm boxes on every floor in apartment houses. If they got the whole house stirred up, it would be a cinch for a man to get out in a dressing gown—even a woman's dressing gown. They could even carry a woman out who was supposed to have fainted."

"Oh!" Ann was appalled. Remington's voice didn't lose its crispness.

"Get a cab and get out of that neighborhood. No—better still—wait right where you are. Are you in a store? Apartment house? Okay. Has it got an all night desk? Fine. Stick close to that desk till I get there. Swell. I've got the address and I'm coming."

She heard him hang up. She felt like a silly little fool. The pride was gone out of her, and she was a little frightened inside. Through it all, she was curious. Maybe Berkin and Frost hadn't thought of that scheme. Maybe the fire engines had gone somewhere else. Maybe she was still the winner in her little game.

She left the booth and walked toward

the door. It wouldn't do any harm to take a look. She had to know if those fire trucks had stopped at the Curlew.

THERE was a dim night light near the phones and another dim light in the foyer, and a brighter light back at the L turn that led to the desk. Trucks were snorting outside. Ann was obsessed with a feeling of horrible certainty, but she had to know.

She had taken only half a dozen steps when a man rose from the semi-dark and dropped into step behind her. She turned, startled. He gave her no chance for overt action, he pushed close to her before she even saw him.

"I shoot quick, too," he said viciously, "and being a woman doesn't rate you a thing. Walk out quietly, or see how neatly all this fuss covers things."

She caught her breath in one swift intake, but there wasn't a scream in her. Even if reason hadn't told her that screaming would be suicidal, she would have been powerless to cry out. The man was still crowding her, but his tone was conversational, almost chummy.

"You were bright, very bright," he said sarcastically, "but I figured you for a dame that would have to broadcast how bright she was. I bet myself a million bucks that I'd find you by checking up phones in the neighborhood." He chuckled. "I owe myself a million bucks!"

There were fire trucks in the block, and the point of excitement was the Curlew. Ann threw a despairing look at the man who was covering her with a pocket-sheathed gun. She found herself looking into the sullen eyes of Ralph Berkin.

The Cider Mill

REMINGTON circled the lobby of the Hathaway Apartments twice, talked to a bored clerk and looked into the phone booths before he gave up hope of finding Ann Mercer where she said she'd be.

"They picked her up on the out trip," he growled. "She played into their hands by staying close."

He blamed himself more than her. It had been on his advice that she had stayed around the Hathaway, instead of taking a cab and meeting him elsewhere. The cab, however, had looked the greater hazard. Men like Tanner muscle into the control of cab companies and intimidate lone drivers.

The clock in the Hathaway lobby struck one. He had an hour until the time Frederick Koler had set for his enemies. He was committed to that appointment, but he wanted to find Ann Mercer. Between the two, he knew that he would give his time to the search rather than the appointment. Tanner and Berkin and Frost would come to his apartment, and he thought regretfully of how well he could have received them on that prepared stage of his that was also his home. They'd be in his hands as the girl was in theirs, but the girl would be a hostage, and his own hand would be weak so long as they held her where he could not locate her.

And there was always the chance that he might slip. Even an hour was too long to leave her in the hands of men who would be vengeful for the thing that she had done to them.

"I'll have to cut the cops in on the deal," he thought.

He cursed the necessity, but Ann Mercer was entitled to all the help that it was possible to swing to her cause. With an impatient swing of his shoulders he went down the block toward the Curlew.

He had made a fast trip out, and the fire apparatus, or most of it, was still in the block. The usual crowd of curious people milled on the sidewalk, and the headlights of giant trucks gave a weird tint to the block. It was an apartment block and they took no chances on fires getting a headway in such areas. Helmeted men moved around in the shimmering light, and uniformed policemen went about the job of keeping the civilians in order.

There was a police car close to the curb, its green lights contrasting with the red of the fire wagons. A blocky man in civilian clothes strode toward the car from somewhere in the vicinity of the Curlew. Remington quickened his own stride and

placed himself squarely in the man's path.

"What are you now—spotter for the fire chief, McCall?"

Dave McCall lifted his head with a jerk, his cold eyes sweeping Remington. "You, too?" he growled. "Now what?"

Their eyes clashed, there was a certain suspicious hostility between them. Remington took a coin out of his pocket, ran it deftly through and over his slim fingers and flipped it like a silver streak into the air.

"I'll toss you to see if we tell each other the truth or not," he said.

"Nuts!" McCall planted himself squarely, as though to repel all boarders. "You're either a damned smart man, Remington," he said grimly, "or you're the crookedest doublecrosser unhung."

"Let's play I'm smart enough to lay it on the line with you, even if I'm not honest enough to do so." Remington's lips smiled, but his eyes remained gravely level. "What's your angle on a cheap fire?"

McCALL rocked, worried a cigar with his lips and spat. "It's screwy. That fire started in Kate Hanlon's apartment. She isn't there. Nobody's there. Somebody *was*. She's a witness in a murder case. That's enough to bring me out here, but we had a burglar call from Kate's floor just before the fire alarm. Phony name—everything about it phony."

Remington had been chafing under the strain of leading McCall slowly to the point. But he knew McCall would have balked, if rushed. Remington felt he was going to need all the slants that he could wheedle or trade for.

"I can clean up the mystery of those calls for you," he said.

And he did. Leaving out the Slate Thurber angle, which might have swung McCall too far afield, he related what Ann Mercer had told him over the phone. McCall listened, his face darkening every second. When he was through, McCall exploded.

"That's you damned amateurs every time!" he snarled. "You hold out on me! You ball things up and get in jams that I have to get you out of! Why didn't she

come clean with us? Why this phony burglar stuff? We could have spiked that fire gag. Hell!"

Remington took it humbly. "Never mind now," he said. "The thing is, we've got to find her—and quick. She's in danger."

"Of course she is!" McCall was steamed up now, his eyes showed it. His jaw jutted and his frosty eyes swept Remington. "What else are you holding out?"

"I'm not holding out." Remington reached inside his dinner jacket. "Here's the proof that Mike Mercer is dead. It's yours."

McCall's jaw sagged for a moment. He snatched the picture as though he suspected a conjurer's trick that would make it dissolve in mid-air before he had a chance to look at it. With the light from shifting headlights dancing over the print, he studied the picture. There was a pallor in his usually red face when he lifted his head; the pallor of strain, of shock, of a nearness to something long desired.

"Where did you get it?" The slackness went out of his jaw, his eyes were suddenly hard again. Remington was thinking back to that scene where he had fumbled the envelope of Frederick Koler before handing it back. He had made Koler forget for a moment that he was America's master of magic; the super-adept at sleight of hand.

"I can't tell you, Mac," he said reluctantly.

"The hell you can't! I'll sweat it out of you if—"

"No you won't. I'm a newspaperman, and that's a privileged communication. I stand on it, and the courts back that—"

Their eyes clashed, and there was smoky anger in McCall's. Grover Remington looked tired. He gestured impatiently.

"I anticipated all this when I gave it to you. You got it anyway. It's a case against Tanner, against any one of his men you pinch. Get 'em! Get—"

McCall broke in savagely. "And you still hold out, still play cop on me!"

"No. I've got nothing that's organized. You get the break, the pinch, the credit, McCall, if I pan out."

"And hell if you miss!"

Remington nodded. "Maybe."

McCall cursed. "I'm getting old. I'm softening up. I ought to have your pants in the brig. I haven't time to monkey with you. I'm going to find that girl, but I'm doing it my way—and you can go to hell!"

He stalked off.

REMYINGTON'S face was gray now with concentration. He had to check things. Everything had to be right.

Koler had prepared the plasteline casts—Koler, who was a mortician. Somebody had killed, and somebody had delivered bodies to Koler. Koler had made and delivered casts, and something had happened to the bodies. That set-up was the key to the mystery of missing men and a missing girl.

Remington looked at the situation coldly, as Koler had presented it.

Koler, the terrified slave of the rackets; the man who had sold his soul to Carl Tanner, and feared for his body. Koler slaving over the casts, throwing the bodies on the floor and photographing them there so that anyone could tell that they were bodies and not casts. Koler assembling his evidence, watching for his chance to break away. . . .

Remington looked at that picture, his eyes bleak. It was incomplete. There was no background. *Where had Koler done all this?*

He made his way toward the Curlew. The crowd was dispersing; tenants were drifting back to their apartments. He made his way to the phone booth and called the *Post-Courier* and Jake Hammond.

"Jake, think fast. Tanner came up in the booze era. Who was his connection? Boldoni? Okay. After that Kentz? Oke. Then Leo Duke? Swell. Any direct line of succession on property breweries and such? The Cider Mill! By the Lord! Yes—I'm following you. . . . Swell!"

He followed Jake Hammond's crisp, punchy summary of Tanner's rise, his eyes bright with the sense of story. There was continuity here, drama; pieces that dropped into place, filling the picture. The Cider

Mill was one of those places, and it fitted so perfectly into the pattern that he accepted it as inevitable. There had to be a place like the Cider Mill in a scheme such as that of the plasteline casts. Since there was such a place, and since it was linked up, he did not insist on clues, footprints in the mud, tire tracks, or cigarette butts. It fitted, and that was all that was necessary.

"Regardless of cynics and realists," he said, "life does follow patterns."

He caught a cab within a block of the fire lines and left it within a mile and a half of the Cider Mill, left it at a dilapidated filling station that had been closed for hours, the solitary landmark on an abandoned road.

He didn't look forward to the hike ahead of him, but Hammond had told him the secret of the Cider Mill's impregnability. The only road in wound over a hill past a cliff that threw echoes down into the hollow. A car could not go in without announcing itself.

Topping the hill, Remington looked down into flat country. The mill stood out against the moonlight like a crudely done movie set of an old castle; a scattered pile of crumbling stone beside a dry creek bed. One pale light showed on the lower floor.

Remington quickened his stride, slowed up for the barbed wire that was laced through the trees about fifty yards from the mill. Then, instinctively, he flinched.

A whole battery of high-powered lights went on in the basement of the mill and the flash from the windows made every barb on the fence wire stand out in bold relief. Remington dropped and eased his body snake fashion toward a drainage trench that sloped away from the side of the mill.

"This," he muttered grimly, "is no time to consider shirt fronts!"

The Chamber of Horrors

OUT of the glare in the basement, light flooded in a tide over the hard, bare ground, splashing up the side of the Cider Mill and emphasizing every

shabby detail of the old building and its surroundings. Crouched in the shallow trench, Remington cursed the intensity of that light, even as he pondered on its possible purpose.

He could see the main entrance of the mill from where he huddled; a wide opening in the stone, with sagging wooden doors. Three stone steps led to the doors, and they were worn smooth. To the left of the steps, there was a cavernous opening without a door, and Remington could see the outline of a truck that faced out toward the rutted road.

What about that truck? There might be bootlegging still, but the era of remote spots like this from which trucks rolled at night was gone. Squinting into the shadows where the truck stood, he could see barrels, ghostly-looking, only dimly discernible. Monuments to a traffic that was dead—or symbols of a racket that was new?

The drainage ditch was dry and Remington was rapidly squirming his way along to the side of the mill. There was a car parked there, a long, rakish car that stood without lights. Remington noted with satisfaction that few of the basement windows on this side had glass in them. He stood up along the side of the car away from the glare.

There was no one in it and no keys. Neither fact surprised him. He moved back.

At the rear of the mill there was no glare, no light behind the windows at all. He thought at first that this indicated that the basement was partitioned into two sections. As he slid forward, he discovered the true explanation.

The only basement openings on this side were barrel chutes; rectangular slits in the wall that gave upon smooth slides. The bottoms were burlap covered, and through the burlap, the light glowed wanly. Remington nodded.

"Perfect!"

He eased himself into the nearest slit head first and, using the flat of his hands to brake himself, slid slowly toward the light. He came to a silent stop at the bottom of the chute with all his faculties

alert. Crouched behind the burlap, he was more than ever conscious of the lights beyond, and still without a clue to their purpose. No one could possibly have been active at anything beyond that thin partition without sending some token of his presence to the strained ears of Remington—he was willing to lay a big bet on that.

He lifted the burlap.

BEFORE him stretched a chamber of horrors; a long, vault-like room that was strewn with human scrap; arms, legs, a torso or two—and heads. Dead faces stared blankly at Grover Remington from shelves or from counters at the high ceiling. One, on the floor, was scarcely a face at all. There had been rats.

Remington stood straight, with his back to the chute. The deep brackets of age and bitter experience were tightening his mouth. He was not horrified at what he saw before him, because he recognized these things for what they were; he was, however, more than a little shaken by his knowledge of what these things signified.

He was standing in the place of extinction, in the place where the bodies of men vanished and from which came the stiff and characterless things of plasteline that took their places.

The silence persisted, doubly intensified now by the grisly setting. It was the silence of the morgue in the hour before dawn. Remington recognized that silence as a menace to himself. If someone shared this ghastly basement with him, that someone might not have to move. Remington had no alternative. He had many purposes that he would like to serve in the old Cider Mill, but they were all subordinate to one. He must find Ann Mercer.

Cautiously he removed his shoes and glided forward. This chamber was set apart naturally by the formation of pillars that supported the mill, but there were no partitions. The light flowed over the entire basement, and he could see loosely piled boxes and barrels in the larger area beyond the pillars—too loosely piled, he decided, to afford a satisfactory hiding place. He didn't think that he was covered from there, and knew no reason why he

should be covered at all. His approach had been discreet, and if he were discovered now, it would be by chance, and not because someone lay in wait for him.

He moved swiftly down the long bench built against the wall, his eyes photographing everything on it with sharp detail that his memory could later bring back as accurately as a print. Despite the disorder and apparent untidiness, there was a scientific precision about the placing of essentials on this work table; the several electric plates; enamel pans of various sizes; spools of brass wire; brushes of Chinese hair; surgical gauze, and containers of different shapes and sizes containing paraffin, resin, white wax, barium sulphate, balsam of Peru, and other materials.

Three feet or less from the end of the bench and running at right angles to it was a porcelain slab of the type commonly used in morgues for the bathing of corpses. Remington stopped short.

BETWEEN the bench and the slab lay a sprawled body—and this one was no plaste-line mockery.

There was a spreading pool of blood about the man who lay there with his arms flung wide and a knife buried between his shoulder-blades. Remington looked down at him, then bent gently and lifted him by one shoulder. The body was limp, still warm. Sightless eyes stared weirdly up into Remington's face. He let the body drop and wiped his hands with a silk handkerchief.

He was not a mourner; he was merely the man who had found the body. Up until a few minutes ago that piece of clay had been Vincent (Jack) Frost. Frost had lived by violence, and died by violence.

Remington straightened up and looked around carefully. The man who struck that blow had been silent and very swift. A gunman of the Frost type is not easily surprised, but the hand of Vincent Frost had not even touched his gun. He had gone down where he was struck, and he had moved very little after he went down.

A man silent enough to kill like that could be lurking within striking distance still.

SUDDENLY on the floor above a foot scraped the floor impatiently and a door creaked. A heavy voice shook the echoes in the basement. "Hey, kid! Where the hell are you?"

Remington faded back swiftly. He felt barrels behind him; three barrels against the wall, between the bench and the slab. He ran his left hand over their rounded surfaces and touched the gun in his shoulder holster with his right.

He was trapped, and it was no time to shoot it out now. Whether he survived or went down, the ten-strike he had planned would be ruined.

Heavy feet started down unseen stairs somewhere in the front of the basement. Remington ran his hand over the barrels again. He had to have a hiding place fast.

The first barrel was out. It was filled to the brim with hardened cement. A furrow creased Remington's forehead, the brackets deepened around his mouth. He had found a missing page in a grim tale.

A split second. The second barrel was filled likewise, but the cement was dry and loose. The third, like the others, had a one-piece cover, but it was mercifully empty. Like a shadow, Remington faded into it and drew the cover down over him.

The footsteps were advancing across the basement now, but the voice no longer called. There was resolute purpose in the advance, as though the men were anticipating what they would find. Doubled into his barrel, Remington felt something under him that scraped slightly to the touch of his foot. He reached down and his fingers encountered metal—sharp metal that was sticky and wet. His fingers slid along it until they touched a carved hilt; then he set it down. Gently.

As he crouched, so had the murderer of Vincent Frost crouched. Now Remington was in the murderer's place, with the murderer's weapon beside him to identify him with the crime. And a barrel was a damned inconvenient fortress to defend from attack.

Remington compressed his lean length harder. There was no crack permitting light. He ran his finger along the inside of the barrel, high up. There was a tiny

plug and he removed it. He looked out across the spot where the body lay. He could not see the body, but he could recognize the two men who approached it.

Carl Tanner and his lieutenant, Berkin.

Tanner was examining the body. "Steel," he grunted. "They opened him right up. Take a look and see if that girl's where she ought to be, Berk."

Berkin spat. "Nix—that's what got the kid rubbed out. What we should have done was bring some of the boys out."



*"That dame lied! Kate lied!
That stuff about Thurber's info
being in her safety box was a
stall. She knew, damn her!"*

Two Shots and a Scream

HELL, they got the kid!" Tanner was bending over the body on the floor. Berkin stood clear of the body; his eyes ranged suspiciously.

"Yeah? *Who* got him?"

"You make a guess and I'll make one."

Tanner let the body fall back on the floor. "We never needed them before," he growled, "and I never wanted 'em trooping through here."

As though by common consent, the two men moved away. Remington could hear them searching the basement.

"The guy could have come right up the stairs, if he was quiet about it, while we were arguing." Berkin sounded disgusted, uninterested in search. Tanner didn't answer him. Remington was pulling for Berkin to put his point of view over.

If ever these two got around to deduction, they would naturally be suspicious of the barrels. Their voices had dropped now and he could not hear. He had gained a few crumbs of comfort from the things that he had heard. Ann Mercer was here. She was undoubtedly on the second floor, since she was somewhere that it would necessitate Tanner sending Berkin for a check-up. If they'd kept her on the first floor, near themselves, they would be more apt to know offhand if she were loose or not. Remington was interested, too, in the fact that the murderer might have ascended the stairs after killing Frost without disturbing Tanner or Berkin. He filed that fact for reference.

The two men returned to the body. Remington could hear their footsteps, and then he saw them through the peep-slot. Tanner was frowning heavily and he had his hands in his pockets. Berkin was still carrying his gun in his hand. Let them once think about the barrels—

They straightened suddenly into an attitude of listening. Remington, too, found himself stiffening. There was a drumming echo from the cliff that paralleled the road; the echo of an automobile engine. Tanner cursed.

"That dame lied! Kate lied! They leaked like a sieve before we got to them. That stuff about Thurber's info being in Kate's safety deposit box was a stall. She wanted time till the banks opened tomorrow. She knew, damn her!"

"That'll be the bulls." Berkin was crouched.

"Sure it'll be the bulls. Nobody else would *drive* in here; anybody else would

sneak. Damn it, this place always was a weak spot!"

"We can— Hell! What are you doing, Chief?"

"Help me do it, you mugg! What we are going to have is a fire. This game's washed up. Dangerous."

Remington could hear the sizzling sputter now. Tanner was lighting long torches of rolled paper and hurling them into the highly inflammable cast-making materials as fast as they were ignited. Berkin was hopping around, taking no part in the fire-making.

"Hell!" he shouted. "That mightn't even be the cops. It might—"

"Makes no damned difference. This is one place they'll never connect up with me," Tanner said savagely.

Flames were leaping high now from a dozen places at once and the two men were racing for the stairs. Remington was getting the smoke inside the barrel, despite the fact that he had replaced the plug. He was feeling the heat, too.

"Time to go," he muttered.

THE thud of feet sounded as the two men ran ahead of the red destruction. As a door slammed, Remington threw back the barrel lid. No need for silence now.

The smoke hit him like a wall, and fingers of flame reached for him. Vincent Frost lay in the path of the flame and Remington leaped over his body as he ran for the stairs. If the murderer could have mounted those stairs, so could he—and he had no alternative. He was forced to beat at his clothes as he ran, to extinguish the small fires that started on the fabric. His lungs ached.

As his feet hit the steps, he gripped the gun in his shoulder holster. There might be a hot reception awaiting him upstairs; as hot as the situation he was leaving behind him. He could not come out stealthily, and if he went crashing into the presence of Tanner and Berkin, there would be a boom of guns. They would be remembering Vincent Frost. . . .

Well, Remington was remembering Ann Mercer, and he could shoot a little himself. If she were to get out of that doomed

mill, he'd have to get her out. He'd have to get Kate Hanlon out, too—and time was his enemy. The furnace behind him was roaring now and it would eat right up through the weather-rotted planks of this old place in a few minutes.

The heat was blistering his back through his clothes and there was a film before his eyes. He stumbled badly on the last few steps, and he was lurching as he pawed for the door. He got his gun into his hand and the door opened to his lunge. Sucked ahead by the suddenly created draught, the raging fire followed him.

There was no one in sight.

The roar of the fire that had filled his ears was behind him and he could hear again. The echo of the car engine still drummed from the cliff, but there was no thunder in it—it was being driven slowly. Stealth? He thought not. Any fool would appreciate the folly of attempting to drive into this place unnoticed, with that cliff there to betray. The road was so bad and so tricky that a good driver would take it carefully anyway. And the police would not depend upon stealth; they would know that the place was a *cul de sac*.

The fact that it was easy to defend against invaders had made the Cider Mill famous in the early days of Prohibition; the fact that it was tough to get out of had doomed it long before Prohibition had run its course.

Suddenly there was a starter whirr, the roar of another engine, and then the soft purr of a motor that is merely turning off; the soft meshing of gears.

Remington ran to the door. Headlights flashed on the high point of road that overlooked the Mill; then the invading car speeded on the down grade. The occupants, doubtless, had seen the flames. Almost in the same second, the big truck below the Mill came out; a heavy, square-nosed truck running without lights and picking up speed as it headed for the road down which the single car was charging.

REMYINGTON could picture the scene of less than a minute away. He could see green lights on the oncoming car. The police car either would not be able to

stop or it would stop only to run into battle. Either way, the cards were stacked.

The two men in the truck could leave it in a hurry and let it go careening on its way, with the ruts in the road to guide it—and the police car would come out second best in the game. Or in a shooting *mêlée*, it would be men behind a heavy engine and high radiator against men in a light car.

Remington had a mental picture, too, of Captain Dave McCall—bluff, hard-boiled, honest—riding in that car; could almost tell to a certainty why he was riding in it. Old Jake Hammond would have worried after giving Remington the dope on the Mill and pieced things together and reached his own conclusions. Then he would have called McCall and spilled it all to him.

Yes, it had probably been like that. And McCall was coming out here because Grover Remington had come out here.

Remington had his gun in his hand. He brought it up, steadied it. There was light of a sort. The fire threw dancing, lurid streaks of flame across the clearing, and the headlights of the racing police car shimmered a wavering path of light down the road.

Remington could see the open space to the back of the truck cabin, the two heads. As slowly and as casually as though he were preparing for a trick shot on a lighted stage, he brought the weapon down, his finger pressing steadily and evenly on the trigger.

The pistol cracked twice.

There was a shriek of brakes, a momentary roar from a suddenly accelerated engine and a human voice that was lost in the clattering bang of a truck that had jumped the road. A mad juggernaut, if whipped crosswise to the ruts, hit the crumbling edge of the dirt road and snorted into the ditch, spilling slowly over on its side.

Then behind Remington, and somewhere in the depths of the Cider Mill, a woman screamed; not a scream of fright or fear or hysteria, but a scream of agony, of sheer terror.

The echoes picked it up and threw it

around, but Remington did not wait for it to die away. He was in the Mill again, charging the stairs through the smoke.

Portrait of a Murderer

THE old Cider Mill was full of strange draughts, and the smoke climbed in straight pillars and in eccentric spirals. The stairs were dark with it, but it was traveling fast and the draughts behind it kept it thin. Remington was almost to the first landing before he was conscious of the man who was coming down. He slowed. Then the smoke eddied and he looked in eyes that were at once startled and relieved.

"Remington! Damn but I'm glad that it's you!"

Frederick Koler almost sobbed his relief. He had a gun in his hand, but his hand was shaking and his face gleamed whitely in the swirling smoke. Remington scarcely broke stride. His gun hand moved in perfect rhythm with the movement of his legs and Koler went down in a crumpled heap before he knew what hit him.

"Impolite, but effective. You'll keep till I get around to you." Remington's lips were hard.

He reached the second floor landing. It was a loft, rather than an upper floor. It had been used for storage, and it was not broken up into rooms. There was, however, a partition across a part of the space toward the rear. The air was comparatively clear back here, but thin streamers of smoke were curling up through the boards, supplementary to the billowing clouds that rolled up the stairs. It would not be habitable long.

There were two chairs and a table in the room which the partition made. In one of the chairs, the body of Big Kate Hanlon slumped. She was drenched with blood, and a small geyser still pumped feebly where her throat had been cut.

The other chair had been overturned, and Ann Mercer's feet were kicking in the air.

Remington crossed the room in a bound. It was too late—far too late—to do anything for Kate Hanlon, but he righted the chair to which Ann Mercer was bound.

She shook her head groggily and as the dazed look left her eyes, horror came back to them.

"She's dead, Ann. Don't look at her."

Remington was cutting the ropes that bound her. Ann's eyes met his. She flushed and her lips parted. "Grover. I knew it. I knew you'd find me." Her breath caught in a sob. "That man, he—"

"Never mind now." It was no time for a girl to re-live a scene such as the one she must have witnessed. He was helping her to her feet. "We've got to make a run for it, fast."

He stood between Ann and the horrible thing that had been Kate Hanlon. There was no necessity for pulse-taking and mirror tests. He threw his battered dinner jacket over the body and passed his gun to Ann.

"We'll find a man on the stairs going down," he said grimly. "He's been slapped around. Think that you can take care of him?"

Her face was dead white and her eyes distended, but there was a fighting set to her jaw and a certain firmness to her lips. She had printer's ink in her veins. Remington remembered that he had heard her kidded once about outshooting her father at the targets.

"I'm the only son he ever had."

Well, she was still the only son of Mike Mercer. The way that she took the gun from his hand told Remington all he wanted to know about her ability to handle the job that was hers. He bent over the chair to which Kate Hanlon had been bound.

IT would have been a heavy lift and a hard carry for a man more robust than Remington—and it was a full job for him. Only his mastery of mechanical principles enabled him to do it. He knew levers and lifts, and how to use them. With the girl leading the way, he made his way to the stairs.

The smoke was thicker now, and he rested his load at the head of the stairs. He rested it again after seven steps down. Frederick Koler was struggling to his feet on the ninth step down. Ann stepped into

him behind the gun Remington had given her.

"You can walk down quietly or stay here for keeps," she said grimly.

Koler half turned. Comprehension came back into his eyes and he gathered himself as though for a spring. Then he saw Remington with his ghastly burden, and the sight saved his life. The crouch and the spring went out of him as Ann's finger depressed the trigger. He was a split-second away from eternity, but he caught himself in time. Ann didn't shoot. He went down the stairs shambling, loose-jointed, afraid.

Remington rested his burden four times more and he lost the two figures ahead of him in the flame-swept, smoke-filled lower floor. His brain was swimming and there was a labored pumping in his lungs. He was muttering to himself, and something inside of him kept urging him to lay the burden aside and fight a way out for himself, while there was still time.

"It's only a corpse. Lay her down. Cremation is as decent as burial."

The voice dinned at him while his feet slowed and his arms became lead. He didn't dare to rest, because he could not have picked the load up again—and he needed a rest.

"She was square. She played square. . . ."

He was still mumbling when he plunged through the big doors and staggered down the worn stone steps. A uniformed copper grabbed him and the load was mysteriously gone. Just as mysteriously Ann Mercer's arms were around him and he was gulping great draughts of clean air into his lungs.

He lost track of time for a while, but there was new life in his brain. "I must see this through. I must!"

Ann was talking to him and he was moving toward the road, and somebody had shoved a wet towel or a wet shirt or something into his hands and he was mopping his face. He felt better. Koler was on the ground, passed out. That fact registered, and he felt himself coming back.

Then he saw the truck. There was a man lying in the shadow of it. Dave McCall and a cop in uniform crouched beside him, and there was a flashlight lying on

the ground, the light of it playing over a grim tableau.

The man in the shadow was Tanner. "I can't talk!" he moaned. "I can't talk while this thing is crushing the life out of me. Take it off!"

"We'll lift the truck when you give us a full confession—the men you killed and made wax works out of."

McCall's voice was harsh. The shock of what he was saying drove the last vestige of fog from the brain of Grover Remington. Murderer or not, Tanner was a human being, and physical torture such as this was too much. Remington took a long step forward, but the protest died on his lips as he came into the shadow of the truck. After all, Dave McCall usually knew what he was doing.

"Talk up, or you'll die under there!"

Tanner moaned. "Damn you, McCall—all right! We killed them, Berkin and Frost and I—mostly Frost. All those guys that came up in wax were our kills. Most of them for pay. We didn't know them even, but we had us a real racket. No corpse—no pinch—no trial."

"Who did you kill them for?"

Tanner moaned again. "Some of 'em we bumped because we wanted to—Duke and DaRigo and Loftus and Rillo and Taintor—and this guy Mercer. They wanted in or else they messed around too much, but—"

THERE was sweat on Tanner's face. The man in uniform had been taking it all down. "Let me out!" he yelled. "What the hell! Even a confession can't prove murder without a corpse. Ginsman will tell you that!"

"Sign what we've got, anyway." McCall's voice was gruff. "You see, Tanner, that truck isn't touching you anywhere. It fell on you and bounced. We've done all we could for you and you can never reach a hospital. You're going out."

"No!" It was a protesting, half hysterical cry that died at its top note. Tanner slumped like something that has been deflated, drawn empty. "What the hell!" he muttered.

He was reaching for the book. "I'll sign

it," he said, "if somebody will give me a drink."

Somebody did. McCall, having complied with the requirement that the signer of a death-bed confession must know that he is dying, reached inside his coat and produced a photographic print in an envelope. He took the print out and held it before Tanner's eyes.

"We can prove death, too," he growled. "Did you ever see that before?"

Tanner never had. When McCall's flashlight played over the picture of Mike Mercer's corpse, Tanner's breath was a sibilant whisper. He recognized it for what it was. His eyes bulged.

"The dirty, double-crossing—" His voice trailed off. "I'll tell you who paid for those kills, the guy that figured all this. He was—"

In his excitement he jerked erect and something inside of him let go. An incredulous expression swept into his eyes and he made a frantic grab at his chest.

He died on that gesture.

McCall clutched at him, but his hands found only the shell of what had been Carl Tanner. He knew it when he touched him. He cursed bitterly. "One more word," he said. "Maybe two. A name . . ."

Remington looked at him. "That name," he said, "is Koler, Frederick Koler."

"What?"

McCall lunged to his feet. There was a veritable eruption a few yards away. Koler had come to life suddenly and in the one flashing second as he turned, Remington became aware of the most grievous oversight in his life. He had knocked out Koler and he had had Ann capture him; but he had not had him disarmed. The cop on guard over him had grown careless, and Koler had laid the man out with a blow. McCall was out of position for the draw and that vicious-looking gun was cracking down on Grover Remington. Behind it were the blazing eyes of the man who claimed that he couldn't kill.

Another gun beat him to the shot. It cracked somewhere on Remington's left. Koler jerked to his toes, hit on his heels and went down. Remington turned as Mc-

Call and the other uniformed cop jumped for the fallen man.

Ann Mercer was standing with Remington's gun in her hand and a strange white look on her face. "I—killed him," she said. "I killed a man."

"Maybe not. If you did, it was a good job." Remington had reached her side now and it was his turn; his arm supporting her, instead of hers supporting him.

DOWNTOWN later, after the barrel of solid cement had been retrieved from the blazing cellar and found to contain the body of Mike Mercer as Remington had predicted that it would, the whole story came out. Koler had had a full set of corpse pictures in an envelope under his shirt—the evidence he had risked his life to get in returning to the Old Mill. Remington spread the pictures out on a long table in McCall's office. McCall himself sat across from Remington, as grimly uncompromising as ever.

There was, however, a bottle of brandy on the table and the two men were alone. It was excellent brandy. McCall had paid for it.

"I've been looking for a big-shot mortician for a long time," Remington said. "There simply *had* to be one masterminding the picture somewhere for the Ghost Trust. Some things were too pat, too well organized—and who knows more about the affairs of the recently dead than an undertaker? Who would be a richer gold mine for an organized ring of mediums?"

McCall growled deep in his throat, but had no answer for that one. Remington smiled.

"Koler got big. Very big. And fast. He was a good organizer, and the blackmail dough is rich cream in the medium racket. But some of the suckers were finding their nerve, and they were dangerous. Men who amass big fortunes usually have a backbone tucked away somewhere. When he had to get rid of a few troublesome ones, and found that murdering influential or wealthy people was too risky for hired hoods, Koler came up with the plasteline scheme—murder *without corpses*."

"But why the casts at all? He got rid

of the corpses by casing them in cement and having the barrels dumped in the river. He didn't need the fancy flourish!"

"Tanner wouldn't. Koler would. It appealed to his ego. And besides, it was a warning to the heirs that they'd better continue to pay for the covering up of family skeletons. Blackmail with teeth in it."

"And you just guessed all that?"

"Deduced is the word. I knew that there was such a thing as a Ghost Trust, and the rest dropped into place. Koler tipped his hand when he tried to convince me that he was a slave of a roughneck bozo like Tanner. It didn't go down—and he wasn't too convincing about it. He was too strong in spots for the weak rôle he said he was playing. And who would be a better suspect as a plasteline cast-maker than a mortician?"

"Okay, okay!" McCall took a quick drink. He grimaced sourly, and it was not because he did not like the taste of the brandy.

"Right. He was smart enough to know that the hoods he hired could use his scheme without him. He didn't want to end up in plasteline, and if he was pushed in the spot, he could tell them what he had, and he had a threat to hold over them — a vengeance to leave behind him. He was already trying to get rid of Tanner without letting things get that far."

McCall nodded. "He was giving Thurber the stuff that Thurber gave Mike Mercer."

"Yes—and if they grabbed Tanner and his gang on the numbers racket, that wouldn't hurt either Koler or the Ghost Trust. It was like that, McCall. Poor Kate didn't know anything, but she bluffed too much, and Koler thought she was dangerous to him. Thurber committed suicide when they grabbed him, so they never worked him over for anything. He cheated them."

Remington rose. McCall glanced at the small amount of brandy in the bottle.

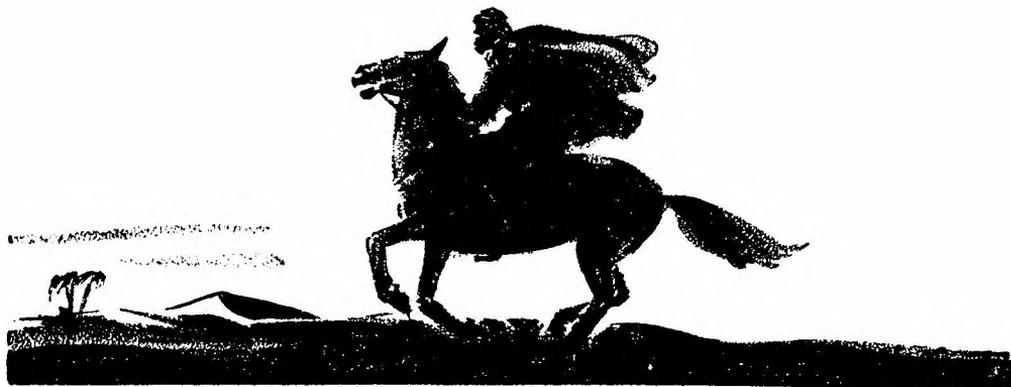
"Have a drink," he said.

Remington shook his head and the eyes of the two men met. McCall knew where Remington was going now. Ann Mercer had passed through the shock of losing her father; now she was faced with the ordeal of having found him. Her last hope was gone. Mike Mercer was dead. Koler, the man she had shot, would face the chair.

Remington's shoulder twitched. His hand dipped into his pocket and he tossed something that looked like a watch on the table before McCall. He was thinking of the last time he had taken that phony watch from his pocket—in the apartment of Frederick Koler.

"You might save that drink for Joe Caruso, our cameraman," he said, "and give him back his watch camera. I didn't get a picture of Big Kate for him, but if I understood how to work the thing, there should be a picture in there of a murderer trying to make a sap out of Grover Remington."

(The End)



SABERS FOR THE KING

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS



The Beginning of a Quest

THERE was going to be another quarrel with his father—Paul had not the slightest doubt of that. On the basis of his past experiences, he had reason to expect that the quarrel would be a good one. Anton Reisling did everything on a

big scale, even to fighting with his son. Well, Paul was ready for it. Today in particular, he was not in any mood to let his father walk all over him.

Outside the big Reisling mansion on upper Fifth Avenue, Paul paused for a few minutes to collect his thoughts. He shouldn't have had so many cocktails be-

Paul Reising, setting out on a crusade of justice, becomes embroiled in a nation's battle to preserve itself and its long tradition of freedom



"So you would attack a foreigner, a visitor to our country? Come on, then, if you are so eager for the smell of blood!"

fore going to that meeting last night. He'd been on the ragged edge when the trouble started, but there was no help for that now. At least he was in no way at fault, and he felt that his conscience was clear as he

squared his shoulders and began to climb the front stoop.

Old Hodges, the aging butler who had been only second footman when Paul was young, opened the door to him. Hodges'

wide face was as expressionless as ever, but his eyes held a look of alarm.

"Your father would like to see you at once in his study, sir," he said. Paul sighed, wishing his head did not ache quite so badly.

"Thank you, Hodges. Is he—excited?"

Hodges looked very sober.

"I'd say he is definitely perturbed, sir. He left word that you were to see him the instant you came in."

"Better leave my coat and hat close by the door," Paul said flippantly.

A minute later the two Reislings, father and son, were facing each other across a big desk in the book-lined study. The resemblance between them was remarkable. Each was broad-shouldered and big-boned, with a wide face and generous mouth. They had the same alert gray eyes that could be very hard on occasion, and the heavy eyebrows that were a family characteristic. They only differed in the fact that Paul's hair was coal black in contrast to his father's heavy gray thatch, and that the elder Reisling was some thirty pounds heavier.

At last Anton Reisling spoke. His deep voice was heavy with anger, although his words came slowly, and his mouth bore those grim lines of intolerance which were characteristic of him in his moments of anger.

"Would you prefer China or Australia?" he said.

Paul stared at him rather blankly. He was accustomed to his father's abruptness, but at the moment he didn't get the point at all.

"China!" he repeated.

"Yes. Or India. Or South Africa. Or any other damn place that's a long way from here!" The storm clouds of repressed anger were gathering quickly now. Anton Reisling's voice ended in a deep bellow. "I've been reading the papers. Look at that!"

A MORNING paper went sliding across the desk as he tossed it down on the polished wood. Paul glanced at it only momentarily. He did not need to read the article, for he already knew it by heart:

MANY HURT AT SOCIALIST RIOT SON OF FINANCIER ARRESTED

Among the thirty men and women arrested after the sanguinary riot that followed a socialist meeting in Artizan's Hall last night was Paul Reisling, son of the noted copper magnate. Charged with being drunk and disorderly, young Reisling was arraigned before Magistrate—

The thing went on at some length, and it really made the whole affair sound worse than it had been. Paul could understand how it annoyed his father, coming as it did as the climax of several other rash escapades. He opened his mouth to explain, but before he could speak his father burst out with a rush of words.

"This is the end, young man! Do you take me for an old fool? You've brought enough notoriety on the name of Reisling. Go off and take a trip somewhere, anywhere, but keep away from here until you've learned a little sense. Furthermore—"

There was a lot more of it, all in the same vein. Anton Reisling was a master of restrained invective, and on this occasion he really let himself go. When at last he paused for breath, red-faced and panting, his son leaned across the desk toward him.

"Just wait a minute before you say any more!"

Paul was white to the lips, actually quivering with anger. He had his father's hot temper, and the devil's own pride, and this time something seemed to have snapped within him. His voice was low and grating, but its very tautness should have served as a warning to the older man.

"As I would have told you before, if you'd given me the chance, I wasn't taking any part in the trouble last night. I was present, and I happened to have been drinking, but that was all. Some fool policeman simply grabbed me because I was near the door. You talk of my going away—just say the word and I'll leave this house at once! Forever!"

That was where the quarrel really should

have ended. Paul was twenty-two and his own master, and at that point his father should have become a little more conciliatory. Probably the old man realized that this time he had gone too far, for he hesitated, but a lifetime of dominating men made it hard for Anton Reisling to compromise on anything.

"Bah!" he said explosively. "You talk like a child! Try anything of that sort and I'll cut you off without a penny."

"So you still think that your money is the solution to everything!" Paul's lips twisted in a sardonic smile. The first heat of his anger had left him, but he was very bitter. "Keep your money. I wouldn't touch any of it with a ten-foot pole. You made it by exploiting Monrovia, by grinding it out of the life-blood of a lot of helpless peasants, and I wouldn't want it anyway. I think I *will* go on a trip. Good-bye!"

Spinning on his heel, Paul stalked from the room. His feet went clattering swiftly down the stairs, the outer door slammed loudly. For a long time Anton Reisling sat motionless where the younger man had left him. Then he rang for the butler.

"Hodges," he said quietly, "did my son go out?"

"Yes, Mr. Reisling." The butler's voice was unsteady. "He—he said he would not be back."

"So he said that! I have a feeling that he means it." Old Anton mused a moment. Then, strangely, he laughed. "Hodges, the boy has spirit. Damned if I don't admire him for it!"

STRIDING swiftly down the avenue with a sublime disregard of the danger of colliding with more leisurely pedestrians, Paul was carried along by the impetus of his anger. He was glad that he had delivered his ultimatum to his father, that he had carried the fight through to the finish. Of course he had been right!

As his emotions finally began to cool, he slowed to a more leisurely pace, and again became aware of the fact that his head ached. He entered the nearest bar in search of a pick-me-up. Seated alone at a small table, staring down at the latter

half of a tall drink that was very soothing, he began to take stock of the situation in which he now found himself.

He tried to be honest with himself, and saw that he'd been a fool. He might as well admit it. His father had had every right to be angry, and if Paul had only let the old man blow off enough steam, the whole tempest would have subsided and blown over.

Well, all that was spilt milk. He wouldn't go back. He had been wrong, but he had too much pride to go back and crawl. He was now completely on his own, and he might as well decide what to do about it. Fortunately he had a little money of his own, inherited from his mother, and would be able to get along after a fashion.

In that moment a sudden resolve came to Paul Reisling. He knew now what he would do, and how he would try to justify himself to both the world and his own conscience. He would go to Monrovia.

There had once been a time, back in the turbulent period at the close of the Middle Ages, when the little Central European kingdom of Monrovia had been an influential state. Its feudal barons had been wealthy and powerful, its neighbors were not strong enough to be dangerous. Then changing European conditions had relegated Monrovia to the status of a minor nation, but at least it had retained its independence. The Red Lion flag of the ancient Monrovia kings still flew over the Tarrenberg Palace.

Some three generations before the present, a Monrovia farmer named Johann Reisling had emigrated to America. The family fortunes had remained modest until his grandson Anton had started an American company to develop the newly discovered Monrovia copper mines, and built a vast fortune.

Therein lay the reason for Paul's scorn of his father's wealth, and therein also lay the inspiration for his present resolve. Hadn't his father exploited the little kingdom shamelessly for his own benefit? Wasn't his case frequently mentioned by socialists as a typical example of the selfish workings of the capitalist octopus? Paul's disdain for his father's riches was sincere.

Well—he could do something constructive about it. He would go to Monrovia and try to undo some of the harm that his family had done that country, that country's people!

In the course of the next few days Paul told a number of his friends what he had decided to do. The response was a little disappointing. They either said that he was hopelessly quixotic and should simply stick around New York, or else they agreed that his idea was splendid and then quickly changed the subject.

Paul finally found real support in Ivar Moroni, a casual acquaintance he chanced to meet one day along Hudson Street. Moroni was a professional proletarian of the type who make a practice of wearing work shirts and keeping their ties loose. At the start of Paul's recital of his plans, Moroni had seemed disinterested, but then a slow flame began to smolder in his eyes.

"Your idea is good," he said at the end. "Splendid. I can even help you. There is in Monrovia a secret organization of patriots called the Blackbirds. They work to free their country from foreign domination of its natural resources, and I am sure they would welcome you. I will write out an address and some directions. Look them up when you get there—perhaps they can show you a little excitement!"

A Girl of Monrovia

PAUL was pleasantly excited as he leaned against the rail of the steamer *Polonic* a few days later and watched the skyline of New York fall away behind him. He had fairly embarked on his quest. The idea of journeying to Monrovia to undo some of the wrongs his father had done that country in exploiting it might be hopelessly quixotic, but he was determined to do it. It was a concession to his conscience, an attempt to justify himself in this complex modern world. At the same time, he was honest enough to admit that a lot of its attractiveness was the glamor and romance that the expedition promised.

Monrovia! To most Americans the word was nothing more than a name, the designation of a minor and unimportant

European country that played little part in the world's affairs. To Paul it was the home of his ancestors, the picturesque and often turbulent little country that had been a childhood legend to him. Ancient forests and patchwork fields . . . sleepy thatched villages drowsing in the sun . . . battlemented castles frowning above the still waters of miniature lakes—the picture had always seemed to him the epitome of all that old-world graciousness that more modern countries lacked.

Of course, Paul reflected with self-derision, he was an incurable romanticist. He would probably be bitterly disappointed when he actually reached Monrovia, and would find it a grubby and uninteresting place that would make him long to be back in New York. Well, there was no use anticipating disillusionment. For the present, there was something romantically appealing in this return to the land of his forefathers.

Turning around with his back against the rail, Paul surveyed his fellow passengers. Most of them had that faintly self-conscious look that all passengers seem to have for the first few hours after sailing. Then his eye was caught by a girl walking slowly down the deck toward him.

Paul certainly did not believe in love at first sight, but he had to admit that this girl not only was one of the loveliest he had ever seen, but also had piquant attractiveness that did something strange to his emotions. He watched her, wishing he could know her. Then, just as she came abreast of him, she twisted her ankle and stumbled.

She threw out one arm to steady herself. A heavy, middle-aged, foreign-looking man who had been walking just behind her, leaped forward with an oath. Paul beat him to the rescue by several inches. He caught the girl's arm just in time to keep her from falling.

"That was a close escape," he said, smiling.

"Thank you." Her voice was low and musical, and with just a trace of some foreign accent.

She was, Paul noticed, slender without appearing either thin or frail. Her dark

tailored suit was very plain, the top of her small hat came a little above his shoulder. Masses of coal black hair were tightly coiled at the back of her neck. Her cool thanks had somehow the air of a dismissal, but Paul had no intention of being put off so easily.

"Look here," he said impulsively. "Wouldn't you like to come back to the smoking room and have a cocktail or something? Fellow passengers, y' know—"

Dark eyes smiled at him in sudden friendliness.

"Really," she said, "you Americans are very direct, are you not? Shall we go?"

They turned aft, toward the smoking room. The heavy man who had been following her, and who had been glaring balefully at Paul ever since he caught the girl's arm, suddenly stepped up and said something in a low voice. Paul could not catch the words, but he did hear the girl's brief and somehow imperious reply.

"*Gut, Heinrich!*"

NOT many of the passengers had yet learned their way around the vessel, and there were very few people in the smoking room. Paul led his companion to a secluded corner table, ordered two cocktails from the steward, and then held out his cigarette case. After a quiet glance around, the girl threw back the heavily figured mesh veil which hung low from the brim of her small hat.

"This is a pleasant place," she said. "I think I like it the best on the ship."

"I always haunt the smoking room when I'm at sea," he said.

He was still looking at her veil, now thrown back from her face. It was a chic and fashionable thing, but at the same time it gave quite a bit of concealment against observers more than a few feet away. He wondered if she could be wearing it for that reason. Then he dismissed the idea as just one more result of the romanticism that had gripped him ever since boarding the steamer.

"Are you getting off at Southampton?" he asked.

"No, I am going further along," she answered. Her faint, entirely charming ac-

cent delighted him, but he wondered at a noticeable restraint in her manner. She seemed to hesitate each time she answered one of his questions, as though weighing her words carefully. Probably that was simply a matter of background and upbringing. The girl was obviously a European, and he had very likely outraged all her national customs and traditions by making her acquaintance in this informal manner.

"I'm going as far as Bremerhaven myself," he said. "My name is Paul Brown."

Before sailing, Paul had decided that he would travel incognito until he reached the borders of Monrovia. The name of Reisling was well known, and he wanted no publicity until he had actually reached his destination.

"Won't you tell me *your* name?" he asked.

"It is—Alicia Baden."

She had hesitated so long that time that he had wondered if she was going to answer at all. There was something mysterious about this girl. She was not bashful or shy, in fact he suspected that she was a very self-possessed person of about his own age, but she was certainly on her guard. The hint of mystery intrigued him, but he knew better than to try to force it now. He was careful to make his next question very casual.

"You're not an American, of course. Do you mind telling me what country you do come from?"

"I am a Monroviaan."

She made the statement firmly and proudly, and for an instant her eyes seemed to be looking into far distances. Paul slowly set down his glass.

"That's interesting," he said. "I—I am planning to visit Monrovia myself. Tell me something about it."

"Ours is a small country, my friend," she said, "but we of Monrovia love it with a passion few foreigners can appreciate. You ask me to tell you something about it! If you want dry facts on exports or finances, I do not know them. But I can tell you of how the smoky crests of the mountains appear from the ancient walls of Tarrenberg. I can tell you the age-old

folk tales of our people, or the legends that have come down from the days when the Red Lions of Monrovia dominated most of Middle Europe. . . ."

Paul saw that he had broken down her reserve at last, even though on an impersonal topic. For an hour they talked, and by the end of that time they seemed in some subtle way to be friends, instead of merely chance acquaintances. At last she looked at her wrist-watch.

"It is later than I thought," she said, again drawing down her veil. "This has been most pleasant. I hope I see you again."

"You can't avoid it, unless you get off the ship and swim!" Paul laughed, but then he caught sight of the stocky man silently watching him through one of the windows that led out to the deck. "Look here, is that heavy lad with the walrus mustache who was behind you on deck some kind of watch-dog or something? He's watching us through that window."

"Heinrich? He's an old servant of the family. Very faithful."

"Well, tell him I'm quite harmless," Paul said irritably. "By the way, will I see you in the dining saloon at dinner?"

"No—I shall dine in my room."

"Then may I see you afterward?"

She hesitated.

"I shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Never mind, you wouldn't understand. But I will see you on deck outside this room about eight-thirty."

PAUL found her leaning against the rail, a slender figure in white satin. Some loosened strands of dark hair formed a cobweb of shadows against her cheek. She smiled at him and slipped her hand through his arm.

"Shall we go up toward the bow? The deck is less crowded there."

Neither of them spoke as they moved forward, till they found a place where they could look out over the water and yet were secluded in the shadow of one of the ship's boats. The salt wind was in their faces, the seas were all about them. Moonlight touched the myriad wave crests with a sil-

ver magic, and on the far horizon some banks of clouds were elfin mountains against the moonlit sky.

Paul felt utterly content. He hardly knew this girl at all, he really had no idea what kind of person she might be, but somehow this seemed to be one of those golden interludes which occasionally come to all men. Softly he quoted:

*"The King forgot his throne,
The shepherdess left her flocks,
And they sailed away in a misty
dawn. . . ."*

The girl half turned to face him. The single jewel at her throat gleamed in the moonlight.

"What made you quote that?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. There's romance and adventure in the wind tonight."

"That's what I told my—my companion, when she almost went into hysterics trying to persuade me not to come out on deck with you tonight."

"Just what is all this mystery about you, anyway?" he asked.

She hesitated a long moment, fingering the thin chain at her throat. In the dim light she looked very youthful, though her eyes were somber. At last she came to a decision.

"Paul, let us understand each other. You are a—well, I like you. We can be friends, if you like, while this voyage lasts—but it must end there. There are reasons why there could never be anything more than that between us, why our friendship must end when we leave this ship. Do not ask me any more, for I cannot tell you. You must take me as you find me. If you want my friendship on that basis, so be it."

At the Sign of the Gilded Horse

STANDING on deck as the *Polonic* steamed up the broad and muddy Weser River into Bremerhaven, Paul Reisling was determined upon one thing. He was not going to let Alicia Baden go out of his life as completely and abruptly as seemed to be her intention. His resolution was due to piqued curiosity and outraged pride more than anything else, for

he certainly was not in love with her. Their relationship had been one of friendly comradeship and nothing more.

The mystery that seemed to surround her was as impenetrable as ever. There was certainly something queer about her background. Her traveling companions watched her very closely, she herself avoided the more populous parts of the boat and would never go in to dance. In the daytime she invariably wore a veil. Those filmy meshes were apparently a chic part of the formal sort of ensemble she always wore, but there was no doubt in Paul's mind that she wore them for the concealment they gave. Alicia Baden was certainly anxious to avoid being recognized by somebody.

It took Paul only two minutes after the *Polonic* had docked to discover that Alicia Baden had eluded him. The staterooms that she and her companions had occupied were empty. The cockney steward who loafed in the corridor denied any knowledge of how they could have left the steamer so quickly. There was a sort of half amused smirk on his face as he spoke, and Paul had a feeling that the man was lying, but he could get no information. The steward must have been well paid to keep silent. Paul shrugged and went ashore.

There could be no doubt that Alicia had deliberately avoided him at the end. Paul's pride was hurt, but he told himself that it did not matter otherwise. It was certainly consistent with the air of mystery that had surrounded her all along.

The railroad journey inland from the seaport, crossing several countries in a time that seemed very short to one accustomed to the wider distances in the States, was interesting. Paul had never been in Europe before, and every mile brought new sensations. When the train reached the Monrovia border, he picked up his bags and alighted.

JUST behind him, at the very edge of the station, was a line of black and white posts that marked the boundary between the two countries. A score of soldiers stood on guard, wearing smart green uniforms with the Red Lion crest on their caps.

Several officers bustled up to Paul and the half dozen other passengers who had left the train. Above a striped sentry box, beyond the highroad that paralleled the track, waved a white flag with three rampant red lions—the ancient flag of Monrovia. Paul felt a thrill at sight of this emblem that had been so dear to his ancestors.

The little border town of Gröeken was not at all an important place in Monrovia, but Paul decided that it would be an ideal starting point for his plans. He wanted to know the country and the people as thoroughly and rapidly as possible. Not till then could he do anything effective about remedying the evil effects of his father's exploitation.

Standing there in the early spring sunshine, on the platform of the little border station, Paul filled his lungs deeply with the clean country air. He felt curiously contented.

The tracks and the highroad wound away into the distance, through rolling farm lands cut up into a patchwork of small fields. Thatched cottages, with white-washed walls and gaily painted shutters, stood here and there along the lanes. Just across the road were the red roofs of Gröeken, and in the dim distance were the purple slopes of mountains. A dray piled high with produce rolled leisurely along the road behind a pair of sturdy farm horses.

Two officers came up to him, greeting him with crisp salutes and a courteous "*Guten morgen!*" One began to go through his baggage, the other took his passport. He examined the visa from the Monrovia consulate, nodded, and then started to read the face of the passport. His eyebrows lifted as he read the name, and he glanced up sharply.

"Herr Paul Reisling, eh? Are you—you are the son of the famous Anton Reisling?"

His voice rang out loudly, and several passersby paused to listen. They were mostly peasants; men in rough shirts and hobnailed boots, women or girls in aprons and blouses, with kerchiefs tied over their heads. Now that he was actually in Monrovia, there was no point in Paul's attempting to hide his identity. He nodded, and the officer beamed.

"You are doubly welcome, *mein Herr*. Monrovia is glad to receive a visit from the son of her distinguished benefactor."

Paul made some polite reply, but his smile was a little sardonic. It was only natural for an army officer, a representative of the ruling class, to extend a cordial greeting to the son of Anton Reisling. He wondered how the peasants—the masses—would feel about him. He glanced at the dozen bystanders who had halted within hearing, and immediately received confirmation of what he had expected.

On most of those broad, red-cheeked peasant faces there was no expression other than polite curiosity. They might be thinking all sorts of things, but they preferred not to show it. One red-haired girl did seem both surprised and nervous, fingering the knot of her head-kerchief where it was tied under her chin, but the others were almost lethargic. Then Paul's glance fell on a thin, swarthy man in a smith's apron who stood on the fringe of the group.

On the smith's lean countenance was an expression of violent and malignant hatred. He gripped his wide belt with both gnarled hands, and his hot eyes bored into the young American's face with a baleful glare. Paul suddenly felt himself begin to perspire. If *that* was the way Monrovia was going to regard him, he might have trouble in convincing these people that he had come as their friend and savior.

An instant later the dour blacksmith had turned and stalked away, but first he spat against the curb in what could only be interpreted as a gesture of profound contempt. Paul sighed with relief. The blacksmith had looked like a fanatic, and it would never do to start his Monrovia visit with a fight.

Once the customs formalities were finished, Paul picked up his bag and started across the tracks into Gröeken. A ragged urchin offered to carry his luggage, but Paul tossed him a copper and smilingly waved him aside. This was just the way he had planned to enter Monrovia—on foot, leisurely, and alone. The other pedestrians scarcely glanced at him. There was no sign of the ill-featured blacksmith.

For the first time it occurred to Paul

that perhaps there was something more to that incident, some cause other than the fact that he happened to be the son of Anton Reisling.

THE central square of Gröeken was as drowsy and ancient as the nation itself. Except for a shiny, incongruous gasoline filling pump in front of one of the buildings, it did not look as though it had changed a bit in the last two or three centuries. Large and irregular cobbles filled the plaza, stray grass and weeds grew up between them. The buildings around the square had high-pointed roofs and myriad chimneys; the upper stories projected out over the street. The window-panes were small and thick. The mass of buildings completely surrounded the square, so that the streets entered through archways. A dozen horses were tied to hitching posts, and one battered automobile was parked in a far corner.

One of the ancient stone buildings was obviously a tavern of some sort. A few iron tables stood outside, and above the door was a tarnished sign of a gilded horse. Paul carried his bags inside, to the big taproom, where barrels of wine stood about and there were half a dozen trestle tables. It was cool and pleasant here, beneath the raftered ceiling, and Paul felt as though he had been transported far back into history.

"I should have a plumed hat and a sword to fit into this place!" he thought.

The proprietor was a fat, bald man who wore a long white apron and spoke in what he evidently believed was English. He greeted Paul with oily cordiality.

"Honored to have you for guest, *mein Herr!* Honored very much. You want room, to stay while? *Schr gut!* I take the bags. Come. Got good rooms, all right."

The room, up under the pointed eaves, was small but clean. Sounds of occasional traffic in the little plaza drifted in the open windows. Paul opened his bags, then suddenly realized that he was very hungry and went downstairs. The taproom was empty. He sat down at one of the tables and rapped for service.

A peasant girl and the rotund landlord entered at the same moment from differ-

ent doors. The man moved off behind the small bar across the room, the girl came up to take Paul's order. She was the same red-haired girl he had seen at the station. On her head she wore a blue silk kerchief, knotted under her chin in peasant fashion, and against the dark cloth her face seemed unnaturally pale. She took his order without a word, glancing across the room at the landlord, but her worried eyes seemed to hold a silent warning.

When she had gone, Paul thought a minute and then shrugged. It must have been imagination. A peasant waitress in an inn of a small Monrovia village could not possibly be warning him.

A minute later the girl came back to set the table. Behind him Paul heard some newcomer talking to the proprietor in low and hasty tones, but he did not turn around. The girl bent over to set the table, her face close to Paul's head.

"You must leave this place, *Herr* Reisling. You must go at once!"

Her words came in a voice so low that it scarcely reached his ears, but he knew that he had heard correctly. He stared at her in amazement, but she seemed intent on her task.

"What do you mean?" he said, instinctively speaking in a whisper. The girl put her finger to her lips.

"Shhh! Do not let them hear you. Go—go at once! It is not safe for you here."

She appeared about to say more, but Paul suddenly heard an oath behind him and then the sound of heavy footsteps. The girl vanished toward the kitchen, and a moment later Paul looked up to face the innkeeper. His wide face was fiery red. He looked as though he were near the bursting point.

"Get out of *mein* inn at once!" he shouted.

PAUL slowly rose to his feet. Across the room he saw the saturnine blacksmith, leaning on the bar and staring at him with a sneering smile. The innkeeper burst out in a volley of profanity, and Paul held up his hand.

"Wait a minute! I don't know what you are talking about."

"No? I have just learned you are the son of that *schweinhund* Anton Reisling—the man who robbed Monrovia of her wealth! We want none of your breed."

"But you don't understand!" Paul tried to be conciliatory. "I do not agree with my father's policies. I want to help you."

"You take me for a fool?" The innkeeper's face was turning from red to purple. "Get out—quick!"

Paul shrugged and turned to the stairs. The man was excited beyond reason, and it was useless to try to argue. This high-minded expedition to Monrovia was scarcely starting out the way he had planned! He went up to his room, packed his bags, and carried them downstairs.

When he returned, the taproom was full. A score of peasants were clustered there, while the blacksmith stood on a table and harangued them. A low, sullen murmur came from the mob as Paul appeared. It was somehow ominous. There was no free path to the door. The swift flow of excited German, common language in Monrovia, was too fast for Paul's superficial knowledge of the language, but there was no mistaking the intent of the blacksmith's shouted phrases.

Paul tried to push through to the outer door, but a burly peasant shoved him back so hard he crashed into a table and nearly fell. Something happened in Paul's mind at that moment. He forgot that he had come as a friend to these same men, that he agreed with the very motives that led them to attack him. He only knew that he was being unjustly attacked, and all the fighting blood of the Reislings came to the fore. Dropping his bags, he backed into a corner.

"Come on, you fools! If you want a fight I'll give you one!"

An angry mutter greeted him, the mob seemed to poise for an attack. Knives gleamed in their midst. Paul went a little cold. Was he to die here, in a barroom brawl in a little border town? Well—there was no help for it now. He braced himself for the attack—and then came a sudden diversion.

A newcomer entered, a man who strolled casually in from the street but took in the

situation at a glance. The sullen crowd was suddenly split asunder and another man took his place at Paul's side. He was an officer of the Royal Lancers, resplendent in his blue and gold uniform, his polished helmet gleaming even in the dim light of the taproom. There was a whistle of steel as he drew his saber and then rested its point on the floor.

"What is this, a convention?" he asked, his voice gentle and rather amused, yet somehow deadly. "So you would attack a foreigner, a visitor to our country? Come on then, if you are so eager for the smell of blood! My sword is ready. You know me, Gustav! And you, Wilhelm! I am Fritz von Carpen, of His Majesty's Lancers!"

Royal Invitation

THE mob immediately lost most of its enthusiasm. Those in the back of the room slipped out into the street, those nearest Paul and von Carpen hastily put away their knives. The ready steel of the young cavalry officer seemed to turn them from a rampant mob into merely a collection of surly villagers. Then they were all gone, and only the innkeeper himself remained. Fritz von Carpen sent his saber ringing back into the scabbard and turned to Paul with a wry smile.

"An unpleasant introduction to Monrovia, *mein Herr*. But please do not hold it too heavily against us. Such incidents are few." Then he spun around to face the now frightened landlord. "Mark you, Gustav, one more affair of this sort and you'll cool your heels in the dungeons of Tarrenberg Castle. We have been watching your place here, and it does not please us."

The innkeeper shrugged his fat shoulders and made some grudging though conciliatory reply. Von Carpen turned to Paul.

"I must make a report of this incident, sir. Would you tell me your name?"

"Reisling."

"Paul Reisling? *Donnerwetter!* I am doubly glad that I came when I did, before that pack of jackals had harmed you. I

was searching for you when I came here to the Gilded Horse."

"You were looking for *me?*" Paul asked. Von Carpen nodded, and clicked his booted heels together.

"*Ja!* Your arrival in Monrovia was reported by the border officials, *Herr* Reisling. I now bear an urgent invitation from His Majesty King Ludwig that you come to Tarrenberg and be his guest at the palace."

Paul hesitated, rubbing his chin and trying not to laugh. There was humor in the situation, and the idea appealed to him. Captain Fritz von Carpen was a very forthright and likable man. His smile was friendly and infectious. The two of them were about the same age, and Paul could think of no better guide for his further explorations of Monrovia.

Yet the whole situation was shot through with irony. Paul had come to Monrovia as a friend of the common people and an enemy of the ruling class, but in his first encounter with the downtrodden peasantry he had nearly been mobbed by them. Now he had received an urgent personal invitation from Ludwig VII, King of Monrovia! It was a queer world.

Well, he might as well go to Tarrenberg. His introduction to Monrovia had not been very happy so far, and it was possible that his approach had been wrong. Moreover, it would be a serious affront to decline the royal invitation, and it might easily cripple his chances of accomplishing anything in the country.

"I'll be glad to go," he said.

Von Carpen smiled.

"Good. I have a military car here and we can start for Tarrenberg at once. It will be pleasanter than traveling to the city by train."

They rode away from Gröeken in a modern touring car that was painted olive drab and bore a military number. A carbineer sat beside the uniformed chauffeur. Paul and von Carpen rode in the tonneau. The young American glanced at the two armed men in the front seat.

"Is all that really necessary?" he said.

"The guard? Probably not." Von Carpen twisted his pointed mustache and



The Baron didn't seem at all pleased. His pale eyes were cold. An instant later he led Alicia away.

shrugged the matter off. "This happens to be a military car, and the regulations call for two men in such cases, that's all."

They drove out of the public square, through one of the ancient and mildewed arches. A flock of geese scattered before them. A peasant farmer pulled his two-

wheeled cart to one side of the road and gave them a cheery greeting. Somehow that little incident helped Paul's morale. He was glad to see that not all the people of Monrovia were as sullen as the dour landlord of the Gilded Horse and the malignant blacksmith of Gröeken.

PAUL REISLING was never to forget that ride to Tarrenberg, a pleasant interlude before a time of trouble and excitement. They rolled at good speed along a military highroad, through smiling fields or drowsy hamlets. Most of the way their road wound through hedges bright with spring. Fritz von Carpen's comments on points of local interest were entertaining, and before Gröeken lay ten leagues behind them the two young men were fast friends.

With each passing mile the mountains ahead came nearer, their purple slopes more plain. Sometimes the road passed through forests, where tall old trees shut out the sky and there was little underbrush, and moss grew thick in the fragrant shadows. Once they came to a blue lake in the heart of such a forest, and on a peninsula in the water stood a stone-walled castle. Von Carpen glanced briefly at the silent ramparts as they passed.

"That is the *Schloss Drachen*," he said. "The Dragon Castle." There was a certain hardness in his voice. He had lost his smile, and his usually mobile face was expressionless.

"Who owns the place?" Paul asked curiously.

"The castle belongs to Baron Schwartzwald. He is—one of the privy councillors, and a great power in Monrovia."

"And you don't like him," Paul said with a smile.

Fritz glanced at him hastily. "Why do you say that? Who am I, a mere captain in the Lancers, to dislike a privy councillor? I have too much sense."

"But not enough acting ability," Paul retorted, still smiling. "You're not deceiving me."

After a while they were in the foothills, with the road gradually rising. The air seemed to grow cooler. Twice they passed cavalry patrols who saluted von Carpen's uniform and let them through. At last they spun around a bend, and some three leagues away across a valley they saw the many roofs of a city. A twin-towered cathedral and a vast castle towered above the lesser buildings. Fritz lifted his arm.

"Tarrenberg—the city and the palace," he said with almost boyish pride. "The

ancient home of the kings of Monrovia."

The car plunged into the woods again, a particularly dense patch, and an instant later the car skidded violently, with a shrill squeal of brakes. The road ahead was blocked by a gigantic fallen tree! At the same instant Paul saw the jagged stump that showed the tree had been felled by axes. This was no accident!

FRITZ VON CARPEN said something savage under his breath and his right hand closed on the butt of his revolver. Then he leaned toward the chauffeur.

"Don't stop!" he shouted. "Swing around and keep going! There is room enough between the trees."

As the car swerved sharply to the left, flinging Paul violently against the side of the tonneau, half a dozen spits of flame darted out from behind tree trunks or bushes. The woods were full of armed men. Bullets ripped through the air, the crash of the discharges was loud in the stillness.

Several bullets smashed into the metal body of the car. Three or four neat round holes appeared in the shatter-proof glass of the windshield. Both von Carpen and the carbineer were firing steadily, and the reek of smokeless powder was strong in Paul's nostrils. A bearded peasant with a smoking rifle collapsed against a tree trunk as they passed. Another—startled by the unexpected swerving of the car he had expected to stop—failed to get out the way in time and was sent spinning by one of the mud-guards. Then the car was back on the road and beyond the ambush, roaring away at top speed, while a few last, wild shots rang out behind.

Fritz swore softly, and began to reload the cylinder of his revolver. Paul relaxed and leaned back. The whole affray had taken place in so few seconds that he really could not tell whether he had been frightened or not.

"Quiet little place—Monrovia!" he said with a twitch of his lips. Von Carpen met his glance with worried eyes.

"I am terribly sorry that this happened, my friend," he said. "I did not think that the news of our coming would have been

able to travel ahead of us so fast. Please do not think that such incidents are common in this country. It simply happens that at this time there is a disorderly, out-law element that is giving us a good deal of trouble."

"Do you mean the Blackbirds?"

"What do *you* know about them?"

Fritz's tone was so sharp that Paul felt his face flushing. That had been a slip! He shrugged.

"I heard something of them back in the States. Some political group, I believe."

"Well, you might call them that."

Fritz's brief moment of suspicion seemed to have passed. "However, most of the ringleaders are foreign-born. The leader is a Czech named Gugolz, who is really little more than what you Americans would call a political racketeer. He is a hunchback, by the way."

"Hunchback? Lean and dark, with a swarthy face?" Paul asked.

Fritz nodded.

"Then I guess I saw him in Gröeken, posing as a blacksmith. In fact, I would say that he was really behind the attack upon me in the inn."

"I wouldn't be surprised. *Donnerwetter*, I wish you had told me about him earlier! There was no such man in the Gilded Horse when I came in—I'll swear to that—but it would be like Gugolz to start something and then slip away. I would have searched the town for him! Well, it's too late now."

It was nearing twilight when the car actually rolled onto the streets of the city. Tarrenberg appeared to be a place of contrasts. Some of the buildings were as old and picturesque as those Paul had seen in Gröeken, others were modern. All the hospitals, schools and similar public utilities were of the newer group. Yet the modern and the ancient structures harmonized so well together that the general effect was uniform and pleasing. It was evident that whoever had supervised the rebuilding of Tarrenberg had been a man of taste and judgment.

The car at last came to a stop in a paved court forming part of the rambling old Tarrenberg Castle. Iron gates swung open

to admit them, and though the faces of the sentries maintained a disciplined impassivity, Paul could see them staring at the bullet holes in the car. Then a gaily uniformed majordomo met him, and welcomed him with courtly German in the name of the king.

FROM the windows of the room assigned to him, Paul could look out over many of the streets of Tarrenberg. The old stone spires of the cathedral were ruddy in the evening sun. A faint but steady bustle of traffic came up from the streets below. There was something soothing and contented about those faint sounds of orderly life, and Paul was whistling as he began to unpack.

Dinner was served in his room, for there was to be a formal reception in the palace that night and Paul had been told that the king would receive him at that time. He put on his dress suit, and was smoking by the window when Fritz von Carpen came for him.

Even the fatigue uniform of His Majesty's Lancers was gay and colorful to one accustomed to the sober khaki of American troops, but Fritz now wore a white and gold dress uniform that was dazzling. Paul leaned back in his chair and laughed.

"Fritz," he said, "you're marvelous! You look like a Park Avenue doorman!"

"We do seem to go in for more color here in the Old World, friend Paul," von Carpen answered quietly, "but unfortunately our bullets kill just as effectively. I only hope that you do not encounter any more of them during your stay in Monrovia. Shall we go down?"

Paul followed the young officer around the grand ballroom, bowing in response to scores of introductions and making no effort to remember the names. Then, as he and Fritz sauntered across the room for a cup of punch, his glance fell on a slender and dark-haired girl who had just entered. She wore a white satin evening gown, and the slanting red ribbon of some order of nobility, and jewels sparkled in her hair. It was Alicia!

As he saw the girl, Paul seized his friend's arm with a tense grip.

"Fritz! That girl who has just come in—over there by the door. Can you tell me who she is?"

Von Carpen glanced at him with an amused smile.

"You are flying high, friend Paul, if that is the first Monrovia girl who has interested you," he said. "That is Alicia, Countess von Sternberg and niece of His Majesty the King!"

From Palace to Hovel

WHEN formally presented to the Countess von Sternberg a few minutes later, Paul bent low over her hand and voiced the conventional polite sentiments. Her reply was equally distant and impersonal, her manner held just that touch of aloofness to be expected from one who sat so close to the throne. And yet her calm eyes seemed full of hidden mockery. Paul suspected that she was laughing at him.

He was sure of it, a few minutes later, when at last he had so maneuvered things that he stood alone with Alicia in one corner of the ballroom.

"Paul!" she said. "Don't look so startled! Nothing awful is going to happen—and I assure you I'm real."

Paul looked exasperated.

"You never told me that you were a niece of the King," he said accusingly.

"But I never told you anything to the contrary, either! You knew I was traveling incognito. And don't forget that you told me *your* name was Brown. I might have handled our—our acquaintanceship on the boat a little differently if I had known that you were the son of Anton Reisling and that we were likely to meet again."

"Acquaintanceship. . . . What a cold word that is!" Paul said. The vast hall was crowded, but at the moment they were off in a little eddy by themselves. "Is that really all it was?"

"What else could there be between us, Paul? Perhaps you forget that His Majesty is aging, and has no children. I am the heir to the throne, you see—which isn't much fun, in more ways than one."

"Then this is my cue to drop gracefully out of the picture?"

Paul had purposely kept his voice casual, his tone bantering. For an instant Alicia seemed to study him, her eyes very somber. Then, suddenly, she smiled.

"After all, I suppose it would be only common courtesy for me to entertain one who is the guest of His Majesty and a son of the great Anton Reisling! I will let you know when I can see you."

"Tomorrow?" he persisted.

"Perhaps."

Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by a newcomer, a giant of a man in the black and silver uniform of a Colonel of Hussars. His pale, almost colorless eyes stared at Paul with an unblinking and definitely hostile glare. The man had sparse sandy hair and a pointed beard. His mouth was like a cruel and bloodless slash.

"Er, pardon me," he said. "*Guten Abend*, Alicia. May I speak to you a moment?"

"Good evening, Baron." Alicia's voice was far from cordial, and Paul thought that she seemed nervous. "I want you to meet *Herr* Paul Reisling from America. Baron Frederic von Schwartzwald."

"Reisling's son? Ah, yes. Delighted. Quite."

As a matter of fact, the Baron didn't seem at all pleased. He shook hands briefly, and though his lips twisted in an attempt at a smile, his pale eyes were as cold as ever. An instant later he led Alicia away. Paul thrust his hands deep in his pockets and stared sourly after them.

So that was the powerful Baron von Schwartzwald, whom Fritz did not like! Well, Paul could readily see why. He didn't like the Baron's face, nor his manner, nor his possessive air with Alicia. Suddenly very angry at the dismissal he had received, he started to stride across the floor after them when he was halted by a brazen peal of trumpets.

Ludwig VII, Prince of Cuprenza and King of Monrovia, entered the room with all the pomp and formality to be expected from the ruler of an ancient monarchy. Above the heads of the bowing crowd, Paul saw a stout and ruddy-faced old man

in a general's uniform. His pointed white mustaches were long and bristling, and his bushy eyebrows had an odd quirk that gave him a quizzical expression. When Paul was presented to him a few minutes later, the King only spoke a few formal phrases of welcome, but Paul somehow felt that the old man's bright and alert eyes were sizing him up very thoroughly.

After the formal reception was over, a military orchestra began to play and many of the guests started to dance. Paul was standing at one side, trying to locate Alicia in the midst of the throng, when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Come along with me, boy," somebody boomed in his ear, "I want to talk to you."

It was the King himself. Surprised and puzzled, Paul followed his royal host out a side door and down a corridor to a door where a pair of Lancers saluted with drawn sabers. Then the door closed behind them, and Paul found himself in a book-lined study.

"**C**HAIR!" Ludwig boomed, pointing vaguely toward the desk in the center of the room. He crossed to a buffet by the far wall. "What'll you drink, boy? Sherry, port, brandy? Brandy? Good! Prefer it myself."

Paul was restraining a great desire to laugh. So this was Ludwig VII, the tyrant who had made possible Anton Reisling's plunder of Monrovia! He wanted to dislike, even to hate him, but it was hard not to feel friendly toward this genial and outspoken old man. Ludwig set two tall glasses of brandy and soda down on the desk.

"Don't stand on ceremony here," he rumbled. "Sit down. Take off your coat. Probably you feel as uncomfortable as I do in this rig. Relax. Put your feet on the desk if you want—your father always does when he's here. Take off your coat."

With a single motion Ludwig loosened his swordbelt and cast it aside. He unbuttoned his uniform coat, and lowered his big frame into an easy chair. He pulled a battered pipe from a drawer of the desk and filled it with coarse tobacco. Then he picked up his glass and leaned back with his booted feet on the edge of the desk.

"How's your father, Paul? What do you think of Monrovia?"

In spite of himself, Paul laughed. This hearty and democratic old-timer was the absolute opposite of what he had imagined even a modern and enlightened monarch would be like.

"Father is quite well, your Majesty," he began. Ludwig pointed the smoking pipe-stem at him like a pistol.

"Don't call me majesty in private, boy! I don't like it. All twaddle. This is my private castle. . . ." He waved his arm around the disorderly, junk-filled, untidy room that seemed never to have been either swept or dusted. "Anyone I invite in here has to act as though we're both human beings. Discipline is necessary in its place, and all that, but not in this room. Go on, tell me what you think of us."

"After all, sir, I've only been here since this morning and haven't had time to form much of an opinion," Paul said hesitantly.

Ludwig nodded. The smile left his face, his eyes became rather thoughtful, and he sighed.

"Right you are—I was forgetting. Captain von Carpen reported to me the attack on you in Gröeken, and the attack on the car. I think we will be able to guard you against any more such trouble. We are having some difficulty just now with a bunch of outlaws and troublemakers who call themselves the Blackbirds."

PAUL made no comment at all. At this present moment it seemed wisest to keep his political views to himself. Ludwig took a deep pull at his drink, and set the glass down with a sigh, and stared off with somber eyes through the haze of drifting blue smoke that now filled the room. His deep voice became almost plaintive.

"Dammit, boy, it's no fun to be a king nowadays! You get the blame for everything, and thanks from no one. Thirty years ago, before your father came along and developed the copper mines up in the mountains, Monrovia was a backward country. Penniless, rather primitive, making no progress at all. The opening of the mines set thousands of men to work, and

the government revenue from them set us on our feet and let us bring in the modern innovations the country needed. And now what's the result? A bunch of demagogues howl from every housetop that I'm a tyrant and a traitor, and that your father has robbed the country. Dammit, I'm often tempted to throw the whole thing up and abdicate!"

He fell silent, still staring off through space, with his thoughts apparently far away. Paul scarcely knew what to think. Either his host was a consummate actor talking for effect, or else he really believed what he said. In that case, it must be that Ludwig himself meant well, but was misled by his advisers. Well, he couldn't try to settle the problem now.

A little later Ludwig shook his broad shoulders, returned to his former smiling mood, and spoke of minor things. Paul took advantage of an opportunity to say casually:

"I happened to come over on the same steamer as your niece, the Countess von Sternberg."

"Alicia? She's a splendid girl, a credit to the house of Tarrenberg. I often feel sorry for her."

"Sorry for her!" Paul echoed. Ludwig's eyes again turned somber, and his smile was twisted.

"She'd be much happier if she were not of royal blood. She's the heir to the throne, you know, since her brother was killed while hunting a year ago. Frederic von Schwartzwald is not my idea of the perfect husband."

"Schwartzwald and—and the Countess Alicia?"

"Oh, yes, she is to marry him in a year or so. One of those royal marriages, a thing of convenience, y' know. The House of Schwartzwald is the second most powerful in the country, and the marriage will be a good thing."

"Oh, I see. Quite," Paul said in a flat voice. He felt a little nauseated. Alicia married to that pale-eyed and ruthless man?

The reception ended a little later, without Paul having a chance to see Alicia again. He did not sleep well in what was

left of the night, and by the time he had finished breakfast next morning his mind was set upon a certain course. He had come to Monrovia with definite aims, and he might as well start to work at once. He was going to seek out the Blackbirds!

SLIPPING into his pocket the address that Moroni had given him back in New York, Paul left the palace by a side door and walked briskly toward the older part of the city. The address he sought was 18 Bergenstrasse. He sought for it vainly for perhaps an hour, then asked a policeman. The officer seemed a little surprised, but gave detailed directions that led to a narrow and very filthy alley in the poorest part of town. The number 18 appeared on an ancient, moldy hovel halfway up the blind alley.

Paul knocked three times on the door, in accordance with the instructions that Moroni had given him, and after a while a narrow slit opened in the center of the portal.

"*Wer ist da?*" a guttural voice asked irritably. Paul glanced at the slip of paper and gave the necessary password:

"*Drei Schwartzvögel* fliegen zu Oesten—three blackbirds fly east."

"*Was suchen sie*—what are they seeking?" came the reply.

"Justice for all, comrade," Paul answered in German, completing the sequence, and the door swung open before him.

"Enter in peace, comrade. You are welcome."

Death in the Shadows

PAUL found himself in a small room lit only by a single, barred window high in one wall. The door was closed and bolted behind him. From the inside it looked as massive and as heavily barred as the portal of a fortress. Across the room was another door, just as heavy. The Blackbirds seemed to be neglecting no precautions against being surprised. Well, a group of independent patriots working against a tyrannical government probably had to be that careful.

The only other person in the room, the man who had questioned Paul and then admitted him, was a heavy-featured peasant in a soiled blouse. A heavy automatic hung on one hip. He looked Paul over slowly and carefully, suspicion heavy in his glance.

"Who are you?" he growled at last.

"I am a friend from America, a comrade anxious to join your group."

"You don't look like one of us."

The guard walked across the room and tapped on the inner door. He held a whispered conversation with someone inside, through a small wicket, and Paul felt that he was being inspected by unseen eyes. At last he was admitted to another and larger room, where there was a center table and many benches. Three taciturn Monroviaans sat at the table.

They listened intently, asking a few questions, while Paul told his story. He explained who he was, how he felt about conditions in Monrovia, and why he had come there to help them. When he told how Moroni in New York had given him the address and passwords, they all nodded, and one of them said something in a low aside. The tension seemed to be lessening.

When Paul finished, there was a brief silence. His three inquisitors said nothing, sitting there as though they were awaiting instructions from someone. Then a dry voice spoke out of the shadows.

"I think we may accept this man. You are welcome, Comrade Reisling. I am sorry that I made trouble for you yesterday."

It was the swarthy blacksmith of Gröeken, now dressed like some small shopkeeper of the city. He limped across the room with his hand outstretched and a smile on his saturnine face.

"I am Josef Gugolz," he said. "You must forgive me for what happened at the Gilded Horse. Of course, I did not know that you were with us in this matter, and when I saw that the son of Anton Reisling had come to Monrovia I could not control my anger. We who represent the common people of this country have a heavy score to settle!"

For perhaps an hour they talked. Gradually Gugolz monopolized the conversation,

delivering a long monologue on the wrongs done to the peasants, while the other Blackbirds nodded from time to time and occasionally voiced a guttural *Ja wohl!* Paul had to admire Gugolz' persuasiveness, the fire of his oratory, but he began to feel increasingly uncomfortable.

Something did not ring quite true. Gugolz was painting a little *too* black a picture, was apparently being dramatic rather than accurate. There was no doubt of his power to sway the men around him, but the man was clearly a fanatic and Paul was inclined to distrust him. After all, this group of heavily armed conspirators meeting in a hidden chamber was not quite the sort of group he had looked forward to joining when he left New York on his crusade to aid the people of Monrovia. In the back of his mind was a disturbing thought that would not be put down—perhaps he was off on the wrong track entirely!

AT last Gugolz paused, almost panting for breath, having just pictured the paradise that was to be Monrovia when the peasants should throw off the yoke of the ruling class. Paul stirred uneasily in his chair.

"And just how do you intend to bring this about?" he asked.

"With fire and sword!" Gugolz almost shouted. "The time is now very near at hand."

"Violence," Paul said hesitantly, "is never a very good—"

The sound of hasty footsteps interrupted him, and a black-bearded man dressed as an artisan burst into the room. He glanced around, blinked to accustom his eyes to the dim light, and then strode across to Gugolz.

"We have her, comrade!" he shouted jubilantly. "The government spy who has given us so much trouble! We caught her just outside the rear entrance. Hans and August are bringing her in now."

For an instant Gugolz' eyes rested on Paul, and there was something terribly ominous in their blank stare. Then he shrugged, and half turned his chair to watch the group that came in the rear door.

TWO burly peasants entered, half dragging, half carrying a woman between them. She was a girl in the ordinary costume of the country, wearing a smocked blouse, and having the typical peasant kerchief knotted under her chin. Her wrists were tied behind her with a cord, her bleeding mouth was gagged with a twisted rag. Some coils of red hair had escaped from under the kerchief on her head. Paul felt himself slowly tensing in every muscle as he recognized her. It was the girl who had tried to warn him in the Gilded Horse! Then she was a member of the Monrovia secret service!

The two peasants threw the girl down in a chair, where she sat with her eyes half closed and her head sagging back. Gugolz looked at her with a bleak twisted smile.

"You will trouble us no more, *Fraülein*," he said softly. Then he snapped an order. One of the men tied a handkerchief around the girl's throat and prepared to twist it tight with a short stick.

Paul suddenly leaped to his feet and kicked back the chair upon which he had been sitting. It probably meant his death as well as the girl's, but he could not sit there quietly and see her strangled. He had been a fool, a hopeless fool, but at least he would not be accessory to a murder.

"I won't stand for it, Gugolz!" he snapped. "You must be mad! Leave the girl here. We can all be in hiding somewhere else by the time they find her."

"So this does not please you, *mein Herr*?" Gugolz drawled. "Fool! Why do you think I ever let you in here? Because you will be a valuable hostage for us! The government will pay well for the son of Anton Reisling. *Take him!*"

Two men leaped at Paul at once, but he twisted aside and sent one of them spinning with a straight left. At the same time he heard a muffled crash at the outer door, and then the sound of many whistles shrilly blowing. Shots rang out. Someone hit Paul over the head with a chair, and even as he crumpled, half-conscious, to the floor he saw the door of this inner room begin to shake from a heavy and insistent battering.

For a few moments the place was a mad

turmoil. Somebody had carried away the bound and helpless girl, but Paul had apparently been forgotten. One of the Blackbirds lay sprawled in the middle of the floor, another emptied his revolver as the door burst inward before a squad of soldiers. Bayonets gleamed. Fritz von Carpen strode through the smoke with his revolver crashing steadily, and then the remaining Blackbirds scattered in wild rout before the raiding party, who were mopping up the headquarters.

Paul was erect and rubbing his bruised head when Fritz strolled back, nonchalantly stuffing fresh cartridges into the cylinder of his gun.

"Ah, there, Paul," he said quietly, "you all right? Good!"

"Did you get them all?"

"Unfortunately not. Most of them got away through a tunnel, and this old part of town is such a rabbit warren that we can't hope to catch them now."

Two soldiers accompanied Paul back to the palace. They were grimly silent, and he wasn't sure whether they were meant for an escort or a guard. He realized that his own presence in the headquarters of the Blackbirds might take a bit of explaining.

IT was late in the day when Fritz von Carpen at last came to his room.

"Nothing accomplished," he said in answer to Paul's question. "We combed the Bergenstrasse quarter, but found no trace of Gugolz or anyone else we could identify."

"And the girl?"

"Her lifeless body was found nailed to the wall of an abandoned shack nearby."

"Look here, Fritz, I'm with you in this thing to the limit." Paul's voice was grating and tense. "Probably you wonder why I was in that place at all."

"We do. One of our men followed you when you left the palace, just a precaution we take for the protection of all guests at the palace, and he reports that you entered that house by giving some kind of password. Matter of fact, it was his report that led us to raid the place when we did."

Paul gave the whole story from start to

finish, sparing himself not at all. A little later he was called upon to repeat the whole thing to King Ludwig. The old man heard him through in grim silence, and at the end he sighed.

"The lure of theories and the words of demagogues lead many men astray!" he said. "All right, boy, I believe you. The order for your deportation will be canceled."

As Paul and Fritz walked away from the interview with the King, the young officer chuckled.

"I am glad that you are not to be deported, friend Paul," he said. "You may see excitement in this next week. My guess is that the whole thing will come to a head then."

"You mean the matter of the Blackbirds?"

"Pah, they are only a small trouble-making group! It is what lies back of them that we fear."

"I do not understand."

"We believe that the Blackbirds are what you would call a smoke-screen, supported and financed by a certain political group in this country who want to overthrow the present government and put themselves in power."

"You mean—revolution?"

"Something very much like it. Not a peasant revolt or anything of that sort, but just a high-handed attempt to overthrow His Majesty's government and put someone else on the throne. Some of us believe we know who is behind it, but as yet we can prove nothing."

"Yes—Baron von Schwartzwald struck me as a very ambitious man," Paul said slowly.

Von Carpen only smiled.

Clouds Over the Palace

FOR the next few days a sort of uneasy quiet prevailed in Monrovia. Things seemed to go on as usual, nothing was changed on the surface, but an air of unrest brooded over the entire country, from the City of Tarrenberg to the frontier beyond the mountains. Paul sensed this, but naturally he could not read the signs

as well as Fritz von Carpen, who went about with a perpetually preoccupied expression.

One evening the young captain of Lancers became confidential. Paul had chanced to encounter him late at night, and the two of them sat alone in the drafty vastness of the main guardroom of the palace. The heavy tread of sentries sounded just outside the door, racks of carbines stood along the paneled walls. Fritz, with his helmet laid aside and his tunic open at the throat, slouched low in his chair, his booted legs stretched out before him, and stared moodily into his stein of foaming beer.

"It's hard to say what will happen, Paul," he said. "The Baron undoubtedly is planning an attempt to seize the throne. I have no doubt of it, and I really don't think His Majesty has either. Not since the Countess Alicia gave Schwartzwald her final refusal yesterday."

"Just where does that fit in?" Paul asked, wondering why he felt so elated to hear that Alicia had rebuffed the pale-eyed Baron. He had been so irritated by the man's possessive manner with her!

"Because the Countess is the heir to the throne, ever since her brother died a year ago. I've never felt quite right about that thing, by the way."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the young Count was hunting with two companions. Experienced guides. The bodies of the other two were found floating down the river, but that of the Count was never recovered. The theory is that they were all killed in a fall while mountain climbing. I wonder!"

"You mean that you—?"

"Suspect foul play? Well, I have nothing to go on, it's just a hunch. Anyway, as I was saying, the Countess Alicia is the heir to the throne, and if Schwartzwald had succeeded in marrying her, he might have been satisfied. As it is, I expect him to try a *coup d'état*."

"Then why doesn't the King strike the first blow and have him arrested?"

"He is too powerful a man to arrest on suspicion. The House of Schwartzwald has always been second in importance to the House of Tarrenberg, and if we tried

anything of that sort he would have too many people rally to support him. No, we must simply sit here on the lid of the volcano until something definite happens."

"Do you think he can start serious trouble?"

"It is hard to say. We are a proud people, we Monrovians, and we sometimes allow old loyalties to sway us against our common-sense. Certainly the Black Hus-sars, whom Schwartzwald commands, will stand by him to a man. My own regiment of Lancers can be counted upon to remain loyal to the King. So can the Household Troops who guard this palace. The stand taken by the rest of the army will tell the tale, and it is impossible to tell how they will go until the time comes."

"What about the mass of the people?"

"Oh, they are basically loyal, in spite of the noise made by a few malcontents who pretend to be the champions of the common people. The trouble is that the whole thing will probably be over, one way or the other, before the people know much about it. No, it is the army who will decide who is to rule in Monrovia. And the test may come any day."

He fell silent, staring up at the shadows that gathered among the big rafters above their heads. Somewhere far across the city a distant clock struck the hour after midnight.

"And what can I do when the storm breaks?" Paul asked. Fritz shook off his moodiness, and glanced up with a sudden smile.

"Perhaps you can ride with the Lancers. Have you ever seen a full squadron of cavalry charge home at a gallop? There are no troops like the Lancers! Gas and machine-guns may have made us obsolete in a war between big powers, but here in Monrovia we are still an important factor."

PAUL had seen Alicia several times during those few days, but there had always been others present. On the day after his talk with Fritz, however, Alicia had agreed to go riding with him. He strolled around the outer courtyard while a groom held his horse, and after a little while Alicia appeared. She wore a formal,

conventional black riding habit with a draped skirt and a white silk stock at her throat. Over her black tricorne hat she wore a close-fitting dotted veil.

"Don't laugh at my clothes," she said as soon as she saw him, "custom requires them. I must wear a skirt and ride side-saddle. If the niece of the King were to appear in public in riding breeches, it would be a national scandal."

Two armed grooms rode with them, keeping all four horses abreast while they passed through the city. After they were beyond the walls, Alicia nodded to the two attendants, who dropped a little distance behind.

"Must we have chaperones even today?" Paul asked irritably.

"Surely, *mein Herr*. One never knows what one of you wild Americans will do."

"Nuts!" he said. Alicia threw back her head and laughed.

"Really, Paul, I wish you would stay here permanently. You are a big relief after the stilted stiffness of most of the people I have to deal with."

"I might stick around awhile, now that I hear you have given the gate to that sour-faced Baron Schwartzwald," he said. Her eyes shadowed.

"Don't let's talk of that now. I am sick to death of politics, and consultations, and the talk of marriages of convenience. For today let's forget everything else and just be ourselves."

They rode for miles that afternoon. Though the two grooms were always with them, they kept well behind and were out of hearing. Alicia was exceptionally light-hearted. Neither she nor Paul mentioned their own difficulties or the clouds that hung over Monrovia.

It was late in the afternoon when they paused for a short rest in the midst of a patch of woodland near the city gates. Alicia and Paul sat on a fallen log, the grooms had loosened all girths and held the four horses a little ways off. Alicia rested her chin on her hands and gave a long sigh.

"Thank you, Paul," she said, "for fitting in with my mood so well. I haven't passed so pleasant an afternoon in a long time—nor am I likely to for some time to come."

"You have no idea how much this afternoon has meant to me," he said with a touch of grimness.

"Please don't say that—you make things hard for me."

Suddenly, without either forethought or hesitancy, Paul took her in his arms and kissed her. For an instant she strained away from him, then she went limp and he felt her lips quivering behind the dotted veil.

At last Alicia drew away, and Paul did not try to hold her. She sighed, and twice she struck one small gloved hand against the log on which they sat.

"You shouldn't have done that!" she said.

"Why?"

"You know why! Oh, don't let's pretend!" The repressed emotion in her voice was near the verge of tears. "We love each other, but what good does it do us? Paul—I've got to marry Baron Schwartzwald. Don't look at me that way, I can't help it. I refused him yesterday, but I have decided it is my duty as the best way of averting a civil war. I told you it was no fun to be a princess!"

"Isn't there some other way out?"

"No—so don't make it any harder for me. Let's ride back."

Neither of them spoke during the return to the city. When they entered the streets, the two grooms closed up on either side. At the end, as they dismounted and separated in the courtyard, Alicia held out her hand with a valiant effort at a smile.

"Goodby, Paul," she said. "I won't see you alone again. Go back to America and forget me. The House of Tarrenberg has always been unlucky!"

"*Auf wiedersehen,*" he said. She shook her head slowly.

"It's not 'till we meet again' this time, Paul. Goodby."

Treachery Within the Palace

PAUL retired to his room early that night, but he could not sleep. After a while he got up again, put on some clothes, and wandered down toward the guardroom. The sentries in the corridor

glanced at him curiously, but said nothing.

Fritz von Carpen was in the guardroom, but half a dozen officers of the Guards, the household troops stationed in the palace, were also there. Fritz seemed restless and irritable.

"There's something in the wind," he said to Paul in a low aside. "I'm nervous as a cat. I may be wrong, but I think something is brewing. I've brought a platoon of Lancers to strengthen the palace guard and quartered them in the rear courtyard."

Feeling something of an intruder in that group of preoccupied officers, Paul started to return to his room. The long, rambling corridors of the old palace were not very well lighted, and somewhere along the way he took a wrong turn. The walls were now stone instead of plaster. Then, just as he came to an open court, he realized what had happened. The more modern palace adjoined the ancient Castle of Tarrenberg, and in some way he had wandered into the older structure.

The courtyard before him was full of men and horses—the Lancers that Fritz had brought to strengthen the guard. There was a low murmur of conversation, leather creaked, occasionally an iron-shod hoof clinked against a stone. The light of a single lantern gleamed on the polished breastplates of the Lancers. A thunderstorm was coming up across the mountains, and now a flash of lightning shed a faint glow over the entire courtyard. With the steel helmets and breastplates of the cavalry, it could easily have been a scene from the Middle Ages, when this courtyard had formed the main entrance to the hold of the Kings of Monrovia.

Paul felt better as he groped his way back through the dim passages toward his own room. The place seemed to be well guarded, the garrison alert. He passed the corridor that led to the rooms of the King, noticing that the sentries were strolling slowly back and forth. Then he came to his own corridor and nodded to the sentry. He was halfway down toward his own room before he suddenly realized that something was wrong. There was a different kind of sentry on guard!

The sentry in this corridor had worn the

green and gold uniform of the Guards, like all others in the palace. Now he was replaced by a grimly silent soldier in black and silver, a cavalryman who wore boots and leaned on his drawn saber. Paul had seen that uniform before! *Schwartzwald's Black Hussars!*

Instantly Paul turned about and retraced his steps. Every muscle was tense as he went by the sentry, wondering if the man would try to stop him. If he had been challenged, Paul would have made a break for it, but it was evident that the invaders were not yet ready for any disturbance. He walked briskly by, and returned to the guardroom.

Fritz was sitting on one of the big tables, idly swinging his booted heels. He looked very weary.

"Back again, Paul?" he said. "I thought you had gone to bed, as sensible people should."

"Look here, Fritz! Why is there a Black Hussar on guard in the west corridor upstairs?"

"What did you say?"

"I said that there's one of Schwartzwald's Black Hussars on guard in the west corridor, instead of the sentry of the Guards who was there before."

"So it's come!"

Fritz's voice was low, but his excitement was evident. He slid to the floor and seized his helmet from the table behind him. Then he spun to face the young Guard lieutenant, who was staring open-mouthed at him.

"Karl—get all the men you can and follow me. There's treachery here tonight!"

PAUL was just behind Fritz as the two of them hurried up the stairs. The Hussar sentry at the head of the west corridor saluted, but stepped out to bar their passage.

"No passage for any troops through the palace tonight, *Herr* Captain!" he said.

"By whose orders?"

"By the orders of the *Herr* Colonel Baron Schwartz—"

The man never finished his sentence, for Fritz hit him on the point of the jaw with a right uppercut that knocked him down.

"Drag him in the nearest room!" he snapped. "Hurry! We haven't a second to lose. God only knows how the Hussars got in the palace, but the harm may not yet be done."

They dragged the unconscious man into the nearest room, which happened to be unoccupied. As the opening of the door let some light from the corridor spill over the threshold, Fritz silently pointed at that which lay just to one side. It was the body of one of the guards, lying on its face, with a thin trail of blood trickling away from the shattered head.

"Struck down from behind!" Fritz muttered under his breath. "Come on!"

They again moved off down the corridor, and Paul picked up the fallen man's saber. Fritz had drawn his revolver. As they neared the next sentry post, another Hussar stepped out to meet them. At sight of Paul's drawn steel, the man started to fumble with his revolver, but Fritz fired from the hip. The impact of the bullet spun the man half around, and he slowly collapsed against the wall.

The sound of that shot went echoing off through the many corridors of the palace. As though it had been a signal, a great clamor and outcry came from a little ways ahead. Shots—a sullen shouting—the sharp clash of steel.

"The King! They are attacking the King!" Fritz shouted, and went ahead at a dead run.

They raced around the curving passage and came in sight of the corridor that led to Ludwig's rooms. The two sentries outside his door stood with their backs to the wall, fighting against a swarming dozen of Black Hussars. Both Guards were wounded, but two of their opponents lay prone on the floor and a third reeled back with a saber slash across his forehead. A Hussar armed with a carbine was shouting for his fellows to fall back, so he could shoot the sentries down.

Fritz von Carpen shot the carbineer as he ran forward, and then flung himself into the midst of the *mêlée*. Paul fought his way to his friend's side. At that moment the door behind them opened and Ludwig himself appeared, wearing a dark dressing

gown and carrying a heavy automatic in each hand. Very coolly he shot the two nearest Hussars and eased the pressure on the defenders of his doorway. He looked like a rampant patriarch, with his mustaches bristling and his white hair a tangled mop.

"Come into my chambers, gentlemen," he said quietly. "We can defend the doorway better from the inside than from here."

They moved to follow him, but then the expected help at last arrived. The young Guard lieutenant came charging down the corridor with a full score of his men at his heels. A volley of shots ripped out, the light in the corridor became dim with the reek of powder smoke. The surviving Hussars fled before the threat of superior numbers. Fritz laughed without mirth and leaned on the hilt of his dripping saber. Paul found himself bleeding from a slight cut on the arm and began to bandage it with a strip of his shirt.

"My thanks to you all," Ludwig said quietly. "The immediate danger is over."

"I'm afraid this is only a momentary lull, sir," the lieutenant said dubiously. "The Hussars are in possession of most of the palace. They came to one of the gates dressed as our own men, and had forced their way in before the sentries realized what was happening. Many of our men were struck down singly, before any alarm could be given."

"What about the old building—the castle?" Fritz snapped.

"I don't believe they have taken that."

"Then it is our best refuge, your Majesty."

"Good! We will get the Countess Alicia, and as many of our people as we can collect, and go there."

EVEN as they moved off down the corridor, the foremost of a returning horde of Hussars appeared at the far end. Some of them carried flaming torches, for most of the lights in the palace had now been shot out. The twenty Guards brought up the rear, firing steadily at the hundreds of Hussars thronging after them, retreating slowly toward the old part of the building.

Paul had been afraid that they would

find the men of Schwartzwald in possession of the corridor that led to Alicia's rooms, and he felt relieved when it stretched empty before them. But where were the loyal sentries who should have been on guard? The question was answered as they all stood on the threshold of the shattered door to the girl's apartments.

Both Guards lay dead upon the floor, while smashed furniture and scarred walls bore silent witness to the valor of the struggle they had put up. Old Heinrich, the stout retainer who had been so suspicious of Paul on the boat, lay across the sill of the door to the inner room with his head split by a saber slash. Alicia was gone!

FOR a long instant they were all silent, staring at the empty and disordered room, which told its own story. The King's wide shoulders seemed to sag.

"Schwartzwald has taken the girl," he said, "we cannot help her now. Our only chance is to go to the Old Castle and try to hold it until help arrives."

All the way across to the stout stone walls of the castle they fought a rear-guard action with the Hussars, who crowded close upon their heels. They had to leave their wounded where they lay and continue their slow retreat. It was like a nightmare, stumbling in the darkness through the maze of passages, but from time to time they were joined by other loyal troops or palace residents in groups of three or four. Then the heavy oaken doors of the ancient stronghold closed behind them and they were comparatively secure.

Standing on the ramparts with Ludwig and von Carpen a minute later, Paul could see that the entire square before them was swarming with black-clad Hussars. Many were dismounted, firing their carbines up at the walls, where the handful of garrison troops and von Carpen's Lancers were harassing them from the shelter of the stone battlements. Most of the houses around the square were shuttered, and from the roofs of a few of them spurts of flame showed, where the burghers were firing down on the Hussars.

"They are not getting much help from

the townsfolk!" Ludwig boomed with deep satisfaction. "Help should be here soon. The whole city is aroused. Listen!"

There was silence.

They could hear a sullen, mounting murmur from all over the awakening city. Somewhere across the town a bugle was pealing. Meanwhile, the flashes of lightning came more frequently, and the roll of the thunder was louder. The Hussars had stormed a house on the square from which the fire against them had been particularly hot, and now the ruddy glow of the flames lit the place like an inferno. Fritz suddenly gave a loud shout.

"Here come the regular troops! The attack is over now!"

MOVING with perfect alignment, fixed bayonets gleaming in the firelight, a long column of regular infantry swung out into the square and swept down on the milling crowd of Hussars.

The latter, now greatly outnumbered and knowing that the whole success of their attempt against the palace depended upon the completeness of the first surprise, at once began to withdraw. There was a great confusion of rearing horses and shouting men as the black-clad riders all swung up to the saddle. Then they moved away to the westward, their rear ranks firing from the saddle at the infantry behind them.

"Oh, for a squadron of Lancers now!" Fritz muttered.

The column of horsemen flowed on, like an ebony river. For a moment they saw Baron Schwartzwald himself, astride a big-boned black stallion and bellowing orders to his captains. Half a dozen of the men along the battlements fired down at him, but he was untouched. And then Paul saw Alicia.

She rode between two Hussars, one of whom had taken the lead strap of her horse. Her wrists were tied behind, her bound arms held stiffly back by a stick at the elbows, yet she rode with her head proudly erect. They could see her for only an instant, her face very pale in the flickering light of the fire, and then she had vanished somewhere in the midst of the swiftly riding column of black horsemen.

"Do not worry, Paul," Fritz said in a low voice, "I will go after her with you. We will ride at once!"

To Schloss Drachen

LESS than ten minutes later Paul and Fritz rode out the main gate of the palace with two troopers of von Carpen's regiment behind them. Two hundred loyal troops now reinforced the survivors of the palace garrison, and there was no longer any danger in that quarter. The four riders were starting out on the long chance of effecting a quick rescue of Alicia.

"Schwartzwald will almost certainly take her to his hold at the Schloss Drachen," Fritz had hastily explained when getting the King's permission to make the attempt. "Four men can ride far more quickly than a squadron, so we should be able to beat them to the castle and perhaps make a surprise rescue."

Ludwig had nodded, then turned to Paul.

"There is no need for you to risk your neck in this matter, Paul."

"Please let me go with them, sir. I—I have personal reasons for wanting to go."

"Go, then—*mein Gott*, I wish I was younger myself—but be careful. Your father will never forgive me if anything happens to you."

The four of them left the palace and rode westward at a brisk trot, the clatter of their hoofs loud in the narrow street. Paul was wearing his own riding breeches and a dark sweater, but the horse they had given him belonged to a wounded Lancer and bore full military equipment. A long saber clanked against his left stirrup iron. The sound was very comforting.

Halfway across the city, a Tarrenberg now fully aroused, its streets swarming with armed citizens, they ran full into the spasmodic fighting that was still in progress. The sound of scattered firing ahead became ever louder, and they passed an occasional body sprawled in the gutter. Most of the citizens they passed, solid burghers, armed with rifles or fowling pieces and rapidly organizing themselves into groups, cheered wildly at the sight of

the Lancers' uniforms. It was evident that most of Tarrenberg stood squarely behind King Ludwig, whatever the rest of the country might think about him.

Still pushing their horses ahead as fast as the crowded streets would allow, they at last came to a spot where they had to halt. A score of infantrymen lay prone on the cobbles, firing at a hasty barricade that blocked the street ahead. Behind the improvised barricade Paul saw many Black Hussars, and also some troops in a brown uniform.

"The Weissenbachen Regiment," Fritz muttered in response to his question. "So *they* have joined Schwartzwald! Well, most of them come from the country around Schloss Drachen, so it is not so surprising."

The four riders had been about to save time by seeking another way out of the city when there came a sudden burst of activity around them. Many citizens had been forming in the shadows and alleys nearby. Now a gray-bearded man armed with an old saber ran up to the lieutenant in charge of the infantrymen and gestured eagerly. The officer nodded and put a whistle to his lips. A long blast rang out.

Scrambling to their feet, the soldiers went forward with leveled bayonets. Behind them came a wildly cheering mass of merchants and artisans, of shopkeepers and businessmen. Paul and his three companions cantered forward in the midst of the throng. One moment the rifle-fire of the defenders of the barricade was flashing in their very faces; the next instant the darting bayonets of the soldiers and the swinging rifle-butts of their allies were scattering the Hussars. Fritz jumped his horse clean over the barricade and began to lay about him with his saber.

Again the horsemen rode forward.

THEY reached a big park on the west edge of the city just in time to see the final climax of the night's battle. On the smooth grass the Black Hussars were drawn up in massed squadrons, while on each side were grouped their allies of the Weissenbachen Regiment. Half the houses bordering on the park were ablaze, and the leaping glow of the flames shone on the

silent and ominous ranks. Scattered sniping was going on from the shadows.

Loyalist infantry surged into the park from both sides, swinging forward in a series of thin waves in the face of a withering fire. For a few moments the issue seemed to be in doubt. Then many bugles pealed, their silvery call ringing loud above the roar of the flames and the crackle of rifle-fire. An instant later Fritz von Carpen stood up in his stirrups and swung his saber high above his head.

"It's the Lancers!" he shouted. "They have come at last! Ride hard, you bow-legged devils!"

Cheers rang out.

Rank after rank of superbly mounted horsemen swung from column into line. Their steel helmets and breastplates gleamed ruddy in the light of the burning houses, their horsehair plumes fluttered on the breeze. The long lines of lances swung down to the level. Then the bugles pealed again, a single blast. With a rolling thunder of hoofs the Royal Lancers of Monrovia swept down against Baron Schwartzwald's grimly silent Black Hussars. Fritz von Carpen turned to his companions.

"There is no longer anything to worry about here in Tarrenberg," he said, "let us ride!"

Even as they rode off, Paul saw how the impact of the galloping Lancers smashed the massed squadrons of Hussars into red ruin. He saw detached patrols of the steel-helmeted cavalymen begin to sweep swiftly through the narrow streets of the city, mopping up such isolated points of resistance as might remain. It was probably the wildest night that Tarrenberg had known since the army of Frederic the Great sacked the city on one of that warrior-king's campaigns long generations before.

Leaving the streets and the noise of the city behind them, Paul and his three companions rode out on the highway to the westward. The thunderstorm had passed over, and the stars now burned clear above them. Here in the open country, the stars seemed to swing only a little way above the top of the trees. The four men rode for-

ward with a steady drumming of hoofs, a jingle of bridles and an occasional clink of equipment. They hardly spoke at all.

THE forests of the foothills surrounded them now, and often they could scarcely see the stars overhead for the thick canopy of leaves. Once they halted for a few minutes at a small stream, letting the horses drink sparingly and loosening the girths. Fritz waited only a brief period before he swung up into the saddle once more.

"Let us ride," he said, and again they thundered on into the night.

Paul sat easily in the saddle as his big-thewed horse went ahead with its steady stride. Occasionally he glanced up at the stars—the same cold stars that had shone down on Monrovia since the beginning of time. How many swift ridings into the night had they witnessed in the past? How many expeditions to rescue a woman held captive, how many silent passings of eager horsemen? Generations had lived and loved, fought and died, in these same fields and forests, under the same stars. How many had been as troubled as he?

Paul wondered. His thoughts were deeply troubled. A strange situation—

Take the matter of the errand that had brought him to Monrovia. He frankly did not know how he stood in the matter. Certainly he wanted no dealings with Gugolz and his murderous Blackbirds. If *they* were the sort who opposed the present government, it was possible that Ludwig was right in the other things he had said. Maybe Anton Reisling really had benefited the country and the people.

At last Fritz held up his arm. The four riders slowed to a trot, and then to a walk. The labored breath of their horses rose, steaming on the night air. Dawn could not be far off. Paul wondered if they were not too late, after all. Then they broke through a fringe of trees and came to an abrupt halt.

Immediately before them, the still waters of a lake were like a sheet of burnished steel that reflected the stars. A vast castle stood beyond the water, its battlements a darker blur against the blackness of the

sky. Fritz slowly pointed with his gauntleted hand.

"Schloss Drachen," he said. "The Dragon Castle."

Riders of Death Sing

THEY rode into a deep patch of woods and left the four horses under guard of one of the Lancers. Then Paul and Fritz, with the other trooper, groped their way through the blackness till they crouched on the edge of the lake, close by the castle. Seen from so near at hand, the thick stone walls seemed to rise to far heights above them.

There was something grim and ominous about the silent Schloss Drachen at night, something sinister and brooding. A few lights gleamed from narrow loopholes far up in the towers, and their reflection put pinpoints of fire on the dark waters of the lake. Behind him Paul could hear the branches of many trees rustling in the wind; before him there was a low murmur, where the ripples of the lake lapped against the foot of the walls.

Fritz von Carpen stirred slightly where he crouched at Paul's side. Then he pointed upward.

"There are sentries above us," he said. The serrated line of the battlements formed an uneven mass against the stars, and between the stone turrets Paul could catch an occasional gleam of starlight on polished metal. Probably it was the rifle-barrel of one of Schwartzwald's sentries. Paul turned to his companions.

"What are we going to do?" he whispered.

"I'm gambling on the hunch that Schwartzwald will send the Countess Alicia right back here with a small guard. We can jump them and take our chances. Even if there are six or eight men, we can bring half of them down at the first volley and then be on even terms. Let's work back to the road—they should be along any moment."

They had no more than regained their horses and led them to the edge of a small clearing that bordered the road a hundred yards away from the gate of the castle,

when Fritz halted and held up his hand.

"Hear it?" he whispered.

Paul shook his head. "No. What?"

"Men singing in the darkness. Listen! There it is again."

Paul heard it then, a low and distant murmur that grew louder with the passing of every second. Many men singing together in the darkness. Closer and closer came the singing, and though the words were not yet audible, it was possible to distinguish a swinging and full-throated tune. Fritz shook his head doubtfully.

"It is the Black Hussars," he said, "they always sing as they ride. But it sounds as though there were many of them. I am afraid that our plan is spoiled."

Now Paul could see a faint light flickering far down the road and hear the clink of iron-shod hoofs. The song rang loudly through the forest, a rolling chorus that was somehow flauntingly insolent:

*"Then ho! for the saddle,
For scabbard and steel—
Make way for the Riders of Death. . ."*

Now the black riders had begun to pass them, riding four abreast down the forest road. Occasional lanterns gleamed along the column, and Paul could see that there was rank after rank of the Hussars who lolled in their saddles with tunics unbuttoned and reins hanging loose. This was no mere patrol such as they had hoped to meet, but a full troop of Schwartzwald's trained horsemen.

And then he saw Alicia.

She rode between two Hussars, head still proudly erect, although her shoulders drooped with weariness. Her arms were still cruelly lashed behind her. Even by the dim light of a nearby lantern Paul could see the deep lines of fatigue in her face. With a savagely muttered oath he started forward, but Fritz gripped his arm.

"Don't be a fool!" the young officer hissed sharply. "We can do nothing against a full troop. It is simply that our plan did not work. We will see what we can do later."

The four of them watched from the edge of the woods as the troop of Hussars

rode into the Schloss Drachen and the gates closed behind them. Dawn was already beginning to streak the eastern sky. Paul drew a long breath and turned to Fritz.

"What now?" he asked.

"We must wait and see who comes next. It should not be long."

THE eastern sky grew steadily brighter, and in the forest there was a sound of birds. Streamers of mist swirled close to the waters of the lake, a thin haze shrouded all the shores and gave the Schloss Drachen an unreal and shadowy appearance. And then they heard the sound of galloping hoofs along the road.

It was a lone officer of the Hussars who came into sight, a man who drove his horse at a headlong gallop. He had lost his cap and one arm hung loosely by his side. The castle gates opened to receive him, and Paul noticed that this time they did not close again. Instead, some two score troopers armed with carbines stood guard around the entrance.

"Looks like the main body is coming soon," Fritz muttered under his breath. "They must be running from the Lancers! I *thought* the Baron seemed pretty well defeated when we rode away from Tarrenberg!"

Now a squadron of Hussars came down the road, heading for the castle. These did not ride singing at an easy pace as did the troop that Schwartzwald had sent away early with Alicia, but they drove their jaded horses pounding down the road, while dust clouds swirled about them. Many were wounded, and there were riderless horses amid the column.

"It must have been a good fight!" Fritz exulted. "We of the Lancers have had a score to settle with the Black Riders for many years, and last night was the reckoning. The Baron lost the battle and rides for his hole, to wait and see what the rest of his supporters in the country can accomplish."

Another mass of Hussars went by, flogging their weary horses, and then there came a brief pause. Somewhere off in the distance Paul could hear a faint crackle of

rifle-fire. Then came one last group of Hussars.

There were only some fifty or sixty men in this rear-guard. They thundered swiftly by on their foam-flecked horses, some of the riders turning in the saddle to fire back into the thinning dawn mist. Their carbines spat viciously. As soon as the last of the Hussars had galloped into the Schloss Drachen the gates swung shut behind them. A moment later the first of the pursuing Lancers came into view.

Ludwig himself rode with the main body of the loyal cavalry, astride a big-boned roan gelding. He listened to Fritz' hasty report, glanced across at the castle and nodded.

"So the black fox has gone to his hole!" he boomed. "We'll smoke him out. Dismount the squadrons and let them open fire on the men behind the battlements. Field guns can be brought from Tarrenberg later, but we'll try to blow in the gates now with dynamite."

The watchers on the walls of the castle had a clear view of their attackers below and could make a good guess on what was to be attempted. Crouching in one of the shallow trenches that had been hastily dug along the edge of the woods to shelter the besiegers, Paul could see some sort of movement going on just above the gate. Then two figures climbed up on the parapet, in plain sight. Once was Alicia. The other was Baron Schwartzwald himself.

Schwartzwald held the girl by one hand twisted in the ropes that bound her, and he stood so close that no one below would dare to fire at him for fear of hitting the girl. He held his other arm above his head in a command for silence.

Whistles trilled loudly along the besieging lines, and the firing died away. The Lord of Schloss Drachen would not have been able to make his voice heard at that distance, but he went through a brief bit of pantomime which was only too understandable. He pointed at Alicia, and he pointed down at the gate below him, which the Lancers were preparing to storm. For an instant he held his revolver to the girl's head. Then the two of them vanished from sight. It was clear that any attempt to

storm the Dragon Castle would cost the life of the Countess Alicia.

Ludwig chewed his mustaches in sullen silence and glowered across at the now silent walls of the castle. His officers watched him in silence, offering no suggestion. At last the King turned away with an angry gesture.

"Stalemate!" he growled. "We have Schwartzwald bottled up, but we dare not storm the place. Draw your lines close for a siege, while we try to think of some other plan."

Men of Daring

VERY little happened as the hours of the day went by. The defenders of the Schloss Drachen could not get out, but neither were the besiegers in a position to force their way in. Two field pieces had been brought down from Tarrenberg, but their muzzles remained mute. Reports from other parts of the country showed that the abortive revolt had failed entirely, but that did not alter the stalemate prevailing around Schwartzwald's place of refuge. It looked as though they would simply have to draw siege lines and starve him out. The thought of what might happen to Alicia during that interval kept Paul wandering restlessly around the camp, savage as a prowling wolf.

Paul had not seen Fritz von Carpen for several hours, but late in the afternoon he encountered him near the edge of camp. The young officer looked so cheerful that Paul, in his helpless rage and despair, wanted to grip him by the throat and wipe the smile from his face. Fritz beckoned him aside.

"I have a plan, friend Paul, and the King's permission to try it tonight. You can come with me."

"What is it?"

"It's a wild idea, but it may be mad enough to work. Are you a strong swimmer? Good! Then come with me. I have sent for some things we will need, and I have found a man in my troop who once spent some time in the castle and is familiar with it."

At sunset the campfires of the besiegers

began to twinkle along the shore of the lake. At the same time, two big iron braziers were set alight on the battlements of the shoreward wall of the castle. They shed a pulsating, ruddy glow on the narrow peninsula that led up to the gates and effectively blocked any surprise attempt to rush the gate. Sentries moved lazily along their beats, and the whole place seemed to settle down to all the monotony of a long siege.

As a matter of fact, a picked company of three hundred Lancers, and as many of the loyal infantry who had now arrived from Tarrenberg, were being held under arms in the woods, just out of sight of the castle. Certain other preparations were being made. Very few of the besiegers really went to their tents and other shelters with any intention of sleeping, but the sentries on the castle wall knew nothing of that. Everything was made to appear as though the attackers had accepted the necessity for a prolonged siege.

The night was clear and calm, but there was no moon at all, which fitted well with the scheme Fritz had in mind. During the early hours of the night the two of them crouched in a tent and smoked innumerable cigarettes and said nothing at all. Their plans were ready, their equipment was prepared, and they simply had to wait for an hour late enough so that everybody in Schloss Drachen would probably be asleep, but the sentries.

At last Fritz glanced at his watch and nodded to Paul. They both pulled off their boots, and then stripped down to nothing but their trunks. The Lancer who was to accompany them did the same. The three men were shivering as they walked around the shore until they were well beyond the glow of any lights from either the castle or the camp. Then they waded out into the lake. Paul's teeth were chattering as the water rose to his knees, his waist, and then his chest; but after he had begun to swim, it was not quite so bad.

THE three men swam easily and slowly, careful not to splash and to make even as slight a ripple as possible. They swung in a wide circle, to approach the castle

from the direction of the center of the lake, whence any sort of attack would be least expected by the garrison. The light of the fire-baskets on the shoreward wall did not reach around there, and they knew that only the most keen eyes of sentries would be able to see them on this moonless night. No challenge or outcry broke the silence, and at last they crouched dripping on the narrow shelf of rock just at the foot of the walls.

After pausing a minute to recover their breath, the three intruders prepared the equipment they had brought with them. From around his waist Johann, the trooper, unwrapped a light but strong rope ladder which had been hastily made that afternoon. Paul took a ball of tough, flexible cord which had been wrapped in oiled silk to keep it dry. He began to spread it out on the rock in loose coils. Fritz von Carpen began to remove the oiled silk wrappings from the third piece of equipment—a sturdy bow and arrow.

“The ancient sport of hunting with bow and arrows is still very popular with a certain class of Monrovians,” he had told Paul when explaining the scheme that afternoon. “I am fairly good at it. I studied all sides of the Schloss with field glasses this noon, and there are some carved beams near the base of one tower that may make it practical.”

Standing with his bare feet wide apart, Fritz drew the arrow to the head and aimed it upward. Far overhead they could see the carved ends of three or four heavy beams projecting out through the ancient masonry. Then he released the arrow, which sped upward with one end of the light cord attached to the base of the shaft. It flashed toward the beams—but it fell short and dropped back into the water. Three more times he made the attempt, each time coming a little nearer. On the fifth attempt the arrow flew squarely over the end of the beam and fell down on the far side, leaving a loop of cord behind it. Fritz turned and grinned wolfishly at Paul, his teeth flashing in the starlight.

They tied the rope ladder to one end of the cord and pulled it up with infinite care until it went up over the beam. At once

Paul stepped to the ladder and began to climb. The thin rope that formed the rungs of the ladder cut into his bare feet, but he gritted his teeth and went on.

As he climbed higher, Paul had a feeling of terrible insecurity. The wind sighed past him, the ladder swayed under his weight, and he seemed to be climbing there in space, under the stars, but himself and a few frail strands of rope. This was the most crucial point of the whole mad attempt, for if he were seen now he would be shot down without a chance. They were simply gambling on the chance that the watch on this side of the castle would be lax.

When he was within a few feet of his goal, Paul paused and twisted one hand firmly in the ropes of the ladder. With his free hand he drew a long knife from his belt and thrust it between his teeth. He glanced down, but in the deep shadow under the wall he could not see his companions below at all. That encouraged him, and he quickly climbed the few feet that remained. When he had his hands over the edge of the great beam, it was easy to swing his feet in to reach the battlements of the main wall just beside the tower. An instant later he was safely atop the wall and crouching low in the shadow of a stone buttress. He had managed to invade the Schloss Drachen without discovery!

FOOTSTEPS suddenly sounded from near at hand, the dragging tread of a drowsy man, the scraping jingle of feet which were booted and spurred. A sentry of the Hussars must be making the rounds. Paul, inexpressibly thankful that he had come over the parapet when he did and not a minute later, crouched motionless in the shadow while the man strolled by. Then, by one of those unfortunate twists of fate, the sentry turned straight to the battlements and idly peered over them.

From the man's sudden tensing, visible in his silhouette against the stars, Paul knew that he had seen something. Probably he had glimpsed Fritz climbing up from below, for he lifted his head as

though to shout. There was only one thing to be done, and Paul acted. Like an uncoiled spring, he leaped on the sentry and buried his knife in his throat, the terrible stroke that allows no outcry. He caught the man's body and lowered it silently to the stone flooring of the parapet.

Those minutes that Paul waited for Fritz and the trooper to join him, crouching there on the wall of the Dragon Castle beside the still-warm body of a man he had slain, were among the longest in his life. Innumerable things went through his mind. His quarrel with his father . . . the ideas with which he had come to Monrovia . . . the misguided fanaticism of the people he had at first thought to be patriots, and the complete change in his own sentiment on the matter—all went through his mind like a panorama. Then he started violently and nearly used his knife as Fritz landed noiselessly beside him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

The trooper glanced about him after he joined them, then pointed to a small door in the base of the tower. It opened on a narrow stone stair that led downward, with a dim glow of light coming from below. They dragged the body of the Hussar inside the door. Fritz nodded to the trooper.

"Put on his uniform, Johann!" he whispered. "You are nearest his size, and it may help us."

They moved stealthily down the winding stairs, the bare feet of Paul and Fritz leaving wet prints behind. Johann kept some six feet in the lead. On a lower landing they met a drowsy sentry who did no more than glance at Johann's uniform and then went down in a crumpled heap as the barrel of a heavy revolver crashed down on top of his head.

"Another uniform for us, *Herr* Captain!" the trooper whispered jubilantly. "And these are the correct stairs. They will lead us to the corridor between the dungeons under the castle."

Eventually they found themselves in a dim, lamplit corridor far down in the base of the Schloss Drachen. Barred doors were on either hand, leading to damp cells cut out of the solid rock. Most of them seemed not to have been used for genera-

tions, but in one was a gaunt, ragged man with long hair and a beard, who gripped the bars, staring as they passed. He glared sullenly at the black uniforms worn by Paul and Johann, but then his glance fell on their companion.

"Fritz!" he cried hoarsely. "Fritz von Carpen! What in God's name are *you* doing in this hellish place?"

For an instant Fritz stared at the man in puzzled surprise. Then his eyes grew round with wonder.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" he said softly. "It is Count Alexis von Sternberg, supposed to have died on a hunting trip half a year ago."

Sabers and Gunfire

SIX months of close confinement had turned Alicia's brother into a ragged scarecrow, but they had not impaired his vigor. When they freed him from his cell, he seized one of the sabers and tested the feel of the grip, swinging the heavy weapon like a toy.

"I have a heavy score to settle with the black hellions who guard this place for Schwartzwald," he said grimly. "They came upon us by surprise when we were hunting, threw my two guides in the river and dragged me here. Let's go!"

"We must first find your sister," Fritz said.

"*Gott!* Alicia is here, too? I did not know. Then she must be in one of the cells in the next corridor."

They moved across to another line of dungeons, and came face to face with a pair of Hussars who were taken completely by surprise. Alexis sprang at one of them with a bestial snarl born of his long months of imprisonment, and Johann accounted for the other. When Fritz and Alexis had taken their clothing, the entire little group of interlopers was equipped with black uniforms. They had now a fair chance of passing for members of the garrison. They moved down the line of cells in the last corridor, and finally they found Alicia. She and her brother said little to each other, but the depth of their emotion at this reunion was very evident.

Now came the hardest part of this reckless expedition which had so far proceeded so fortunately. They had won their way into the Schloss Drachen—but now they had to get out again.

"We can still make a rush for the courtyard and hope to unbar the gate before the guards get over their surprise," Fritz said. "The storming party on shore is ready and will make a rush the moment we give them the signal."

"Why do that?" Paul demurred. "We did not think we would find Alicia so easily. Let's go down the ladder the way we came, and then there will be no reason why our forces cannot blast down the gates and storm the castle."

"Right! Back to the stairway in the wall!"

They returned to the narrow door at the foot of the spiral stair, and as Paul was in the lead, he was the one to jerk it open. An instant later he had slammed it shut once more and shot the heavy bolts—only just in time. The stairs were filled with Hussars hurrying down. Evidently the slain sentry on the wall above had been discovered, and probably the rope ladder as well.

EVEN as they gathered for a hasty council, the narrow door began to shake and quiver under the smashing impact of many rifle-butts. Its timbers and bolts were stout, but they could not stand up for long under that battering.

With that means of retreat cut off, the situation of the little group was very perilous. It was Johann, the trooper, who made the only possible suggestion, his swarthy face sharp and eager in the light of the smoky lantern that hung in the middle of the rocky corridor.

"They must either break down that door to get out of those stairs, or else go all the way to the top of the walls again. It gives us a few minutes. We can try to rush for the main gate. I know the way."

Fritz's eyes kindled.

"Good! Show us the way!"

"Much of the way we will be in sight of others," Johann said hesitantly. "We

who now wear Hussar uniforms can pass inspection at a little distance, but Madame the Countess—”

“I understand,” Alicia said. “Go on and leave me here. I will probably be safe during the short time you will need to get the gate open and let your men in.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Paul said, but Fritz shook his head.

“We can’t do that. If we move in a compact group, perhaps no one will notice that we have a girl with us until it is too late.”

“Wait—I have it!” Alicia said. She ran into the cell where she had been imprisoned and came back with a short length of rope. “Here, tie my hands again—quickly! They have kept me bound whenever I was outside the cell, and if you lead me along that way, anyone who sees us may simply think that the Baron has sent for me again.”

She turned her back to Paul, crossing her wrists, and he hastily tied her hands. He held the end of the rope, and the rest of the group formed around them. Alicia walked with head and shoulders bowed, as though weary and dispirited. With Johann leading the way, the rest of them trying to appear casual and unhurried, they climbed the main stairs that led up to the courtyard.

The stairs ended in a bare guardroom that looked out on a sort of covered cloister at the side of the courtyard away from the main gate. They hesitated for an instant, then boldly walked out the door.

They stood there hesitantly.

“Head straight across the yard,” Fritz whispered fiercely. “Stick to a walk until we’re challenged, then run for it. When we reach the gate, Paul and Alexis take down the bars, while Johann and I cover you.”

The covered passage was full of lounging Hussars, many of them dozing on blankets stretched out on the stones, but the light was very dim. Some of them looked up drowsily as the little group came out of the guardroom, then shrugged and glanced away, reassured by the sight of the familiar uniforms of their own regiment.

THE thing went very much as Fritz hoped. The hour was late and the light was dim; none of the people who saw them had the faintest idea that there were any interlopers within the castle. Those who did have a vague suspicion wasted precious seconds wondering if they ought to do anything about it.

Meanwhile, the silent little group was halfway across the courtyard toward the gate. Paul was beginning to hope that they would actually reach their goal unchallenged when a strident cry came from the battlements behind and above them.

“Stop them! Seize those men! They are Loyalists dressed in Hussar uniforms!” Some of the party on the spiral stair had evidently retraced their way to the top of the wall. Fritz von Carpen’s voice came in a low hiss:

“Run for it! Keep together. *Now!*”

Abandoning further attempt at concealment, they sprinted toward the deep shadows that masked the archway of the gate. A man fired a carbine at them from the wall above. Another sprang in front of them with drawn saber, only to go down under the raking slash of Johann’s heavy weapon. Hundreds of wildly shouting Hussars were pouring down the steps from the parapet atop the wall, others came tumbling out of the doorways that led to the barracks, but the invaders had too much of a start.

Running into the tunnel that led to the actual gate, Paul and Alexis began to lift down the heavy bars. Fritz fired the three quick shots that were the agreed signal, then turned to face the hordes of men who were swarming toward him. He had his saber in his right hand, his revolver in his left, and his teeth were bared like those of a snarling wolf, Johann stolidly moved up to take position just to Fritz’s left.

Pressure of numbers slowly forced Fritz and Johann back, foot by foot, but they contested every inch of the way. In the narrow space, the very numbers of the attackers worked against them, for they got in each other’s way and created a vast confusion, whereas the two men defending the passage knew just what they were doing. There was a great danger of meet-

ing blades. It was an uneven struggle that could end in but one way, and that in a very few moments more—but already half the bars of the gate had been removed. A confused shouting outside showed that the storming party was coming up as arranged.

Glancing back as he lifted down the last bar, Paul saw Johann stagger and fall while the saber dropped from his failing hand. The old war-dog was down, dying as he would have liked to die—with a ring of his slain around him. Paul shouted to Alexis to swing the gates open, and then he leaped forward to take Johann's place at von Carpen's left.

THE last few incidents in the drama crowded close on each other's heels. Alexis managed to swing the massive gates open so that there was a gap of several feet between them. The desperate Hussars surged forward in a last effort, and Fritz went to his knees as he bled from half a dozen wounds. Then the thud of many hoofs sounded on the causeway outside the gate and three hundred Lancers swarmed through the opened portal. They swung their long weapons downward as they passed under the archway, and then rode full into the mass of the Hussars without drawing rein. After them came the rest of the storming party, three companies of veteran infantry moving at the double.

(The End.)

with fixed bayonets gleaming in the ruddy light of the still blazing fire baskets atop the wall. The Schloss Drachen had fallen!

Paul had dropped his saber as the cavalry rode into the castle. He picked Alicia up in his arms and leaned against the wall in the little eddy of safety just back of one of the opened gates. He fought for control against the waves of weariness that were sweeping over him, now that the castle was captured and the struggle was over. Then, with great deliberation, he kissed Alicia.

"Really, darling," she said shakily, "you might at least untie my hands!"

A deep rumble of mirth sounded from nearby, and Paul glanced up to see Ludwig astride his big roan horse in the shadow of the gate. Paul threw one arm around the girl's shoulders in a protective gesture that was half defiance, but then he realized that the King was grinning at them. So was Count Alexis, who leaned on his bloody saber nearby; so was Fritz von Carpen, who sat propped against a heap of bodies while his wounds were being bandaged.

"Don't look so worried, Paul!" Ludwig boomed. "Alicia is no longer heir to the throne, now that her brother has come back to life. After all, I have long thought that it might not be a bad idea to have a little new blood in the House of Tarrenberg. *Ju wohl!*"



FLAMING BARRIERS

In answer to a fighting challenge, Cal Brady
erects a barrier of flaming guns and courage



*"Hit her, will you?"
Cal gritted, and his Colt
began hammering.*

GUN *by* LEE BOND



Cal Gets a Shock

CAL BRADY'S voice lifted in a shrill, exultant whoop as the big sorrel gelding he had just mounted went into a vicious fit of bucking. Brady's body swayed and bobbed loosely in the

saddle, and there was a grin on his lean, bronzed face as he gave the sorrel a rough, though not cruel gouging with spur rowels. Dust boiled up within the new pole corral, and the sorrel's squeals and grunts of anger came shrilly above the mad pounding of hoofs.

"Hook the critter, Cal!" Runt Walton yelled from the topmost rail of the corral. He removed his battered old Stetson from a mop of tow-colored hair and began fanning the air frantically, brown eyes following every sinewy twist of the bucking horse. He became so enthusiastic in his waving that he smacked his hat full into the face of Gooseneck Gorman, who sat beside him. Gooseneck was a tall, cadaverous fellow, with sunken black eyes.

"Quit it!" Gooseneck yelled, after the hat had whipped into his face. "Dang it. I want to see Cal get slung so he can't go traipsin' around after that Lenore Preston filly!"

But Cal Brady showed no signs of getting tossed into the dirt and soiling his new Levi's, neat gray shirt and big, clear beaver Stetson. In fact the sorrel was giving up the notion of tossing him off even as Gooseneck spoke.

The big gelding grunted disgustedly, did an angry little crow hop, then sidled toward the corral fence, where the two punchers sat grinning at their young boss. There was a twinkle to his gray eyes as he gazed up at them.

"Wanted to see me tossed, eh?" he chuckled. "Well, I've been tossed plenty, that's a fact, but this is my lucky day!"

"Uh-huh!" Gooseneck said sourly. "Lenore Preston gets home today after four years back East. And you'll ride that fine gelding sway-backed getting down to the Ladder P to see her, too!"

"As if you two knot-heads aren't anxious to see Lenore, too!" Cal laughed. "And say, when she comes and sees that—" He waved toward a two-story house of newly peeled pine logs that sat beyond the corral. The house was shadowed by pines. Below the wide bench where it stood ran a mountain stream, glinting like silver as it wound its way between grassy banks.

Cattle grazed here and there in the great, granite-walled valley—cattle that wore Cal Brady's Block B brand. The pride Cal felt, as he surveyed this great, fertile basin of Lost Valley, was pardonable. With a start like this—

"That fellow's plumb addle-brained, Gooseneck!" Runt Walton's voice ripped

through Cal's thoughts. "Look at him!"

"Say, come out of it, you two cow-pokes!" Cal laughed. "When we ride up here with Lenore, and she sees the house—"

"Yeah," Runt Walton said. "And maybe she's married. A pretty gal like Lenore Preston can't circulate around a fancy Eastern college and stay single long."

"Say, you two sun-dodgin' scallawags, get a hustle on!" Cal laughed. "Lenore will be at the Ladder P by the time we can ride down there. Come on!"

But Cal Brady's grin was forced now. His enthusiasm was dead, and there was a troubled look clouding his gray eyes.

WHAT Runt had said about Lenore being married—somehow Cal could not quite get the idea out of his mind. He felt like cuffing Runt for having said such a thing.

Gooseneck and Runt were still razzing him as they rode away from the new corral a few minutes later. Cal managed to grin, but the fear within him was growing by leaps and bounds. Lenore had been gone so long! She might have learned to care for some Eastern fellow.

He jammed the spurs to the big sorrel finally and shot ahead of his two yammering punchers. And he kept ahead of the worrisome pair as he raced down through the fertile basin and into the sheer-walled pass beyond.

Through the center of the pass the mountain stream boiled, filling the dim blue world beyond the basin with a thunderous roar as it cascaded down worn granite to boom dully in a deep pool its own force had gouged in the earth. Mists rose like vapor, to float back through the pass. The sun caught the spray near the foot of the falls, painting a brilliant rainbow against the white and boiling water.

But Cal Brady's gray eyes did not linger on the beauty of the falls. He was looking out over mile after mile of hills that gradually fell away to a grim tan smudge on the far horizon that was the desert proper, a good fifty miles away, yet discernible as a tan smudge through the rarefied air.

But Cal's mind was not on the desert and the distance it lay from the cool, timbered mountains at his back. His eyes were picking out landmarks much closer—the two round-topped hills that lifted above their sisters only five miles or so away. Those round-domed hills were on Ladder P range, close to the big, rambling ranch house where Lenore would be.

Cal's throat tightened and his heart thumped a little heavily as he rode on down through the pass and struck the gentle slope that rolled away to the hills. His mood became more somber with each passing mile.

So Cal rode down from his wilderness ranch, torn by hope and doubt, fear and happiness. He was grim when he finally topped the last ridge and dipped down into the wide, shallow little basin where the great white Ladder P ranch house sat sprawled comfortably beneath huge oak and cottonwood trees. Then he was across the shallow basin and dismounting at the arched yard gate, eyes going instinctively to the wide, shadowed porch.

"Cal! Cal Brady!"

THE cry brought Cal up straight, a sudden grin on his tanned face. He jumped through the yard gate, Lenore's name on his lips. He saw her then as she came from a cool nook on the porch—saw the filmy sheen of her sheer blue dress.

She came lightly down the wide steps, both hands outstretched toward him.

"Lenore!" he said, all doubt and fear suddenly vanishing as he strode down the gravelly path. Then he clamped his boot-heels down hard, skidding himself to a sudden, numbed halt.

From the deep porch behind the girl stepped a tall figure—a lean, blond-headed fellow who regarded Cal with eyes that were amused and aloof. The stranger fished a silver cigarette case from one pocket of a well tailored gray sport coat, tapped the ready-made smoke on the case, then returned the case to his pocket. There was a faint smile on his mouth as he stalked down the steps and halted beside the girl.

Lenore Preston swayed forward until

her slender hands were almost touching Cal Brady's big shoulders. But Cal had eyes only for that smugly smiling young man who had lighted his cigarette and was stepping closer to Lenore. He reached out a slim, well kept hand, laid it gently yet possessively on Lenore's arm.

"I take it, my dear, that this is Cal Brady, the wild and woolly cowboy you have talked about," the blond youth said with a grating little laugh. "But my word, Lenore, the fellow is even wilder than you said he was! The man hasn't even spoken to you!"

"Saddle Up"

CAL BRADY was never sure just how he got through the half hour he spent there on the Ladder P porch. Lenore Preston looked hurt, and Cal saw her regarding him almost angrily at times. He had managed to shake hands with her before coming up onto the porch.

"Glad to see you back home, Miss Preston," Cal had managed to say. Then he had been introduced to the blond youth, whose name was Randall Mason.

"Rand has been wanting to meet you, Cal." Lenore tried to thaw the chill atmosphere. "I've told him so much about you."

"Indeed she has!" Mason laughed his cool supercilious laugh. "As a matter of fact, Brady, I've heard a good deal about you in the three years I've—ah—known Lenore."

Cal tried to speak, but no word could get out. He kept shoving nervous fingers through his shock of unruly brown hair. He moistened his lips a dozen times as if to speak, but each time gave up.

Then Gooseneck Gorman and Runt came clattering up onto the porch, their leathery faces split in wide grins. The noisy pair charged toward Lenore, who jumped to her feet and met them with outstretched arms.

"Gooseneck! Runt!" she greeted them. "You haven't changed a bit!"

"And you haven't!" Gooseneck said.

"Golly. Gosh darn!" Runt said. "You're sure enough—"

"Jolly party, isn't it?" The cool, sneering remark cut across the punchers' raving.

Gooseneck and Runt turned, staring at the smug young man who sat regarding them with contemptuous amusement.

"Sa-aa-y!" Runt's nose twitched as he eyed Randall Mason. "Lenore, you've gone and brought home one of them soovy-neer things!"

"Uh-huh!" Gooseneck said. "One of those knick-knacks people pick up—"

"Why, you miserable little moron!" Mason snapped, leaping to his feet, pale eyes boring Runt Walton. "If you think you're being funny you're sadly mistaken."

"Gooseneck," Runt said in a grieved tone, "what's that there word moron mean?"

"I couldn't rightfully say," Gooseneck said solemnly. "But if any hombre called *me* one, I think I'd paste him on his snoot."

"Good idea!" Runt nodded, his fists clenching.

"Stop it!" Lenore cried, stepping squarely in front of Randall Mason. "Runt, I'm ashamed of you and Gooseneck! Mr. Mason is my guest, and you'll treat him as such or leave this place."

"There's some hot air mixed up in what you said, Lenore," Gooseneck observed drily, "but you can't fool Runt and me. Reckon we're invited off the place pronto. Come on, Runt!"

THERE was nothing Runt could do, for Gooseneck literally dragged him across the porch. But Runt Walton's eyes were blazing, and he twisted his head to glare back.

"Hell!" he exploded. "That there tailored coat couldn't be a man, Lenore, or it wouldn't hide behind your skirts! Better let me shoot it before it hurts somebody!"

Mason snarled an oath from one corner of his thin mouth and made as if to step forward. But Lenore turned on him, dark eyes blazing.

"Rand, I told you to expect some kidding when you came out here!" she cried. "If you hadn't gotten nasty first, those two boys would never have said a thing out of the way to you."

"Then I'm to understand that their

crude behavior is something to be borne with grace?"

"They're my own people." Lenore's voice came more calmly now. "To you, Rand, they may seem crude, uncouth, ill-bred. Their ways are vastly different from yours. They think differently, act differently, and *are* different people from those back East. They can't help their lack of polish and—"

The girl caught herself, turning suddenly to look at Cal Brady. There was a white line forming about his mouth. Cal's gray eyes were puckered a little, and Lenore saw a blaze there that made her step quickly forward.

"Cal, don't misunderstand!" she cried. "I—I wasn't driving my remarks at you or—or anyone in particular."

"Even Brady has sense enough to know that, Lenore." Mason's thin chuckle was like a whip-lash across Cal's flesh. "But enough of that. Brady, I understand that you own a place known as Hidden Valley."

"Oh, Cal, I'm so glad!" Lenore warmed instantly to the subject. "Hidden Valley's so beautiful! Remember how we used to ride up there and have picnics on that bench above the stream?"

Cal fought desperately for control of himself. Did he remember those rides!

He wanted to tell her of his house and of his cattle, but there was Randall Mason, watching him out of those pale eyes, smiling in that supercilious way he had.

Cal needed no one to tell him that Lenore was quite fond of the pale-eyed, tow-headed Easterner. That they were engaged Cal knew, too, for there was a great, blue-white solitaire on Lenore's finger.

"Yes," Cal heard his own voice saying. "Yes, Mason, I got hold of what is known as Hidden Valley. It's a good ranch spot."

"Lenore has described it to me a good many times," Mason nodded. "Is it true, Brady, that the creek leaves the valley through sheer granite walls a hundred feet or more high? And is it true that there are no side canyons of consequence cutting into the basin, or valley, as you call it?"

"Not that Rand doubts my word, Cal," Lenore said, "but he's an engineer, you see, with a flair for locating dam sites. He thinks the West should be won with irrigation ditches and fences, instead of open range and herds of cattle."

"The old tommyrot of 'this is my range, stranger, so keep off' has gone the way of all myths," Mason shrugged. "With water, the desert beyond the hills could be made to bloom. And those blossoms, Brady, would grow golden dollars."

"You make it sound romantic, Rand," Lenore said. "But that's off the topic. Cal, would you mind greatly if—if Rand and I came up? He wants to see Hidden Valley, you know."

"Why—why, come right ahead." Cal forced a smile to his lips. "You may be a bit surprised, Lenore, for I've changed the valley some. Sure, come right ahead."

CAL BRADY was turning as he finished. He walked down the steps with the stiff, careful tread of a man who has drunk too much and would hide the effects. He saw the gate loom ahead of him, and saw dimly that Gooseneck and Runt Walton were there, standing beside their mounts.

Lenore called something, but Cal didn't hear. He found a swinging stirrup, jabbed a boot-toe into it, and went up into the saddle.

"By gosh, I'd have smacked that sneering devil over if I'd stayed another minute!" he rasped through clenched teeth as his horse plunged away.

"Me, too," Gooseneck said grimly, and Cal realized he would have to be careful not to show his feelings.

But no man could have hidden the hurt that was in Cal Brady's heart. He was white-faced and silent on the road back to Hidden Valley. As he went up past the booming falls and into the cool mists, he was blind to the beauty of the place for the first time. The new house looked cheap and meaningless somehow as he approached, and the valley seemed suddenly depressing, lonely.

Gooseneck and Runt watched him out of troubled eyes, but they were wise

enough to say nothing, and for four days and nights Cal roamed about the place, eating little, sleeping only when sheer weariness lulled his brain.

His cheeks became gaunt, and there were dark rings about his eyes when he stalked out to the corral on the fifth morning. Gooseneck and Runt perked up, for Cal had on his "town" clothes, and there was a six-shooter swung against his right thigh from a shell-studded belt.

"Cal's headin' for Sentinel town to raise himself some hell, I betcha!" Runt whispered. "He'll feel better if he gets on a good drunk, Gooseneck."

"Cal doesn't take to hard drink, and you know it," Gooseneck whispered back. "We've been so busy up here I'd most forgot that he and the town marshal in Sentinel don't hit it off so good."

"Gosh, that's right!" Runt nodded. "But Bull Walker's not rightfully a town marshal. He's just hired by that skinny-faced, penny-pinchin' banker, Nelson Sibley."

"Yeah, but Bull Walker took it on himself to act as town marshal, even if he never was appointed proper," Gooseneck grumbled. "And the skunk jumped Cal one day and got a beating. Nelson Sibley set Bull onto Cal, I betcha."

"But why?" Runt wanted to know.

"Because Cal wouldn't borrow money from his bank to outfit this ranch with!" Gooseneck snorted. "Cal went all the way to Tucson and borrowed what money he needed from a bank he can trust. And did that burn up old squinch-eye Sibley!"

"Bull threatened to shoot Cal on sight," Runt muttered. "Do you reckon he'll try it?"

"I'd bet on it." Gooseneck sounded worried. "And Cal's nerves are frazzled out complete. He's in no shape to go up against a gun-slinger like Bull Walker, Runt."

"Saddle up, boys, if you want to ride into Sentinel with me." Cal called as he approached the corral.

"Gosh!" Gooseneck croaked under his breath. "Hell will sure pop if Bull Walker sees Cal in town!"

Grim-eyed, Runt and Gooseneck saddled

their horses, knowing that arguing with Cal Brady was out of the question.

Straight Between the Eyes

IF Cal expected trouble, no one could have guessed it as he rode into Sentinel's main street. Hands lifted in salute here and there, people called out to the lean young rancher on the sorrel gelding.

Gooseneck and Runt had buckled on their own guns before leaving Hidden Valley, and rode with their hands close to the weapons, eyes alert.

Cal halted before the Elite Saloon, swung lithely down, and looped the sorrel's reins loosely about a gnawed pole. Gooseneck and Runt cursed uneasily, for the Elite was Bull Walker's hangout. They cursed more when Cal headed straight for the batwing doors.

At the sound of the voices Cal turned, frowning at the scowling and nervous punchers. "What's wrong with you two?" he said sharply. "You look and act like—"

"Say, I thought you never would come to town, Cal Brady! What you been doing, hibernating out in that valley you bought?"

The words cut through Cal's voice. He turned sharply, to grip hands with a short, florid man who grinned up at him.

"Hello, Mort," Cal greeted him heartily. "How's the law business these days?"

"Plain hell, if you want the truth," Mort Vinton sputtered, mopping his perspiring face with a limp handkerchief.

"How so?" Cal grinned. "Can't you get anybody into trouble so's you can get 'em out again?"

"Too damned many cases now!" Vinton growled. "Cal, what in hell did she do it for?"

"Who? Do what?" Cal said jerkily. Somehow he knew "she" would be Lenore Preston. The little attorney was staring up at him out of troubled eyes, lips pursed thoughtfully.

"You didn't know?" he asked.

Cal swallowed hard. "Lenore has married Randall Mason!" The thought struck across his brain like the bite of hot metal.

He felt suddenly weak, and moved hastily to the saloon wall, to lean there and fumble with cigarette paper and tobacco.

"I don't get much news up where I've been," he managed to say. "What's up, Mort?"

"You'd better come up to my office," Vinton said. "This will be a blow to you, Cal."

Cal licked his smoke into shape, gripped it in lips that were ringed with white. He nodded at the gray-haired attorney, then followed him along the street, Runt and Gooseneck trailing. They clumped up rickety stairs, turned down along a hallway that was dim and hot. Then they were in Vinton's office, seating themselves.

The attorney swore, fumbling beneath his desk. He brought out a quart bottle, took small glasses from a desk drawer. Ordinarily Cal would have refused the drink, for he never cared for hard liquor, but he felt that the drink would help him now, thaw out the cold fear in his heart.

He downed his drink at a single gulp, shivered a little, and lit his cigarette. Gooseneck, Runt and the attorney had a second drink before anyone spoke.

"Well, what's the news, Mort?" Cal asked. Billowing smoke hid the dread in his eyes as he leaned forward, waiting.

"Lenore Preston is now of age, and I no longer manage the Ladder P affairs as I've been doing since her father's death," the little attorney said quietly. "Eastern schools did something to her, Cal. Softened her brain, if you ask me."

The lawyer stopped to light a black cigar, puffing furiously as the tobacco took fire.

"What does Lenore's age have to do with whatever is bothering you?" Cal asked slowly.

"Plenty!" the attorney snapped. "If she was under age, I'd turn her across my knee and spank her for even mentioning this fool business. But she's of age, and I can't do a thing."

"About *what*?" Cal asked irritably.

"About these." The attorney banged his fist down on a heap of legal-looking papers on his desk. "Cal, that fool girl has given a certain development company

the right to run as many canals across Ladder P range as they see fit. She has practically signed the Ladder P over to that company. In fact, she's signed papers that will give that damned company complete control of the Ladder P, to do with as they please!"

CAL leaned back in his chair. He dragged a hand across his hot face and laughed till his cheeks were scarlet.

"What's so funny?" Vinton bawled. "Cal, are you crazy on that one drink?"

"N-nol" Cal gasped, getting hold of himself. "Mort, you had me scared stiff. I thought—say, what was it about some company having *complete* control of the Ladder P?"

Cal was leaning forward now, face tense, eyes puckered and hot. "And what was that about irrigation ditches?" he pressed, when the lawyer stared at him in amazement. "Go on, Mort, tell me about it. I—I was thinking of something quite different."

"You'd better come down to earth!" Vinton snapped. "Lenore Preston has practically given the Ladder P away to a development company that aims to ditch water down yonder to the desert and sell farms. And Nelson Sibley is the head of that development company!"

Cal Brady sat staring for a long minute, slowly turning over what he had heard. His lean fingers drummed the arm of his chair, and there was again that whiteness about his lips.

"Does Lenore realize what she has done?" he asked finally.

The attorney nodded. "I talked to her until I was blue in the face," he growled. "I showed her exactly what she was doing, Cal. But that damned idiot she aims to marry talked faster than I did. In the end, Lenore signed the papers, saying this was that fool Mason's big chance to prove himself the country's best engineer."

Cal nodded, eyes hardening as he thought the thing out. "And where," he said grimly, "do they figure on getting water to run in their ditches?"

"I tried to find that out," Vinton shrugged, "but if Lenore knows, she won't

talk. Mason gave me his sneering grin and said flatly that there would be water running down there to the desert."

"Hell, that Mason pink-tea lizard is crazy!" Runt snorted. "There's not a place on the Ladder P where a dam could be built that would hold water enough to run all the way down to the desert."

"Of course there ain't!" Gooseneck thundered. "That Mason jigger has euchred Lenore out of her ranch, that's what. He's in cahoots with Nelson Sibley, I'll bet."

"You'd win that bet, Gooseneck," the attorney nodded. "Sibley's been grinning like a fox ever since Lenore signed that mess of papers. And I've seen Mason and Sibley together about every day. Fact is, Mason admitted right out that Sibley had taken him under his wing."

Cal Brady's mind had been rocking back to that unforgettable day when he had ridden to the Ladder P with the hope of telling Lenore of his new house. He thought of the house, of his dashed hopes, and of the things that had been said there on the Ladder P porch that day. A gleam came into his gray eyes, and a cold, hard smile drew his lips to a thin line.

He got up, turned toward the door. "Thanks, Mort, for telling me about this," he said. "And in case you see Mason before I do, tell him he'll have one hell of a time getting his hands on the property he has to have before he can put his irrigation scheme through!"

THERE was new life to Cal's tread as he went down the steps and out onto the street. Runt and Gooseneck were following, their eyes big with amazement.

They saw Cal swing up the raised wooden sidewalk—and saw him plow to a sudden halt as Lenore and Randall Mason stepped from a store porch.

"Howdy!" Cal's voice was almost cheerful as he tipped his broad hat. "I thought maybe you two would be up to my place before this, Lenore. It isn't much of a ride from—"

"Duck, Cal!" Gooseneck bellowed suddenly. "My God, man, look behind!"

Cal swept Lenore and Mason from the

sidewalk with a fierce swipe of his left arm. He spun at the same time, knowing even before he turned what to expect.

He had glimpsed Bull Walker standing just inside the Elite Saloon door as he passed but a moment ago. The self-styled marshal had started, huge jaws hanging open, at sight of Cal Brady. But Cal had pretended not to see him and gone on by. But he saw Bull Walker now—saw the huge, heavy-jowled face mottled with rage, raw murder glinting in the small, thick lidded eyes.

"By hell, I warned you!" Bull roared as Cal spun. "You can't beat up the law, Brady, and get by with it!" His huge, hairy hands were swooping down, splayed thumbs striking at gun hammers before the weapons were out of their holsters.

Cal saw those things. He settled his lean body slightly forward, gray eyes cold and intent. Bull Walker was beginning to grin now, for his guns were clearing leather, tilting.

"Wake up, Cal!" Runt shrilled.

Lenore screamed. Feet pounded as men leaped out of the danger zone. Then a single shot sent its hoarse, flat voice out over the hushed town.

The single shot was echoed by two more, then silence settled again, while Bull Walker settled down slowly on great, trembling legs. Not until he was almost in a sitting position did his great thick body lurch, flop over backward. There was an ominous black dot fairly between Bull Walker's piggish eyes.

Cal Brady calmly replaced the spent shell in his Colt cylinder, holstered the gun. Lenore and Mason were staring at him in white-faced terror.

"That's one of Nelson Sibley's tools that didn't do the work it set out to do." Cal's voice was flat, cold. "I wonder who'll be the next cog to get shot out of Sibley's little irrigation machine?"

A Shot from Ambush

IT was a long, tense moment before the dead silence was broken. The first sounds that came were small, and ran along the street like waves following the

sudden plunge of a stone into placid waters.

"Hell!" some hoarse-voiced man croaked. "Cal Brady let Bull Walker draw and *then* beat him to the trigger!"

Voices lifted then, and men came out of cramped positions to move in a sudden flurry of tinkling spurs and clumping boot-heels.

Randall Mason's pale eyes were wide and staring. He was shorn of his self-possession for the moment. He dragged a shaky hand across his damp forehead, eyes held as if by some magnetic force to the grim, cold face of Cal Brady.

"You—you *killed* him!" Mason's voice was high-pitched, shaky. "Good Lord, Brady, you shot that man dead!"

"To save my own hide," Cal nodded. "You and Nelson Sibley started something, Mason, when you set out to grab this country and rob its people. You made a fine, brave start, too, by robbing a girl. You oughta be proud of yourself!"

Mason shivered, jerked his eyes away from that grim brown face. "Come, Lenore," he said huskily, and drew her away.

Cal Brady laughed.

There was a hum of low voices behind him, where a curious and excited crowd had formed about the dead gunfighter who had posed as marshal. Cal heard those voices, but did not turn to look at the crowd. He kept his eyes on Lenore Preston.

The girl and Mason were cutting straight across the street, heading for the little red brick building that was Nelson Sibley's bank. Cal saw the bank door jerk open, saw Sibley come down the two stone steps to the sidewalk.

Sibley was a thin, bony-looking fellow, with a sharp-chinned face and greedy little eyes that were more green than gray. Cal heard Sibley yelling questions at Mason, and saw the banker pawing nervously at his hair, his bony fingers shaky.

Cal stepped out into the street, past the crowd, and headed for the bank, a light of grim amusement in his cold eyes. But he was less than halfway across when Lenore tugged her arm free from Mason's and spun quickly. She came straight at Cal, her face white beneath the brim of her Stetson. As her slender hands moved the

sun struck white hot sparks from the big diamond on her left hand. The flash of the stone's fire was like cold water in Cal Brady's face. He doffed his hat slowly, once more grim.

"WHAT does this mean, Cal?" Lenore's voice was quiet, but troubled. "Why did Bull Walker want to kill you?"

Cal thrilled in spite of himself. Eastern schools or no, Lenore was making no silly flutter over seeing a man shot dead. There was deep concern in her eyes now as she came closer, laid a hand on his arm.

"Why, Cal?" she asked. "What's wrong? Why did he want to kill you?"

"Sibley's orders." Cal fought for self-control, forcing his voice to sound calm. "I hate what happened, for Bull Walker was only a tool. Hired killer, yes—but only a tool in the hands of Nelson Sibley."

"Cal, I was so scared I almost fainted," Lenore said. "I thought you'd never defend yourself. But what if Sibley has you arrested and charged with murder?"

"He won't do that. You see, Lenore, I'm only one of those crude, unpolished Westerners you mentioned the other day. Still, I've got sense enough to know that there were too many witnesses to what happened for Sibley to make a murder charge hold against me."

Two spots of color came into Lenore's cheeks. She drew her hand from his arm.

"I meant nothing personal by what I said out at the house the other day, Cal." Her voice was sharp, the color in her cheeks mounted. "But if you choose to think I did, that's your business. Anyway, that's beside the point. What I'd like to know is why Sibley would want you killed. I think you're jumping at conclusions."

"Another crude Western custom, eh?" he said. "Well, maybe you're right. On the other hand, I stand in the way of Nelson Sibley and that oily little city slicker you aim to marry."

"Oh, how dare you!" Lenore cried. "I thought you were bigger than that! Why, this whole thing is simply—simply that you're sulky and ill-tempered because—because—"

Cal Brady reached out, cupped her chin

in one big hand, and lifted her face until her angry eyes were staring up at him.

"I've loved you always, Lenore," he said calmly. "I've loved you since we were kids together, when my folks owned the old Block B that joined your dad's Ladder P. You've known that—"

"This—this is no time for that." Lenore tried desperately to make her voice severe, but her lips were unsteady, her eyes infinitely appealing.

"I'm telling you this, Lenore, because I want you to understand that whatever steps I have to take will be to protect what is mine." Cal's voice was a little strained despite his effort at self-control. "I sold the old Block B and put the money in Hidden Valley—plus some I had to borrow. But I know that my mother and dad would approve if they were living, for the old spread was worn out, too small to carry on."

"I'm glad, Cal," Lenore said. "But I still don't see what you're talking about. Oh, I understand about Hidden Valley—yes—and I'm glad you have it, since you've always dreamed of building your ranch there. But this trouble you hint at is what I can't understand. I'm afraid, Cal, that you're simply being a—a cad, trying to hint that Rand Mason isn't—trustworthy."

"I won't argue that," Cal snapped. "But I will ask one favor, Lenore. Will you keep your eyes and ears open when you're around Mason and Sibley?"

Before she could answer, there came a shrill voice from across the street, and Nelson Sibley came rushing out into the deep dust, waving one bony fist at Cal. The banker skidded to a halt, face furious, eyes glittering beneath scraggly brows.

"You—you murderer!" he shouted. "I'll have the law on you for this, Brady! This community of decent, law-abiding citizens will not tolerate your killing an honest man that way. You'll hang for this if—"

"You'll bust a cinch, Sibley, if you don't calm down!" Cal cut in sharply. "Get back to your bank, before I punch some sense into you!"

Cal stepped forward, and the fuming banker fled. Gooseneck and Runt came on the jump, hands on gun-butts. Mason

stepped down into the dusty street, caught Lenore's arm and led her away.

Cal Brady watched them a moment out of narrowed eyes, then turned to his two cowboys. "War's over," he told them shortly. "Come on, boys, we'll have to get home and prepare for company."

"Company!" Gooseneck grunted.

"Yeah, company," Cal said. "Randall Mason and Sibley will be up to Hidden Valley sometime tomorrow, if I know straight up from down."

"Oh, they will, huh?" Runt grinned broadly. "Say, there's a big cottonwood just below the house that's got some mighty stout limbs on it. Gooseneck, if you and I got a fit of hanging fever—"

"It'll be worse than that before it's over," Cal said. "You two knot-heads see the handwriting on the wall?"

"We're not close to any walls, and my eyes are dim," Gooseneck snorted. "Cal, Runt and I are fair bustin' with wonder. What's it all about?"

"Mason and Sibley have set out to irrigate the desert down yonder and clean up a million dollars," Cal said as he moved down the center of the street.

People lined the sidewalk, and there was still a knot of men about the spot where Walker had fallen, although the gunman's body had been carried away.

"Hell, we already know about that irrigation pipe-dream!" Runt snorted. "What Gooseneck and I want to know is why you got some of your old fire back so sudden-like."

"Fire's right," Cal grinned. "Boys, we're sitting on a keg of powder, and the fuse is due to get lit most any time."

"All right, Runt," Gooseneck said in a grimly resigned voice. "You take his legs and I'll take him by the horns. We'll have to waller him in the dirt until he quits being mysterious and talks straight out."

"Idiots!" Cal snorted. "To run water all the way down to the desert, Sibley and Mason will have to have a mighty big dam. Where could they build one that would hold such an amount of water?"

"Gooseneck and I have sprained our brains trying to figure that out," Runt growled.

"Sprained *what?*" Cal grinned. "Say, there's only one place in this country where a dam could be built that would impound enough water for this scheme of Sibley's—and that place, boys, is Hidden Valley."

"Aw, what the heck!" Runt snorted. "Cal, you own Hidden Valley. Sibley couldn't get it in a million years."

"If something happened to my cattle, I couldn't raise the money to pay off the small mortgage against the place this fall." Cal explained grimly. "On the other hand, if something happened to *me*, Nelson Sibley wouldn't be above producing a deed to Hidden Valley, said deed reading subject to existing encumbrances. That would give him a chance to pay off what I owe and grab the valley."

"You mean—" Gooseneck got no further. As if to offer ghastly proof of the thing just suggested, there came the dull, sinister *smack!* of a striking bullet.

Cal Brady lurched, lost his footing, and fell face down in the dirt. His Stetson rolled aside, to show a sluggish flow of blood seeping slowly through his hair, staining the dust red. From somewhere down and across the street came the sharp, whip-like crack of a rifle.

"Look!" Gooseneck Gorman's voice was almost a scream. "Smoke coming from the door of that old building down yonder that used to be the Hitch Rail Saloon!"

"Cal's done for, Gooseneck!" Runt choked. "Run! Help me corner the bush-whackin' son that did this!"

"Get a Rope!"

SENTINEL was still in an uproar when Cal Brady opened his eyes. There was a strong scent of antiseptics in the air, and his head felt cold and heavy. He looked slowly about, saw the many strained faces there above him.

"The bullet hit that turquoise-studded hatband of his, glanced upward," a voice sounded as if miles away. "I took seven stitches in his scalp. But he is suffering only from the shock. A mighty lucky thing that bullet hit one of those turquoise settings in his Navajo hatband, I can tell you!"

"Thanks, Doc." Cal recognized that second voice as Gooseneck's. "But are you dead sure Cal's skull ain't busted?"

"It's only a scalp wound, Gorman," came the calm reply. "Don't worry now. Brady will have a headache and a sore scalp, but nothing worse. He's a mighty lucky hombre, if you ask me."

Cal heard, but was still too numb and drowsy to speak. His eyes closed wearily, and for the next half hour he was only half-conscious.

Then he felt the first hot, stabbing pains along the back of his head, and was surprised to find himself sitting up. When he opened his eyes, this time his vision was quite clear, and he managed a feeble smile. Gooseneck and Runt were beside him, handling him with gentle hands as they begged him to lie down and relax.

"Wow!" Cal cried. "My head's a balloon. What happened?" He looked about, guessed he had been carried to the town's one hotel. He was undressed and the bed did feel good. But he pushed his two punchers away, glancing at a row of men who stood along the far wall.

"Why so solemn, gents?" he grinned. "After all, it's *my* head that hurts!"

"Cal, you came damned close to going over the Big Divide," a grizzled merchant said. "Any idea who would be interested in seeing you put six feet under?"

"My ideas would be hard to untangle from this headache I've got," Cal stalled. "Did anybody get a look at the gent who handed me this wallop? Seems I heard a rifle crack, but I'm not sure."

"You heard a shot, all right," Runt said, "but it seems nobody got a line on the jasper that did the shootin'. He was holed up down in the old deserted building that used to be the Hitch Rail Saloon."

"A dozen of us got there right after Runt and Gooseneck," another man volunteered. "There were tracks in the dust on the floor of the old building, but they didn't tell us much."

"Anyway, Cal is all right," another man said shakily. "Me, I'm heading for the Elite. I need something to steady my nerves."

The men called friendly farewells and

filed out. Cal listened until the clumping of booted feet grew dim in the outside hall, then looked keenly at his two punchers. They were grim-lipped, and Cal needed no one to tell him that those two had discovered something they hadn't wanted to tell anyone just yet.

Still pale and shaky, but far from disabled, Cal donned his clothes. He was just finishing knotting his neckerchief when Runt fished a small white cylinder from one shirt pocket and held it out, grimly silent.

CAL frowned, recognizing the thing as the stub of a ready-made cigarette. He took it, glanced at the burned end, which showed plainly that it had been stamped under a boot or shoe sole, then turned it slowly, reading the maker's name on the white paper.

"Well?" he said.

"Uh-huh, damn well!" Gooseneck snarled. "Every man buck in this country twists his own smokes with Bull and brown papers. A few use white papers, sure. But outside of drummers and that stud dealer down at the Elite, nobody in this neck of the woods uses ready-made cigarettes—except one hombre who's just lit in our midst."

"In other words, Gooseneck, you figure Mason is the man who took that pot-shot at me."

"Who else?" Runt said somberly. "I sashayed down to the Elite awhile ago and mooched a ready-made cigarette from that stud dealer. Here it is."

Cal glanced at the unsmoked cigarette. The brand was different from the one on the stub Runt had given him.

"We found that stub by the front door of that old building," Gooseneck explained. "Cal, you'd better hunt Mason up and put a bullet in him before he takes another pop at you."

Cal lifted his hands to his head, feeling gingerly of the tight bandages. He took his Stetson from the washstand and tugged gently at it, until it was fitted down over the bandages. The hat rode at a crazy angle, but it would stay put.

"Come on, boys," he called grimly. "I

reckon what sign there was in that old building has been tromped out by now. Just the same, I want to have a look-see. This smells fishy as hell to me."

"What do you mean, fishy?" Runt growled. "It's as plain as the nose on your face, Cal—Randall Mason tried to kill you!"

"That's where the boot pinches," Cal said. "This all points a little *too* strong at Mason."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Gooseneck growled. "Runt and I kept what we knew a secret, figuring you'd want to settle with Mason in your own way. And here you go pawin' dirt, disbelieving us!"

"I believe you boys, sure," Cal said, "but I'm not convinced that Mason did that shooting. Mason is a full-fledged skunk, but he's not a killer. I doubt if he could hit the broad side of a barn with any kind of a gun."

Gooseneck and Runt glowered their disgust, but offered no further argument. Cal led the way out of the room and down the steps into the hotel's little lobby. There was a crowd there, and Cal found it hard to get away from the men who swarmed around him to ask questions or tell him how lucky he was. But he broke free at last.

He was striding toward the door when Lenore entered, white-faced and breathless. She stopped short at sight of Cal.

"Cal! Oh, Cal!" She came swiftly to him, hands reaching out as if to prove by touch that he was real. "I—I just heard!" Lenore seemed not to know that the crowd there in the lobby had become still, all watching. "I just heard, Cal. They said that you were—were dead!"

Lenore swayed, shuddering. Cal reached out to steady her.

"Here!" he called sharply. "Steady, little partner! No sense going to pieces, is there? Come on, Lenore, snap out of it!"

She sighed, and for the briefest moment Cal felt her lie motionless in his arms. Then her eyes were open, and she was straightening up, a wan smile on her lips.

"Very touching, to say the least! Does one pay on entering, or is the show free? Nice audience we have!"

THE cold, sneering voice was like a plunge into icy water. Cal jerked erect, staring straight over Lenore's head. He felt her stiffen. Then she was out of his arms, and Randall Mason was walking through the door, an amused, contemptuous smile on his thin lips.

"Get him!" Gooseneck yelled. "Nail that dressed-up doll-face, Runt!"

"Hold it!" Cal snapped as his two cowboys started forward.

"Eh?" Mason sneered, pale brows arching as he eyed the angry punchers. "So the bold gunman has to keep his—"

"You'd better keep your mouth shut, Mason!" Cal snapped. He knew Gooseneck and Runt couldn't be controlled if Randall Mason loosed so much as one insulting remark.

Mason's sneering smile widened, and his pale eyes flashed defiance as he came forward, arrogant, almost swaggering, to take hold of Lenore Preston's arm.

"I think the spectators have had enough for the time being, my dear," he said, his voice unruffled, though anger made his lips twitch, and his cheeks were white, drawn.

Cal saw Lenore shrink back, face flushing. He also saw Mason's long, tapering fingers wrap tightly about the girl's arm, saw her wince as those fingers pressed into the flesh.

"Rand!" she cried sharply. "You're hurting me—let go!"

"Another act?" His voice had an acid sting. "My dear, this sort of thing— Say, let go!" Mason almost yelled the last three words. Cal Brady had stepped forward, lips tight, a hot glow in his narrowed eyes. His big, work-hardened hand closed down like a vise over Randall Mason's bent elbow.

Mason tried to jerk himself around, but groaned and turned white as he felt those powerful fingers clamp down until it seemed that the very bones of his arm were being mashed.

"Time to go, at that." Cal's voice was level, hard. "Come on, Mason. I'll walk a ways with you and Miss Preston."

"By George, you can't handle me like this!" Mason began. "You strutting, scum-bred killer, I'll—" His voice ended in

a choked gasp, for Cal Brady's hand clamped down still tighter.

"Quit kidding, Mason!" Cal said. "Some of these men might think I was actually forcing you to walk with me."

Randall Mason looked furtively up at the big cowboy's face and let himself be shoved out through the front door and along the street.

"Cal! Don't, Cal!" Lenore's voice came tensely as she kept pace with Randall Mason. "For heaven's sake, Cal, don't make a scene! I'll die of mortification if you do!"

"I thought of that." Cal's blazing eyes stared straight ahead. "If I hadn't, I'd have broken this slimy egg's neck back there in the hotel. Mason, if you ever lay hands on her again, I'll rip you to pieces as sure as God made little apples. Is that clear? Answer me! Do you hear?"

"Yes!" Mason's voice was a gasp. "You're breaking my arm! Let go!"

Mason's knees were wobbling and he tried to lag back. But he shot forward suddenly, and there was the loud *whap!* of a booted foot against the seat of his trousers.

"Fetching up the drags is my special job, Cal," Gooseneck chuckled. "Let him sag again, so Runt can take a swat at him."

"You—you're brutes!" Lenore cried. "Cal Brady, I simply don't know you any more. What's the matter with you? Let Rand's arm go before you break it!"

THE red rage that had swept over Cal at sight of Mason hurting Lenore was gone now. He felt weak, and there was a hollow feeling within him as he released the trembling Mason and glanced at the girl.

"Sorry, Lenore," he said stiffly. "Blame my behavior on the antics of a crude, unpolished Westerner. Out here, you know, a man who lays violent hands on a woman is liable to find himself in a jack-pot."

"Stop talking like an idiot! And for heaven's sake stop throwing insults at Eastern people!"

"I'm not throwing insults at Eastern folks," Cal said sharply. "Some of the

finest people I ever met in my life were people who came out here from the East. I imagine Mason would have gotten worse than I gave him, had he pulled anything rough among your crowd back East."

"Quite the bully, aren't you?" Mason sneered. "Some day, Brady, I'll pay you for this stunt."

"Cal's right, Rand, and you know it," Lenore said wearily.

"I—I'm sorry about losing my temper," Mason said stiffly. "But after all, it's upsetting to find your fiancée in the arms of another man. An old flame."

Mason's pale eyes whipped to Cal, his thin lips pulled into a tight smile. Cal went red, then white. Mason rammed his hand into a coat pocket, pulled out his silver cigarette case and snapped it open.

He was on the point of saying something when Gooseneck's lean arm shot out. Gooseneck snatched the silver cigarette case, plucked one of the slim white cylinders from beneath the spring holder, and glanced briefly at the maker's name.

"There!" he said in triumph. "Told you so, Cal! Runt and I *told* you it was this Mason bird who took that pot-shot at you. Look! This cigarette wears the same brand as the one Runt and I found down in that old building!"

Cal groaned, for Gooseneck had fairly shouted the words, and there immediately came an angry mutter, the swift stamping of many feet. Cal jerked around, to see a swelling mob charging along the sidewalk.

"What's that you say, Gooseneck?" a man called excitedly as the crowd drew closer. "Did you say you know who tried to murder Cal Brady?"

"We sure as hell do!" Runt shrilled. "Gooseneck and I found one of these ready-made cigarette stubs down yonder in that old building where the shot was fired from. And this blasted Mason sidewinder has got a fancy silver case full of those ready-made smokes, which have the same brand as that stub has."

"That's proof enough!" some hombre whooped. "Get a rope, boys! We'll hang this Mason buzzard to one o' the beams right in the building where he hid to take that shot at Brady!"

"Rope! Get a rope!" The cry was taken up by other voices until it swelled into a roar.

Lenore screamed as the mob closed in and hard, relentless hands seized Randall Mason.

Plans for Attack

CAL simply stood there, letting the mob surge about him until their first wild yelling died to an ominous rumble. Of all the crowd Cal was the only one who was calm. He watched almost indifferently while a coarse rope was brought and a hastily wrapped hangman's noose was slipped over Randall Mason's sleek blond head.

Lenore was sobbing, trying futilely to shove men away from Randall Mason. Cal felt a twinge of pity, but he realized clearly just how he had to play his cards.

He waited until Mason's lax, fear-numbed body had been buffeted and cuffed, knowing that in all the rough handling the angry crowd was working off the most dangerous edge of its fury.

Mason was disheveled and whimpering when Cal at last shouldered his way to him, held up his hands for silence. The calmness of him, the steady look of his eyes and the sternness of his face halted the mob, silenced their savage cries.

"Thank God!" Lenore sobbed. "Cal, make them stop this, do you hear? Drive these men back!"

Cal swore under his breath, for the girl had said exactly the wrong thing. He felt hard bodies press around him, felt a gun-muzzle gouge into his back.

"Maybe Cal will try to stop us, Miss Lenore," a grizzled old fellow growled. "And maybe he won't. But thanks for the tip. I've got a gun in Cal's ribs and he'll have to behave, whether he wants to or not."

"Put up your gun, Kent!" Cal's voice was as calm as his eyes. "Some of you gather Mason up and fetch him along. We'll have a look at the beams in that building down yonder."

"Attaboy, Cal!" Runt whooped. "Now you're talkin' sense!"

"Call!" Lenore cried, and as he glanced at her, he saw the hurt, the fear and uncertainty, in her eyes.

But Cal had his game to play and realized that the least hesitancy now might spell doom to his plans and cost the life of Randall Mason. That mob was in dead earnest and had to be handled with utmost care. A wrong word or act on his part would blow the works.

"So you're like the rest!" Lenore's voice was shrill. "Cal Brady, you're a coward, like the rest of these savages. I hate you, do you hear? Hate you!"

Cal dragged his gaze from the frightened, half-sobbing girl, looked down the street. He motioned one big hand, aware that the mob had grown deathly still, and that many eyes were watching him. He stepped calmly away from the gun that was still against his back, swinging his big hand again in a motion for the men to follow.

Voices rumbled, a man's hoarse, nervous laugh sounded. Then Cal was stepping out into the dust of the street, going forward at a swift, steady stride.

Cal's eyes raked along the street, caught and held on the bank window, which was directly before him. There was a face pressed close to the glass. Cal recognized that face as Nelson Sibley's. And the banker was grinning!

That fact beat persistently at Cal's whirling brain as he stalked on down the street and entered the door of the long unused building that had once been a saloon. Cal was shaken a little, for the fact that Nelson Sibley stood there at the bank's window, grinning, held sinister significance. But there were other matters to be considered now—that could wait.

THE mob was swarming into the old building, silent and grim-eyed now, for they were beginning to realize that their job would not be easy. Cal understood their mood, but his face was calm as he turned to survey the crowd.

"Let's get this over with!" a man panted.

Mason was shoved out into the center of the floor. He stood white and shaken, staring about out of fear-glazed eyes. He

was anything but the sneering, coolly contemptuous youth Cal had seen the first day at the Ladder P.

Mason cried out once, but his hands were jerked roughly behind him and tied with a length of rope. Then the free end of the rope that was about his neck shot up toward the ceiling, looped over a stout beam, and dangled back, to be grasped by ready hands. Cal saw the suddenly strained expressions on the faces of the would-be hangmen, and knew that the moment had come for him to act.

"You men want the blood of an innocent man on your hands?" His voice was like the crack of a whip. From the tail of his eye he saw Lenore sway through the front door. He heard the girl's low cry at sight of Randall Mason's plight. But Cal dared not take his direct gaze from the tense faces of the men who had already grasped the rope, ready to hoist Randall Mason clear of the floor.

"Gooseneck, you and Runt show me where you found that cigarette stub!" Cal's voice crackled sharply through the deathly silence.

His two punchers shifted, released their grip on the hang rope and moved obediently forward. Cal's scheme was working so far, yet he dared not be too sure. He hitched his gun slightly, kept his lean right hand close to the curving butt. If the worst came, he would do his arguing with bullets.

"Here," Gooseneck said gruffly. "Right here under this busted-out window is where that cigarette was."

Cal crossed the room, but never completely turned his back on the glowering, sullen mob. His keen eyes raked along the floor, probing the dusty surface of the worn boards.

"I thought so!" he said suddenly, and there was real triumph in his voice.

"Thought what?" one of the men who still held to the hang rope snarled. "Damn it, Brady, this is the kind of business best got over with. You're stalling, that's all!"

Dangerous talk, that. Cal kept alarm out of his face only by sheer will power.

"Here, Gooseneck," he said. "Give me that cigarette case you took from Mason."

THE crowd around Mason was shifting. A grim murmur ran through the men. Two more stepped forward to grasp the rope where Gooseneck and Runt had held it.

"What you want of this thing?" Gooseneck's voice was sullen, almost angry. "Hell, Cal, you *are* stalling! Seems to me you'd want Mason strung up—after what he took away from you!"

Cal's face crimsoned, then went dead white. His hands shook a little as he took the silver cigarette case, flipped it open, and extracted one of the round white smokes.

"Don't ever say anything like that again, Gooseneck," he said, his voice cold and hard.

He fished a sulphur match from a trouser pocket, scratched it on the wall and lit the ready-made cigarette he had taken from Mason's case.

"Come over here, all you men," he called. "I only want a minute of your time. After that you're free to do whatever you feel like doing."

A dissenting voice rose, died out. Then the men crowded toward Cal, shoving Randall Mason ahead of them. They were angry at what they considered a senseless delay, yet their curiosity was aroused.

Cal smoked, while the crowd pressed in close. Then he took the cigarette from his lips, regarded the half inch of coal and ash a moment. He drew on the smoke again, then dropped it to the floor beneath the window and placed the edge of one boot-sole on it. He pressed down firmly.

"Now, Gooseneck, point to the spot where you found that cigarette stub," he said.

"Hell, Cal. I *showed* you!" Gooseneck snorted. "There's the spot—right there!"

Gooseneck bent, touching the floor with one long finger. The spot was only a few inches from Cal's boot. He moved his foot aside, showing the white cigarette he had lighted. The cigarette was now cold, its tip flattened like the tip of the stub Gooseneck and Runt had found there.

But there was something else, and the keen eyes of the range-bred men were quick to see. Where Cal had smashed out the

cigarette there was a round black smudge of ash and burned tobacco. Yet that was the *only* such spot to be seen beneath the window!

"Hey, something's wrong!" Runt yelled in sudden excitement. "There's no black spot where Gooseneck and I found that other stub!"

"Exactly!" Cal could have whooped in relief. "You see, men, I never did figure that Randall Mason was the kind who'd shoot a man from ambush. But somebody wanted it to look like he did, and the trick damned near worked!"

Cal's eyes stayed steadily on the mob. They seemed uneasy now. He saw that his work was done, and felt the sweat coming out all over him. But his face was still calm, and his eyes unflinching as he shoved through the muttering men and stalked toward the door.

"You jaspers almost hung an innocent man," he called over his shoulder. "Better watch yourselves—not go jumping into things, boys!"

He was gone through the door then, escaping the bombardment of questions that immediately began. He heard Lenore call his name, and darted swiftly around one corner of the building. He didn't want to see Lenore just then.

Cal ran, stooping low as he passed beneath the windows. He came out into a littered alley, stepped in behind another building, and breathed a great sigh of relief.

He was trembling, and it struck him as a bit crazy that he had just saved the life of Randall Mason—Mason, who had won the only girl Cal could ever care for, and then tricked her out of her ranch!

A silent, choking something that he could think of only as laughter shook him so that he leaned against the corner of a building he had just reached. That he was leaning against the corner of the red brick bank building did not occur to him; he just leaned there, shaking with that uncontrollable laughter.

"Lordy, what a mess!" he thought. "The man I ought to hate most is beholden to me for his life—and Lenore will hate me for it!"

THE convulsive laughter died down, and Cal dragged hard knuckles across his eyes. A breath of wind whipped in from the hills, steadying him, awakening him to his surroundings. He saw that he was against the bank, and was just straightening to move away when feet clumped close beside him and a man's voice came in a sharp, strained oath.

Cal started, jarred completely back to reality. He glanced to the right, saw a window that was raised slightly for ventilation. It was the window that led into Nelson Sibley's private office.

"Well?" the banker's thin, garrulous voice crackled sharply. "Spit it out, Hamer! What happened? Did they hang that smart-alecky kid?"

Hamer! The name struck at Cal like the burn of a whip. Gus Hamer, outlaw, cattle thief, suspected murderer, had been run out of the country ten years ago by outraged ranchmen who would have hanged him had they been able to catch him. Word had come back that he had died in a brawl down on the Border—but Hamer was not dead. He was here, in Sentinel, talking to Nelson Sibley.

Cal became tense, every nerve drawn tight. His mind was grasping at many threads of thought, weaving them swiftly into a grimly significant truth-fabric. At the same time, he listened intently, drinking in what he heard, not once thinking of himself as an eavesdropper.

"They didn't hang him." That hard, guttural growl would be Gus Hamer's voice. "Hell, Sibley, the thing went haywire on us! And do you know why?"

"Spill it!" Sibley's voice was nervous.

"Brady horned in!" Hamer thundered. "Brady saved that fat-headed young fool from getting put out of our way. He showed the mob that the cigarette stub had been planted there, Sibley. I was scrooched down behind that old pile of beer kegs in the back corner, listening. And now the whole country will be wondering who put that stub there. Reckon they'll run us down, too."

"Damn him!" Sibley snarled. "But how did Brady know the stub had been planted?"

Mason was disheveled and whimpering when Cal at last shouldered his way to him, held up his hands for silence.



"Simple—we should have thought of it," Hamer rumbled. He told how Cal had pointed out the flaw in the planted evidence against Mason, and Sibley swore in a thin, shrill monotone.

"You gave me that cigarette stub to plant," Hamer finished. "When you picked it up off the floor here after Mason had

tromped it out, you should have seen the black spot it left and thought—"

"And *you* didn't kill Brady!" Sibley cut in sharply. "Why didn't you shoot him through the body, instead of trying a head shot at that distance?"

"Keep your feathers smoothed, Sibley!" Hamer said grittily. "Hell, man, we've been in worse jams than this before and come through all right! Like the time ten years ago when I had to light out with this whole damned country on my tail after

I shot that rancher, so you could foreclose on his spread. Your brain worked right that time, and you circulated the story of how I was killed down on the Border. Quit cussin' and do some thinking! I'll back your brains with my men and my guns, the way I always have."

OH, this isn't so bad," Sibley said sourly. "Only we'll have to let Mason in on the money now. We wouldn't dare try another trick."

"But we haven't got Hidden Valley yet," Hamer growled. "You slipped up by letting Brady buy that property. How'll we get it?"

"I'll take Mason up there tomorrow. I'll try to buy Brady out. But what I really want is for Mason to get a good look at that pass where the dam will be. I want him to start work on his blue prints as soon as possible."

"But Brady won't sell!" Hamer insisted. "You know that, Sibley—he hates you."

"I have a deed already made out which gives me claim to Hidden Valley." Sibley's voice was purring, sleek. "I've never seen a signature that I couldn't duplicate, so no court will ever question Brady's signature on this deed. Take your men to Hidden Valley, Gus. Get there about dusk tomorrow night and you'll find Brady and his punchers in that new house Brady's just finished."

"New house!" The gunman seemed startled. "Where does the house stand?"

"Brady built it on that bench about a mile inside the valley," Sibley sneered. "I reckon he meant to keep it a secret, for unless I had sneaked up there a few days ago with Mason, we wouldn't have known the house existed. After you've—ah—finished your work, it might be a good idea to set fire to the house. If Brady and his two punchers are found in the ashes, their remains will certainly show no bullet holes."

"That's more like it!" Hamer said. "Sibley, your brains and my guns will make us millionaires on this deal. I'll take all eight of my boys, so there'll be no chance of a slip tomorrow night. But for the rest of the day I'll be down in that closet yonder,

for if I show myself on the street too much, some jasper might recognize me, even if I have got my hair and beard dyed and wear this get-up that makes me look like a prospector."

"Sure, hide yourself," Sibley laughed. "I want you to have a steady gun-hand when— Quick! Into that closet with you—there's someone at the door!"

Showdown Guns

CAL BRADY sat hunkered there in the mouth of the granite-walled pass, eyes red-rimmed and swollen from loss of sleep, face drawn, lined, weary-looking. He gazed out and down over the hills, sucking absently at the dead cigarette that slanted down from his lips.

He had ridden all night and most of the morning, yet his mind and eyes were alert, despite the weariness of his body. He had gotten into Hidden Valley less than an hour ago, bathed in the icy cold water of a stream, then had breakfast.

Gooseneck and Runt were coming up into the pass now; he could hear their horses clattering over the rocks. He glanced around to see them dismount at the far end of the almost tunnel-like pass and come forward on foot. They looked excited, and were packing carbines.

"Why the rifles?" Cal demanded. "Didn't I tell you two that everything had to look natural?"

Cal had told them what he had learned the day before. Runt and Gooseneck had immediately howled for action, wanting to take Sibley's bank apart, hang Nelson Sibley and do worse to Gus Hamer, but Cal had put his foot down hard on such antics, and laid before them certain plans of his own. He eyed his two punchers rather sourly now for lugging those rifles along.

"Aw, Cal, some of Hamer's killers might ride up here with Sibley and Mason," Runt argued. "Besides, suppose we *did* carry rifles when they came?"

"It'd show that we expected trouble," Cal said. "I don't want Mason and Sibley to smell anything wrong until the time comes. It's noon, so they'll be along any time. Get those rifles out of sight."

"Aw!" Gooseneck and Runt growled, but clumped back to their horses and stowed the rifles in saddle scabbards. They were just completing the job when they heard Cal yell, and tore back down the pass at a run.

"They're coming!" Cal said. "And damned if Lenore isn't with them! I hoped she'd stay home."

Or *had* he hoped it? Cal was not sure as he sat there on his heels, listening to the dull roar of the waterfall, watching three riders come up along the slope toward the pass. The riders had seen him now and were waving.

Cal lifted a lean brown hand in a perfunctory salute, swearing under his breath at the way his heart hammered at sight of Lenore Preston. The girl had spurred ahead; she was the first into the cool pass.

"It's the same grand place, Cal!" she said. "It—it never will be changed, will it?"

Cal caught a note of wistfulness in her voice. There was something else, too, that made him suddenly attentive. Lenore's dark eyes were searching his face, studying it thoughtfully.

Suddenly he felt bitter and savage.

He got stiffly to his feet, spat the cigarette from his lips with an explosive sound.

"You know all about the plans for changing this place!" His voice was harsh, stinging. "In fact, you contributed your whole Ladder P toward furthering those plans!"

Gooseneck and Runt were staring. Lenore seemed to shrink. Her shoulders sagged a little.

"I—I honestly didn't know, Cal," she said. "Not until last night did I know that Rand and Nelson Sibley wanted this place for their dam."

There was the ring of simple truth in her words, and Cal was infinitely glad, though too angry, too hurt and stubborn, to show it. And there were grim things, too, deep in his tired, throbbing brain. He was glad that Nelson Sibley and Mason arrived just then, for their arrival saved him from answering the girl. He faced the two men, nodded briefly, coldly, with-

out moving aside to let them come into the pass.

"Good morning, Brady!" Sibley's sharp features were wreathed in smiles. "Grand ride up here—makes a man feel fit, eh? But I doubt if you can hear what I'm saying for that waterfall's roaring!"

"Brady, I—ah—had no chance to thank you for coming to my rescue yesterday," Mason spoke up. "Taking everthing into consideration, it's a bit difficult, you know. I—"

"You owe me nothing," Cal cut in sharply. "I would have done the same thing for any other cur."

"Say, look here!" Mason's face was beet red. "Are you calling me a cur?" He was the same cold-eyed, slyly sneering fellow Cal had seen that first time at the Ladder P. His thin lips twisted in anger, and he made as if to dismount.

"Don't do it, Mister!" Gooseneck warned him grimly. "Keep the seat of those fancy pants glued to that saddle if you don't want some broken bones. Brady's in a hell of a temper this morning. He'll take you apart and put you back together worse than you're put together now."

"Couldn't be done," Runt snorted sourly. "Whoever put that jigger together, Gooseneck, made some awful mistakes."

"We're not up here to fight!" Sibley said uneasily. "Mr. Mason will overlook your—er—whatever it was you said, Brady, I'm sure."

"Cal, please!" Lenore said, before Cal could speak. "I—please don't make trouble, Cal!"

Cal shot her a sidelong glance that brought a flush to her cheeks. She turned quickly to her horse, mounted.

"Do you mind very much, Cal, if we ride on into the valley?" she asked. "I want to see it again while I'm here. This will probably be my last visit. Don't spoil it, please!"

Cal shrugged, his eyes cold. He stepped out of the way, moving on down the pass with Gooseneck and Runt.

THEIR three horses were there in the shade. As they mounted, Lenore rode up beside them, smiling a little sadly as she

looked out over the green, tranquil valley.

She reined in beside Cal and rode in silence down into the valley. They forded the stream where it fanned out over a wide gravel bar and turned a short bend around heavy timber a moment later.

CAL was jerked from his somber thoughts by a sudden gasp from the girl. Yonder on the bench sat the log house, beneath the tall pines that marched down from a still higher bench.

How he had dreamed of riding here with Lenore, of telling her that he had built the house and furnished it for her, for their home. What ashes his dream had become!

He ripped at his mount's flanks with spur rowels, cursing. The horse bolted, snorting, alarmed at the unaccustomed punishment, then reared to a halt beside the wide, cool porch a few moments later. Cal swore again as he quit the saddle. Lenore spurred after him.

"Calm down, you fool!" Cal told himself fiercely. "You're acting like a kid!"

He forced his face to a calm mask as he fished tobacco and papers from a shirt pocket, began building a cigarette. He kept his eyes on his work until he had control of himself again. When he looked up, there was a hint of a smile on his lips. Drooped eyelids hid his eyes as he lit the smoke, inhaled deeply.

Lenore stood there in the yard, staring at the house in honest admiration.

"Cal, it's beautiful!" she cried. "Why, this is our—the bench where we used to picnic! The pines for shade, the stream just below. And the house—" She came up the steps, across the wide porch. "Why, it—it's even furnished!"

Cal winced, but steeled himself to the ordeal.

"Uh-huh, it's furnished," he agreed calmly. "Nothing grand, and the stuff may have a few scratches from the long haul up here. Want to go in and look the shack over?"

"Shack! Cal Brady, don't you dare call ou—call this a shack!"

Her voice ended on a rather flat note, and Cal did not dare look at her as he

held the door open. Then they were going from room to room, Cal cool and serene, the girl exclaiming in delight at each piece of furniture and each room.

Cal's knees were weak and sweat stood on his brow in beads when they finally finished their tour and went back down the stairs.

Mason, Sibley, Gooseneck and Runt were in the living room. Mason lifted himself languidly from a deep-seated chair, pale eyes sullen as he looked from Lenore's flushed cheeks to Cal's coldly set face.

"Sorry we were a little late," Mason's voice was pointedly sneering. "But then, I can't begrudge you the chance of showing her the house you had—ah—all ready, Brady."

"Rand Mason, that'll be enough of your sneering!" Lenore's voice was angry. "You remember what I told you last night, don't you?"

"Nonsense!" The words crackled from Mason's lips. "And I told you, my dear, that your housekeeper had simply filled your head with silly notions. Dash that woman! I'll enjoy firing her when the time comes. She's a meddlesome old fool, and acts more like one of the family than a servant."

"Anna is not a servant, Rand." Lenore's voice was calm now. "She's the only mother I've ever known. And it looks as if I should have taken her advice long ago."

"Here, here!" Sibley said shrilly. "The rest of us don't want to hear a lovers' quarrel right now."

Lenore flushed, eyes sparkling in a way that would have pleased Cal had he been looking. Mason shrugged, smiled his smug smile, and seated himself.

NOW that you've been personally conducted through this mansion by its owner, my dear, perhaps we can get down to business," Mason said gratingly. "You found the—ah—dream castle quite charming, I take it?"

"I did, you smug egotist!" Lenore's voice was like a whip-lash. "Rand, what I told you last night is a certainty now. This house *is* a mansion, although you're

much too blind to see what I mean. I'm glad Cal let me find it as I did. It will be something to—to remember."

"Bravo!" Mason's pale eyes glittered. "Well spoken, my dear."

"Lenore, didn't you know this house was here?" Cal's voice was so calm that the men in the room stared curiously at him.

Lenore turned. "Why, of course I knew nothing about the house, Cal!" she said simply. "Why?"

Cal's lean face crinkled into a grin—but that grin was like the snarl of a trapped lobo. "Funny you didn't tell her about the house, Mason," he said.

"Eh?" Mason started. "What you hinting, Brady?"

"Only this." Cal's voice was flat, dangerously edged. "You and Sibley were up here a few days ago, prowling around, hunting faults in the sides of this valley. You couldn't help seeing this house."

Sibley made a strangling sound in his throat. Mason looked as if he wanted to sink into the floor.

"Rand, were you up here before?" Lenore said sharply.

"I—er—why, confound it, yes!" he blurted. "Mr. Sibley and I did come up and—and look around. But—"

"But we didn't want to bother you, Brady," the banker put in swiftly. "You see, I've been thinking of—well, now that things have gone the way they have, I thought you might be willing to sell out."

The banker's glance at Lenore, then back to Cal, was pointed enough. Cal laughed.

"Sibley, you haven't money enough to buy even one handful of this valley," he said quietly. "You and that sneak thief Mason have hit a snag. No dam will go across that granite pass and fill this valley with water. Your irrigation dreams have backfired."

"Look here!" Mason almost screamed the words. "Brady, you mule-headed simpleton, you're just a barrier in the way of progress. Why, this deal means millions, man! You can't block a thing like this—throw a barrier—"

"The barrier is already thrown," Cal cut in. "I'm laying a barrier across the path of a murderous, crooked devil who

would rob the whole country if this thing went through. And here, Mason, is the main stake in that barrier." Cal tapped the butt of the gun at his thigh.

"Dramatic, aren't you?" Mason sneered. "But your gun barrier can be torn down. This country must progress, go forward as it should. You can't stand in the way, Brady. With this dam up—and it will be—thousands of acres of land below here could be sold to farmers."

"Right," Cal said calmly. "But that soil down on the desert is shallow, Mason. After a few seasons the alkali would come through it from constant irrigation, and the farms would be worthless. Sibley knows that—but all he wants is to make a million or two off that land and off the water rights a dam here would give him."

"You—you're crazy!" Sibley cried. "I—I simply want to see the country prosper as it should. Brady, you'll gain nothing by acting this way."

"Money is all you can think of, Sibley." Cal straightened slowly as he spoke. "You even doublecross the dim-witted fools who help you put your schemes through."

"You—you could be sued for libel for making that remark!" the banker shrilled. "You couldn't prove such a thing, Brady."

"You're wrong," Cal said. "Suppose I know the truth about that deal yesterday?"

"W-what deal?" Sibley stuttered, fear in his eyes.

"Why, that stunt you cooked up to get me killed and have a mob hang that fool over there!" Cal's finger stabbed toward Mason. "Suppose I went to court and proved that you picked one of Mason's cigarette stubs from your office floor, gave it to Gus Hamer, and had Hamer drop it under the window in that old saloon where he was hiding when he took that shot at me?"

"**LIES!**" Nelson Sibley screamed, but his frightened face was a plain confession of guilt.

"Cal!" Lenore cried. "What on earth are you saying?"

"Sibley used Mason—had Mason get you to sign over the Ladder P," Cal said,

without looking at the girl. "Then Sibley framed that deal in town yesterday, knowing that Gooseneck and Runt would find that cigarette stub and suspect Mason. You know how close the scheme came to working. If Hamer's slug hadn't hit that turquoise in my hatband, Mason and I would both be dead, and Sibley would have control of this valley, along with the Ladder P. Sorry, Lenore, but the only thing I can do is make it plain blunt. You've been swindled. By both Mason and Sibley."

"Lies, I tell you!" Sibley screeched. "Miss Preston, he's lying. You and Mason and I had best get out of here before—"

"Before the fireworks start, eh?" Cal cut in. "No, Sibley, you and Mason stay here to face the music. Lenore, you're free to ride. Better light out. Be sundown in another hour or so."

Sibley jerked to his feet, leaped toward the door—but Gooseneck and Runt Walton were there, grinning at him down the barrels of leveled guns. The banker tried to lunge between them, whining in terror. Gooseneck's Colt cracked sharply across the banker's head, and Sibley fell back into the room, whimpering in genuine terror.

"Brady, you'll pay for this!" Mason shrilled. "All this gunman stuff will land you in jail! If I had a gun—"

"If you had a gun," Gooseneck thundered, "I'd make you eat it!"

"You—I'll have the law on you for this, Cal Brady!" Sibley yammered, nursing a lump rising on his head. "I'll go to town and report this!"

"You'll stay right here and wait until Gas Hamer and his gang show up at dusk," Cal said coldly. "Instead of killing Gooseneck, Runt and me and burning the house down on our bodies as you told him to, Gus Hamer and his mangy pack will hit hell when they show up here. Runt, tie up these two rats, and tie 'em good. Lenore, get to your horse and ride straight for home. Fast!"

"No, Cal." The girl's voice was soft. "Do you think that I'd leave when—when there's trouble coming? What if something happened to you?"

Their eyes met for one long moment,

then Cal turned away to oversee the job of tying.

Nelson Sibley was limp with fright. Mason made the error of slamming a fist into Runt Walton's face. Runt holstered his gun. His hardened fist lashed out, and before Cal Brady could stop the blow, Randall Mason was sprawled on the floor, groaning.

"Let me alone!" Mason sobbed. "Damn you, Brady, give me a gun! Sibley has lied to me, tricked me. He's guilty of all you charged him with. I saw it in his face. Give me a gun—"

"Tie him," Cal snapped, glowering down into Runt's grinning face.

Cal hurried outside then, drinking in the pine-scented air. He had not dared look at Lenore for fear of seeing her hurt over Mason's plight.

IT was later than he had thought, for the valley was already in shadow. He stood there, watching the light fade from the peaks, slowly turning over the events of the day. He could not see how he might have handled things differently, and yet felt that he had unnecessarily hurt Lenore.

"Had there been a way out, I would have let Mason take her and ride on away," he mused grimly. "But Sibley will talk, and the law would have run Mason down anyhow. Lenore will hate me for this, but it wasn't anything I hatched. I wish—"

Gooseneck and Runt came out, chuckling. "We got Miss Lenore to that big upstairs bedroom, Cal," Gooseneck panted, "but we had to tell her first how we rode all night gatherin' men to hide up there on the rims. Reckon they'll snag Hamer and his gang?"

"Their orders are to shoot to kill," Cal answered grimly. "And those men who are hidden on the rims will do just that, for Gus Hamer and his gang dealt them all grief before Hamer was run out of here ten years ago. Light a lamp inside there, Runt, so it'll look natural here."

A moment later yellow lamplight poured from the windows.

"Good thing there were only four places

outside the pass where men and horses could come down from the rims," Goose-neck remarked. "Otherwise, Cal, it would take an army to guard this place."

"We'd better go now," Cal said. "I'm betting Hamer and his crowd try riding straight into the pass, bold as brass. We'll get over there to help the boys. They'll have come down out of the brush to watch by now."

Runt came out singing off key, and the three of them stepped down off the porch and went to waiting horses. They rode away. Darkness had come to the heart of the valley, but the peaks and rimrocks were still light, and Cal felt no need for speed.

Had he and his two punchers been traveling fast, the thundering pound of their mounts' hoofs would have drowned the sudden terrified scream that came through the night. The three reined around, alert. The scream came again, and an oath ripped past Cal's lips.

"Lenore!" he said. "Something's gone wrong at the house."

He jammed in the spurs, thundering back over the trail. As he topped the bench, a stab of powder-flame ripped the night ahead of him and he felt the wind of the bullet pass his face. The gunman was at the corner of the house, dimly outlined against the white logs.

Cal's Colt came out, crashed twice. The shadowy form beside the house slid down, melting into the darkness along the foundation stones. Then other guns were chattering, and Cal Brady felt the burning pain of a bullet along his thigh.

He was at the porch now, leaping from the saddle. He lost his balance, fell headlong, rolling completely across the porch. A gun spewed from the doorway, and he heard a bull-like roar of rage.

"Gus Hamer!" Cal gasped. "How in hell—"

Both Hamer's guns spewed, and the twin streamers of fire seemed to light the whole shadowy porch. Cal felt a hammering impact of lead against his ribs, felt his breath catch, stay locked within his lungs. His head swam, the gun in his hand wobbled, but he fought off the weakness, horror driving through him. There in the

doorway he had seen Gus Hamer, both huge arms around Lenore. He was using her for a shield, laughing drunkenly as he stalked out onto the porch, dragging the girl.

"I knew something was wrong when we saw a bunch of men up on the rims, gal," Hamer was saying, "but my men and I used to hang out in this valley, so we knew how to get in past those guards. Soon as I make sure I've kilt that Brady fool, you and I'll get better acquainted, sweetheart. You've grown, Lenore, in these past ten years."

CAL BRADY heard, and the plight of the girl helped him fight off the weakness that was enveloping him. He tensed his muscles, staring hard up through the darkness. He could see Lenore's white face, and the shaggy bulk of Gus Hamer's huge head above. Cal gripped his gun, thumb tightening on the hammer.

"I'll have to pour some more lead into Brady to make sure he's dead," Hamer was snarling. "We all had to come down here on foot when we saw the place was guarded. No time to lose, for we'll have to leave on foot. I— *Ow-e-e!* Bite me, will you? Say, I'll— Take that, you hell-cat!"

There was the sound of a heavy blow, followed by Lenore Preston's sharp cry. Cal saw the girl fall, saw Hamer lift a boot as if to kick her.

Cal brought himself up, managed a shout of warning. Gus Hamer turned, guns spitting at the sound.

"Hit her, will you?" Cal gritted, and his Colt began hammering. It didn't stop until it was empty.

Through glazed eyes, Cal saw Gus Hamer falling, heard death rattling in the big killer's shattered chest. He heard, too, the strangely distant beat of guns, and the far-off yells of men riding down from the rims to lend a hand.

Cal tried to walk forward, but his knees bent and he felt himself falling. It seemed that there were a lot of feet pounding the porch about him, and he kept thinking of Gooseneck and Runt and Lenore. He ought to see about Lenore, then go help

Gooseneck and Runt. But he was tired. damn tired. When his side got a little easier—

CAL BRADY came awake with a start. Sunshine was on his face, and there was the fragrant odor of peeled pine logs in his nostrils. He was in a room—the big bedroom he had built upstairs in his Hidden Valley ranch house — the house that was to have been—

His mind jerked to a halt. Someone moved, and he turned his head on the pillow to look levelly into Lenore Preston's eyes.

"Are you all right, Cal?" Her voice was low-pitched, as if she feared waking him.

Cal grinned, sudden happiness welling up within him. "Sure, I'm fine," he said almost lightly. "What happened last night? Last I remember I was worried about you and Runt and Gooseneck."

"That was four nights ago, Cal," Lenore told him gently. "Gooseneck and Runt are all right. The men on the rims got down in time to help them capture Hammer's men."

"Four *nights* ago!" Cal said weakly. "You mean I've been out that long and that you stayed to nurse me?"

Lenore nodded, her smile tender.

"Yes, Cal."

"I'm sorry, Lenore, about — well, the way things turned out," Cal said grimly. "If there had been any other way—"

"You mean you're sorry the way Rand Mason turned out?"

"Yes, I reckon that's it," he said. "What happened to him?"

"He and Nelson Sibley are in jail," Lenore answered. "Cal, I had given him his ring back the night before we came up here. I was through with him, with his small-mindedness and snobbery. I'm sorry for him, but he's no good. I found that out even before you exposed him here. Cal, I've been such a fool! It'd help worlds. Cal, if you'd tell me that you don't despise me for a—a—"

Her head lifted, and the smile on Cal Brady's wan face silenced the words on her lips. He reached out, drew her gently to him.

"Maybe my gun barrier did some good, after all, Lenore," he said. "Gosh, if I had sold out, this house of ours would be floating in water before long. Lenore, this — you *will* make this our house, won't you?"

Her dark head came closer, her lips were against his. And that was answer enough for Cal Brady.

(The End.)



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE Caribbean, mother of many storms, is the setting of L. Ron Hubbard's adventure story, *Hurricane!* Captain Spar, escaped from the French Penal Colony, is caught in a series of strange adventures on land and sea, while he hunts out the man who framed him—the sinister man called the Saint, who doomed him to the hell of fever and forced labor in the horror camp of criminals.

FOR mystery, there's the strange case of *The Locked Vault Killing*. Sheridan Bell, dying in a locked bank vault, tries desperately to get help by using the emergency phone—but help is too late. His strength fails, his voice dwindles away—and he dies without being able to name his killer. A baffling, tremendously interesting murder mystery by Kenneth Whipple.

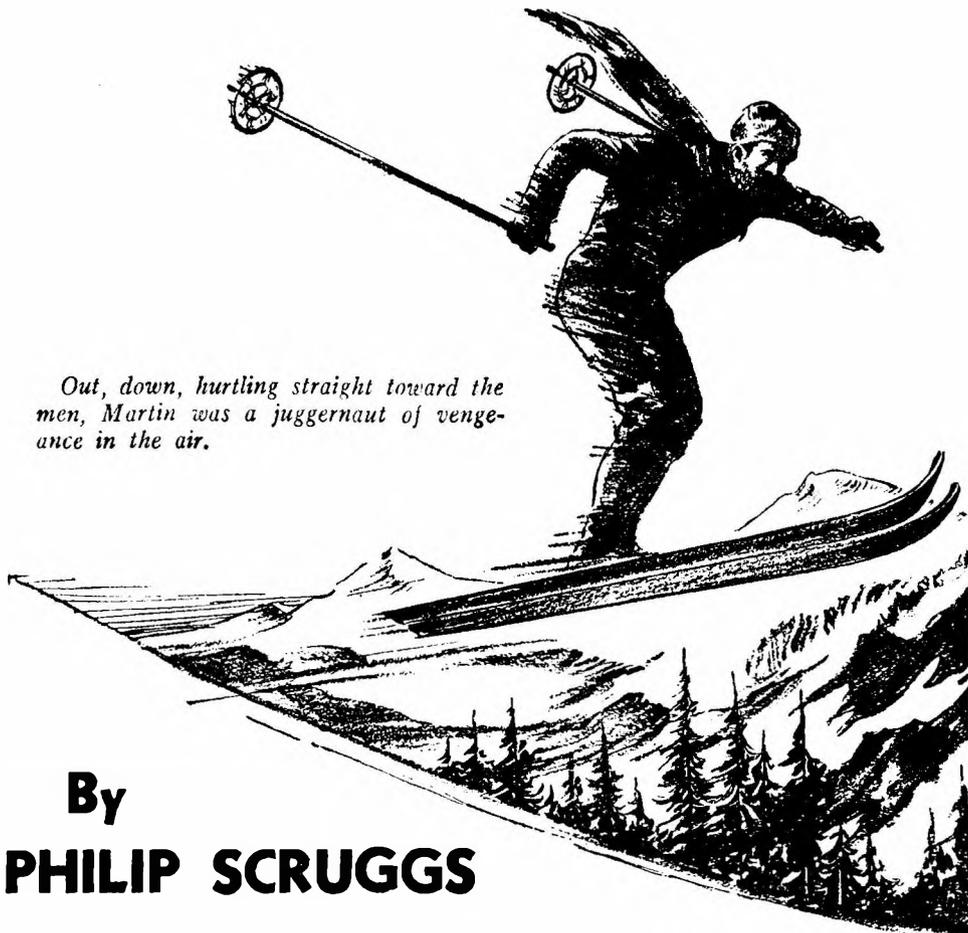
OUR Western is L. P. Holmes' *Gun Shadows*, the story of Johnny Mosely, who wages a long hard war against his former boss—a war for water rights. And the man who had been his employer and friend fights back, bitter and stubborn, not seeing the wreckage he is piling up for the land he loves.

LONDON VERITY'S *The Blue Terror* is a fascinating adventure-romance of Egypt. Men who tried to ferret out the secrets of drug traffic in Egypt paid for their courage with death—and it was a slow, horrible death that left their bodies blue, a weird electric blue. And now Rhodes sets out to take up the task that brought death, and to avenge the tragic end of men who had been his friends. He thought he knew his quarry, and he meant to go straight to the master criminal's lair and bring the blue terror to an end. If he died for his efforts, as his friends had died, he determined to take Boris Barakat, the sinister curse of Egypt, with him.

SPORT comes in with *Rookies Take Plenty*, Philip L. Scruggs' unusual story of the making of a great baseball team and the rise of a rookie who had to take plenty before he earned his way to the respect and praise of manager and public alike. A corking story of the diamond.

THE MYSTERY JUMPER

Out, down, hurtling straight toward the men, Martin was a juggernaut of vengeance in the air.



By
PHILIP SCRUGGS

Ice to Fire

MARTIN STURM was sure that morning that all the good things of the world were his. He whistled as he dressed, looked appraisingly at himself in the mirror. He had no physical vanity, yet he thought he had that look that a man likes in a man—a certain rugged strength and clear gray eyes, with hair just brown enough to pass beyond being called blond. He did not know that these things would, by most women, be summed up as “handsome,” and he did not care.

His money he rather took for granted, never having known the lack of it. What

interested him above all else was that today he competed in the ski-jumping championship, and the experts said he had an excellent chance to win. Action, athletic achievement, was what appealed to him more than anything else. Yes, life was good, was grand, and would be more so before the sun set this brief winter day.

Cynthia would be there. She had promised. His blood stirred at the thought. The toast of night clubs, sought by older, more experienced men—those men referred to as “clubmen,” the gay blades—she favored him above them all. She might—yes, she had practically admitted she might accept him.

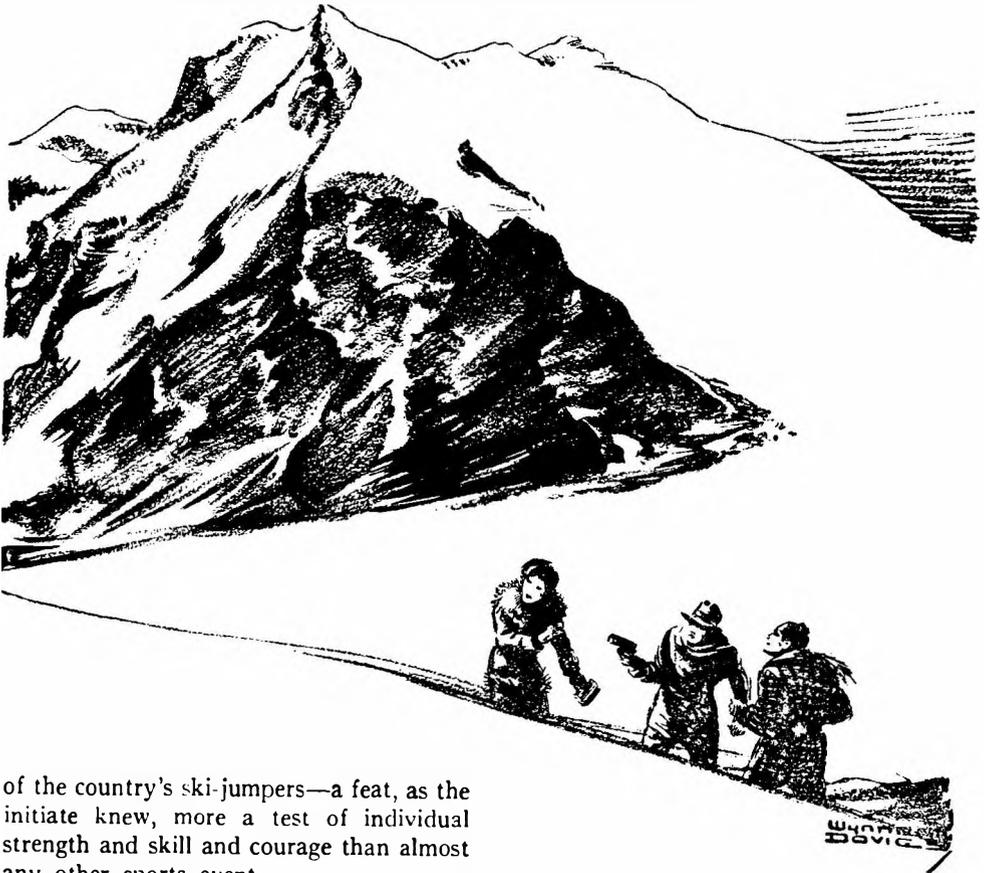
Everybody hailed him when he reached

"He's yellow!" the crowd said, and Martin Sturm began to wonder, and to be afraid of being afraid—because he had fuked his jump

the scene of the Winter Carnival. Everybody liked Martin Sturm. Why not?—a man like that with everything, and yet modest about it, friendly, generous, a "real guy." He had been intercollegiate ski champion. He had been an All-American football second-team choice, and today he was the favorite to win against the pick

the landing, up the slope, smiled to himself and climbed up to join the competitors on the platform.

THE jumping started, with the great crowd cheering each performance, but waiting for Martin Sturm. Martin appraised them, admiring, but conceding



of the country's ski-jumpers—a feat, as the initiate knew, more a test of individual strength and skill and courage than almost any other sports event.

There was the take-off, high up there near the top of the hill. There was the smooth, packed snow on the steep slope. There, Martin thought, with an image of himself soaring through the air, is where I should—where I shall—land. It was a healthy leap he was allowing himself. He looked at the gay crowd packed around

nothing, blood stirring at sight of these stalwarts he had to lick. There was Tunstall, from the Far West, Bergson, from New Hampshire, Krentz, a giant from Wisconsin. They were great names in skiing. They made prodigious leaps, thrilled the spectators into tremendous applause—but the crowd waited for Martin Sturm.

At last his name was called. He could almost feel the crowd push closer, far down there below him, straining up to see. Tense, keen, powerful, Martin shoved off, whizzed down the run, leaped from the take-off, soared up and out through space, then down, down to the steep slope below, to make contact and go downward in a dizzying rush, bringing up with a telemark check that was like a graceful flourish, a period set at the end of achievement. The cheers were acknowledgment that he had done the expected. They told him, before the announcer's shout, that he was on the way. A hundred and seventy-seven feet—six inches beyond Krentz.

"You've got it," a little group of his friends called. "You'll pull up into a hundred and eighty or more."

Martin looked at them and smiled and climbed the slope again.

The jumps went on. Tunstall, Krentz and Bergson increased their distance. There were others jumping, good men, but not in the class with these three and Martin Sturm. Martin leaped again, as surely, as brilliantly as ever, but something strange happened to him then. In the air something seemed to snap, he wavered, he was off form, and his jump was short and ended in a headlong tumble off the course.

The crowd gasped, then were silent—a silence cold and sharp and ominous as an accusing finger pointing at him. What had happened? Was that really Martin Sturm? No, he was not hurt, but what had happened? They could see a stunned bewilderment on his face. They drew back to let him through, but no one spoke. There was no sound until, just starting up the slope, he was stopped by a woman, smart, perhaps beautiful.

Cynthia Adair said, "What happened, Martin?" She seemed distressed.

"Oh, you got here?" He stared at her dully a moment, then relaxed. "Damned if I know, Cynthia. But I'll get out there next jump. I'm going out in front next time."

He said it savagely, but with a lack of conviction strange for him. Somehow she did not give him the reassurance, the confidence he needed. And he had thought he would do great things for Cynthia Adair.

He was worried as he went back up the hill. His face was set, grim, like a boxer's in the ring when the gong first sounds. But the other jumpers on the platform just grinned when he joined them. "Everybody spills occasionally, Sturm. Tough luck, but forget it. Hope you weren't hurt."

"No, I'm all right. Set for the next go." But his fists were clenched and his blue-gray eyes like ice.

Krentz went to a hundred and eighty-five, and somebody back of him said, "You'll have to stretch that a bit, Sturm. You can do it."

"Maybe," Martin muttered. That morning he had thought he'd go a hundred and ninety, or close to it. He had felt right, had expected to make the greatest leap of his career. But now? His great body was like taut piano wire, like beautifully tempered steel, bent but unprung. Something was wrong.

"Martin Sturm! Third and last jump!"

MARTIN went to the head of the run, set himself, stood there a long time while the crowd waited. There was an electric tension in the air. Then, furiously hurling himself down the run, he gauged his leap. Now! But as he jumped something was wrong again. He had almost checked himself, as if trying to stop. It looked as though he had almost balked the jump. The jump was short again, his skis were angled wrong. He lit and tumbled into the snow, and this time the silence of the crowd was like a blow in the face. A man said, as if talking to himself, his voice carrying in the stillness, "Sturm fuked his jump!"

Like an echo another voice said, "Must have lost his nerve."

Instantly, as is the way with crowds, they took up that verdict, and here and there the word "yellow" could be heard. Martin Sturm heard it. Baffled, angry, trying furiously to understand, he did not understand. Was it true? Could they be right? How could it be explained? He had seen such things happen and felt contempt for men who could not make the grade. But afraid—he, Martin Sturm, afraid? He didn't know. He did know

queer things happened to athletes at times. They seem to funk, to show a yellow streak, when everything else about them denied it. Yet how else explain it? He had been right, in perfect shape.

Stumbling off through the snow, not hearing or caring now who had won, he almost knocked Cynthia down. Sympathy was in her eyes, her voice. Gently, "Poor darling! Tell me about it. Forget this nasty crowd, they don't know what they're saying."

Her comfort was sweet, her reassurance something to cling to. Upset, puzzled, afraid—terribly afraid that he really had *been* afraid—he turned blindly to her and let her take charge.

The sports writers were ironically nasty, some of them. Others were just puzzled, groping for the answer, like Martin himself. But it was clear that the general verdict was that Martin Sturm had funkled when the crisis, the big test, had come. The bright, full world he had greeted so confidently that morning was shattered like a vanished dream. But there was Cynthia assuring him it all meant nothing, assuring him of her love.

A sort of haze clung to him the next few weeks, a haze in which he was conscious of a mild surprise, of shock tempered by what he thought to be the promise of happiness, of joy, when he and Cynthia were married in the Little Church Around the Corner, in New York.

Then a trip, a honeymoon, by air and rail and water that then—and even more so later—seemed a fantastic, unreal thing. But at last, back in New York, his brain cleared. He felt sane and normal once more and discovered that bitterness had taken root in him, like some hidden, slow-working poison come to light at last. He discovered that Cynthia Adair, as friends had once warned him, had one god, Money, and had no heart. She had been legally wedded to a fortune and that was all that mattered to her. He, Martin Sturm, was a puppet, a fool, a sap easily taken in. It was the old sordid Broadway story once again. The only thing she demanded of him was money—and more and more of that. Yes, his world had indeed crashed

around him. He faced it, he took it on the chin, but saw there must be a new start somehow.

It was soon after that that Martin Sturm disappeared. To escape her, everybody said. For a while people talked of nothing else, with the yellow journals dragging it out to its ultimate sordid worth. Martin Sturm's meteoric fall from a man everybody liked, admired, to a man with a taint on his courage and made pitiable by his wife. Tragic, pitiful—no wonder he had run away. Why not? Hadn't he already shown that he couldn't really take it? It was what you would expect now from Martin Sturm.

Months later it was reported that he was in Africa, hunting big game. A columnist made some wisecrack about his having gone from ice to fire. And then people forgot Martin Sturm.

Like a God From the Sky

THE girl moved along the packed snow of the trail, a bright scarlet flower blooming in the frost-bound wilderness. Her scarlet skiing costume served a double purpose — protection against hunters, her love of strong, definite colors and contrasts.

Her fur-lined pacs made a squeaking sound on the dry snow as she moved with the easy, graceful stride that showed she was accustomed to walking in rough country. Health radiated from her; there was an intense exhilaration in just being alive, and the thought of why she was there made her laugh, now, after weeks of it. She laughed aloud, the sound clear and musical in that empty land. "Tired"—"nerves"—"rest"—the words were a paradox now. But tired, nerve-wracked and needing a rest she certainly had been when she arrived.

It was a fortunate break that Sam Kaufman, her sponsor, manager, and producer, had owned this camp in the wilderness and suggested it as an ideal retreat. The thing that had sent her here was a fading nightmare, and still something of a fabulous dream. Sam had just glanced at her that morning in his Broadway office, tensed, and said, as though miracles were common-

places, "You're perfect. Can you start rehearsals tomorrow?"

That had begun an eighteen-month run; had signaled a new star on Broadway; had made Kit Carroll famous. But eighteen months of fame, of doing the same thing until you become the character you are acting, can wreak havoc. Kit had grown stale, finally reached a nervous edge that made her doctor say, "Get out! Get as far away from here as possible and forget the stage. Go and learn to be yourself and just a plain ordinary girl again."

"For Kit to be that *would* be a miracle," Sam Kaufman had snorted. "But I have the answer. I have a place—"

Well, a month of it and here I am, Kit thought. She rounded a turn in the trail. The forest swept back before one of those strange open spaces that occur in the wilderness. An expanse of pure white lay before her, like a great white apron spreading away from the base of a steep slope. She paused to examine it. Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a shriek. A body was hurtling down from the sky.

Kit recovered quickly, seeing what it was. A man, on skis, leaping out from the hilltop, out into space. He descended, touched the snow and rushed downward, the powdery snow a glittering cloud around him. As he reached the level space, moving with terrific speed, he suddenly executed a graceful telemark and swerved to an abrupt stop, facing her.

Kit thought, "A god fallen from the sky!"

The tall, powerful figure of the man stood immobile, like a statue. A blond beard hid the lower part of his face, emphasizing the strong, straight nose above, the clear, hard gray eyes. A woodsman's fur cap topped a mixture of woodman's and sportsman's costume of doeskin skiing trousers and mackinaw jacket of red and blue plaid. A blue scarf that her practiced eye spotted instantly as product of an expensive shop, was wound around his throat. She waited for him to speak, but the man was regarding her with a fierce, inexplicable disapproval.

Smiling—that smile that had electrified Broadway—she said, "Am I intruding

then? Or is it that you don't like red, that you look at me that way?"

"Even," the man said, "in a wilderness they find you. I might have known that no place is safe!"

"Do you speak in riddles always, or shall I accept what seems a rather obvious meaning—that you consider this country sacred to the male? Are you about to tell me that woman's place is in the home; that this is wild and savage and dangerous country and I'd better get out?"

THE man's expression did not change, but there was a certain weariness in his voice when he replied. "It seems there is no place left dangerous enough to keep women out. I don't own these hills. You are, I suppose, quite free to be there, and there's nothing I can do."

"You're gallant, aren't you!" Seeing this man was just a man after all, and not a very pleasant one, she expressed her annoyance. "Are you just a poor little man who has been wronged by a female and gone sore on the sex? I suppose I frighten you. Just a great big silent man shy of women and trying to hide it by being fierce. I've heard about you. Bill, the cook and caretaker and what-have-you, where I'm staying, told me there was a 'quare feller' living over this way. It must be you."

"So you're at the Kaufman place," he said.

"Oh, you're quick and clever, aren't you! Right the first time. I suppose you know Bill."

"One is likely to know everybody in this region. There aren't many. And who, may I ask, are you? And why are you here in winter?"

He won't know probably, but I might as well remain the incognito recluse, Kit thought. She said, "My name is Mary Jones and I came up here to restore shattered nerves. As you can see, they are quite restored, but I like it and intend to stay. That is, if men don't persist in leaping out of the sky at me."

"I suppose I might as well tell you who I am," he said. "My name—is Robert Jones. I'm not at all queer—unless liking privacy and not liking women is queer.

But then we probably won't meet again and it doesn't matter."

Kit smiled. "No, it doesn't matter, Mister—Jones. What an unromantic name for a man so romantically met! Have you had it long? And how amusing that we selected the same name!"

She saw him start, and the smile remained on her face. "Do jump again for me," she begged. "I was so startled by your first appearance I'm afraid I couldn't fully appreciate it. Or don't you care for an audience? The glimpse I had was grand. I've seen a bit of jumping and know you are good."

"I don't," he replied coldly, deliberately, "care for an audience. I like ski-jumping for itself, and not as a show to entertain others."

Kit Carroll, alias Mary Jones, decided she did not like this man. He inspired her to malice. "I bet," she said, "that you would look right human without that beard. Oh, not that it isn't a lovely beard. Perhaps," she said reflectively, as if to herself and as if he could not hear, "perhaps it has no chin, or it might be a disguise. Yes, that's it. It's hiding from something. Maybe it's a bad, bad murderer in hiding—but it looks harmless." She shook her head slowly and a pitying expression replaced the smile. Watching covertly, she saw a look of fury on his face.

"Well, goodbye, Mister—Jones," she murmured. "It was nice knowing you." A line from her play, "Never to Know," popped into her head and she said in tragic, anguished tones, "Ah, if only we could have met under other circumstances, life might have been different—full and rich and happy. But we must go now, each his destined way, lonely and afraid and not knowing anything of what awaits us!" She smiled mockingly and continued along the trail, conscious that he had turned, watched her, and that her little scene had stirred him for a moment out of his cold aloofness to a look of speculative interest.

ONCE out of sight, she crept back, kept hidden, and watched him. He stood immobile for a long time, finally shook his head and started up the hill, his skis mak-

ing a great criss-cross pattern in the snow.

After an interval, while he was hidden by a great swell on the slope, she saw him coming again. He rushed out over the swell, leaped into the air with what she took to be a fury of effort and soared up and out and down. It was a beautiful thing to see. The man's technique was flawless. It was a prodigious jump. But this time he rushed on across the open space and disappeared in a trail breaking the forest on the far side. Kit circled back toward "No More New York," the amusingly named camp of Sam Kaufman. Each summer Kaufman left New York with the statement, "I'm through. I'm never coming back. No more New York for me." His friends had called his wilderness retreat by that name for years.

"I saw that 'quare feller,'" Kit said to Bill when she reached camp—really a lavish structure of logs, fitted out like a sportsman's dream turned into a stage set.

Bill grinned. "He's a 'quare one right enough. What'd he do?"

"He was very nasty. I don't think I'd like him, Bill. Sure you don't know anything about him—who he is?"

"I don't know nothin' anybody else don't know, ma'am. He just turned up about a year back and has been over there in that place of his ever since. Right enough fellow if you don't try to pry into things. You oughta see him jump off that hill on them ski things."

"I did. He almost jumped on me," Kit informed him. "Well, he need not worry. I'm not going to bother him."

Bill looked appraisingly at her, his grin widening, nodding to himself. Later on he told her maid, "'Twouldn't surprise me to see that Jones feller come mushin' in here some day. Miss Kit's a looker, she is."

Blanche, grim and efficient, said, "Stop calling her by that name. She doesn't want anybody to know who she is. If that man comes over here don't let him in. He might be a reporter."

"All I know is that if I was that young feller—"

"She can have any man in New York," Blanche said angrily. "She won't have any of them—and she certainly doesn't want to

be bothered with any backwoods riff-raff." "Do tell!" Bill muttered, unperturbed. Bill was sixty. He could neither read nor write. But Bill was no fool.

Before a Fire

BILL came in a few days later looking vastly amused. Kit said, "Share it, Bill. What's funny?"

"It's that feller who calls himself Jones," Bill replied. "I met him on the trail. He asked me all sorts o' questions about you—but me, I didn't spill a thing. I just asked him some instead, thinkin' you might be interested, ma'am."

"I'm not," Kit retorted. "Not the least interested, but—what did you find out, Bill?"

"Nothin'," Bill admitted glumly. "He's a close-mouthed sort. Asked me if you had sent me to find out about him. Course I told him you hadn't." Bill's broad grin was back. "Curiosity's a powerful thing, once it gets to workin'—specially up here where there ain't nothin' much to occupy a person's mind." Bill went back to the door, glanced at the sky and sniffed the wind like a dog. "It's comin' up to blow. Blizzard on the way."

Kit joined him and saw the curious yellow light in the sky, the queer haze, and there was something peculiar, ominous in the air; a tense, ominous quiet on the forest. Blanche, standing behind them with that forbidding, grim look, said, "Hadn't we better get out of here?"

Bill looked at her with that amused expression he always had when she spoke. "You wouldn't get far. No need, anyway. We could stick out the winter here, if it snowed from now till June. Supplies enough to last for half a dozen folks."

"I think a blizzard might be exciting," Kit exclaimed. "I've seen them in the Northwest, years ago. I'm not afraid. My father," she exclaimed to Bill, "was a mining engineer and I've been in the Alaskan and Canadian camps in winter in conditions much worse than this can possibly be. That's why I like it here. I'm no tender-foot."

Bill's keen eyes spotted something down

the trail. He saw a figure emerge from the forest and cut across an arm of the lake below them. He said, "There's that Jones feller, and he's heading up this way."

They watched him disappear in a fir thicket. A few minutes and he appeared near them, on the trail to the camp, walking swiftly, snowshoes strapped on his back. Kit closed the door. "Act as if we hadn't seen him," she instructed. Bill and Blanche disappeared and Kit sat down before the fire, opening a book. In a moment there was a sharp rapping at the door.

Kit casually got up and opened it. "Oh! What a surprise! Do come in!"

Jones kicked the snow from his pacs, hung the snowshoes on a rack above the door and entered. There was a frown on his face, as if he were about to undertake a very disagreeable duty. He refused a seat, standing before the fire. "I have only a few minutes," he protested. "Trouble coming. Thought I'd better see how you are fixed. Ever been through a blizzard?"

"Never," Kit lied. "They must be fun."

He gave her a look of cold disgust. "Fun! They're hell. Even for a man. Even for anybody who's lived up here. How're you fixed for fuel and supplies?"

"Oh, I suppose we're all right," Kit said with beautifully simulated carelessness. "I'll ask Bill." She called and Bill came in, nodding to Jones. "How are we fixed for fuel and supplies, Bill?" she asked, winking.

"Nicely, ma'am," Bill said gravely. "We can weather it."

Kit was as grave as Bill.

"I thought so. You see, Mr. Jones is worrying about me. He came to look after me, Bill. Don't you think he's sweet?"

Bill managed to keep a straight face. Bob Jones scowled and checked what he was about to say. Kit looked at Bill and made a sign with her hands—like pouring liquid in a glass. She made a gesture, measuring, and Bill nodded.

"Do sit down, Mr. Jones. If you won't for social, friendly reasons, then do for simple courtesy, and tell me what I have to expect from a blizzard."

Jones glanced outside, sat down with re-

luctance, drew out an oiled silk tobacco pouch and a pipe. "Do you mind?"

"I'd love it," Kit said. "All women love a man with a pipe before an open fire, it's so cozy. Too bad you aren't wearing rough English tweeds to complete the picture." Her voice was sweet and low and her expression ingenuous and disarming. He looked at her quickly, trying to fathom her meaning. He seemed to decide that it wasn't irony, packed his pipe and lit it.

"I'll just have time for a pipe," he said. "Then I'll have to make a dash for it."

Bill came in with tall glasses, a bowl of ice cubes, a bottle of bourbon.

"Ice cubes!" Bob Jones said.

"And electric lights," Kit added. "Mr. Kaufman, in escaping New York, brings as much of it with him as he can. Not a bad idea. Except Bill grumbles about hauling in gas for the power plant. Won't you mix your own?"

Somewhat grudgingly, Bob Jones said, "This is a real treat. I'm not a solitary drinker and there's seldom anyone to drink with, so I rarely have it. Shall I fix yours?"

"Please. Plain water, just like your own. Bill taught me that. He said good whisky should never be mixed with anything but plain water. But he takes his neat."

THERE'S no time a drink hits you as it does when you've just come out of bitter cold into a warm room, preferably before an open fire. Kit saw that her visitor was feeling it and beginning to mellow instantly. She asked him where he had learned ski-jumping.

"College. Did a bit of it in prep school, but really learned in college. Greatest sport there is. More like flying than riding in a plane."

"But isn't it rather tiresome alone? Don't you ever compete in the winter carnivals?"

His face hardened again. "I did. But not for a couple of years now. Maybe I will this year. Yes, in fact I've entered."

"I'd love to see you. I've seen quite a lot of winter sports. Even gone in for them myself. I have skis here, but your place seems to be the only available spot to use them."

"It is. Why not try it?"

The man's almost human with a drink in him, Kit thought. Just then Bill entered and immediately they were conscious of the growing darkness and of a high-pitched moaning sound outside. Even as she turned to look out through the double-paned storm windows, Kit saw the firs across the lake bend before the wind as if a giant invisible hand had suddenly swept them down.

"It's here!" Bill grunted laconically. He looked at Jones. "Reckon you'll be stayin' with us, Mister."

Jones was staring out, his face stony. "Yes," he said reluctantly, "I guess I will. I'd never get back now." He turned to Kit. "I'm sorry, but it's humanly impossible—"

"That's splendid!" she exclaimed. "Much better to have company if we're going to be shut in."

There was a look in her eyes that made him wonder if she had planned this, given him a drink and led him to talk until the blizzard came. He muttered something angrily to himself, and added to her, "Well, it can't be helped." He saw Blanche standing in the doorway and said, "I see you're well chaperoned. Not that it matters much up here. Or would matter anyway."

Blanche's grimness seemed to have thawed somewhat. She said, "I'm glad you're here, sir. I'd hate to be here with just that man," looking contemptuously at Bill, whose response was that same wry grin with which he always greeted everybody.

Kit smiled and immediately the room seemed brighter, a nice place to be in. "Bill and Blanche fight constantly, but I think they're really quite fond of each other—eh, Bill?"

"Sure," the man growled. "She's a tiger cat, that one, but I can handle her."

Blanche slammed the door in his face.

The wind was screaming now. It had grown swiftly darker, and the fine snow, driving horizontally, was thickening, blotting out the world. Bob Jones said, "It looks like the real thing. We're in for a hell-freezer."

The girl laughed gaily. "Rather intriguing, this. Girl and man isolated in a lodge

together, in a blizzard, with a maid and a backwoods caretaker. The man, for some mysterious reason, dislikes females. Only the fury outside makes him remain. It's a situation that might lead to murder—or anything. But you aren't so bad with a good drink in you."

JONES was finishing his second high-ball. Her open mockery amused him. His eyes, she saw, were nice when he smiled. "I admit that you aren't so bad, with or without a drink—but don't get any ideas. If you think this is romantic, you'd better stop it now. As far as I'm concerned, romance is an illusion—and a damned silly one."

"Don't assume things," she retorted. "I deal in romance professionally, and that leaves me no time for practicing it as a human being. But, after all, we're here and can't help it, so we might as well have an understanding that we'll be agreeable while it lasts."

"Oh, of course. I'll keep my end up as the grateful guest and, actually, I'm delighted to be here. I never get lonesome when I can keep busy, get action, but being cooped up alone through this would not be my idea of fun."

She sniffed the air toward the kitchen door. "Bill's a good cook—as you may know. We'll have supper very soon. And Blanche isn't as fierce as she seems. It's just that she doesn't like men around me. Thinks I'm too good for any of them. By the way, you can be quite comfortable here. That room, off to the left, is Sam's. You'll find everything you may need there. Not just your taste, perhaps, but at least your size. Any clothes you want to use will fit well enough."

"Then if you'll excuse me, I'll investigate. This outfit isn't exactly suited to lounging before a fire."

In Kaufman's room he found the big chest of drawers well stocked. Kaufman, obviously, was luxurious in his tastes. Somewhat amused, having resigned himself to his present position, Jones selected fresh linen, a pair of heavy gray flannel slacks with a pin stripe, a pale blue flannel shirt and a belted dark blue jacket. Then he

investigated the bath and thought it surely must be a dream. It was fitted up with an astonishing luxury for such a place and the tap actually ran hot water. Jones thought of his own Spartan lodge and whistled. This would be a real treat. Half an hour later he emerged, shining and immaculate.

"Not exactly my style," he said somewhat sheepishly, "but the best I could do. Mr. Kaufman seems to run to the rich and gaudy."

"Oh, you look lovely!" she exclaimed. "I can't compete at all."

Her own costume was a checked flannel shirt of clear yellow with square, brown wooden buttons, tucked into navy blue slacks, and even Bob Jones was forced to admit, a little breathlessly, that the girl was beautiful. He said gravely, "I might state, with quite impersonal approval, that you're a knockout."

Blanche relieved the moment by dragging up the table near the fire. She spread a red and white checked heavy linen cloth and set the table with heavy, bright peasant ware. As they sat down and were served, he exclaimed involuntarily, "My God! Roast beef!" and Kit—Mary Jones to him—smiled.

"I suppose you have been having simple bachelor food—flapjacks and such?"

"I don't do badly at the stove," he asserted, "but this is out of my line." He turned and bowed toward the window and the white hell raging outside. "Thanks, Mr. Blizzard, for shutting me in." He set to with a ravenous appetite, and Kit, watching, saw that Blanche was pleased. Her grimness was thawing before this man, and her mistress was thinking that if he impressed Blanche that way, he must possess some rare appeal. An appeal not quite, she assured herself, apparent to her.

Bob Jones Removes the Mask

ALONE in the great room, with the birch-log fire roaring against the fury outside, they sat for a long time quietly and there was a great peace on them. Jones' face was relaxed as he smoked his short, thick pipe, the aroma

of the tobacco speaking of rich, fragrant blending, of lands far from this snowbound isolation, Perique from Louisiana, Burley from Kentucky, and the good Virginia leaf that was pure gold.

Kit studied him through curling cigarette smoke and found her mind wandering along paths she had not permitted since beginning her stage career. There was this peace, security, a quiet happiness in her and she thought, abruptly, "To live like this always might be a perfect thing!"

In spite of himself Bob Jones had succumbed to food and drink and this girl's simple, frank, comradely manner. He felt, suddenly, the need of an outlet for all the things pent up in him since coming here to escape the things he hated. He was not born to bitterness and it was a difficult rôle to bear.

"I don't think," he began, "that there's any particular reason, under the circumstances, why you should not know something about me. In confidence, of course. I've got to talk about it, and I feel you would not mind."

Sympathy showed briefly in her eyes. "No, I wouldn't mind. Please say what you will."

"I married a girl," he said, "soon after leaving college. Met her at the Winter Carnival and thought she was a dream. She was playing in a show that year and knocking Broadway cold—I thought I was the luckiest man alive when she gave me dates. I was a big shot, a man of the world, all that sort of rot—so I thought when I took her around to the bright spots and saw all the world look at us, and saw the envy in other men's eyes. Well, to cut it short, I proposed and she said 'Yes.'"

"For about two weeks, more or less, the dream lasted, and then I waked up to find it less secure even than a dream. She was a grand actress—fooled me completely—but the girl had no heart. It was money she wanted and a sap like me to provide it. I had it, and she was welcome to it, if she had been what I thought. Well—you can imagine what happened. She played me for a fish until she saw I was wise. Then came her real play, what she

had planned from the first—divorce and alimony. My real name, by the way, is Martin Sturm. The papers ran it. Perhaps you saw it?"

She nodded. "I did. You're supposed to be big-game hunting in Africa."

"Yes. She had no grounds, and while I was willing to let her go, I was sore enough not to—preferring to block her game and prevent the divorce; show her the sucker could play a card or 'wo and not be completely landed. I planned it carefully, arranging to go abroad, to Africa, and catch the next boat back and hide away up here. I don't care a whoop for Africa or big game. I like this country. It clicked. I've been here quite a while. She can't make a move, doesn't even know where I am."

"But that's silly!" Kit said. "She can go to Reno, Arkansas, lots of places, and divorce you on desertion. Don't you know that?"

Martin Sturm's face hardened and he said grimly, "Yes, I know, but I hold a trump card. I've got evidence that would give me a divorce in New York. My attorneys are instructed, and she knows it, to bring counter suit on those grounds the moment she makes a move. She wouldn't get a cent and would get publicity that would wreck all her plans. As it is, I give her a fair allowance and have her tied up."

KIT smiled pityingly. "A mess, all right, but I think you are being foolish. You gain nothing but a halfway sort of revenge. It gets you nothing. Why not let her divorce you and end the farce?"

"And pay her huge alimony and let her have what she wanted all along? Not half! What she has done to me—I was an idealistic sap, and she wrecked all my fine ideas, wrecked everything I wanted from life. Money! It was a curse to have it. I'm happier up here than I ever was in New York."

"I think you're still an idealistic sap," Kit said. "But, at least, I understand why Bill calls you the 'quare feller. And why you greeted me as if I had leprosy. Now that you've confessed, I might as well tell you who I am, and let you know the worst."

Being an actress will, no doubt, make me all you think—”

He raised his hand and checked her. “I know who you are. I’ve known all along. I saw you when your play opened. It was just after we returned from our wedding trip. When I saw you that day on the trail it was like everything I hated suddenly overtaking me. But I’m not quite so big a fool as you think. I’m not condemning you just for being a woman—but I wanted—I want—to let you know that meeting you here, all this, isn’t setting the stage for romance. I knew what girls are like. I’m through!”

“I see.” Kit laughed, but there was no humor in it. “As a human being I’m all right—as a female I’m out. That clicks with me, Martin Sturm. My career is my only interest. This is just a stop-gap, my being here. Men—no man interests me beyond casual friendship.”

Martin stood up, held out his hand. “Then we can shake on it. We’re friends, and all this silly love business is definitely out. O.K. with you?”

Kit shook hands. “Perfect. It’s nice to have a clear, frank understanding with a man. Saves so much bother.”

“Yes, it’s good,” Martin said.

Blanche, the maid, ear pressed to the closed door, smiled. She had hated this place, considered herself exiled where human beings had no business. But now she found herself a spectator at something that held great promise. She put no belief in the surface of words she heard beyond the door. Words were nothing. It was the way a man and woman looked at each other that counted. Blanche decided this backwoods isolation might, after all, prove thrilling entertainment. Like many a grim-faced middle-aged woman who pretended to be fierce and cold with men, her heart was warm with hidden dreams of romance. Now she retired to the kitchen and amused herself by baiting Bill; by telling him what horrid creatures men were. And Bill, wise with the penetrating insight and instinct of a man who lived close to Nature, understood and played his part. He and Blanche had a swell time, really. Some people are born to fight with words as a

game to be played, having nothing to do with real thoughts and feelings.

The man and girl before the fire were silent again, under the spell of birch logs burning and the soothing heat; they were silent while the blizzard raged outside like, now, an impersonal terror that could not touch them, but was death to all that breathed and moved where it could strike. But Kit, at last, smothering a yawn, announced, “I’m sleepy. I’m turning in. If there’s anything you want, call Bill.”

Sturm glanced at a pile of magazines on the table. I’ll look through these. Haven’t seen any since I’ve been up here.”

He had leafed through several magazines when a door creaked open.

“Good night, Martin Sturm.”

She stood there in a warm, bright yellow robe. Tiny furred mules showed beneath. Her hair was a blue-black mass framing the perfect oval of her face, and her eyes were violet pools, mysterious, fathomless. She was the loveliest thing he had ever seen. His pulse quickened, his hands clenched the chair arms, but he just smiled, said gravely, “Good night, Kit Carroll.”

He sat on there for a long while after her door closed, staring at the fire. Bill came in and fixed it to burn through the night and still he sat on. He was sitting with a dream, recaptured from the past. He was seeing life as something bright and beautiful again. But memory turned the wheel to bitterness once more so that he muttered to himself, “Damn her! They’re all alike!”

Invisible, Silken Chain

FOR two days the blizzard raged, its pauses merely seeming brief rests, gathering strength for new and more terrific assaults. But the four people in the camp known as “No More New York” were snug against its fury and each, in his or her own way, content. There were times when memory flashed back to turn an acid phrase, and slowly Martin Sturm began to take Kit’s with a grin, and she, in turn, acquired a tolerant smile and shaming statements like: “Forget somebody stole your candy and act your age!”

They were resourceful. There was no boredom for them. Kit entertained them hour upon hour with dramatic monologues. Martin, who had been everywhere, made Bill's eyes pop with tales of far places and strange ways. They played poker and often played a game called Monopoly, at which Bill, strangely enough, was best. He had lived always close to reality, and played it ruthlessly, as reality demanded. It was played on something roughly like a parcheesi board, and was a miniature reproduction of business life, where the object was to acquire blocks of property on the board and wage business war against each other to acquire monopolies of property, forcing and foreclosing mortgages, trading railroads and public utilities, just as the drama of business went on in any town.

"Life," Martin said, "is just like this game. Those who have, get, and the others go to the wall."

Kit watched him throw the dice and land on her most expensive property. While he counted out the fake money to pay rent for landing there, she said, "But Fate can make the dice change a life in one throw. You had me tied up, and now I have the advantage. You can never tell what's just around the corner."

Bill, puzzled, changed the subject. "Listen! It's over!"

It was very still. Going to the window they saw the sky blue and glittering with far-off worlds. Kit pointed, said softly, "There's Ursa Major, and Ursa Minor there above. The Great Bear and the Little Bear—big and little Dipper. Remember, Martin, that life can't fill a big dipper with a little—not in one pouring. You expected too much, were too thirsty. Wait, have courage and patience, and drink more wisely next time."

"Yes," Martin said, "I get it. And I won't be a fool again."

As the third day came, they had grown intimate and friendly and a certain quiet happiness burned in the lodge like a candle flame, still and lovely, at dusk. And so, though no one seemed aware, soft, silken strands, invisible but strong, and winding tighter, closer, drew them together. Fate

had rolled its dice, called up a blizzard, and they had turned down a new path together without knowing.

THE bright dawn came with the sky bluer than anything in the world except Kit Carroll's eyes. Frozen and white and still, the world was new and clean. Nothing moved anywhere outside, and the man and girl stood together and stared at it like awed children first glimpsing the beauty and wonder of the world.

"It's queer," Martin said, "but something has happened to me. I want to live again, to do things. I feel clean and fresh and almost bursting with a need for action."

"Then you'll go out to the Winter Carnival and enter the ski jumps?"

"Yes. I feel that it will be a sort of test. What I do there will be a sort of trial at living again. I always wanted the skiing championship more than anything. If I win it I'll go back to New York and tackle bigger things. I'll go into the business my father left and do some of the work of the world."

"And if you don't win?"

"I've got to. You see," he hesitated a moment, evaded her eyes, and went on in a low voice, "in my last competition something strange happened. I wasn't afraid—I don't think I was—but I fucked my jump. Everybody thought it was nerves, that I was scared. My wife—we weren't married then—used to taunt me with it—not that she cared, the money was the only thing I had that mattered to her. But the curious thing is that after that I really was—perhaps it was psychological—I really was afraid, for I couldn't make a decent jump from a really high take-off. I still don't know whether I can. This hill here is no test." He was moody, depressed now. "I've got to prove to myself there's no yellow streak in me. It's a thing that means everything to a man. Perhaps a woman would not understand."

"You forget," she reminded him, "where I spent my childhood. In mining camps courage, often, was the only test men lived by. Often it was the only thing that determined success or failure, life or death.

Yes, I understand. My father used to say it was all that mattered to a real man—whether he had guts or not. But of course you have. You'll do it—and you'll win the championship. I'll be there to see it, if you don't mind."

"No," he said, "I'd like to know you were watching. It would help. It's only a few weeks off. We can break a trail out of here any time. Now I'm going back to my place. This has been grand. I've come to life again. Try not to think I'm too big a fool."

"A man isn't a fool because his ideals are thrown in his face," Kit said. "Not if he sees one woman doesn't make a world, and doesn't represent all women."

Martin went inside. In a few minutes he came out, attired in the outfit he had arrived in. He took his snowshoes.

"Thanks," he said. "I owe you a lot. Get Bill to bring you over to my place. If you don't show up there, I'll be back."

"I'll come," she promised. "I'll try that hill with you."

She watched him move with astonishing ease and grace across the deep snow. His tall, powerful body, his skill, made the awkward snowshoes seem easy and effortless. When he reached the wall of snow-bowed firs he turned, waved once, and disappeared. Kit Carroll felt a heavy loneliness descend upon her. Bill and Blanche were no longer sufficient human company. There was, too, a new and sudden fear of this vast wilderness, as if a shadow had descended over it; as if something dark and menacing had settled on the earth.

"I am," she told herself, "close to being just a plain damn fool." But there was something tight and dark in her mind and heart, and with a woman's intuition she felt that something had gone, or was going wrong. Her mind refused to accept what her heart told her: that it was because of Martin Sturm.

The Female of the Species

WHEN two days had passed and the bright, still, frozen world wore on her nerves, Kit announced, "I'm going over to Mr. Sturm's. How do you think the trail is, Bill?"

"All right, ma'am. He would've broke through the bad spots, and the rest is swept and packed tight by the wind. But I'd better go along."

"No, I'll try it. If it's bad I'll turn back."

In her scarlet costume, skis strapped on her back and feet thrust into the thongs of her snowshoes, she started off and Bill saw proof that she knew her stuff in country such as that. Once he started to follow, but Blanche stopped him. "You heard her. Stay here. She knows her way around. She don't need any fool man to help her." What Blanche meant, of course, was the old truth that often three's a crowd.

Kit passed below the hill where she had first seen Martin Sturm hurtle down through the air. The snow on the hill was smooth, untouched. She wondered at that. Down the trail and up around the shoulder of the hill. There was his cabin, blue smoke curling above. He was at home. She called, but no answer came, no door opened. She went on up, thinking it very strange. Then, nearing the place, she saw the trail from the outside world and saw it had been well packed. He must have visitors—something strange indeed.

Her knock brought no answer, so she pushed in, to stop, transfixed.

Two men stood before the big fireplace. In their hands, carelessly pointing in her direction, were guns—not the kind men carry in the wilderness, but the short, ugly automatics of the city. To one side, roped to a chair, was Martin Sturm, a handkerchief bound over his mouth. Then, more astonishing still, she saw a woman sitting calmly across the room, looking very much at home. One hand held a cigarette, the other a half-emptied highball glass. For a moment Kit stared, then ignored the men, walked across to Martin and removed the handkerchief.

"What is this, Martin? Who are these people?"

An icy fury showed in the eyes of Martin Sturm. He nodded toward the woman. "May I present my wife? And these charming thugs are either friends or employees of hers—she forgot to say."

The woman's lips smiled, but her pale blue eyes were cold. She pushed back a wave of hair so palely golden as to seem almost white. "How do you do, Miss Carroll? I've seen you on the stage. I'm glad you came. It makes everything easier—and quite plain. Now I see why Martin was content to lose himself up here."

Kit's look would have withered the average recipient, but Cynthia Sturm only smiled.

"What," Kit asked, "does this strange tableau mean? Why are you tied up, Martin?"

"Mrs. Sturm," the way he said the name was like an epithet, "has her own methods of getting what she wants. But she is going to be disappointed this time. She finally traced me here and brought these two nice little boys along to force me to give her a divorce on her own terms. I've been—a bit uncomfortable, but she's wasting her time."

"You'll see, fella," one of the thugs growled.

"Oh, it's quite simple now," the woman said. "Put the girl in that other chair. I think it will be quite easy to get what I want—I'm grateful to you, my dear."

BEFORE Kit could move they had her arms, had forced her into the chair and swiftly bound her there. She was completely helpless.

"Now," said Mrs. Sturm, "shall I get what I want, Martin, or shall we use additional persuasion? You see," she addressed Kit, "we're friends here, so I don't mind admitting that I value money highly. In fact it is the only thing I really care about. Martin, of course, is a fool. He chose to make it difficult. Now it's my turn."

"You," Martin snapped, "can go to hell!"

"Is that nice, darling? Well, let me explain. Miss Carroll shall be made most uncomfortable if you do not sign the papers I have here. And I fear no comeback. You see, if necessary, I could just let the New York papers have the charming little story of how you and Miss Carroll enjoy the wilderness together. I rather think

that would cancel the threat you have held over me. I am sure any court would recognize my claim as well as yours. Are you ready to sign?"

"Don't do it, Martin. I'm not afraid."

Martin Sturm looked at Kit and said, "I'm sorry. I suppose she wins. I refuse to bring you into this. Free us," he told Cynthia, "and I'll sign your paper."

"Don't do it, Martin! Don't be yellow! She can't hurt either of us enough for that. I'd die before I'd let her force me."

"Yes," the woman said, "he is yellow. I don't suppose you know about that skiing business. He was in a big meet and backed down when put to the test. He isn't really worth your interest, Miss Carroll. He came here as much to escape that as to escape me. You can't blame me for wishing to divorce a coward."

Kit just said quietly to Martin, "I don't believe it, but prove it, Martin. Don't concede her a thing."

The woman tossed her drink. She nodded to the thugs. "Be careful. Don't leave any evidence to show. I think I'm going to enjoy this."

One of the thugs picked up a short length of rubber hose torn from a cistern water line under the roof. Carefully, with an expertness that showed he knew his business, he began to beat Martin Sturm, obviously enjoying it, a smile on his flat, ugly face. Martin did not speak or move, but stared at him with a faint, contemptuous smile.

"You're wasting your time," he gritted. "And you'll pay for this!"

Kit shuddered, closed her eyes, but the sound was just as bad as seeing.

The blows were harder, faster, but Martin's expression did not change nor did he flinch, though the man was a powerful brute and the pain obviously was great. Each blow jarred him, the thudding blows had a sickening sound in the room, and Cynthia Sturm seemed, as she had predicted, to be enjoying it. She asked, "Is that enough? Will you sign?"

Martin ignored her.

"All right," the woman said, "try her."

Martin gritted, "You wouldn't dare! Touch her and you'll go up for life—if

there's anything left of you after I get at you. And don't think I won't!"

The men hesitated. One of them shook his head. "We didn't bargain to handle anybody else."

The woman's face hardened. "Get out of the way." She came over to Kit. "This is a pleasure," she said. Viciously she slapped Kit's face, first one side, then the other.

Tears came, but Kit did not flinch. Instead she said through clenched teeth, "Ignore it, Martin. She can't really hurt me."

But Martin's face had gone deathly pale. He shouted, "Stop! Damn you, you win!" He strained futilely at the ropes that held him. As the woman stepped back he said to Kit, "Wasn't it Kipling who wrote 'The female of the species is more deadly than the male'? Give me the paper, Cynthia."

One of his hands was freed. He scrawled his name, in spite of Kit's protestations.

Triumphantly, the woman said, "Let them go. Now I suppose we can say good-bye. It wouldn't be wise to try to follow us—even if you had the nerve."

The three of them bundled up against the cold. Then they cut the ropes and, with guns still out, passed through the door. The woman called back, "Go ahead and enjoy your wilderness, darlings. I hope you both freeze!"

MARTIN stamped circulation back into his legs, swung his arms, wincing. His back muscles were cruelly painful. Kit said, "Isn't there a gun?"

"No. They hid it somewhere. Probably buried it under the snow." He groaned. "I'll never forgive myself for letting you into this. That woman—"

He looked from the window, paced the floor, raging. Suddenly he stopped and almost shouted, "I'll try it!"

"Try what, Martin?"

But he made no reply. He was putting on his skiing pacs, pulling on a heavy coat. He took down his skis and skiing poles. "Wait here!" he shouted and dashed out, paused and called back, "Or go get Bill, and a gun!"

Kit followed, bewildered and afraid. She saw him go around the hill. The woman

and the thugs were out of sight. Surely he was not going to attack them without weapons! She started to call him back, but knew it was useless. When she came in sight of Martin, he was at the top of the slope above the jumping take-off. Far below she saw three figures moving, the two men ahead, the woman following. Then she knew what Martin planned to do. He was already moving, the swell of the slope hiding him from below.

Hurrying frantically, desperately afraid for him, she reached a point where she could see just as he shot out into the air. The figures below did not see him at first and when they did, seemed paralyzed. They stared upward, and Kit heard the woman scream.

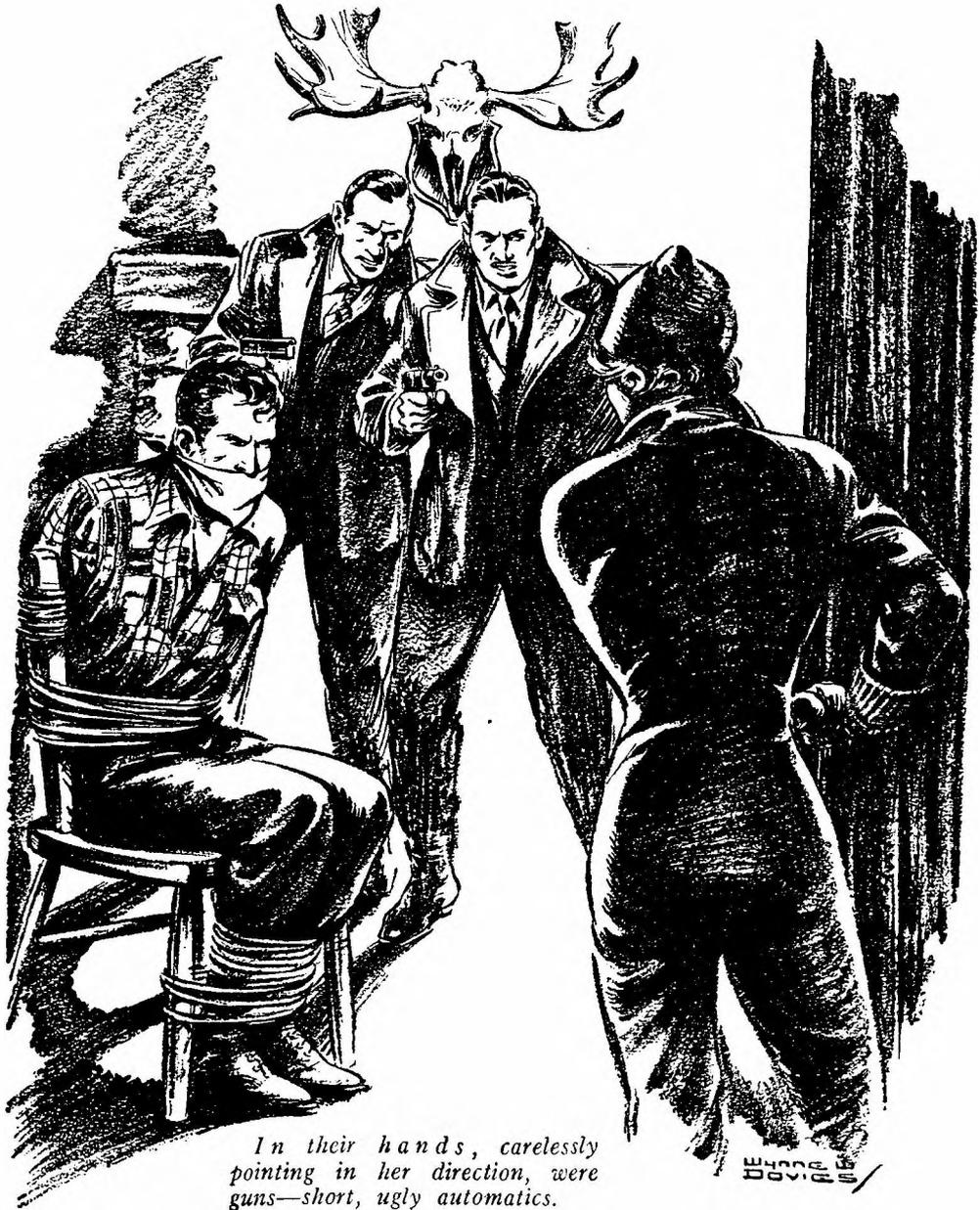
Out, down, hurtling straight toward the men, Martin was a juggernaut of vengeance in the air. The men came to life, leaped back, fumbling for their guns. His skis touched the slope and he rushed straight at them. Even in that moment of amazed horror, Kit thought, "And people have said he was yellow!"

There was a cloud of powdery snow as Martin checked and swerved toward them. A gun spat as he hurled a ski pole. It caught the man on the side of the head. Martin crouched, shifted the other pole, leaped aside and hurled it at the other thug. Before they could recover he was free of his skis; he leaped forward and his fist smashed the first man down. He grabbed his gun, covered the other, and the man's hands went up. Martin dropped the gun and leaped at him. There was a moment's struggle, then Martin stepped back and again his fist flashed out, dropping the man as if an axe had struck him.

Hardly conscious of what she was doing Kit had been floundering down the hill. Now, as she came close, she saw the woman opening her bag. "Martin! Watch her!"

Martin whirled, with one leap grasped her wrist and wrenched the tiny pistol from her. He took the three guns then, handed them to Kit as she came panting up.

"Cover them!" he snapped. He grabbed Cynthia's bag, took a paper from it, glanced at it, then calmly struck a match



In their hands, carelessly pointing in her direction, were guns—short, ugly automatics.

and set fire to it. When it was black scraps on the snow he laughed, bowed ironically to the woman.

"We won't detain you," he said. "I think you will find it pleasanter in New York. Your kind doesn't go so well up here. And if you don't keep your mouth shut, I think you will regret it." He turned to the men. "If you want to keep out of

doing a long stretch you'd better see to it that she keeps quiet." He stepped toward them. "I've a mind to give both of you a good beating." But as the men recoiled, he laughed contemptuously. "Your nerve seems a bit weak without guns. Get out! I won't soil my hands with you."

The men stared, sullen.

But even then, in spite of everything,

Martin asked the woman, "Can you get out all right?"

Sullen, furious, hate blazing in her eyes, Cynthia said, "Yes. I have men from the village meeting us."

He emptied the tiny gun she had tried to use, handed it to her with the cartridges. "I advise you to keep them in front of you. Load this when you've gotten far enough away not to be tempted, and keep them covered. I have an idea they might not like you so much."

"Big-hearted, aren't you!" she snarled. "I'm not afraid of them, or any other man!"

"Neither," he said contemptuously, "is a rattlesnake."

WHEN they had disappeared, Martin turned to the girl. "Did she hurt you very much? I could gladly have killed her for that."

"No," Kit said. "The only thing that hurt seriously was knowing it would force you to give in." There was a new expression in her eyes now when she looked at him. "Martin, no one can ever question your courage. I was terrified. Those men would have killed you—they tried to. It was a foolish thing to do—but magnificent."

"Not so much," he said. "I knew that type would be afraid of an attack they could not understand. They're just rats. All their courage is in their guns. I counted on scaring them enough to get a crack at them before they could shoot. If it hadn't worked I could have swept on by. She was the one I was afraid of. If ever there was a cold-blooded, man-eating tigress, she certainly is one. No more heart than a slab of granite."

"I understand now," she said softly. "I don't blame you for anything, except not seeing from the first what she is. Any woman would know at a glance. And I'm sorry the male code kept you from giving her at least one healthy slap."

"So am I," he admitted, "but of course I was a fool, and let myself in for everything."

"It's nice some people can be fools—if you're one," she murmured. "I think—"

A voice hailed them. "What's all the shootin' I heard?"

Martin saw Bill emerging from the forest. "Oh, just doing a little target shooting."

Bill looked at the tracks in the snow. "Huh!" he grunted, pointing. "Those the targets?"

"No, I was." Martin grinned. "I'll tell you sometime, Bill. You're too young and innocent to get it all of a sudden."

Bill scowled. "Maybe I know more'n you think. That Blanche woman's got a loose tongue and a keen ear. And I met some fellers from the village said a couple of tough city guys and a woman were up this way."

"Forget it," Martin said seriously. "It's better left in the dark."

"All right," Bill agreed. "It's forgot. I ain't one to pry."

Not to be Cheated

KIT CARROLL, back at camp, and somewhat piqued that Bill's arrival on the scene had made it unnecessary for Martin to return with her, sat before the fire thinking. Feeling, too—a new feeling for her—questioned at first, examined, considered, and at last accepted as fact. "But it can't be," she sighed. "My career must go on."

She called to Bill. "How's the trail to outside, Bill?"

"All right, ma'am, for you."

"And Blanche?"

Bill chuckled, glancing at the maid. "She's tough. She can take it."

Blanche made a little choked sound of rage and Kit barely repressed a smile. "All right, Bill, we're going out. Soon as possible. You can get our things out later and have them shipped. Get ready, Blanche."

An hour later they were on the trail, and at the first fork found it packed and easy traveling. Like most such places, it seemed a remote, inaccessible wilderness once there, but actually was only eight miles from a village and a highway. And Kit was spurred by something that made her indifferent to the rigors of the trail. Blanche,

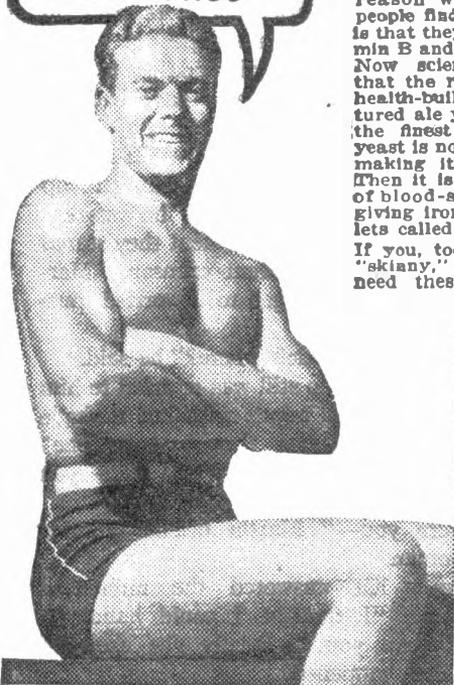
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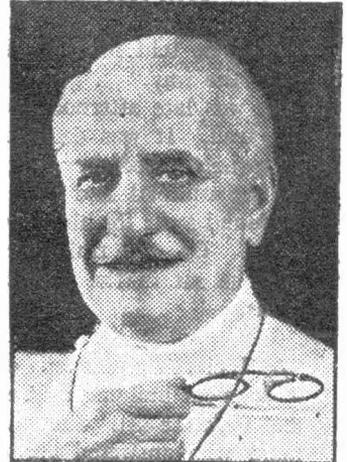


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as Bill had said, "could take it," and Bill carried small bags with their necessities. They would reach the village before dark.

Martin Sturm, in his own place, was alternately raging, dejected and lost in this new dream possessing him. Suddenly his present status had reached a point past enduring. He felt a need for freedom and a new chance at life, and resolve followed quickly upon recognition of that need. "I may be a fool again; there may be no hope," he told himself, "but I'll at least clear the way."

It was late afternoon before he was on the trail. It was dark and bitterly cold when he reached the village. The last bus to the railroad had gone. By the time he found a car for hire it was close to midnight. On the train for New York at last, he sat in the smoker and made his plans.

AT eleven a.m. a girl entered an apartment building on Central Park West and took the lift. She gave her name to a maid who answered her ring and waited in a sitting room that was exactly what she had expected—more color than taste, more of everything than the room needed, but with a certain atmosphere of wanton luxury about it.

A cold-eyed, slim woman with extraordinarily pale gold hair came in after keeping her waiting a long time—deliberately, Kit was sure. She wore a black lace negligée obviously designed for male eyes. Her smile compromised with a sneer.

"Good morning," she said with mock courtesy. "You may be surprised to learn that your visit does not surprise me at all." She reclined on a pink satin chaise longue and said, "Well, what is it? Please make it brief."

Kit Carroll lit a cigarette. "What do you want, to free Martin without any fuss? It isn't what you think. I have had no affair with him, and there will not be any. Nor do I intend to marry him. It's just that we are friends and I think, in these matters, women understand each other and should accomplish a settlement more easily."

"I saw you were in love with him," the

woman murmured languidly. "You're welcome to him. All I want is my price. If there's to be any divorce, I take nothing less than a half million settlement. He's got it. Are you acting for him, or is this your own idea?"

"It's my own idea. But I've been to a lawyer, and I have powerful friends. Also, I have affidavits from two witnesses that will spoil any counter claim you might make about the situation up there in the woods. I have legal advice that assures me that Martin can get rid of you without paying you a cent. But it would mean a disagreeable affair, publicity best avoided. Those are my cards. What do you say?"

Cynthia Sturm remained unperturbed. "I say that Martin is a fool. I played him for a sucker—and once a sucker always a sucker, in this case. You are overlooking the cards you dealt me. You love him and you'll marry him. He loves you and will marry you. I've seen people in love. I know what fools they are. And I know Martin Sturm. I'm sitting tight."

There was a buzz somewhere back in the apartment. A maid appeared. "Let him in," the woman said, adding to Kit, "It's Martin. You seem to have had the same idea."

Kit looked wildly around. There was no escape. She had thought him still up there in the woods and here he was entering the room. For a moment they stared at each other. Kit went crimson. Martin's expression changed to a worried, puzzled frown.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

The woman who still was married to him laughed. "'Two minds with but a single thought—two hearts that beat as one'. Charming, really quite charming—you saps!"

"Were you—" Martin began, ignoring the woman.

"Yes," Kit answered the unfinished question. "I thought I could handle it better than you." Briefly she sketched what had happened.

Martin shook his head. "You had better stay out of this mess, Kit. I'm grateful, but I'll settle it alone."

Kit looked stubborn. "Under the cir-



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cumstances, after what has happened, I'm sitting in. I'm involved in this now."

Martin looked at the woman. "I'm willing to compromise. I haven't as much money as you seem to think. But I'm willing to pay a reasonable settlement, seeing my own gullibility got me into it. Make a reasonable proposition and I'll agree. Otherwise, I'll hold my cards."

The woman smiled, pressed a button. "I'm a practical person," she said. "I anticipated this and am quite ready."

A thin, hawk-faced man entered the room, carrying a briefcase, and was presented as her attorney. After a whispered consultation he told Martin, "My client will settle for a guarantee of twenty-five thousand a year. To end, of course, if she should marry again. I think—ah—that a reasonable proposition to avoid any—ah—undesirable publicity for you and the young lady here."

Martin glanced at some notes in his hand. "Accepted. If you will see my attorneys—Colston, Colston and Blackburn—and they will arrange it. Your—er—client will, I suppose, go to Reno and take care of that end of it?"

"Yes."

Martin stood up. "Then we'll leave you. I trust you will find another husband soon. Unless you've lost your technique, I'm sure you will. You should have remained on the stage. You are a remarkably good actress when it comes to stimulating emotions you do not possess. Twenty-five thousand is cheap to be free of you."

Cynthia was looking at Kit Carroll. "It will be a pleasure to deprive *you* of it," she said.

IN the street, Kit and Martin both breathed deeply, as if glad to get into clean air again. Martin suggested lunch. In a quiet restaurant they ordered double daiquiris and a filet of sole. Martin asked, "Now will you tell me why you were doing that for me? I was never so amazed in my life as I was at finding you there."

Kit replied wearily, "You know there can be but one answer to that, Martin. I

wanted to help you. There's no sense in our fencing with each other. There is only one thing that could make a woman take that much trouble for a man. I had to help you if I could."

"Then you mean—" He reached across the table and took her hand.

"Yes, Martin. I fell in love with you those two days we were shut in together. I meant for you never to know, for it can't mean anything. I can't give up my career, and that means I can't marry."

"But you know I love you, Kit. That all I said up there meant nothing, once I knew you, saw what you were like. That—all my horrible past—is ended now. You—why, darling, you mean a new life for me!"

"I saw all this coming," she admitted, "and I did nothing to stop it. I, too, was grasping for something I did not have, something I can't have, Martin. I tried to do something for you—to free you, but not with the idea that anything would come of it for us. I saw Sam Kaufman this morning and I start rehearsing a new show two weeks from now. I made my choice when I went on the stage. A woman cannot have a career and a husband, too. Not when her career is the stage."

"That isn't true. I—you could go on, Kit. I might even go into it myself. Be your manager, producer—organize our own company. That's often done."

"Yes," she agreed, "but only when both parties are show people. No, Martin, it wouldn't work."

The waiter interrupted. Afterward Kit refused to let him continue. "Not now, Martin. I'm too tired. And it's no use, really. You'll get over it. We both must put it aside and get over it."

When they left, while he was putting her in a cab, he said, "I'm going to marry you, Kit. Life isn't going to cheat me again."

She wouldn't look at him. "When is this ski-jumping affair, Martin?"

"Exactly ten days from now."

"I'll be there to see you. I hope—I know you will win. And you will succeed in whatever you do—and forget this."

"I'm going to marry you," he repeated.

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She spoke to the driver and the cab moved away. She turned and waved. Martin Sturm wondered if he were right in thinking he saw tears well up in her eyes. If a girl like Kit felt strongly enough for tears, there might be hope. "Life," he swore savagely, "shall not cheat me again!"

man agreed, "it will be all right. You can use another name, as long as we know it, but when it is over—if you should happen to win, or even place—your identity must be revealed."

Martin smiled. "If I win, I won't care for further mystery and disguise." He

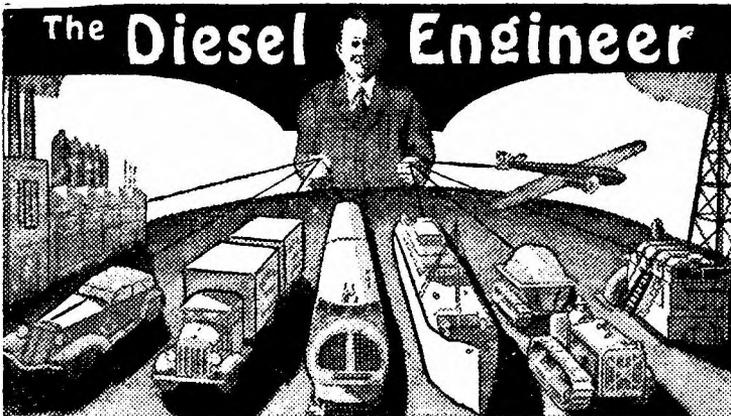
Robert Jones, Sportsman

UP in the New England hills where the great Winter Carnival was to take place, Martin Sturm held a closeted conference with the officials.

"Under the circumstances," their spokes-



Martin's fist flashed out, dropping the man as if an axe had struck him.



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touched the beard still hiding his lower face. "And I'll get a shave."

There was much speculation about who this "Robert Jones" was and where he was from. It is a curious fact that when a man gives a name not his, it is instinctively felt by others. Robert Jones seemed too good to have remained unknown to winter sports fans. The beard was additionally intriguing, for he clearly was a young man. Each day, as he practiced, he had quite an audience and became known to the crowd gathering there as "The Mystery Jumper." It had been long since Martin Sturm had been in competition, and anyway, Martin Sturm was supposed to be in Africa. No one had any reason to suspect, and the beard was a perfect disguise.

"Looks like one of those blond, bearded Vikings you see in old pictures," a spectator said. "Robert Jones—sounds phony to me."

In practice jumps Martin forgot all about his supposed funk—the yellow

streak once attributed to him under his real name. Nobody here knew, and he was not worrying about it until competition started. He had thought it out, thought he had solved it as just a queer twist of the mind that had made him balk that day. It was perhaps just the effect of failing for the first time, when he had always won. The same thing happened to all athletes, even to teams, even to race horses. But suppose it came again? That was his real worry, even though he laughed at himself sometimes after a prodigious leap out into space.

Kit—would she come? He wired her flowers. He sent her a telegram: I love you stop I'm going to marry you stop, and told the girl who took the message, "Send one of these every day until I notify you otherwise."

The girl said, "Or until she says 'Yes?'" Martin smiled, a wry, humorless smile behind his beard. "When she does that, I'll send you a dozen orchids."

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POPULAR MECHANICS

"I can depend on that?" the girl asked, smiling.

"You certainly can," Martin said.

The girl said, "Don't forget. I'm betting on you."

THE preliminaries started. All competitors made three qualifying jumps. Lindstrom, from Minnesota, with generations of ski-jumpers behind him, led the qualifiers with a leap of a hundred and eighty feet. Lewis Gordon, just a year out of Dartmouth, was second, with a hundred and seventy-five. They seemed destined to be the star performers. Martin was among the first ten, with a leap of a hundred and sixty-nine. A better jump was voided on bad landing form. He was purposely not doing his best. He did not want too much attention from the crowd.

He had, he considered now, a fighting chance. It depended entirely on whether the others were anywhere near their best in the qualifying jumps. And it depended, heavily, on how "right" he was when the jump-offs took place. So many things counted—form as well as distance; suppression of that nervous fear that the old mental twist might return and throw him off; the effect, if she came, of Kit's presence.

But there was relief and encouragement in knowing that the woman he had married was in Reno and his freedom was on the way. That marriage, like a disease, like a blight on him, was lifting at last, and Kit had given him a fresh viewpoint to resume life with. Naturally a fighter, a man of action, that isolation in the wilderness had given him a chance to find himself, think things out, and discover the miracle of real love. That it was, in view of Kit's statement, hopeless, he thrust aside. Nothing, if you wanted it enough, was hopeless of attainment.

When he found the drama pages of the New York papers announcing: "Kit Carroll will be back on Broadway next season in 'Circle, Squared,' going into rehearsals for try-outs next week," he felt rather sick. But a night of sleeplessness, seeking a solution, a plan of campaign and action, made

him take a day off and run down to New York. When he returned he felt better. He had a card, a good one, to play when the time came. Whether it would be a trump or not remained to be seen. But Martin Sturm was the kind of man who believed in sitting tight and forcing any card he held to be a trump, in the end. It didn't always take four aces or a full house to a win a pot.

Martin knew that.

There was an almost reckless brilliance in the way he performed his practice jumps the remaining days before the jump-offs. The ski-jump championship had become a symbol of success in everything.

The Return of Martin Sturm

ONLY the red-blooded, hardy, adventuresome spirits—men and women—follow winter sports. There is no place there for the thin-blooded, timid souls. Ski-jumping, or ski-racing; bobsledding, skating—all these things require a tremendous vitality, muscles of steel, a magnificent, reckless courage to come through with the leaders. That was an imposing group of men who gathered that day around the platform above the jumping take-off.

The glassy starting chute, the upward incline of the take-off platform, and below the steep slope with the crowd far, far below, gazing upward, is something that any man, however stout-hearted, must steel himself to face.

Martin Sturm, still for this day the mystery jumper, "Robert Jones," went up the hill alone to join that small group who were the greatest jumpers in the land. He was tense, but with that nervous exhilaration that comes when a man has trained himself for, and faces, an attempt to perform a prodigious feat. The crowd was, to him, just so many thousands of curious, staring eyes. They meant nothing to him. But halfway up the hill a voice hailed, arrested him: "Martin—Mister Jones!"

Never, he thought then, had he seen such loveliness. A tremor ran through his

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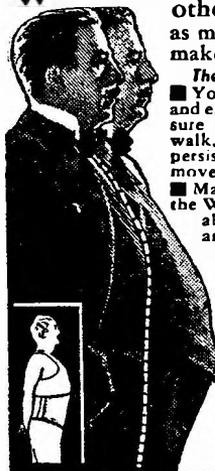
... writes George Bailey

		
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great frame, he was breathless as Kit stepped out toward him on the slope of the hill. Her fresh beauty was enhanced by what, he remembered, women would call a spectator sports costume. It was of a rich blue compounded of the sky above and the blue of her eyes. A scarlet beret topped it. Even in that brilliant throng she stood apart, fresh, vital beautiful and perfect.

She said, "You'll do it, Martin. Oh, I know you will! I'm so excited I can hardly stand it. I know this means so much to you." She smiled, said teasingly, "The papers have taken you up. I suppose you haven't read them. 'Robert Jones—Mystery Jumper.'" She laughed, but her eyes were serious. "After this is over perhaps they will write up your performance as 'The Return of Martin Sturm.' A return to life, Martin. The full, grand life I know you will make for yourself. This will be your turning point."

Martin, barely hearing, solemn and unsmiling, his eyes and heart full of her and his blood leaping at her words, said like a man emerging from a dream to see glory dawning, "Why, you're here! My God, Kit—you're beautiful!"

Before his look, the intensity of his words, she fell silent. Then Martin, with a grim, fighting look on his face, said, "I'll do my damndest, darling. I love you and I'm going to marry you."

"Don't think about that now," she begged. "Just jump—but if it will help, know that I'll be happy too, if you win. And those telegrams—I liked them. I like a man to do things like that. I might—but go on, Martin. You're due up there and I'm rushing down below to see you jump."

"Just a moment," he commanded. "Are you under contract to Sam Kaufman? Or to anyone?"

"Not yet. But why—"
"Then don't be," he said. "I've taken a two-year lease on the Stuyvesant Theater. And an architect is waiting to discuss remodeling with you."

Before she could reply he was gone up the hill.

THE entrants were checked, drew for the order of jumping, and the crowd below was herded back clear of danger. That slope, the white apron of snow at the end, seemed incredibly steep and far away. It was, to a novice, almost inconceivable to think of men leaping down there and coming out alive. Martin saw Lindstrom draw first jump. That, in a way, was bad. Lindstrom would set a terrific mark to shoot at. He would discourage them from the start.

And Lindstrom did. A big, beautifully built man with flaming red hair, he rushed down the incline, shot out on the take-off, sprang up, up and out. His form was flawless, slightly bent knees, straightening somewhat as he started down, arms out for balance. He made the jump with ease, grace and power, and his rivals strained to hear the announcer after the jump was measured.

"Lindstrom—one hundred and eighty-two feet and six inches!"

The cheering of the crowd rose to the platform in a deafening thunder of sound. The jumpers tensed. That was a jump to challenge the world. Somebody back of Martin said, "The European champion, that Norwegian, Johansson, just did one ninety-three last year. Lindstrom's going to come close to that before he's through."

"I doubt it," a man replied. "I'm betting that's his best."

The second jumper whizzed down and leaped, went beautifully until he started down, then wavered, his skis slightly angled, and when he struck the slope lost control and plunged off into a snow bank. He was helped up, limping heavily, and there was a murmur, "One gone!"

Three other jumpers went down to marks far short of Lindstrom's. Then Lewis Gordon's name was called. He was a favorite with the crowd. They waited eagerly, hoping he would surpass the Minnesotan.

Gordon was nervous, he was young, but it left him as he started. He attained terrific speed, shot far out into the air, but failed to get sufficient elevation. When he struck, the men with the tape measured

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swiftly, the announcer shouted, "A hundred and seventy-two!"

"Robert Jones!"

Martin took his place at the top of the run, judged the distance, shoved off. Gauging himself, he put all his strength into hurtling his body up and out. It was like flying, wild, free, exhilarating—but with that dizzy drop waiting, the world, seemingly, rushing up to smash him. Watching his form, he held steady, straightened, saw the slope rush up to meet him, felt the skis make contact, then he whizzed down the slope with the speed of a stream-lined train. Leaning to the left, bringing pressure on the left ski, he executed a graceful telemark check and knew his jump was at least flawless.

"Robert Jones—one hundred and seventy-five feet and seven inches!"

Ah! Better than his qualifying jump! Second place so far—but not enough. Not nearly enough. He realized grimly what a tremendous effort, absolute perfection in co-ordination, was needed to rival the great Lindstrom. And Gordon would do better next time. He started slowly back up the hill.

A blue-clad figure pushed through the crowd, rushed toward him. He waited, feeling that lilted rush of blood again.

"That was grand, Martin! A little more elevation next time and you'll do it. It was beautiful, your form was perfect. You've half the crowd with you now. Did you hear them cheer?"

"I wasn't thinking of the crowd," said Martin Sturm. "I was thinking of you. I love you, Kit."

"Go on," she said in confusion. "Go up and beat them, Martin."

LIKE a huge, but graceful bird, like a red-headed eagle soaring, Lindstrom made his second jump and Martin almost groaned when he heard the mark: "One hundred and eighty-five!"

"Lindstrom's got it," the expert said, and the crowd agreed. That was a champion's leap. But a shock awaited them. A tall, lean young Canadian, looking fierce and desperate, launched himself into the

air and the crowd gasped and almost forgot to cheer when he passed Lindstrom's mark by six inches.

"Bouchereau—one hundred and eighty-five feet, six inches!"

Lewis Gordon, standing near Martin, muttered, "That's bad news. Must have been just practicing before."

The tension and excitement grew. But there was no further threat until Gordon stretched his mark to one seventy-eight and got back in the running.

Martin saw his chance fading. He would have to surpass the best he had ever done even to place. Moving to the top of the run he thought: "I've got to! I must do it! I've set this as a test and I can't fail. Kit—Kit's watching, and I must beat them all!"

A slip, the tinniest error in form, would ruin him. He was thinking of it, not quite concentrated on the jump. As he rushed down, leaped into the air, a flash of memory returned, of that jump he had fuked so long ago. Just a flash through the mind—but in an instant he had wavered, seemed to tremble in the air, and when he landed he was off form, couldn't get control, and rushed off to spill ignominiously in the snow.

"No jump!"

That was one completely wasted. Now, he thought bitterly, perhaps some of them will recognize me, know who I am. They've seen me do that before.

But there was Kit, her expression unchanged. There was strength and courage in the way her eyes met his, in the whispered, "Martin, Martin, you can do it, I know you can. You will!" Then he was starting up the hill again. He could not speak. But once more he heard her, breathless, overtaking him, and her whisper was like elixir in his veins: "I love you, Martin. Perhaps—win, Martin, and I might change my mind. Win for me, Martin!"

His face was grim, haggard, his eyes like ice with fire shining through, but he choked and could not say the thing he tried to say—just nodded, went slowly up the hill.

While he waited, seeing two officials

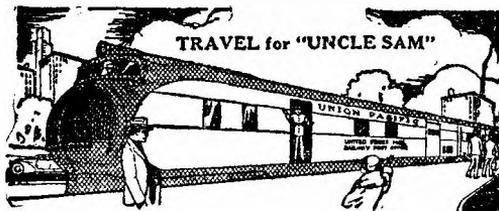


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glance at him, whisper together, he knew. They knew who he was and remembered. They knew the story of Martin Sturm. They remembered and were saying, "Sturm has funk'd again."

But there was the fresh image of Kit before him, the whispered promise still thrilling through despair. He was hardly conscious of seeing Lindstrom jump, or hearing the announcer shout: "Lindstrom—one hundred and eighty-nine!"

His mind came back, concentrated on the jumping, as Bouchereau took his last for a hundred and eighty-six. Gordon, the youngest of them, stretched to a hundred and seventy-nine, and the starter called: "Robert Jones!"

"The mystery jumper," somebody said and there was a subdued ripple of laughter. Martin heard it, but the crowd meant nothing to him. There was Kit Carroll down there—the rest were brightly colored puppets against the snow. What had she said? Oh, yes—"I might change my mind."

HE stood at the head of the run so long that the crowd was nervous. Some held pity in their eyes. But there was no sound. The sky was a flawless, hard metallic blue. The air was still and cold. The great crowd was a mass of pied color against the snow. Abruptly, as though shaking away some detaining hand, Martin Sturm shoved off. His powerful body had moved galvanically, as if launched from a catapult. Exactly at the right moment he leaped into space, seeming to defy the laws of gravity—soaring, flying up and out. Could he make it—would this be far enough? It seemed to him that his swoop downward started all too soon, that he couldn't possibly reach Lindstrom's mark.

Kit Carroll, staring upward, not breathing, remembered the first time she had seen that figure hurtle through the air and had thought, "A god fallen from the sky!" All her being strained toward him now, her arms were half opened toward him, as if she would hold him up there, draw him far out at last to where she stood. All of her was in that brief, unuttered prayer:

"Oh, God, let him make it! Let him win!" Then he was hurtling down.

He had rushed onto the level, stopped, and all the crowd was silent, waiting, held by some premonition of great drama in the air. The men with the tape seemed incredibly slow. They pulled and stretched and straightened, started all over again, but at last they stood up. The announcer shouted, his voice distinct and clear in the great silence: "Robert Jones—one hundred and ninety-three feet and nine inches—a new record for this meet!"

The cheers came then, and the rush of the crowd. But they checked as the announcer shouted again, "The winner, competing under the name of Robert Jones, is really Martin Sturm. A few years back Mr. Sturm was picked by experts as a potential champion. He has proved them right."

The name passed through the crowd. They remembered now. Some remembered that Martin Sturm was supposed to be in Africa, hunting big game—or, as others remembered, to escape that gold-digger he had married.

All that Martin knew or cared about was that he was edging out of the crowd with Kit clinging to his arm, and that she had whispered, "Congratulations, Martin Sturm. You came back!"

In the village, in the sitting room of his suite in the resort hotel, Martin said, "I've heard of such things happening—of a woman's love making a man do things he could never do before. I always laughed at it for the pretty fiction I thought it was. I didn't know such things really happened. But now—well, of course, you know that's what did it. It was you. I would have leaped through a wall of flame, over a mountain cliff, after what you said. It's true, darling? You said you might change your mind—and you have?"

"It's true, Martin. I just couldn't help it—I love you so. But what's this about a theater you leased? Kiss me again, and then tell me."

After a while Martin managed to explain. "I told you we could team up on

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this. You're a grand actress, and if you don't want to give it up quite yet you need not. Except, first, we'll take a long trip somewhere—anywhere you like. Then, if the stage still calls, we'll do it together. You can select your own plays and produce them in your own theater. I'll handle the business end."

"Then," she said, "let's hurry and get married. But I dread telling Sam."

"Sam Kaufman? Oh, don't let that bother you—Sam's coming in with us. You have to have a director. I'm offering him a third interest. Now excuse me just a minute." He reached out and dialed a number on the phone.

"Hello! This is Martin Sturm speaking. You the girl who handled those wires for me? Fine! Well the answer was 'yes' and I'm sending those orchids right around. It's a pleasure—you were very encouraging—and right. Goodby."

"Just a little debt," he said. "Girl in the telegraph office. She encouraged me when I needed it. I certainly needed it then."

"You won't ever again, Martin. And I'll never forget that jump was for me. You can count on one thing as being true—there really isn't any fiction in the world. It's all a reflection of life. For example, if I read about any woman being as happy as I am I would be skeptical—or would have—but now I know it's truer than anybody could ever make it seem in a book. That's because we're in love."

A long time afterward she whispered, "Martin, I like your chin. I'm glad you've stopped hiding behind that beard!"

(The End.)

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DEAR EDITOR:

I want to say I like the *Circus Midget Murder* in your December number. It's out of the ordinary and quite interesting. Besides, I always like stories about circus life. And it seems to me the writer has done something good in making midgets seem real and natural to the rest of us. I never thought of them as real people before—they always seemed like dolls.

C. H., PEORIA, ILL.

DEAR EDITOR:

I liked your polo story, and I am looking forward to Bruner's hockey story in the next issue. I'm a hockey fan—but I like any sport, and like to read about them.

T. K., BOSTON, MASS.

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm a pretty new reader—bought my first copy of F. N. a couple of months ago—the November issue—and I want to say I enjoyed the stories a lot. I liked most *White Hell*, *Men in Orange*, and *Triggers of Hate*. But I liked the whole magazine. If you keep it like that count me in as a regular.

B. F., LOVELAND, COLO.

YACHTING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm kind of slow getting around to it, but I wanted to let you know I thought *Grudge Fight* was a swell prize fight story. I like sports. Do you run

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20x5.00-19	2.45	32x4 1/4	3.00
20x5.00-20	2.45	32x4 1/2	3.00
20x5.25-17	2.85	31x3 1/2	3.15
20x5.25-18	2.85	31x3 1/2	3.15
20x5.25-19	2.85	31x3 1/2	3.15
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yachting stories? I like baseball, fighting, and yacht racing. Football too.

K. G., NEWPORT, N. H.

DEAR EDITOR:

You had more good stories in the November and December issues than I've come across in a long time, and I read a lot. I liked *No More Betrayal*, but it seemed too far off anything that could really happen. Kind of spoiled the story for me, though I liked it enough to read it through to the finish. I think *White Hell* and *Ride 'Em Off!* were the best of the lot, which doesn't mean I didn't like the others.

R. N., ASHEVILLE, N. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

If you'd keep out the love stuff I'd like your stories better. They're good, but they always have to drag in the girl. How come, if she isn't necessary? I don't care if she's there for some reason, but I get fed up on having her in the story if she doesn't mean anything but a movie clinch.

D. S. V., MACKINAW, MICH.

DEAR EDITOR:

Give us more of R. M. Hodges, will you? His *White Hell* was exceptionally good. So was *Murder on the Spot*. More power to you if you give us stories like that!

S. R., PIERRE, N. D.

DEAR EDITOR:

I like your artists—Wynne Davies and E. T. especially. I always want more illustrations—they add something to the stories.

A. G. E., NORTH PLATTE, NEBR.

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Inside back cover

Missing Page

Back cover