FIVE-NOVELS

JULY-SEPT.

20c

MAGAZINE

A DELL MAGAZINE

DELL

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By CORNELIUS MORGAN

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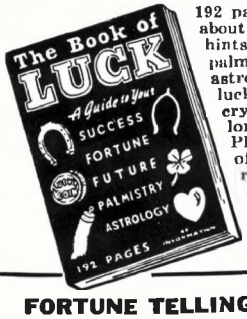

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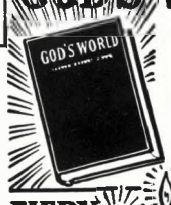

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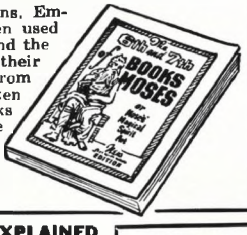

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FIVE-NOVELS MAGAZINE

F. A. McCHESNEY, Editor

Volume 63 JULY-SEPT., 1943 Number 2

CONTENTS

FORECAST

A bang-up good baseball novel has come sizzling off the mill of Ben Peter Freeman. It's *The Kokomo Fireball,* the story of Mart, a good guy who gets a dirty run-around from a manager who whines and wheedles him into a spot and then tries to needle him out of the game. Like any good redhead, Mart sets himself for a fight, out to settle the score the way he knows best—via the dusty diamond.

For suspense and thrills in murder mystery, we're betting on Curtiss T. Gardner's novel, *The White-Hot Ladle.* With the roar and heat and incessant activity of a steel plant for a background, Gardner weaves a story that's Grade A for vigorous, colorful and breath-taking entertainment. You'll go for it in a big way.

We are glad to introduce another newcomer to this book, Rollin Brown, in *Escape to the Olanca,* a corking good Western about young Randy Owen who, away from his native range, starts making good in the Olanca mine, only to face defeat at the hands of an enemy from the past. How Randy meets this threat of disgrace and disaster makes swell reading.

Also

An unusual, colorful air adventure by J. D. Blaufox and a gripping new sea story by David Allan Ross.

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Blazed Across Africa

"Help me, somebody!" the wounded man was crying. "Gee! Don't I even get a chance to fight?"

BACK IN Grafton, North Dakota, where he played goalie on the championship hockey team, they called him Bitsy. It was not by any means a derogatory nickname. On the contrary, it was held in high esteem by the local hockey fans and the team.

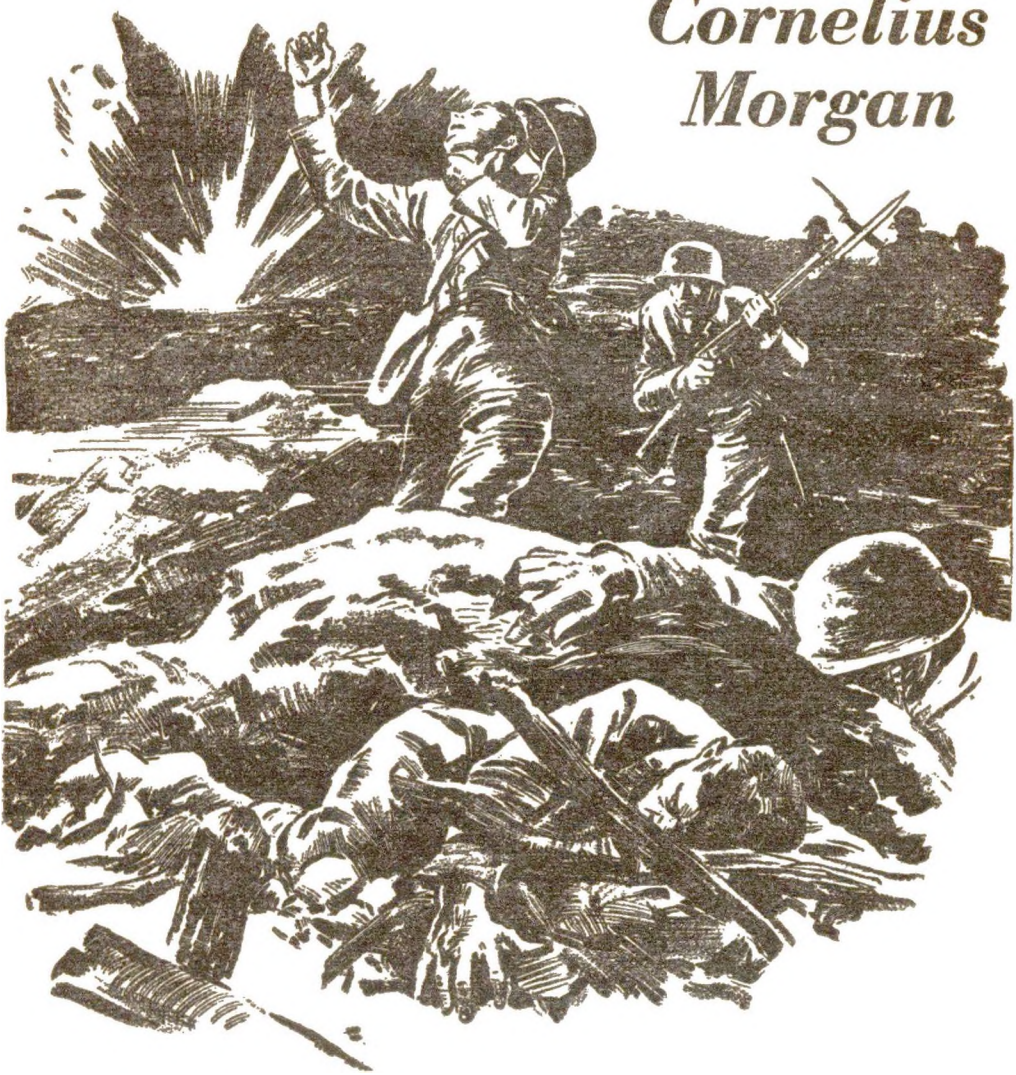
But it was far better than his given name, Clarence. Bitsy loved and honored his parents, who been killed in an automobile accident. But he wished his father's name had been something other than Meeks.

He could not remember who had first dubbed him Bitsy. The name stuck to him even now that he was a soldier.

His size didn't matter when he was tending goal, for he could get down there close to the ice and, with the aid of sharp eyes, snag the puck whizzing for the corners of the cage, turning it aside with his hockey stick. But his stature counted against him in uniform.

They were marching now—at about three o'clock in the morning—down the blacked-out streets of some port in the south of England, the Dakota regiment having just arrived there by troop train from the neighborhood of London. Beside him, towering above him, was Bulldog Hutson, defense man on the Grafton team. Bulldog was a powerful guy, six-

By Cornelius Morgan



feet-one in his socks, hard as a rock. Not once, but a hundred times a night, Bitsy had seen opposing forwards flash in on the net only to come up against Bulldog Hutson. *Wump!* You could feel the jar right down through your bones as the player went down and Bulldog took the puck up the ice. Great eater, Bulldog! Had to be, Bitsy supposed. A big guy like that—

"What place is this?" Bulldog asked, looking around in the dark, the sound of marching men filling the street, their army boots striking little sparks, like fireflies, from the cobblestones.

"I haven't any idea," Bitsy said. "I heard someone say it was Plymouth. I wouldn't know."

He had never trained himself to be positive about anything, which was, he supposed, typical of his name, Clarence Meeks. He was content to take the middle of the road on things, to sit on the fence so he could jump on either side, whichever side was the safer for him.

"What part of England is Plymouth in?" Bulldog asked.

"Kent, I think. I'm not sure."

"Know what, Bitsy?"

"What?"

"This ain't a maneuver. This ain't another transfer to a different camp. Boy, I've a hunch this is it! We're headed for action, mark my words." And he added, "Gee, I'm hungry!"

BURDENED as he was with marching kit, Bitsy yet managed to reach in his blouse pocket for a small package of peanut brittle, the last bit of candy in the parcel he had received from Janie. He gave it to Bulldog, and the star defense man casually accepted it without any thank-you.

"Why didn't they tell us then?" Bitsy asked.

"Tell us what?"

"That we were headed for action." Bitsy shivered a little, for the night air was cold.

"Say! In this man's war a guy doesn't know what the hell is coming off. I asked the sarge just before we climbed aboard the train. He said, 'Soldier, even the King of England doesn't know where we're going.'"

"Who does, then?" Bitsy's voice was plaintive. "*Somebody* must know!"

"No talking, men!" came the order from ahead of them.

"No nothing!" Bulldog said, disgustedly, eating the last piece of peanut brittle. "Gee, kid, I'm still hungry!"

Bitsy lowered his voice. "You know, Bulldog, when you come to think of it a guy never does know *where* he's going."

"Shucks! *I* always know."

"I mean a guy gets up in the morning to go to work, and maybe something happens—an accident or something—and the next thing he knows he's in a hospital. And maybe, because of the accident, he loses his job, and lands in a different kind of job entirely. Take the war, for instance. A year ago none of us had the slightest idea we'd be in England."

"That's right," Bulldog said.

"What's more, a guy doesn't know when he's going even on his greatest adventure of all."

"What's that?"

"When he dies, or is killed."

"I don't aim to get killed," Bulldog said. "I'm going after that twenty-five grand, and I aim to be alive to spend it."

That twenty-five grand! Bitsy winced as he thought of it, and the conditions that went with it.

Ahead of them the sergeant barked, "Didn't I tell you to cut out the talking?"

"Cut out the talking, he says!" Bulldog spat. "There's a thousand men marching down the street, making enough noise to scare Hitler, and he says cut out the talking!"

Considerable mystery had been attached to the secret orders from the first. In the case of the erstwhile Grafton hockey team, all privates in the Dakota regiment, the sudden orders had bordered on the sensational.

Under special arrangements given time off for practice—not as much time as they wanted—the team had played several hockey games in England, a concession to soldier-entertainment. They hadn't done so badly, considering, having lost only to a Canadian outfit that had once gone into the semi-finals for the Allan Cup. They had drawn 3-3 with a top-notch English six, and easily won their other games.

This very evening they had been in the dressing rooms of the Westminster Rink, skates and pads on, ready for a return match with the Canucks. Their regimental manager, Captain Thurlow, came in and said:

"The game's off, boys. They're trying to muster up a scratch team to substitute for you. Back into your uniforms, as quickly as you can. The bus will be waiting to return you to camp."

THE BOYS gasped at the suddenness of it. Why, the auditorium was packed to the doors with fans, soldiers and civilians, eager to see the return match!

Scotty McCabe, their center-ice man,

had the temerity to ask, "What's the idea, Captain?"

"You've got me. All I'm doing is obeying orders. Now get out of those duds quick."

They obeyed, put on their uniforms, left the dressing room, each man carrying his hockey equipment. The Canadian team was on the ice, chasing the puck around as they warmed up. The crowd had begun to clap noisily over the game's delay. Carl Liscombe, the Grafton wing man, leaned over the boards and said to the Canadian goalie, "We're not playing."

"Not playing!"

"Sudden orders."

"Running out on us, eh?"

"Like hell we are!" Carl Liscombe, with the rest of his team, felt sore because the military order had made them the goats. Why should the Canuck team be privileged? Why hadn't they, also, been called off the ice?

"Say, listen!" Carl told the goalie, "the next time we tangle up with you birds we'll trim the pants off you!"

Carl barged his way out of the arena. Little did he know, little did any of them know, that the Grafton Hockey Club would never again play together as a team.

They tumbled into the army truck waiting for them, hurried along by Captain Thurlow, throwing their skates and hockey sticks into a corner. The truck rattled through the dark London streets, and for a while none of the boys had a word to say.

"Smoke, if you want to," their manager said. "I've a hunch your training —that is, for hockey—has come to an end for a while."

"Gee!" Marve Camlo complained. "My girl got leave to attend the game tonight. She's sitting up in the balcony, wondering what's happened."

"What girl is that? The one you had in Deptford?"

"I've got other girls," Marve growled.

That was tacitly conceded. Marvin (Marve) Camlo, their left winger, had more girls fall for him than all of them put together. He was well-built, with smiling blue eyes; but for good looks he couldn't hold a candle to Roy Berling, their defense man.

"He gets 'em by playing the piano," Carl Liscombe always said.

To some extent this was true. Marve handled the ivories about as well as he handled the puck, and with much more delicacy. He also wrote songs. In Grafton, North Dakota, he had built up an orchestra of his own, earning quite a bit of extra money playing for local dances and in nightclubs. During the day he was a soda jerker in the popular Hollywood Drugstore.

FROM SOMEWHERE in the ancient bomb-battered town of Plymouth came the mournful chimes of a church bell that had escaped the Nazi savagery. 4:15 A.M. It was a miserable English morning, cold, with a driving, thin rain. The long train ride in unheated cars seemed to have given everyone the sniffles. As the men marched on in the vanishing dark, the tang of the sea came to their nostrils, and suddenly the rain was salty with sea spray.

The great docks, the quays, were swarming with men in uniform, indistinguishable figures burdened with their war equipment. Thousands upon thousands of men, most of them Americans, to judge by their lingo. Great phantom ships could be seen, soldiers in never-ending lines going up the gang-planks.

As dawn crept in, the scene became more and more impressive until it was awe-inspiring. A veritable armada had gathered about the docks and in the Plymouth roads, while beyond, silhouetted ghostily in the bay, were scores of battleships of all sizes. Ten thousand men, British and American, gazed at the grey panorama, some with apprehension, some with fear, but most of them with sparkling excitement.

"This is it!" Bulldog Hutson said with fervor. "Boy! Now we're headed for something!"

The Dakota battalion went aboard shortly before 7:00 A.M., finding themselves quartered with an infantry outfit from Georgia, and a Maine artillery battery. Bulldog Hutson was not the only man hungry, and as the ship had never before carried American troops, the British stewards were somewhat staggered by the appetites.

The ship, loaded with troops, slipped the mooring ropes and moved out to the bay, giving way to the loading of other ships.

AROUND eight o'clock something happened that, when it was all over, had a profoundly damaging effect on Bitsy.

Quite suddenly the whole harbor seethed with excitement. Out of the clouds came a lone German bomber, obviously on the prowl to machinegun the Plymouth streets and drop a couple of bombs where they would do the most good. What the Germans discovered as they came down clear of the mist must have so staggered them that for an odd moment or so they were too overwhelmed to think.

It was a moment luckily saved for the British; and the warships, the land batteries, instantly opened up with all they had. That fast Messerschmitt bomber must never be allowed to get back to its base, or the massing of the convoy would become known, and the whole long-planned expedition might go for naught, or be intercepted by submarines and aircraft. The close-guarded secret of a gigantic campaign was at stake.

Thousands of troops lined the deck-rails of the ships to watch the fight. The German bombardier released his bombs in haste, and they fell in the bay, pulverizing a fishing boat and a buoy, but otherwise doing little harm. The morning sky burst into a volcanic upheaval of shell-fire and tracers. Explosive flashes left smudges of smoke in front, behind and all around the plane. The bark and crack of guns, the ferocity of machingun fire and pompoms, shattered the eardrums. The grey waters spouted up little blobs of milk-white spray. Spent bullets, pieces of shrapnel and shell splinters fell on the decks of ships, on the rooftops of houses, the warehouses, the dock cranes, and rattled off the men's helmets.

There was, one had to admit, something compelling in the way the Messerschmitt tried to escape. The pilot dove, twisted, tried to go inland, tried to go seaward. Already hit by bullets and high-explosives, his guns still blazing, he was dodging like a hare pursued by a pack of ravenous hounds. Above him, six Spitfires hovered, waiting to see which way he would turn if, by some miracle, he could escape that inferno of gunfire.

Men held their breath as they watched the unequal struggle. As the sorely pressed German, his rudder belching fire, swooped low to avoid the heavier artillery, tracer bullets bracketed him in a network of yellow and green. For one second Bitsy and those around him felt certain that he would crash against one of the ship's funnels as he screamed right over them. He missed the funnel by a fraction, tried desperately to gain elevation, then—*wham!* Something heavy caught his plane amidships and it burst in half, both halves plummeting down to a sea that sizzled and boiled and tore at them to finish off the job.

It was all over in a matter of moments, and fast motor-boats knifed through the water to pick up the survivors.

They managed to grab three of the crew, a British sailor diving for two of them. He could have saved himself the trouble, for they were dead from machinegun fire before they hit the water. The one survivor needed immediate care and was rushed to the hospital of the nearest ship, which happened to be the transport carrying Dakota boys.

THE TROOPS watched him being hoisted over the side, where he was loaded on a stretcher and covered with a blanket, only his face left exposed.

Scotty McCabe's mouth flew open and he shouldered his way through the crowd to have a closer look. "Say! I've seen that guy some place before," he told Bitsy. "I don't know where and I can't place him, but his face is darn familiar!"

The German was quickly removed to the ship's hospital, where doctors worked on him in vain; he died under the knife. It was learned that he was the pilot of the Messerschmitt, and the troops were kind of sorry to see him go, for he had put up a thrilling fight to save his ship and crew.

Still trying to place the man, Scotty went in search of Captain Thurlow, and the latter, after inquiry, was able to supply the German's name.

"Lieutenant Max Kleinschmidt. Does that mean anything to you?"

"It sure does! Well, if that isn't the strangest thing I ever heard of. I played against him back in 1938." There was admiration in his voice. "He suddenly quit the league. Nobody knew what became of him." Scotty was excited. "Say! Wait till I tell the fellers!" He raced back on deck.

Scotty was the oldest member of the Grafton hockey team, being twenty-eight, had played senior hockey three years before Bitsy and the others had graduated to the club.

"Know who that pilot was?" he asked them. "Max Kleinschmidt. He used to play center ice for the Warren Cougars, Minnesota."

Max Kleinschmidt! All of them had heard of him. Most of them had seen him play.

"Many's the time he and I spilled each other going after the puck," Scotty said. "Gee! And he came down right at my feet! Dead. A German pilot. Can you beat it?"

"Didn't he win the Melville Trophy at one time?"

"That's right. In 1938." Scotty looked downcast. "Like you, Bitsy, he was voted the most valuable player in the league."

Bitsy remained quiet. The coincidence made him uneasy, and far ashore the tolling of a church bell sounded ominous.

The morning excitement over, scores of rumors spread through the ship, each one different.

One rumor was that they were going to Russia over the Murmansk route; another that they were headed for Norway. Carl Liscombe heard they were going to relieve the U. S. troops in Iceland. Marve Camlo had the most exciting story of all. Commandos and Rangers were about to shoot the works around Dieppe, and 200,000 American and British troops would follow them in an invasion of France.

WITH thousands of bedrolls and barracks bags piled aboard, crowding aboard ship was unavoidable. The officers were assigned to regular cabins, as were the army nurses. All the soldiers were quartered below decks and in the holds, every available space packed with men and their equipment. Each compartment was filled with long wooden tables, with benches on each side. The men ate at these tables, wrote their letters on them, played cards, shot craps, and at night slept in white canvas hammocks slung from hooks above the same tables.

The first couple of days at sea the ship appeared to mill around without purpose or destination, and eventually she stopped altogether, laying at anchor. But here they rendezvoused with other ships, and finally a big convoy steamed slowly into a prearranged formation.

Five days out from Plymouth the men got the straight official news that they were headed for North Africa.

"Africa!" Scotty McCabe gasped. "What d'you know about that?"

Advice booklets had been distributed throughout the ship dealing with the conditions the men had to meet and explaining how they would have to conduct themselves.

"Say! It's good we didn't bring our skates with us. The only ice you'll find in Africa is in a refrigerator."

"Refrigerator? That's not worth a damn in that heat. I've heard it remains constant at 130 degrees in the shade."

"The nights are cold," Bitsy said.

"How do you know?"

"The booklet says so."

The boys began studying their copies, and Carl Liscombe gave a chuckle. "Oh-oh! Marve," he said to the Lothario of the team, "you're going to be plumb out of luck. Gee, this is going to be tough for you!"

"Spill it."

"It says here—rule 4—we've got to observe strict rules with the Moslem women. Just listen! Never stare at one. Never jostle them in a crowd. Never speak to one in public. Never try to remove her veil."

"That's O.K.," Marve said. "I couldn't go for Moslem women anyway."

Carl Liscombe said, "You sure better not. It says, 'Serious injury, if not death, at the hands of Moslem men may result if—' "

Bulldog laughed and offered Marve his big paw. "S'long, Marve," he said. "You're cooked. That's one guy less I'll have to worry about when it comes to earning that twenty-five grand."

Roy Berling said, "So it's in Africa we go after that prize money!"

THEY WERE silent, instantly concerned with their thoughts. Gathered together in the hold of a ship, thousands of miles away from their home town, all were thinking of a never-to-be-forgotten evening there when a public reception had been given for them, the formal disbanding of the hockey team.

Until then, even during the playing season, the boys had been employed in different occupations. Roy Berling had been a bank teller, reliable, well-thought-of, and although his humor was on the sarcastic side he was witty enough to get by with it. Captain of the team, brilliant in defense, where Bulldog Hutson depended on strength, Roy was hero-worshiped in Grafton. Grafton men and women alike said that if any young fellow there was going in a big way to succeed in life it was Roy Berling.

Bulldog, who lacked Roy's education and flair for smart clothes, had worked as motor mechanic in the Sunbeam Garage. Carl Liscombe was studying law under the eye of his father, Judge Liscombe. Scotty McCabe worked on his uncle's farm, twenty miles north of Grafton. Bitsy Meeks had the humblest job of all, with the slimmest chance of advancement. He'd been a grocery clerk in the local chain store.

Next to Roy Berling, however, he was the most popular member of the hockey team, and it had been his great goal tending that won the 1940-41 championship, Grafton beating out Crookston, Minnesota, by four points. Indeed, they were well on their way to winning the championship again in the next year, being tied for the lead with the Winnipeg Eagles, before they broke up.

Soon after Pearl Harbor, Scotty McCabe and Bulldog Hutson were drafted. Without them, the team began to lose. Then their star player and local idol, Roy Berling, enlisted. That tore it. The team disbanded, as other clubs in the league did.

They had played three seasons in a semi-professional league, and their backer, the man who put up the dough for their traveling expenses and salaries, was Mose Findale, Dakota representative of the Chicago Harvester Company, and the richest man in Grafton. His interest in hockey and baseball amounted to a passion and, though he kept a keen eye on the financial returns of these interests, he was very generous with his players.

He had arranged a rip-roaring celebration and dinner when they won the Hockey Championship, and when they finally disbanded in order to join the army, Mose Findale outdid himself in his patriotism and zeal, and his love for the team.

HE GAVE a big reception for them, and the players came in uniform,

this time in Uncle Sam's colors. It was a red-letter evening. The boys drove through the town in the mayor's car. They were carried into the reception hall on the shoulders of their admirers.

Of course Bitsy was there. You couldn't leave Clarence (Bitsy) Meeks out of it. The greatest little goalie in the league, bar none!

Indeed Mose Findale insisted that Bitsy occupy the table of honor with them. The Mayor also called for him to come up there. So did his teammates.

Bitsy tried to hide. He was in an agony of embarrassment. He didn't think he belonged up there with the rest of the team. But they hauled him up on the platform, and when the crowd gave him an acclaim his throat closed tight and tears actually slid down his cheeks.

"Three cheers for Bitsy Meeks! The greatest little guy on the team!"

There was a shout from the back of the hall. "Yes, and get his wife up there, too! Where's Janie Meeks? Get Janie up there!"

For, unlike his teammates, Bitsy was married. Some people thought he had acted a bit hasty, saying that he should have waited until he was more sure of his ground, more secure financially. While the hockey team existed, his grocery store wages were augmented by what Mr. Findale paid him, never less than $50 a week. Now, of course, he and Janie would have to get along on very little unless he found a better job. Bitsy didn't think he could find a better job, having no talents except tending goal at ice hockey and playing shortstop on the baseball team. He was scared.

But his marriage to Janie Thomas was, by all odds, the most miraculous thing that had ever happened to him. Janie wasn't pretty, yet she was a girl everyone liked. The fellows who knew her couldn't say enough about what a swell kid she was. At the hockey and football games they went out of their way to protect her from getting crushed by the crowd, because she was a small, dainty little thing.

Just how Janie came to accept him, Bitsy had no clear idea. Her mother had suggested that he'd be more comfortable, perhaps, living with them rather than in a small room. He could pay for his room and board, of course. Mrs. Thomas modestly suggested $8 a week.

He was too shy to take advantage of the electrifying offer, because with Janie around there the whole house would be electric. $8 a week! He was paying that much for his room *without* board.

Eventually he summoned up the courage to suggest an alternative. He'd accept the offer if— Well, he was earning almost $70 a week in the fall, and if Mrs. Thomas—if Janie— Somehow he got the words off his stammering tongue.

Janie did a surprising thing. She threw her arms around his neck. So that was that.

On the night of the celebration for the hockey team, now disbanded for the duration, he and Janie had been married five months.

"Where's Janie?" the crowd kept yelling. "Get Janie up there on the platform!"

But Janie couldn't be found. Too deeply stirred by everything, she had quietly left the hall.

THE HIGHLIGHT of the evening, the big moment, came when Mose Findale sprang his surprise. It was sensational.

He began by praising the hockey skill of the five boys in uniform—almost forgetting to include Bitsy. He spoke of the record of the team, and said now he was prouder than ever because they were wearing the insignia of the greatest team in the world, the United States Army.

Wild cheering.

"Folks have called me eccentric," he continued, wheezing a little. "Well, maybe I am. But there's nothing eccentric in what I propose to do. It comes straight from the heart.

"Now I've saved a little money in my time." (Laughter) "There are lots of good institutions I could leave it to when the time comes, not being married and having no children of my own. But I've always thought of these boys as my own. I've admired their good sportsmanship, their skill, their courage, and their guts.

"I know they'll take those same qualities into action wherever Uncle Sam sends them—to India, to the Pacific, or to Africa or Europe. Not one of us here this evening knows where. Stand up, boys!"

Amid cheering the five soldiers rose from their chairs, Bitsy remaining seated. He wasn't expected to stand up.

"Now what I'm about to reveal," Mose Findale told the audience, "is in no way intended as an incentive for them to perform heroic deeds beyond the call of duty. They'll conduct themselves like soldiers without any urging from me. They've all got what it takes, as you've seen a hundred times on local ice. But here's what I've done for them.

"I've deposited $25,000 in the North Dakota bank. Now you all know that at the end of every season we have what is known as the most valuable player award, the same as they have in the big leagues, football, baseball, hockey. It's an honorary award, worth more than money maybe; a distinction, a medal or a cup. Last year when we won the championship, the experts voted the award of most valuable player in the league to Bitsy Meeks."

Loud cheering.

"In like manner, the $25,000 I have deposited in trust will go to the best player of the Grafton Ice Hockey Club now playing on the new team, Uncle Sam's team."

For a moment everybody was very still, struck by the generosity, the unusualness of it. Then came a prolonged clapping of hands.

"The lad who performs the most courageous deed in action while overseas will get a greater award than any I can offer, for he will be decorated by his country. Just the same, in addition to that award, I will present him with $25,000 on his return, so as to set him up in business and make up for time lost."

The applause became deafening, and Mose Findale, his hands held up for silence like an announcer in the ring, had to wait until the commotion died down.

"In the event"—his voice had lowered, causing a hush in the audience—"in the event that he doesn't return, I have decided that the award shall be paid to his next of kin."

It was a solemn moment, and the crowd, gazing at the five soldiers they had so often cheered to victory in the local arena, became tense in the reflection that they might be gazing on them—at one or more of them—for the last time. Nobody looked at Bitsy any more.

The speaker continued. "I had thought, in the grave eventuality just mentioned, that the award should go to the lad next entitled to it by value of military services rendered. But somehow that defeats my purpose. In any team, when it comes to a general vote, or if it has to be the decision of the manager, one man—and one man alone—is judged the outstanding player. By that right, the laurels belong to him.

"In this case I shall reserve the final judgment to myself. Some deeds speak for themselves. Other deeds remain unknown. Many a soldier has earned the Congressional Medal with no officer present to report his bravery. I shall hope to hear every account of heroism performed by these boys, no matter how small, even if it has never come to the attention of the military authorities.

"One more word and then I'm done. If I am no longer here to welcome the team back home, then the boys themselves are to be the judges of the winner. I know, as I stand here beside them this evening, that their decision will be fair, honorable, and manly. I know it because those virtues are an integral part of each lad's character. It made them a cham-

pionship team. It will serve them equally well on the field of battle."

More than a year ago, that!

BITSY remembered it vividly, as he swung in his hammock to the ship's roll, re-reading Janie's last letter to him, received three weeks ago in England.

"—sending a parcel by the same mail. I hope the peanut brittle will keep fresh, you were always so fond of it. The three pairs of socks I knitted myself, but mother knitted the comforter. Do you realize the baby is almost seven months old—"

He remembered going home that night after Mr. Findale's eulogy of the boys in uniform, remembered how Janie had tried to console him, because he was the only one of the team not in uniform.

"Don't let it get you down, Bitsy," she said fiercely. "You're just as good as any of them. Better!"

He kept his thoughts to himself, and slept on the couch, knowing he would toss all night. For he had come to a 'Clarence Meeks decision,' although he was uncertain just how to proceed. Maybe it was best to wait a few days. Even then he would be the subject for good-natured ribbing all over town.

"Out to get a crack at that twenty-five grand, eh, Bitsy? Well, I guess we'd all go through hell and high-water to win it. Old Man Findale ought to have made it open to the whole town, instead of only to his pet team."

But it wasn't the $25,000 that influenced him. He hadn't the remotest chance of winning that. Janie had more real courage in her little finger than was contained in his five feet three-quarter inches. Tending goal on the hockey team didn't require courage, or if it did it was no sort of courage Bitsy recognized; just a pair of sharp eyes, quick feet. Just a good game.

War! He didn't have to go. He was married. Janie was going to have a baby and would soon have to give up her office job. No, he didn't need to go. Nobody would blame him for staying behind.

But it looked bad, the team going off without him. It was like quitting cold just before the most important game of all. Bitsy couldn't explain how he felt about it, not even to himself. It was as if the team was about to play for the world's championship with a man short, a wide-open goal behind them, because there was no one there to defend it. Crazy way of looking at things, but he couldn't get that notion out of his head.

He passed the physical test without a hitch, volunteering for the North Dakota regiment, and the officer who swore him in said there was every chance that he would be in the same company as his buddies.

Private Clarence Meeks! He fully expected Janie to break down when she saw him in uniform, for he had not given her any inkling of his intentions. He simply walked into the house one evening, letting the uniform speak for itself. Janie stood stock-still for a moment, and then, throwing her arms around him, she said she loved him more than ever.

"I knew you wanted to go. I knew it the night of the reception. I could see you were suffering, what with Bulldog and Marve and Scotty being in the army. It wasn't right for me to expect you to stay home just—just because you'd married me." She kissed him. "I'm so proud of you I don't know what to do."

The hoarse voice of Bulldog Hutson broke in on his reverie. "It says here" —he was still reading from his booklet—"that you've got to take off your shoes before entering a room. Leave your socks on."

"Yes, and you're not supposed to smoke or spit in front of a mosque. What's a mosque?"

"Kind of a morgue, I guess," some soldier said.

THE SHIP had speeded up, making a sudden turn so sharp that it heeled over. Roy Berling came clattering down the companionway. "Hey, lugs!" he was

shouting. "Come up here! A torpedo just passed behind us!"

They raced out of the hold, reaching the bracing air of the starboard quarter deck. They were on the outside of the convoy, and the British corvettes directly beyond them, also the transports running aft, were signaling with flags. Other corvettes were dropping depth charges that exploded sea and foam a hundred feet into the sky. That was all there was to it. Nobody on the ship claimed to have seen the torpedo, and there was no sign of the submarine.

But now the convoy, moving in unison, zigzagged constantly. British warships were ahead and on all sides of them. The convoy seemed to use three or four different geometric patterns, and every now and then the entire formation would change from one pattern to another, fascinating to watch.

"Like a football team shifting from a huddle," Scotty McCabe said.

Carl Liscombe looked down at the ice-blue, swirling waters. "Boy!" he grinned. "I don't want a watery grave! I'll take what's coming to me on land." He was a fatalist, Carl Liscombe. He wasn't pessimistic about things exactly, preferring to make a joke of his belief that there was a shell with his number on it. Yet back of his apparent lightheartedness there was a note of resignation. He expected to be killed. Just a hunch.

Carl was engaged to the prettiest girl in Grafton, next to Roy Berling's girl, who had been crowned queen of the state.

"It's the other kind of guy who gets it," Roy philosophized. "The guy who doesn't expect it. Carl will live to be an old family man, then die falling down a coal chute or something."

Bulldog nodded dispassionately. He was eating a big hunk of bread and cheese he had dug up from some place, watching the speeding corvettes and their spectacular depth bombs with stolid unconcern. Marve Camlo was trying to get the eye of one of the nurses on board. He brashly blew her a kiss from the distance, and she smiled.

THAT EVENING they came to the Straits of Gibraltar, the historic Rock looming up in massive defiance, bastion of the British Empire. Ten thousand American troops gazed at it in silence, feeling safe under the protection of its mighty arsenal, its countless unseen guns. As night fell, lights began blinking on both sides of them, from Gibraltar and, across the straits, the coast of Spanish Morocco.

In the morning, under a cloudless blue sky, they sailed on into the calm blue of the Mediterranean, extremely dangerous waters. A strict life-boat and raft drill was maintained, then orders were given for the men to pack. Additional equipment was now issued to each soldier; desert gear of sandstorm masks, water purifiers, sun protection. That evening the men were given a special dinner of roast beef and potatoes, all they wanted of string beans, pudding, tea, coffee, milk.

Above decks, older officers were explaining to captains and lieutenants the battle plans on maps strewn around staterooms. At midnight the Dakota battalion were paraded in full battle dress before Colonel Walsh, its commanding officer. Bitsy was so loaded down with equipment that he was hard to find under it.

"About the only other thing you could wear are your hockey pads," Roy Berling laughed.

Bitsy was too keyed-up to laugh.

Colonel Walsh explained that they would go ashore in barges shortly before dawn. Likely they would be under shellfire from the shore batteries, for the attitude of the French, whom they had come to relieve, was by no means certain.

"The chances are they will fight," the colonel said. "If so we will retaliate. Let none of you underestimate the fighting qualities of the French colonials," he warned them. "But we outnumber them in men and modern equipment, and it

is a mathematical certainty that we shall occupy Oran, our immediate objective, within twenty-four hours."

The chaplain then gave a short prayer.

The convoy sailed on unmolested under brilliant African stars. Waiting for the order which would load them into landing barges, the men slept or dozed wherever they could find the space to sit down.

"How do you feel, Bitsy?" Bulldog asked him.

"Fine."

"Not scared?"

"Who? Me?" Bitsy's teeth were chattering a little, and he couldn't stop them.

Fear! It is a dreadful malady of the flesh, the heart, the spirit, and there isn't any cure for it. It is the worst illness attendant upon man, for it is a living death, a sort of leprosy which brave men and animals can detect. Hundreds of Yanks were jittery that early morning. This was no discredit to themselves, for they were green troops, despite long and arduous training, and had no battle experience like Britain's First Army, which was to make the assault with them, Tommies who had been through the bloody hell that was Dunkerque.

Bitsy, palsied with fear, envied the big, recumbent form of Bulldog beside him, now blissfully snoring, and the casual, sarcastically indifferent Roy Berling; envied them to the point of hatred. Abstemious all his life, he wished he had a bottle of rum. Would that cure him? No. Because the moment the effect wore off—

AN UNCANNY silence had fallen over the ship, and Bitsy felt as if something was about to happen. His instinct was right. The African night seemed to split asunder with the crack of gunfire all around him, bursts and tongues of yellow flame puncturing the velvet dark. At once, in the blackness of the coast, geysers of light splashed upward, one of them turning into a brilliant writhing red, spreading over a wide space. Rockets and Very lights went up into the sky from all directions. Pinpoints of wicked flame answered the warships' barrage, and the troopships instantly felt the effect of them.

There is no more terrifying sound than that of an approaching high explosive shell. It is indescribable. You have to experience it to feel the unholy panic that goes through you and settles in your gizzard. The shell may land hundreds of yards away, but the hideous sensation is that it has just missed hitting you right between the eyes.

"All right, men!" came the order. "Prepare to land. Every man to his allotted station and barge."

Shells were exploding in the water all around them, and although it was still too dark to see, the explosions flung salt spray in men's faces. The land heights a half mile beyond them were now a continuous line of splotches, flashes, and stabs of light, blue, pink, orange, white. An unseen plane roared overhead.

"No smoking, men. And when you get in your landing barge, keep your heads down until you get the order to wade ashore."

Two French battery shells hit the ship simultaneously, making a sound like the intensified breaking of match wood.

"That damn shell," Bulldog swore, "went right by my nose!"

The ship was full of smoke and something that tasted like ammonia. They could hardly breathe. Bitsy thought he'd choke to death, and this new ordeal took his mind off the shelling. His heart began banging painfully in all directions.

"Get moving, Bitsy. Get going down that net into the barge!"

He clambered down, using his fingernails and feet to hold on. Unseen hands helped him into the steel-encased, flat-bottomed boat. The air was criss-crossed with tracer bullets, and Bitsy stumbled over something in the boat, falling headlong. In righting himself, he found he had tripped over a man in a grotesque posture of death. Bitsy's mouth was dry

as cotton. The soldier beside him pushed him away, almost in disgust.

"Take it easy, Mac," he said, not knowing him. "We ain't seen nothin' yet."

The British warships were pouring a frightful concentration on the more active French land batteries, blowing their guns and gunners sky-high, silencing them.

DAWN came, mantling the mountaintops east of Oran in soft grey light. Machine-gun fire and occasional artillery fire still came from the lower heights, also from various points on the beach. Foreign Legion tanks south of the town began opening up, until they were dispersed by the U.S. Twelfth Air Corps. Paratroops were dropping inland to disrupt communications and attack the garrison from the rear.

That successful landing in crowded, slow-moving barges under fire did something to the Dakota battalion. Many of them never reached shore alive, remaining inert in the bottom of their boats. The rest splashed through the sea, holding their Garands above their heads, shouting, yelling like mad.

Within four hours, after passing through the machine-gunning on the beaches and the subsequent sniping by artillery fire, they were, in the main, confident fighting men, aware that they knew how to operate whether under adverse or favorable conditions.

There was a good deal of mopping up to do, and this despite the fact that the natives, observing the landing with frozen bewilderment to the neglect of their own safety, began cheering when the flag with the stars and stripes came down the white roads.

The men from Dakota, led by officers who competently met every tactical situation, quickly adapted themselves to enemy shooting. Bulldog, Scotty McCabe and Bitsy happened to be in a squad that was ordered to storm a particularly annoying French machine-gun nest. Bitsy went forward on leaden feet, stumbling blindly every now and then as they stalked the position.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" McCabe asked him. "You seasick or something?"

"Me? I'm—I'm all right."

There was a rapid burst of fire from the machinegun, and one of the men spun around like a ballet dancer and collapsed. In the growing dawn light, his face became a crimson mass of blood. Through it he sputtered.

"Help me up, somebody! Gee! I want one smack at them babies before I'm through!" Then he was crying, a pitiful sound. "Gee! Don't I even get a chance to fight?"

Bullets continued to whizz and whine all around them, ricocheting wildly from rocks. Bitsy's knees gave way and he collapsed.

The air was full of shouting and strong American oaths as running men passed over him, one of them stepping on his convulsed hand. Then came the vicious explosions of thrown bombs, also the crack of rifle firing. Bitsy recognized the latter sound. Garands in the hands of his buddies.

Cursing his vanished will power, he scrambled to his feet, swayed for a moment, ran forward as fast as he could. He couldn't shout. He had no feeling whatsoever in his mouth. A maddening longing for water took possession of him, but as he imagined drinking it his stomach revolted and he felt sick. Still he ran on, not knowing if he were going forward or away from the fighting.

"Where you heading, Bitsy?"

The big, grinning Bulldog Hutson elatedly stiff-armed him backward, knocking him on his rump.

"You're too late, kid. It's all over. Hey!" he called to one of the French prisoners. "Meet Bitsy Meeks—greatest little ice-hockey goalie in the world!"

DAZEDLY Bitsy got to his feet. Bulldog's hand was bleeding. He and Scotty McCabe, and two other Dakota men, had five French prisoners, two of

A feeling of exultant savagery swiftly came and went as he thrust his bayonet into the enemy

them wounded. All were smoking cigarettes.

"*Vive Americains!*" one of the Frenchmen said, offering Bitsy his hand. "We knew you were coming, but we had to put up a bit of a fight for the hell of it. Also," he winked, "for the sake of appearances." He glanced at two of his comrades being brought out on stretchers. "Killed by Americans!" he said. "Lafayette will turn over in his grave!"

The sergeant in charge of the Dakota squad spat vigorously. "Yeah," he agreed. "One hell of a note! Well, let's report back, and find out what's cooking."

There was fighting most of that day, but so far it had been a relatively easy campaign. American troops and equipment, including tanks, continued to come ashore in landing boats. Most of the inhabitants welcomed the American flag, and indeed some of the sporadic battles were of the comic opera order. Even while rifles cracked, the local milkmen kept delivering supplies just as if nothing important were happening. American soldiers were being invited into cafes for a glass of wine.

Beyond the town the French Legion tanks and artillery continued to give trouble. They comprised a motley army; Senegalese, Arab Spahis, Algerian Chasseurs, and Colonial French—all not especially loyal to Vichy France, but rigidly loyal to their officers. No braver men were to be found, nor better fighters.

Roy Berling and Marve Camlo had been sent with a company to oppose the Algerian tank forces, in which engagement (before the French willingly surrendered) they lost quite a few men.

"Boy, you should have seen it!" Roy said excitedly, telling his experiences to Bulldog and the others. "That fire was damned accurate. We held on to our position as they came down the hill—four tanks at first, then nine of them. Our anti-tank guns ripped holes in them, Say, it was like shooting at elephants!"

MARVE CAMLO spoke with some restraint. There were lines in his face that had not been there before. Nothing brash about Marve now. He said:

"One of the shells lit right smack in the middle of our anti-tank battery. It killed or wounded every man without injuring the gun. You never saw such a sight."

"So Marve and I took over," Roy put in a trifle too eagerly.

Marve looked at his former hockey captain from whom he had taken many orders on the ice. He didn't say a word. He just looked at him. Roy evaded his gaze and said a trifle lamely, "Well, that is you ran out there to man the gun, and I followed you. We knocked a tank out of action."

Carl Liscombe was the calmest man among them, saying nothing except what his grin left unconcealed. There had been no shell or bullet with his number on it that day. Bulldog's left hand continued to bleed. He said there was nothing wrong with it that a little water wouldn't cure.

"Come on," Bulldog said, "let's go see if we can find any chow. I'm hungry."

"Sure." Roy Berling got to his tired feet, and dug a playful jab into Marve Camlo's ribs. "And no flirting with the women. Remember what that booklet said."

Marve didn't answer him.

"Let's go, Bitsy," Bulldog said.

"I'm not hungry. I guess I'll stay here until you guys return."

They were lying on the sloping beach where they had landed. Orders were for them to line up on the promenade at 7:15 that evening. They were to proceed east in army trucks along the road to Algiers and beyond. It was rumored that Algiers was already in British and American hands.

As his five buddies left him, Bitsy abruptly decided anything was preferable to being left behind, so he joined them, trailing a couple of paces in the rear. His mouth and throat were still parched, and he had the frantic desire for brandy or a glass of wine—something to offset the cold vacuum in his stomach.

IT WAS a strange country to men from Dakota, whole families of Berbers moving out to the sidewalks to gape at them, Arabs riding in majesty on mouse-like donkeys amid a babel of tongues.

The beaches were piled with supplies, and they were being rushed up the coast by trucks and the fine U.S. standard-guage railroad running from Casablanca to Algiers and Tunis.

Bitsy got his wine and found it very bitter. A second glass aroused his appetite and he ate a prodigious meal. Having saved more money than his teammates, he was now in a prodigal mood, treating them to drinks. A little tipsy, a feeling of vast bravery took possession of him. Soon he worked himself into a combative frame of mind and Roy Berling began kidding him, his humor barbed with sarcasm.

"One more crack like that," Bitsy threatened, "and I'll punch you right smack in the kisser. So help me!"

They got him back to the beach and let him sleep it off until parade time. They had hardly rolled out of Oran in army trucks, going eastward up the Algerian road, when he was violently sick. Bulldog took care of him.

The roads wound crazily across rugged mountains and desolate plateaus, every road bearing infantry guns of all descriptions, warlike stores, tanks, jeeps. In the early morning, the terrain resembled North Dakota in green grandeur, but there the similarity ended.

The battalion stopped on a bleak roadside for breakfast, near a company of Tommies who were having hot tea, bully beef and hard biscuit. The Americans were given scrambled eggs, mashed potatoes and coffee. There was good feeling between the troops, for they had learned to like and respect each other.

"Cigarette, buddy?"

"Thanks, Yank. Got one. How's the war going?"

The land convoy started on, to the roar of the Bren carriers and the deeper rumble of huge trucks. British and American parachutists sped past in jeeps. Every so often the high drone of a keen whistle could be heard above: Spitfires keeping watch over an army on the move. As the morning cleared, snatches of song came from the infantry trucks. Algerian villages, old when Mohammed founded Islam, resounded with "Deep in the Heart of Texas," "Roll out the Barrel" and, "There'll Always Be an England."

The Arab villages shocked the Dakota men with their pitiful squalor. Boys with eyes soft and big as cow's eyes ran frantically beside the trucks begging for cigarettes and food. Men in white burnooses stood motionless before little houses that whiffed to heaven. In the high plateaus Arabs were tending flocks of sheep. There was biting wind up there, and some of the passes were swept by snowstorms.

"Who said something about Africa always being 130 degrees in the shade?" Roy Berling jeered.

It was up and down mountains, through villages and towns, up high again through rain-swept passes. Sometimes the road took them to the coast, following the massive contours of desolate ranges that stood out against the sky like the knuckles of a giant's hand. Tunnels intensified the roar and rumble of the big trucks, sending the noise seaward to mingle with the pounding of high waves, slate-blue, smashing against the coast.

AT NIGHT there were gun-flashes in the distance from anti-aircraft batteries. Reverberating *wumpp-wumpps* could be heard as the Luftwaffe bombed towns, desperately trying to impede advance. Men slept wherever they could.

The tremendous campaign ran like a well-oiled machine, food supplies, even mail catching up with the men on schedule. On again the next morning, through rain-squalls and flashes of exceedingly hot sun, over long stretches of road that shook the daylights out of drivers and troops alike.

Men lost all sense of distance. But already the invasion was a brilliant success. In one week after General Eisenhower's American Army landed in North Africa, it ruled a coastline as long as from Maine to Florida, and controlled a hinterland nearly as big as the U.S. Casablanca, Rabat, Oran and Algiers had fallen with comparatively few casualties, and by the week's end the Americans and British First Army had plunged into Tunisia in an effort to take Bizerte and Tunis, strongly fortified by crack German and Italian troops.

As Colonel Walsh put it, "Men, the real fighting is just ahead of us. I've a hunch it's going to be tough."

The first sign of it was aerial activity, the sky filled with Messerschmitt-109's, Dorniers and Junkers-88, often with no Allied plane in sight. The column was halted one dark night during a bombing of the road. The Germans and Italians were dropping magnesium flares, creating a ghostly scene of grey desolation.

Terrific explosions ripped the night into red and yellow ribbons. Men huddled under their trucks, only a few of them running to either side of the road, the flares plainly revealing them.

"Lie low! Don't move!"

With the rest of them, Bitsy was lying under his truck in the dust of the road. Something prickly ran across his hand and with a feeling of horror he shook it off. A scorpion? His flesh cringed.

"We've just got to lie here and take it, I guess," Bulldog said. "Who's got any chewing gum? You, Bitsy?"

"N-no."

A bomb exploded beside the big truck fifty feet ahead of them, shattering the universe in a jagged red burst of acrid smoke. It blinked out in an instant, leaving the duller glare of flames. Then came the crisp, tearing sound of burning material, and through that sound came the cries of wounded men.

"Hell!" Carl Liscombe shouted. "Let me get out of here!" and he started to crawl out between the wheels.

"Stay where you are!"

"Like hell I will!" Carl snapped. He was not panicky, he had no intention whatever of running away. Instead, he ran toward the truck ahead of them, where, despite the fierce flames, he dragged a wounded man to safety, scorching his hands, his legs.

Bitsy could see him in the light of the burning truck. He saw him trying to save another man, saw him driven back by the flames.

At this moment, guided by the blazing truck, a German swooped low, letting go with all his machine-guns. He came straight up the road, his bullets nicking up the dust in little running fountains, smashing wind-shields to bits of broken glass. Instinctively, Bitsy had shut his eyes, otherwise he might have seen Carl Liscombe fall.

Carl had found the bullet with his number on it. Indeed, he had gone forward to meet it.

THEY BURIED him by the roadside in the morning and, in the scant time at their disposal, fashioned a small wooden cross to which was nailed a flattened out piece of tin. On this, with hammer and nail, they punctured his name and regimental number. Scotty McCabe wanted to add that he had been the right winger on the champion G.H.C. team, but this wasn't considered military. Besides, there wasn't room.

So Scotty hurriedly penciled that epitaph on the back of the cross, where it would shortly be washed off by the rains, the cross itself probably swept away, leaving nothing at all to mark his burial place.

The American army raced forward, singing snatches of song, but in one army truck there were five saddened men with tight lips.

The objectives were Tunis and Bizerte, and they were well into Tunisia now, on historic battle ground. Roy Berling proudly acclaimed his knowledge of the country, maybe to take their minds off Carl Liscombe.

"The ruins of ancient Carthage are close to the modern city of Tunis," he said. "It was from Carthage that Hannibal started the famous march that took him across the Alps to the gateway of Rome. He used elephants to battle his way through. We'll be doing the same thing, but using tanks."

They had stopped for a while to allow a column of American tanks to roar through. The tank crews were in fine fettle as they sang the Marine song.

> From the halls of Montezuma
> To the shores of Tripoli,
> We fight our country's battles
> On the land as on the sea.

"Stephen Decatur of the U.S. Navy inspired that song," Roy told them. "He took Tripoli back in—around 1804, I think."

"Decatur, eh?" Bulldog said. "Well, now it's going to be taken by Dakota. And I don't mean maybe," he added grimly.

IT WAS said that the British First Army had driven the enemy from the town of Medjez-el-Bab, having successfully negotiated the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. All evidence pointed to a big offensive.

The Dakota battalion, in relief, was somewhere west of Tebourba, and the timely arrival of the U.S. armored forces, in addition to the expert night maneuvering of the long motor convoy over open country, had already snatched a large body of British troops from an Axis pocket. The spearhead was pointed at Tunis through Djedeida.

Without showing as much as a flicker of light the battalion disembarked from their trucks, assembling outside a farmhouse that looked like a sieve under the Tunisian moon. Ahead of them in the silvery dark, guns were booming, flashes lighting the terrain. The courtyard of the farmhouse was littered with stretcher

cases, men covered with blankets, all still, silent.

Meanwhile, there was chow and coffee, plenty of it, and sheltered from observation the field kitchens did a roaring trade. Here, too, precious mail caught up with the battalion. There were letters for Roy Berling and Bitsy.

The little guy's hands trembled as he opened the envelope in the light of a shaded candle beneath the ruins of the farm, the ground vibrating with constant gunfire and bomb explosions.

"Say, Marve!" Roy Berling said, looking up from his girl's letter, "the Hollywood Drugstore burned clean to the ground."

"That's too bad. How'd it happen?"

"Caught fire at night. And here's another item that will interest you. Eve Nielson's going to marry Bob Bricker."

"That so?" Marve tried to sound indifferent.

Roy got in one of his barbs. "No wonder you haven't been hearing from her!"

"Eve meant nothing to me. I've plenty of other girls."

"That's the trouble," Roy pointed out. "You'll wind up without any dame at all in the end."

Marve's rifle went clattering as he sprang to his feet. "You looking for trouble?" he snapped at his former hockey captain, and flung himself on Roy, taking a vigorous swing at him. The blow missed and both men went sprawling to the ground.

Bulldog Hutson went in there, separating them, holding them apart by the sheer strength of his arms. "Quit it," he said, "or I'll sock the two of you!"

The men's nerves were frayed by what they had already seen, by the long jolting advance through a strange country, and the certainty of a morning battle against the Axis.

"You ain't the only one not getting any letters," Bulldog told Marve. "Now pipe down before I paste you!"

"You and who else?" Marve asked. But his temper had cooled, and he flopped down on his bedroll.

Bitsy resumed the reading of his letter. "—I don't even know if you're receiving them, for I haven't had one from you in ten weeks. Did you get the snapshot of Jackie, taken when he was four months old? Mother sends her love. She continues to improve in health.

"Everything is fine and dandy here, and so far as we're concerned you have nothing to worry about. I'm working again, so what with your army pay and that, there are no money troubles. I pray for your safety every night, and ask God to return you to me and our son. All my love, dear. Janie."

There was a *P. S.*—just two lines—and for some reason it stood out like big block type.

"You will be sorry to hear that Mr. Findale died."

FOR several moments Bitsy didn't speak, and in the silence following Marve Camlo's flare-up, the sound of more General Grant tanks could be heard lumbering up ahead. It was not only the grinding of motors, but the rattling of thousands of tool cases over bumpy roads, like miles of heavy chains being dragged over sheets of corrugated iron. After that noise faded into the distance, the metallic crack of 25 pounders took its place, along with the whine of enemy shells going overhead searching the roads.

Bitsy said, "Mose Findale is dead."

"*What?*"

"When!"

"Janie doesn't say."

"Gee! The old boy—"

All were silent as they took in the news that placed on their shoulders a responsibility none of them cared to mention. A solemnity took possession of them.

For his part, Bitsy was thinking of Carl Liscombe. He didn't believe any man could display greater heroism.

It was obvious that the rest of them were of like mind, for Scotty McCabe said, "Right now it's Carl, if I have anything to say about it."

Roy Berling said, "He disobeyed orders."

"What of it! He gave his life to save others, didn't he?"

Again they lapsed into silence, drawn together, united as never before. Marve Camlo offered a shamed hand to his hockey captain.

"Sorry I blew up, Roy," he said.

"That's all right, Marve. I guess I asked for it."

ROY crossed over to sit beside Bitsy, asking the date when Janie's letter had been written. It had been mailed two weeks later than his own.

"I'm awfully sorry to hear that Janie had to quit her job," he sympathized, glancing at his own letter.

"Quit her job?"

"On account of her mother." He turned to the others. "I guess some of us have been wondering what's happened to Bitsy lately—why he's been so quiet, with hardly a word to say for himself. Know why? His wife's mother. They took her to the hospital two months ago. Said there was no hope for her. It takes guts for a guy to keep a thing like that under his belt."

Bitsy, appalled by the news, went cold from head to foot. Unconsciously he crumpled Janie's letter in his hand, numbed by her brave restraint in not telling him, not letting him worry. *Everything fine and dandy!*

For one second it almost broke him in half. He closed his eyes, opened them, forced a smile. With a supreme effort he borrowed strength from Janie.

"You've got it all wrong," he said raggedly. "Her mother always felt worse in the fall. She's—she's back home again now. And Janie's working again." The words were like jagged stones in his throat. "Everything's fine and dandy—"

A voice called down the shattered steps to the evil-smelling cellar.

"O.K., men! Line up in the courtyard on the double! Snap into it!"

They collected their army equipment and hurried on out into the night. Ominous clouds were fleeting westward over the moon and a squall of rain descended. The courtyard reeked of medication and the pungent smell of drugs. Above, far ahead and to the left of them, a German flare slowly fell, shedding its weird light. Everything assumed phantom shape, the ruined farmhouse, the stretcher cases on the ground, the lined-up battalion, men with pale-blue faces and opaque eyes.

"Stand still!"

Two bombs straddled them, blowing bricks, wood and other debris high into the air. The flare blotted out. From somewhere in the vicinity a searchlight poured out, catching a Junkers-88 in full view, its swastika emblem plainly visible. Instantly machine-guns began rattling, spouting up their tracers. The Junkers heeled and twisted like some monstrous dragon of the night, its teeth spitting out its hate. Bullets rattled off its hide, but apparently invulnerable to them, it flew on out of sight.

ABOVE the din an officer was trying to make himself heard through a megaphone.

"We're going into position, men. About five miles from here. Keep to the edge of the road. Single file by squads and companies."

The top-sergeant of the Company came down the ranks. He couldn't distinguish the men by their faces so he hollered:

"Privates Hutson and McCabe! Two paces to the front!" The two men stepped out.

Unable to read the military order in the dark, the sergeant boiled it down to a few words. "Promotion to corporals for your action in Oran." He reported to his immediate officer. "O.K., sir."

The marching order was given, and by company the men slogged out of the courtyard, gained the road, and proceeded silently along each side of it in single file.

Now that Bulldog Hutson had been promoted, Bitsy felt more alone than

ever, robbed of his companionship, his moral support. But he was unable to dwell on it, for he kept thinking of Janie. Something was gripped in his left hand, and he realized it was her letter, crushed into a ball. Straightening it out as best he could, he put it in his pocket. So far as he knew, the only pal near him was Marve Camlo, about four or five paces in the rear. Bitsy deliberately let part of his equipment fall, stopped to recover it, and scrutinized the men passing him.

"That you, Marve?"

"Yep."

Bitsy fell in step behind him. "Pretty swell about Bulldog and Scotty," he said.

"Yep."

"You and Roy should have been promoted, too—for what you did to them tanks."

Marve said, "To hear Roy talk, he ought to be made a captain."

"I wouldn't put it past him. He doesn't turn a hair, no matter what happens. I guess they were right about him back home. Gee! When we came ashore in that barge, bullets flying around us like hail, he was singing."

Somebody said, "Button your lip, soldier!" Of all people, it was Corporal "Bulldog" Hutson!

The going became tougher as the battalion slogged on, the road churned by armored cars and supply convoys. At a given point they veered off across fields, gullies, up stony slopes. It was raining hard when they reached their position, and they were deployed in olive groves. The troops immediately began to put their machine and antitank guns in position, digging slit trenches against a possible dawn attack.

With the rest of the men Bitsy put his back into the work, toiling ceaselessly with spade and trenching tool. He felt no physical exhaustion, though he was hollow inside. He kept praying for courage, but no such blessing came to relieve his dread sickness of heart and soul.

In the rain and the mud, the scene unnerved all of them. The battalion appeared to be entrenched in a forward position which, so far, had escaped the enemy's attention. An inferno raged to right and left of them a little to their rear. Tank battles were taking place all around them. Between the thud of bombs and the incessant firing and explosions of artillery fire, men could hear the tanks maneuvering, "breathing" louder as they gained the tops of hills, squatting there for a moment like prehistoric rhinoceri. Machineguns chattered everlastingly in the whine and crack of shells. British 25-pounders kept up a steady slamming.

Fear! As Bitsy continued to deepen the trench he stood in, fear gathered in drops of perspiration on his forehead, fell and left depths of fear still untapped. Bitsy cursed himself for a coward, lashing himself with scorn. To counteract his fear, he wanted desperately to grab his rifle and dash for the enemy lines, charging the Germans single-handed. To what purpose? Only foolhardiness, futility, death. There wouldn't be any real courage in it. Bitsy, always a religious man, prayed silently for release from the paralysis of fear that gripped his limbs, his brain.

As the rainy dawn slowly revealed their position, the scene was like an etching of ruin and abandonment. Halfway up the ridge four battered tanks remained still, two of them smoking. Sporadic rifle fire criss-crossed the churned up terrain, pinging from rocks, slamming into the trees and mud. From somewhere ahead came the hoarse cry of a man for the stretcher bearer, the voice sounding weaker until, suddenly, it died away. Every instinct in Bitsy urged him to go out there in search of the man. He couldn't move.

BULLDOG CAME down the line, totally unmindful of the criss-cross fire. He looked like something indestructible, as though bullets could go

right through him without harming him. He jumped into the trench beside Bitsy, giving him a searching look before roughing him up with a big, muddied hand.

"How's it going, kid?"

"Me? I'm okay," Bitsy said.

"Swell. We'll be relieved in an hour or so. D Company will take over while we get some chow. Then the whole outfit is to advance. We're going to drive the Jerries from that ridge." He turned his head to an olive grove fifty yards in the rear. "Gee!" he said hungrily. "Can you smell that coffee?"

A shell came in with its awful warning of destruction. Both men ducked their heads, feeling that the shell would land right beside them. Surprisingly, it exploded a hundred yards behind them, to the left.

Bulldog, who had not yet had time to put on his corporal's stripes, casually gave utterance to a rule from the soldier's creed.

"You never hear the shell that gets you, kid."

"Bulldog?"

"Huh?"

"How does it happen that some guys —like you, for instance—can stand it better than others?"

"I don't know. We've got thicker hides, maybe. No imagination."

The explanation brought no comfort to Bitsy. "No, it's something more than that," he said, trying to keep from chattering.

"Listen, kid," Bulldog said, "Don't get the idea I ain't scared. I'm scared plenty. Everybody is. And that goes for the Krauts too. But what the hell! The way I look at it is this. This uniform says I'm a soldier in the United States Army. And that means that I'm Mr. Whiskers in person. Me. Bulldog Johnny Hutson who not so long ago was fixing flats for a living, playing ice hockey, with nothing on my mind except eats and eight hours' sleep a night in a comfortable bed.

"Well, now it's different. I figure I owe a lot to my country. My folks came over from Norway a hundred years ago. The United States took them in, made citizens of them, gave them liberties and opportunites they never had before.

"All right. Now it's my turn to pay Uncle Sam back. I'm part of him now. One of his soldiers. I'm defending him and all the swell things he stands for. I'm fighting for him. And if that means giving up my life, it's okay by me. It's a debt of honor. I'm proud to have the chance."

"I try to feel that way, too. But—but it—somehow it doesn't—"

"Look, Bitsy. If I'm fated to go, I go. That's all there is to it. Why think about it? Why let it get me down? I don't aim to die— Who does? I want to put in my licks where they'll do Uncle Sam the most good. But if I've got to go, why, that's O.K., too, because I pledged my life to Uncle Sam the moment I put on his uniform."

Bulldog spat. "In our little crowd there's only one guy who acts like he's really having a whale of a big time for himself. That's Roy."

"Yes."

"I like to have that guy around. He ain't got a jumpy nerve in the whole of his body. When he was born Lady Luck stood by. He's got a fine family, good looks, a swell position in a bank, athletic prowess, and the prettiest girl in the state."

BITSY FELT better after his talk with Bulldog, and when the order came for them to go back to a much needed breakfast, he reached the olive grove on firmer legs. Enemy shells were ripping the trees to pieces, and the position of the field kitchen was in constant danger. The men lined up for their coffee, porridge, bread and bacon. In high spirits, Roy Berling was getting in his gibes at the expense of this or the other person.

"Hello, Bitsy," he cracked, "you still with us? You look like you'd been fished out of a mudhole."

Bitsy offered a wan grin. He had difficulty in swallowing his bread, and the hot coffee trickled down his chin. He thought there was a queer light in Roy's eyes, as though he was running a fever. For all his aplomb, his laughter sounded artificial.

But all the men were tense, their conversation forced. For the first time, they were going to make a frontal attack in battalion strength, British and other American units on either flank. The objective was aimed at cutting the rail line between Bizerte and Tunis, isolating the German-Italian forces around the two cities. The enemy would be met in considerable strength, for he was strongly entrenched in the two ridges directly ahead.

To Bitsy the battle was vague from the very start, confined to his immediate surroundings. He hadn't any conception of its magnitude, was completely unaware of what was taking place on each side of him, or up ahead.

The battalion had filtered across fields and through clumps of trees, in places knee-deep in mud. Machine-gun and artillery fire met them, and they were under savage aerial activity. Men pitched forward as though tripping over roots. All morning Bitsy stared with stark eyes at the fallen, motionless bodies of men he had known, and suddenly it came to him that they had been advancing for hours. Not once had he fired his rifle. There was no enemy to aim at.

The issue grew in ferocity, until the stony terrain became a cauldron of explosive flashes, smoke, shrieking bits of hot steel, whines, the crack of tank guns, and through it all the continuous buzzing as of maddened bees.

The ridges were fortifications built around powerful German anti-tank guns, and already many tanks advancing before them had been knocked out. The fighting became as bloody as any Tunisia had seen in all its war-scarred ages. The battalion swept on in succeeding waves, sadly depleted during every rush.

Bitsy noticed that both his hands were bleeding from cuts and skin-scraping against protective rocks as they went forward in short rushes. One thing alone kept him going: a dull instinct to perform his duty. His throat was dry, and he swallowed constantly.

MEANWHILE, up ahead, Scotty McCabe had displayed great initiative and daring. Forty men of the battalion, led by an officer, had crept around the enemy position. When the officer was killed, Scotty took his position. He rushed the anti-tank gun, the men following him. With bayonets and grenades they slaughtered the gun-crew, enabling the tanks and the North Dakota battalion to sweep forward, taking the ridge.

There Bitsy found himself in a mêlée of hard hand-to-hand fighting. Under bleeding hands his rifle was slippery, his aim poor. A German infantryman loomed up before him. Bitsy fenced his rifle aside, lunged forward and thrust his bayonet into the man's chest. A feeling of exultant savagery swiftly came and as swiftly went, and as he yanked the bayonet out again the sensation so nauseated him that he fell on top of the man, his uniform saturated by the German's blood.

Somebody hauled him up. It was Roy Berling, his once-handsome face distorted by a quivering grimace. Cursing, Roy thrust the barrel of his rifle against the dead enemy's chest and, to Bitsy's horror, pulled the trigger. The bullet tore the man's breast pocket away, shattering a paybook.

Scrambling on, Bitsy followed Roy Berling over the ridge top.

All hell was breaking loose. Ordered to consolidate and keep up a rapid fire, the depleted battalion dug in, holding their dearly won position against mortar and machine-gun fire and six dive-bombing attacks, until a squadron of Lockheed Lightnings came on the scene, shooting down two Ju-88's.

The ridge now seemed to be a mass of flame and smoke into which poured

German shells, the ground shaking with explosion, the smoke ripped by jagged flashes of yellow and electric-blue light. The frightful detonations reduced Bitsy's brain to jelly. He had no feeling at all in his body.

A line of mixed Americans and British scurried down the far side of the ridge, under a lifting barrage from the 25-pounders and the U.S. 155's. A German tank was burning on the left. It smelled of frying, rancid grease. Other tanks were maneuvering for a pitched battle. In the smoke and confusion it was hard to tell friend from foe.

And now a concentrated artillery fire came from the second ridge, and it seemed impossible that a living thing could survive it. Stunned, Bitsy looked around for a comrade, any comrade, preferably someone in his own battalion. The feeling that he was alone sharpened his fear.

At this moment, coming through the smoke and shell explosions—and coming amazingly fast—was the monstrous shape of a tank, its guns cracking. Right in its path, Bitsy jumped into a foxhole, and the tank roared over him, its caterpillar wheels straddling his small refuge.

He remained curled up in a heap, trying to get his breath. He couldn't. His throat appeared to be gripped by an iron hand. He opened his mouth, inhaling gasoline fumes. He tried to fight the panic that took hold of him, and ran on—forward—in search of his battalion.

THE hideous experience of the tank was forgotten in the one that immediately followed. He had found a comrade. Roy Berling. They were suddenly, miraculously, side by side in the same shell crater.

But Roy didn't seem to know him. His eyes, preponderantly white, were staring. He no longer had his rifle with him. He had a revolver in his hand.

"Found it on a dead German officer," he was babbling. "Been looking for something like this all day."

Something about him struck hard into Bitsy's consciousness. Roy Berling had worse tremors than *he* had. The unexpected revelation needled the first feeling of courage into Bitsy.

"Come on, Roy," he said, "let's catch up with the outfit. We can't stay back here!"

He was about to run forward when he heard a whiplike crack behind him. Roy had slumped backward, his right hand up, the revolver pressed to his temple.

The terrific and unexpected act turned Bitsy to stone, and in that moment he knew, at first sight, the difference between fear and cowardice. Roy Berling —whom all of them had envied for his apparent indifference to danger!

High explosive was bursting right around them, but now Bitsy didn't hesitate. He jumped back into the crater, pried the revolver from Roy's tightly clenched hand and threw it as far away as he could. The battalion would think Roy had died in action. Bulldog and Scotty and Marve would remember him as captain of their team. The kids in Grafton, North Dakota, would continue to hero-worship him. Bitsy ran on, hardly seeing where he was going, his eyes blinded with scalding tears.

He remembered little more until darkness. One company of the battalion was isolated at the foot of the second ridge, the rest of them strung out into a thin line. There was a rumor that they were to be relieved, but fresh troops had failed to materialize.

Night falls fast in Tunisia, the air bitterly cold. Bitsy, shocked by Roy Berling's tragic end, lay shivering in a foxhole. There were men he didn't know somewhere to each side of him, but he felt quite alone.

THERE WAS a slithering sound in the darkness behind him, and a soldier stood etched against the flashes of British and American gunfire to the rear. He was dragging something behind him that looked like a sled. Bitsy had turned to guard himself, for German para-

troops wearing Arab burnooses had been dropped behind them, so it was said. The order was to fire on them at sight, since the Arab population had cleared out.

"What outfit are you, buddy?" came a voice.

"North Dakota regiment, 4th Battalion." Bitsy, his teeth chattering from the cold, welcomed the friendly voice. "What outfit are you?"

"Stretcher bearer, 12th Medical Corps. My helper was killed on the way up. You're the outfit we were looking for. There's a company of you ahead of here, isn't there?"

"I don't know."

"Halfway up the slope of the ridge. Surrounded on three sides. Lots of casualties. One of your non-coms brought back seven of them under fire. Corporal Hutson."

"Not—not Bulldog Hutson?"

"He's a bulldog, all right, that guy!"

The news of his pal and the fact that he was still alive roused Bitsy. He couldn't speak.

"He's still up there, bringing out badly wounded men. Seems he found a jeep nearby, only the driver had been captured. He volunteered to run food and water and ammunition to the ridge. He'd made three trips when I left the dressing station, and was starting out on his fourth. He's already cited for a decoration. Some guy!"

Bulldog's heroism ran like quick-silver through Bitsy's veins.

A voice called, "Stretcher bearer?"

"Right here."

An officer came up. "How many stretchers have you?"

"Three in all, sir. Only I lost my bearer on the way up. Killed."

"We've a badly wounded man here. Must be taken back without delay."

Bitsy felt a red-hot slash across the fleshy part of his left shoulder, that half-spun him around. He fell headlong.

"Looks like we've another casualty on our hands," the officer said, bending over him.

"It's nothing, sir. The bullet just grazed me." Bitsy got to his feet.

They examined him as best they could, deciding that the wound wasn't serious.

"Think you could give a hand with the stretcher? You can get your arm dressed at the clearing station."

"I'll sure try, sir."

The trip back with the badly wounded man was a nightmare. In the dark, over treacherous ground pitted with shell holes, they were under fire all the way. Blood ran down Bitsy's left arm, but fear had left him. This was different. This was an act of mercy.

Several times the stretcher bearer asked him if he didn't want a rest. Bitsy said no. After sixteen hours of continuous battle he was out of it at last, and the surcease gave him prodigious strength. He struggled on, gritting his teeth in pain. His fear was gone now. The bullet wound, then, had been a godsend!

AT THE field dressing station two doctors were overwhelmed by work. When Bitsy laid down his end of the stretcher, he toppled to his knees from exhaustion and loss of blood. An orderly gave him a glass of water, examined his wound, dusted it in sulfanilimide powder and slapped a sterile bandage on it. He was to wait for an ambulance to take him to the field hospital ten miles away.

The blanket was removed from the badly wounded man, and the sight was horrifying. There was a big hole of tangled flesh and uniform in the man's side. His face was paper white. Skilfully they cut the clothing off him and lifted him to the operating table.

Bitsy stared, and then his mouth fell open with shock. The man he had carried across that endless black terrain was Marve Camlo!

Marve's condition was so grave that both surgeons and their orderlies gave him instant attention. With aching eyes Bitsy watched them. Six hundred cubic centimeters of blood was pumped out

of his chest cavity, the shell splinter removed, and the wound sewed up. Marve! Flashy wing man of the champion Grafton Hockey Team! Something died in Bitsy's heart. Marve Camlo lying insensible on a table while his own blood was being strained through sterile gauze and injected back into his veins...

A medic came by and Bitsy plucked at his sleeve. "Will he"—he could barely speak—"will he live?"

"A remote chance. If you'd brought him ten minutes later—" The medic spread his hands, passed on to the next wounded man, just being brought in on a stretcher.

There was an altercation at the entrance of the blackout tent. "You've done enough, Corporal."

"I know the route. I'll make one more trip." That was Bulldog's voice!

Rising on leaden feet, Bitsy went outside. There was a deep glow in Bulldog's eyes that gave splendor to his rugged face, and Bitsy suddenly felt very small.

"Hello, kid. What's going on here? A free hospital ride?" Playfully Bulldog roughed his hair.

Bitsy pointed to a jeep. "Is that the car?"

"That's her, kid! Some bus!" He turned away, shouting instructions. "Check her up for gas and oil, fellers, while I get me a mug of java."

RETURNING to the tent, Bitsy found his shirt and muddied tunic, took them outside. Nobody paid much attention to him. An ambulance car was drawn up, wounded men being carried or helped inside it.

The jeep was loaded with more food, water, ammunition. Watching his opportunity, Bitsy climbed aboard it. He was fully dressed now, and his left arm seemed as good as new.

When Bulldog came, he stared at Bitsy in silence for a moment. "No you don't!" he said then. "Hop out of there! Get in that ambulance!"

"What for?" Bitsy's voice was squeaky. "There's nothing wrong with me!"

"You heard me, Bitsy. Get outa there!"

"Listen! Like you, I brought a wounded man in. I didn't have a jeep to ride in. I walked. All I'm asking is a lift part way back to the battalion. Have a heart, Bulldog!"

"A heart, eh?" Bulldog's eyes were shining. "Kid," he said quietly, "what I've done ain't nothing to what you're doing now." He offered his hand. "Put it there."

They set off into the darkness, toward the brilliant display of star-shells, Very lights, gun and bomb explosions that made the horizon a fairyland of joyous color. Neither man spoke. The going was too rough.

The shell came from nowhere. It exploded on the driver's side of the jeep and blew off the rear wheel. The car swerved violently, but didn't turn over. There was the smell of burning rubber, and the pungent odor of gasoline.

Bulldog was slumped over the wheel. Almost in the same instant a German flare lit up the immediate ground, fully revealing them. Machine-gun bullets came whistling in from a clump of trees on the right, thudding up against the jeep.

Bitsy never knew how he got Bulldog away from the now blazing car. But he did, dragging him over the ground with both hands.

The flare showed up a silent machine-gun position protected by rocks. Bitsy figured it wasn't a German position, because the gun was facing east. He tried to get Bulldog on his back, but couldn't manage it. He tried to carry him in his arms, but couldn't do it.

A Ju-88 dropped a bomb that seemed to blow up the world. And now they were being machine-gunned from two directions. Bitsy knew something had to be done about it.

He ran to the abandoned machinegun, saw that its belt was in position, trained the barrel on the clump of woods, and

commenced firing. The gun jammed. Bitsy couldn't get it started again. He could see Bulldog lying there, exposed to view. Bullets were spouting up earth all around him.

There was a bag of hand grenades in the machinegun position. Bitsy filled his pockets with them, and grabbed two in his hands. As he ran toward the concentrated fire from the clump of trees he tried to recall Bulldog's words:

"This uniform says I'm a soldier in the United States Army. I'm fighting for him. If that means giving up my life, it's okay by me."

A bullet toppled him, but he scrambled to his feet. Thirty feet from the trees he let go with two grenades, saw their wicked flashes. The machinegun fire ceased. Bitsy threw another bomb in there, then ran back in the fading light of the magnesium flare and dragged Bulldog over the scrub cactus to a shell crater.

MACHINEGUN fire now concentrated on them from a new position. Bitsy staggered out there, a grenade in his right hand. He no longer had a left hand.

He wished Bulldog could see him. He wished some Dakota guy could see him. He felt ablaze with courage, but there'd be no one to tell of it except the Germans.

He had thrown his grenade, but he was never to know the result of it. A blast of machinegun fire mowed him down, and Private Clarence Meeks, the little guy from Dakota, pitched forward, a smile on his face.

Some months later many U.S. soldiers were being evacuated from the battle zone to England, from where they would be shipped home. For many of them, their fighting days were over, because injuries would keep them inactive.

Scotty McCabe had lost a leg, Bulldog needed expert attention to save the sight of his eyes, and Marve Camlo was still a stretcher case, not yet able to walk.

Both Scotty and Bulldog had been decorated for daring and bravery. Seated at Marve Camlo's bedside, they had been discussing their return to Grafton.

"No," Bulldog said, "folks may not understand it, seeing that two of us earned citations. But it's like Mose Findale told us. Many a soldier has earned the Congressional Medal, only his bravery wasn't seen by any officer."

Marve nodded. "Bitsy saved my life. The stretcher bearer kept asking him to take a rest, but he kept on going, wounded though he was."

"And he saved my life," Bulldog added, "though nobody knows how the little guy managed it."

"Then there's his wife and kid," Scotty said.

"I don't think we should consider that angle so much," Bulldog said. "The reward was for the bravest act under fire. Since we've got to decide who gets that honor, I vote for Bitsy Meeks. That kid really rated it.

"I'm not sure whether you all know this, but that little guy was scared stiff from the day we landed at Oran. I knew it from the first. He talked about it in his sleep. He was in deadly, mortal fear. Every time I saw him trying to stand up to it—gee, I don't know, you had to take off your hat to him.

"I read somewhere that only the brave can afford to fear." Bulldog's mouth twitched. "Gee! That night when he came out of the dressing station and got in the jeep with me—wounded—he was still afraid! Nobody back home will ever know what real bravery made him do that. Nobody probably could see why we'd give him a medal for it. But I knew, right then and there, that nothing I ever did—nothing I ever *could* do—" Bulldog couldn't go on.

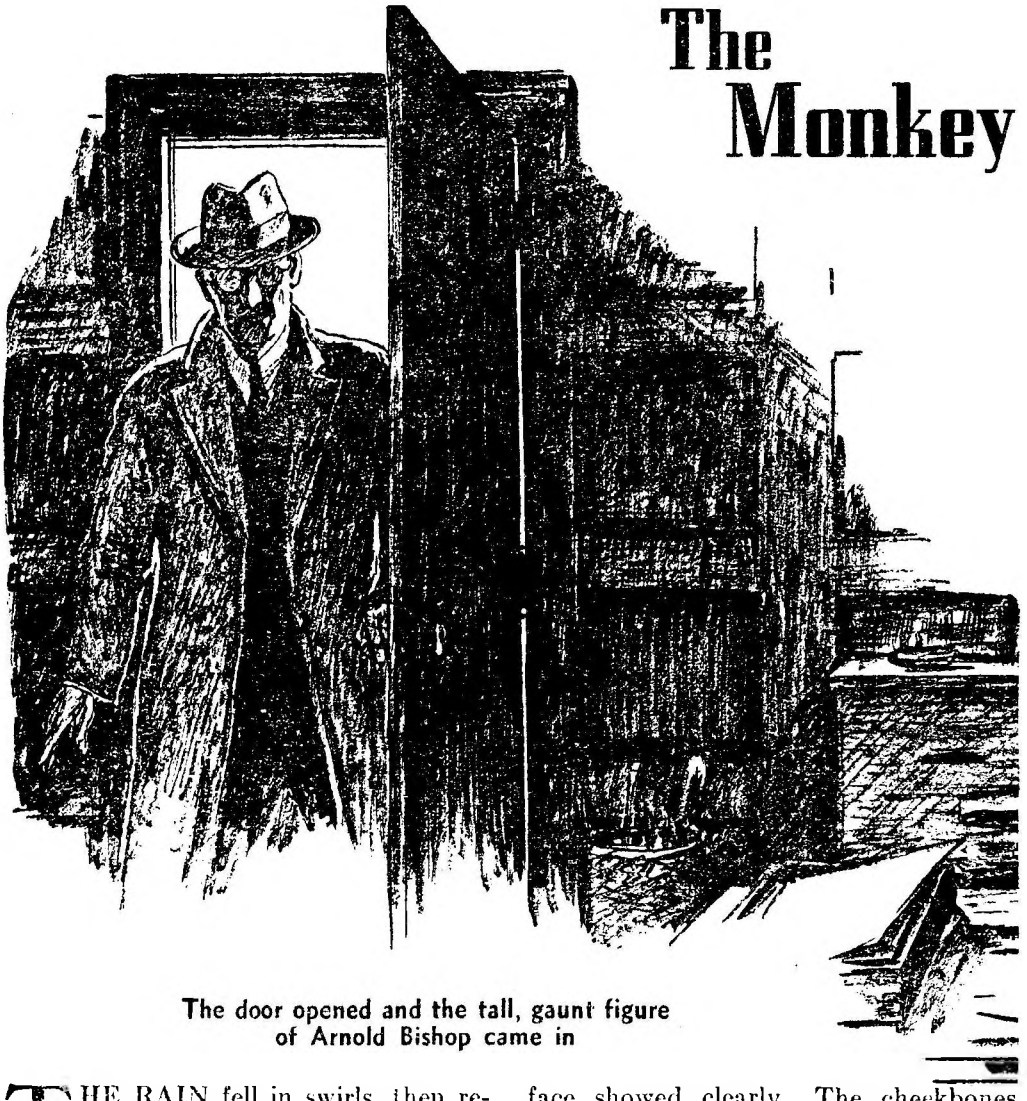
"Then we're all agreed," Marve Camlo said. "Bitsy is it."

The other two nodded.

Private Clarence Meeks! Publicly unheralded, publicly unsung. Without military citation or ribbon—

Vale, Bitsy. Well done. . . .

The Monkey



The door opened and the tall, gaunt figure of Arnold Bishop came in

THE RAIN fell in swirls, then relaxed in dispirited weariness as the wind died down. Cabs probed their way along dimmed-out Broadway. At the 79th Street subway exit, a fresh throng of people huddled a moment beneath the protective kiosk while umbrellas were raised, papers folded over hats, collars rolled up. Then the crowd spilled out into the rain and scattered into the rainy darkness.

Now only one man was left in the shadowy exit. He stood there, his shoulders slightly stooped, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his long slicker. Presently his hands moved. A match flamed suddenly as he lit a cigarette.

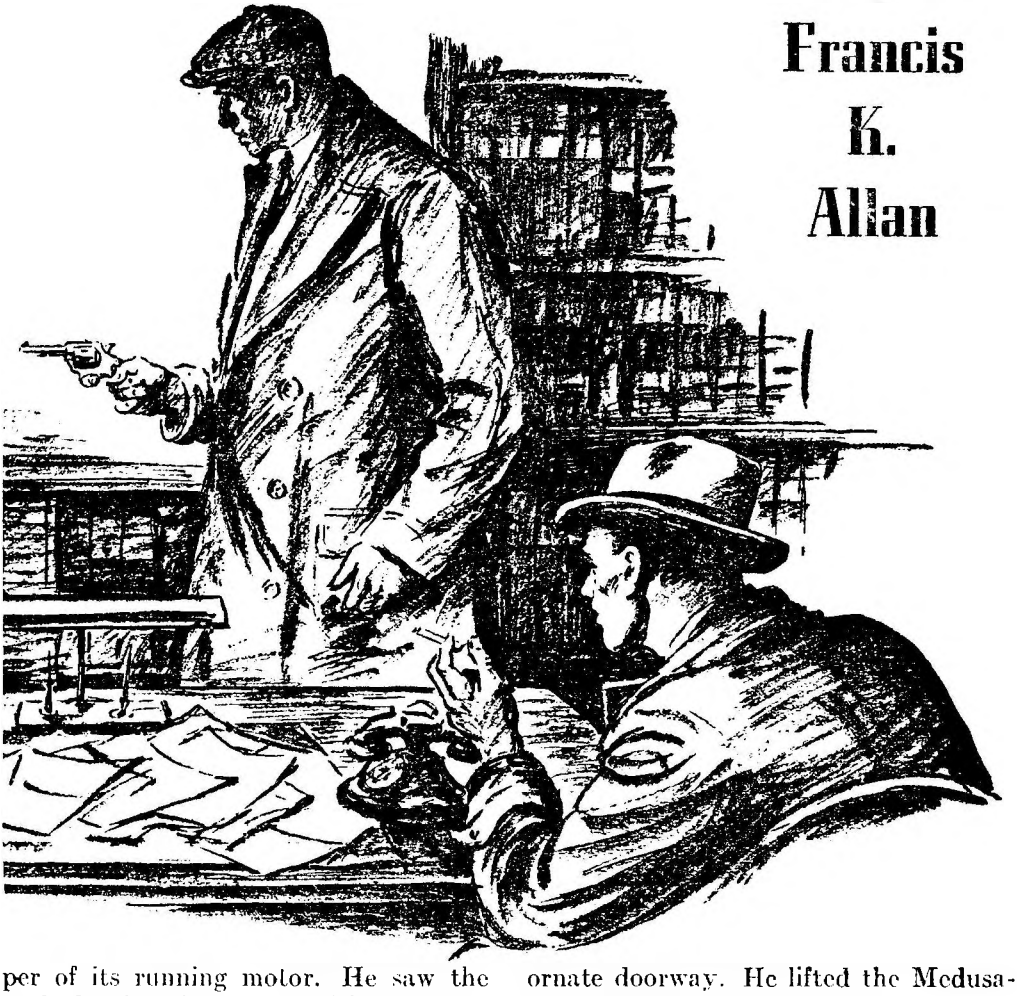
In the yellow glow, the man's long face showed clearly. The cheekbones were bold and large. The mouth was wide and humorless. His eyes were wide apart and blue beneath heavy brows. He drew on the cigarette, shifted the match-light to glance at his watch, then flicked the match away. He hunched his shoulders and stepped out into the rain.

He walked at a moderate pace down the incline of 79th toward Riverside Drive. The sweep of wind off the Hudson River lanced across his leathery face and blew loose embers off his cigarette. Upriver a ferry moaned.

At Riverside the man turned uptown, leaning into the gusty wind. As he crossed 80th Street, he passed a parked dark coupe and heard the throaty whis-

Lost His Head

By Francis K. Allan



per of its running motor. He saw the coal of a live cigar move within the car. Beyond the first large apartment building, the man frowned and went on to an iron gate.

Beyond that gate was a small patch of lawn. Beyond that, the massive shadow of a squat brick house. A small square of yellowish light shone at the front door. At the right corner of the second floor, slices of brighter light showed around the edges of drawn shades.

The man unlatched the gate, stepped into the yard, latched the gate behind him, and moved to the grotesquely ornate doorway. He lifted the Medusa-head knocker and let it fall.

The sound died. The man looked through the small door-window into the entrance hall.

AT THE right was a curving stairway. On the dark-paneled walls hung somber tapestries, suspended from thick bronze bars. There was an ugly table toward the rear of the hall: there sat a telephone and a straight black chair. Nearer the door stood a huge Oriental vase. In total effect, the hall was chill and ponderous and medieval. Again he knocked.

Suddenly a door slammed loudly behind him. He turned. A taxi was drawing away from the gate. Then the gate slammed and two figures hurried through the rain and darkness. At the same time, the dark coupe, its lights off, glided past and vanished. The man watched it just a moment as it passed the corner light.

"Are you looking for someone?" a breathless voice asked. The voice was that of a girl. She opened the door hurriedly and stepped into the stale-scented, warm hall.

"My name is Wall. I'm looking for Mr. Sparling."

"I'll tell Father. Just a minute." She shook the rain from her short black hair and took off her coat. Her companion entered the hall. He was a blond man of about thirty. He knocked the rain from his hat and tossed it familiarly toward the black chair.

"Nasty," he commented, and peered at Wall curiously. "Don't think I've ever met you. My name's Herron."

They shook hands. The girl went up the curving stairway and her heels tapped along the hall above their heads. Herron rattled the coins in his pocket. Wall dropped his dead cigarette into the Oriental vase and listened to the click of a latch upstairs. He heard the girl's distant voice speaking:

"There's a Mr. Wall downstairs to—"

The quick words stopped abruptly. For a moment there was silence. Herron wandered idly about the hall. Then the girl's heels clattered suddenly above.

"Father! Fath . . . Oh! Oh, Fath . . . Clyde! Clyde!" she screamed.

Herron's head jerked. He leaped at the stairs and plunged upward. The girl's feet drummed sharply. Wall heard her sobbing. "He—he's in there! There he—"

Wall dashed up the stairs. In the upper passage, Herron stood holding the girl. Her face was buried against his shoulder. Her sobs came in hoarse, breathless monotony. At the front of the hall, the rectangle of light from an open door spread across the carpet and climbed the dark-paneled wall. Silently Wall passed the crying girl and stepped into the room.

A massive four-poster bed dominated the scene. There, half-propped amid twisted covers and pillows, lay the vast and bony figure of Emanuel Sparling. His pajamas gaped open across his hairy barrel chest. His flabby arms were lost beneath the tangled covers. His mouth was open; the blank eyes were empty and glassy. Down his left temple extended the crusty lines of dried blood. Across the left side of the huge head was a deep and ragged gash.

"Timothy Wall, you're a little late," Wall told himself drily. From behind him came the continual sobbing of the girl and the pleading, patient voice of Clyde Herron.

CAREFULLY Wall looked over the room. Everything seemed in order. He studied the bedside table. There was a pack of cigarettes, with two books of matches. An invalid's bell, a telephone, a glass and pitcher of water, and a thermometer in its glass case.

Next Tim Wall studied the drag of the loose covers. The drag was toward the left, where the table stood. He noted the taut, almost dynamic yet hushed tension that transfixed the body. He tip-toed to the bed and lifted back the covers.

A soft indrawn breath whispered over his lips.

Locked in the grasp of the dead man's fingers was a small figure of carved ivory. He bent and peered between the bony fingers, studying the shape and design of the black ivory object that Sparling had grasped before he died.

He covered the body again, and looked searchingly about the entire room, a frown gathering between his eyes. When he turned, Clyde Herron was blocking the hall door. The man's grey eyes were narrow and cautious; his fair face was flushed and bleak.

"He's dead?"

"He's been dead for hours," Tim Wall

answered. He saw Herron's tongue go over his parted lips, saw the dawn of a question, of a suspicion, framing itself behind the man's grey eyes.

"No, Herron. I wasn't leaving when you came up," Wall snapped. "Get out in the hall and stay there."

He lifted the telephone carefully and dialed.

"Hello. . . . Is Inspector Jacobin around?" There was a pause. Herron remained in the doorway, staring fixedly.

"Jacobin? Tim Wall speaking. I've just lost a customer. You can have it if you want it. . . . Yeah, dead. Sparling. Emanuel Sparling. . . . Yeah, the same one. . . . The same place: Riverside, just above 80th. . . . Yes, I'll wait."

He hung up and crossed to the door. Herron stepped back to let him pass. He closed the door behind him and looked at the girl. She stood at the head of the stairs, facing him rigidly.

She was a slender girl. Her shoulders were rather square; her close-cut hair curled in black ringlets about her head. She wore a brown skirt, a white sweater, and a brown, half-length jacket. Not pretty, Tim decided, but smart. Her eyes were wide-spaced and level beneath fine brows. Her mouth was full and slightly stubborn.

As Tim approached her, her fixed stare shifted jerkily, following each step he took.

"He was your father?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes. I'm Gay Sparling," she said tonelessly.

"And Herron?"

"My fiancé."

Tim nodded. "I've called the police. They'll be here soon. You might as well sit down and wait." In afterthought he added, "My name's Tim Wall. I'll be here until the police—"

"I understand. You don't have to explain things," Gay interrupted wearily. Her eyes strayed beyond Tim to Herron. Some of the tension left her face. Herron moved closer and took her hand.

"You mustn't worry, dear," he murmured. "I'll be here."

AT SEVEN-THIRTY Inspector Jacobin arrived, with Russe, the Assistant Medical Examiner, and a bovine-looking man named Miffin. Jacobin shook hands with Gay Sparling and Herron, left them in the hall with Miffin and went into the bedroom with Russe and Tim. Russe went to work immediately on the body. Jacobin pushed back his wet brown hat and surveyed the room with a mixture of curiosity and distaste. Presently he looked at Tim.

"What got you here?" he asked.

"He called me. I went by the office a little before six and found a notation from my secretary telling me that Sparling wanted to see me as soon as possible. I came up on the subway. I met them—" he nodded toward the closed hall door. "They were just coming in. Gay Sparling hurried up here and found it."

"When did Sparling call your office?"

"I don't know. Have to ask Nonnie."

"Any idea why he'd want to see you?"

"Nope. I'd handled a little job for him once before—in 1939. Blackmail. I haven't seen or heard of him since then."

Jacobin sucked in his olive cheeks and blinked sleepily.

"When did you get here? Was anyone here then?"

"Apparently not. Nobody answered when I knocked. That was about six-fifty."

Jacobin glanced at his watch, then went over to the bed and studied the body. "Sparling was blind, wasn't he?" he asked.

"Blind, plus a bad heart. He wasn't leaving the bed even back in 1939."

"Do you know if he still—did any business?"

"I wouldn't know," Tim replied evenly. Jacobin arched his slanting brows quizzically, then shrugged. Suddenly he leaned forward. Russe straightened and pointed to Sparling's locked hands.

"A black bishop," Jacobin mused. He turned and surveyed the room sharply. "Suppose," he decided suddenly, "we go downstairs, Tim."

He led the way into the hall, closing the door.

"If you don't mind, Miss Sparling," he said pleasantly, "I'd like to ask a few questions. Is there some place downstairs?"

"Yes, of course," she agreed mechanically. She turned down the stairs, followed closely by Herron, then by Tim and Jacobin. She opened the door to the left of the entrance hall and turned on the light in a small, book-lined study.

AGAIN Jacobin's searching eyes roamed. He frowned, slowly took out a cigarette and sat down on the corner of a desk. "Was your father here alone this afternoon, Miss Sparling?"

"I—I suppose so. I left about one. Max was here. He's the cook. He was here then, but it—" She frowned vaguely.

"But it what?" Jacobin prompted.

"It may have been another one of those times," she finished. "For about two months father's been urging me—all of us—to get out of the house and leave him alone. He used to—to dislike being left alone, but lately . . . I don't know why," she ended.

"Did he urge you to leave this afternoon?"

"He seemed anxious to get us out, yes."

"Have you any idea why he—"

The door opened and Miffin poked his head in. "A guy named Max Berker's just come in the back door. Says he's the cook. Do you—"

"Send him in," Jacobin ordered, and turned back to Gay. "You have no idea why your father changed his mind recently about being left alone?"

"No, I haven't," the girl replied steadily.

Jacobin shifted his brown eyes to Herron. The blond man shook his head mutely. The door opened again and Miffin ushered in a blocky, swarthy-faced man in a heavy overcoat and tweed cap.

"So you're Max Berker, the cook." Jacobin glanced at his watch. "Dinner was going to be rather late tonight, wasn't it?"

"No later than sometimes. I came back when the Chief said. He said stay away till seven-thirty."

"You were Sparling's chauffeur in the old days, weren't you, Max?" Tim asked.

Berker's face twitched slightly. "Maybe I was."

"And you did ten years for manslaughter. Now you're a cook."

Berker's face twitched again. Gay and Clyde Herron looked at him fixedly. Jacobin cleared his throat.

"Your father was blind, wasn't he, Miss Sparling?" The girl nodded. "And did he have any diversions? Any hobbies or games?"

"He liked music. Clyde often played for him. He read a great deal—in braille."

"Did he play chess?"

Tim glanced at Herron's face. No sign of reaction or emotion disturbed the man's heavily handsome features. He was watching Gay.

"Yes," Gay answered evenly. "He played a great deal. Clyde played with him. Father tried to teach me, but—" She shrugged.

"Yes? But what?" Jacobin prompted.

"Chess was too complicated, so I didn't like it and didn't play. Dr. Vorhees gave father the chess set. He played with him."

"Where is the chess set usually kept?"

"On the table beside Father's bed."

"Always? When did you last see it there?"

"I don't—I guess—I think it was when I left at noon. I went downtown shopping. I think it was there." Tim smiled, then turned his back to the group and studied a small, gold-framed picture of Gay Sparling. He took out his handkerchief. When he returned it, the picture went with it.

"I—I'm not really sure the chess set was there at all," Gay said suddenly.

Jacobin leaned forward, his dark eyes glowing. "As a matter of fact, you *know* that chess set was—"

The door opened abruptly and Miffin thrust his face in. "Listen, Chief, there's something damn funny back here! Back in the kitchen! I just happened to find—"

"Funny?" Jacobin went out in quick long steps.

Herron swallowed heavily and fumbled for a cigarette. Gay twisted a handkerchief in her taut fingers. From the rear of the house came a muffled exclamation, a short silence, then Jacobin came back. He held a dishcloth in his hand.

"And what would this be, Max?" he snapped.

The swarthy man's eyes popped.

"Oh, my God!" Herron gasped. Gay Sparling started to scream, then silently crumpled to the floor. Tim's eyes were narrow and bleak.

Amid the folds of dishcloth in Jacobin's hand sat a brown and hairy head, about the size of a baseball. It was the head of a monkey, blood-stained, torn, mangled.

Only the head. No body. . . .

AT nine-thirty short, humpty-dumpty-shaped Dr. Vorhees padded down the curving stairway, entered the study, and closed the door.

"I've put her to sleep for tonight," he told Jacobin in his shy, lispy voice. "Shock. She should be normal by noon tomorrow."

"How long had you attended Emanuel Sparling?" the Inspector asked.

"Eighteen, twenty years. A great while."

"What caused his blindness?"

"In his earlier years, Mr. Sparling was what I would call a rather heavy drinker. In my opinion his whole trouble grew out of bad whiskey—poison whiskey of prohibition days. He'd been totally blind over ten years."

"Did the bad liquor cause his bum heart?" Tim injected.

"In my opinion, yes."

"Just how helpless was Sparling, Dr. Vorhees?" asked Jacobin.

"Oh, he was able to serve himself in bed; to read, smoke, use his telephone—such light tasks. Naturally he couldn't leave his bed."

"How positive are you of that?"

"Why—" Vorhees frowned. "Why, the actual fact is, he *has* left his bed—but always with disastrous result. In the last five years, I've been called here perhaps a dozen times. On each occasion Sparling had attempted to get about the house alone. Each time an attack had felled him. It has at times required my utmost resources to keep him alive. My utmost resources!"

"When was the last time he pulled a slip?" Tim wondered.

Vorhees frowned. "I would say—two months ago. Yes."

"Two months," Tim mused.

"How often did you visit Sparling?" asked Jacobin.

"ON Tuesday and Friday afternoons or mornings, usually. Today being Friday, I came as always. This morning he seemed quite normal."

"I suppose you know that he played chess," Jacobin said.

"I do. As a matter of fact, it was at my suggestion that he took up the game. Gave him something to do, you know."

"Do you play yourself?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed."

"Did you ever play with Sparling?"

"Quite often. But not lately, Inspector. Press of work, you know. It has kept me on the go."

Jacobin lit a cigarette. "What do you know about this pet monkey Sparling kept?"

"Zucco—?" A frown clouded the little physician's moonish face. "Rather despised the damn thing. Dirty and smelly. Constantly picking at my clothes, buttons, stealing my glasses and running off with them. I never—I couldn't understand why Sparling wanted the animal."

"Did it stay in Sparling's room?"

"Eternally!" Vorhees glanced at his watch, coughed tentatively, and tapped his fingers together.

"Okay," Jacobin decided. "You can go. Thanks."

"Quite welcome. This—this is really a horrible thing—the murder of a blind man!"

Jacobin waited until the front door closed, then he cursed softly. Tim Wall grinned.

The hall door opened and Miffin came in.

"That monkey's carcass just isn't around here—not in the house or around outside." He hesitated. "It's my idea, Chief, that the guy who cut up the monkey was aiming to take the head away, like he took the body, but something excited him and he left in a hurry. Maybe he didn't have time to pick up the head. You see, it had kind of rolled back behind a bread box on the drain board. It wasn't exactly in easy sight, if a guy was rattled."

"Did you find the chess set?"

"Nope. Nothing there, either."

Jacobin sighed and looked at Tim.

"I'm leaving this damn place for the night, if you want a ride downtown."

"N-no, I think I'll have a drink and walk awhile. Thanks." Tim went into the hall and shrugged into his long slicker.

"Stay here until I send somebody out," Jacobin told Miffin. "Lock all the inside doors you can find keys to. All the outside doors and windows. Nobody gets in, understand?"

The man nodded. Jacobin put on his hat and coat and opened the front door. The rain had turned to a steady, even pour. There was no wind at all. He and Tim walked out to the curb, where Jacobin's car was parked.

"It's damned strange—" the Inspector started vaguely, then stopped. "Well, you still don't want a ride?"

"I'm still walking," Tim nodded, rolled up his collar, and turned toward 80th Street.

He heard Jacobin's car start. He glanced back and watched it turn up toward Broadway. He waited a full minute, then went to the curb where the dark coupe had been parked. A taxi passed; another. Each time Tim studied the dark wet street. When a third car passed, he stepped out. He bent down. His fingers closed on the crushed and soggy butt of a half-smoked cigar.

In the murky light of the 79th subway station, he looked at the frayed band. The cigar was, or had been, an Havilla.

AT ELEVEN o'clock that night, Timothy Wall pressed the bell of Suite 89 in the Adrian Apartments. Presently footsteps approached and the door before him was opened.

"Yes?" a man inquired briefly.

"Mr. Arnold Bishop?"

"I'm Arnold Bishop. I don't believe I know—"

"We've met only once. My name's Tim Wall."

"Wall? I don't . . . Wall," the man repeated again, more slowly. Then he opened the door wider and stepped aside. "Come in."

Tim did. He walked into a small study-living room. The furniture was heavy and expensive. The rug was a good Oriental, but soiled. The antique desk was littered and dusty. In the thickness of the rug and long drapes there lingered the stale odors of tobacco smoke and unventilated heat. The room was hot and depressing.

"I seem to remember now," Arnold Bishop said slowly. "Aren't you the private investigator who handled a case for E. J. Sparling a few years ago? Blackmail, I seem to recall—"

"That's right." Tim unbuttoned his coat and faced Bishop. The man was spare-boned and large, his head bald and high-domed. His ears were quite small and close-set in his long head. His eyes, deepened and magnified by the thick-lensed glasses, seemed but black holes in his face. His mouth was thin and very wide. He wore a faded smoking jacket, and a thick cigar smoldered in his long, bony fingers.

Tim took out a cigarette.

"Are you still Sparling's lawyer?" he asked.

"I am. Why?" The measured voice was neither hostile nor warm.

"Who do you think killed him?"

Bishop's sparse brows shot up. "Killed him!"

"Killed," Tim repeated drily. "Murdered. You know what I'm talking about. You were parked down the street from his house this evening. I recognized your car; it's the same one you had when I met you before. You were in that car, watching the house, and smoking the same brand of cigar you've got in your hand now."

BISHOP looked at his cigar, glanced at Tim, frowning slightly, and stroked his pale cheek. Tim sat down and pushed back his hat. They studied each other in silence a few moments.

"In what capacity are you here, Wall?"

Tim grinned. "That's up to you. I've a feeling you're going to be looked at when Inspector Jacobin discovers that Sparling's lawyer is a fellow named Bishop."

"What's so significant about my name?"

"Well," said Tim idly, "it will be like this: Just for the records, Jacobin will wonder where you were this afternoon; and he might find out you were up around Riverside Drive and 80th. Then the Inspector might develop a hunch that you'd entered Sparling's house when Sparling was alone this afternoon—when he was murdered, also. And something tells me you did. Maybe you left fingerprints. Thereupon Jacobin might feel urged to look into your relations with Sparling. I don't think you'd like that. . . . All of this," Tim explained, "is because Sparling was holding a black chess bishop in his hands when he was found."

Arnold Bishop's breath sucked harshly. The cigar jerked in his fingers. He stared sharply at Tim.

"You didn't see that," Tim said drily.

"You—you're telling me that Sparling—you're trying to suggest that I—"

"I'm just drawing a picture; you can paint it to suit yourself. But Sparling was blind, remember. He was ill. He couldn't leave his bed. And he knew trouble was coming. He called me to come up immediately. The killer beat me to it. But Sparling knew who he was. When he identified the killer approaching his room, he resorted to the only weapon he had—revenge! He grabbed the black bishop from the chess set beside his bed and concealed it beneath the covers. He was murdered, but in death he identified his slayer."

"How very clever!" Bishop said icily. His limpid eyes roamed slowly from Tim to the littered desk. His feet shifted.

"I'd forget the gun in that drawer," Tim advised quietly. "I might have left word with someone—"

Deliberately Bishop removed the thick glasses and began to polish them against his cuff. At last he sat down.

"All right," he snapped. "What's your proposition?"

"Much better—much better!" Tim said. "I'm really doing you a big favor, if you're innocent. You're hiring me. Sparling had a job for me; he hasn't any more. I suppose you'd say I'm annoyed—I don't like to lose a fee, and I don't like to be made a fool."

"In simple terms, you're holding me up," Bishop corrected.

Tim shrugged. "I might be saving your crooked hide."

"How much is this—er—protection costing me?"

"A thousand dollars."

Bishop flushed darkly. He shoved himself from his chair, pawed through the litter on the desk, and found a pen and check book. A minute later he thrust the completed check at Tim.

"Now get out!" he said.

Tim blinked and lit a cigarette. "Do you play chess?" he asked.

"I never touched the damn game!"

"Did Sparling still do any business?"

"I don't know. Get out!"

Tim sighed and got up wearily. "We'll have another talk when you cool off," he said. As he moved toward the door, his eyes roamed carelessly over the room again. Just once they paused, just an instant, at the gold-headed walking stick that stood beside the front door.

He slipped the folded check into his wallet and walked out.

ON THE street below, he crossed to a small bar and cafe, took a table by the darkened front window, and ordered a whiskey. He drank slowly, watching the door of Bishop's apartment building.

Twenty minutes later he saw the walking stick again—clutched in the white-gloved hand of a rooster-like little man. The little man strutted from the building, jerked his cape about his small shoulders, and gestured imperatively at a waiting cab. The man bounced inside as the cab pulled to the curb. It left at once.

Tim threw a dollar on the table, strode out the door, and whistled sharply at a second cab.

"Keep your friend in sight," he ordered as he climbed in.

The little man's cab turned into Central Park, reached Broadway, and turned south. It stopped at last before the entrance of a nondescript hotel. Tim was thirty feet behind the little man when he strutted across the lobby to the desk. He saw the man get his key, number 714. The man entered an elevator and said, "Theven," to the operator. Tim waited five minutes. He looked at his watch. It was ten after midnight. He mashed out his cigarette and wandered toward the elevators. As he pressed the button, the door opened. Out rushed the little man, the walking stick clutched in one hand and a small leather bag gripped tightly in the other. Across the lobby he darted, his loose black cape rippling out behind him. He vanished at the front door. A moment later Tim heard his shrill but lisped command:

"Thaxi! Thaxi!"

"Up, please," the elevator operator reminded Tim.

"No, thanks." Tim was crossing the lobby as he saw the yellow back of a cab drawing away from the front curb. He saw the little man's bleak, birdlike profile in the shadow of the rear seat. A minute later Tim was hunched forward in another cab, his eyes fixed on the weaving taxi ahead.

The man's route led across town once more, then turned toward the business district. Down Fifth Avenue. On through the mid-town business section. At Twelfth Street, the man's cab turned right.

Tim frowned and leaned forward, curious.

The first cab crossed Sixth. A red light caught Tim's. Still he watched, not even breathing. He could trace the tail-lights ahead. He saw them shifting toward the curb; he could tell that the cab was stopping.

"Lord!" he whispered. He slipped a bill to the driver and climbed out. Swiftly he walked along the dark street. He was halfway down the block when he heard the shot—one shot. It crashed, and its echo tossed into silence against the dark brick buildings. Brittle stillness followed, and then someone yelled.

TIM started to run forward, checked himself, hesitated an instant, then went on slowly. Windows were slamming up. Swift feet hammered on the pavement. A door banged. Another.

"Eddie! Come here, Eddie!" someone shouted. "A guy's shot!"

Dark figures gathered on the sidewalk ahead. Tim rolled up his collar, pulled down his hat, and edged on.

"—just heard a gun! I ran out here, and that's all I know!"

Someone struck a match. Tim stood on tiptoe and peered over the shoulders. He saw the little man.

He lay near the steps leading into an apartment house. His hat was crushed beneath him. His flowing cape was beginning to bead with rain. Beyond one

outstretched hand lay the gold-headed walking stick. In the other hand, still tightly clutched, was the small leather bag. On the wet sidewalk lay a thickening dark stain. Blood.

A shrill whistle raked the air. Tim cursed. He cursed all the way back to a drug store, when he looked up the telephone number of Arnold Bishop, and dialed. The phone rang for three minutes. There was no answer.

He looked up the Sparling number and dialed. Presently the dry voice of a cop answered. Tim asked for Max Berker.

"The cook? He took a walk two hours ago," the cop said.

Tim cradled the receiver, and then dialed Clyde Herron's apartment. A girl's voice answered.

"Hello?" The tone was weary.

"Is Mr. Herron in?" Tim asked.

"Just a moment."

A few seconds later Herron's curt voice spoke: "Yes?"

Tim hung up, frowning. "So Gay isn't his only—" He looked up Vorhees' number and dialed. There was no answer. He left the drug store and signaled at a cab that started from its parking lot. It rolled on past him. It was occupied.

In the semi-darkness of its back seat, Tim recognized the face of swarthy Max Berker. The cab sped away.

Twenty minutes later Tim knocked at the door of a Brooklyn apartment. Again he knocked. At last padding feet answered. The door opened slightly.

"What is the—" a girl's sleepy voice started.

"Get up, Nonnie." He walked in and closed the door. "Get out the cards. I'll mix some drinks. We've been playing gin rummy for the last two hours, if anyone should ask."

"Well! What fun! Just a cozy little game of—"

"This is no game, honey. A man just got himself murdered. And he did it in front of my apartment house. Jacobin's bright enough to add that one up to look funny."

"Because you're in it," she said, frowning.

"In a way, I'm in it."

"Maybe you'd better sit down, Tim."

SHE glanced about the room, her eyes alert. She lowered the shades, opened a drawer and tossed him a deck of cards, moved two ash trays, then nodded slightly. She dashed into a second room and the door closed behind her. Tim shed his hat and coat, then went back to the little kitchenette.

He emptied one ice tray and melted the cubes down the sink. He left the empty tray on the drain, set up two glasses, got ice from a second tray, and mixed two drinks. Then he drank three jiggers of whiskey in quick succession, coughed, and rubbed his black hair abstractedly. He picked up the drinks and returned to the living room. Nonnie had dressed and was setting up a card table. Tim flipped open a score pad and filled two sheets with scores.

"What time did Sparling call the office?" he asked as he worked.

"Four o'clock." She raised her level grey eyes. "Is it something about him?"

"He was slugged to death before I got there at seven." Tim tossed the pad across the table and lit her cigarette. "What did he say on the telephone?"

"Only that he had to see you—talk to you—as soon as possible. That was all; no reason why—nothing."

Tim squinted at his drink. "Crazy!" he snapped suddenly. "The whole damn thing's crazy!"

"Do I get told?" Nonnie inquired.

"Suppose you tell me. If you slugged a blind man to death, why would you mangle his pet monkey and steal the body?"

"Why would I *what?*" she gasped.

"Somebody, maybe the killer, butchered Sparling's pet monkey and left the head in the kitchen. The monkey's body is missing. Also, if you were about to be killed, why would you grab the black bishop from a chess set and hide it under the covers?"

Nonnie looked at him patiently. "How much," she countered, "have you had to drink?"

"Don't be a fool!" he snapped. "Sparling was holding a black chess bishop when I found him. And furthermore, the chess set has gone the way of the monkey's torso. It ain't any more."

"SUPPOSE you let me get this straight. Sparling was slugged to death while he was hiding a bishop under the covers. A monkey's body and the chess set are missing. And what was this story about a man being murdered in front of your door?"

"That's somebody else. I wouldn't know who. He was having a quiet session with Arnold Bishop when I walked in—"

"Arnold Bishop?"

"Sparling's lawyer. He was parked down the street from Sparling's house when I got there; his car lights were off, but the motor was running. He faded when Miss Sparling and her fiancé, Clyde Herron, arrived in a taxi. We found the body. I called Jacobin, he fiddled awhile, and when the party broke up, I dropped in on Bishop."

"I begin to sense the Wall touch," she remarked. "Jacobin wasn't told about Bishop and the waiting game outside?"

"No, honey, he wasn't." Tim mashed out his cigarette, took another drink, and continued. "As I said, when I got to Bishop's, he had a caller: a little man, European-looking, with a walking stick and a flowing cape. The little man stayed in the other rooms while Bishop and I reached a temporary understanding. Then I—"

"What was the understanding?"

"That he needed me a thousand dollars' worth. At first he—"

"I think," she interrupted quietly, "I understand that, too." She looked at him a long moment. Then, very carefully, she put her cigarette out and folded her hands. "Sometimes," she said, "I wonder why I ever give a damn."

"About what?"

"You. I know exactly what happened. You spotted that chess bishop; you'd already seen Arnold Bishop parked outside. For some reason you decided he wasn't guilty of the murder, but you also knew he would be Jacobin's first guess if all the facts were known. You explained all that to Bishop in your innocent, sad way. He paid up."

"Certainly he paid up!" Tim said flatly. "Bishop's no fool, and he's no white lily. He knew I had him tagged; he knew he'd been in Sparling's house and seen the body, too. Maybe he's not the killer, but he's no choir boy either. He—"

"Did it ever occur to you to do things the normal way? Why didn't you simply tell Jacobin what you knew, and let the pol—"

"Then where would I have got a thousand dollars?" A restless light moved in his cold blue eyes. He clipped his words off in sharp, staccato succession.

"The thing is damned simple to me, Nonnie. Bishop killed Sparling, or he didn't. If he did, I'll prove it and turn him in. If he didn't, he'll damn well need help to prove it. That's me, and it's my thousand dollars for it. That's business. That's the way I make money. What difference does it make how it sounds?"

"You wouldn't be able to see."

"And when did murder get handled like an orchid corsage? When you've got murder, you've got dirt. This case is no snow-white exception. Sparling was no angel—look back at his record! And Bishop damn sure isn't. The thousand I'm taking from him came from the biggest-shot crooks in New York. Everybody knows—"

"So now Tim Wall gets *his* cut!"

NONNIE pushed back her chair savagely and stood up. She looked at him briefly, turned, walked around the room, looked at him again, then slowly came back to the table.

"You know, Tim," she said, "when it's a little things—when you're buying me a drink or telling me a joke, or when

you're lighting a cigarette—you seem like just an ordinary man; you do the little things just the way other people do them. But the minute something gets big, you always take the back-alley cut. You're always playing a double angle. You—"

"Keep going," he said icily.

"I—I wish that—that just once, on something big, you'd act human and honest and—and, well, honest," she stammered. "I wish I—" She stopped, blinked, then slowly pushed her fingers through her soft black hair. "I don't know why I give a damn."

He said quietly, "You've said it before, and it didn't get you anywhere. I work *my* way, and my way gets results. I never hurt anybody that wasn't due to get it. I'm not crying about myself,

Someone struck a match. Tim saw the little man. He lay near the steps, his hat crushed beneath him

and I'm not asking anybody else to. And," he added, "I never had a secretary who couldn't quit."

"Oh!" The room turned very still. Just as she started to speak, a board creaked in the hall. Another. Solid, spaced steps came near. A knock came at the door.

"You can still quit," he told her softly. Then he crossed the room and opened the door. "Well, hello, Jacobin!" he said.

"Hello, Tim," came the slow, quiet greeting. The olive-skinned, slender Inspector came into the room, closed the door, nodded to Nonnie, then looked at Tim again. "Playing cards?"

Tim nodded and smiled. "And you?"

Jacobin didn't smile. "How long has he been here, Miss Carr?"

Tim watched Nonnie's fingers. They lay against her sides. Once they started to close, stopped, then very slowly loosened again.

"We've been playing cards for two hours," she said.

JACOBIN sighed. He picked up the score pad and tossed it down. He glanced at the ash trays, at the glasses.

"Let's go for a little walk, Tim," he said. Silently Tim put on his slicker and picked up his limp felt hat. He opened the door for Jacobin. The Inspector looked a last time at Nonnie, shook his head in weary resignation, and walked into the hall. Tim met Nonnie's sober eyes.

He smiled slightly. She didn't respond. He closed the door.

"Where are we walking?" Tim asked when they reached the street.

Jacobin didn't answer. Silently he got into his car. Tim shrugged and got in beside him. Jacobin drove north and turned up Broadway. He parked at the entrance of the nondescript hotel the strutting little man had visited.

"Send out the boy named Louis Jospell," he ordered the doorman. The man entered the lobby. Presently he returned, with the boy who had been operating the elevator. Jacobin snapped on the car's ceiling light.

"What about it, Louis?" he asked.

The boy studied Tim's face intently, then nodded anxiously to Jacobin.

"Yes, sir. I'm sure, sir," he said.

Jacobin turned off the light and shifted the gears. The car moved slowly away. For a minute no word was spoken. Then Jacobin scratched a match and lit a cigarette.

"I saw you leave Arnold Bishop's," he said patiently. "I checked the cab you used from there to that hotel. So—?"

"So Nonnie and I must have had a floating game. What else?"

"I lost you at the hotel. When I tried your apartment house, guess what I found."

"I wouldn't know. What did you find?"

"You know damn well what I found!" Jacobin exploded. "I found a corpse named Felix Tervanzi. And I found a little leather bag full of diamonds. But I didn't find you."

"Diamonds!" Tim mused. "Tervanzi had them?" Jacobin did not speak. "And you say he was killed in front of my place?"

"But he lived in that little hotel back there. The Marsham," Jacobin bit out. Tim glanced at the man's taut face, studied it, then smiled.

Jacobin parked before headquarters and they went to his office. There a detective whom Tim remembered as Porter was waiting.

"I checked on Tervanzi," Porter said. "He's a European refugee who entered this country three months ago. He's been living at the Marsham. Came from Hungary. He was a servant, a sort of valet, to somebody. And," Porter pointed his words, "the Customs records don't show any diamonds."

"Thanks," Jacobin said. The man nodded and left.

JACOBIN sat down at his desk and nodded Tim to a chair. He said,

"Tim, neither of us is a fool. I'm not going to yell murderer at you. I don't think you killed Tervanzi. But I think you know who did. I think you know *why* he was killed, which is more important, I believe. You know a lot about the Sparling case you haven't spilled; the Arnold Bishop angle. Where Tervanzi fits, for example. Now—" He paused a moment. "I said I wasn't drilling you for murder. But I'll damn sure tag you on a charge of complicity if you try to short-circuit me. Is that clear?"

"Quite."

"Who killed Tervanzi?"

"I don't know."

"Why was he coming to see you?"

"I don't know."

Jacobin's eyes hardened. At that moment the door opened and a rain-soaked cop came in, followed by Porter. In the cop's hand was a newspaper-wrapped bundle.

"This is Lee," Porter introduced him. "He covers a beat along Riverside Drive, from 76th to 72nd."

"Yes?" Jacobin lifted his brows.

Lee ambled forward, laid the rain-wet bundle on the desk, and backed away. "I found this stuff in a clump of hedges in the park," he explained. "A lady said her dog was growling funny—"

Jacobin split the paper. He leaned forward with a sharp jerk. A slow breath eased past Tim's lips.

There lay the Queens, the Pawns, the Rooks. There lay all the delicately carved black and white pieces of a chess set. All but the black bishop.

And there, muddy, gory, and brown, lay the headless body of a small monkey. The body had been hacked and slashed to bits. . . .

AT FOUR in the morning, Jacobin rubbed his stubbled chin and sighed. "So there just aren't any fingerprints on the chess pieces!" he rasped. "Sparling's or anybody else's! There's nothing about the monkey's body to give any proof! We haven't got anywhere!"

"Did you ever decide what was used to slug Sparling?"

Jacobin nodded. "Yeah. A heavy bronze Buddha that was used as a doorstop. We found a trace of Sparling's blood on the base, but the killer cleaned his prints there, too."

"And the death room is covered with everybody's prints, I suppose: Bishop's, Vorhees', Max's, Gay's, Herron's. And mine."

"Yeah. And the stuff on the bed-table carries the prints of Sparling, Gay Sparling, and Dr. Vorhees."

"Hm," Tim mused. "Vorhees said he visited Sparling the day before the killing. If the pitcher and glass weren't cleaned and polished in the interval, that might merely mean that Vorhees poured Sparling a drink."

"Max says they weren't cleaned," Jacobin agreed drily. "The rest of the stuff carried only Sparling's prints; the match-books, the cigarette pack, the telephone, the bell—"

"You know, of course," Tim said, "that something is still missing? The chess board that—" Suddenly he stopped, his mouth half forming an unspoken word. His blue eyes narrowed as he looked at Jacobin.

"Where is the stuff you found on that table?" he asked softly.

Jacobin unlocked a drawer and lifted out a tray. There was the invalid's bell, the cigarette pack and match-books, the pitcher and the glass. "I left the telephone," he said ironically.

"Didn't you leave something else?"

Jacobin frowned at the tray, then at Tim. Tim mashed out his cigarette and stood up.

"The killer made one mistake, I think. And damned if he didn't correct it while you chased me around town!"

"What mistake, Wall?" Jacobin asked gently.

"There was a thermometer in a glass case on that table. You haven't got it there."

Jacobin blinked. "I don't remember any thermometer!"

"I do." Tim walked restlessly around the office. "Well, it's gone! Why? You tell me. And maybe," he said suddenly, "you can tell me what the heck a blind man wanted with a thermometer, anyway!"

"He had others take his temperature, I sup—" Then Jacobin stopped abruptly. Tim grinned at his blank face.

"Yeah," he supplied. "Why did Sparling, with heart trouble, have a thermometer? Or did he have fever?"

"I think I'll get Dr. Vorhees out of bed and ask—"

"Put down that telephone!" Tim snapped. He thought quickly back to the telephone calls he had made after Tervanzi's death. "Let's go see Clyde Herron," he said.

THE grey-eyed, blond-haired man opened the door in a faded red bathrobe and blinked thickly. "Uh—Oh."

"Sorry." Jacobin and Tim Wall walked in and closed the door.

"What's the matter? What time is—"

"We just want to ask some questions, Herron."

"Questions?" The man sat down, scratched his rumpled hair, then fumbled a cigarette from a small cannister. Tim looked at the room. It was well furnished, on the modernistic side. One end was given over to a piano, a music stand, a radio-phonograph, a record cabinet, and a violin case. That end of the room was shabbier, dustier, and more littered. It looked more lived-in.

"How long had you known Emanuel Sparling?" Jacobin asked.

"About two years."

"How did you get acquainted?"

"I played a concert in the Metropolitan Hall about two years ago. I'm a violinist; a member of the Metropolitan Symphony, also. Anyway, after the concert, a dinner was given for me at Lucian's. Gay—Miss Sparling—was there. I met her. We made an engagement for the next night. After a week or so, I visited at the house. There I met her father."

"Have you been there often?"

"Why—why, of course! We—Gay Sparling and I have been engaged for seven months. I've been there frequently for dinner, to spend the evening. Sometimes I've gone to play for Mr. Sparling. He rather enjoyed my violin," the man added.

"So you knew him pretty well?"

"Yes."

"You knew that he'd been the de luxe fence for an international jewel-theft ring?"

"I'd heard—stories." Herron fixed his lips primly. "What he was made no difference in my feelings toward his daughter."

"Okay," Jacobin sighed. "Now do some remembering. Do you know if Sparling ever had a fever—say, in the last two months?"

Herron's eyes froze on the Inspector's face.

"Well—*do* you?" Jacobin snapped.

"BUT it—it was so insane!" Herron cried. "It *was* two months ago that it began! Every time I was there he shoved that damned thermometer at me!" Herron jabbed out his cigarette and moved nervously about the room. "I never understood it, and he'd never explain it. And he was always so—so violent when I told him his temperature. He never—"

"Did he ever have a fever?" Tim interrupted.

"No. That was the peculiar thing. He never had a fraction of a degree. I suppose I've visited him a dozen times in the last two months, and every time—"

"Were you two, you and Sparling, alone those times?" Tim broke in.

"Why—" Herron stopped. He blinked at Tim and frowned. "Why, yes. It was rather curious. He would ask me to visit him on certain afternoons, ask me to bring my violin or come to play chess. When I'd arrive, the house would be completely deserted except for me and Sparling. He was always rather vague about where people were."

"And," continued Tim, "you say Sparling reacted violently when you told him his temperature?"

"He became furious. It was just as though he—he actually wanted to have a fever! He would lie back against the pillow, panting and cursing and . . . I believe he *wanted* a fever!"

Tim rubbed his nose gently and wandered about the room. He stopped before a small table. There on the small tapestry cover lay a very small paper sack. Beside it lay a slip of paper: the cash-register receipt of a purchase.

"I believe you told us you met Miss Sparling for cocktails yesterday afternoon," Jacobin was saying.

Tim lit a cigarette and put the match in an ash tray on the table. He lifted the sales slip:

W&R VARIETY STORE
Mar. 8, 43
Dept. 3. 00.10
00.15
00.25
SE8945

"March 8th—yesterday," Tim mused. He crumpled the slip into his pocket and turned idly.

"—met for cocktails at the Penguin Room," Herron was saying. "That was a little after four. Before that I practiced all afternoon."

"Where?"

"Here. Here in this room."

"By the way," said Tim, "did you ever take Sparling's temperature in the presence of others?"

"No. We were always alone. Almost always the house was empty."

Jacobin pursed his lips. "Would you say Sparling was in any way a hypochondriac; obsessed about his health?"

"No. That was the strange contradiction. He was so wild about the matter of his temperature lately, and yet he risked his life many times to slip from his bed—Lord only knows for what reason. No," Herron said, "he was brutal, suspicious, and ill-tempered; but he wasn't a hypochondriac. I—I des—" He stopped.

Tim smiled faintly. "You started to say, I despised him."

Herron flushed. "Yes, I suppose I did. He wasn't human. The way he treated G—Miss Sparling, I—"

"Would you have killed him, Herron?" Tim asked.

"There were times when I wanted to," came the even reply.

Tim smiled again. He mashed out his cigarette and blinked sleepily about the room. "Just off the record, Herron, do you often have late visitors? Of the opposite sex?" he asked.

The blond man seemed to congeal into a block of stubborn flesh and bone. His face became peculiarly pale.

"No," he said flatly.

Jacobin asked impatiently, "Where were you at twelve-thirty tonight?"

"Skip it," Tim injected. "Let's go." He opened the door. The Inspector frowned, then shrugged and stepped out.

"DRIVE me home," Tim said when they reached the street. He closed his eyes and leaned back in the seat. He yawned and said, "A mangled monkey—a hidden black bishop—the cock-eyed story of a stolen thermometer— They add to what?"

"I had Miffin searching everybody who left the damned house!" Jacobin snarled. "Maybe he'll know who was carrying—"

"I doubt it. Anyway, Vorhees had his bag with him. He could have walked out with a dozen thermometers and never been picked." Tim yawned again. "We were having a talk, remember?"

"I remember."

"I'll spread some cards. I'm on Arnold Bishop's payroll."

"Since when, Tim?"

"Since after the murder. Around about eleven o'clock."

"What gave you the idea to—"

"I'll pick the cards, Jake," Tim interrupted gently. "And you won't get

cheated. Bishop is tangled in somewhere; I can swear to that. Whether he knocked Sparling off, I don't know now. If he did and I prove it, I'll dump him in your lap with everything I find. But until I do, I'm taking his money."

"You wouldn't," said Jacobin, "rig up a white-wash for him?"

"Have I ever?" Tim snapped. Jacobin shook his head.

Tim rubbed his eyes sleepily. "I might have something on the Tervanzi job by tomorrow, or I might not. I'll let you know. And you—" He looked at Jacobin. "At the time Tervanzi was killed, three men weren't at home; Bishop, Vorhees, and Max Berker. You might find out where they were."

"But you know Herron was home?"

"Yes. And I think that tomorrow would be a good time for Gay Sparling to overcome her nerves and start talking. I'd like to listen."

Jacobin stopped before Tim's apartment building. A faint hint of dawn was in the skies. The rain was gone. The sidewalk, where earlier had lain the body, was strangely bare.

"All right, Tim," Jacobin said finally. "I'll play just that far. You give on Bishop and Tervanzi, all you know when you know it. I'll see you tomorrow. But remember—no wash-outs; no private blow-up; nothing phony or cute."

"You and Nonnie must have had beautiful childhoods," Tim muttered and got out.

TEN minutes later Tim stretched himself wearily in bed, settled the ash tray beside him, snapped out the light, and lit a cigarette. He smoked slowly. His cold blue eyes watched the greyness at the window. The grey turned to a muddy white. He lit another cigarette. At seven o'clock he murmured, "Just maybe—" and went to sleep.

At ten he stirred restlessly and opened his eyes. He sniffed experimentally.

"Good morning, Wall." Arnold Bishop put down his cigar, shifted himself in Tim's chair, and took off his thick glasses. He began to polish them casually.

Tim watched him awhile. The man's long, colorless face was urbane and serene. His black eyes looked naked and flat without the glasses. He completed the polishing, returned the glasses to his nose, and considered Tim at leisure. Now, behind the thick lenses, his eyes were large and bottomless.

"I have been reflecting upon our rather abrupt conversation of last evening, Tim. I am afraid I seemed unappreciative of your offer."

"You were all right."

"Also, I have been pondering, since reading the morning paper—and chatting with an Inspector Jacobin," he added genially. "It may be that I have information that will throw some light on this tragic affair."

"Information that Jacobin did or didn't get?"

"Did not," Bishop said with a smile. "I felt that whatever I knew would be more—more skilfully employed in your hands. I have often found that the mind of one man surpasses the mass-mind of an organization. You follow me?"

"Gladly." Tim punched up his pillow, lit a cigarette, and rubbed his chin vigorously. "Tell me."

"The facts are," Bishop began promptly, "that Sparling did not become completely inactive in business when his illness and blindness occurred. Naturally he was forced to retire from so energetic a program as he once followed. But when the occasion presented itself, he still made an attractive sale or purchase. In the last six years, I know that he has done so at least a dozen times."

"Then he made the deals at his house?"

"In a way. You must understand how international Sparling's reputation was; it didn't cease when his Eastern Diamond Company closed. So whenever someone wished to make a deal that was too large or too delicate for ordinary channels, they appealed to Sparling, even though he was ill and blind."

"How did he know whether he was buying good jewels or glass?" Tim grinned at Bishop. "You helped him; but you could have been bought. His old appraisers could have helped him—but *they* could have been bought. There wasn't a soul on earth he trusted. When I quizzed him on blackmail in 1939, he told me the world was filled with thieves and fools. He suggested that you were one of the former."

Bishop smiled. "Sparling—an interesting character, Tim." He seemed to smile again at some whimsical recollection, then shook his mind back to facts. "He worked this way, and I use an example. You will recall the visit of Count Diversti and his wife to this country in 1940. A rather exclusive ball was given for them in Washington. Unfortunately, an attaché of a certain diplomatic corp was rather pressed on his debts. Likewise, he was a guest at the Diversti ball. Well"—Bishop gestured—"the short of it was, Diversti's wife was quietly slugged by an unidentified guest and relieved of her necklace and rings."

"Then the attaché visited Sparling?"

"Certainly. You can imagine the delicacy of the situation. The attaché went at once to Sparling. Sparling accepted the goods. He did not then pay the man. He waited until—"

"NOW I begin to see," Tim nodded. "Sparling used his devious alleys to become the middle-dealer. He kept stolen jewelry until the word was sent around. The proper buyers were steered to him; they inspected the stuff and bought at his price if they wanted to. Then Sparling kept his cut and paid off—to the attaché, this time."

"That was the program," Bishop agreed. "At times I was able to send him a suitable client, or at least to investigate the background of any questionable individuals."

"All right—that answers the question, Was Sparling doing business? Now what else? You said you'd been pondering—"

Bishop stroked his glistening bald head thoughtfully. At last he said, "You understand, I would deeply regret doing injustice to one who is actually innocent. What I am about to say is motivated purely by the desire to see—"

"Sure," said Tim sourly. "Now tell it."

"Well, this morning I found that Inspector Jacobin held me in disfavor. I might say, he suspects me of the murder. I did not do it." The man paused, then leaned forward. "I am absolutely convinced that one of three people killed Sparling."

"And those three?" Tim asked gently.

"Max Berker, Gay Sparling, or Clyde Herron."

A twinkle woke in Tim's blue eyes. "What gets that answer?"

"Sparling kept a fortune in stones secreted in that house. Some he was holding to pass on. Others represented a large part of his fortune which he had converted from cash to hedge against inflation. I have no idea where they are kept in the house. The three people I named are those most likely to know."

"And you say one of them killed him and robbed him?"

"I DO. Berker is capable of it; he killed a man once before. I was able to get him a manslaughter sentence. Sparling trusted him more than anyone else, but even Sparling might have been wrong. Herron—" Bishop rubbed his face in distaste.

Tim nodded thoughtfully. "And Gay Sparling?"

"I know this much: Sparling was rather brutal to her, as he was to everyone. He gave her very little money; I have had to make arrangements for certain of her debts which her father refused to pay. I think she hated him. I think she longed for him to die."

"Well," said Tim, "you've given me the motive and the killers. Much better than last night." He got out of bed and began to dress. "Oh—did you ever take Sparkling's temperature?"

"So you've heard about that!" Bishop looked at Tim flatly. "Yes, I have. Almost every time I was there, he insisted on it. He never had a fraction of fever."

"Who watched you take the temperature?"

"Why—no one. We were always alone."

"When did Sparling develop this peculiar habit?"

"It must have begun about—say, two months ago. Yes."

"How did Sparling react when you told him the results?"

"He was furious! It was damn peculiar. I—I often had the feeling that Sparling would have given a thousand dollars to have had even a degree of fever." Bishop shrugged. "Damn peculiar!"

"Yeah," Tim murmured. For a moment he stood still, staring absently down at his bare feet. "You know," he mused. "I don't think Sparling was worried about fever at all."

"No? Then why did he—?"

"I wonder! Too bad I missed Tervanzi. I think he might have known."

"Tervanzi?" Bishop raised his brows.

"A little guy with a walking stick. Last night somebody killed him."

"Too bad."

"Yeah. And I think I know who did."

AT eleven-thirty Inspector Jacobin walked into the cafe where Tim was finishing breakfast. Tim folded the morning newspaper away and gestured to the other empty chair. He said, "I saw Bishop this morning. He said he'd talked to you. Where did he say he was at twelve-thirty last night?"

"At twelve-thirty he was on his way to meet Gay Sparling at a little cafe-bar called Vito's on East 46th."

"He was *what?*" Tim exploded.

"Yeah. Furthermore, Gay Sparling *was* at Vito's from about eleven o'clock last night until around twelve-twenty. The bartender seems to know her well; says she came in, got a table at the back, drank a string of cocktails alone, used the telephone about midnight, had another cocktail, then suddenly beat it. The bartender says she was nervous."

"Damn! I thought you'd staked a man at the Sparling—"

"I did. Jefferies stayed there all night. Gay Sparling slipped out; Jefferies doesn't know when. And that's not all! The girl can't be found now."

"Did she leave Vito's with Bishop?"

"No. The bartender also knows Bishop; says he and Miss Sparling have been there often together. Bishop arrived about twenty minutes after the girl left—about one."

"Did Gay leave any message for Bishop? Any hint as to where she was going?"

"No. The bartender says she just seemed to crack. He noticed, he says, because she'd never drunk much before. Last night she was tossing 'em like water. He said she started to the telephone half a dozen times before she finally put the call through. After that she was so nervous she couldn't sit at the table. She had two drinks at the bar, then suddenly scrammed. Left her bill."

Tim stared at his empty coffee cup a few moments, then he began to curse, softly and methodically. "That breakdown of hers was a fake, plain and simple! She knows damn well who knocked her dad off. Or she—" He crushed out his cigarette and sighed rawly. "All right; what about Vorhees and Max Berker?"

"Mr. Berker," Jacobin said sarcastically, "felt the call of the open spaces last night. He took a long walk through Riverside Park; he was gone from ten-thirty till almost two. No, he didn't see a soul who could identify him. Yes, he just wanted to walk!"

"And Vorhees?"

"Dr. Vorhees was the hell and gone up in the Bronx, attending a patient. He dug up a small army of witnesses this morning to prove it. He's simply astounded that I should wonder. . . . He was devoted to Sparling. Words fail him. He chokes to think about it. And," Jacobin added wryly, "there's a ther-

mometer and case in his little bag. He can't imagine where it came from, because he knows it wasn't in there yesterday morning."

"INNOCENCE rears its well-planned head, huh? Well, Bishop told me Sparling was still doing business now and then. He said there were jewels in the house, hidden somewhere, Jake. If I were you, I'd send out a man to take the place apart. And I'd try like the devil to find Gay Sparling."

"Certainly, Mr. Wall!" Jacobin drawled coldly. "Like to give any other orders?"

"You might find out what happened two months ago. That's when the thermometer first began showing up; that's when Sparling began wanting to be left alone with certain visitors; and that's when—"

"I've investigated all that!" Jacobin said acidly. "Sparling had an attack on the afternoon of January 6th, almost exactly two months ago. On the morning of the 6th, he sent Berker to Boston, Gay to Harrisburg, and Bishop to Pittsburgh, on business. Each of these people was ordered to call him long-distance from those cities. They did. I've got the telephone records. On that same day, Clyde Herron was making a guest appearance in St. Louis, and he was out there a week."

"And Vorhees?"

"Sparling ordered Vorhees to come to the house at exactly five that afternoon; the order was placed at noon. Vorhees arrived at five, opened the door, and found Sparling unconscious on the floor of the lower hall."

TIM started to speak, then shut his mouth abruptly. He drained his coffee cup thoughtfully. "By the way, did you have those diamonds appraised—those Tervanzi was lugging?"

Jacobin peered at Tim strangely. "I— Why?"

"They're fakes, aren't they?"

"And how did *you* know?"

"Just a hunch. But it damn sure clears the air."

"Maybe you'd like to tell me," Jacobin growled.

"Maybe I'll be in your office in two hours, too."

Twenty minutes later Tim entered Dr. Vorhees' office. The little man peered up, smiled brightly, and extended his hand. "Mr. Wall, I believe. Sit down, sit down!"

"It won't take that long. I want you to do a little remembering. Two months ago, on January 6th, you walked into Sparling's house and found him unconscious on the floor of the lower hall. He had called you at noon and asked you to arrive at five. Right?"

"Why, yes. Precisely. I told the Inspector all that."

"All right. Now, when you found the man, was there anything unusual about him? Any detail, any article about him—"

"Detail? Article?" Vorhees blinked. "No. I'm sure I don't recall—" He stopped, then suddenly reached into a drawer and took out a loose-leaf book. He flipped to a page and read.

"Peculiar! I'd quite forgotten," he mused. "That odor—"

"Odor?"

"I have a notation in Sparling's case-file here pertaining to that particular afternoon. I recall now, I detected a rather unusual odor about Sparling when I found him. Quite a strong odor, too. I couldn't quite identify it."

"You never identified it?" Tim snapped. The doctor shook his head. Tim cursed silently. "All right. Now: before January 6th, when was Sparling's last attack?"

"On December 23rd," Vorhees reported from the book. "On the afternoon of December 23rd, Max Berker returned from town and found Sparling alone and lying unconscious in the lower hall. This occasion, I might add, was his most narrow escape. A severe attack."

Suddenly Tim's eyes narrowed and lighted. "December 23rd to January

6th—that's not much time between trips. And didn't you say that Sparling had made only about a dozen escapes from bed in the last five years?"

"Yes, I did say that."

"Could he have slipped out and back without your knowledge?"

"In his condition, no," came the emphatic answer.

"Was there ever before such a short time between trips?"

"No. Usually there was a six months' interval."

"Before December 23rd, when did he slip out?"

"On—on July 18th, 1942."

"When was he found? By whom?"

"He was found on the floor of his own room at six-thirty that evening by Gay Sparling."

"By Gay Sparling. And on the floor of his room. That's a different location from the lower hall, isn't it?" he asked softly.

Vorhees blinked again. "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. What did you think about Sparling's obsession regarding his temperature?"

"Absolutely insane. I told him so."

"One thing more: Were you alone with Sparling often—say, in the last two months?"

Vorhees peered at Tim curiously. "Rather interesting, that question. To tell the truth, the house was almost always empty when I made my visits; I often had the feeling that Sparling had gone to deliberate pains to get everyone away so that we might visit alone—though there was nothing intimate or secret we had to say," he added quickly.

Tim nodded with finality and settled his hat.

"You've been a great help, Dr. Vorhees," he said and went out.

In a cigar store, he dialed Clyde Herron's number. There was no answer. He left the store and caught a cab. He gave Herron's address. Half an hour later he left the blond man's apartment and locked the door with his pass-key. From there he walked the half block to the W&R Variety Store and went to the manager's office.

"GREETINGS," said Tim, an hour later as he closed the door of Jacobin's office behind him. "What turned up at the Sparling mansion?"

"Not a damn thing! I've had four men combing the place for hours. They don't find any hidden jewels. Furthermore, the whole jewel angle in this mess is cockeyed. Theft of jewels wasn't the motive for Sparling's murder; a thief could have stolen a blind man dry and planted glass for a substitute. The thief wouldn't have had to pull murder. So I say the killing was plain hate for Sparling; he had a horde of enemies. His own house was thick with hate. And the killing of Tervanzi was—"

"Where's Gay Sparling?" Tim interrupted.

"I wouldn't know," Jacobin snapped back. "Do you?"

"Well, not now. She spent part of the night at Clyde Herron's. She was there a little before one last night; she was also there when we visited him."

The telephone rang. Jacobin answered.

"Hello. Yes, speaking . . . What? . . . Where? . . . Is there much in there?" A voice rattled through the wire. "And then you what?" Jacobin rasped. "I'll be out! Don't touch a damn thing!" He slammed down the receiver and shoved back his chair.

"They've busted into a hidden closet under the stairway out there! Pederson says the place is filthy with jewelry!" He jerked his hat from the rack and bolted for the door.

"Take a picture before you move anything," Tim advised. The door slammed behind Jacobin. Tim lit a cigarette and toyed with the dead match a moment. He began to tap the desk with a blunt fingernail. Abruptly he rose and crossed the room to Porter's desk.

"Jacobin asked me to tell you: Try and get Max Berker, bring him to Arnold Bishop's apartment, suite 89,

Adrian Apartments. Soon as possible."

HE WALKED out, caught a cab, and gave his office address. When he opened the ante-room door and stepped inside, Nonnie glanced up, started to speak, then set her lips.

"Still mad?" Tim grinned.

"I'm not the emotional type," she said frigidly.

"Then you're still mad." He crossed the room to the steel filing cabinet, unlocked the top drawer, took out a shoulder-case and strapped it on, then slipped a German Luger inside.

Nonnie watched him silently, unblinking. Tim closed the drawer and grinned at her.

"Something tells me the Sparling case is going into the ninth inning, hon. I'll be back when—"

"Shall I ask Miss Sparling to wait?"

"What?" Tim said sharply.

"Miss Sparling wishes to see you. She came at twelve. Said she'd be back later."

"What did she want? Where did she go?"

"I would not know. She seemed nervous. She stayed only a moment. She said it was most important—that she knew something about a thermometer."

"Keep her here when she comes back. Don't let her leave. I'll be back as soon as I can make it."

He hesitated, frowned uncertainly, then hurried out, grabbing a cab to Bishop's place.

He left the automatic elevator and moved to the door of Arnold Bishop's apartment. He took out his ring of keys and fitted one, then another. On the third effort, the bolt moved. He stepped silently into the darkened, unventilated room. He locked the door behind him.

"Maybe," said a testy voice, "you'd better stand right there."

Tim blinked. Gradually, in the dim room, a crouched figure became distinct. A gun in its hand became clear. Tim stood quite still.

"You're early, Maxie," he said quietly.

The swarthy-faced man stopped in his slow sneak across the rug. His thick lips parted. He blinked.

"Don't get disappointed," Tim advised. "I telephoned him ten minutes ago. He's on his way here now."

"Somebody I know, maybe?"

"You're waiting for Arnold Bishop." Tim gestured slightly to Max's gun. "How about letting that rest?"

"What would you do?"

"Take a look through this apartment. Maybe I'd find something you missed."

"You won't find a damn thing."

"I'm still curious." Tim studied the man's face carefully, looked at the gun and the hand, then moved with slow deliberation toward the littered desk.

METHODICALLY he dug through each of the six drawers. Each time he studied Max's face, Max's eyes, as he opened another drawer. Nothing in the man's stolid, half-curious stare changed. Finally Tim rose. Max shifted his feet and glanced at the mantel-clock.

"Don't worry about me," Tim advised. "I'm not going to break up your little party."

"You've got a lot of guesses."

"I'm not guessing, Berker." Tim took out his pack of cigarettes and lit one.

"What did he do with the gun, Max?"

"Gun—?" Max blinked roundly.

"The gun he used to kill Tervanzi. You were following him last night."

"Last night? I was walking in the park."

Tim smiled faintly. "You'd better change that story in time to hang Bishop. Because," he added, "you're the next choice."

Max licked his lips. He started to speak. From outside the door came the sound of the automatic elevator opening. Max froze one instant, then melted into a quiet glide.

"You keep still," he whispered to Tim. He drew himself back into a dim corner of the room. A foot scraped on the floor outside. A key tickled the lock. The door opened, admitting an angle of

brighter light from the hall. The tall, gaunt figure of Arnold Bishop came in. The door closed and clicked. Bishop snapped on the light and started across the room. He stopped abruptly.

"Hello," Tim said, then gestured toward Max. "Another friend of yours."

Bishop's dark eyes deepened behind their thick glasses. They jerked toward the corner.

"What do *you* want?" he rasped.

Max shot a hard glance at Tim.

THE two men before Tim were strangely quiet and stiff. Bishop's dark eyes kept staring at the gun. Max kept fingering his coat with his free hand. Suddenly Tim laughed sourly.

"It's rather embarrassing to kill a man before an audience, isn't it, Max." He turned to Bishop. "Where's the gun that used to be in this desk?"

Both men glanced at him sharply, then stared at each other again. Tim leaned forward.

"I'm going to make you a proposition, Max. You came here to kill Bishop. You want to kill him because you tailed him last night; you saw him shoot Felix Tervanzi; you knew he was middle-dealing on a diamond deal between Tervanzi and Sparling. Maybe you're killing him to keep from getting framed. Maybe you've figured out a profit angle for yourself, too. Anyway—" He hunched forward again.

"I mentioned a proposition. Now, would it be smart for a guy with your record to kill Bishop with that gun? Are you sure it can't be traced? Are you sure you've a good alibi for where you are right now?" Tim paused, then wagged a finger. "Now suppose I took my gun out of my pocket and handed it to you—it's registered to me. Suppose you killed Bishop with *my* gun. Suppose, when things break, I say I nailed Bishop—it's all in a day's work. And in return, you play your profit-deal if you wish, and you spill the proof against Bishop. The case is solved; you're clean on murder; and you make your gravy too. How does it sound to you, Max?"

The man flicked his eyes slightly, then wet his lips as he stared at the tense, silent Arnold Bishop.

"Maybe—maybe you'd change your mind, Wall," Max said.

"Or maybe I wouldn't; that's a chance you'll have to take. Because," Tim said gently, "I've also got a proposition for Bishop. This is a sort of—er—auction." He smiled slightly, then looked at Bishop's taut, averted profile.

"I know that you're the killer, Bishop. I can swear you were around the Sparling house the afternoon of the murder; you can't laugh off that black bishop Sparling was holding. Furthermore, I know you were acquainted with Felix Tervanzi. He was here when I visited you last night; he overheard our conversation, became convinced you'd killed Sparling and also feared you were leaving him in the middle. He beat it to his hotel, got the phony diamonds, and went to my place to do his confessing. You picked him off at the front door. You had just enough time to work it in before you went to Vito's to meet Gay Sparling. I can prove all that because—" Tim leaned forward once more "—because I went to Tervanzi's hotel with him. I talked with him there. And I sent him on to my place to wait for me."

"You—you're a damned liar!" Bishop said hoarsely.

"Maybe," Tim admitted. "As I told Max, that's a chance you'll have to take. But about my proposition. Berker hasn't a good alibi for the time when Tervanzi was killed. With a little oil, he could be greased for the slide. Furthermore, he might have killed Sparling and robbed him. His record certainly won't help him look innocent. So—how much is it worth to you, Bishop, for Berker to lose his marbles?"

"Fi—five thousand dollars!" he said thickly.

"Five thousand dollars!" Tim turned the words on his tongue. He looked at Berker. "What do you bid, Maxie?"

"Nobody—nobody's going to frame me! I know damn well he killed that Tervanzi guy! I know where he unloaded his gun! I know about the switch on the diamonds that—"

"Seven thousand dollars!" Bishop said hoarsely. "He can't pay—pay that! He can't prove I killed—"

"I think he can," Tim interrupted. "And it's a funny thing, but damned if I'm not feeling almost honorable today. I think I—I think I'll just slip you my gun, Max."

"Wait, listen! Listen! I'll—I'll make it ten grand! I'll fix it so you . . . *Fifteen!*" Bishop cried wildly.

"You understand, Max," Tim continued calmly. "You take my gun; you leave your gun on the corner of this desk. You kill Bishop and get out. I'll tell the story my way. I killed him when he wouldn't come in the easy way. That's the deal you're taking. Or I'll take Bishop's fifteen-grand offer. And," he added pointedly, "don't get any extra ideas. Don't try—"

The swarthy little man's head nodded almost imperceptibly. With agonizing deliberation Tim reached inside his coat. Slowly he took out his gun. He laid it very carefully on the far corner of the desk.

"Trade, Max," he said.

The man sidestepped softly. His left hand closed on Tim's Luger. He balanced it testingly, slipped the safety, then slowly laid his own gun aside.

Max moved three steps to the center of the room.

Bishop strangled on a thick breath. "Don't—don't let him kill—kill me!" He stumbled backward, his face contorting, his lips shaking. "I killed—I killed Tervanzi! I'll tell the story. I never killed Sparling. He—*Max* did that. He knows he killed Sp—"

"So you killed Tervanzi, and Max knows he killed Sparling!" Tim laughed softly and opened the palm of his right hand.

"Something's missing, Maxie."

In Tim's hand lay the clip of the Luger. Tim lifted Max's gun and levelled it on the man.

"You—you damn—"

Tim stood up. He circled the desk and moved toward Berker. The little man retreated until his shoulders found the wall. He stopped, and Tim stopped.

"Now we're all going to do a little remembering," Tim told them tartly. "You can sit down there, Bishop; stay there. You can answer my questions, Berker." He waited. The gaunt lawyer sank down in a leather chair. Berker blinked furiously.

"Now, Berker—did you kill Sparling?"

"No. I—No!"

"Did you know Sparling had a secret jewel compartment hidden under the stairway?"

"A—no. I never knew a damn thing about that."

"And you don't play chess?"

"Hell, no!"

"Where were you on the afternoon of July 18th, 1942? That, in case you don't remember, was the afternoon Sparling had a heart attack."

"If that was the day, then I was in Jersey City. Every time Sparling ever had a heart attack, I've been out of town. He always sent me. I can prove I was away," he added sourly.

"So you've been out of town every time Sparling's had an attack!" Tim said with slow deliberation. Then he looked at Max sharply. "Who found Sparling that day?"

"Miss Sparling told me she did."

"Okay. Now—about two months ago Sparling had another attack. Can you remember anything peculiar that happened just before that attack?"

"What do you mean, peculiar?"

"Did Sparling send you on any unusual errand? Did anything extraordinary happen around the house? Anything to cause suspicion?"

"Hell, I don't know everything that goes on around—" The man stopped and his face narrowed in recollection. "Maybe, now that you mention it, there was something about two months ago."

"And that?"

"A lot of canned stuff and groceries got knocked down in my kitchen closet. Nobody ever admitted they were fooling around in there. I finally figured it was the damned little monkey."

"Did Sparling know where you kept certain supplies in that closet?"

"I guess so. He used to cook himself enough steaks in that kitchen before he went blind."

"Was anything missing from the supplies?"

"I wouldn't know. Not much anyway, I guess."

Tim looked at him closely, frowned, then retreated to the desk. He sat down on the corner and balanced the gun in his hand.

"Now, Bishop: What about Tervanzi? What was that racket?"

"I thought you'd talked with him." The gaunt lawyer was regaining his composure. His eyes were feverish.

"What," drawled Tim, "if I gave Maxie a *loaded* gun?"

BISHOP SET his lips and swallowed. "I— I was approached by Tervanzi about three months ago. He said he'd managed to slip some valuable diamonds through Customs. He needed the money; and the jewels were hot. He wanted me to contact Sparling and get an offer. I— I realized his position was not favorable for bargaining. I took his diamonds and replaced them with fakes. I held the fakes a few days, then called Tervanzi back. I told him Sparling didn't want any part of the deal. I gave him the fakes and he went away. Then I took the real diamonds to Sparling and had him market them for me."

"Then Tervanzi got wise," Tim supplied. "He came back to see you, and you told him to go to hell; you told him about the Customs rules. You had him neatly nailed. Then what?"

"He said he was going directly to Sparling with the story. Of course I was not anxious for Sparling to know what had happened, inasmuch as he was then holding my good diamonds and I had not yet received any money on them. I knew he would be quite capable of—"

"Of thieving from a thief," Tim grinned. "Go on."

"I stalled Tervanzi—told him the mistake would be corrected. I tried to rush Sparling into paying me, and he promised payment for yesterday morning. I went by. When I got there, Tervanzi had already visited him, so Sparling knew the whole story. He refused to pay me. I was—naturally I was sore. It was a forty-thousand-dollar deal. I came back here and thought."

"Sure. Then you got your gun and went to Sparling's for a showdown. You found him dead. You heard a noise, didn't you," Tim filled out. "You were afraid to investigate. But you waited in your car outside to identify whoever might come out of the house. You were busy thinking of blackmail. How am I guessing?"

"Splendidly!" came the frigid answer.

"AND finally, when people showed up at Sparling's, you left," Tim went on. "When you got here, Tervanzi dropped in. He still wanted his diamonds or a cut. You left him in the other room when you talked to me. But he heard enough about Sparling and murder and Bishop to decide the game was over his head and all out of control. When he left here, he picked up the fakes at his hotel and tried to reach me to make a clean story. You detained him—permanently. Then you hurried on to keep your appointment with Gay Sparling at Vito's."

The lawyer moved his tongue over the tips of his teeth. He said nothing. Tim looked at Max.

"What tipped *you* on Bishop, Max?"

"I was at the house yesterday morning when the little guy came by and spilled his story. When he left, Sparling called me and said there was maybe going to be a little trouble with

Bishop. So when Sparling turns up murdered, I remember. As soon as I could shake the cops out there last night, I came by here. It was just when Bishop was catching a cab. I followed him to the Village. He parked himself in a service-alley and put a slug in Tervanzi when he showed up. He tossed the gun in a garbage can and got another cab to Vito's."

"And that gun?"

"It's checked in a lock box at Pennsylvania Station." Berker took a key from his pocket and flipped it to Tim.

Tim put the key in his pocket and stood up. He crossed the room, opened the door, and gestured. He waited as Berker and Bishop filed slowly past him. He closed the door and rang for the automatic elevator.

Twenty minutes later Tim opened the heavy door of the Sparling mansion and gestured the two men into the hall. The study door opened and Jacobin peered out.

"My contribution," Tim said. "Bishop is the gent who killed Tervanzi, and Berker is the man to prove it. The gun's in the Pennsylvania Station." He handed over the key.

"What about Sparling?" Jacobin asked.

"What about the secret jewel compartment?" Tim countered.

The Inspector called Miffin out of the study and nodded to Bishop. Tim put away his gun and followed Jacobin past the base of the curving stairway and to the narrow, dark-paneled section at the rear.

"This," he said, turning a candle-shaped wall-light to the right, "releases the bolt on this—" He pressed his hand, palm-flat, against one paneled section. It swung inward, revealing a small dark closet, ranged on all sides with shelves. Jacobin struck a match. On the shelves sat small, closed trays. Tim lifted the lid of one carefully.

WITHIN, row on row, rested single stones. All in that box were diamonds. He closed the lid and took out his own matches.

One after another he struck, and with slow deliberation inspected each shelf and each tray. Finally he inspected the interior of the hinged panel. There was a small knob.

"Things haven't been messed?"

"They have not," Jacobin snapped.

"All the trays full?"

"Yes."

"I'll make you a little bet they aren't all full of good stuff."

"Did Bishop tell you that?"

"My eyes told me that." Tim turned and placed his fingers on two trays, side by side on the top shelf. "You'll find fakes in these."

"And just how do—"

"And this little knob—" Tim interrupted curiously. "Turn it."

Jacobin hesitated, his eyes narrowing, then gripped the knob and turned it sharply. "And that told you something, too?" he asked sarcastically.

"Maybe. Let's use the phone." Tim went out in the hall and crossed to the extension on the table. "Anybody upstairs?"

"Murphy." Jacobin's voice was faintly hostile.

"Murphy!" Tim called. A cop poked his head over the upper banister. "Go into Sparling's bedroom, dial some number—just any number—and then hang up."

The cop blinked, started to speak, then shrugged and went away. Thirty seconds passed, then came one single clear *ting* from the telephone box beside Tim. Another few seconds passed, then the same single bell note came again. One note; one instant's contact of the hammer and the bell. Thereafter came the footsteps of Murphy, returning along the upper hall. Tim turned to Jacobin.

"You said Sparling was killed with a doorstop. Which door did it come from?"

"The first on the left, at the head of the stairs."

"On the way to Sparling's room from down here?"

TIM LIT a cigarette, rolled the dead match thoughtfully between his fingers, then looked at Jacobin. "Yesterday afternoon Sparling entertained a single guest in this house. That guest was a thief. At some time prior to four o'clock, when Sparling called my office, the 'guest' raided the jewel compartment. Unknown to him, he snapped the trap Sparling had set.

"Sparling, knowing the identity of the thief, called me. Unfortunately he called too soon. The thief was still in this lower hall. He heard the single note of the telephone, lifted this receiver, heard Sparling give the message to my secretary, and realized something had slipped. Whereupon the thief went up the stairs, picking up the doorstop on the way, and slugged Sparling to death.

"Sparling, in his last moments, identified the thief's approaching steps and realized he was going to be killed. He frantically snatched the black bishop from the bedside chess set. That bishop was meant to identify his murderer."

"How did Sparling, a blind man, know that his jewels were being stolen? All the trays are full. Blind, he couldn't tell jewels from glass."

"Remember the two trays I pointed out? I said they would contain fakes, planted by the thief to deceive Sparling. I know because those are the two, and the only two, trays which are not fitted precisely along two tiny notches on the shelves. If you'll go look again, you'll see that every other tray has its edges fitted exactly to small notches in the shelf it sits on. Sparling knew, *by sense of touch*, which of his jewel trays had been disturbed."

"I suppose," Jacobin snapped, "that Sparling hustled out of bed and trailed the thief downstairs yesterday, then slipped back to bed and called you. Tricky—for a blind man!"

"No, Inspector. Better than that. Sparling merely asked the guest to take his temperature." Tim smiled faintly. Jacobin blinked, owl-eyed.

"Smell your own hand!" Tim snapped.

Jacobin automatically looked at his hands, hesitated as he peered curiously at Tim, then moved one palm to his nostrils.

"What's so funny about the smell of my—" he started. He stopped. An expression of brittle surprise crossed his features. He smelled again, more deeply. He frowned. Tim smiled and said:

"You figure it out. You might get a hint from Max's kitchen closet. I'll be back in an hour."

TIM OPENED the door of his office and closed it behind him. Across the room, Gay Sparling half rose from a chair. Her eyes were shadowed and dark; her mouth was weary and drawn. She swallowed as she started to speak. Tim shook his head and motioned her back to the chair. He glanced toward Nonnie.

"Go to Grillman Brother's and buy a cheap chess set and board. On your way, telephone Dr. Vorhees and Clyde Herron; tell them to get out to the Sparling house and wait for me. When you've got the chess set, go out there yourself. Oh, yes . . . Tell Herron to take his violin with him. And tell Vorhees to bring his bag. *With* thermometers!" He winked at her. She rose, shook the folds from her skirt, put on her coat, and walked out. Tim lit a cigarette for Gay Sparling and one for himself. He settled himself on the edge of the desk and smiled quietly.

"I believe you want to tell me who murdered your father."

"I—yes. I mean, I think I—"

"Suppose you just tell me and don't think."

"It is—was Dr. Vorhees. I saw him going into the room—"

"Into your father's room?"

Gay nodded. "It was when he was giving me the hypo last night after the —the monkey. We were in my room. He thought I wasn't conscious. I saw him tiptoe to the bathroom door and listen. Then he went into the bathroom and listened at the other door that led into father's room. He—"

"The bathroom connects the two rooms?"

She nodded.

"Yes. He listened until he heard the policemen leave father's room and go downstairs. Then he slipped in. When he came back, he had something in his hand. He put it in his bag."

"And that something?"

"A glass case and thermometer," she answered slowly.

"Thank you, Miss Sparling. What else did Vorhees do?"

"Why, he—he just wiped his hands on his handkerchief and listened. He looked to see if my eyes were open. I played asleep. That was all."

"That was all!" Tim smiled at her again and leaned forward to mash out his cigarette. "I had figured you for more brains, Miss Sparling," he commented.

"What—what do you mean?" she asked sharply.

He took from his pocket the small photograph of her. "I borrowed this," he apologized. "You told us that you'd been shopping on the afternoon of the murder. Right?"

"I—" She stopped. She sat very still.

"I visited the stores you mentioned," he said. "It seems that you didn't shop." He paused. "What did you do?"

"I—but I did go to town! I wasn't —I sold two bracelets! I pawned them in a place on Sixth Avenue!" she confessed.

"Where did you get the bracelets?"

"I—Clyde gave them to me. I didn't want him to know. I needed— Father wouldn't give me any money. I had to have—"

Tim laughed shortly and tossed the photographs aside. "We're both liars, Gay. I haven't visited any stores."

"Oh. *Oh!*" she repeated.

"I didn't need to," he continued calmly. "Because I know you were lying last night—faking a passout. It's taken you this long to get a twobit story cooked up. By the way, who advised you to come to me and tell your story?"

"Clyde. But I'm not—"

"It was damn poor psychology, Gay. Or maybe you didn't tell him that you murdered your father?"

"But I—I didn't! I was downtown on Sixth Aven—"

"SUPPOSE we skip that and think about something else. For instance, remember an evening when you came home and found your father unconscious? The date was July 18th, last year."

"I—I remember."

"You said that you found him on the floor of his room, when you went upstairs. Is that right?"

"Yes, yes, that's where I found him," she agreed nervously.

"But isn't it strange, Miss Sparling, that never before or since that time was your father able to climb the stairs after leaving his bed?" He paused a moment. "What gave him such phenomenal strength on the evening of July 18th?"

"I—I don't know what you mean," she faltered.

"I think you do. I'll explain what you already know. On July 18th your father had his house to himself. He slipped from bed, went downstairs, entered his secret jewel compartment—to add or withdraw or merely check on the contents. A heart attack felled him while he was in that compartment. You came home and found him there. In so discovering him, you likewise discovered the location of his jewel hoard. So what did you do?"

Tim's gray-blue eyes narrowed sharply. "You dragged your father, unconscious, up the stairs and into his room. Then you summoned help. You told him, when he revived, that he'd been found in his room. You told him nothing of discovering his secret. Then, in the ensuing months, you raided that secret compartment, stealing good jewels and replacing them with fakes. Right?"

"No! No, I swear I— I *didn't* find him downstairs. I didn't know there was any jewel com—"

"You're lying, Gay Sparling! From July 18th till December 23rd, you stole from the jewel closet. On December 23rd your father made his usual semi-annual checkup on the closet. He discovered that the position of the trays—two of them—had been changed. He then knew that someone had been entering his closet. He knew what the one purpose had to be—theft! That discovery was a terrific shock to him. Vorhees states that the December 23rd attack was the most severe one Sparling had."

"But I swear I—I—" The girl's face was drawn and white; in the depths of her eyes a brittle shadowlight was beginning to play.

"SO," TIM continued with deliberate precision, "your father lay in bed from December 24th till January 5th, thinking; planning a trap to catch the thief—a trap that a blind invalid could set. On January 6th, his plan was formed. He emptied the house, and made a date with Vorhees to arrive at five, pretty sure he would have an attack. Then your father got out of bed, went downstairs and set the trap in the jewel closet. And he passed out. Vorhees found him. That was two months ago. Ever since then your father has waited—waited and offered the bait! Yesterday, broke and desperate, you bit. You stole, and the trap was automatically sprung. You realized that when you heard your father call my office. You killed him, hurried to sell the stolen goods, and then met Herron for cocktails.

"Last night you became terrified. You thought of appealing to Bishop for help. You changed your mind and ran to Herron. You told him only half-stories. He advised you to come to—"

"No, no, no!" she sobbed. "I haven't—I didn't kill! I—"

"You are the person who found your father in his jewel closet on July 18th! That is the only important date in this whole case. That is when this case actually began. The killer of your father came into this house on the evening of July 18th and found him in his closet. And who found him? You have admitted that *you* found him. You are the murderer of—"

"Oh, I can't stand it! It isn't true! I—" The girl suddenly strangled. Her face was deathly white. Her lips stayed parted. For a still, frozen instant she stared at Tim, and then her eyes seemed suddenly to glaze. Her throat corded.

"No! Oh, dear heaven, no!" she cried. And fainted.

Tim looked at her without moving. Then he stood up and sighed. He left the girl where she lay, and he locked the office door behind him. He caught a cab for Emanuel Sparling's house.

He lit a cigarette. His fingers strayed to his pocket. Idly he took out a plain spool of common black cotton thread. He turned it absently in his fingers. He almost smiled.

"Funny—such a little thing. And yet so big. . . ."

"THIS is the last time I'll bother you with Sparling's murder," Tim said. "Fortunately, or unfortunately, the case is solved. All of you have been, at one time or another, inconvenienced or suspected; I think, therefore, that all of you have a right to the explanation." He looked at them, sitting in a semi-circle before him in Emanuel Sparling's study. Dr. Vorhees, urbane and quiet; Bishop, flushed and white at the same time; Max Berker, stolid and suspicious; Clyde Herron, nervous and fretful. Miffin was there too, and two cops stood placidly on each side of the door. Beside Tim at the desk sat Jacobin, impatient, scowling.

"I am sorry that Miss Sparling cannot be present," Tim added. "I regret to say that she is—indisposed." He turned to Nonnie, behind him, and took a brown-wrapped package from her hand. Slowly he loosened the cord and opened the inner box. Out tumbled the pawns, the rooks and Queens and Kings;

all the pieces of a chess set. He looked up at the intent faces before him.

"Max, you say you don't play chess?"

"I don't!" Max growled.

"But just for experience, come up here and arrange these chess men. Just any way that looks good to you."

Berker rose jerkily and crossed the rug. He moved the men about jerkily, without any pattern.

Tim looked at Vorhees. "And you do play chess, Doctor?"

"I do," came the quiet answer.

"Please correct the placing of the men."

The doctor quickly rearranged the chess pieces in position to begin a game. He nodded at his finished task, then returned to his chair. Tim, in one easy sweep, destroyed the pattern, scattering the men over the board. Then he looked at Bishop.

"You said you did not play chess?"

"I don't. Never have," Bishop said bluntly.

"Arrange the men—any way you like."

The lawyer moved to the desk, and grouped the men—as Berker had—with no pretense at system. He sat down. Tim looked at Herron.

"Will you correct the pieces to start a game, please?"

The blond man rose jerkily and, arranging the pieces for a contest, sat down. Tim nodded absently, then destroyed the positions with a sweep of his hand.

"And now," he said apologetically, "let's do it all over."

"Hell!" Jacobin growled. Tim's face stayed bland. The entire process was repeated. When it was done, he smiled.

"I just wanted to be sure," he said. He looked at Herron. "You brought your violin?"

"I did. Yes."

"I wonder if you'll play for us—just a few minutes."

"Listen, Wall! You're making a ridiculous—"

"I'm explaining a murder, Inspector," Tim interrupted. "As I said, I'm sorry Miss Sparling is not here. She could make my task much simpler. However—" He nodded again to Herron. The man frowned, started to speak, then sighed and moved to his violin.

"What am I to play?" he asked testily.

TIM TOOK a crumpled paper from his pocket and leaned back. "Just a little of Brahms' Hungarian Dance Number 1."

Herron tightened and resined the bow. He began to play.

"That's enough," Tim interrupted. "Now, the Hungarian Dance Number 6."

Again Herron started. Almost immediately Tim stopped him.

"Now play Kreisler's Liebesleid."

"I don't play the Liebesleid. I—" He stopped, looked at Tim squarely a long moment, then said apologetically, "I mean I don't care for it."

"Okay, that's all. Sit down." Slowly Herron replaced the violin in the case and returned to his chair. Tim lit a cigarette and took a deep breath.

"Yesterday, at four in the afternoon," he began, "Emanuel Sparling called my office and asked that I come to see him at once. So at four o'clock Sparling knew he needed a private detective. When I arrived, around seven, Sparling was dead — murdered. Examination showed that he had been dead since about four o'clock. In other words, Sparling was murdered almost immediately after he called me.

"Two odd details showed up. First, Sparling was found clutching the black bishop from a vanished chess set. The bishop was concealed beneath the covers, indicating that Sparling had grasped and hidden it in his last moments. And second, Sparling's pet monkey, Zucco, was mangled. Its head was discovered in the kitchen, its body was found—with the vanished chess set—in Riverside Park, under some bushes."

Tim leaned forward. "I know this much: The killer was playing chess with

Sparling yesterday afternoon. Sparling grasped and hid the bishop in an attempt to identify the man who was coming to kill him. And the monkey was slaughtered by the killer because the monkey possessed evidence that would have proved the killer had been in this house during the murder time."

"What could have proved—" Jacobin started sharply.

"Let me finish." Tim tapped his cigarette gently. "Now I am going to tell a story; the story of a blind man's trap to catch a thief; a trap that worked. And backfired.

"On last July 18th, Sparling emptied this house and then left his bed. He descended the stairs, entered his hidden jewel closet in the lower hall, and inspected his store of jewels. While in that closet, a heart attack felled him. When Gay Sparling returned home the evening of the 18th, she found him. She says she found him on the floor of his upstairs bedroom. And there is the base of the lie, for Sparling was not found in his bedroom. Never, on any occasion, had he been able to summon strength to remount the stairs. Always he had passed out downstairs. It is fantastic to suppose that he possessed any phenomenal power on July 18th. But to continue:

"SPARLING was told that he'd been found in his bedroom. It was not until almost six months later, on December 23rd, that he made another trip to his jewel compartment. He immediately discovered that someone had been stealing from his closet. We know he made this discovery then because he waited only long enough to plan a trap before he returned. He waited only from December 23rd until January 6th to return to the closet and set his trap. If anything had been missing on July 18th, Sparling certainly would not have waited six months to return. So we can safely assume that the closet was discovered by the thief on July 18th; and that Sparling learned of the discovery on December 23rd. And I can prove that Sparling set his trap on January 6th."

"And just what *is* this blind-man's trap?" Jacobin asked testily.

"I'm going upstairs," Tim said. "I'm going to bed in Sparling's room. If you wish," he said to Jacobin, "you can come with me. I want each of you—Vorhees, Bishop, Berker, and Herron—to enter the jewel closet at the rear end of the hall. Go alone, one at a time, then come upstairs and into Sparling's bedroom, just as the killer did yesterday. You," he said to the cops, "will see that, while one goes, the others stay here. You, Miffin, bring each one up, then bring him back here and do the same with the others. That's all . . . Oh—I want your thermometer, Dr. Vorhees. And I'll take this chess set with me."

He gathered up the chess men, the board, and took the doctor's thermometer. He nodded to Jacobin.

No word was spoken as they climbed the stairs and went down the hall to Sparling's bedroom. Within, Tim set up the chess board and pieces on the dead man's table, and placed the thermometer beside them. Then, with a grin at Jacobin, he kicked off his shoes and slipped under the top cover.

"Now," he snapped at the sour-faced Inspector, "watch!"

FROM THE hall came the sound of dual footsteps. Then Miffin appeared. He stopped at the threshold, and Bishop came on in. The gaunt lawyer was granite-faced and stiff.

"Well?" he said.

"You're already nailed for one murder, so you're no bargain, Bishop. Anyway," Tim admitted, "if you'd killed Sparling, you wouldn't have had to kill the monkey. You didn't do it. Get out."

The lawyer's face darkened. He turned and stalked out. Tim called after him, "Don't let them talk down there, Miffin!"

Jacobin glanced at Tim speculatively when they were alone. Tim did nothing.

Presently footsteps came again. Berker entered and plodded stolidly to the bed.

"You're not hanging anything on me, Wall."

"I wouldn't even try, Maxie. Do you usually keep garlic in the kitchen?"

"Gar—? Sure. Garlic. Plenty!" Max blinked.

"Take him back, Miffin," Tim ordered.

"Sensational!" Jacobin said sarcastically.

Again footsteps came. Dr. Vorhees.

"Why did you steal Sparling's thermometer out of here last night?" Tim asked quietly.

Vorhees' smile died away, leaving his face pasty and lax. A thick swallow corded the throat.

"I—I remembered . . . But I didn't—I didn't kill him!" the man stammered.

"What did you remember?"

"What—what Sparling told me once, the first time he had me use that thermometer. I remembered, and then I realized—"

"What did Sparling tell you, Vorhees?"

"He said, 'The last man who uses this damn thing is going to be in a hell of a lot of trouble.' That—that's what he said; that's *all* he said. But then when I found he was murdered, I remembered, and I remembered I'd taken his temperature on my visit yesterday morning. I realized there must be some connection, though it was so insane, between the thermometer and Sparling's prophecy. I stole it. You see, I thought about fingerprints. I did nothing else, I swear!"

"I just wondered," Tim said. "I know damn well you didn't kill Sparling. I know because, Vorhees, you wouldn't have had to kill the monkey. The murder of the monkey fits only one necessity: destruction of proof that the killer was here before Sparling died. You admit you were. Get out."

A minute later Miffin returned with Clyde Herron. The blond musician stopped at the side of the bed. He wet his lips and waited.

Tim said, "Yesterday afternoon you were practicing at your apartment; then you met Gay Sparling after four, had cocktails, and came home with her."

Clyde Herron nodded.

"Arrange the chess men to start a game, Herron."

THE ABRUPT order made Herron jerk. He stared at the chess board, wet his lips again, then hurriedly rearranged the men.

Tim said, "Now, suppose I'm blind. Take my temperature."

Herron slowly picked up the thermometer, slipped it into Tim's mouth, and stepped back. A taut minute passed, then Herron removed the thermometer and replaced it on table. Tim looked at him idly.

"I smelled garlic on your hand when you placed the thermometer in my mouth."

Herron didn't answer. A beading of sweat sprinkled his forehead.

"I notice," Tim continued, "that when you arrange chess men for a game, you always place the white men in front of you. That might indicate," he mused, "that your opponent usually used the black men. It might," he continued more slowly, "even explain why your fingerprints were *not* on the chess piece that Sparling blindly and desperately grasped yesterday. Because Sparling grasped a black bishop. You were handling the whites. He meant to get *your* prints! His blindness prevented him—"

"You—you're insane!" Herron cried. "I was—I was practicing yesterday! I—my neighbors can prove I was prac—"

"I've visited your place, Herron. Your neighbors *did* hear violin music during yesterday afternoon. In fact, they were able to tell me the titles of some of the selections. One of those selections was Kreisler's Liebesleid. *You* said you didn't play the Liebesleid."

"But—no! I sometimes—perhaps I—"

"But I did find a recording of the Liebesleid in your room. I found it stacked with eleven other violin solo records. The twelve records were free

of dust, proving they had been played quite recently. All were records that the neighbors heard yesterday. And your automatic record player is still set at slow-and-return! You came here prepared for trouble! I bet every visit you've paid Sparling has been padded with a record alibi!"

"YOU—you're mad!" Herron cried huskily. "I was in my apartment all afternoon—until after four, when I went to meet Gay—"

"You're a liar! You played chess with Sparling yesterday. You were alone with him. You raided the jewel closet and got the garlic scent from the knob onto your hand. When you came upstairs, Sparling had you take his temperature. He detected the scent of the garlic he'd planted. When he thought you'd gone, he called me. You were in the lower hall. You heard his message and killed him."

"I—damn you, I didn't—"

"You *have* to be the killer! No one else would have had to kill the monkey. Gay lives here; she didn't need to destroy traces of her presence. Bishop was here yesterday morning; he didn't have to hide his visit. Or Max—he works here. Vorhees was here and admitted it; he had nothing to conceal. Only you! You had been here, and you didn't want it known! The monkey held proof—so you killed the monkey!"

"What proof could the monkey—"

"A button, Herron. Such as the kind on your suit: large and thick. The monkey pulled one off and tried to swallow it. It got the button stuck in its throat. You knew if the monkey died, the button would probably be discovered and the time of your visit here would be revealed. So, after killing Sparling, you butchered the monkey and got your button back. Bishop came and you had to scram for it. And you forgot the monkey's head."

"You're mad! Look! Do you see any missing button? Look at my suit! They are all on! You can't prove—"

"Did you ever see this?" Tim opened his hand. He was holding out a spool of black thread and a small packet of needles.

Tim said incisively, "These were bought from the W&R Variety Store. The sales slip was in your room. The serial shows that the sale was made around four-thirty yesterday. And I took the liberty of borrowing these from your dresser drawer. The matched thread on one of your buttons is going to burn you. And just six inches is gone from this spool—just about enough for one button." He smiled grimly. "I think it's going to fit, Herron."

Herron stood very still. His fair skin was ashen now. The beads of perspiration on his forehead became thick drops of sweat. They gathered in rivulets and began to slip, to pause, and then to slide down his cheeks. And Herron cracked.

His fingers clenched at nothing. His eyes flared wildly and lanced about the room. Then he leaped for the door.

JACOBIN shouted and kicked back his chair. Miffin braced himself. His ham-like fist knotted, poised itself, then flashed out. There was a sodden, flesh-and-bone crack. Clyde Herron's body twisted to the floor, rocked, and settled. A thin film of blood began to trickle across his pale lips.

Jacobin looked at Herron's still figure a moment, then looked at Tim. Tim smiled.

"On that July 18th evening," he explained, "Herron was with Gay when they came in. Gay must have gone straight to the kitchen to prepare her father's tray. Herron discovered the unconscious figure, *and* the closet. He carried Sparling upstairs. That's where Gay did find him."

"She told you that? She talked on Herron?"

"In a way." Tim got out of bed and lit a cigarette. He lifted the black bishop and turned it idly, then put it away. "Kind of ironic, catching Herron on that song. You know, Liebesleid means Love Sorrow."

The Long Shot Kid

Georgie Fee reached, hung on as Chip beat at his hand with the shotted bat

By Ben Peter Freeman

WITH CHIP UP, Heart's Desire did not stumble. Chip took her one lap of the half-mile practice track at an easy gallop, and then he shook her out. "Now we go, baby," he crooned, and rose higher in the stirrups and unwrapped the pretty filly.

Heart's Desire wanted to go and Chip let her breeze, keeping her in hand, alert for her tendency to stumble. The filly ate the track joyously, bolting like a flowing chestnut ribbon, her rich light tail fanning a line behind her. Nary a stumble! Chip James was showing one of his rare slow smiles as they flashed past the last post and he began wrapping her in.

"You're a lot of sweet horse, baby," Chip chuckled, and petted the filly as he turned her. The pretty chestnut arched her glossy neck and nickered, and they came back that way, Chip James and Heart's Desire, both of them happy.

A stable boy took the filly's head, and

Chip slid to the ground and faced Harry Primrose, owner of Heart's Desire and the well known Primose Stables.

"See?" Chip said. "She can be cured of stumbling, but she needs careful handling. I'd go easy if I were you. Not run her till next year."

Primrose grunted, eyeing the loose, lean-hard young rider speculatively. Primrose was handsome in a swarthy way, early middle-aged. He was just over middle height, but he loomed almost a head taller than the tanned and sun-bleached Chip James.

"You like that filly, don't you?" he asked.

Chip's bony face showed its usual dead-pan expression, but his slaty eyes gleamed briefly. "Uh-huh," he admitted. "I wouldn't race her though. I'd breed and build up from her."

Primrose shrugged his expensively tailored shoulders impatiently. "She's bred to run, and she stands me over ten thousand already. So she'll race and win, or—" Primrose checked and went on more easily "—or I'll sell her to you."

Chip's smile was very thin indeed. "I haven't the kind of money to buy a filly out of Desire by War Heart," he said. "If I had, I wouldn't be riding the half-mile tracks and breaking your colts, Mr. Primrose."

"You can have the money by the end of next summer," Primrose said. "Five thousand, and I'll hold the filly for you."

Chip chewed gum, drawled, "You could just as well say fifty thousand, mister. I don't ride on the Big Apple."

"You ought to, though," Primrose pointed out, and was suddenly brisk. "I offered you a chance before to ride for me. You're a crackerjack jockey, and why in thunder you insist on burying yourself on those piker tracks and making peanuts, when you could be grabbing real sugar and having a swell time—"

"Do we have to go into that again?" Chip interrupted mildly. "Say I like the little tracks. I'm a country boy, see?"

"Nuts!" Harry Primrose snorted. "Everybody wants big money and a high time. Don't give me that!"

CHIP SUPPOSED Primrose believed that. Primrose was the typical big city plunger, throwing his money into expensive breeding farms and stables, and getting a kick out of seeing his name in the papers and his colors on the big tracks.

Primrose looked baffled, but only the more determined when Chip shrugged.

"Look here," he demanded. "You told me the one thing you want in the world is your own breeding farm, and maybe building up your own racing string. That right?"

Chip nodded and half sighed, because he was a long long way from that dream.

"How do you expect to get it by sticking on the cheap little tracks and breaking colts?" Primrose challenged.

"Well," Chip began, "I've got me a couple of acres now, and an option on some more. Maybe in a few years—"

"You're talking nonsense and you know it," Primrose cut in. "You need more land than you can ever afford, and buildings. You need high-priced mares. Hell, the way you're going, you'll be ten years before you can buy a mare, and another ten before you get your first foal!"

A small flush tinged Chip James' tanned, bony face. Most of that was painfully true. Not altogether. A man could build up the long way. It would take time of course, and you had to keep curbing your impatience and keep digging—

"You know I'm right," Primrose pressed. "And here I am offering you a chance to get started in a year. You can have Heart's Desire then, and maybe twenty thousand dollars to get your farm going." He added hastily, as Chip's slate-colored eyes narrowed suspiciously: "And you get it *honestly*."

He laid his arm along Chip's reluctant shoulders and steered him toward the big white house on the knoll above the

barns. "Come along and have breakfast," he urged.

Chip didn't like Primrose's arm. He didn't know why he didn't care much for Harry Primrose; except maybe he was always a little contemptuous of a man who wore beautifully tailored riding clothes and yet never got on a horse. Primrose really didn't give a damn about his fine animals either, except as they brought him publicity, and maybe a killing on a bet.

Those were dumb reasons for disliking a man, and Primrose had always been decent to Chip James. Those box-car figures he flung around were a little dizzying too, and Heart's Desire. So the lean little rider went along, his built-up left boot making his limp practically unnoticeable. . . .

RATIONING or no, Primrose's cook did him well. There were steaming biscuits and coffee and eggs and ham and potatoes in the big farm kitchen, and both men tied into it. Chip and Sing Wu didn't get breakfasts like this in their little cabin over the next fold of Jersey hills. Chip was showing what was almost a smile, for him, when they finished.

Primrose took a cigar then, and Chip a cigarette, and Primrose talked. He was less brisk now; quite charming.

"It's like this, Chip," he said. "You know Al Duffy was my contract rider. Well, we had a falling out. I had an apprentice rider I expected great things from, but he just got drafted. A good boy I had second call on joined the Navy."

Chip grimaced slightly. He had wanted his own crack at the Nazis and Japs, but the brass hats didn't take too kindly to bantam jocks. Particularly not to one with a shorter left leg, from when bumped horses had twice fallen and rolled on it.

"I need a first class contract rider," Primrose was saying. His voice slowed deliberately: "Now get this! I'll pay seven hundred and fifty a month. A year's contract. Also the usual ten per cent on all stake winnings, and you know I've got the horses to shoot at those fat purses. Besides, I always ride a little bet for my jockeys with my own."

What you could do with money like that! Chip put the alluring thoughts aside and tried to withdraw gracefully. "You want a big-time reinsman, Mr. Primrose," he began. "I'm just—"

"I know all about you," Primrose spoke over him blandly. "You're just about as good a rider as there is in the business, and that goes for Arcaro, Meade, all of them. You've got as much right on those little piker tracks as Whirlaway in a cheap claiming race. And better horsemen than I say the same thing."

Chip said, "Well—that's mighty nice of you to say that. It's not true, though."

Primrose smiled. "Don't kid me, Chip," he said. "You know you're good. You've got the hands, pace, judgment, experience, and you can get the most out of a colt. Come on, now. Let's settle this business. I'm offering you that Heart's Desire filly and your farm. It's a deal, isn't it?"

Chip's bony poker face didn't show his inward struggle, and his tight lips didn't release his inner groan. This was a heartbreaker to pass up; but Chip's tone held only polite regret when he said, "It's a fine offer all right, Mr. Primrose. I'm sure much obliged. But I'll have to pass it up."

Primrose stared incredulously. "You're crazy!" he blurted. "Why, for heaven's sake?"

Chip shrugged. This was the one thing he couldn't tell Primrose, nor any man. "I told you," he said lightly. "I don't like the big-time."

The veins in Primrose's swarthy face swelled angrily. He slammed the table so the china rattled. "You must have landed on your head when those horses threw you!" he stormed. "You're a dumb little hick and I was a fool to waste my

breath on you! Believe you me, I'll never do it again. Now get out of here!"

Chip James' thin face seemed all bone as he stood up. He didn't like that kind of talk, and for two cents he would slap this man's ugly temper back down his throat. Only this was Primrose's house, and he had just eaten Primrose's meal.

The lean little rider walked out of there, his limp seeming to show a little more as it ran with something like despair in his mind: there went a great big, beautiful dream. . . .

SING WU was away with the motorcycle so Chip took the buckboard into the village to inquire for mail. There was one letter for him. From Carter, the jockey agent.

"The small tracks are closing down all over the country," Carter wrote. "Only the ones around big cities are running, where folks don't need cars to get there. I'm going to try my luck on the Big Apple. New Orleans first. Why don't you come along? You could knock them dead, and I'm not kidding."

Chip said, "Huh!" With the small tracks closing down, how was he going to earn the money to keep his option on those cherished acres? Breaking colts for Primrose was just off season work, for groceries. But now there wouldn't be that, either.

Ben Harris called to Chip from his real estate office, and Chip crossed the street. Ben asked, "Chip, you gonna be able to string along on that option?"

"Why," Chip said slowly, "I'm hopin' so. Why?"

"Funny thing," Ben said. "Nobody ever wanted that land before. It's held too high for farming. But I just got a call from the bank. They've got a cash customer."

Chip felt a hard pang. "They have, huh?"

"That's what they say. I wanted to tell you. Happen you don't take up four acres in sixty days and pay taxes, you'll lose your option and all."

Chip chewed gum and covered his dismay. Four acres and a year's taxes came close to $1000, and Chip didn't have that many cents. His jockey earnings of last summer and fall had gone into the cabin, fence and barns. Now if he lost his option, he lost all that and his eight paid-up acres too.

"Who wants my land, Ben, do you know?" Chip asked.

Harris shook his head. "I asked the bank, but they wouldn't tell me. Said the client didn't want his name mentioned."

Chip thought. As Ben Harris said, the piece was held too high for farming. It was too far out for truck gardening; not big enough for extensive ranching. Nor was it big enough for a real horse man. Unless—

Chip's jaws stopped working, then went on. Harry Primrose had more land than he needed now. He wouldn't be so mean as to pull a trick like this just because Chip refused to ride for him—or would he? Primrose had shown a nasty streak this morning. Maybe he thought he could force Chip into line this way.

Chip's slaty eyes were bleak as he said, "Thanks for telling me, Ben. Be seeing you." He climbed into the buckboard, and Ben Harris, who liked the tanned little rider, gazed after him troubledly. . . .

SING WU was there when Chip got back to the cabin. Sing Wu was a plump young Chinese with a moonlike, perpetually beaming face and intelligent, perpetually twinkling eyes. Chip told him about his talk with Ben Harris, and Sing Wu made a soft, sympathetic sound.

"One thousand dollars," Sing remarked, "is not hay."

"I could get a good part of it if the small tracks weren't closing down," Chip fretted. "Maybe borrow the rest. But now I don't see a way. Unless—" He checked.

Sing Wu waited, and reluctantly then,

Chip told him about Harry Primrose's offer.

Sing Wu made that soft sound again, but with deeper sympathy this time, and then they were both silent. Sing Wu still beamed, because he always beamed, and Chip was more dead-pan than ever. Finally Sing began, "It is written—"

"Don't give me that Charley Chan stuff!" Chip snapped.

Sing Wu smiled. The son of a Western ranch cook, Sing was as American as hamburger-on-a-bun. He had even been a jockey before his rapidly expanding girth spoiled that career. But it amused him to speak as some Americans expected him to.

"Charley Chan or Confucious," Sing said, "it is still written that an ostrich with its head in the sand is invisible only to itself."

"It depends where the ostrich is," Chip said.

"An ostrich of superior talents will be noted and spoken of farther than it can see," Sing pointed out.

Chip groaned. "Lay off the double-talk!" he commanded. But he knew Sing's double-talk was usually most pertinent. "Then you figure I ought to take the chance?" Chip asked.

Sing smiled. "Your heart is in these acres," he replied. "If I know you, you will take the chance."

Chip grunted. He had known that from the moment Ben Harris told him about the unknown coveter of his land. "But suppose—" he began.

"It is also well written that there is time to cross the river when one reaches it," Sing said, and shrugged. "Who knows? The river, after all, might be but a mirage."

"Not this river," Chip said grimly. "Now cut it out. You've got *me* talking that way!"

Chip called that night at the big white house on the knoll.

"If that contract job is still open," he told Harry Primrose curtly, "I'll take it."

Primrose grinned pleasedly, but without surprise. "I thought you'd change your mind," he said.

Watching him, Chip was further convinced that Primrose had put the squeeze on him by bidding for his land. Chip felt his vague distaste for this man become a positive thing, and he was sorry. Primrose was Bonny's foster-father, and Bonny was—well, she was a darn nice girl.

Primrose went east a couple of days later. Chip and Sing Wu followed in two weeks. All jockeys need valets; and since he had grown too heavy for a jockey's skimpy saddle, Sing served as valet to Chip and to other riders at the same meetings.

At Jamaica, the Primrose horses occupied six big sheds. Chip and the exercise boys galloped those horses for three mornings before the spring meeting got under way. On Opening Day, Chip was given the mount on Harry Primrose's Dark Dandy in the feature Jamaica Special.

CHIP DONNED his new silks, the primrose pink and yellow of the Primrose Stables, and lined up with the other bantam jocks to weigh in before the fifth and big race of the day. The big-time reinsmen, most of them just flown in from New Orleans and the Coast, went to work on the new Primrose contract rider.

"The cowboy wonder from the wide open spaces, eh? Looks to me like there's too much space between his rabbit ears. . . . You mean between his shaking knees. Don't get scared, busher. Just keep out of our way on the track and you won't get hurt."

Chip didn't bother even to shrug. When you've ridden the half-mile "jungle" tracks for six years, the outlaw tracks of Canada and the West, you're not afraid of anything that might happen in a horse race. You've seen all the tricks and learned the answers, or your riding days would have been over long ago.

But when Chip joined the parade to

the post on Dark Dandy, hunched a little to the side as he always rode to a start, he found himself caught up out of his calm. He had never seen a crowd like this at a track, or heard such a noise.

A new excitement put a surge of color under the deep tan of Chip's bony, expressionless face, and he knew a sharp thrill. This was the Big Apple. The best horses in the world, and the best riders. Every jock, no matter what he tells you, has a dream of doing his stuff up here. Chip forgot his hard forebodings. His slate-colored eyes gleamed. He almost smiled.

THE START was out of the chute, and they turned off the track to go into the stalls. The jocks, bunching to thread their mounts in, milled around Chip and wagged their chins: "The bigshot from the bushes is pale around the gills. . . . Remember to gimme plenty room, hayseed, or I'll put you over the rail!"

That last was from Al Duffy, Primrose's former contract rider. Chip put a cool, appraising glance on the popular reinsman. A natural flyweight, Al Duffy, but with the shoulders and arms of a little blacksmith. A bold jaw and insolent eyes. Duffy was up on the favorite, the Nugent Farms' Thunder Bird.

"So you're the punk that Primrose dragged out of the sticks to take my place?" Duffy laughed sneeringly, and deftly slid his mount past his stall and away.

A couple of other jocks drifted away with Duffy, and Chip saw the ruse and turned Dark Dandy with them. They wanted him to get in there and fret with his nervous colt while they delayed the start. Chip talked a little, soothingly, to Dark Dandy, and his sure hands were quieting too. And when the starter commanded angrily, Chip was the last one to go into the stalls.

Some of the other jocks looked surprised and more respectful. Al Duffy looked neither surprised nor respectful, but his hard grin showed more teeth. Chip thought, Mr. Big, eh? and he was through being excited and was ready for business.

With the electric eye, you get a quick start. The great roar of the horse fans, "They're off!" burst from the stands and rails almost as soon as Chip took Dark Dandy into his slot.

They broke in a flurry of flying silks and bolting horseflesh. Chip, in the number four slot, sensed before he saw Al Duffy bearing in on him from number five. Likewise bearing in was the boy in number three. Chip had the whip to Dark Dandy before the pattern could take solid shape, holding him on a dead straight line for Al Duffy.

Duffy had Thunder Bird, the favorite, didn't he? He couldn't afford to chance being bumped out of the race.

Duffy bawled threateningly, "Get over, you dumb hick!" and Chip lifted his voice as he only lifted it on a race track: "Get over yourself!"

"You'll get killed—" Duffy began to peal, and then had to swerve as Chip, not giving a shaved inch, loomed on him.

Chip had Dark Dandy a head in front of the favorite Thunder Bird as they thundered out of the chute into the backstretch then, but he wasted no thought in triumph. This wasn't a "jungle" track, and a big gun like Al Duffy, riding the favorite besides, certainly wouldn't risk a pile-up.

Chip only thought, "Let that be a lesson to you," and he was rating Dark Dandy, wrapping in the eagerly flying colt, picking his spot for his move when they would hit the turn.

Jim Asher, Harry Primrose's trainer, had ordered Chip: "Don't make your move until the last quarter. But be right up there for it, *with something saved.*"

The boy in number three was streaming after the leaders on the rail now, but Chip gave him only one glance and knew number three wasn't going to be able to make it. Not with that overstraining

colt. Al Duffy on Thunder Bird was the one to watch. And that big grey, fighting to the front up ahead.

Al Duffy was taking Thunder Bird wide, probably meaning to go around the leaders on the turn. Thunder Bird was a helluva horse. He could go the long way round and still have plenty of power left for the breakneck race to the wire.

THUNDER BIRD was pulling abreast now, and Chip let the eager Dark Dandy open up a little more. This colt was burning to fight his way up there, but you couldn't let him do it. Chip had the feel of this colt in his hands now. Dark Dandy was a sweet horse; but he was no Thunder Bird, and he was held third in the betting, behind Thunder Bird and the big grey.

They rammed through the backstretch for the home turn, and the jam of fans was heating it up for Thunder Bird and the grey. Calls for Dark Dandy too, and for the chestnut fighting the grey. But mostly: "Thunder Bird! Bring him home, Al!"

Almost on the turn now, and number three was fading. Chip had Dark Dandy flashing past number three and heading for the rail, and the three leaders promptly wove a pocket to head off Chip as they swept into the turn; the big grey on top in the center, the chestnut swerving to close the hole on the rail, and the little bay horse flanking the right.

Chip had expected that too. He headed Dark Dandy at the fast-closing hole on the rail and "*ki-yiied*" shrilly. The boy on the chestnut came hard on the rail and blocked the hole, and Chip lifted Dark Dandy to the right and shook him out fast.

"We go, boy!" Chip sang, and put the bat lightly to his mount. Dark Dandy sprang tearing to go between the chestnut on the rail and the big grey, and those two leaders veered at once toward each other to shut Chip back in that pocket.

Chip lifted his war cry then, the war cry they knew and had learned to heed on the outlaw and jungle tracks. "I'm comin' through!" Chip keened over the thunder of hooves. "Outa the way, you sons o' guns! I'm coming through!"

They didn't believe him. Out of the turn and into the wild bedlam of the stretch, and the chestnut and the big grey still moved to close the pocket as they tore for the wire at the end of the long stretch.

Al Duffy, coming on the outside with Thunder Bird, was making his move now, unwrapping his favorite. Chip saw the pattern as he had visualized it; but that hole between the chestnut and grey was pretty thin now. In a moment it would be closed—

"I'm coming through!" Chip shrilled, and knew they heard him over those pounding hooves and the crowd roar. As Chip batted Dark Dandy again and leaped at that thin slice of a hole, the boy on the chestnut looked back, incredulous and a bit scared.

"You heard me!" Chip bawled, and he had Dark Dandy's frantic head in between them. If they didn't give now, it was gonna be too bad. If they didn't give—

"Here I come!" Chip screamed, and he whipped Dark Dandy still again.

DARK DANDY'S panting breath was on the grey rider's pants when that boy looked and blanched, and he pulled his grey with all he had. The grey whipped aside as the crowd broke off their roar to gasp, and the chestnut swerved to the rail and raced there, and Chip James was safely through on Dark Dandy.

Chip was safely through and running with the chestnut; but another gasp broke from the crowd, louder than a roar, as the pulled grey bumped the little bay on his right and drove him over to loom threateningly across Al Duffy on Thunder Bird.

Al Duffy had to pull Thunder Bird. It was pull him or crash head-on with

the little bay. Al Duffy cursed and pulled, and then whipped his mount savagely and swept around the bay.

It was the chestnut and Dark Dandy rushing in front for the wire. The disappointed favorite bettors wailed to heaven; but the chestnut and Dark Dandy bettors leaped and screamed like crazy folks: "Lady May, come on!" . . . "Come home, Dandy!"

Perched high, Chip James crooned Dark Dandy through the maelstrom of the stretch. "We've got it, boy. Run, son!" Only a light flick with the bat now, and a yell: "Come on!"

Dark Dandy should have more than the chestnut. Chip had saved this last ounce of rush for him, but the chestnut's rider hadn't saved anything.

"Come on!" Chip yelled, and touched his colt again, and Dark Dandy leaped and went under the wire a fair length in front of the chestnut.

The second-favorite grey staggered home for show money; and the great favorite Thunder Bird, with Al Duffy whipping him like a madman, boomed across fourth—out of the money.

Chip wrapped Dark Dandy in gently, stroked his sweated neck and took him mincing back to the winner's circle in the pandemonium of noise. Al Duffy and the grey's jockey were already on the ground and shouting at the stewards, and just for a moment a hint of a smile tugged at Chip James' mouth. The outlaw tracks or the Big Apple—it was you or they, and who would scare first.

Jim Asher, the surly-mannered trainer, met Chip and took Dark Dandy's head. "Good enough," he approved ungraciously, and then commanded, "Stay up there. The newspapers want pictures."

"I don't like to see the dickey bird," Chip said shortly, and swung a leg across the saddle to slide down.

"Get back there!" Asher rapped, and pushed roughly. "What're you afraid of? You stick up a bank?"

So Chip sat dead-panned for the camera boys, and the ghost of a smile in his eyes disappeared. He didn't cotton to this trainer, Jim Asher, either. Funny; usually Chip didn't go around disliking folks. But lately he seemed to be finding quite a few he just had to dislike. . . .

Harry Primrose, in handsome shepherd's checks, was waiting when Chip came from the jockey house. Primrose laughed gayly and clapped the lean little rider's back. "That was as cute a spread as I ever saw a smart jockey pull," he chuckled. "Boy, I thought I'd die at Al Duffy, he was so mad. Maybe those jocks will be more careful with you next time, huh?"

"Why," Chip said mildly, "I hope they will."

Primrose chuckled again and pushed a small sheaf of bills at Chip. "Here's another payment on the farm," he said.

Chip looked and frowned. $800. "What's this for?" he asked. "You already paid me a month's wages."

"I told you I always rode a little bet with my own for my boys." Primrose said. "Dark Dandy paid off at eight-to-one. I had a century on his nose for you."

Chip had forgotten this legitimate and very nice custom on the big-time. On those little half-mile tracks, an owner usually had all he could do to scrape up the jock's ten-buck fee.

Chip said gratefully, "Much obliged, Mr. Primrose."

"Forget it. There will be lots more. I'm having a little party tonight, Chip. I want you to come."

With a man's $800 tip in your pocket, you couldn't refuse his hospitality. "Thanks again," Chip said.

HARRY PRIMROSE'S "little" party looked like a set out of Hollywood. At least a hundred people milled about Primrose's huge Long Island house. Two barmen mixed drinks like magicians; and the crowded game room, with its two roulette wheels, bird cage and crap table, resounded with whoops and groans.

The boss sure likes to spread it on,

Chip thought, and was a little uncomfortable in the gaudy setting. Some folks, when they recognized the lean, quiet little rider, were overly cordial, and Chip guessed they had had a bet on Dark Dandy today.

Even Moira, Primrose's glamourous, exotic daughter, was cordial. She, Chip decided, must have made a pile on the Dandy. Fond of the Blue Grass Horse Gentry role, like her father, Moira always before was either indifferent or downright contemptuous of the bush track jockey, Chip James.

I must be getting up in the world, Chip thought wryly. But Moira made him remember he was looking for Bonny.

Bonny was there. Primrose's foster-daughter, Bonny didn't have the exotic beauty of Moira. But Bonny had her own wholesome, direct attractiveness; and when she wore riding clothes she rode a horse. She rode well, too, and she shared Chip's horse sense and love of a thoroughbred.

Bonny was in the uniform of a Wave. "I have a week's furlough," she explained. "I'm awfully glad to see you, Chip. I must say I'm surprised to see you here though."

"I'm going to have my breeding farm yet," Chip told her, and there was an almost gay note in his voice which nobody but Bonny had ever heard. "Sooner than you think, too, and—"

CHIP stopped suddenly, caught by a pulse-quickening thought. Why, if he was all set with his farm next year—

Bonny blushed at that direct, startled look in Chip's eyes. But she didn't turn away, and her own deep eyes mirrored the same sudden, startled dream.

"Well?" Chip urged. "You know what I want to say. Bonny—"

She barely nodded, then stood up, and Chip took her hand and walked with her out of that noisy house onto the broad quiet lawns. They walked dreamily to the blue waters of the Sound. Chip's heart sang, and he didn't hear Harry Primrose's annoyed call after him.

Bonny said, "I guess Harry wants to show you off to his guests. Perhaps we'd better go back."

Chip shook his head. "I'm interested in only one of Harry's guests tonight," he said.

The next day, Chip had two mounts. In the first race, a five-furlong dash for two-year-olds, Chip had the Primrose Stable's Rapid Rhythm. The colt had placed in the money only once in six starts and was shown on the tote board at 30-2.

"Get him away fast and stay on top," Jim Asher told Chip in the paddock. "This pig might just surprise us today."

Rapid Rhythm and Chip James surprised practically everyone at Jamaica in the first race that day, including the handicappers, and delighted a very fortunate few. In the number-two slot, the Primrose entry broke fast.

The favorite, on the rail spot, started badly and was literally left at the post while thousands of bettors groaned.

Chip, to his pleased surprise, was able to guide Rapid Rhythm to the rail at once and encourage him to tear. He glanced back and saw the second and third favorites sweep recklessly across the field from the outside for the coveted rail. They grazed other horses, stumbled, recovered and set after Chip.

"They won't catch us now!" Chip chortled. "Git, boy!" He perched his gay silks high, but with his weight off the colt's neck, and trailed his bat along Rapid Rhythm's flanks. He didn't whip, just kept the bat brushing, and he kept a low, urgent calling in the flying colt's ear: "Step, son! Lay into it!"

Into the turn on top, and out of it with the hooves of the second and third favorites drumming loud on their ears. But they weren't going to catch him now. Not in a short skedaddle like this. They had booted away their chances back there.

Not much noise in the fervid stretch this time. Only the lucky few long-shot bettors screaming like frenzy as Chip touched Rapid Rhythm smartly and

jumped him in under that wire first.

The stewards had half a dozen jockeys on the carpet after that race and read them the riot act. The jocks on the second and third favorites were set down for five days, and then the stewards asked Chip what he had seen.

"Nothin'." Chip said laconically. "I was too busy riding." Reinsmen could fight each other on the track and off; but no jock worth his tack popped off in the cage. . . .

Chip had another mount in the seventh and last race of the day, one mile and a furlong for three-year-olds and upwards. Chip rode Sultan Sam, a big hammerhead bay that had been winning and losing races for five years.

IT WAS a goofy race, Chip thought. The favorite, Torchman, set a sizzling pace from the start, and was still sizzling after three-quarters. Two other horses, given a good play in the betting, sizzled all out up there with Torchman.

"Dumb jocks," Chip grunted. "They can't run a mile and a furlong at that pace!" He rated Sultan Sam carefully, taking him through the ruck of horses and watching the track for bad spots too, and he saw Al Duffy rated his horse with Sultan Sam.

Chip shot Sultan Sam through a hole on the rail on the home turn and batted Sam and made his move. Al Duffy made his move with Chip, and head and head with him. They piled out of the turn and stormed up fast on the three now fading leaders, and a fresh bedlam of noise came out of the stands as the new picture showed itself. The favorite up front was dying—

"Here we go!" Chip yelped and batted the willing Sultan Sam again. Al Duffy, alongside, was batting his mount too, second-held horse in the betting.

"Run, baby!" Chip called and slipped his big mount through two horses to run even with the blowing favorite. I'd like to lick Duffy again, Chip thought, but didn't dream too hard. Duffy was on a better horse.

Past the favorite—past the other two leaders now, and it was Sultan Sam and Al Duffy on his mount going for the wire hardly a furlong away.

"Come on, Sam!" the customers screamed.

"Bring him home, Al!"

Both those little jocks high, calling, Al Duffy whipping hard, Chip not whipping at all now. Then Al Duffy whipped his mount's legs for a final effort, and the horse swerved. Not much, as the strong-armed Duffy held him. But it was a swerve, and it cost him the race. Sultan Sam, with Chip ki-yiing, boomed under the wire a nose in front. Sultan Sam had a big nose.

IN THE jockey house, Sing Wu beamed and threw Chip a towel as the lean rider came from the shower. "Not bad," Sing said. "Your first three rides on the Big Apple, and three wins. Two long shots! Harry Primrose is no fool."

"I was lucky in both those races today," Chip said, and thought there was an odd note in Sing Wu's voice. But he forgot it, thinking in relief that he was indeed lucky. Both last night's and this morning's papers had displayed his picture on Dark Dandy, winner of the Jamaica Special. There were no repercussions.

Harry Primrose, looking very pleased, was waiting outside the jockey house again. "Well," he chuckled, "it looks like I guessed right on you. Here is your cut, son."

Chip had a vague qualm of unease, somehow connected with the odd note in Sing Wu's voice just now. But then Harry Primrose was saying apologetically, "I didn't think Rapid Rhythm had a chance, so I didn't bet him. I put only a few notes across the board on Sultan Sam too, just for sentiment's sake. So I didn't make much for you today."

Chip felt better, and didn't try to understand his first vague uneasiness. It looked as if everything was going to

work out okay, and he walked away with a spring in his heels to keep his date with Bonny. Yes, everything was working out fine. . . .

Chip was at the track at 5:30 the next morning to gallop horses as usual. It was his firm conviction that if a jock watched his diet and galloped horses religiously, he could keep himself in the pink and his weight down. Chip had seen too many lazy jocks, sweated weak from the electric cabinets, lose races because they weren't strong enough to hold iron-mouthed horses from running away with them.

Bart Nugent, owner of the well known Nugent Farms racing string, was waiting when Chip finished galloping at 9:30. A big, hearty man, Nugent, with a Boston accent.

"You look good out there," Nugent said. "Harry Primrose says you can take lots of work, and whip lefthanded. I've got more mounts than Al Duffy can handle. How about a second-call contract with me at two hundred and fifty a month?"

Chip chewed gum and didn't change expression, but inside he laughed exultantly. $1000 a month on his stable contracts! Plus ten per cent on stake race purses, and Primrose riding those little bets for him. Boy, that breeding farm was coming close!

No Primrose horse was on the card that afternoon, but Bart Nugent's trainer had two mounts for Chip. In the third race, a five-furlong scramble

"What's the matter, boy?" Chip chided. "Cut it out now!"

for "maidens." Chip had the rail position. He got his colt away fast and clean and found himself literally booted home first, as the other poor colts pocketed both favorites, and succeeded in keeping both the favorites and themselves out of the race.

A cheap race; but the long-shot bettors hollered gleefully for Chip James, and Chip cocked an eye at the board and saw he had delivered another shellacking to favorite backers.

In the feature race of the day, the fifth, two Nugent horses started as an entry, with Al Duffy riding the favored Two Spades, and Chip astride Nobody's Pet. In the paddock, Duffy and Chip ignored each other.

"I'm afraid this is going to break your string of wins," Nugent's trainer told Chip. "Your nag is just going for the ride."

IT WAS a mile and a sixteenth, and a big field of sixteen, and Al Duffy was in trouble from the beginning. He had an outside position, and managed to work himself in toward the rail by daring and masterful riding. But three horses wove a pocket for him then, and Duffy and Two Spades stayed tight in the pocket.

"Al will dive for the rail on the turn," Chip told himself, and guided Nobody's Pet on a close flank to the pocket. Nobody's Pet was an amiable rocking horse under Chip. A temperamental horse, they told him. Not in a running mood lately, and so just in there today in a hope of catching a bit of fire.

They were banging for the turn, and Al Duffy started outside, then inside, and then dropped back into the pocket without making a further effort.

"He'll be too late after the turn," Chip fretted, and didn't add it at once. It was risky, trying to break out of a pocket by diving at a dime-sized hole on the rail; but that was the way the top jocks won a lot of their races, and Chip had seen Al Duffy take chances without hesitation.

And then Chip saw a long roan horse streak out of the pack on the outside and begin to leap to the front, and still Al Duffy didn't succeed in breaking out of his pocket. That roan was a 40 to 1 shot, and Duffy was still back here with the favorite!

Chip thought, Why the son of a gun! and slipped his bat to his left hand. Maybe Duffy was not just as content to stay in his pocket and let a 40-1 shot romp home. Maybe! But the way it looked to Chip—

"Ee-yow!" Chip shrilled in his surprised colt's ear, and fetched the colt a sudden whack on the *left* side. The startled Nobody's Pet, accustomed to feeling the whip on his right side only, bolted and swerved to the right.

Chip bawled, "Look out ahead!" and dragged on the left rein. Al Duffy promptly pulled right, and the three jocks in the close pocket ahead darted looks back, then swerved right to hold Duffy and the other half of the Nugent Farms entry.

Chip was kicking at Nobody's Pet then, shifting his bat again and whipping the lazy colt's right side, and renewing that high thin screaming in the colt's annoyed ear while he headed him at the now open hole on the rail.

NOBODY'S PET was furious at that bat on his sacred left side, and maddened at that unearthly screaming in his ears. He leaped and drove at that hole on the rail with a fire he rarely cared to show.

The boy on the rail side of the pocket saw the ruse and swerved, heard that high warning, "I'm coming through!" He had seen Chip James dare to risk a pile-up when they tried to block him off the rail in the Jamaica Special last Saturday, and now he hesitated a flash of a second.

That flash of a second was enough, and Chip was through the hole on the bolting Nobody's Pet. Through the hole, and around and out of the turn, into the boiling stretch. Still shrilling, just

threatening with the bat now, Chip lengthened the fiery Nobody's Pet on the rail and flew for the wire.

Nobody's Pet, running with the 40-1 roan horse on the outside, in front and head and head, and the stands crazy.

"Here is where you earn your keep, old lazybones!" Chip sang, and saw the boy on the 40-1 roan whipping like mad. Chip whistled his own bat just before the wire, heightened that wild scream in the colt's ears, and Nobody's Pet soared under the wire as if shot out of a catapult.

They called it a photo finish and waited for the picture. But Chip was pretty sure as he wrapped in the angrily heaving Nobody's Pet and turned him back for the winner's circle. Yep, there she flashed: First, Nugent Farms entry.

The stands gave Chip James an ovation. The top-favored Nugent entry, because of Al Duffy on Two Spades, was heavily backed. Chip had saved the bacon. The fans thundered approval.

In the jockey house, Al Duffy and two other jocks from that fifth race eyed Chip malevolently. Chip regarded them expressionlessly and gave his saddle and tack to Sing Wu.

Sing beamed and murmured, "I could be wrong, but I think Al Duffy wished that forty-to-one shot to be shooed in."

Chip shrugged noncommittally. It looked that way, but you couldn't be sure. Duffy, one of the turf's ranking cavaliers, didn't have to risk his neck like an apprentice with a name to make. Anyhow, until all the cards showed, Chip was a great believer in keeping his nose clean.

"Be careful," Sing murmured again. "It is written that it is dangerous to break a thief's stolen dish of rice."

On Thursday, Chip rode a Primrose horse in the second race and finished second to Al Duffy. But the fans hollered louder for Chip than for Duffy. Duffy had the favorite. Chip's mount paid $17.50 for place.

Chip had a Nugent Farms mount in the fourth race and finished out of the money. A vast groan rose out of the stands when Chip's mount just missed "show" money by a neck.

"What're they yappin' about?" Chip asked Sing Wu in the paddock. "I had the second longest shot on the board."

"They're beginning to speak of you as The Long Shot Kid," Sing replied. "Already, many bettors are putting their money on you, instead of the horse."

Chip frowned. Most of his earlier fears of publicity were gone, but still . . . Also, this was the way a jock got put on a spot. But you had to ride 'em as they came; and besides, Chip had to admit he was getting a boot out of hitting the jackpot so often. His bankroll was getting a boot, too. . . .

ON FRIDAY, with rain falling in sheets and thunder rolling, Chip won the first race on a Primrose horse that returned $26 to $2 bettors. He won the second race on a Nugent Farms horse that returned $41.80 on a $2 ticket.

You could hardly see beyond your mount's head on that rain-lashed track, except when lightning crackled. And with the feet of flying horses kicking mud in your face and eyes, you had all you could do to stay aboard and try to steer. But Chip had the funny feeling that he was being shooed home in those first two races. He had nothing to hang that feeling on, but when you've raced so much you feel things you can't see. . . .

There was a roar from the stands that sounded even over the thunder after that second race. Chip remembered Sing Wu's assertion that the bettors were following him on any horse now, and he guessed he had made them a killing on the daily double.

Chip got the word in the jockey house. The daily double was paying off $543.40, the largest kill of the meeting to date!

"If all the hunch bettors hadn't rushed to back you," Sing said, "the price might have been twice as large. Those two horses you had are fugitives from a glue factory."

That odd note was back in Sing Wu's voice, and Chip grunted, recalling his feeling that the jocks on better horses were shooing him home in those two races.

Chip was annoyed with himself. His breeding farm was coming closer every day, so why look for trouble? He had had enough trouble through no fault of his own. This wasn't the jungle. This was the Big Apple, with smart stewards and racing associations. If they hung up the green light, it had to be okay.

Chip had two more mounts that day. He finished out of the money in both races, although the handicappers had made him the second favorite in the seventh race.

The lean little rider had a sense of relief. There you were. You could never tell about a horse race.

Bart Nugent hailed Chip outside the jockey house. "I usually place a bet for my rider when I think he has a chance to win," Nugent said. "I didn't think you had a chance in that second race, though. Sorry, son, and that was a swell ride."

Chip's relief mounted. Nugent must be okay.

Harry Primrose was approaching with Bonny. Primrose was shaking his head ruefully. "You sure surprised me in the first race," he told Chip. "Jim Asher and I didn't think you had a prayer, so I didn't bet a single two-spot."

"I did though," Bonny crowed, and held aloft a sheaf of bills. "Come on, Chip, we're going places!"

CHIP WENT with a light heart. If his owners were not betting their own long-shot winners, it meant they were not in on the frame—if there was a frame. So if there was, it meant a few jocks were building it by themselves.

Chip's eyes were clear now. He could take care of himself against his fellow reinsmen. It was only when your owners and trainers were crooked that you were a clay pigeon.

BONNY GAVE Chip her promise that night. She was due for another furlough in six weeks, when she came up for her commission. The horses would be leaving Empire for Saratoga then. Chip would take a week off for their marriage and honeymoon.

Chip was happier than he had ever been the next day. He rode five winners that afternoon, and if there was anything dubious about any of those wins, Chip, with his head in the clouds, never noticed it.

He rode with a sure, polished daring that had the fans gasping; and judging by the roars after his victories, half that great Saturday crowd was backing him.

Two of Chip's wins that day paid more than $20 for a $2 ticket. In the feature $5000 Broker's Stakes, starting with Dark Dandy at 4-1 behind the more closely held Thunder Bird and Gray Goose, Chip rode a ding-dong hell-for-leather race with Al Duffy on Thunder Bird from the bell all the way to the wire.

Al Duffy was trying today; any rail bird could see that. Three times he broke out of tight pockets at the risk of his neck. But those times he was held gave Chip a chance to rate Dark Dandy, and Chip dove for the rail on the first turn and never gave it up.

Duffy had to do a lot of weaving on Thunder Bird, and he had to make his move at last from the far outside. The second-favored Gray Goose stepped in a soft spot in the track and went to his knees, and it was Chip on Dark Dandy and Al Duffy on Thunder Bird for the $5000 sack then.

Chip's rail spot and his nerveless rating of Dark Dandy did it. He beat Duffy under the wire by a jump and a holler.

Chip had to fight his way through an enthusiastic mob of fans and camera hounds between the paddock and jockey house.

Jim Asher, the sourpuss Primrose Stables trainer, came in with a shambling, liquor-potted, grey-haired man.

"You had a pretty big afternoon," Asher told Chip. "Take a rest now. I'm putting another boy up in the next race."

Chip's bony face actually showed surprise. It was unlike Asher to show such consideration.

"Oh, yeah," Asher said. "This guy wants to meet you. Nick Arnold. Used to cover the horses for the old New York World. Before you were born, I guess, and before the *schnapps* got him."

"Hiyah," Chip grunted, and started away for the shower. But the old newsman held him, pulled him around and examined his face through red-rimmed eyes.

"A dead ringer for old Tommy Clark!" Arnold breathed. "Looks like him and rides like him. Only thing, this kid is a clam puss, and Tommy was always laughin' and raisin' hell." He hiccupped gently and shook his untidy grey head sadly. "Poor Tommy," he said. "I felt awful bad when they got him."

With Jim Asher's eyes on him, Chip couldn't jerk away. He felt himself go pale, though he kept his face expressionless.

"You know Tommy Clark?" the drunken Arnold was demanding. "He had a kid would be old enough to ride now. Maybe—"

"Never heard of him," Chip growled. "Let go, rummy." He shook off the fellow's hands and walked to the showers. Without his built-up boots on, his limp was evident.

Sing Wu followed with a towel. There was a mild sweat on his round face. "Don't let it trouble you," he urged. "One old rumpot reporter—it means nothing."

Chip licked dry lips. "Sure," he said. "Sure."

EVERY METROPOLITAN sports sheet carried pictures and a story on Chip James the next morning. Chip in the winner's circle on Dark Dandy. Chip coming from the scales with his saddle and tack on his arm. Chip on the ground in street clothes. A lean, hard, tanned little guy with a bony, expressionless face.

"The Long Shot Kid," they called him. "The coolest, smartest, most daring jockey to hit the big-time in many years. No reinsman in the business can get more out of a colt than he can; and when he drives for a hole on the rail as big as your ear, woe betide the jock who tries to ride him off!"

Chip James, the find of the year. The Long Shot Kid.

Chip looked at the papers, and he knew pride, and he knew fear too. And then he tried to put it all out of his mind, because tomorrow Bonny went back to the Waves.

They went, by command, to Harry Primrose's huge party. "We have to go," Bonny told Chip. "He says this party is for me. Not that he needs an excuse to throw a party—" Bonny checked, then went on reluctantly, "I do think, in this war, Harry could do more good with his money than throwing it away on these parties for his sponge friends."

Chip said nothing, though silently he agreed.

"Harry spends his money like water," Bonny went on. "Moira, too. I worry about them, Chip."

Those two didn't need worrying about, Chip thought. They were the kind to take care of themselves first. But he only said fondly, "You've got too big a heart, baby."

Al Duffy was at the party. A spruce but sulky looking Duffy, in a white tuxedo that made him look like a fancy fly. He was drawing a lot of attention from Moira.

Chip stared, surprised to see Duffy here. According to the story, Duffy and Harry Primrose had had a terrific row when Primrose fired him as his contract rider.

Duffy saw Chip then and glowered. A newspaperman at Chip's shoulder murmured, "Little Mr. Big doesn't love you much, Chip. He loves his headlines and

you're swiping them right and left!"

Chip was faintly amused, watching Moira hasten to soothe the sulky Duffy. And then Chip stopped being amused, remembering he had to put Bonny on a train in an hour, and out of his sight for six long weeks. . . .

IN THE NEXT fourteen days, Chip had fifty-four mounts, and was out of the money only eight times. He rode twenty-six winners, for an average of almost two a day. He booted nine long shots under the wire, each of which paid over $20. The big board showed killings in place and show money for several other Chip James mounts.

The papers showered down for Chip James, fast riding to the front as the leading cavalier in the East. The long-shot bettors blessed him, and the bookies all over the country began to "hedge" their bets automatically against a Chip James mount.

Only the touts cursed the lean little rider. The suckers passed up the touts' tips these days. They just bet the Long Shot Kid.

But oddly, as his fame and bankroll grew, the shadows deepened in Chip's eyes. He was pretty sure now. Pretty sure that two or three expert jockeys, led by Al Duffy, were shooing him under the wire in many of those long-shot wins.

Clever jocks like Duffy can pull a horse so you can't see it from the rail or cage. They can rate a horse poorly, and yet you see the colt trying all the way. They can bungle a start; pocket and get pocketed; ride roughly, when it looks like daring stuff, and deftly ride off the favorites.

And they can deliberately leave those holes open on the rail. . . .

Chip had seen all the tricks on the jungle tracks. Now he saw them again, only meshing to perfection with such master reinsmen as Al Duffy. And when the rains came again, in three of the last four days of this meeting, then Chip was sure.

The rains blew in off the sea with fog, so the stretch looked like a bog shrouded with milk, and the backstretch was a dirty black alley. It is in such a backstretch that so many races are lost—and won. And it was in such a backstretch that Al Duffy and those two other jocks took off their gloves.

Fuming, Chip saw Duffy and his two pals bump favorites off stride in that murky and all but invisible backstretch. He saw them ride favorites all the way out, where they had to pile up or pull their horses. He saw them grab saddlecloths, grab horses' tails, grab and hold back jockeys themselves.

The stewards could see nothing with their glasses in that filthy murk, but Chip saw himself chased home in three of his longest long-shot wins of the meeting, and he saw a good apprentice jock named Johnny Monroe robbed of two victories.

Johnny Monroe took a poke at Chip in the jockey room after the second of those steals.

"Chip James, the Long Shot Kid, eh?" Monroe snarled. "I'll tell you what you are. You're a dirty lousy crook!"

Chip blocked his blow and held him. "Take it easy," Chip commanded. "I don't blame you for thinking that, but I'm not in on this."

"Don't give me that! You and your jerk pals robbed me on two races. The next time you try it, I'm gonna—"

"You're gonna what?" Al Duffy inquired mockingly. He was flanked by those two other jocks, Georgie Fee and Hank Dahl.

"I'll go to the stewards!" Johnny Monroe told Duffy hotly. "If you guys think you can—"

"We don't think nothin'," Al Duffy cut in, still mockingly. "You said you were goin' to the stewards. Okay, why don't you go? See how far you get, and" —the little strong-armed jock's voice threatened—"see what happens to you afterward."

Johnny Monroe tried to hold his glare against those three hard-faced, mud-spattered riders, but his glare dulled and

wavered, and you saw the paleness under the dirt on his face.

Chip spoke then, quietly. "Come on, Johnny," he said. "I'll go with you."

Al Duffy looked startled and alarmed then, and so did those other two with him. "Come on," Chip urged Monroe again, and he thrust aside Sing Wu's sudden warning hand.

But Johnny Monroe, the little apprentice, shook his head. "I've got a mount in the next race," he muttered, and then he tried to bluster: "But if you wise guys pull anything on me again, I'm sure as hell goin' upstairs with it!"

Al Duffy and those two others laughed relievedly, mocking again, and looked at Chip James. Chip clucked disgustedly, seeing how it was. Johnny Monroe, the little apprentice, didn't have the nerve to showdown with those three big-time reinsmen. Four, counting Chips, for Monroe believed Chip was in with them.

Chip swung to face Duffy and Fee and Dahl, made another disgusted sound when he saw the stream of jockeys and valets coming toward them. There was a cloudburst outside, and the officials were holding up the rest of the card. . . .

IN THE DINER, later, Chip worried it aloud to Sing Wu. "What gets me is why they picked *me* for the Cinderella guy," he said. "Of course I got a big publicity play as Primrose's new contract rider, and I've never been set down. But they don't know me. How do they know I won't turn them in, as I would have done today if Johnny Monroe hadn't turned yellow."

"Someone must have assured them you wouldn't."

"That's dumb. Who could tell them that?"

"Whoever is paying them off, of course."

"They're paying themselves off," Chip said impatiently. "They're getting me on those long shots and shooing me in."

Sing Wu shook his head. "I don't think so. They're clever, but they themselves have lost to you too often on better horses for their trainers and owners not to be suspicious. *If* their trainers and owners are honest."

Chip frowned. He didn't like this turn. It had been gnawing at the back of his own mind, and he had thrust it away.

"Fee and Dahl are free-lance riders—"

"And popular riders who get many mounts," Sing took him up. "And so good boys for—uh—whoever-it-is to have in his pocket."

"Maybe," Chip grunted. "But Al Duffy is Bart Nugent's contract rider. I ride for Nugent too. But neither Nugent nor his trainer ever asked me to ride a wrong race."

"They don't have to, with Duffy on the favorites, and Fee and Dahl doing their bits," Sing explained. "It's better to have you honest in all eyes, so no suspicion can attach to you. Also, in this way they can—" He stopped.

"Can what?" Chip demanded.

"Nothing," Sing said evasively, and took another tack. "Duffy, they say, hates Harry Primrose," he said. "Yet he goes to Primrose's parties and is very two-sy with Primrose's daughter. And hasn't it struck you as strange that Duffy, hating Primrose, would cause Primrose's long-shot horses to win?"

Chip said quickly, too quickly, "Primrose has no part in that. He's a great plunger, but he didn't have a nickel on most of his long shots. I know because he didn't bet for me."

Sing Wu smiled gently, pityingly. "*He* says he didn't bet his long-shot winners. Just as Bart Nugent says. They know you're honest. What else could they say?"

"Can you prove they *did* bet 'em?" Chip challenged.

"Not as yet," Sing admitted. "I've no wish to be impertinent, Chip, but you've told me how it is with you and Bonny. Are you sure your eagerness to absolve Primrose is not because he is to be your foster papa-in-law?"

CHIP'S hard flush confessed that, and his misery in fighting off his sus-

picions of Harry Primrose. He had to remember Primrose's crafty ruthlessness in making Chip his rider. Remember his greediness for prestige, and the money he had to throw around. So far as was known, Primrose had no income outside his racing activities; and few honest men made fortunes on racing strings only.

The Duffy angle didn't add up, either. Duffy loved his position as premier jockey. He wouldn't willingly cede that position to Chip, for Chip was a formidable rival on merit alone.

Also, Chip won *honest* races which Duffy wanted to win. Like the $5000 Brokers' Stakes. The winning jock in that race got $500, and Chip had beaten Duffy to it. No; if left to himself, Duffy would pick an inferior stooge to bring in those long shots.

Chip looked at Sing Wu unhappily, and the Chinese said softly, "The wise man takes the other road when he sees the tracks of the hungry wolf pack, Chip."

Quit and go home, Sing meant. But the coveted breeding farm was so close, and that Heart's Desire filly. All the happy plans Chip had made with Bonny—

"The pattern indicates they have much larger plans," Sing Wu urged. "They wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice you, Chip, if necessary. And if the past became known then, the breeding farm and all else would be impossible. You've made a bit of money. Quit now, and go back to building the long way."

"I haven't got enough to do anything with," Chip began. "I wouldn't get Heart's Desire, either. Besides—"

He was engaged to Primrose's foster-daughter. That gave him a small club. He could go to Primrose, say what he suspected, and demand the truth. Then, if necessary, he could quit. Primrose, as Chip's future father-in-law, deserved a chance to clear himself, too.

Sing Wu was plainly dubious of this plan, but Chip insisted. He went directly to Primrose's big house, learned that Primrose was in the city for the night. Well, tomorrow was the last day of the Jamaica meeting, and of the $10,000 Royal Handicap.

Chip would see Harry Primrose tomorrow.

USUALLY, when he had a horse going in an important stake race, Primrose was at the track in the morning to see him work out. But Primrose wasn't on hand this morning when Chip took Dark Dandy an easy lap of the track to make sure he was all there.

Dark Dandy assured Chip and Trainer Jim Asher that he was all there. The colt was keyed up, recognizing from the signs and shortened rations that he was going to the races today. And once on the track he was full of run, fighting for his head.

Chip held him, gentled him, talked to him. Pretty soon he had the colt under control. "He'll do," Chip told Asher, and the surly trainer nodded.

Following his surprising victories in the Jamaica Special and Brokers' Stakes, with Chip in the driver's seat, Dark Dandy was being held evenly with Thunder Bird and Gray Goose today. Three to two, and take your choice.

But at noon a flurry ran through the barns, and over the radio wires and ticker tapes in bookies' rooms. Thunder Bird was off his feed and showed signs of a cold. He was scratched!

Gray Goose, a little tender in the off foreleg following that stumble in the Brokers' Stakes, had pulled up lame this morning, and was likewise scratched from the rich Royal Handicap!

That left the Primrose Stables' Dark Dandy practically alone in the betting, and there was a rush of sure-thing bettors to get on him. By track time, Dark Dandy was well-nigh backed off the board, held at the exorbitant price of 1-5.

Chip came close to a chuckle, donning his silks in the jockey house. Too bad about Thunder Bird and Gray Goose, but that was the way the cards fell. And

with those two out, this race was as nearly in the bag as any horse race can be. A $10,000 purse! That meant one cool grand for Chip's and Bonny's farm.

Sing Wu wasn't around. Chip weighed in, then looked again for Sing. The Chinese never missed accompanying him to the paddock. But this time Chip went out there alone with his tack.

Sing didn't appear in the saddling stall, and Chip took a leg-up from Jim Asher. In the circle of the paddock, the usually well-mannered Dark Dandy was fractious. He kept fighting for his head. Once he reared and almost unseated Chip.

"Easy, boy. Easy!" Chip soothed, and thought he must have communicated his own eagerness to the colt. He talked to the Dandy, finally got him in hand and took him onto the track behind the red-coated postillion for the parade to the post.

Dark Dandy had drawn number one, another break, and a full-throated roar greeted him as he minced behind the lead pony to the barrier. Hunched sidewise on his back, a lean little bag of bones in bright silks, Chip James chewed gum methodically.

Behind Chip came Georgie Fee on My Sal, backed second at 4-1. Pete Dahl was in number six on Mountain Boy, held at 9-2. Al Duffy brought up the rear of the procession on Five-by-Five. He was to have ridden the scratched Thunder Bird. Five-by-Five, in poor esteem, was held at 40-1.

Dark Dandy surprised Chip by having another fractious moment at the gate, tossing his head and refusing to enter the slot.

"What's the matter, boy?" Chip chided. "Cut it out now!" And suddenly Dark Dandy went in like a lamb.

With the electric eye, they got a rapid-fire start. Chip boomed Dark Dandy out of the pack and streaked him along the rail through the first turn. This to avoid any bumping on the start, and to prevent any cutthroat from jumping the rail on the turn.

The stands howled gleefully for the Dandy's fine start and began rooting home their "money-in-the-bank" bets.

THEY POURED out of the turn into the backstretch, and Chip sized the field and began wrapping in his colt. He was sitting pretty. All he had to do now was rate the Dandy carefully, keep free of tangles and pockets and be in a position to make his move as usual in the last quarter. It ought to be a breeze.

They flew through the backstretch, thundering for the turn. A tall black horse zinged out of the pack and tore to the front, with Georgie Fee on My Sal, and Hank Dahl on Mountain Boy, flanking him a half length back.

A little reluctantly, Chip opened up Dark Dandy a notch more. That black horse didn't matter; he would soon fade. But Chip chose not to take any chance of having to fight out of a pocket Fee and Dahl might have in mind.

A big stake race like this was hardly the place for a sharp coup. But Chip was not forgetting Al Duffy on the Nugent Farms Five-by-Five back there. A 40-1 shot was Five-by-Five, and Chip decided to play it safe. Dark Dandy was strong enough—

Yep, that tall black was fading now. Chip got set, ready to bat Dark Dandy if Georgie Fee, in the lane alongside, made a sudden swerve with Hank Dahl to pocket Chip on the rail.

But Georgie Fee didn't swerve. He held straight on with Hank Dahl, and then those two were steering toward the *outside* of the track as a chestnut came out there to make his bid.

Almost on the turn now, and Chip thought, Now who the hell are those two playing policemen for? Al Duffy was back there on a 40-1 shot all right, but they all knew that Duffy's Five-by-Five didn't have a prayer to outrun Dark Dandy. So if Fee and Dahl were running interference for Duffy, they ought to be busting their necks in a try to stave off Chip James.

It was screwy, but here was the turn. If those guys had a trick up their sleeves, they were too late. Just steer through this turn, give the eager Dandy his head, and this race was on the ice. Here we go then— Hey! Something was wrong!

Dark Dandy had his head up, tossing it wildly, slowing. "Boy!" Chip hollered. "What's the matter? Get goin'!" He loosed the Dandy's head, but the colt still went through the motions of fighting for it. Chip played the bat then. "Dandy! Come on!"

Out of the turn and into the stretch, and the fans, on their feet to root their money-in-the-bank Dark Dandy home, saw it, gasped and began to yell: "Something's wrong with Dark Dandy. . . ! He's pulling him. . . ! That's right! Let him go, Chip!"

Chip's bony face gleamed white through his tan. He worked with the Dandy, pleading, threatening, then whipping. The colt kept his head up, tossing it wildly. Fee and Dahl had that chestnut horse sewed in a pocket on the outside, and Al Duffy on the 40-1 Five-by-Five was streaking inside them and pulling even with Dark Dandy.

THE FANS roared amazement and anger now: "Turn him loose, Chip! The dirty son-of-a-gun is throwing the race!" Then screams from the long-shot bettors: "Here comes Five-by-Five! Come on home, Al!"

Five-by-Five's stretching neck was in Chip's lap. It pulled ahead. Then it was gone, and you saw what you had never seen before in Chip James' dead-pan face—furious panic.

Through the stretch to the wire. Al Duffy on the 40-1 Five-by-Five a full length in front, Duffy whipping and grinning. Georgie Fee on My Sal and Hank Dahl on Mountain Boy pounding on Five-by-Five's flying hooves. The chestnut chased them, free of the pocket at last, now they had killed him off.

The enraged thousands in the stands threatened to tear down those stands as Dark Dandy, still fighting for his head, went under the wire behind the chestnut to finish a futile fifth.

"The dirty burglar pulled Dandy!" fans roared. "You scummy little bum, James!"

Past the wire, Chip hauled in Dark Dandy as rapidly as possible, slid to the ground as he saw Jim Asher and a swipe rush onto the track for them.

"Stay away!" Chip snarled at the swipe, and swung the colt the other way. "You, too!" Chip ordered Jim Asher, and when the surly trainer tried to rough him aside and grab the Dandy's head, Chip let go with a vicious kick to the shins.

Asher stumbled and swore, and Chip probed swiftly in Dark Dandy's wide nostril. He cursed, knowing what he would find, and he cursed louder when he found it. A sponge up that nostril!

"Gimme that!" Asher commanded, and lunged.

Chip ducked aside, then shoved, and Asher went to his knees on the cinders. "I'm giving this to the stewards!" Chip rapped, and he turned swiftly to go back up the track.

On his knees, Jim Asher called sharply, "Go right ahead, *Tommy Clark*."

Chip stopped with a jerk, started on again.

Asher scrambled after him. "Okay, you damn fool," he hissed. "I'm coming along. When I tell them who you are, who do you think they'll believe, you or me?"

Chip stopped again, sweated pale, breathing hard. He remembered Asher bringing that old rumpot newspaperman into the jockey room a couple of weeks ago. It wouldn't be too hard to prove Chip's identity. And Chip knew he wouldn't deny it.

The stewards would believe Jim Asher then. Believe Chip had pulled Dark Dandy, or fixed him with that sponge. Chip was traveling under a false name, wasn't he? He was the son of the late Tommy Clark, one of the truly great jockeys fifteen years ago, until the lure of the gamblers' easy money got him.

Chip stood there stricken, while Jim Asher roughly worked the sponge out of his hand. Chip was remembering those headlines which had disgraced his father. The easy-laughing Tommy Clark, weakened from high living and having to make the weight year after year, had soon died. But his disgrace lived on in the annals of the turf, and now Chip would re-inherit it.

The stewards were calling them, and the lean little rider climbed the stairs to the cage with his heart like lead.

THE STEWARDS were curtly disappointed. "We didn't expect this from you, James," the secretary said. "You were building a great career. Well, let's have it. Did you pull that horse?"

Chip shook his sun-bleached head miserably. "No, sir."

"What happened then?"

Chip shook his head again. He could tell the truth from here to doomsday; but the moment Jim Asher disclosed his identity, Chip would stand convicted.

"The colt just went bad," he said. "I couldn't do anything with him."

The stewards made a disapproving sound. "What were you fighting about with Jim Asher here?"

Jim Asher spoke up smoothly. "That was my fault, gentlemen," he said. "I guess I lost my head. I thought the boy pulled the Dandy, too."

The stewards looked sharply at the trainer. "You mean you don't think so now?"

"I—well, no," Asher admitted with well-feigned reluctance. "Chip is a smart jockey. If he wanted to lose the race, why would he keep pulling the colt all the way up to the wire? Even the dumbest apprentice would know better than that."

The stewards' faces showed that was bothering them too. A boy who pulls a horse does it only long enough to be sure he can't catch the leaders, then he rides hell-for-leather after them.

The stewards kept Chip and Asher around for the vet's report. When that came up, Dark Dandy was given a clean bill of health. The saliva test had shown no trace of narcotics.

Sure it wouldn't, Chip thought bitterly.

"The colt showed a sign of cold the other day," Asher ventured then. "It's possible—" he shrugged. "I don't know, of course, but I've seen colts choke up that way."

The stewards were not satisfied. You saw that. But they said at last, grudgingly, "You've got a clean record, James. Mind you keep it that way. We're not sure yet, but . . ."

Chip gathered he was being let off, and he went down the stairs, relieved and yet not relieved. Another race was just finished, and the spectators saw Chip James and booed him roundly.

SING WU was in the jockey house now. He looked up anxiously, but was silent while Chip showered and dressed. Then they went to the diner, and briefly, Chip gave Sing Wu the details.

Sing nodded without surprise, asked, "Do you believe now that Primrose is a thief?"

"I know Jim Asher is, and I suppose—" Chip checked, went on stubbornly, "I've no proof against Harry Primrose."

Sing Wu sighed. "I have," he said softly. "You noticed I was not with you before the race today?"

Chip nodded, and Sing said, "I was in the clubhouse. An old Chinese gentleman is a waiter there. He is from the province of my fathers. He is paid and pledged to be discreet; but as a favor he permitted me to follow him."

Chip knew what was coming then, and it came. "This gentleman places bets for Harry Primrose and Bart Nugent," Sing explained. "The bets they make at the track only, of course. I watched him bet one thousand dollars for them today. He placed it on Five-by-Five, the forty-to-one shot Duffy rode for Nugent."

Chip stood up, his tanned, bony face dead-pan as usual.

Sing asked anxiously, "We'll return to the farm now?"

"No," Chip said curtly, and went out of the diner. He caught a bus and was in Primrose's house an hour, waiting, before Primrose got there.

Primrose was looking very gay, nor did he change when he saw his contract rider. "Well, Chip," he remarked, "too bad about the Dandy today."

"Save that," Chip said flatly, and got up. "I'm engaged to Bonny," he said. "That saves you a beating, big as you are, and maybe worse. Now give me my contract. I want to get out of here."

Harry Primrose's swarthy face darkened, but he smiled. "Figuring to freelance?" he asked lightly.

"That's right."

"Now that's too bad," Primrose said regretfully. "But I'm not ready to break our contract."

"You'll break it, all right," Chip told him. "Now!"

Primrose stopped smiling. "Cut it out!" he snapped. "I said I'm not breaking it. I signed you for a year, and I'm holding you to it. What are you kicking about? You're making the big dough I said you would, aren't you? And by the end of the year you can have your breeding farm."

"I'll have my farm, all right," Chip said. "But not with your dirty money. Now listen, you—"

"No, you listen!" Primrose shouted. "I don't want to talk to you any more. You heard me, and that's all there is to it!"

"Like hell it's all! I—"

"Shut up!" Primrose bawled, and the thick veins were purple swollen in his face. "Tommy Clark!" he yapped. "Tommy Clark! Now will you get out of here, or do I have to give that to the racing association and the newspapers?"

Sing Wu had no counsel to offer that night. The case was too clear. Under contract to Primrose, Chip could not ride for anyone else. And if he quit Primrose, Primrose and Asher would declare he *had* pulled Dark Dandy, and identify him as the hide-out son of the crooked jockey, Tommy Clark.

Chip would almost certainly be ruled off the turf then. He would be finished as a rider, trainer, owner, anything. And branded so, he must be finished with Bonny, too.

"I've got to string along awhile and try to find an out," Chip groaned. He added with more hope than he felt, "The judges will be watching me after today. Primrose knows that. He'll be afraid to put me in the middle again."

"On the contrary," Sing Wu began, and subsided. . . .

THE PAPERS flared for a day over that Dark Dandy race, then dropped it when the association took no action against Chip. The horses moved to Empire, and for the first day or two, Chip James heard catcalls from the customers when he came onto the track on a mount.

But the customers forgot too as Chip's mounts ran strictly according to form in the first ten days at Empire. Primrose and Bart Nugent both started fewer horses, and so Chip had fewer mounts, and better mounts. He won eight races, and in seven of those races, the handicappers picked him to finish in the money. His eighth win was his only long shot of those ten days.

The papers began to praise the Long Shot Kid again, and the bettors began to back him heavily again.

"See?" Chip told Sing Wu. "Primrose has to be good."

"Yes?" Sing asked. He didn't seem convinced at all.

They ran the rich American Handicap on the 23rd. As was the case before the Royal last month, the three favorites were Dark Dandy, Thunder Bird and Gray Goose. But this time, following his fiasco in the Royal, Dark Dandy was held a little longer at 4-1. Thunder Bird and Gray Goose were 3-2.

Jim Asher told Chip on the night be-

fore the Handicap, "Primrose doesn't want any more funny talk, just in case the Dandy has a bad day, so we're putting another boy up on him."

Chip winced slightly. The winning jock in the Handicap would earn $1200. Also, this was a slap in the face before the racing world. On the other hand, Chip never rode a race now without ants in his pants, worrying if the fix was on.

"Who you putting on the Dandy?" Chip asked.

"Georgie Fee," Asher replied, and added when Chip's eyes narrowed, "You are up on Bart Nugent's Thunder Bird. Al Duffy can't ride. He's still banged up from that spill yesterday."

On the surface, it sounded all right. A colt could step in a hole, or run a bad race for no reason at all. And if Dark Dandy ran bad again, with Chip up, heat might well be turned on Primrose and Asher. And Al Duffy *had* been unseated yesterday.

It sounded all right, but Chip didn't like it. He admitted as much to Sing Wu. Sing said nothing, but his long, intelligent eyes were unwinking for a long time, and not twinkling.

WHEN CHIP and Sing came out of their boarding house at daybreak the next morning, two plainclothes men with shields in their hands accosted the jockey. "Come along," they said.

"Wait a minute," Chip protested. "What is this?"

"Don't know," they said. "We were told to bring you in."

"But I didn't do anything. I've got to exercise a horse."

"Exercise your feet, buddy. Let's get goin'."

Chip looked angrily for Sing Wu, but the Chinese had slipped away.

In the station house, Chip cooled his heels on the long bench until nine o'clock. Then a well-dressed, pie-faced man came in with one of the plainclothes dicks, looked at Chip and said disgustedly, "Naw, that's not the fellow who stuck me up."

Chip was turned out, fuming, and hurried to the track. Thunder Bird, of course, had already been worked. The colt was "right on top," Bart Nugent's trainer assured Chip.

Four hours to kill. Chip was nervous as he had never been until the last couple of weeks. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep or read, so he trolleyed into town and found a morning movie. He saw two features, and couldn't have told you of either.

Sing Wu was roaming the jockey house when Chip got there at 1:30. For once, the patient Chinese was in stitches.

"Where were you?" he demanded. "I've been hunting you for two hours." He didn't wait for answer, but grabbed Chip's arm and hurried him outside to a quiet spot on the lawn.

"This is it," Sing said rapidly. "When those cops picked you up this morning, I was suspicious. I had a thought someone did not want you at the track, so I ran there. It was as I thought," he said angrily. "In the dark, they were breezing Thunder Bird. Running this afternoon's race right out of him! I was hidden in the stands and saw it."

Chip's breath caught, then ran evenly again. He thought he wasn't really surprised, only dismayed.

"I have talked with my Chinese friend again," Sing Wu hurried on. "Primrose and Nugent are not betting heavily. Perhaps a thousand dollars. That, of course, is to hold the odds up. Their heavy betting must be through out-of-town bookies."

"What horse are they betting?" Chip snapped.

"Jitterbug. He started higher; but their betting, careful as it is, has forced him down to thirty-to-one."

Thirty-to-one, with say $10,000 on the line with bookies throughout the country, would reap a fortune. You could spread that much on such a big race, when the public is betting freely, without altering the odds so seriously as to arouse suspicion.

"You can't ride, Chip!" Sing declared.

"There is a rumor Gray Goose is not right. Thunder Bird is backed down to even money. If you bring him home out of the lettuce, as you did Dark Dandy two weeks ago in the Royal—" Sing shuddered.

Chip repressed his own shudder. This time he would be a dead pigeon, and that would be okay with Primrose. Primrose knew he couldn't hold Chip much longer, and so he and Asher and Bart Nugent were building this last and biggest coup with him.

Chip thought desperately, and his thoughts were not easy. And then, his slate-colored eyes bleak, he hauled out his wallet and handed Sing Wu $200. "Put this all on Jitterbug," he commanded. "Now! Then meet me in the secretary's office."

Sing looked amazed. "Jitterbug!" he stammered.

"That's right," Chip snapped, and started on a run, so his limp showed, for the clubhouse. . . .

THE SECRETARY of the Empire Jockey Club heard Chip's few direct sentences in startled surprise. "You say Thunder Bird was breezed this morning, and Gray Goose and Dark Dandy will finish behind Jitterbug?" he repeated. "How do you know?"

"I know," Chip replied positively.

"That is hardly proof for us," the secretary said disapprovingly. "You are making some very serious charges."

Chip had been afraid of that. There was only one way out. "I breezed Thunder Bird myself this morning," he said laconically, and turned to Sing Wu, panting in the doorway. "Give me the tickets you just bought for me, Sing," he ordered.

Sing handed them over reluctantly, and Chip tossed them onto the desk before the secretary. $200 on Jitterbug to win.

The secretary's face closed over, dark and ominous. "What made you back down now?" he demanded suspiciously.

Chip shrugged. "You can believe it or not," he said. "I never rode a crooked race on purpose, and I'm not starting now."

The secretary digested that briefly, showed he didn't like it, and picked up his phone. "Get Mr. Primrose and Mr. Nugent and their trainers and bring them here," he directed. And he told Chip and Sing Wu, "Stay where you are."

The first race was already over when Primrose, Nugent and their trainers were ushered into the office. Those four looked at Chip sharply, venomously, and then masked their faces.

"GENTLEMEN," the secretary said, "some serious charges have been brought here. We haven't the time to go into them now. However—Mr. Nugent, your Thunder Bird is the top favorite in the American Handicap today. I would advise you not to start him if you suspect he might not run true to form."

"Why, Mr. Secretary—" Nugent started to stammer.

The secretary spoke over him. "The same holds true for you with respect to Dark Dandy, Mr. Primrose," he said. "I might add that Chip James will not be permitted to ride today, and I am ordering the boy on Jitterbug supplanted."

"You've been listening to this little liar, James!" Primrose broke out in rage. "If you knew who he was—"

"Never mind that, Harry," Nugent tried to stop him.

But Primrose's violent temper was flaring. "He's Tommy Clark's son, that's who he is!" he shouted. "The dirtiest jock who ever lived, and his brat here is just as bad!"

Chip, his face white, leaped for Primrose, but big Bart Nugent and his trainer caught and pinned him. Nugent was clever enough to answer the new suspicion in the secretary's face.

"We just found out about this," Nugent lied smoothly. "We were sorry for the boy, and wanted to give him a

chance to live down his name. But now—" Nugent shrugged regretfully.

Chip and Sing Wu watched the American Handicap from the rail. First they heard the disappointed groans come out of the stands when it was announced that Thunder Bird was scratched. Then they watched a newly chastened Georgie Fee, on Dark Dandy, ride a thrilling, ding-dong race against Gray Goose.

Gray Goose copped the rich Handicap by half a length over Dark Dandy. Sundown was third. Jitterbug, with Johnny Monroe up in the sudden shift of jockeys, finished no place at all.

"Well," Sing Wu sighed, "at least you spoiled their killing and lost them a big pot of money in bets, besides."

They had saved the public from a master rooking, too. But as Chip voiced it discouragedly, "Where does it leave us?"

They got that answer three days later, from the racing association. Because of his confession before the race, Chip James was being set down for "only ninety days."

Only ninety days! With the papers blaring Chip's identity as the late and perfidious Tommy Clark's son—"A Chip off the old block," one tabloid put it—the racing association might just as well have said ninety years. Everyone knew that the Long Shot Kid was all through as a big-time and big money reinsman.

Chip knew he was all through in every other way. . . .

SING WU stayed on the circuit to make what money he could as a valet, and Chip returned to his handful of empty acres in the Jersey hills. He was puttering around there, and not doing much else, when Bonny arrived a month later.

Bonny wore the insignia of a lieutenant, j. g., and she was lovely in her sympathy. "A fine beau I've got," she tried to jeer. "I have to come down here to remind him he promised to marry me."

Chip felt his heart squeeze. "You're pretty swell, Bonny, wanting to stick by me," he said huskily. "But I can't let you do it. My name is mud—"

"Not to me," Bonny said quickly. "I know you never did anything dishonest."

Chip's eyes showed his gratitude. "I can't get in the Navy with you because of my limp," he said. "I can't make a living with horses, the only thing I know, because they say I'm a crook. It's no use, Bonny."

"What do you mean, 'it's no use?'" Bonny said hotly. "Are you trying to tell me they've got you licked?"

Chip shrugged. "Licked or cornered, it's the same thing," he said. He looked at her. "There's another thing. Harry Primrose is your foster-father. He's my —well, enemy."

Bonny's eyes didn't waver. "If he is your enemy, then he's my enemy too," she said. "If he loved me, he would have stood up for you, not branded you. He showed me he is a liar, too. Come with me, Chip. I want to show you something."

Chip followed, touched by this girl's loyalty so that he had to fight to keep the mist out of his eyes.

Bonny led the way into the main Primrose barn to a loose box stall. She only pointed there, not saying anything, and Chip looked. He looked again, more closely, then stiffened.

The chestnut filly in there was Heart's Desire. But not the Heart's Desire Chip had known and held in his heart. That filly had had a rich glossy coat and a tail like a proud banner. Lustrous eyes full of eager spirit. Full of beautiful run.

This filly's coat was rough and uncared for. Her tail drooped. Her eyes were spiritless. When Ship held out his hand, she hesitated before she came to nuzzle it listlessly.

"Harry promised to keep her for you," Bonny said angrily. "He promised not to race her. But he put her out on the cheap tracks, because she stumbled and couldn't make him any money." Her

voice broke. "Look at her! Crooked men pulled her, doped her, broke her spirit. I have friends here. They told me. I claimed her yesterday in a cheap five-hundred-dollar race."

Chip's rage rose to match Bonny's own, to top it. And then, after a while, he said, "Don't cry, baby. Her blood is the best. I'll fix her for you. Make her hold up her head again."

"Fix her for yourself!" Bonny said fiercely. "For both of us. Maybe some day we'll find a way."

"Sure," Chip said soothingly. "Sure." Anything to make Bonny feel better. "We'll find a way," he said.

So then there was something to do. A way to keep busy. Chip worked with Heart's Desire. He groomed her, walked her, took a long time before he rode her. At first, feeling even Chip on her back, the filly was unsure. On the practice track, she pulled up in the stretch as if jerked by invisible hands.

Chip kept working patiently, and Bonny watched and helped. Chip brought out his own ancient roan, and Bonny rode the roan around the track alongside Chip on Heart's Desire.

After a while, gradually, Heart's Desire stopped quitting in the stretch. After a while she stopped stumbling, and showed some of her old desire to run. And gradually a tiny dream winked sometimes in Chip's eyes.

Bonny saw all that and was glad. And in the last week of her furlough, she and Chip loaded Heart's Desire into the old van and trundled her the few miles to the annual fair. They got a boy to put up on her there. But in the first day's racing Heart's Desire stumbled and ran fifth in a field of eight.

CHIP WORKED with the filly, fed her, groomed and talked to her. Heart's Desire's coat was fine and glossy again. She nipped Chip playfully. This track was not under the jurisdiction of the racing association, so Chip rode Heart's Desire himself on the last day of the fair. The filly didn't stumble. Her long tail fanning, she flashed away from the field to turn a 1:39 mile.

That hint of a dream was brighter in Chip's slate-colored eyes then, and Bonny could leave him with a lighter heart. She was reporting for duty on the West Coast.

Bonny left on a Saturday. Sing Wu appeared at the farm the following Tuesday. Sing asked, "You know about Primrose? He is in trouble with the income tax bureau. The law states, you know, that money won on bets must be reported as income."

Chip wanted to forget Harry Primrose. "I suppose he threw it all away on his parties and plushy living," he said indifferently. Then he eyed Sing curiously. "But how do—"

"My friend, the Chinese waiter, is a good American," Sing explained casually. "He agreed with me that one should not cheat the government. And this is war time! He may have—ah—informed the government of many of Mr. Primrose's winning bets."

Chip only shrugged, and Sing went on: "Primrose needs money desperately in order to stay out of jail. We spoiled his killing in the American Handicap, and he has been forced to be honest since. The officials watch him and Bart Nugent like hawks."

Sing was coming to something, Chip waited.

"I knew Primrose would make some last crooked attempt to save his greedy skin," Sing said. "I watched and listened, and it was not too difficult to discover his plan."

Chip was more interested now. "Yeah?" he grunted.

Sing asked, "You read perhaps of the new track up north, in Hartfield?" And when Chip nodded, Sing continued. "Hartfield, you know, is now the center of great war industries. Workers crowding in have money to spend on the ponies."

"Even so, they can't attract the big stables," Chip declared. "With transportation so tough now, and Hartfield

so far off the main stem, all they can get are the little guys."

"Exactly," Sing agreed. "But the Hartfield promoters have money and ambition, so they are putting on a Derby on Labor Day. Thirty thousand dollars added, with twenty thousand to the winning horse. They hope that will draw some good horses."

"It won't," Chip said. "There are two rich races in Aqua and Arlington that day. Why go all the way to Hartfield, and then have to come all the way back right afterward?"

"Harry Primrose is coming," Sing Wu said softly. "Primrose and Bart Nugent, and Al Duffy and Georgie Fee. The horses will be Primrose's Dark Dandy and Nugent's Two Spades."

"The sons of guns!" Chip exclaimed. "Dark Dandy to draw the sucker money and Two Spades the sleeper, eh?"

"Of course." Sing sighed wistfully. "If only we had a horse! It need not be a truly great horse, Chip. Only good enough—"

Only good enough to cop a $20,000 purse!

"Stop dreaming," Chip said sourly. $20,000! That would finish buying this farm, and start a breeding string from Heart's Desire—

Heart's Desire! Chill excitement struck through Chip, and he cried, "We've got a horse! Maybe she'll stumble. Maybe she'll quit. But if she runs true to form, she'll beat Two Spades hands down. Yes, and maybe Dark Dandy too!"

Sing Wu looked a little alarmed. "You are feeling all right, Chip?" he inquired.

"I feel fine! Listen!" Chip talked, and Sing Wu beamed again, but soberly.

"It's an awful long chance," Chip concluded, "but—"

"A very long chance," Sing agreed. "And dangerous." His eyes twinkled. "But are you not the Long Shot Kid?"

Traveling slowly, stopping at small, out-of-the-way tracks to tune Heart's Desire in small, unimportant races, they checked in at Hartfield on the eve of Labor Day. . . .

SOME twenty thousand war workers in the stands on Labor Day, and ten horses parading to the post behind the red-coated postillion for Hartfield's first Derby. The skies were cloudy, and a drizzle of rain fell, but the mincing horses and their bright-silked jockeys shone like gay Christmas toys.

The spectators buzzed and cheered. They cheered loudest for Dark Dandy, the big favorite today, backed down to 1-3. That was the big-time jock, Georgie Fee, aboard him. The fans cheered John L., second favorite at 2-1.

The fans mixed in a few boos among the cheers. The boos were for the dead-panned, gum-chewing, lean little bag of bones aboard a cheap plater, Heart's Desire, a 30-1 shot. But the Long Shot Kid wasn't bringing home that pretty pig today!

Hunched sidewise on Heart's Desire, crooning to her now and then, Chip James heard the boos and paid them no heed. He was hearing Al Duffy, behind him on Two Spades. "Tommy Clark," Duffy was yapping. "Tommy Clark. Try the least thing today, you drip, and this mob will take you apart!"

Chip looked at the tote board. Two Spades was down now to 12-1. All the bookie money, Primrose and Nugent money, was doing that at the end, before the suckers could catch a hunch and get on the "sleeper" too.

Another jock spoke from behind Duffy. "Tell that Chip James punk not to pull any fast stuff on the rail today," that jock said loudly to Al Duffy. "Or I'll sure as hell put him over the rail, and this crowd will give me a medal."

That was Hank Dahl, a surprise entry to Chip and Sing Wu. Dahl was on some unknown colt named Night Owl.

Primrose and Nugent are sure playin' it safe, Chip thought grimly. Fee and Dahl to take care of any dangerous horses, while Al Duffy comes home with Two Spades.

Those jocks were openly contemptuous of the plater, Heart's Desire, and Chip hugged that thought to him as a high trump. Maybe, before they woke up to what he had under him . . .

HARTFIELD had its electric eye gate too, and the joyful roar of the crowd, "They're off!" came after less than twenty seconds at the barrier. Dark Dandy broke on top, on the rail, and Hank Dahl on Night Owl broke almost as fast from the number-three slot.

Zinging through the ruck in the middle, Chip saw the pattern take shape before they hit the first turn. Georgie Fee on Dark Dandy and Hank Dahl on Night Owl had the horse they feared most, the 2-1 John L., sewed tight in a pocket.

The turns were where you gambled your luck and your skill, and Chip wanted the rail for Heart's Desire. John L., he figured, would have to go wide, and those two would go with him—

"Watch it!" Chip shrilled as they hit into the turn, and he pointed Heart's Desire at the long angle over Al Duffy on Two Spades. Al Duffy shouted back, "Watch it yourself!" and shouted a curse as Chip came on.

"Here I come!" Chip shrilled. Duffy would have to let him over. He would have to, riding that sleeper, that dirty coup horse of Primrose and Nugent.

Duffy swerved and let Heart's Desire steal the rail. He couldn't chance a bumping, as Chip knew he couldn't.

Chip ghosted a tiny grin. So far, so good. But he frowned as they swept out of the turn into the cloudy drizzle of the backstretch. Heart's Desire was running freely, gladly, but if she stepped into a soft spot on this wet track, with her tendency to stumble at any time—

Chip pushed that fear out of his mind, watching John L. start outside halfway down the backstretch. Now, if this race was jigged as he and Sing Wu figured it. . . . Yep! there they went, Dark Dandy and Night Owl, swerving out to keep John L. pocketed.

Two other horses cut in to try to steal the rail then, but Chip was touching Heart's Desire lightly with his bat, singing, "Here we go, baby! Step, now!" And Heart's Desire stepped. She lengthened out and flew along the rail, leaving those two challenging horses behind.

"Pretty baby," Chip crooned, and wrapped in his filly a notch, so she still raced hard, but did not thunder. A red colt boomed out of the pack and raced even with Heart's Desire through a furlong. Then he dropped back, his short threat done.

Primrose and Nugent had laid this right then. Only two real horses in the field, Dark Dandy and John L. But the short-priced Dandy was running himself out right now, teaming with Night Owl to block out John L. at the same time. Duffy's Two Spades was good enough to beat these other dogs—except Heart's Desire.

Chip let himself say that now. He even let himself laugh aloud. He knew the feel of a horse, and he knew he was coming home in front with Heart's Desire. The filly was not going to stumble. She wasn't going to quit. She knew it, too! Chip felt it in her every fiercely eager bound.

Al Duffy, starting to make his move on Two Spades before the home turn, saw it, too. Duffy could not eat that length between him and Heart's Desire, and he raised a furious, incredulous bellow: "Georgie! Hank! Get Chip!"

Through the veils of rain, Chip saw George Fee and Hank Dahl look around, show the same incredulous fury as Duffy. Then they were shouting at each other, and Chip swore because they had not missed this just two seconds longer. He would be in the turn then.

HANK DAHL swung his Night Owl in on John L. from the outside, and Georgie Fee fairly lifted Dark Dandy half across the track to cut off Heart's Desire. The rain and clouds shrouded this, but could not hide it completely.

The boy on John L. shouted alarm as Night Owl loomed on him, and Chip thought in the split-second of free thought he had, that those guys must be sure they could get away with murder. And maybe they could. This was ambitious Hartfield's first Derby. They wouldn't want to throw it out on a foul.

"Foul, hell!" Chip snarled, and put the bat to Heart's Desire, driving her at that fast closing hole on the rail. If only she didn't quit now, or stumble—

"I'm comin' through!" Chip keened. "Georgie, you louse, I'm comin' through! Gimme room or I'll pile you up!"

The stands couldn't see it clearly, but they screamed as John L. skidded across the track and went down. Night Owl didn't go down. Hank Dahl spun him around and lit out after the leaders. But Dahl and John L. were both out of this race.

The ambulance was already spinning out of the infield ahead. Georgie Fee saw it. Georgie Fee, Chip figured, would do anything for money. Anything short of suicide. And closing this hole against Chip and Heart's Desire was going to be suicide!

"I'm comin' through!" Chip began again, and Georgie Fee swerved just enough to leave room on the rail for Heart's Desire. Heart's Desire was up there, and Georgie Fee reached for Chip's saddle cloth. He reached, hung on as Chip beat at his hand with the shotted bat he had carried into this race.

They went into the turn that way, and Heart's Desire was slowed just enough to let Al Duffy on Two Spades pull almost even, outside Georgie Fee. Georgie's hand was laid open from fingers to wrist from Chip's shotted bat, and now he cursed and lashed his whip in Chip's face and grabbed Chip's pants.

Chip timed his balance, arced his right fist, and Georgie Fee slammed back on his saddle. Then Chip was gone. . . .

THE CROWD turned their screams from the accident to wilder bedlam as those two long shots—Al Duffy on Two Spades and Chip James on Heart's Desire—whirled out of the last turn and began thundering the stretch for the wire.

"Two Spades. . . Come on, Heart's Desire!"

Heart's Desire came on. Even with Two Spades now, then drumming a nose ahead. A neck. "We go, baby!" Chip sang, and never noticed the blood spurting down his face from Fee's whip.

"Come on, sweetheart!" Chip begged, and saw Al Duffy's face twist in helpless fury as they inched away from him. No pot of gold for Duffy today, nor for Harry Primrose. The can for Primrose. And a farm for Chip James and his Bonny.

"Baby!" Chip shrilled, and touched the filly once more before the wire, just to make sure. She couldn't stumble now. She couldn't! Chip prayed. And she didn't. This was Heart's Desire, by War Heart out of Desire, come into her own. Her long light tail fanning high behind her like a triumphant banner, Heart's Desire leaped and fled under that wire first.

Chip wrapped her in long past the finish wire. His always steady hands were shaking now. He turned her for the return to the winner's circle, and the horseshoe of roses. He rode slowly back through the thunder of the stands, and he neither heard them nor saw them.

Chip was seeing his rolling green pastures. His fine barns. The foals Heart's Desire and other fine mares would give him. Chip saw himself riding those acres with Bonny. He smiled, seeming to hear Sing Wu say, "It was written. . . ."

Only distance could save the boat from being swamped when the Cygnet went down

Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp

By

J. B. Ryan

THE TORPEDO struck while the lifeboat was less than a dozen yards away from the ship. Doug Ramsey, working desperately at the oars with his shipmates, glimpsed the long grey shape slithering through the water. The shell exploded against the hull of the doomed freighter, but no one looked up to see the vessel break in two; only distance could save the boat from being

swamped when the *Cygnet* went down.

A second detonation heralded the blowing-up of the boilers. Water cascaded on the laboring lifeboat as though the craft had run smack into a waterfall. The sea underneath heaved and twisted, the boat spun crazily. Ramsey's oar jerked against the thole-pin, slammed into his chest, knocking him against the gunwale. Another sailor, striving to maintain his balance in the rocking boat, tripped over a thwart and his knee drove into Ramsey's face. The sailor would have gone overboard into the swirling water but Ramsey, half-stunned and gasping, managed to catch the man and haul him back.

Through all this, Ramsey had kept his grip on the oar. On his knees, he dug the blade into the watery turmoil and fought with his companions to keep the boat upright. Somehow the grim men won through; the great wave created by the *Cygnet* passed on, leaving the small boat bobbing and half-filled with water, but safe.

The oarsmen, exhausted by the short but terrific struggle, were glad to rest. The panting Ramsey took a deep breath. But when he straightened his shoulders there was a faint stab of pain in his chest. The sensation was fleeting, and did not return when he inhaled again.

A year ago, when he had been Douglas C. Ramsey, Ph. D., such physical exertion would have left him slumped across the thwarts sobbing and coughing for air, like Jones the oiler who had been wounded by the shell that had demolished the radio antennae. Ramsey tried to take comfort from such evidence that the year spent as a seaman had just about cured that spotted lung that had caused the Army to reject him. It would not be long before bronzed and stalwart Ramsey would be accepted as promptly as the flat-chested college professor had been turned down.

The sea was still dark under the dim stars that had enabled the submarine to creep up on the freighter in spite of the watch maintained by Captain Kearns. Already the *Cygnet* was gone, her grave marked only by subsiding bubbles and a pall of smoke.

The captain, a great gash on his forehead, had had to be carried over the side when the Second Officer had given the order to abandon ship. He was still unconscious, his head cradled in his sister's arms to keep his mouth and nostrils free of the sloshing bilge water. It had probably been the girl, crouching beside her brother and clinging to the nearest thwart, who had prevented the helpless man from being pitched into the sea when the boat had come within a hair of turning turtle.

RAMSEY shifted on the seat to bring himself nearer to the girl. "How is the captain, Miss Kearns?"

Enid looked up. Like everyone else in the lifeboat, she was drenched, and the wetting made her dark-red hair appear almost black in the murky light, accentuating an oval face wan with strain. "I—he is still breathing." She tried to smile. "But I'm afraid he has been wounded in the chest also."

Ramsey knelt beside her and shifted the skipper's weight to his own knee. He pulled back the coat and tore open the wet shirt. Below Craig Kearns' right shoulder was a jagged cut that it would have taken the palm of a hand to cover. The captain's breathing was regular but slightly rasping.

"This is bad, Miss Kearns." Ramsey frowned. "Let's hope a Navy patrol arrives without delay. Your brother should be rushed to a hospital—"

"Look!" A man in the bow half-rose, pointing ahead. "The sub!"

Out of the foglike obscurity came the submarine, the grey-black hull slicing through the waves, the conning tower silhouetted against the blur of the sky. Ramsey could hear the throbbing of engines, and the submersible passed the lifeboat so close that the white-foamed wake slapped against the little craft.

The lifeboat danced away, dipped into a trough of waves, and when the next

swell lifted them the sub had reached the spot where the *Cygnet* had sunk. From the foredeck a searchlight shot over the high-pointed bow and moved over the water in widening circles, finally coming to rest on the other of the two lifeboats that had put away from the freighter. In the glare Ramsey could see the half dozen or so figures in the second boat.

The beam steadied and the sub circled, drawing nearer to the spotlighted boat. Ramsey caught his breath. "God!" he grated through clenched teeth. "They're going to shell the lifeboats!"

THE U-BOAT stopped and a muffled shout sounded. A man stood up in the lifeboat, facing the searchlight. By the set of his shoulders Ramsey recognized the man as Second Officer Tattersall. Tattersall's arm gestured in answer to the hail from the submarine, but the lifeboats were too far apart for Ramsey to hear what was being said.

The light winked out abruptly. The ghostly bulk of the submarine shifted, turning. The searchlight fingered out again, questing over the wave-broken water.

"It must be us they're looking for," muttered Ramsey, slightly mystified. The Nazis had not molested Tattersall's boat.

The light found and flooded over the lifeboat. The creeping submarine slowed, and one of the figures on the deck tilted a machinegun to bear directly on the boat's occupants. An officer, leaning against the rail cupped his hands to his mouth. "Ahoy!" he called in English. "Which one of you is the captain?"

Ramsey heard the gasp that escaped the girl beside him. "They—they have come for him!" she whispered, and her arm moved toward the wounded man in an instinctive gesture of protection.

Ramsey knew now why the submarine had approached after blowing the *Cygnet* out of the water. These raiders of the deep were no longer content with the destruction they were creating among the United Nations' shipping. Whenever they had opportunity, as they had obtained now by shooting away the wireless before a warning could be broadcast, the Germans took with them the captains of these freighters and tankers. The technique, if continued, would prove more damaging to the Allied war effort than the actual sinking of ships, as it takes longer to train a master mariner than it does to build a cargo vessel.

"Well?" the submarine commander shouted. "Can't you hear me?"

It would do no good to claim that Captain Kearns was not in the lifeboat. The other boat undoubtedly had already informed the Germans of the skipper's whereabouts.

Something touched against Ramsey's trousers—the sodden cap of Captain Kearns floating in the water that reached to Ramsey's ankles. His fingers closed on the master's cap and he stood up.

"I am the captain," he lifted his voice in answer. "What do you want?"

The quixotic attempt to save Captain Kearns might succeed. To protect themselves against the fog and coolness of the Norwegian waters, Ramsey, like the other sailors, was wearing a thick woolen coat; and there was nothing to distinguish the garment from Kearns' pea-jacket. Now that Ramsey had the cap—

THE GERMAN said, "Have your men row alongside, Captain. We are taking you aboard the submarine."

Ramsey nodded briefly, and looked down at the men in the boat, who were staring at him blankly. "Pull over to the submarine, men."

The puzzled sailors made no move to obey. Enid caught at Ramsey's sleeve.

"No—you can't do this, sir!"

Ramsey's voice dropped so that the men on the submarine could not overhear. "Captain Kearns will die if he is taken to a German prison camp. I can pass myself off as him long enough for you to get away. Take your brother back to England, Miss Kearns. Nurse him back to health and send him to sea

again. Good captains must be kept in service."

"Come on board, Captain!" The U-boat officer was becoming impatient. "Must we empty this machinegun into your boat before you're convinced that we will tolerate no nonsense?"

"How about it, boys?" Ramsey's low voice was almost a whisper. "Do you want to hand the skipper over to those fellows?"

A burly oiler growled refusal and slid an oar over the gunwale and into the water. Other oars clattered into position and the boat moved toward the waiting submarine. Enid's fingers slid down Ramsey's arm to grip his hand tightly.

"Thank you!" she murmured huskily. "Would you tell me your name, so that I may pray for you?"

"I'm just a member of the crew." Ramsey tried to speak lightly. "But the name is Douglas Ramsey."

The boat bumped against the hull of the sub and steadied. Ramsey caught the rungs of the ladder and a sailor leaned down to help him gain the spray-washed deck of the undersea craft. The German commander surveyed the newcomer from head to foot. "You are Captain Craig Kearns?" he inquired.

Ramsey nodded, conscious of inner anxiety. He had assumed that to these Germans the *Cygnet* was just another ship; but if these fellows knew the name of the ship and the identity of the master—

However, it seemed that the commander knew Kearns by name only. His expression of satisfaction was not lessened by his scrutiny of Ramsey. "*Gut!*" he grunted. "My name, Herr Kapitan, is Schmidt." He turned once more to the rail.

"The captain's sister," he called down to the lifeboat. "Miss Enid Kearns—she is to join us also."

"Eh?" Ramsey's head lifted quickly. "What was that?" He brushed aside a sailor who stood in his path and caught Schmidt by the arm. "Herr Kommandant! Miss—my sister knows nothing of ships. Isn't it enough that I am willing to go with you?"

THE PLEA fell on deaf ears. "Come, Miss Kearns," said Schmidt. "You will find the submarine more comfortable than an open boat."

"No!" Ramsey shouted. "Shove off, men! Get Miss Kearns away from here!"

The oarsmen below stirred uncertainly. Schmidt said, with cold deliberation, "If that boat moves, Lieutenant Krauss, you are to fire."

The officer behind the machinegun nodded, and the muzzle of his weapon moved to cover the men who had touched the oars. The relentless searchlight made every movement in the boat visible, exposed with cinema clarity the changing expressions on every upturned face. Ramsey gripped the rail tightly.

"Enid—" he cried, then paused. What could he say? To declare that he was not Kearns would not better the girl's situation. Whether the submarine carried off Ramsey or the true captain, Enid would be the German's prisoner. And Ramsey could stand the rigors of captivity better than the wounded man.

"We are waiting, Miss Kearns," said Schmidt.

The red-haired girl turned her pale face toward the speaker. Her arms and knee still supported her unconscious brother. Slowly she shifted position, resting the body of her brother against a thwart, then rose to approach the ladder leading up the side of the submarine.

Ramsey hurried forward to meet her, and the Nazi sailor who was on the point of assisting the girl to the deck glanced inquiringly at Schmidt. The U-boat commander gestured for his subordinate not to interfere.

Thus, while Ramsey was helping the girl up beside him, there was an opportunity for the exchange of furtive whispers. "I am sorry," Ramsey murmured. "I wish there was something I could do to spare you this."

She smiled faintly. "I don't mind," she answered in an undertone. "I am

willing to do as much as you, a stranger, are doing to save Craig."

Commander Schmidt was beside them then. The German waved for the girl and the man to proceed him toward the conning tower, down the hatch and into the instrument-crowded control room. The hatch closed, and clanging valves and the rising whine of motors announced that the vessel was preparing to submerge.

"What is the meaning of this, Herr Schmidt?" Ramsey demanded. "I know you Germans are picking off ship captains, but to kidnap a girl is nothing short of an outrage."

Schmidt shrugged. "I am only following orders, Captain," he said mildly. "My instructions were to sink the *Cygnet* and to take Captain Kearns and his sister to Major von Meding."

"Von Meding?" As Ramsey repeated the name, he watched Enid. "Who is he?" But the name von Meding seemed to mean nothing to the girl.

"You will discover that in due time," Schmidt parried. "I am taking you to Skogen, a Norwegian town you doubtless know very well."

THE PRISONERS were shown into a tiny cabin and locked in. The Germans did not offer them any dry garments. However, the interior of the submarine was warm, if stuffy, and their wet clothing would dry out in a short while.

Ramsey stood in the center of the cabin while Enid perched herself on the edge of the room's single bunk. "You think Craig will be all right, Mr. Ramsey?"

"Yes," he said. "The men will keep the captain comfortable, and the boats are probably already headed back to the shipping lanes of the convoys. They should be picked up tomorrow or the next day at latest."

He liked Enid Kearns for the concern she was showing over her brother, forgetting entirely her own grimly serious predicament. That had been Ramsey's first trip on the *Cygnet*. All the crew had been British except himself and a Norwegian named Lunde. Ramsey was an American. His previous ship, returning from Murmansk, had been forced to put into Newcastle for repairs. Ramsey, not wishing to be idle, had shipped on the *Cygnet*. He had believed that the cargo of ammunition, rifles and machineguns was destined for Russia, but when darkness had fallen the evening before, Captain Kearns had pulled out from the convoy of which he was a part and had headed through the foglike mist toward the coast of Norway.

"Miss Kearns," Ramsey asked, "who is this von Meding?"

"I don't know. But I think I know why he ordered Craig made prisoner. The *Cygnet* had another unofficial name, Mr. Ramsey—the Will-o'-the-Wisp."

"Will-o'-theWisp? I don't believe I ever heard of it."

She smiled. "No. Neither the English nor the Germans advertise the *Cygnet's* activities. You see, Craig and I are half Norwegian, and although we were born and raised in England, we spent every summer with our mother's people. Craig especially knows the fjords and mountains of Norway as well as he knows England. For more than a year he has been smuggling guns into Norway, guns that are hidden away against the day when they can be turned on the invader."

He nodded. It was logical to assume that such activities were going on from Finmark to Gascony.

ENID CONTINUED. "Because of his knowledge of Norway's coast, Craig became one of the most successful of the gunrunners. Already the Norwegians speak of the Will-o'-the-Wisp, the phantom ship that flits in and out of the fjords and islands, keeping every rendezvous for delivery of the guns in spite of the Germans' vigilance. They even use the same term for Craig—Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp."

Her blue eyes crinkled in a smile. "So you see you and I have done more than

save my brother's life. The Germans will boast of this feat, and they will be dumfounded when the Will-o'-the-Wisp returns to plague them."

Ramsey was thoughtful. "Did you always accompany the captain on these dangerous expeditions? Competent though he was, he must have known there was always a chance that he would come to grief."

"This was my second trip," she said. "We are arming all of Norway, and have to guard against betrayal. Craig was to land me near Skogen, and I was to work ahead of him, making contacts in the various towns for the handling of the next cargoes of guns."

"Skogen! That's where Major von Meding waits for us! I don't like this. It looks as if you have already been betrayed. How did Schmidt know the name of the master of the *Cygnet?* How did he know you were on board?"

"I suppose their spies located us in Newcastle. But can't we tell Schmidt now that you are not my brother? He might be prevailed upon to release us, rather than take us into Skogen and admit to von Meding that he was duped into bungling his task."

Ramsey shook his head. "We can't do that. If Schmidt knew the truth, the submarine would hunt out the drifting lifeboats and get Captain Kearns. We must keep up this pretense at least long enough for the *Cygnet* survivors to be picked up."

"But it may be days before Craig is rescued—and we should be in Skogen some time tomorrow morning."

"Even then we can carry on." Ramsey smiled reassuringly. "I don't believe Captain Kearns and von Meding knew each other personally. Remember, Schmidt was not surprised when I failed to recognize the major's name."

According to Ramsey's wrist watch, it lacked but an hour of midday when Commander Schmidt finally put in an appearance. "You and Miss Kearns may come up on deck, Herr Kapitan," he announced. "We have arrived."

The submarine had surfaced and was moving at reduced speed through the water. On the conning tower, Ramsey breathed gratefully of the fresh air. The sub was entering an inlet wide enough to be classed as a harbor. A small hilly island lay astern of the U-boat, and ahead was a more rugged coast, with a town nestling at the broad foot of a tree-clad mountain.

The submarine came to a stop some distance away from the few dilapidated fishing smacks tied up to a small jetty. Schmidt waved for Enid and Ramsey to descend from the conning tower to the foredeck, where sailors were launching a collapsible boat. Four men, including Schmidt, followed the couple into the boat.

Ashore a group of mildly curious spectators watched the newcomers' approach. Among them were two German soldiers, one of whom Schmidt addressed as Fritz.

"This is the man and the girl we have been expecting?" Fritz asked.

"*Ja,*" nodded Schmidt. "Captain Kearns and his sister."

There was a stir among the Norwegians in the background. Schmidt grinned sardonically at the crowd. "Yes," he said, "your Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp has been netted at last."

"The Herr Major will be pleased," said Fritz.

THE BEST house in town had been taken over as a residence for Major Manfred von Meding, commander of this garrison in northern Norway. Through the cobbled streets of Skogen Schmidt escorted his prizes, the guards of soldiers increasing to a full dozen by the time the destination was reached. Ramsey had just sighted the house, with the swastika flag waving over it, when Enid touched his arm.

"You can tell von Meding the truth," she whispered. "Craig is safe now, or will be before they can find him again."

Major von Meding, a blond man with a colorless face and pouch-underlined

eyes, rose slowly from his seat at a low desk as his visitors entered. "Ah," he murmured to Schmidt, "you are on time, *mein Freund.* I have only just completed my preparations to receive you." He surveyed the two prisoners. "You had no trouble?"

"Everything took place as planned, Herr Major," reported Schmidt. "Lunde signaled the *Cygnet's* position, enabling us to find the vessel even though it was traveling without lights. We—"

Von Meding moved his hand disinterestedly. "Spare me the details. I am interested only in results. I relieve you of further responsibility for these people."

There was a brisk exchange of Nazi salutes and Schmidt and his sailors withdrew. Von Meding said, "Sergeant Bocker, I place Fraulein Kearns in your custody until further notice. The rest of you may go, leaving Fritz on guard at the door. I wish a few words alone with Captain Kearns."

EVERYONE left but Fritz. Ramsey tried to see Enid as she went into the hall, but the closing of the door not only prevented him from seeing where she was being taken, but also cut off any chance to learn which man was Sergeant Bocker.

Von Meding said, "Be seated, Captain. Do you care to smoke?"

"No, thanks," Ramsey said as he sat down. The German lighted a cigarette, studying his prisoner. The man's baggy-skinned eyes were keen, and Ramsey hoped the major had not secured a good description of Captain Kearns. Kearns was a freckle-faced carrot-top; Ramsey was black-haired, and tanned an even brown, whereas Kearns, being very fair, was sunburned.

"You are a much younger man than I expected, Captain," von Meding remarked. There was no suspicion in his tone and Ramsey felt more at ease. "I understood that the famous Will-o'-the-Wisp was thirty years old."

Ramsey grinned. "I am afraid there are many things about me that are due to disappoint you, *mein Herr,*" he responded.

"No doubt. Heroes seldom come up to their reputations." He inhaled on the cigarette. "Now, Captain, you can save both of us considerable unpleasantness if you answer my questions. Who are the Norwegians who were to receive your shipload of war material?"

Ramsey's brows lifted. "You expect me to tell you that? Wouldn't it have been much simpler to follow the *Cygnet* and see where we landed the cargo?"

Von Meding scowled. "You know we have tried that, only to lose you among the fjords. The last time we trailed you, a destroyer ran aground in shallow water. It was then that I resolved not to attempt to capture the *Cygnet* itself but to get you. With the help of Lunde, our man, we intercepted you on the high seas and had you brought here."

A sardonic smile touched the German's thin mouth. "And the thing does not end here. I intend to make the name of the Will-o'-the-Wisp a thing of dread among these Norse rebels. You, Captain Kearns, are not to be treated as a prisoner of war. You will help me find the cached guns we know you have landed in this country and get names of the people who have hidden them."

"You know I cannot do that."

Von Meding sighed. "You stubborn English! You are aware that I can break your spirit, Captain? In you I have the means of uprooting the seething underground activity that is a nightmare to Berlin; my task is to render Norway harmless against the day of the Allied invasion. The Gestapo can make you talk, so why not be sensible and yield to the inevitable?"

"I have nothing to say. In the end you can only kill me. So do your worst, and be damned."

The major studied the ash on his cigarette. "We do not intend to start on you, Captain," he murmured. "We shall commence with your sister."

"Eh?" Ramsey started. "You mean you would torture *her?*"

"So I do ruffle your equanimity?" grinned von Meding. "We humans are oddly constituted, *nicht wahr?* You, *mein Herr,* are prepared to accept martyrdom for a warped ideology, but you blanch at the thought of pain and suffering for someone dear to you."

"But—Enid knows nothing of my activities. You can kill her by inches and she could tell you exactly nothing."

"I am aware of that," von Meding said coldly. "It is you, Captain, who can end or prolong her agony."

RAMSEY'S mouth felt suddenly dry. Like the rest of the world, he had heard of the scientific tortures of the Gestapo. And it was too late now to save the girl from the fate in store for her; he would not be believed if he tried to convince Major von Meding that he was not Craig Kearns, and that neither he nor Enid could supply the information the Germans desired.

Von Meding said, "It was in the vicinity of Skogen that you gave us the slip a month ago, Captain. Therefore it is reasonable to suppose this whole district is honeycombed with hidden guns. My spies have been unable to locate the places of concealment or the names of the natives who are in revolt against the Reich, so you must tell us."

Ramsey took a deep breath. "I cannot do that—for more reasons than you will ever know."

"You know the alternative?"

Ramsey nodded. "I am prepared to die rather than betray brave men who trusted me. And Enid, my sister, I am sure, is willing to give her life to the same great cause."

"I fear, Captain," said von Meding, "that you do not realize to what you are condemning your sister simply because you have been taught that it is the thing to do." The major dropped his cigarette butt and rubbed it to shreds with his boot. "You will shackle this man, Fritz," he said to the man beside the door.

The guard produced handcuffs and snapped them on Ramsey's wrists. A car was summoned, then von Meding and Fritz conducted the American out of the house. "I am taking you to a concentration camp," said the major, as the car moved out of the town and headed into the hilly and forested interior. "I want you to know exactly what it means to defy me."

"A waste of time," Ramsey said shortly.

"I think not. You have read, doubtless, how our Secret Police bend men to their will. You probably felt contempt for those individuals who weakened. But those men were no different from you, Captain Kearns. You too will succumb, even as they did."

The prisoner made no comment.

THE FARMLANDS and pastures began to thin out, the road winding between the rising foothills. "A few more miles," said the major, "and we shall be there. Your sister will be taken to another such camp. Whatever befalls you here, *Herr Kapitan,* you are to remember that your sister is undergoing the same discomforts and hardships. And always remember that you can terminate her sufferings with a word."

The road curved to parallel a fence of closely woven barbed wire. Low, barnlike structures appeared at intervals, and a high wooden gate, thick-posted as a stockade, blocked the road. Tall sentinel towers stood at each end of the barrier, and armed men emerged from them as Fritz stopped the car.

After a brief colloquy with Major von Meding, the gate was opened. Fritz drove into the vast enclosure and stopped before a cluster of buildings.

"This," said the major, as grey-clad soldiers surrounded the automobile, "is the office of the prison camp. I am turning you over to Lieutenant Deute. Day by day your condition here will grow worse, a time-tested recipe for making you see things our way. It depends upon you whether you ever see either me or your sister again."

An officer stepped to the side of the

car and saluted briskly. "Lieutenant Deute," said von Meding, "I bring you a famous prisoner, Captain Craig Kearns."

Lieutenant Deute's eyes widened. "Kearns?" he repeated. "That notorious Will-o'-the-Wisp?"

"The same." Von Meding smiled smugly. "And you are to give him your special attention, *Herr Leutnant.*"

Deute exposed his teeth, like an animal sighting raw meat. "I believe I know what is required, *mein Herr.*"

The handcuffs were unlocked; Deute opened the door, and as Ramsey stepped out of the car two men with bayoneted rifles moved up behind him.

"Come this way," Deute said brusquely.

"Lieutenant Deute," von Meding said, "whenever Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp expresses a desire to communicate with me you are to bring him to me without delay." The major lifted his hand in a mock salute. "Auf Wiedersehen, Herr Kapitan."

As the long car glided away, the tip of a bayonet nudged between Ramsey's shoulders. "I shall show you your quarters, Captain," said Deute. "You will be just in time to share the evening meal with your fellow prisoners."

They skirted the administration buildings and Ramsey found himself crossing a stretch of refuse-littered ground. He tried to pick his steps, but the Germans, crunching the garbage underfoot, forced him to go straight through it.

"You'll have to get over your daintiness," Deute jeered. "There's worse than that in store for you."

THE DAY was drawing to a close. In the dimming light Ramsey glimpsed row on row of unpainted buildings, rough sheds under which were grouped, in every conceivable attitude, men who were gaunt and hopeless, bearded and ragged, unwashed and uncombed, men who watched the approaching Germans with apathetic eyes.

Deute smiled ironically into the listless faces. "Gentlemen, you are to be honored by the presence of the most famous prisoner ever captured in Norway. This is Captain Kearns, the notorious Will-o'-the-Wisp. Make room for him in your pig sty."

A sudden stir of interest ran audibly through the hapless crowd.

Stooping to avoid the low roof, Ramsey shuffled into the rude structure. Deute's classification of the place as a pig-sty was not far from the truth. Doorless, with only three plank-walled sides, with a roof resting on a minimum of supports, the building would barely pass muster as a stable, let alone an abode for human beings. Ramsey stood ankle-deep in mud of indescribable origin, and the air held a rancid, sour taint.

A man, tall and bony and sunken-eyed, with a scar-like welt on one cheek, stepped out of the shed's shadows to meet the newcomer. "Back here, Captain Kearns," he croaked. "There is room here to sit."

"Ah, Arno Jensen!" Lieutenant Deute laughed. "It will not be necessary for me to explain the regulations of this camp to you, Captain. Jensen can explain his disfigured face, the result of his attempt to escape in spite of the fact that the barbed wire is electrified, that guards on foot and in the towers have every inch of ground under surveillance, that the woods outside the camp are patroled, and that we have men and dogs to track down any man who gets past all that. Listen to Jensen's story, Captain, and resign yourself to your position."

BUT Jensen was in no mood to enlighten the new arrival. He showed Ramsey a comparatively dry spot where he could squat with his back to the plank wall, and then drew off in silence. The other prisoners gathered about the American, for even in the concentration camps of Norway the stirring exploits of the Will-o'-the-Wisp had been whispered.

One thin-faced boy, crouched beside Ramsey, was the chief questioner. What had happened? Did this mean that the ghost ship would flit in and out of the fjords no more? Was it the end of the

fine hope beginning to stir throughout the land of the midnight sun?

"Gunnar!"

Ramsey was in the midst of a recital of the torpedoing when Arno Jensen's voice snarled through the darkening shed. The boy at Ramsey's side looked up, startled. Jensen, his sunken eyes like bitter blue flames, was glaring at Ramsey.

"Get away from that fellow before you talk too much! He is not Captain Kearns, Gunnar!"

Gunnar fell back, then scrambled to his feet. The other men also began to withdraw, clearing the trampled, muddy floor between Kearns and Jensen.

"You knew Captain Kearns?" Ramsey smiled.

Jensen, starved to skin and bones, must have been a muscled giant in other days. Before the darkness had intensified, Ramsey had noted the man's hollow cheeks, but now in the gloom the Norwegian's ragged yellow beard lent a grotesque fullness to his face.

"Yes." Jensen's shaggy head nodded. "That is where you Germans made your mistake." He advanced a step and Ramsey saw that he was clutching a heavy piece of timber. Planting himself before the American, Jensen said in a sharp voice, "You see this Nazi trick, everybody? They place a spy in our midst and tell us he is the famous Will-o'-the-Wisp—"

"Wait!" Ramsey attempted to rise, but Jensen's club swished before his face, causing him to fall back to save his eyes from being raked by the jagged tip. "It is true I am not Kearns—"

"No need to explain!" snarled Jensen. "You were sent here to gain our confidence, to learn who is fomenting trouble." He scowled at the boy Gunnar. "Already he has spotted you, Gunnar. It will be the whips for you tomorrow."

Gunnar's face paled. "I—I said nothing—"

Someone in the background growled, "That means you too, Arno. Only it will be the rifles for you *this* time."

"I will not be shot for anything this dog reports," Jensen retorted grimly, "for he is not to live long enough to turn in any of our names. Come," he said, swinging his club, "let us smash this spy to a pulp for Deute to find in the morning!"

RAMSEY, already jammed against wall and floor, kicked upward with both feet as the club fell. His heels caught Jensen in the pit of the stomach, jarring him with more force than any blow of the fist. The aim of the descending club was deflected; it missed Ramsey's head, but landed on his shoulder and against the wall behind.

In spite of the stunning shock, he managed to whip his arm about the club before Jensen could jerk free for a second and more accurate blow. The Norwegian refused to yield possession of the weapon. For a space the two men tugged, then Ramsey's doubled knees straightened again, knocking Jensen's feet out from under him. The Norwegian tumbled on top of the American.

The shed was in an uproar. Gunnar, a length of scantling in his hand, was hopping about, eager to aid Jensen. Others, with stones and bare fists, pressed forward with the same murderous intent. Gunnar's two-by-four rose and fell, but the blow crashed against Jensen's skull instead of Ramsey's.

Ramsey, one arm rendering the club immobile and the other encircling Jensen's neck, had been hard pressed to hold the giant at bay. But now, half-stunned by the wild swing of the scantling, Jensen was weak. Ramsey could have flung him aside, but he only clutched the Norwegian the tighter, realizing that the sprawled body of Jensen protected him from the crude weapons swinging to bash in his brains.

"Listen, Jensen!" Ramsey said, trying to reach the man through all the uproar. "I am a friend! Captain Kearns—"

An oath, louder than the mumbled curses of the milling men, reverberated through the shed and there was the thwack of a gun-butt against shoulder-

blades. A light flared, and men scattered out of the way of soldiers come to investigate and quell the disturbance. Ramsey released his hold on Jensen, allowing the Norwegian to roll out of sight before the Germans could reach them.

The light flooded into Ramsey's face, and without ceremony he was hauled to his feet.

"What's going on here?" A hand knocked the club out of his grasp. "*Ach!* It is the new prisoner—the ship's captain. What was all the commotion about?"

RAMSEY'S eyes moved away from his questioner, Lieutenant Deute, to the gaunt, unkempt faces in the background. Would it help his case with his fellow prisoners if he attempted to pass off the altercation as a boisterous but friendly argument? Deute, he supposed, would have him flogged as a matter of discipline, but that was not the thought that kept Ramsey silent. There was Arno

"Tell the major—" Ramsey began—then drove his fist against the German's jaw

Jensen, the one man in the camp who really knew he was not Captain Kearns—

"A couple of these fellows tried to kill me, Lieutenant," he said.

"Who attacked you?" Deute demanded sharply. "All of them?"

"No. My assailants were only two—Jensen, there, and that young fellow called Gunnar."

"Jensen, eh?" Deute gave the bony man a cold glance. "He was always a trouble-maker!" He gestured to the helmeted men behind him. "Place Jensen and Gunnar in irons." Then his eyes narrowed a trifle. "But why, Captain Kearns, should these Norwegians try to kill you?"

"He is not Kearns!" Jensen snarled. "Take your damned spy out of here, Deute, before someone finishes what I tried to do!"

"He's not Kearns?" Deute frowned. "But Major von Meding—"

"Jensen is right." Ramsey smiled into the lieutenant's puzzled face. "I am not the Will-o'-the-Wisp. If you will take me where we can talk privately, *Herr Leutnant*, I will explain the deception von Meding and I practiced on you."

Deute scratched his jaw doubtfully. Major von Meding had ordered Deute to listen to this particular prisoner. "You wish to get in touch with the major?" he asked.

"Yes. I was planted here to secure information, and already I have learned what von Meding wishes to know."

Deute turned to leave the shed, saying curtly, "Come into my office."

"Jensen and Gunnar must go, too. The news I have for von Meding concerns them also."

Deute hesitated momentarily. "Very well," he said then. "Bring them along, boys."

Young Gunnar was silent as the prisoners, with two guards behind them, followed Deute toward the administration building. But the fierce-eyed Jensen crowded close to Ramsey.

"You shall pay for this, you Nazi dog!" he muttered, not caring that his voice was loud enough for all to hear. "You may have Gunnar and me shot, but this is not the end. Already you are a marked man, and this concentration camp cannot hush the whisper that will go out to avenge us."

"Silence!" A rifle barrel shoved Jensen back, but Lieutenant Deute eyed Ramsey queerly. Was this prisoner the secret Nazi agent Jensen claimed?

IN DEUTE'S office Ramsey began his explanation, weaving a narrative out of guesswork and certain remarks dropped by von Meding.

"You are aware, Lieutenant, that Major von Meding was sent into Norway not only to put an end to the activities of Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp but also to undo the damage the fellow already had done—locate the stores of guns and jail all the Norwegians waiting for a chance to use them.

"Von Meding found it impossible to capture Captain Kearns, so he did the next best thing, tackled the problem of the identity of the men who are receiving the smuggled guns. His plan necessitated the use of a stranger, and I was sent from Germany to assist him. The idea was to put me in this prison camp and state that I was Kearns. Among all these captives there would certainly be some who belonged to the rebel organization, and as Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp it would be easy for me to win the confidence of those individuals and report them to von Meding."

"But if you are one of us, why did the major give explicit orders to punish you for even trivial offenses?"

"That was part of the game. To make my masquerade convincing, I would have to be manhandled exactly as you would treat the real Will-o'-the-Wisp."

Deute smiled faintly. "It was a good plan, *mein Herr*, but unfortunately it will not work now. Jensen upset your little applecart right at the start. By this time the whole camp knows you are an impostor."

"If you will think a moment, Lieutenant, you will realize that I have succeeded. Why was Jensen able to expose me? Because he must have seen the real Captain Kearns. It follows then that he must be one of those who received the guns Kearns is said to have landed near Skogen. That is all von Meding requires —one man who he is positive knows where the guns are concealed. This underground organization is a chain extending over all of Norway. Jensen is the lever von Meding needs. He can force Jensen to disclose the names of his confederates. That will enable us to clean up Skogen. The chain can be followed over the entire country and the menace to our safety removed."

ARNO JENSEN, standing near the wall with young Gunnar, sneered defiantly. "Your damned Gestapo cannot make me talk!"

"You see?" said Ramsey. "He has practically admitted he is a link in the chain."

"You are right." Deute reached for the telephone on his desk. "I shall call the major at once."

"Do so," Ramsey urged. "And have your men get a car ready. The major, I know, will want Jensen and Gunnar brought to him at once."

"*Ja.*" Deute paused, his hand on the phone. "Heinrich," he addressed one of the two soldiers, "you will bring the car to the door. We are taking these people to Skogen as soon as I have talked to Major von Meding."

The guard left the room. His movements synchronized with two other activities; Lieutenant Deute lifting the receiver from its hook, and Ramsey stepping around the desk toward Deute.

"Tell the major—" Ramsey began in a confidential tone, then drove his fist against the German's jaw. The closing door muffled the thud of his knuckles and he jerked the pistol from the belt of the slumped man before the one remaining soldier realized what had happened.

The sight of Ramsey facing him with a gun took him by surprise, and he was afforded no opportunity to recover his wits. Ramsey closed the distance between them and thrust the Luger into the fellow's midriff.

"If you make a move or a sound," he grated, "I'll kill you!"

"B-b-but—"

"Quiet!" Ramsey warned. "Help me, Jensen! Disarm this fellow and gag him. Gunnar, get over to the desk and silence the lieutenant if he comes to."

The two Norwegians were even more bewildered by Ramsey's behavior than the Nazi soldier. But they had seen him knock out Deute, and here he was with a gun against their guard's stomach. That was enough for them. Gunnar sped toward the desk where creaking sounds indicated that Deute was stirring, and Jensen slipped behind the soldier and clapped a hand over his mouth.

Between them, Ramsey and Jensen bound and gagged the guard, then hurried to help Gunnar tie up Deute.

Jensen found the time to ask, "What the devil does all this mean?"

"I am your friend, Arno," Ramsey said. "Will you believe that long enough to work with me until we all get out of here? Let my actions instead of words be a guarantee of my intentions."

"But"—Jensen gestured toward the men they had rendered helpless—"this means nothing. How are we going to get past the gate or through the barbed wire?"

"Heinrich is bringing a car. It is a slim chance, but we may be able to make it. You have that fellow's gun. Whether we escape or not, you will at least be able to go down fighting."

The tall Norseman nodded, staring at the weapon in his hand. "That much is true," he acknowleged, "but—"

The sound of a motor came through the walls. Ramsey said, "Make up your mind, Jensen! Heinrich is in front with the car. If he gets in here the jig will be up."

"I'm with you." Jensen tossed the automatic toward Gunnar, then grabbed

the bayoneted rifle leaning against the wall.

"No," Ramsey said. "The rifle is too bulky. Heinrich mustn't know that you two are armed."

Jensen nodded and restored the rifle to its place—but not before he had loosened and removed the bayonet. He slid the blade inside his trousers' belt so the knife dangled against his thigh. "Now we all have something to fight with."

AS RAMSEY reached the door he heard the sound of automobile brakes outside. He stepped onto the narrow porch as Heinrich was opening the car door. Before the German could step to the ground, Ramsey was beside the car, crowding himself into the seat beside the driver.

"You are to take us to Skogen at once," he said brusquely. "Major von Meding must see these two men as soon as possible."

Heinrich stared, first at Ramsey, then at the two Norwegians climbing into the tonneau. "But Lieutenant Deute—he was to go to Skogen also."

"Yes. But the phone talk with the major has changed our plans a little. Deute remains here. Major von Meding decided you and I would be guard enough for two unarmed prisoners."

Heinrich eyed the Luger, which Ramsey had made no effort to conceal. His indecision lessened somewhat, but not enough to prevent his gaze from returning to the door of the office building. "I would like a word with the lieutenant first," said Heinrich uncertainly. "I—"

"Deute is busy," Ramsey interrupted. "I doubt if he is in his office now. *Herr Gott*, man, don't you realize great things are afoot? Don't waste time! Von Meding stressed the need of haste. He has given you exactly fifteen minutes to cover the ten miles between here and Skogen. Go hunt Deute if you will, but it is you, not I, who must answer to the major if these men are not delivered to him on time."

Heinrich's answer was to shift gears. The car turned around and the headlights picked out the great gate and the two guardian towers. A single sentry was on duty, standing in the center of the road until the car slowed.

"Open the gate!" Heinrich called. "Special orders from Major von Meding and Lieutenant Deute. I must be in Skogen within the quarter hour."

"Ah, Heinrich!" The guard advanced. "You have a pass?"

"*Nein*, there is no time for that."

The sentry stared at the other occupants of the car. "Who is this you have with you? This man was brought in only a few hours ago, and the others—these are prisoners, Heinrich. You are taking them out alone?"

Heinrich inclined his head toward Ramsey. "Von Meding's special agent. The prisoners are in his custody."

The sentry turned to Ramsey. "You have a pass, or papers, *mein Herr?*" he asked respectfully. "I cannot open the gate without authority, not even for Heinrich."

"Didn't Lieutenant Deute telephone we were leaving?" Ramsey simulated surprise. "He promised to clear the way for me."

"Perhaps one of the other men in the tower took the message. One moment, *mein Herr*, while I investigate."

He started away from the car, but the moment his back was turned Arno Jensen reared up and lunged with his bayonet, thrusting the blade deep. The Norwegian struck with such force that his body, bumping against Ramsey's, drove the American's head against the windshield.

Momentarily, the situation was beyond Ramsey's control. Cramped against the instrument panel, he saw the startled Heinrich leap up. But before the Nazi could cry out for help, young Gunnar caught the edge of his helmet, pulling backward, so that the strap under Heinrich's chin pressed tightly against the man's windpipe. With his free hand Gunnar struck with the automatic and Hein-

rich toppled, slumping against Ramsey.

The American had managed to squirm away. Jensen was hauling the dead sentry into the car.

"The keys, Gunnar!" Jensen panted. "Get them and open the gate!"

Ramsey pulled the unconscious Heinrich away from the steering wheel and crawled over him. He heard Gunnar leap out of the car and hurry toward the gate. The American dimmed the headlights to make Gunnar's lack of uniform less noticeable.

The wooden gate swung open and Ramsey drove through, slowing down until the young Norwegian had closed the gate. Gunnar stepped on the running board and the car went speeding down the road, the pines concealing them from the camp at the first curve.

AFTER several miles, Heinrich groaned and tried to straighten up. Jensen peered into the dark woodland on either side of the road. "If you will stop a moment, my unknown friend, we can get rid of these Nazi rats. If you are going into Skogen they will be a handicap."

Ramsey nodded and applied the brakes. "You are not going to bayonet Heinrich?"

Jensen shook his head. "We'll tie him up and leave him in the underbrush. I'm not really bloodthirsty. That other fellow had to be killed without warning or we could not have got past that gate."

The corpse was dragged out and shoved under a clump of bushes. Heinrich was marched beyond earshot of the highway and roped to a stout tree. Eventually he would be discovered or would work himself free, but Ramsey and his Norse friends would have at least the night in which to move freely.

On the way back to the car Jensen halted beside a tall straight pine and peered up into the branches. "Telephone wires," he nodded. "This bayonet is proving useful, indeed!" He caught the tree-trunk and began to climb. "I'll cut those wires so Deute can't warn von Meding.

That bit of sabotage accomplished, the three fugitives hurried back to the car.

"Now," said Jensen, "will you explain all this, you who are neither Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp as the Germans claimed, nor a Nazi spy, as Gunnar and I believed?"

THE NORWEGIANS listened intently as Ramsey listed the circumstances that led him to double for Captain Kearns. By the time he ended his story the car was mounting the hill that disclosed the night-shrouded village of Skogen on the flat between sea and highland. He stopped the car on the summit.

"The sister of Captain Kearns is a prisoner in that town," he reminded his companions. "I do not believe Major von Meding has yet had time to remove her to prison. Can I count on your help to get her out of his hands?"

Jensen made no reply, but Gunnar said quickly, "Just lead the way, Ramsey."

"We have only until Lieutenant Deute warns von Meding. That is why we must act swiftly and with all the force we can muster. I got you two out of that camp because I knew you belonged to the Norse underground. I need your help now, Arno. Take me to your secret leader so Miss Kearns' rescue can be accomplished at once."

"Ah!" Jensen's lion-like head lifted. "I was expecting a proposal like that!"

The chill edge of hostility in his voice and manner disturbed Ramsey.

"Surely," he said anxiously, "you do not doubt me now!"

"I would like to believe in you wholeheartedly," said Jensen, "but we men of Norway have learned the cost of taking even little things for granted. After all, this could still be what it seemed in the beginning, an intricate intrigue to learn the names of those who fight the Germans in secret. I tell the name of my leader to no one, least of all to a man who is still a stranger."

"Very well," Ramsey agreed. "Leave

your chief out of this. Round up a few of your friends so we can take von Meding's house by storm if necessary."

Again Jensen shook his head. "That would be to expose my compatriots to the same risk of capture."

This extreme caution nettled Ramsey. "Then you suggest that we abandon Miss Kearns, the sister of one of Norway's greatest friends? Leave her to her fate?"

"I have never seen Miss Kearns," said Jensen. "I am not aware that Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp even has a sister."

"O. K.," Ramsey snapped. "You and Gunnar can get out, and I'll go on alone. But I am disappointed in you, Jensen."

The gaunt man smiled. "Drive on, Ramsey. The Nazis know the identity of Gunnar and myself. We can help you save this young lady. In fact, we are more than eager to do so, whether or not she is Captain Kearns' sister. But I refuse to give von Meding a chance to uproot all our work of the past two years."

Not much of their journey remained to be accomplished by car. Another hill, a curve, and the cleared farmlands lay ahead. Ramsey moved the car off the road into the dwindling pines.

"The Germans will spot the car if we approach any closer to Skogen. Arno and I shall enter the town on foot. You, Gunnar, will stay with the car."

Young Gunnar tried to argue, but Ramsey said, "You can do more good by keeping the car hidden and ready for the quick getaway we may need. The night is still young. Remain here until just before dawn. If by that time we have not appeared with Miss Kearns, you will know that the Nazis have captured us, and you'll be free to do whatever you deem necessary."

ONLY a few lighted windows showed in the village as Ramsey and Jensen, passing the first scattered houses, turned off the main street into the darker and less frequented byways. Arno, a native of Skogen, was able to lead the American to von Meding's headquarters without being seen by even the townspeople themselves, let alone the solitary German patrols.

The house where von Meding lived, Jensen explained, had once been the home of the mayor of Skogen. That official had been dispossessed because the stone-and-mortar walls and the tiled roof of the building had appealed to von Meding. The absence of wood in the edifice minimized the danger that some member of the underground would fire the house while the major slept.

It was a two-storied structure, centered in a yard of considerable size. From a dark alley, Ramsey studied the building he and Jensen must enter if they were to rescue Enid Kearns. No lights showed in the place, and its stout, solid, age-greyed walls suggested a castle-like impregnability.

A shadow flitted past the alley mouth, disclosing that they were already at the edge of von Meding's defenses. The streets about the house were patroled by sentries. The house too would have its complement of soldiers; a guard would be posted behind each of the locked doors.

However, the only way to remove a mountain is to remove a handful of earth at a time. The first task was to cross the yard and get beside the house. Patiently the two crouching men timed the march of the sentry, seizing the exact moment when it was safe to dart across the street and help each other to the top of the low brick wall and drop to the ground inside the guarded yard.

Trees and shrubbery dotted the grounds, but the bare limbs and branches afforded little protection to prowlers. Still, the moon had not yet risen and fog from the nearby ocean obscured the stars. On hands and knees Ramsey and Jensen crawled toward the house.

In the shadow of the lightless house the two men stood up. The murky dark would enable them to remain unseen from the streets. Jensen tiptoed along the wall and Ramsey followed, touching the stones for guidance.

THE NORWEGIAN paused before a window. His hand groped into the opening, then Ramsey heard a soft curse.

"They've cemented gratings in these windows," Jensen muttered. "The bars are so close together I can't get more than a finger through. Von Meding must have feared some of us would throw a bomb or a grenade through the glass."

He moved on to examine another window. It too had bars close together. Jensen cocked his head, trying to peer through the darkness at the second floor of the building.

"We'll have to try the roof," he said. "There may be a window up there that is not screened."

Both knew that the chance was a slim one; the wary von Meding would have all windows grilled. Nevertheless, Jensen edged along a bit further until he had located a slim pipe that extended from the ground up to the roof—the drain spout that carried off the rainwater collected by the eaves-troughs.

The spout creaked as Jensen tested it with his hand. "You won't make it, Arno," Ramsey said. "That pipe won't support your weight."

The Norseman again shook the pipe. "I think I can climb it—"

"Arno!" Ramsey gripped his companion's arm. "What was that noise?"

The sound he had heard was a hollow, muted thump, as though someone had inadvertently knocked against a drum.

Jensen shook his head. "I heard nothing," he said, after a moment's silence, and gripped the spout once more. "Give me a leg up."

As Ramsey stepped forward, again the dull boom sounded. Even Arno heard it this time, but unlike Ramsey he guessed instantly at its source.

"It's the cistern," he explained. "We're standing on top of the cistern into which this spout empties." He drove his heel lightly against the ground, recreating that empty reverberation, then scraped at the dirt with his toe until he had bared the curved edge of some time-worn wood.

The closeness of the platform to the stone wall interested Ramsey. "Arno," he asked, stepping closer, "does that cistern cover extend under the house?"

"Eh?" Jensen exclaimed, then a quick oath escaped him. "By thunder, Ramsey, I believe we've found von Meding's Achilles heel—the one thing he forgot when making this house impregnable."

He began to kick away the years' accumulation of earth and sod on the ancient reservoir. Presently he stooped, caught a rusty metal ring and lifted a portion of the platform till there was a two-foot square opening.

"See?" A grin stirred Jensen's tangled yellow beard. "Through this cistern we can get under the house."

Ramsey did not share his enthusiasm. "What good will that do? We're attempting to enter the house, not find a place to hide."

The Norwegian explained. "This cistern was built under the house so an inside pump could draw up soft water. The room above was the laundry when the Mayor and his wife lived here; it has probably been unused since the Germans moved in." He tapped the bayonet hanging from his belt. "We can cut a hole through the floor and crawl up into that empty room."

He seated himself on the platform, thrusting his legs into the hole. "Hope it isn't too full of water," he smiled, then let himself down into the blackness.

There was a faint splash, then Jensen's guarded voice came up. "The water is waist-high, Jim. We can work in here without drowning."

RAMSEY placed a hand on either side of the opening. Jensen's groping hands caught his dangling feet. "Replace the lid," he whispered, steadying the American. "We don't want any Nazis falling on top of us while we're down here."

The cistern was pitch dark, and the air foul and dank. The pipe from the pump overhead was found, and with this as a guide and support, Ramsey climbed

on Jensen's shoulders to reach the roof of the cistern. The edge of the hole through which the pipe descended afforded purchase for his fingers, and the timbers of the platform were so old and warped that he was able to remove them with his bare hands.

The flooring of the house, however, offered sturdier resistance. Pulling themselves up out of the cistern, Ramsey and Jensen had to lie flat to accommodate their bodies to the narrow space between the house and the ground. Wet and shivering from the dank water, they listened patiently to assure themselves that the washroom above was unoccupied. Then they went to work on the oak boards between the thick joists.

THE steel of the bayonet bit and cut into the wood. The two men, wielding the tool by turns, toiled slowly and carefully, making no sound that might be heard from another room or hall of the house.

The first severed board was pried out and placed on the ground. After a time, a half-dozen of the wooden strips had been removed. But above was another layer of flooring, narrower lengths of hardwood that tested the bayonet's edge to the utmost.

But at last there was a hole wide enough for them to squeeze through. Ramsey was first into the laundry. The room was small, its tubs and pails almost hidden by the broken furniture, boxes and other articles piled indiscriminately in the room.

Jensen brushed off the dirt clinging to his damp clothes. "If we can find Miss Kearns, we can get out of here the same way we got in."

Ramsey nodded, not caring to remind his companion of the time that had elapsed since their escape from the concentration camp. By this time Lieutenant Deute would be free, and by now, notwithstanding the cut telephone wires, Major von Meding would know that the supposed Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp had escaped.

THE LAUNDRY door opened on an unlighted hall. Ramsey led the way, seeking a stairway that led to the upper floor of the building where, he reasoned, Enid Kearns would be imprisoned, if von Meding had not already taken her away.

The corridor ended in a rectangle of doors. Ramsey opened the nearest, peered into a dim room, sighted a shaft of light on the floor and heard the murmur of voices. One voice was loud enough for him to recognize as von Meding's.

He glanced at Jensen, who nodded silently. Ramsey fingered the Luger and pushed the door wider. At his heels, Jensen stole into the room, one hand on the bayonet, the other gripping the pistol taken from Heinrich.

The shaft of light came from a room beyond a half-closed door. Moving to the edge of shadow, Ramsey found himself looking into von Meding's office. The major was at his desk, and in the chair Ramsey once had occupied sat Deute, the lieutenant from the concentration camp. In the background stood a number of grey-uniformed men.

Deute's face was flushed, von Meding's was dark with anger.

"You are an unmitigated fool, Deute," von Meding was saying. "Kearns played you for an imbecile. You knew the Will-o'-the-Wisp was shrewd and full of cunning. What in heaven's name made you swallow that cock-and-bull story about him being a spy of mine instead of a clever, all-too-able enemy?"

"They staged their act very convincingly," Deute said, trying to defend himself. "And I was not duped entirely, Major. I was about to call you on the phone when Kearns hit me. They were hardly out of camp when I was after them in another car. They took Heinrich and the sentry with them, but when I found their automobile hidden in the forest there was only one man in it—a Norwegian called Gunnar."

"Where is this Gunnar now?"

Lieutenant Deute smiled briefly. "He attempted to flee. We shot him."

Beside the listening American, Arno Jensen started. His arm jerked up, but Ramsey blocked the rising pistol, shaking his head warningly. Jensen's deep-set eyes glared, but he relaxed and let the automatic sink to his side.

"You killed Gunnar?" von Meding's voice was ice-cold, and the smirk vanished from Deute's lips. "Before he died I suppose he told you what had become of Heinrich and the sentry and where we could find Kearns and this fellow Jensen?"

The lieutenant went pasty-white and stammered:

"I—I did not think—"

"Obviously!" sneered von Meding. Then his manner changed abruptly. "I shall not elaborate on your errors, *Herr Leutnant*. We must work together now. It is evident, from what you have told me, that Kearns returned to Skogen to rescue his sister." He laughed shortly. "He will find that more of a task than he anticipates."

"That is how I read his motives," Deute ventured. "The woods, hills and town are being scoured for them. Gunnar was awaiting their return, and I left a squad of men about the car to apprehend them if they go back."

"Good. But Kearns impressed me as a lone wolf type. It would be just like him to tackle this house single-handed."

"No one can get into this house, Herr Major," Deute declared.

"I know. And yet—he is the elusive Will-o'-the-Wisp." He drummed his fingers on the desk, then his eyes singled out a sergeant. "Bocker, Miss Kearns is guarded closely?"

"She is under lock and key, Herr Major."

"But not guarded, eh?" probed von Meding.

"No one can get upstairs, sir."

"So one would think," said the major. "But a ghost is on the loose, Sergeant. Get upstairs at once, assure yourself that the girl is in her room, then remain on guard before her door until we have located this foreign ship's captain—"

WHATEVER else von Meding said, Ramsey did not hear. Sensing what was coming, he waited only long enough to learn Enid's whereabouts; even while von Meding was speaking, Ramsey had caught at Jensen's sleeve, drawing the Norwegian back to the door through which they had entered.

"We're just one jump ahead of Bocker," he said, once they were in the vestibule. "We've got to get upstairs before he sees us."

Swiftly he opened the nearest of the other doors. But that exit led only to a continuation of the hallway. Only one door remained untried, but before Ramsey could try it, there was a faint rasp behind him—the door of the room behind them was opening.

He flattened himself against the narrow wall of the ante-chamber, and at the other side of the door Jensen did likewise. As the door blocked off Jensen entirely as Bocker stepped into the tiny room, Ramsey had the job of handling the sergeant.

Because of the man's helmet, Ramsey had to swing his automatic horizontally, driving the butt of the Luger just under the metal headgear and catching the German between ear and eyebrow.

As Bocker pitched forward, Jensen caught him. Ramsey shoved aside the German's feet and closed the door.

"We'll have to take him with us," he said, patting the pockets of the senseless man until he had located a bunch of keys. "Let's hope we don't run into anyone before we can dispose of him."

He opened the door to the stairway and Jensen, the sergeant's body slung over his shoulder, ascended slowly, testing each step to see that it did not creak under his weight. A light in the hall above relieved the darkness of the stair well.

At the head of the stairs, Jensen whispered, "Better see that the coast is clear before we go any further."

They were at one end of the upper hall. Ramsey edged forward. As far as he could see, the corridor was deserted.

He stole forward with more confidence. If he could find the room where Enid was kept—

There were three rooms on the second floor, and all three doors were closed. Ramsey walked the length of the hall, wondering which room was the one he sought. To try to unlock even one door might bring disaster if he did not guess correctly.

LIGHT showed through the transom of one room, and laughter and the brisk slap of cards sounded through the panels. At the second door, Ramsey placed his ear close to the keyhole. From this room came sound also; a rhythmic rasping, as though someone were engaged in tearing canvas into strips. Ramsey was satisfied that Enid was not behind *that* door; he could not imagine the charming little redhead snoring.

The third and last room was dark and silent. Ramsey fitted key after key into the lock until the tumblers turned and the door yielded to his gentle pressure.

"Enid?" he whispered, as he stepped across the threshold.

There was no answer from the darkness.

"Enid?" he called again, louder this time, and again his only response was silence. His heart sank. Was the girl in one of the other rooms, guarded by the snoring sleeper or the card players? He was on the point of retreating into the hall when his ear caught a faint rustling, a sound that might be the shifting of a weight on a chair or cot.

"Are you here, Enid?" he said. "This is Doug Ramsey."

There was a smothered gasp, then a soft patter of feet on the floor. Out of the darkness she came, her arms going about his shoulders, her curly red head pressed tightly against his chest.

"Doug!" Enid's voice was muffled, choked with emotion. "Is it really you, Mr. Ramsey? "

"Yes, Enid," he murmured, his arms about her comfortingly.

"But—" Her hair brushed against his face as she lifted her head to look up at him. "They told me you had been taken to prison—back somewhere in the mountains. Why did they bring you back?"

"They didn't," he grinned down at her, able now to make out her features in the gloom. "I escaped, and I've come for you. If the luck that brought me here holds out, we'll be out of here in a few minutes."

She followed him into the hall and watched puzzledly as he gestured toward the lighted end of the hall. Jensen, unseen by the girl, caught the signal and stepped into view from the stairway, still carrying the body of Bocker.

"That is Jensen, a friend who helped me get out of that concentration camp," Ramsey explained in a low tone. "As soon as we dump that German in this room—"

The words died in his throat, for Jensen had fallen, heavily and quickly, the weight on his shoulder causing him to hit the floor with a thud that resounded from end to end of the hall.

Ramsey darted forward. On the floor, Bocker and Jensen had rolled apart. The sergeant had one of Jensen's feet gripped tightly in his hands and Ramsey realized what had happened. Bocker, his head and arms dangling down Jensen's back, had recovered his senses and, before Jensen was aware that the fellow had revived, had grabbed and pulled hard on one of the legs of the man who was carrying him, making Jensen land flat on his face as though he had tripped over a taut wire.

Ramsey swung his automatic viciously at the sergeant's head. But Bocker saw the blow coming and ducked out of harm's way, although to save himself he had to relinquish his hold on Jensen.

"Run, Enid!" Ramsey ordered, as he hauled the half-stunned Jensen to his feet. "Get downstairs as quickly as you can!"

Obediently the girl made a dash for it, but already it was too late. The door of the lighted room burst open and into the hall, between Enid and the stairway,

spilled grey-green figures—the card players, drawn by the noise.

Enid stopped, but before she could turn a soldier had her by the arm. An instant later Ramsey and the stumbling Jensen were caught, pistols leveled at them from all sides.

"What's the trouble?" one of the soldiers demanded. "What's going on? Sounded like a fight!"

Sergeant Bocker laughed and pushed himself forward. "You should be thankful someone in this house attends to business. This is Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp. Under your very noses he was on the point of freeing the girl we were told to guard. Take them downstairs. Major von Meding will be pleased indeed to see them."

BOCKER'S PROPHECY was an under statement. Von Meding, talking with Lieutenant Deute, turned as the group from above stairs trooped into his office; his look of inquiry became an expression of slight bepuzzlement at sight of Enid, then flashed into complete amazement as his eyes rested on Doug Ramsey.

"You!" he exclaimed, thunderstruck. "*Gott in Himmel*, Bocker, where did you find *him?*"

Bocker grunted. "I do not know how he got into the house, sir, but he must have arrived just ahead of Lieutenant Deute. When we went up to guard the girl, he and this Norwegian were waiting in the vestibule for me. They slugged me and carried me upstairs, but I regained consciousness in time to prevent the two of them from rescuing the girl."

Von Meding stared. "How the devil did you get past all my guards, Kearns?" Then, before Ramsey could have answered even if he had so chosen, alarm chased over the major's face. "Get outside, some of you, and see what has happened! *Herr Gott*, this place may be surrounded by Kearns' friends—all our sentries lying with their throats cut!"

Two men sped toward the street door.

Lieutenant Deute said thoughtfully, "I arrived in Skogen hot on Kearns' heels. Taking the time element into consideration, I do not believe he and Jensen had opportunity to enlist the aid of any confederates. This is a lone wolf gesture, an act of the individualism you cited as typical of Captain Will-o'-the—"

Deute broke off, silenced by the same distraction that had caught von Meding's attention. The two men the major had ordered outside had halted in the doorway, talking to the sentinel on the threshold and a fourth man who, while indistinct in the darkness beyond, was obviously not in German uniform.

Von Meding rose, calling sharply, "What's wrong out there?"

ONE of the soldiers turned. "There is a stranger at the door, Major," he reported, "who wants to see you. He says his name is Lunde."

"Lunde?" The Nazi major repeated the name gropingly, and like the German, Ramsey felt that he should remember the name of Lunde. Complete recollection came first to von Meding.

"Of course!" he cried. "Lunde! Bring him in at once!"

The man stepped into the room; a sharp-faced fellow with protuberant blue eyes and straw-colored hair. Doug Ramsey caught his breath. The man wore the rough garb of a seaman. Lunde! One of his shipmates on the torpedoed *Cygnet*. Lunde—the spy von Meding had planted on Captain Kearns' ship to betray the freighter to the submarine!

"Good evening, Herr Lunde," smiled von Meding. "I hardly expected to see you so soon. I want to compliment you for the excellent help you gave us."

The sailor exposed crooked teeth in a grin and said, "I have great news for you, *mein Herr*."

Ramsey's brows knotted as he studied Lunde, the Norwegian in the pay of these Germans. How on earth had Lunde appeared so quickly in Skogen? Ramsey had seen him last adrift in one of the two lifeboats many miles off the coast of Norway.

"Your news has run ahead of you, Lunde." Von Meding's smile broadened. "Captain Kearns and his sister were delivered to me a few hours after the *Cygnet* went down."

Lunde's eyes followed the major's glance at Doug Ramsey.

"Hello, Doug," he said, his grin twisting into a sneer. "That was a smart trick you pulled off. Too bad you are not going to get away with it."

"Doug?" von Meding repeated, frowning. "What—"

"This is not Captain Kearns," said Lunde. "Commander Schmidt picked up the wrong man. This fellow is an American named Douglas Ramsey."

"Eh?" gasped von Meding. "But how—why was a mistake like that permitted to happen? You were there, Lunde. You should have seen to it that Schmidt got the man we were after."

Lunde spread his hands. "I did my part. I told Schmidt which boat Kearns was in. Schmidt is to blame, not I, if this Yankee succeeded in hoodwinking him."

Major von Meding's face soured, and his gaze went from Ramsey to Enid. "I suppose the girl, too, is an impostor? *Gott,* if Berlin hears of this I can never show my face in Germany again!"

"The girl *is* Enid Kearns," Lunde said. "There, at least, Schmidt made no error. But you've no need to look so crestfallen, Herr Major. When Schmidt failed, there was still Lunde to carry on for you. I have brought Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp to Skogen."

There was a startled exclamation and Enid was beside Lunde, her hand on the traitorous sailor's arm. "My brother! You mean he is here now? In Norway?"

A LONG STRIDE carried von Meding around the desk and he shoved Enid aside roughly. "Stand back!" he commanded, and Lieutenant Deute forced the girl back beside Ramsey.

The American clasped her hand. "Be calm, Enid," he whispered. "We must find out exactly what has happened."

Von Meding was questioning Lunde. "You have Kearns in Skogen? Where is he?"

"Where you can put your hands on him any time," said the sailor. "I didn't bring him here because—well, it would be somewhat unhealthy for me if these Norwegians knew I was—er—cooperating with you. Captain Kearns is in the farmhouse of Henrik Kaad, where he insisted that I take him."

Arno Jensen's feet shifted, and Ramsey noted that his hollow-cheeked face had gone pale.

"Kaad?" von Meding said dubiously. "Impossible! Henrik Kaad is a little insignificant fellow with the bravery of a scared rabbit. He could not be one of these guerrillas the Will-o'-the-Wisp is arming." His eyelids narrowed until his eyes were almost closed. "Suppose you start at the beginning, Lunde, and tell me the whole story."

Lunde told how the two lifeboats had drawn together after Commander Schmidt's submarine had submerged. It was only then that Lunde had learned how Ramsey had substituted himself for the wounded captain, but it was too late then to recall the U-boat. Then Captain Kearns revived and learned what had taken place. The captain pleaded with the men to set out for Skogen to rescue his sister and the American who had taken his place.

But the sailors feared they would be captured if they approached the Norwegian coast. They argued that they should row westward, back to the Allied shipping lanes where the boats could be picked up. But Kearns refused to abandon his sister, and in the end the two lifeboats parted company.

"I volunteered to accompany Kearns," said Lunde, "and because I was a Norwegian there seemed nothing strange in my offer, and Kearns accepted."

The rest of the men crowded into the other boat, and Lunde and Kearns set out for Skogen. They had landed in the darkness less than an hour ago, and Lunde had helped the wounded man

reach the home of Henrik Kaad. Kaad, it seemed, was the leader of the anti-Nazi Norse in the Skogen district; he had welcomed the enemy captain like an old friend.

"And where is Kaad now?" asked von Meding.

"Kaad and his wife put Kearns to bed; then Kaad and I footed it into town to get medicines and dressings for the captain's wounds. When Kaad left me at Voss' Tavern, saying he would return for me in an hour, I seized the opportunity to get in touch with you."

LIEUTENANT DEUTE could contain himself no longer. "Success is yours at last, Herr Major! We can arrest Kaad, the leader of these rebel Norwegians, and send a body of men to the farmhouse to seize Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp—"

"And the guns?" reminded von Meding thoughtfully. "That is what we really want, Deute—the explosives that lie somewhere under the feet of every German soldier in Norway."

"We can wring the truth out of Captain Kearns and Kaad—"

"There have been occasions when the Gestapo failed," said the major. "Men like Ramsey, Kearns and Kaad are hard to break. I think I see a surer way to accomplish our ends. Lunde, you were to meet Kaad at Voss' place? Good! Get there at once, and when Kaad appears invite him to a table to have a glass of beer. While you are there, two of my soldiers will sit at the next table and, in tones loud enough for Kaad to overhear, will discuss Miss Kearns, the prisoner I am holding. And so Kaad will learn that I have been ordered to take the girl and Ramsey, whom I am still supposed to believe to be Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp, to Berlin, and that tomorrow afternoon I intend to set out for Oslo with my prizes, the first leg of my journey."

He smiled into the perplexed faces of Lunde and Deute.

"Do you not see, my friends? Kaad will report the conversation to Captain Kearns, and the Norse guerrillas will jump at the chance to ambush me and rescue Ramsey and Captain Kearns' sister. To do that, they must use the guns we know they have concealed somewhere. You, Lunde, will be with them while all this is going on. Insist on joining them in the attack. Thus you will learn the identity of many of the rebels, but most important of all, if you play your cards correctly you will be shown the hiding places of the guns. When you can tell me *that*, all Norway will be safe in our grasp."

Von Meding paused to light a cigarette, then continued. "There is a wild and lonely stretch of road about midway between Skogen and the next town. I have purposely set my departure for late in the afternoon, as additional bait for Kaad and Kearns. The place I have mentioned is ideal for an ambuscade, and Kaad will realize that I'll arrive at that spot not long after darkness falls. Undoubtedly, Lunde, you will be able to inform us if Kaad intends to attack there."

LUNDE RUBBED his receding chin doubtfully. "Must I play along with Kaad that long? After all, if I am with those guerrillas when fighting starts I may get killed and—and then there will be no one to furnish you the names you want or lead you to the buried guns."

"I shall have men back in the hills ready to surround Kaad's men as soon as they reach the point of ambush. If you try to leave before that time, Kaad or Kearns may become suspicious, and we cannot risk that. But, as you say, you must get away with the valuable information only you can obtain." The major pursed his lips, then his brow cleared. "Your garb as a British seaman is a bit different from the garb of these natives. The men will be instructed not to shoot at you."

"But—" Lunde was still perturbed. "A chance bullet—"

"*Lieber Gott,* man!" snapped von

Meding. "Will you take no risk at all? You will be the safest one on both sides! It will be dark when we jump the rebels; the terrain is rough, studded with boulders and scrub pine. At the first shot you can hide yourself or steal away from Kaad. If you can reach my men, they'll let you through to the rear and you can return to this house to await me. Now hurry back to Voss' Tavern so you can be there when Kaad arrives."

The sailor bowed and left.

Von Meding surveyed the three silent prisoners. "Sergeant Bocker," he said, "you are to be commended for your capture of this Norwegian and this masquerading American. Because of your resourcefulness I am placing them in your charge until the time comes to stage our apparent trip to Oslo."

The sergeant saluted. "I shall take care of them, *Herr Major*," he said.

And Bocker did just that. Enid, Jensen and Ramsey were marched back upstairs to the room in which Ramsey had found the girl. Bocker was considerate enough to place additional cots for the two men, but the prisoners were compelled to stretch themselves on the pallets, handcuffed arms above their heads, the chains of the shackles passed around the iron frames of the beds.

Through the rest of the night and the long day that followed, armed guards stood at the door, and in the hall the slow tread of an additional sentry sounded back and forth hour after hour.

Finally, Bocker came and unlocked the handcuffs long enough for Ramsey to remove his arms from about the bed frame.

"It lacks but an hour until sundown," said the sergeant. "We leave now. Major von Meding has everything in readiness."

LIEUTENANT DEUTE was with von Meding when the captives were ushered into the major's office. But for the three men who were with Sergeant Bocker, the great house seemed empty. Every man who could be spared, Ramsey presumed, had stolen unobtrusively out of Skogen to form a part of the trap von Meding was preparing for Captain Kearns and the luckless Henrik Kaad.

Two automobiles stood before the house. Sergeant Bocker got under the wheel of one car and Ramsey was ordered into the seat beside him. Lieutenant Deute followed Enid and Arno Jensen into the tonneau.

"I shall be right behind you in the other car," von Meding told Bocker. "Drive slowly through the town. Kaad probably has spies out in the streets and I want him to believe that he has only to overwhelm two cars to effect the rescue of the prisoners."

There were, indeed, idlers on the sidewalks and in doorways to observe with apparently disinterested eyes the departure of the Nazi automobiles. Had Ramsey been sure that one would carry a message to Kaad, he would have shouted a warning.

Just out of sight of the last house they came to a fork in the road. It was the left fork, Ramsey recalled, that von Meding had taken the day before when conducting him to the concentration camp back in the hills. To the American's surprise, Bocker halted, his car pointed toward the left branch, and von Meding drove alongside, the nose of his car facing the right-hand road. At the same time a third automobile, bristling with helmeted soldiers, automatic rifles and machineguns, appeared from behind a clump of dense shrubbery.

Von Meding grinned at the expression on Ramsey's face.

"We part company here, *mein Herr*. I have no doubt concerning the outcome of this venture, but I want you and Miss Kearns to be where I can still use you if things *should* go wrong. Lieutenant Deute is taking the three of you to the prison camp, where you will be safe. By this time, doubtless, a message is on the way to Kaad informing him that my party comprises two cars. And so it shall. But"—he jerked his thumb at the third car that had purred to a stop be-

hind him—"we are substituting that car for yours. By the time the rebels discover you are not in it, at least half of them will have been cut down or blown to pieces." He waved. "You may go, Bocker. Drive to the camp as fast as you can, so none of Kaad's men can spot you."

THE THREE CARS started simultaneously, von Meding and his grim escort taking the south road while Bocker sped on toward the concentration camp. Ramsey craned his neck to peer at the rear seat. Enid and Jensen, their handcuffed wrists in their laps, were seated one on either side of Lieutenant Deute, their eyes fixed on the floor.

Deute lifted the pistol in his right hand. "If you look around again, Ramsey," he said, "I'll blow your head off your shoulders!"

Bocker, an expert driver, was not forgetting von Meding's order that the trip be accomplished in record time. The big car went climbing and twisting through the rising hills at a speed that Ramsey would have chanced only on a straight road. Several times, when Bocker roared full-tilt around a sharp curve, Ramsey instinctively braced himself. But the sergeant, shifting foot from throttle to brake at just the right instant, sent the car through the turns with the careless ease of perfect coordination.

This skilful maneuvering was due, no doubt, to Bocker's familiarity with the road. Ramsey himself was not unacquainted with the highway, having been over it twice. Over there to the left among the trees, was where he and Jensen had left young Gunnar with the car stolen from the prison camp. And just ahead—Ramsey sat up at the recollection—was a hair-pin turn in the road with a ten-foot drop at the side, a more dangerous curve than any Bocker had yet tackled.

Bocker grinned maliciously at Ramsey, having observed the American's previous tenseness, and deliberately shot the car forward at increased speed as the sharp twist in the road loomed ahead.

But Ramsey had not set himself this time because of apprehension. He didn't even see the sharp turn toward which they were rushing. His eyes were on Bocker's foot flattening the accelerator to the floor.

As Bocker's foot lifted, shifting quickly toward the brake, Ramsey drove his own foot forward, landing his heel viciously against Bocker's shin.

The sergeant's foot missed the brake entirely, and the sudden blow, one that would have broken his ankle but for the protective leather of his boot, sent such a wave of pain through him that he spun the steering wheel the wrong way.

"Enid! Arno!" Ramsey shouted, flinging himself down among the cushions. "Look out!"

Frantically, Bocker tore at the wheel. But he had already lost the instant he had allowed himself to negotiate the curve. Out of control, the huge car swept forward, smashed through the wooden guard-rail and was over the steep embankment.

The bole of a tree leaped toward the car. A fender crumpled and was ripped away under the impact; the windshield shattered. Ramsey, all sense of direction lost, struck against the top and side of the car; then a weight jarred against his spine, jamming him back against the cushions.

THE CHAOS of sound and motion ended. The car stood tilted on its side. The object holding Ramsey down was the engine-block, rammed back half its length by the collision. Bocker was slumped queerly, still holding the steering wheel. The post below had been driven through it, impaling the German through the chest.

All this Ramsey observed as he struggled upright. His concern was for his two companions who had had even less time than he to prepare themselves for violence of the crash.

The occupants of the tonneau were piled in the corner nearest the ground.

All Ramsey could see of Enid was the tip of her red head, the rest of her hidden by the bodies of Jensen and Lieutenant Deute. Jensen had a knee braced against the lieutenant's back, pulling remorselessly on the handcuff chain he had looped about Deute's neck.

The warped door yielded a few inches and Ramsey managed to get himself out of the wreckage. The rear door was already open, dangling from one hinge. Ramsey grabbed Jensen's arm.

"Quick, Arno!" he cried. "We've got to get out of here before some more Germans show up!"

The Norwegian relaxed his choking hold and Deute, purple-faced from strangulation, crawled out of the car and collapsed on the ground, gasping and fingering the bruised flesh of his neck.

Enid emerged next, breathless but apparently unhurt.

"It was Deute who kept us from being banged up," Jensen explained, after he had located Deute's fallen pistol. "When I caught him with these cuffs, he kicked up such a fuss that he was a shock absorber for both of us."

Ramsey took Bocker's pistol and found the handcuff keys in a pocket of the dead sergeant's coat. When their wrists were freed, Ramsey snapped two sets of the manacles on Lieutenant Deute's arms and legs.

"That'll keep him here for some time," he said, starting up the embankment that led to the road above. "Let's go. This machine is a total loss, but the car we left with Gunnar should be in the woods just back of this curve."

Jensen hesitated at the foot of the slope. "Deute left soldiers to keep an eye on that car. They expected us to return for it."

"That was almost twenty-four hours ago. Those guards will be gone. Von Meding is using every available man to round up Kaad's followers." He waved the automatic significantly. "Even if they're there, we've got to fight them for that car. We need it to save Kearns and Kaad."

ON THE ROAD, they glimpsed the sea through a break in the trees and hills. The fading sunset light dimmed out noticeably among the trees, and the three were close enough to the deserted automobile to touch it before Ramsey spotted the car deep in its nest of underbrush.

The twilight that almost made them miss it proved a blessing. The shutting of the door, after they had entered the car, created a peculiar echo—a guttural exclamation and a sudden agitation of the brush.

Ramsey was at the wheel. Jensen leaned forward, aiming his pistol at the stirring shrubbery. A head materialized among the branches as Ramsey touched the starter. Jensen pulled the trigger, spattering twigs into the German's face, and the fellow vanished. Ramsey turned the car sharply, scraping bark from one of the trees. Behind him a rifle cracked and a bullet clanged into the metal body of the car, but they got away.

They bumped over the uneven ground and picked up speed as they sped into the smoother road. "Where is Kaad's farmhouse?" Ramsey shouted. "We must see if Captain Kearns is there."

Jensen leaned forward, his eyes on the swift-moving belt of highway. "There's a lane near here that is a short cut to Kaad's place, and that way we can avoid the town."

The side road appeared, an ungraded path that emerged from the pines onto cleared land. Jensen pointed through the darkening twilight at a solitary house with a cluster of barns and outbuildings —Kaad's home.

There was no sign of life there as Ramsey drove into the farmyard. No one answered their knock. The two men shoved the door open. Every room was empty, and they found the rumpled bed where Captain Kearns had lain. Wounded though he was, Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp was not the man to lie idle while plans to rescue his sister went forward.

They leaped into the car once more, and even the intrepid Sergeant Bocker would have raised his brows at the speed

with which Ramsey regained the main highway. They had barely turned their backs on Skogen when Enid, peering through the rear window, said, "The Germans are coming, Doug! I see the lights of cars and motorcycles!"

Ramsey pressed on, so fast that the car became a black streak in the darkness. Traveling without lights, so the pursuing cars might be shaken off, the three fugitives sped on until the sounds of the Germans' motors faded. And now a jutting hillside blotted out the lights behind.

"Drive into that pasture and head for those trees!" cried Jensen. "If we can reach them before they sight us again, we may be able to give them the slip!"

THE CAR jolted drunkenly off the road and plowed through the frail fence of the field. Ramsey was well out of sight of the road before the first headlight flashed around the base of the hill. Nevertheless, as the trees swallowed the fugitives, the light turned and the machine, a motorcycle, roared into the field. The alert German had spotted the gap in the fence.

Jensen plucked the gun from Ramsey's pocket. "Drive as nearly as you can in a southeasterly direction. Enid and I will take care of the man on the motorcycle."

Jensen climbed into the back seat and handed Enid the extra gun. With his own weapon Jensen shattered the rear glass. Already the motorcycle light could be seen bobbing through the trees. A second light swept into view. Ramsey had outdistanced the automobiles, but the motorcycles were overhauling them.

The car rocked as Ramsey struck the large stones that added to the roughness of the ground. Jensen shoved his arm through the glassless window and fired at the leading motorcycle. Enid sent a second bullet through the opening. Jensen fired again, and the first motorcycle spun crazily.

"Got him!" exulted Jensen. "Now to get that other fellow!"

But Jensen's bullet had hit the first motorcycle solely through chance. The rocky forest floor, jolting and bouncing both car and motorcycle, made marksmanship very difficult. Again and again the guns barked, spitting lead and flame, and still the remaining motorcycle drew closer. Presently it was even with the rear and came inching up as the driver, Luger in hand, sought to draw even with the man at the wheel.

Ramsey, needing both eyes to spot scattered boulders in the darkness, nevertheless sensed the menace moving parallel with the car, knew that the German was lifting the pistol—

A granite outcropping seemed to spring out of the ground ahead. Ramsey jerked the wheel, swinging the car in toward the massive stone instead of away from it. The sharp twist sideswiped the motorcycle, smashing the smaller machine into the jutting granite.

THE crash knocked Enid and Jensen to the floor, and only his grip on the wheel saved Ramsey too from being unseated. The car spun, ground into another boulder and stopped abruptly.

"We couldn't ride much further," Jensen said consolingly. "Now that we've got rid of the motorcycles, the Germans in the cars will have to travel on foot from here on if they intend to follow us. Follow me! Kaad can't be more than a couple of miles ahead."

They were deep in the mountains. The cars of the trailing Nazis could be heard laboring up the hostile terrain.

Even Jensen was unfamiliar with the way they had chosen. Twice a yawning cliff and a cul-de-sac forced them to turn back. All sound of cars had ceased; the Germans were on foot also. Once Ramsey heard a shot echo in the darkness, and the closeness of the sound disturbed him.

He climbed over a fallen log, missed his footing and found himself splashing knee-deep in running water. Jensen grunted exultantly as he plunged into the stream. "The creek! I know where

we are now! The going will be better."

They clambered up the further bank. Jensen, now that he knew where they were, set a pace that taxed the strength of Enid and Ramsey. Hearing the girl's labored breathing Ramsey called softly, "Not so fast, Arno!"

"Don't mind me!" Enid said huskily. "I can keep up."

"Hush!" Jensen said, and stopped short.

In every direction there were trees, so close together that their spreading branches formed a canopy that intensified the darkness. Out of the blackness had come a faint noise, like the crunching of a pine cone underfoot.

The sound was not repeated, and Jensen stole forward warily.

"Halt!" came a voice deep among the trees. "Who is there?"

"This is Arno, Henrik!" Jensen lifted his arms promptly. "Arno Jensen and Captain Kearns' sister."

A shape seemed to flow out of a tree-trunk and became a slim man slightly more than five feet tall. This, Ramsey knew from von Meding's uncomplimentary description, must be Henrik Kaad, the leader of the Norse underground.

"Jensen!" Kaad's keen eyes scanned the taller man. "What are you doing here?"

The diminutive guerrilla had a rifle in his hands. Out of the woods came other men, all armed, with pistols, rifles and sub-machine guns; almost every pocket bulged with grenades.

"Enid!" A long-limbed, freckle-faced man with a clothbound forehead dropped his rifle and came forward with outstretched arms.

"Craig!" Enid ran into her brother's arms. "Oh, Craig, thank God we were in time!"

HENRIK KAAD frowned and turned to Ramsey. "You are the American? How did you get away from von Meding?"

"We never were in the major's car," Ramsey said swiftly. "This whole setup, Kaad, is a trap. You have been betrayed. There are soldiers among the rocks and trees about you—"

He broke off, arrested by one face among the men emerging from the forest —a thin face with prominent teeth and protruding eyes. "Lunde! There's the man paid to deliver you to the enemy!"

Lunde, who had read the recognition in Ramsey's eyes, had tried to slip into the background. At the direct accusation, he whirled and ran.

"Stop him!" Ramsey shouted. "If he gets away—"

The rifle leaped to Kaad's shoulder. It spoke once and the fleeing Lunde pitched forward and lay still. "I hope you made no mistaken charges, Ramsey," remarked Kaad. "The man is dead."

"Kaad! You shouldn't have fired! That will bring the Germans down on us! Hurry! Get your men out of here!"

"We needn't run." Kaad was undisturbed. "Now that we have been warned, we can give the Nazis better than they send."

"But other soldiers are behind and you'll be caught between two fires. Why risk a fight now that we are free? If any of you are killed or wounded, von Meding will have a flock of clues to work on."

Captain Kearns stepped forward. "Ramsey is right, Kaad. Remember, our whole plan is based on the agreement that none of the guns I brought you are to be used until the Allies land in Norway. Sporadic fighting, such as this would be, will get us nothing but the unnecessary death of brave men."

"Very well," Kaad nodded. "Pass the word, men, for everyone to get out of here. Not a gun is to be fired unless we are attacked."

The men faded among the trees with the stealth of the trained guerrilla. But when the woods again were silent, one man remained, Ramsey, and as soon as the last Norwegian disappeared, he hurried to where Lunde had dropped.

Lunde was dead, which was the point on which Ramsey had wished to satisfy

himself. With Lunde silent, there would be no information to reach von Med—

Ramsey, about to rise, froze suddenly. All about him, less than a hundred feet away, shadows were moving, spreading through the forest.

"The shot came from this direction." Already the Germans were close enough for Ramsey to hear their voices!

THESE were the men von Meding had ringed about the place of ambuscade. The trap had sprung, and not quite too late. If the Nazis continued to spread as they were doing, stragglers of the retreating Kaad would be sighted and then the Norwegians and the Nazis would engage in a running battle all the way back to Skogen, with a damnable chance that the soldiers who had followed Ramsey could cut across and head off the guerrillas.

Ramsey stood up and, fully exposed, ran toward the oncoming Germans, not halting at the sharp command and the rifles lifted to bear on him.

"That way!" he yelled, pointing away from the forest. "The rebels are coming! They know you're here and intend to surprise you!"

"Don't shoot!" A voice stilled the leveled rifles. "He has the garb of a British seaman! It's Lunde, the man we were to watch for!"

The speaker, a sergeant, strode forward. "What's wrong?"

"Kaad knows everything!" Ramsey cried. "He know the prisoners have been sent to the concentration camp and that von Meding placed you here to surround him. He thinks that if he strikes first he can wipe you out. Listen! I hear them!"

The sergeant heard the sound also, the splashing of boots in water. His face set grimly. "This way, men, on the double-quick. Pour lead into them as soon as you see them. You, Lunde, get back out of the way. Von Meding instructed us to see that nothing happened to you."

The pines swallowed Ramsey as the Nazis raced toward the creek. Those men climbing up the bank were Germans also, but before the two groups could realize they were fellow countrymen there would be killing and confusion, and so a delay would be created that would enable Kaad and his men to escape.

As the first volley sounded, Ramsey hurried on. The long chance, born when he had seen that he and the dead Lunde wore the same sort of sweater and coat—

"Doug!"

Out of the darkness came another running figure and he halted.

"Enid!"

"Oh, Doug!" Enid's face was white and tear-stained when he reached her. "Where were you! We missed you and I hurried back—"

"Enid!" he cried again. There was no mistaking the concern in her face. It was more than the apprehension one feels for a vanished comrade. "You should have kept going!"

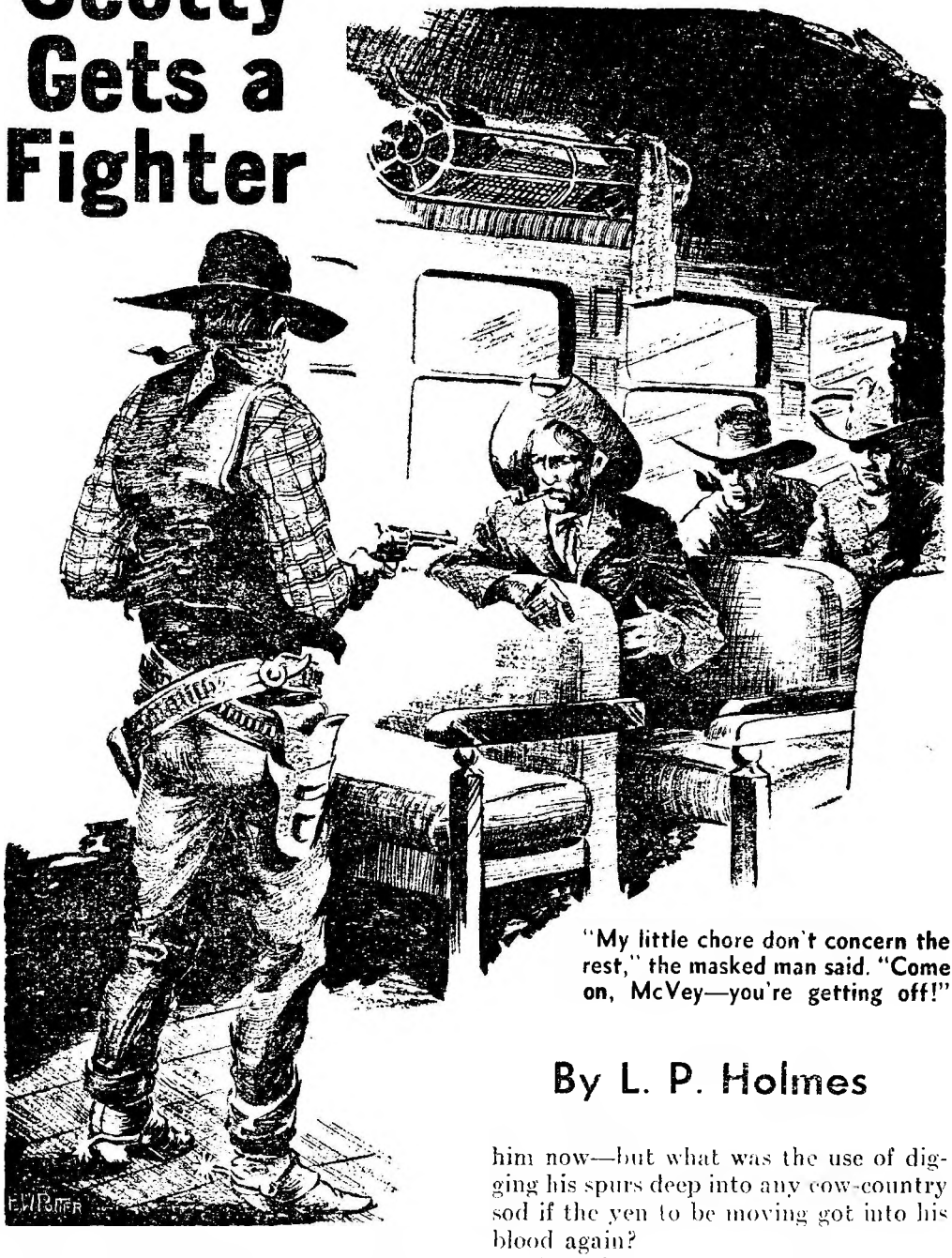
"Ramsey!" Captain Kearns and Arno Jensen were behind Enid. "Thank the Lord we've found you!" He peered off among the trees. "Was that shooting?"

"Dog eat dog," Ramsey grinned. "I've got the Germans fighting each other. The Norwegians will have plenty of time to hide their guns and return to their homes. But Kaad and Jensen cannot return to Skogen. Von Meding now knows of their activities."

"They are going into the mountains with you and Enid and me," smiled Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp. "The Swedish border runs through these mountains. The Swedes will be tolerant if we dodge back and forth between the two countries, but if von Meding once crosses the border they will crack down on him."

He led the way back into the rocks and pines. Not long would they be fugitives in the Norse hinterland. A few more days would see spring returned to the Northland — springtime, with all Norway waiting to back up the armies of Britain and the United States. . . .

Scotty Gets a Fighter



"My little chore don't concern the rest," the masked man said. "Come on, McVey—you're getting off!"

By L. P. Holmes

JIM CONASTER had wondered, as he got his time from old Bob Doran and headed his horse for the sunset, if he had ridden so many hills he'd acquired too itchy a saddle to settle down. Now as he rode the train headed for Belle Point, he was still wondering. The yen for new trails was not nagging him now—but what was the use of digging his spurs deep into any cow-country sod if the yen to be moving got into his blood again?

After five years of wandering, he hadn't a thing to show. Not even a horse or a saddle. Lady Luck had crossed him up at poker back in Casa Grande and stripped him clean. He had less than ten dollars in his jeans, and the old Peacemaker .45 which was stuck into the waistband of his Levis, well to

the left, where the flap of his calf-skin vest would cover it. That was all. Oh, well, maybe the back-trail would get him something.

Idly he looked down the aisle, taking in his fellow passengers. Up front sat a pair of Shoshone Indians, humped and stoic, not saying a word as the train clicked along. A couple of seats behind them sat a man and a woman and a pair of young 'uns. Sodbusters, was Conaster's guess, wistfully chasing a future they never quite managed to catch up with. Jim had seen many of their kind.

In the middle of the car sat another couple. By the thickness of the man's hair, the heaviness of his shoulders and the rakish set of his sombrero, Jim guessed he was somewhere in his thirties.

The girl beside him had glossy auburn hair and looked very trim and young. Jim couldn't see much of her, but the erect, even set of her shoulders suggested youthful pride and spirit. Funny, he hadn't seen much of women these last few years. Too busy hitting the saddle from here to there.

A few seats ahead and across the aisle sat an older man, alone. Grizzled hair and weathered, deep-lined cheeks—he looked somehow tired and beaten, as well as old. A battered, stubby pipe between his teeth, he sat hunched down, staring into the black night beyond the window.

The train's whistle wailed and the rhythmic beat of the wheels slowed for the steadily rising grade ahead. Jim stretched, yawning. They'd hit Belle Point soon. He'd be glad to climb a kak and ride in the clean open air again.

As the train slowed to little more than the pace at which a fast walker can go, Jim rubbed the dust from the window and looked out. It was a clear night with bright starlight. Jim could make out black patches of sage against the lighter stretches of open ground.

Abruptly he tensed, for he saw right below him a man running along beside the train. Moving faster than the train, the fellow soon vanished on up ahead.

Jim's first thought was that he had seen one of the train crew who had dropped off for some reason and was now trying to swing up the steps of the car ahead. But why would a crew member have dropped off in the first place? Jim had watched many a train crew in action and he knew that a crew member, instead of running to catch the car ahead, would have waited for the next car to come by before swinging up and aboard.

Jim's second thought was that he might have seen a hobo bent on grabbing a ride over the long uphill stretch to Belle Point. But a hobo would have grabbed at the first open vestibule to come by, instead of running ahead that way. No—the man he had seen was definitely trying to catch on at a certain car.

Jim took another look. Nothing but sage and open country. A little thread of prescience slid up his spine and he let one hand drift to the butt of his Colt's.

And so, when the door at the far end of the aisle banged open to admit a man in range clothes, a gun in each fist and a bandana masking all but hard, bleak eyes under a battered sombrero, Jim was set for trouble.

"Don't anybody move!" the masked man snapped.

The sodbuster's wife gave a thin cry and instinctively clasped both her young ones in her arms. The Indians didn't move. The auburn-haired girl sat a little straighter. The man beside her put both hands on the back of the seat ahead, but made no other move. The old-timer across the aisle seemed almost unconcerned. The masked figure spoke again.

"None of you folks will be hurt or bothered if you mind your own business. My little chore don't concern any of you. It's with that hombre yonder. Come on, McVey—you're getting off!"

He made a little jabbing motion with one of his guns by way of emphasis.

THE old-timer answered in a weary rumble, "No. I'm staying right here. This is a little too raw for even Knowlton to get away with. If he aims to have me killed, it will be right here in front of these folks, not out in the brush somewhere. I'm staying put."

The masked man cursed and came another step down the aisle. "If you want to make sure of dying, just play stubborn, you old fool! Do as you're told and you'll have a chance. Otherwise, you've asked for it. I say get on your feet and move!"

McVey said very distinctly, "No—I'm staying here."

Jim Conaster, watching close, saw the feral gleam leap into the shadowed eyes above the mask. He had seen the decision to kill come into a man's eyes before. And so he did a thing characteristic of his reckless, headlong nature. He said, sliding the muzzle of his big gun over the top of the seat ahead of him. "You forgot me, pardner. That was a mistake!"

He saw those two guns shift and stab at him, saw the gusty red leap from the round blue muzzles. But not before his own gun had leaped in recoil and sent its flat thunder rolling through the car.

The window beside him shattered, letting in a cold blast of air. And a strip of brass trimming at the rear end of the car bent under the impact of the other slug from the masked man's guns. As for the fellow himself, he took a queer, fumbling half-step forward, caught himself momentarily, and then went down in a long, slow fall, his head lolling, his eyes wide with the suddenness of death. Then Jim was standing, erect and easy, swaying in the aisle, his gun poised, his eyes on the fallen man.

At last the Indians moved, turning and staring with sloe-black eyes. The sodbuster's children began to cry. The girl and her companion were both on their feet, staring from the dead man to Jim Conaster. But when the man's glance went back again to the dead man, the girl's remained on Jim, her finely chiseled face drawn and tense, horror in her eyes. And Jim, seeing that horror, said, "It was cold-blooded murder he was bent on. I couldn't let him get away with it, ma'am."

He wondered, immediately after, why he had felt called on to explain himself to this girl he had never seen before.

The old-timer across the aisle said, "It certainly was murder he was intending, cowboy. I can't find the words to say how obliged I am to you."

"No need of any," said Jim. "You better roust out somebody in the train crew. I want this thing fully explained and settled on by the time we get to Belle Point. I'm getting off there and I want to get all the questions over with."

It was not necessary to go after one of the train crew. The sound of those shots had carried, and a conductor and a brakeman came rushing into the car.

It took the rest of the way to Belle Point to get things thrashed out. The old-timer stripped the bandana from the dead man's face and identified him as one Sled Price. The trainmen questioned everyone, even the Indians. The girl's answers came in a low, rather throaty voice, and Jim could not get the import of her words. Her companion said heavily, "It happened quick. This hombre with the mask comes banging in apparently gunning for Scotty McVey. Other gent right away buys into the argument and it's all over."

The conductor turned to Jim. "Ever see this hombre before, the one you downed?"

Jim shook his head. "No. Nor any of the others. I bought in because, in my book, when a juniper breaks into a car masked and threatening to shoot folks up, that fellow is dragging his rope—and asking for it."

The conductor looked Jim up and down, noted the lean strength of him, the cold, clear eyes, and shrugged. "His sort have been leaded up before. I don't know what's behind this, but offhand I'd say the guy who needed it got it. I'll turn in my report that way."

THE train had speeded up after crossing the crest of the grade and now was whistling again. And this time when it slowed, it was slowing for Belle Point. Jim built a cigarette and went out to the rear vestibule of the car. A cold night wind raced about him, tugged at his clothes. Station lights and those of the town beyond swept into view and the train ground to a stop. A stocky, slightly hunched figure got down behind Jim. It was the old-timer, Scotty McVey. He said, "I don't know you, don't even know your name, but I'm ready to bet plenty right now that you're the man I want. If you're interested in half ownership of a pretty fair cow spread, come uptown with me and have a cup of coffee while I make you a proposition."

It was on the tip of Jim's tongue to refuse, but there was an earnestness, a flat, quiet honesty about the old fellow that made him pause. He said gravely, "That sounds like a big order, Mr McVey. I'm wondering what kind of strings are attached."

"I'll tell you over that coffee," said Scotty McVey. "Come on."

Jim went. As he and McVey moved away, two dark figures cut across the station platform and headed uptown also. It was the auburn-haired girl and her thick-shouldered companion.

Without turning his head, Scotty McVey said, "They're Sylvia Morrison and Keg Ashton, her foreman. Been over to Pioche, I reckon, looking over Sylvia's big winter range there. Ashton is one of the men who've been wanting to buy me out—dirt cheap. I keep telling myself it isn't Sylvia's money behind him, for I can't believe she'd try to force that kind of deal."

Jim thought, What you're trying to think and what you really think are two different things, old boy!

They turned into a little hashhouse and found themselves alone at the counter. Scotty McVey ordered the coffee and jerked his grizzled head at a shelf, saying, "That pie up there looks good. We'll split it, huh?"

As they ate, McVey said, "You'll think I'm crazy as a jay-bird. Maybe I am. But when a man puts half his life into building a ranch from the ground up—when he's seen it grow and prosper—it gets to be a part of his life, and something he don't let go of easy. I thought maybe I *could* let go of my spread—I've been away from Belle Point looking for a legitimate buyer—but I ended up not trying to sell at all. Made up my mind to come back and see it through, even if they did me in for it."

Jim said, "I'm trying to follow you, but there is too much dust in the trail for a newcomer to see through."

SCOTTY McVEY dipped a gnarled forefinger in his coffee cup and drew two wavering, but parallel lines across the counter. "This 'un is Jimpson Creek and this 'un is Old Rocky. All the range worth a hoot is my range, here between those creeks. Over here, past Old Rocky, is Butcher Block range, owned by Leek Knowlton. On past Jimpson Creek is Sylvia Morrison's range, the Crossed Arrows. For five years Knowlton has been putting the squeeze on me. He's busted my crews, either bought 'em out or scared 'em out. He wants my range real bad, for I've got water on each side of me, good winter cover and plenty of high, sweet fattening range. Now do you see?"

"Some of it," said Jim. "Not all. Go on."

Scotty shrugged. "Ain't much more. I'm an old man, and I'm tuckered out fighting Knowlton. I reckon there's just so much fight in a man. After the fight runs out of him he's a whipped chicken. But it came to me while I was away that when a man got to the point where there wasn't any fight left in him, he might better stay put, and die. Anyhow when Price showed up on the train ready to smoke me down, it didn't surprise me much. I knew what he was after, the minute he showed. Knowlton must have been following my moves all the time I was away and knew I was coming

back. So he decided to finish me once and for all."

"I'm still trying to figure where I come into the picture," said Jim.

McVey turned on his stool and for the first time looked Jim straight in the eye. Scotty's own eyes, bright blue and sober, were keenly searching. He nodded, as though satisfied with what he saw.

"It's like this," he said. "I'd like to see Leek Knowlton licked. What years I've got left, I'd like to live in peace on the ranch I've built up. But I'm a lone man, no kin in the world, as far as I know. And shucks! A man can eat just so much, he can wear only one shirt, one pair of jeans, one pair of boots at a time. And what money he's got in the bank, a man who's alone like me and dies alone—why, that money ain't worth a hooraw in hell to him."

He took a gulp of coffee, then said gruffly, "Back on that train you saved my life. And you showed me a lot. You showed you had plenty of salt, that you knew how to handle a gun, that you were a square-shooter, else you'd never have bought into the play. So here's the proposition. Half my ranch is yours if you've a mind to fight for *all* of it. I'm not trying to sell you a blind horse. Leek Knowlton is tough, and he's got a tough crew. You stand more than a fifty-fifty chance of getting a skinful of lead. I can't promise you anything but half my ranch, if you can iron out Knowlton and come through alive. I'm not asking you for a snap judgment. If you're interested at all, we'll put up for the night at the hotel and in the morning ride out and look the old layout over. Then you can decide. I—I kinda hope you're interested."

THOUGH Scotty said this last almost offhandedly, Jim got the impression that the old fellow was waiting with a sort of strained intentness.

Jim finished his coffee and pie and rolled a cigarette before answering. He found himself liking this old-timer and his breathtaking offer. Half a cattle ranch! It was being offered to him—to Jim Conaster. It could be his if he'd fight hard enough to hold that half and the other half too. Half for him, half for Scotty McVey. . . .

And Jim, hardly believing this offer had really come, said, "I'll consider it, and I'll ride out with you in the morning, Scotty. Which makes it right for you to call me Jim—Jim Conaster."

Scotty let out his breath in a gusty sigh. He turned and shoved out a gnarled, toil-calloused hand. "I never was so glad to shake hands with anybody in my life," he said simply. "Shake, Jim."

The hotel was two-storied and the narrow steps creaked as Jim and McVey climbed them and went down the hall to their room, which held two single beds, a battered bureau with a heavy white pitcher and wash bowl. Beside it was a single chair with a towel draped over the back. Scotty sat on one of the bunks and began pulling off his boots.

"Years take the sap out of a man," he said. "I'm dog weary and turning in."

Jim nodded. "I'm curious enough to go out and take a look about town. I'll come in quiet later, Scotty."

He closed the door behind him and went back down the hall. His thoughts were seething. He wanted and needed movement while he took in the full import of Scotty McVey's offer. He still wasn't at all sure that this wasn't all some kind of crazy dream.

He heard the stairs creaking, so he paused, for the stairs were almost too narrow for two people to pass. Voices came ahead of the steps. A man's heavy, sulky growl, and a throaty, feminine voice with a definite note of anger in it. The girl was saying, "I don't care to argue about it, Keg. I know what I saw and what I heard. For all of you, that wolf of a Sled Price would have gunned Scotty McVey. You made not one move to stop him. And that doesn't make you stack up any too high in my eyes. Now I'm through discussing it. Good night."

There was a mumbled curse below and the stamp of angry bootheels leaving. The girl came on up the stairs alone. At the top she saw Jim Conaster and swept by him, her head up, her eyes averted. Jim touched his hat and inclined his head in a grave nod. "I'm glad what I did on the train met with your approval, ma'am," he drawled.

He didn't expect her to answer, but she did. She said coldly, "I don't see that killing is justified in any case. You could have handled things some other way."

Jim smiled slightly. "Ever since Eve, women have reasoned with their emotions, ma'am. If you'd just—"

A door slammed emphatically and the hall was empty except for himself. He went on down the stairs and out into the street.

The wind blew cold and dry and sweet. And he strode the blackness of the street, jerking his thoughts back to Scotty McVey and his incredible offer. Finally, the restlessness walked out of him, he entered a brightly-lighted saloon.

HERE it was quiet and warm. Card tables, about half of them filled, stood in a circle about a big old pot-bellied stove that creaked and glowed. At the bar stood only one man, a whiskey bottle and glass before him. It was Keg Ashton, Sylvia Morrison's foreman. Even as Jim glanced at him, Ashton poured and downed another drink, grimacing at the bite of the raw liquor and scowling over his thoughts.

As he spotted Jim, he hunched his shoulders a little, his head thrust forward belligerently. He rang his glass on the bar and moved nearer Jim, his scowl deepening. Jim thought, He's big and strong as a bull. Fancies himself in a rough and tumble. Just enough whiskey in him to turn him mean.

A sneer in his voice, Keg Ashton said, "I can't see where you did such a much. That was a sneak shot you pulled. You were sitting back there alone and that gave you a break. No, I don't see any fancy medals on you. You look damn ordinary, if you ask me."

It got under Jim's skin a little, even if there was whiskey behind it. He said, "Like most other ordinary men I don't like to be bothered by drunks. Go sleep it off. You don't ride near as wide a trail as you think."

There was leashed anger in Jim's words and tone, but Ashton was in no mood to heed it. The bartender saw that, and tried to placate the man. "Wait until morning, Keg. You'll reason better then."

Some of the card players had turned to watch. Jim put an elbow on the bar and said to the bartender, "Bourbon. A short one to rock me to sleep."

"Try this!" blurted Ashton. "It's quicker—and cheaper!"

He came forward with a heavy lunge, throwing his clenched fist ahead of him, aiming at Jim's jaw. But Keg Ashton wasn't nearly as fast as the liquor in him told him he was. Jim went in under the punch easily and hit him with a short, savage hook that stopped the man in his tracks and set him back hard on his heels.

Ashton's mouth dropped open, a trickle of blood running from one corner of it. Jim hit him again, full on the point of his loose, sagging jaw, and Ashton went down—and out. Jim turned, took the drink the bartender had poured and downed it neat. He spun a coin on the mahogany and said, "Sorry. Nobody hates a dumb fight any more than I do."

The bartender, his eyes popping, stuttered, "That wasn't a fight, that was a revelation. First time I've ever seen Keg Ashton on his back, drunk or sober. You sure hit for keeps, don't you!"

Jim shrugged and went out. A card player laughed and said, "Who he is or where he comes from I don't know, but I rise to remark that there's a hell of a fighting man in Belle Point tonight!"

JIM and Scotty McVey ate breakfast at dawn and then, on a pair of horses picked up at the livery barn, rode out

of town. Sunup found them several miles out, pausing to let their horses drink at a pleasant little alder- and willow-shrouded creek.

"Jimpson Creek," said Scotty. "When we hit the far bank we're on our own range, Jim."

Jim's lips quirked slightly. 'Our range' had a funny sound. He studied Scotty McVey as the grizzled rancher rode ahead of him across the creek. There was a patient slowness about the old fellow and a certain air of stubborn honesty. But there was weariness too. Scotty was like some gnarled old piñon tree, buffeted and battered by wind and storm, yet with roots still set and clinging to a bit of well loved soil.

Jim had known many men, but had been a friend of very few. His joy in always taking new trails had made him more or less of a lone wolf. But he found himself liking Scotty McVey, liking him a lot.

As they rode on together, they passed cattle carrying a simple Box M brand, Scotty's brand. Scotty grew more voluble, eager and enthusiastic. Almost absently Jim noted the cattle and their condition, noted the spreading flats of willow and alder that made winter shelter. And when they broke beyond the flats and climbed the long, slow slope beyond, he noted the reaching acres of sun-cured grass. Scotty hadn't exaggerated. Good range, this. Very good.

They crossed a low swelling ridge and there, at the head of the draw beyond, were buildings and the fresh green of grass which denoted the seepage from a spring.

"Home," said Scotty simply.

Two tall riders, angular and slow-moving with age, were puttering about the corrals. "Sam and Nib Leland," said Scotty. "The only two punchers I've got left. The only two Knowlton couldn't buy or scare away from me. But like me, they're too old for fighting."

Jim reached for the makings. "Scotty," he said, "before we go any further, I'm wondering if you still feel exactly like you did last night. No use committing myself unless I'm sure of that."

"I meant it last night and I mean it now," Scotty answered. "A half share in this ranch if you'll fight for all of it. I'm going to put it in writing, Jim. You see, this is home to me. I realized as soon as I got away from it that I'd rather be dead here than alive any place else in the world. But while I'm alive I don't want to see that damned Leek Knowlton get his paws on it—him or nobody else, but mostly him. I ain't fool enough to expect you to fight for nothing, or for just wages. I'm asking you to fight for range that is yours and mine, and for cattle that are the same. Maybe—maybe you'd like to go through the cabin. It's a right nice cabin."

Jim looked away. He had a queer tightness in his throat, a slight mist in his eyes. Old Scotty got under a man's skin. Gruffly Jim said, "Yeah, I'd like to look it over, Scotty—kind of get used to it. Because I'll be living there. I'm taking you up on the proposition. I'm warning you I may get restless and hit the saddle again. But while I'm here I'll try and knot this Knowlton jasper's tail for him."

Scotty let out a deep sigh. Then he seemed to expand and straighten, as if he'd found new strength, new courage. He said, "I'm younger than I've been for a long, long time. Light down, Jim, and turn your bronc into *our* corral."

SCOTTY put aside a well licked pencil and shoved a heavily scrawled tally book across the table to Jim Conaster. "That's as near as I can hit it," he said. "I make it we've got around nine hundred head of good sound cattle, Jim, and that ain't exactly starting from scratch. Then there's thirty, forty head of pretty good saddle broncs. I reckon we can make out, eh?"

"I reckon," Jim nodded.

Scotty brought out another pencil and a clean sheet of paper, shoving them over to Jim. "You take over from here, Jim. I ain't much of a hand at writing. We

ought to have a lawyer to make out this partnership agreement, with a lot of big words in it. But you make it up the best you can, everything fifty-fifty, and I'll sign it."

Jim shook his head. "No. We either trust each other or we don't, Scotty. If we do, maybe we can lick this Knowlton. If we don't, then we're a cinch to get licked even if we sign a thousand papers. I'm taking your word and giving you mine. That's enough for me."

Scotty fumbled at his pipe. "In the old days I knew a few men like that, Jim. I'd sort of figured they'd gone the way of the buffalo. It's mighty fine to meet that kind of a man again. Soon—soon as I get this old pipe of mine going, we'll seal it with a drink. There ought to be a bottle around this shanty somewhere, providing them two danged old packrats, Sam and Nib Leland, ain't stole it on me."

That night Jim lay awake for some time on his bunk. In the next room he could hear old Scotty snoring contentedly. Well, this was it. He hadn't been dreaming. This was real all right. Out of nowhere fortune had dumped substance and permanent foundation into his lap. There was a fight ahead, but then, he wouldn't have touched the setup if there'd been no fight to look forward to. For then everything would have been false. This way it was sound—if he could just keep it so. If only the old saddle itch didn't get to nagging him again. . . .

THE next morning at Dawn Jim laid a rope on a likely looking claybank in the cavvy corral, snubbed it and cinched a saddle into place. Scotty and the Lelands came over.

"If you're aiming to look things over, I'll come along and show you where our limits run, Jim," said Scotty.

Jim shook his head. "I've got prowling to do and I do that best alone, Scotty. I won't get lost."

Nib Leland turned without a word and walked stiffly over to the little bunkhouse. He was back almost immediately with a scabbarded rifle and a handful of cartridges.

"Hang this on your kak, boy," he said. "That short gun you've got shoved in your jeans ain't worth a storm-blowed bird's nest in a range fight. And there's no tellin' what you're liable to run into. Cut a fine sight with this Winchester and she'll lay the lead right there."

Again Jim felt an odd stir of feeling. These old fellows, all three of them, were the pure quill. He nodded and hung the scabbarded rifle under his near stirrup leather.

"Jimpson Creek is the healthiest side," Scotty called after him as he rode away.

Jim rode the bank of Jimpson Creek for a while, rating the Box M cows he passed and the grass they were feeding on. Abruptly he reined away at right angles, for the thought came to him that this was a poor way of starting off. If he was going to make a fight of this thing, then the place to ride was right down the other fellow's throat. Nothing foolhardy, of course, but not taking the safest and easiest trail either. So he crossed the miles to Old Rocky Creek.

He thought, with wry humor, that there wasn't much difference between Jimpson and Old Rocky. Both were sweet-water creeks, now foaming and tumbling along, now sliding softly over shallows. Dark green and flashing white where the shade pockets lay, glittering silver in the sun. One thing he noted. Not so many Box M cows here as there were over on Jimpson. Probably the Lelands had, during Scotty's absence, loose-herded the cattle over Jimpson way, to avoid any fuss with the Butcher Block crowd. Jim decided there'd be no more of that. Box M cows would graze anywhere on Box M range, and if Leek Knowlton and his gang didn't like it, let them make their move and he'd sure enough figure a way to counter it.

But Jim saw no sign at all of the Butcher Block, aside from a few cattle that had strayed across the creek. He didn't bother these, but kept on riding,

climbing higher and higher up the mounting slope of country, which began to break up into ridges and gulches and cut banks. The steady murmur of Old Rocky became a lusty roar, as its waters cascaded and tumbled from shelf to pool.

At last Jim swung away to his left again, riding a wide arc. And so, in time, he came back to Jimpson Creek. He paused at a ridge crest to watch the slim, mounted figure on a shelf beside the creek, hazing some half-dozen cows along. On sudden impulse he left the ridge, dropped down the short slope and jogged over to her.

He tipped his hat and said, "Long as we're slated to be neighbors, we ought to know each other. You're Sylvia Morrison, Scotty said. I'm Conaster, Jim Conaster. If you're worried any about your cows feeding on our range once in a while, don't. Like human beings, cows

A sudden suspicion burned through Jim's mind as he strode swiftly toward them

figure the other side of the creek looks like better grazing."

STARTLED at first, she watched him with clear, level eyes as he spoke and then said, "Maybe I didn't hear right, Mr. Conaster. But I thought you said *our* range."

"You heard right."

"Then you've hired on to ride for Scotty?"

"No. I'm not exactly hired."

"In that case there is only one other reason for the use of 'our'. You've bought in with Scotty."

Jim reached for the makings. "You might call it that," he admitted slowly. "Scotty and me made a deal. It's half and half now."

She nodded slowly, then said, "I wonder what Leek Knowlton will think of that."

Jim said dryly, "I don't give two hoots and a holler what Knowlton thinks. The best thing he can do from here on out is mind his own business, while Scotty and me mind ours."

Still watching him, Sylvia Morrison noted a certain tautness about his mouth and chin as he said this, saw the coldness come into his grey eyes and the sudden flare to his nostrils. And she thought, That affair on the train wasn't just a chance thing. This man is made that way. He's a hard and savage fighter.

Jim's horse threw up its head and whistled shrilly, twisting its head. Instantly Jim was tense and alert, sliding sideways in his saddle as he looked back over his shoulder. And then, with a single deft move, his slid his rifle out of the scabbard and dropped it across his arm.

"Strangers to me," he said crisply. "Maybe you know them."

FOUR riders had topped the crest of the ridge and were now dropping down to the shelf, one in the lead, three spread somewhat in the rear. Sylvia Morrison said, "Leek Knowlton in the lead. Three of his men with him. If you're going to leave you'd better make it quick, before they get you pinned against this cutbank. It's thirty feet down to the creek, and there's lots of rocks."

Jim laughed softly. "If I thought you really figured I'd cut and run, I'd feel like a fool. The one who's leaving is you. In case Knowlton gets to spreading himself too fine, I don't want an innocent spectator around to cramp my style. It's been nice seeing you."

Turning away, he brought his horse around to face the on-coming riders, and the girl, a trifle pale and breathless as she watched, saw him crack the action of his rifle slightly and throw a quick glance down at it to make sure there was a cartridge in the chamber. Then he set the lever fully back in place with a slow finality that was ominous.

The girl said hurriedly, "Don't be a fool! It's four to one. Get over between the cattle and the creek. The cattle will cover you long enough to get clear and make a ride for it. Hurry!"

Apparently he didn't even hear her. He just sat light and high in his saddle and waited.

Leek Knowlton rode up to within ten yards before he reined in. He nodded in the general direction of Sylvia Morrison, but his eyes remained fixed on Jim. Knowlton was a chunky man with blunt, ruddy features, an unruly mop of pale yellow hair, and eyes like gimlets. He leaned forward in his saddle, his blocky hands folded across the saddlehorn. Jim, watching him with narrowed eyes, thought, He's considerably oversold on the great Leek Knowlton and runs easy to temper. And the guy right in back of him is bad medicine—plenty bad!

Jim waited. Knowlton out, returning stare for stare, and saw anger rise in Knowlton's face. Knowlton cleared his throat.

"The description fits," he rasped. "You're the one who threw a fast gun on the train coming into Belle Point a couple of nights ago."

"I'm wondering," murmured Jim, "who went to the trouble of telling you. Not that I care. If you don't want your riders laid out for the long, long ride, Knowlton, then don't send 'em busting into trains behind a bandana mask and a couple of guns, threatening sudden death to decent folks. That sort of play always gets you trouble."

"You got off at the wrong stop when you got off at Belle Point," said Knowlton. "You should have kept going."

"Belle Point was the rainbow's end for me," Jim drawled, "so I got off." He shrugged as he said this, and the shrug brought the muzzle of his Winchester directly in line with Leek Knowlton's chest. At the same instant the lock clicked as Jim pulled the hammer back.

His tone sharpening, he said, "Nothing could beat me to this shot, Knowlton. So if I go, you go. These are soft points in this rifle and there's no mending a man hit by one. Something for you to think over. It's your move. Where do we go from here?"

THE man directly behind Knowlton, dapper and cat-lithe, with eyes as empty as a dead furnace, said, "I told you, Leek, but you would go bulling your way in. Lots of men have been buried for that."

Jim saw the blood mount and congest in Knowlton's face.

"Shut up, Dandy!" said Knowlton. "I know what I'm doing. There'll be no gunplay. I'm having a talk with this hombre."

"Fine," Jim nodded. "I want a talk with you. But we'll both pay more attention to the other fellow if we talk alone. Tell your men to drift, Knowlton—I mean drift—plumb out of rifle shot—or we'll stay like this all day. Not my fault I don't trust you. I've been hearing plenty things. Your reputation travels."

Jim's tone was casual again, but his eyes were not. Knowlton said without turning, "Dandy, Solo, Jake—go on back to headquarters. I'll be along later."

Dandy said, "Don't blame us. You asked for this!"

Then he turned and jogged off, the other two dropping in beside him. They disappeared over the ridge and did not look back. Jim, hearing the sigh of relief that broke from Sylvia Morrison's lips, smiled.

"Seems like being anywhere around me is hard on your nerves, Miss Morrison. But this jigger came hunting trouble, even if he does use double talk. Now I'm going to make you mad. You tell that big lug of a foreman of yours he better hunt a new range. Him and me ain't going to be able to get along together anywhere around here at all. Not *at* all."

There was a startled, indignant sputter, then her voice, cold and haughty: "I'll do nothing of the sort. Whoever works for me is my business and none of yours."

"You tell him to get going," Jim persisted. "I'll tell you why. He's been blabbing to friend Knowlton, here—describing me, telling him who it was that upset Knowlton's pet killer on the train. And I don't like a blab-mouth."

"I don't believe you!" Sylvia flared.

Jim gave a shrug. "Figure it out for yourself. In that car there were just you and your foreman, Scotty McVey, that squatter family, them two Indians and me. Just you, your foreman, Scotty and me got off at Belle Point. Now, you didn't tell Knowlton, I know. Scotty didn't tell him and I sure didn't. So who does that leave? Figure it out. If you don't believe me, take a good look at Knowlton. See how his neck gets red when you prod him with the truth. Yep! It's settled; Keg Ashton better hunt new pastures pronto. Any time I sit into a tough game, like the one I'm in now, I divide folks up into two classes—them that's for me, them that's against me. And I've no patience with them that's against me, unless they fight clean and in the open. Now if you'll just get going, please, Mr. Smart-boy Knowlton and me will get down to cases."

The girl said angrily, "You—you're impossible! You're—"

"I know," Jim cut in. "But go on now, please."

She left then, spurring away in anger.

JIM lowered the hammer of his rifle and dropped it back across his arm. "Mighty fine young lady, Miss Morrison is," he told Leek Knowlton laconically. "Too bad Scotty and me ain't got a neighbor like her on both sides our range."

Jim saw the little start Knowlton gave and nodded. "That's right, Knowlton. Half of the Box M is mine. The name is Conaster—Jim Conaster. It's McVey and Conaster from now on. Which makes the Box M a heap different proposition for you now. I ain't old and tired like Scotty was. If it's fighting you want, you're going to get your craw full, starting now."

He rolled a smoke while Knowlton pondered this information. Knowlton settled back in his saddle as he said, a hard smile on his lips, "One thing, Conaster—we know just where we stand. Damned if I'm not going to enjoy this. Fight you're talking, and fight you'll get. I've got good men behind me."

Again that shrug. Jim said, "Don't let the extra men you've got in your outfit make you too proud, Knowlton. There's more to a good fight than numbers. There's the way you go about it. Like now. This is the last time we ever trade words, Knowlton. The next time we meet we trade smoke. You and me. Maybe you can get me, maybe you can't. If you don't I'll sure as hell get you. I wouldn't waste words trying to bluff you out, and you couldn't talk enough to pull the wool over my eyes. Any man who would send a cheap killer out to smoke down an old man like Scotty McVey, just to gobble up range and cows—hell!"

Jim leaned forward in his saddle, his eyes like ice. "Get this, Knowlton," he said harshly. "I say it again: the next time I see you, I do my best to kill you. I won't bother to tell you my angle, except this. I've everything to gain and damn little to lose. But it is you and me for it, next time we meet. That's my idea of how to settle this. And if you want it now, we'll get it over with."

Jim flipped the rifle upside down, slid it into the scabbard, then sat back, his hands outspread on his thighs. "You've got a couple of hog-legs there. I've got one. We can settle this whole thing quick!"

Leek Knowlton ran the tip of his tongue over lips suddenly pale and dry. Showdown was the last thing in the world he'd expected, or wanted. Why, this lean, cold-eyed newcomer was dynamite. Knowlton had never faced a man like him. Other men Knowlton had crossed swords with had had to work up to a showdown. You had a chance to study them, to figure out their weak spots. But this Jim Conaster—!

The directness of the thing, the abrupt, cold finality of Jim's challenge, befuddled a man's wits, upset his calculations. No fencing around, no jockeying, no chance to plan or scheme. Jim just smacked the issue right out into the open. Yes or no—just like that!

Leek Knowlton wanted none of it—not just now. He had to have time to think, to figure his moves. There was one advantage he glimpsed. This Conaster was fool enough to declare his intentions, but not to act on them this time!

Knowlton licked his lips again. "I didn't come out here to throw a gun against any man," he mumbled. "Some things I wanted to find out, that's all."

Jim laughed. "Well, you've found out, and so have I. You know where we stand, Knowlton. Next time is it. Now git!"

Knowlton didn't argue. He was raw with rage inside, knowing that this man had backed him down, made him crawl. But the fear in him was greater than the rage. He turned and rode away, as his men had done, and disappeared across the ridge.

JIM CONASTER finished a second cup of coffee and built a cigarette. Through the blue curtain of smoke that dribbled from his lips and curled up across the hard contours of his face, he studied the three old cowmen who sat about the table with him. And then he said, the line of his lips less grim, "I've kicked the top off the pot and let us all in on a deal that's going to keep us from any regular sleep for a while. Think you're up to it?"

Scotty McVey squirmed with impatience in his chair. Since Jim had come back from his ride around the Box M range, Scotty had been dying with curiosity. But he and the two Leland brothers had waited, unwilling to break in on the grim mood Jim was in. Now that a hint of future action had been given, Scotty wanted to hear the rest.

"When a man gets old he gets into a habit of sleeping too much," he said. "It would do me and these two old buzzards good to change all that. Stir our livers up, maybe. What's brewing? Dang it, Jim, speak up! Don't keep a feller hanging in midair!"

Jim chuckled. "I ran afoul of Knowlton and three of his crowd. Dandy, Solo and Jake, he called them. And—"

"Goshamighty!" broke in Scotty. "That crowd! And you're here all in one piece? By gollies, I knew I could pick a fighting man when I saw one! What happened?"

"Did you warm up that rifle, Jim?" asked Nib Leland eagerly. "Did you lather them?"

JIM shook his head. "No need to. Knowlton sent the other three home and him and I had a talk. I think I pushed him into the open. I aimed to. I took a good look at that hombre and I reckon I've got him figured. He likes to work slow and cautious if he can, Knowlton does. He likes a case game. He don't like to be pushed into something before he's had a chance to figure every angle. Well, I pushed him. I told him next time we met there'd be a smoke-rolling. I spurred him pretty hard, but I did it on purpose. That's a good way to play poker sometimes."

Sam Leland nodded. "I know what you mean, Jim," he said in his quiet, careful way. "You can rough some men into making a fool bet. I've seen it done."

"You telling him you were going to start shooting next time you met up with him will sure have him jumping sideways," said Scotty, his eyes shining with excitement. "He's liable to try and bust us complete, first pop out of the corral."

"I want him to try," Jim drawled. "That's why I spurred him. If he does, we've got him in the open. We know exactly where we stand. We play this thing any other way and we ain't got a chance. He's got us outnumbered four or five to one. Had we played a quiet waiting game, he'd have looked things over, laid his plans and then started oozing us out of the picture one by one. Plenty of chance to drygulch a man in this country, pick him off at long range and leave no trace. There are other angles he could have worked, too. It's tough to lick a man in any fight if you let him pick his own time and place. If you rush him, you get him flustered and he makes the wrong move. I hardly think Knowlton will make a break at us tonight. But he might, and we can't afford to take chances. So starting tonight we begin posting night guards, two at a time. The two who get to sleep will bed down away from the house here and sleep with a rifle handy. Then if Knowlton wants to make a night raid, he'll run into something. And when and if he does, that will give me a chance to spread the word that he's doing some night-riding and give me reason to put out the word in Belle Point that I'm going to smoke him down the first chance, and why. Most men I've met—halfway decent men—have no more use for a night raider than they have a horsethief."

"Cute," murmured Sam Leland. "Cute

as all hell! We'll have backing. Not in the open, maybe, for Knowlton has got most folks in these parts pretty well bluffed. But other men will get to thinking that if Leek Knowlton starts trying to night-raid us, what's to keep him from night raiding other layouts. Right, Jim?"

"Right!"

Scotty McVey leaned back, stretching his arms high. "I'm getting younger by the minute. You've got a head on you, Jim. Here I was, all washed up and not knowing which way to turn. And you come hot-footin' along with an answer."

"Don't get too salty," Jim warned. "Maybe I've guessed wrong. Maybe Knowlton is deeper than I figured. But it's a good gamble."

"One thing I'd like to know," said Nib Leland. "You say Knowlton sent Dandy Fair, Solo Slade and Jake Chester home. Now them three gun-chuckers didn't fade easy unless for one thing. You had the drop on 'em, Jim. You musta had."

"I did," Jim admitted. "Rather, I had it on Knowlton and he knew that no matter what the other three tried, I'd get him before they could get me. So I dealt the hand."

"Why didn't you plug him?" asked Nib bluntly. "Finish him then and there? Then most of our troubles would have been over with."

"Two reasons," said Jim dryly. "One is, I've got to live with myself. The other, I've got to live with the decent folks on this range. And I couldn't do either was I to gun a man I had the drop on just because I held all the cards at the time. I know men have died for taking fool angles like that, but—" he shrugged.

"Aw—I know," Nib mumbled. "In your boots I'd have done the same, I reckon. It's hell to be born with a conscience."

"Yep," Jim grinned. "But I know why you wonder I didn't kill him. I've been wondering myself."

THEY spent the afternoon putting shoes on a number of barefoots in the cavvy herd. Scotty tended forge, Nib and Sam did the roping and throwing, and Jim did the shoeing.

It was a good life, thought Jim, sweating and toiling in the sun. No forty and found job, this. These live hoofs which he pared and rasped and fitted with iron shoes were his, or at least *half* his. So he didn't mind the sweat and grime, and the smell of the warm dust was good in his nostrils.

With one horse left to go, Sam Leland quit work and headed for the cabin to get supper, for the sun was low in the west and the shadows were beginning to flow in a cool, blue tide. And Jim, as he finished clinching the last nail on the last hoof, heard Scotty say, " 'Evening, Miss Sylvia. Mighty handsome of you to pay us a visit. You're just in time for supper. Better figure on staying. No better hand at biscuit tossing than Sam Leland ever greased a skillet."

Jim didn't look up until he had finished the final rasping. Then he helped Nib Leland loosen the tie ropes and watched the horse scramble to its feet and shake itself before scurrying off to join its fellows. He carried his box of tools over to the corral fence, shoved it under and climbed over, dropping down beside the forge on the far side to look up at Sylvia Morrison as she sat her saddle there in the blaze of sunset.

Jim was grey with dust, except where the sweat had streaked his face and throat in muddy little rivulets. The girl, bare-headed and in khaki blouse and divided skirt, had a cool, immaculate look to her, and Jim, apparently unmindful of the contrast of his own condition, nodded to her gravely.

"I'd like to second Scotty's invite," he said.

"I didn't come over to mooch a meal," she said. "I came to tell you you were right about—well, what you said out along Jimpson Creek this morning. And

I wanted you to know that it was entirely his idea, not mine."

"I knew that, of course," said Jim quickly. "Some folks play fair and some don't, that's all. But I'm glad you came to tell me. It gives me a chance to ask again that you stay to supper."

She flushed slightly, looked away and said, "I am hungry and it is quite a ride home. So I'll stay." She dropped her reins and slid lithely to the ground.

Old Scotty glowered at them. "Dang it!" he exploded, jabbing furiously at the cooling slag in the forge. "What in time you two talking about? Who was right about which up along Jimpson Creek? Jim, you didn't tell me you met Miss Sylvia this morning. All you said was that you'd had a talk with Leek Knowlton and told him off. Now it seems—"

"Quit your sputtering!" Jim grinned. "When I get good and ready to tell you something, I'll tell you. Now you visit with Miss Morrison while I go dig out from under this blanket of corral dust. And tell Sam to do himself fancy at that stove."

THERE was a sickle moon in the west and a heaven full of glowing stars as Jim swung into the saddle and headed out into the night with Sylvia Morrison riding beside him. He had overruled the girl's protests about accompanying her home.

"Why, I've grown up on this range," she scoffed. "I know every foot of it. To ride alone at night holds no terrors for me."

To which Jim answered soberly, "Nobody knows what any night might hold. I'm going along."

Before leaving he had pulled Scotty aside. "Let Sam and Nib take the first watch. I'll be back in time to take over the second with you, Scotty."

He and Sylvia rode for some time in silence. Then Jim said, "When you pulled out up along the creek this morning you were mad. Why didn't it last?"

"Two reasons," she answered simply. "Because I found you were right about Keg Ashton. And because I did not go straight home. Instead, I left my horse down at the creek and came back on foot below that cut bank. I heard everything that passed between you and Knowlton. Oh, you can call it shameless to eavesdrop so brazenly, but there were things I had to find out."

"Such as—?"

"Whether you were really what you pretended to be or whether you were just another wandering rider whom old Scotty had trusted and who would prove just as easy for Knowlton to bluff out or buy out as many others have been. Oh, I know you claimed to be partners with Scotty, but that didn't mean anything unless it proved to be the truth."

"Was it?" Jim murmured.

"Apparently. You and Knowlton were hardly friends when you parted."

"Why should you have been so interested?"

She seemed to think over her answer. "Because Scotty has had a tough trail, because he is old and I want to see him hold out against Knowlton. I don't want to see him lose what he's fought so long to hold."

"I've heard Keg Ashton has tried to buy Scotty out for a song," ventured Jim. "And that your money was behind the offer."

"A lie!" the girl burst out. "And if you think that I'd—"

"I don't. I didn't when I heard it. I figure you're telling the truth and you're doing me the same honor. That makes us even."

There was a long silence, and then the girl asked hesitantly, "Did you really mean what you told Knowlton—that the next time you met him it meant shooting?"

"I reckon. The issue is up. It's him or me. There can't be any other way to settle the argument. I've known that all along. When I agreed to take over the fight for Scotty for a half share in his ranch, I knew that."

"Wait a minute!" Sylvia's voice had a clear, but cold ring, and she reined

in as she spoke. "Let me get this right. Do you mean to say that the reason you were willing to put up a fight for Scotty and the Box M was that he offered you a half interest in the ranch? Is that the deal?"

"We seem to be putting all our cards on the table tonight," Jim said, "so you might as well see those. Yes, that was the deal."

SHE sat her saddle very still, a slim shadow in the faint starlight. Waiting for her to speak, Jim reached for the makings and built a smoke. As he spun it into shape she said distantly, "You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Conaster. Why didn't you demand Scotty's right arm and leg at the same time? A man so careful of his own interests shouldn't be riding in this night air, he might catch cold. So I'll say that this is as far as I care to have you ride with me—now or any other time!"

The whipping scorn in her tone cut deep. Searching for an answer, Jim tucked the cigarette in his lips, drew a match sharply across his saddle skirt and cupped the yellow glow in his hands as he lifted it toward his face.

Something snapped between his lips and hands, so close that he felt the cigarette flutter and the match puffed out. And over to his right in the darkness a rifle spanged thinly.

Jim's reactions were instinctive. From the corner of his eye he had noted that pale, orange finger of rifle flame and, though the distance was fairly long, he whipped the short gun from his waist band and slammed three quick shots in return. And even as the last shot rumbled, he sent his mount barging into the girl's horse, startling it and driving it to headlong flight. And as girl and horse melted into the night, Jim reined to a speeding half circle, gun high and poised and ready to chop down, while his eyes tried to pierce the dark and spot the source of that rifle shot.

There was a cold anger driving him, the reaction any man might feel over such a cowardly attempt, and he pushed recklessly in toward the region of the shot, relying on the darkness and the movement of his horse to shield him.

The rifle spanged again, this time not fifty yards away. Jim felt the shock of the bullet as it hit his horse. The animal gave a grunt, humped in the middle, then went down in a heap. Jim kicked free of the stirrups and rolled clear.

He lay still, close to the earth, his senses tense and strained. He heard his luckless horse sigh as the life went out of it, and then the night was very still, so still that Jim's ear caught the muffled clank of a spur chain—over there!

He drove a shot at the sound and heard, beyond the echo of the shot, a curse of surprise and pain. He shot again, coming to one knee. There was no answering shot, just the ragged pound of boot-heels in a short run. Then came the snort of a horse, the creak of riding gear and the pound of hoofs speeding away.

"Dogged it, the dirty coward!" Jim mumbled savagely. "No stomach for lead coming *his* way. At that, I think I nicked him."

He got to his feet, punching the empties from his gun. He thumbed a fresh round of shells from a pocket and reloaded, bitter and raging. So this was the way Knowlton played the game, eh? Well, he'd sent a damned weak sister to do the job! If this was a sample of Leek Knowlton's tough crew, the odds wouldn't be so heavy after all.

As Jim went over to his dead horse, his anger surged anew. This had been a good little horse, too good to die before a cowardly shot in the dark. Jim found that the way the animal had fallen, the butt of Nib Leland's rifle was clear to his grasp. He drew it from the scabbard and dropped it over his arm. He could have cut the saddle clear and carried it home with him, but it would keep until morning when he could ride out after it. The best thing he could do was get back to headquarters as fast as possible. No telling what else Knowlton had in mind.

Maybe Scotty and Sam and Nib would be needing him pronto.

He had just started out when a call came from the darkness. "Jim! Oh, Jim!"

He did not answer and he heard the sound of Sylvia's horse as she rode closer. There was a definitely anxious note in her voice as she called again, "Jim Conaster!"

He answered then, his voice rough with the anger in him. "Come back again, eh, to see if I was lying or not? Well, I'm not lying when I tell you the best thing you can do is go home and stay there. And if I choose to make a fight for a deal for half a cattle ranch, that's my business. If it scandalizes you, that's just too bad. Maybe after tonight you'll realize I'm ready to pay a pretty good price for that half interest in the Box M. But I'm not interested whether you realize it or not. Go on home!"

"You may be hurt—"

"I'm not hurt. I'm not touched. Go on home!"

Her answer was a long time coming. It was rather ragged. "Very well."

He heard the slow tempo of fading hoofs. Then there was only the night and the stars and stillness. And Jim Conaster, rifle over his shoulder, began the long walk home.

NO HINT of a night raid disturbed the Box M that night. When dawn broke, Jim rose from a spot above the headquarters and stood stiff and chilled for a moment, before striding down to the buildings. Scotty, equally stiff and chilled and grumpy, came in from below. Sam had breakfast going and old Scotty brightened as warm food and hot coffee took effect. Jim, however, remained grim and harsh. Scotty, eyeing him guardedly, said, "You better turn in and get a little more sleep, Jim. Me or one of the boys will go out after your saddle."

Jim shook his head. "I'll go," he said. "Want to look around some. I'll borrow your saddle."

So he was riding again even as the sun came up. Jim managed to get the saddle free of the dead horse without cutting the cinch. He slid it and the other riding rigging into a gunny sack, which he tied to his borrowed kak. Then, leading his new mount behind him, he began circling, studying the earth.

He found the spot where the would-be killer had been. A couple of empty rifle shells lay on the ground, bright yellow in the sun. Jim looked them over, then tossed them aside. Standard shells for a standard gun, they might have come out of any one of a hundred different weapons scattered about the country. What interested Jim mostly was the hoof tracks of the prowler's horse. He swung into his saddle and began following them, not the way the fellow had gone after he had run, but backtracking them.

For a time they led in a wide circle toward Old Rocky Creek. Jim was just about to figure they had come from the Butcher Block layout, when they turned down country. And presently they curved right back to within a couple hundred yards of the Box M headquarters!

JIM had a smoke over this startling fact. Then he rode home, cinched his own outfit onto a fresh horse and told Scotty laconically that he was riding into Belle Point. Scotty eyed him worriedly for a moment, then shrugged. "I won't bother you with questions, Jim. You've got something on your mind."

Jim had plenty on his mind. First was the nagging mystery of who it was that had shot at him. As he saw it, the fellow had hung about the Box M headquarters until he and Sylvia had started for the Morrison layout. Knowing the trail they would take, the fellow had then ridden a wide and fast circle to get in ahead of them. Lying out beside the trail and waiting for a shot, he had caught the glow of the match as Jim started to light his cigarette and, being sure then which rider was which, had

tried a snapshot, missing by a hair. Then, downing Jim's horse with his next shot, but finding answering lead coming his way, and probably slightly winged by one of Jim's slugs, he had lost his nerve and pulled out.

It was a queer go—damned queer—and it had Jim guessing. The other thing that was grinding at his mind was Sylvia Morrison. Her reaction to the true reason he was putting up a fight for the Box M, her scathing, scornful words, lay hot and smarting in his memory.

Why the hell shouldn't he fight for a good proposition? What did she take him for, a simple-minded cluck risking his skin just for the fun of it? Women! They did about as much sound reasoning as a hoot owl.

Of course, thinking him hit, maybe seriously hurt, she had ridden back as soon as she could control her startled, spooked horse. She had called to him anxiously. And he had rawhided her savagely because of the bleak fury the cowardly attack, plus her bitterly scathing words, had roused in him.

He had hurt her all right, for there had been that ragged tremor in her voice just before she rode away. So what? She had hurt him, hadn't she? So she had it coming. And why should he give a damn about her or any other woman? He had known her but a few short days, and if he gave way to the sudden urge sweeping over him, he'd darn well never see her again.

For today the old fever for new trails was hitting him. Out there the hills were beckoning, hazy and tawny in the sun, tempting a man to ride over them and leave all responsibilities behind. He straightened in his saddle, his nostrils quivered and his narrowed eyes gleamed with love of far horizons. He knew how a soaring eagle felt. Some men were made for space, and space for them. He was like that.

He started to turn his horse toward those faraway hills. But driving up through his restless spirit came something to hold him back. He'd made a bargain with Scotty McVey. He'd shaken hands on it. Wasn't he the one who had turned down Scotty's offer to put the proposition in writing? Wasn't he the one who had said something about trust and honor?

He shook his head, like a fighter recovering from a blow, and urged his pony along the trail to Belle Point, his eyes brooding, his face hard and moody.

BELLE POINT, quite unconcerned with the problems of Jim Conaster, drowsed in the sun and went its easy, unhurried way. A train whistle moaned in the distance as a long freight toiled and puffed the miles away. Nobody paid Jim any attention as he tied his pony in the shade of a poplar and went into the general store.

There was a variety of leather goods hung on a rack and he pawed this over. The storekeeper came up behind him and waited. Presently Jim turned, holding in his hands a cartridge belt and carved, Mexican-style holster that had obviously seen plenty of use before.

"How much?" he asked.

"Just what it cost me, and glad to get rid of it," said the storekeeper. "A down and outer who was hungry talked me into letting him have a couple of dollars' worth of grub for that gun rig. I was soft-headed enough to let him have it, and I've had the belt and holster on my hands for nearly a year. It's yours for the two bucks."

Jim buckled on the rig, tried his gun in the holster and nodded. "A box of .45s, too."

The storekeeper grinned. "Going scalp hunting, maybe?"

"Maybe. Got a buckskin thong, so I can tie it down?"

"If Johnny Barr knew you were feeling that way he'd take your gun away. Johnny's the town marshal."

"Johnny better mind his own business," retorted Jim. "Nobody takes this gun off me—unless I'm dead."

He went out and stood in the shade of the store's overhang, smoking and

watching the few people idling along the street. He was still standing there when Sylvia, her bare head gleaming in the sun, came whirling into town in a buckboard, to swing her sweating team to a neat stop before the store.

She looked at him as though he wasn't there and went by him with her head high, with that light, graceful walk of hers. With an irritable gesture, Jim spun his half-smoked cigarette into the dust of the street, but stayed where he was. A good quarter of an hour passed before Sylvia came out again, to walk off down the street. Jim did not look after her, knowing who it was by her quick, light step. Presently the storekeeper made several trips in and out of the store, lugging a couple of sacks of flour and various other items of food, which he heaped in the back of the buckboard. Dusting his hands after the last trip, he paused beside Jim.

"If you're waiting for somebody, with smoky ideas in your mind," he said, "how about moving down street some? I've got a flock of windows in this store I'd just as soon keep whole. And there's always the chance that the other fellow would be faster on the shoot than you, in which case my store front would be all messed up. How about it?"

Jim looked at him and a hard, mirthless smile pulled at his lips. "Reasonable enough. I'll move."

He went down the street, fighting his own thoughts. About to turn into a saloon, he saw Sylvia cross the street some hundred yards farther along, and hurrying up along the opposite side, bent on intercepting her, was Keg Ashton.

JIM was too far away to hear any of the words that passed between the two, but he could see that the girl was angry and wanted none of Keg Ashton. Abruptly she turned her back on the fellow and started away. Ashton caught her by the arm, arguing. The girl jerked her arm to free it. Her elbow struck Ashton in the side and Jim saw Ashton give back slightly, bend a little and press a hand to his side. And Jim laughed harshly as a sudden suspicion burned in his mind. He strode toward them.

The girl saw him coming and waited, facing him. She said, as Jim came up, "I'm asking it as a favor. It's the only one I've ever asked of you—the only one I ever will. Please grant it. Don't start anything."

"A lot you don't understand, lady," said Jim curtly. "Stick around and you'll learn something."

There was something queer about Keg Ashton as he faced Jim, something trapped about him. Bulky and powerful as he was, he seemed suddenly to have gone flabby, and had a look in his eye that confirmed Jim's suspicion.

Jim's right hand flickered and his gun was in it, bearing steadily on Ashton's belt buckle. "I ought to smoke you down here and now," he grated. "Maybe I will. There's something rotten about you, Mister—something creeping and yellow, and damn crooked. You need a skinful of liquor to give you nerve, like that first night in the saloon yonder. But last night when you tried that sneak shot at me, you ran for it even after you'd downed my horse!"

Ashton swallowed thickly. "I don't know what you are talking about."

Jim's free hand shot out, grabbed the open front of Ashton's shirt at his throat and in one powerful yank tore the garment half off Ashton's thick torso. Tore it far enough to expose a fresh white pad of gauze neatly taped to Ashton's left side.

"THAT'S IT," Jim growled. "I knew I'd nicked you. There's a bullet slash under that bandage. I gave it to you. Too bad it wasn't deeper, right through the heart. I've got it figured. You trailed Miss Morrison when she rode over to the Box M yesterday. You hung around, coming in fairly close to the cabin when night came. Probably waiting for a chance to get me against the light of window or door. When you

didn't, when the lady and I started for her ranch, you rode a big circle to get in along the trail ahead of us. And there you lay waiting for the chance to drill me in the dark. You tried, Ashton, when I scratched a match to light a smoke. And you came close—but not as close as I did when I shot back. Funny, I didn't think it was you until I saw you flinch and favor that side just now. I was looking for some hombre with signs of a fresh wound on him, but I hadn't thought of you. I ought to smoke you down right here and now!"

Ashton didn't answer. It wouldn't have helped, no matter what he said. For guilt was written all over him. And fear.

Jim socked his gun back into the leather. "The lady just asked me a favor, the first and last one. So I'm turning you over to her, Ashton. What she can see about you, I don't know. But I'm warning you to keep out of my way from now on. You ran to Knowlton and blabbed who I was. Then you try and get me from the dark. I don't want any third time. You make one more break my way and one of us takes a long ride. Get going!"

Ashton never said a word. He turned and shambled off down street, his torn shirt fluttering. And a voice called harshly from across the way, "Try me, Conaster! Let's see you tear *my* shirt!"

Jim turned slowly. At any moment he expected to feel the shock of a slug crashing into him. And when he was full around and nothing had happened, he let out his breath in a slow sigh.

Out there a third of the way across the street stood a lanky, forward-leaning figure, feet spread. Guns loose-belted at the tops, yet strapped down at the bottoms, jutted outward, and nervous, restless hands swung back and forth beside the jutting butts. Jim had seen gunfighters wear them that way before. The narrow, bitter face of the rider struck a chord of remembrance in him and he nodded slowly. "You're the one Knowlton called Solo—Solo Slade. I'll say this for you, you don't shoot a man in the back. Which makes me believe you've maybe got another scruple. The lady is too close. Suppose we wait until she gets well away."

"A deal," rasped Solo Slade. "Lady, just move on, please."

The girl gasped.

Jim said softly, so only Sylvia could hear, "I'm going to hate this. That man is too decent to die for Knowlton's greed. But you can't stop this. It has to be. My chances will be better if I know you're in no danger. Please give us room."

She gave him as strange a look as ever a woman gave a man. And then, white-faced and taut, she moved up street. Jim moved out toward Slade.

"There's no sense to this, Solo," he said. "But you called the card. Start any time."

"Sure," said Solo, his voice going dry and thin. "Sure. Now!"

Jim's gun was flashing out and level and bucking in recoil. He knew he was a fool, for he was not holding center. Solo had only drawn one gun—the right hand one.

Jim's thoughts ran faster than the shooting, jerking out in queer fragments. "The man's fair—a gun to a gun. His right arm, high up—that's it. You got it—now that left gun. It juts so far—you did it, Conaster, you did it! But you're a fool!"

Solo Slade spread his feet a little farther, then stood there, a dazed, unbelieving look on his face. For his right arm hung limp and dripping and there was no gun waiting for his searching left hand, only a shredded holster. A fatalistic laugh broke from his lips.

"I had to live this to believe it," he said. "You win, Conaster. Go ahead and finish it!"

Jim holstered his gun. "Instead, we'll tie up that arm. We're both lucky, Solo. Here, let me steady you. You look a bit shaky, man!"

He helped Solo Slade over to the saloon and Solo was mumbling, "This beats all hell! So help me, it does!"

MEN WATCHING from the saloon gave way as Jim steered Solo Slade through the door and to a chair. Jim looked around. "There must be a doctor in this town," he said. "Somebody get him."

A slender, cool-eyed, grey-haired man stepped out of the crowd. "That's me," he said. "Dr. Gates." He nodded to the saloon swamper. "Bo, run over to the office and get my satchel. It's on my desk."

He took a pen knife from his pocket and with swift, deft fingers slit the blood-soaked sleeve on Slade's arm. "Couple of clean bar towels and some water, Stub," he called to the bartender. Then, in a casual manner, he added, "This was damned slick shooting. Slade, you got a lot better than you deserved."

Jim brought a stiff drink of whiskey. Slade downed it thankfully and said, "If ever you saw a fool, that's me."

A short, dumpy, red-faced man wearing a marshal's badge came elbowing through the crowd. He took a look at Slade and then demanded, "Who was on the other end of this smoke-throwing?"

Jim said, "I was."

The marshal looked him up and down, then held out his hand. "I'm taking your gun."

Before Jim could shake his head, Slade spoke up, "Go back to your wine jug, Johnny Barr. In the first place, I started it. In the second place, Conaster gave me first bite and then made a dumb monkey of me. You're slow and clumsy as a hedge-hog, and before you crawl so far out on a limb you can't get off, think it over good!"

This brought Barr up short. He took another good look at Jim Conaster, especially at his eyes, and said blusteringly, "If you started it, Slade, that's different. But I'll have you all know that smoke-rolling in Belle Point is out. That goes for everybody next time."

He left the way he had come, burrowing through the grinning crowd.

Slade laughed. "Same old Johnny Barr. With him, it's always next time!"

The swamper came back with the satchel and the doctor got to work. Slade sat and took it, cold sweat rolling down his face. When the bandage was set he sighed deeply and brushed the sweat off his face with his free hand. Then he asked, "Why didn't you kill me, Conaster?"

"Because you could have shot me in the back and didn't. Because you waited for that lady to get well away. Because when you saw I only had one gun *you* used but one gun. If I must fight, I like a man who fights clean."

Slade said, "I'm buying plumb out of this ruckus. But mark this, Jim Conaster. Dandy Fair and Jake Chester wouldn't have waited for you to turn around. And they're both looking for you. Knowlton is too—from a distance. Don't take the same trail home from town, and watch yourself at every turn. You were careless today, and I'm tickled all to hell that I missed you."

Jim smiled and said as he left, "Drop in and see Scotty and me sometime, Solo—as a friend."

AS JIM strode up the street of Belle Point, he knew he was a marked man, a man who had bested Solo Slade fairly in a smoke out. And some would envy him and others fear him because of it. But he had a deep sense of satisfaction over the whole thing. Instead of leaving a dead man back there, he had left a man as a friend. That counted.

The buckboard, he noted, was gone from in front of the store and he swung into his own saddle and pulled out. He took Slade's advice and rode wide of the regular trail on the way home. When he got there he found Sam and Nib Leland prowling restlessly around. Jim asked, "Where's Scotty?"

Nib said, "That's what's got Sam and me on edge. We're just getting ready to go after him. He left some time ago with a couple of chunks of cattle salt for the salt log up at Squaw Flat, along Jimpson Creek. Should have been back

by this time. Of course he may have decided to go on somewhere else, but with things as they are around the range—"

"Throw your saddles and we'll go looking," Jim said grimly.

They rode fast, Nib leading the way. Squaw Flat was a bit of meadowland about four miles up Jimpson. As they broke into it at the lower end, Nib said, "The salt log is up farther, past that willow patch yonder."

As he spoke there came an anxious whicker, and a riderless horse with dragging reins thrashed out of the willows. Sam said, his voice going tight, "That's Scotty's bronc!"

They rode full out then, pounding around the point of willow, and Nib said bitterly, "Something told me—the hunch was riding me hard—"

Here an alder had fallen, long ago. On its prone trunk two flats had been chopped out, and on each of these rested a new block of cattle salt. And lying across the log, face down beside one of those salt chunks, was Scotty McVey.

The Lelands dragged Winchesters out of saddle boots and ran bleak eyes over every spot within rifle range that might conceal a gunman. Jim leaped from his saddle and ran to Scotty. Seeing the blood on the old fellow's shirt, he thought he was dead as he eased the limp figure off the log. But when he realized that Scotty's heart was still beating he set earnestly to work, stripping the wound clean, then running to the creek to fill his hat with water and doing the best he could with what he had to work with. He lifted his voice in a relieved yell. "He's not dead! Nib, stay on the watch. Sam, come help me!"

Sam said, his voice husky, "Tough old catamount, Scotty is. If he's got a chance, he'll make the grade. Damn them, Jim, it's always been this way! Leek Knowlton's way. The dirty way!"

"We can't take him in across his own saddle," growled Jim. "Too rough. So it'll be this way. It'll be a tough lift, Sam, but get him up as high as you can."

Jim brought his horse over and got into the saddle. Sam lifted Scotty as high as he could, and Jim, leaning over, brought him up the rest of the way and held the old fellow in his arms, as he would a child. He said, "Belle Point for you, Sam. Fan the dust. There's a sawbones there, Doc Gates. Good man, I think. Get him. Nib and me'll do the rest."

Sam rode away at a gallop, and with Nib leading Scotty's horse and keeping a sharp watch ahead and behind, Jim carried Scotty McVey home.

JIM CONASTER stood under the stars, smoking. Sam and Nib were in the cabin, along with Doc Gates and Scotty McVey. Doc Gates had told Jim, "Not a fifty-fifty chance, but a chance. His age, you know. But he's a tough old rooster. We'll do all we can for him."

Now Jim was thinking it out. Apparently his first strategy had failed. He had not spurred Knowlton to a full-out attack. Knowlton was playing it his way. Get 'em alone and at a disadvantage. That was always Knowlton's rule. And had everything worked as he planned, this day would have seen the Box M minus an owner, new or old. Drygulcher lead for Scotty, while Jim himself was to have gone down under Solo Slade's guns. Only because Slade, gunfighter though he was, had some sense of fair play, was Jim alive now.

Now Jim saw clearly how this thing would have to be, if the Box M was to live. He tossed his cigarette aside and flexed his arms, an instinctive gesture of challenge.

For a moment he froze that way, then dropped to a low crouch, tense and alert. For from the outer dark sounded the clump of approaching hoofs. When the sound was close enough, Jim sent a curt challenge across the night.

"Speak up! Who's riding?"

"Sylvia Morrison." The answer was clear and quiet. She rode up and said, "One of my men was in town when Sam Leland went after Doc Gates. If someone is hurt I thought I might be of help."

Jim dropped a hand on the rein of her horse. "I wouldn't deserve this, but Scotty does. They tried to drygulch him this afternoon at Squaw Flat. Doc Gates gives him less than a fifty-fifty chance. Ride on in. You'll be welcome. I'll take care of your bronc."

HALF an hour later Sam Leland came out. "She's a grand girl, Jim. She's staying the night, so I fixed up a bunk for her. She and Doc are going to watch the night out. Doc says if Scotty's alive at sunup tomorrow he may make the grade. Where do we go from here, Jim?"

"Right down their throats!" Jim said abruptly. "I start on the first Butcher Block man I can run down. I'm hitting town in the morning. Knowlton will be wanting to know what's in the wind and will have a man in town to find out. And he'll damn sure find out—I'll see to that. No more waiting around, Sam, with them plotting the moves. I'm going after them."

"It's a long chance, Jim—one man against that crowd. Cut Nib and me in on this some way."

"You and Nib have your job to do in guarding Scotty and the cabin. The odds won't be too long if I can hit 'em one at a time. They play it that way, so they'll get it that way!"

Just once that night did Jim go into the cabin. The lamp was turned low. It was toward dawn, when vitality runs at its lowest. Doc Gates and Sylvia sat by Scotty's bunk, grave and intent, watching the old cattleman's fight for life. Jim tiptoed out again.

Sam came and called Jim around to the kitchen for breakfast. Sylvia was standing by the stove, drinking a cup of coffee and lost in her own thoughts. Jim ate in silence. When he was ready to go Sam said, "I still think that either Nib or I should ride with you, Jim. One of us is enough to guard things here."

Jim shook his head. "Thanks, Sam, but this is one ride I've got to make alone. I took on a chore, made an agreement. So far I haven't carried it out very well. Now I'm making up for lost time. Alone."

OUT of sight of the ranch he swung off the trail, mindful of Solo Slade's warning, and he reached Belle Point without incident.

There was a hitch-rail in a shady alleyway alongside the hotel, where a man's horse was out of sight of anyone on the main street unless they took a look down that alley. Jim tied his horse there, went into the parlor of the hotel and took a chair by a window. From there he had a pretty good view of the street. He sat there, smoking, hour after hour.

The proprietor of the place, hovering nervously for some time, finally came over. "I don't mind you waiting here, cowboy, but when the ruckus starts I hope to Pete you're somewhere else. Window glass costs money."

A bleak smile touched Jim's lips. "I didn't mention any shooting."

"You don't have to. You ain't sittin' by that window just to keep your britches warm. And there's other things. You've got that look about you."

Jim smiled, but the smile faded to grimness as a rider jogged into view, a man who was glancing sharply from side to side as he passed along the street, obviously wary and watchful.

Jim got to his feet. The man was Jake Chester of the Butcher Block. He reined in before the saloon, swung down and ducked quickly through the swinging doors. Jim said dryly, "Your windows are safe this time, amigo."

JIM went straight to the saloon, and he entered on a strange scene. In a far corner sat Solo Slade, facing the door. Solo's right arm was in a sling, his left hand resting on the edge of a card table, fingers drumming softly. There was a tight, strained smile on Solo's thin face, a fatalistic, reckless sort of smile.

In the middle of the room, his back to the door, glaring down at Solo, stood Jake Chester, feet spread, itchy fingers

fluttering over his guns. And Jake Chester was lashing out with savage words:

"This is better luck than I hoped for, Slade. They tell me you and this Conaster hombre are real good friends now—that you and him went easy on each other, and that you warned him off Dandy and me. Well, that got to the boss and he didn't like it any better than Dandy and I did. None of us cotton to a squealer and double talker. So you've asked for it. And then I'll wait around for your good friend Jim Conaster. I'll show him the Butcher Block ain't all *your* breed!"

Jim said coldly, "Conaster has already found that out. Solo was the only white man in your crowd. You got up too late this morning, Chester. I beat you to town. And *my* shooting arm ain't in a sling. How you answering that?"

Jake Chester turned slowly, with little shuffling, spraddling steps. Full around, he glared at Jim, trying to muster his wits. Solo Slade threw back his head and laughed.

"Jake—I'm going to enjoy this! Jim, he's left-handed. That's his danger side."

Jake Chester seemed unable to find words, so Jim spoke, his words coming out with a flat finality. "You didn't kill Scotty, Chester. He's going to live. You flubbed your job."

"You're lying!" blurted Chester. "The way he went down—!"

He broke off abruptly, for he saw the cold fire leap into Jim's eyes and realized he had been tricked into betrayal.

"So!" murmured Jim. "So you *were* the one who tried to gulch Scotty. I had that hunch. Well, you came here looking for me and I came looking for you. What you waiting for?"

Jake Chester was dull in the head. Yet one thing he could see and recognize. There was only one way out. He had to get there first.

He tried mightily, his trained left hand far faster than his right. But he was late by the space of time it took for a slug to reach half the width of the room and crash into his heart. He fell heavily, and lay unmoving on the dusty floor.

Solo Slade said, "You're the best I ever saw, Jim. And you ought to be publicly congratulated. I never was any angel, but Jake Chester was a dirty coyote. You saved my skin, for I'd quit packing a gun. He'd have got me for sure."

"Scotty is a grand old man," Jim said, "and Chester tried to drygulch him. I reckon things ought to balance."

Solo said, "Keg Ashton is in town, Jim, and drinking heavy. Watch out for him. Sometimes liquor makes a lion out of a brush rat. But Ashton's the sort to run to alley shooting. So watch out."

Jim started to answer, but at the moment there came a pound of hoofs outside. He cracked the doors and looked out and saw Leek Knowlton, Dandy Fair and a third rider whipping in toward the hitch-rack. He was surprised when Solo Slade spoke just at his shoulder.

Solo said, "Big brave guy, Knowlton! Him and Dandy and Belton hung back and sent Chester in ahead. That shot of yours brought 'em. Ten to one they figure it came from Chester's gun—with me on the hot end. I've got one of Chester's hog-legs. Shall we take 'em outside or wait for 'em in here?"

"It's not your mix, Solo. And I like the open air."

As Knowlton, Fair and Belton ducked under the hitch rail, Jim stepped out.

THERE WAS a stir beside Jim and then Solo Slade's voice. "Whatever Jim's play is, I'm backing his hand. And Dandy, remember how we used to argue as to who was the fastest, you or me? Well, now maybe we can prove it, even if I am shooting from the wrong side."

Jim said harshly, "Damn you, Solo, I told you to stay out of this!"

Solo's reckless laugh echoed. "I'd have been dead twice except for you, Jim. I hate to owe any long term debt. Here's my chance to pay up. Knowlton, what you shaking for?"

Leek Knowlton, shocked and floun-

dering, blurted stupidly, "Where's Jake? I—we were looking for him."

"Waiting for you, Knowlton," growled Jim. "At the gates of hell, amigo. I've made three promises since I hit these parts. One was to you, remember? The next time would be you or me. Well—this is it."

Dandy Fair ripped out venomously, "Damn you, Slade!"—and went for it.

Solo's gun blared and Jim saw Dandy Fair jerk and go back a step. Then he forgot everything but Leek Knowlton, for Knowlton was dragging a gun from under his coat. The movement opened his coat far enough to show a white button against his blue shirt. Jim shot at that button twice, and saw it disappear.

Something burned across his ribs, white-hot fire. He saw Knowlton stumble to hands and knees, his head falling forward. And he saw Dandy Fair down under the hitch-rail, queerly doubled up. Belton was leaning on the hitch-rail, staring numbly down at a leg that had doubled under him. And Solo Slade was saying, "I went easy on Belton. He didn't belong in this nohow."

Jim nodded and said slowly, "I could never have made it alone, Solo. I can see that now. You don't owe me a thing now. Except friendship. Some day, when that arm of yours mends, you'll be punching cattle again. Scotty McVey could use a man like you. Remember that, will you?"

"How about you, Jim?"

Jim shrugged. "There are still new trails to ride. I aim to look over a few. Be seeing you before I pull out, Solo."

There were groups of fearful and wondering citizens gathered in the street and they watched silently as Jim strode over into the alley and came out leading his horse. As he reached for a stirrup, about to mount, a thin, high yell of warning came from Solo, who still stood before the saloon. And even as Jim whirled, dropping out of the stirrup, Solo hammered out two rolling shots.

Jim's hand, flashing for his gun, stopped half way. A heavy figure was slumped across the sill of an open window in the second story of the hotel. A rifle, fallen from limp hands, clattered down to the street. And sliding out of the window after it came the limp body of Keg Ashton.

Solo Slade called out, "Maybe I'll hit that trail with you, Jim. You're too careless. You need somebody to watch your back."

SCOTTY McVEY'S eyes were clear, though his voice was hardly more than a whisper. "The old man fooled 'em again, eh, Jim? But we're calling this thing off. They might go after you next time, and make it good. No ranch is worth that."

Jim said, "Knowlton won't go after anybody ever again, Scotty. Nor any of his crowd. You get to sleep now."

Scotty smiled and closed his eyes.

Sylvia, standing in the shadows, had watched and listened. That momentous day when Jim Conaster rode home from town, his first glimpse of the Box M had shown her standing in the door, watching the town trail. She had stayed there almost until he arrived, then slipped out of sight. The Lelands, who had been prowling the place anxiously through the long hours, had welcomed Jim with open relief, but marking the weary set to his face and the brooding light in his eye, had known that something big had taken place.

Jim told them the story, curtly and without emotion. "Solo Slade," he ended, "is four square. Should he show out here, make him welcome."

"Where you going, Jim?" asked Sam.

"To the Butcher Block. I doubt that there's any fight left in them, but if there is I want to know it. I want to make sure this thing is finished."

Nib headed for the saddle pole. "This time I go along, regardless," he called back over his shoulder. "A drygulcher will tackle one man where he'll pass up two."

Jim started to object, then shrugged. And soon he and Nib were riding.

JIM and Nib Leland rode right into the Butcher Block layout without opposition. There was a small group of riders by the corral. Word from town had apparently just reached them. They eyed Jim and Nib with a sullen respect.

Jim said curtly, "I see you've heard the news. The Box M didn't ask for this. Knowlton forced it on us. I like to know where I stand. Is this the finish or do you want more?"

"Hell!" said one of the gang. "If Dandy Fair wasn't good enough or Jake Chester, I'm sure as hell not. I've got my limitations. One is trying to fight when I know I can't win. As I see it I'm out of a job, so I'm riding."

That idea prevailed. They began catching up horses and saddling. They went into the bunkhouse and came out with packed war bags. Jim swung his horse about.

"We can go home, Nib. I reckon Scotty and you and Sam can go about raising cows in peace now."

Nib pondered this remark all the way home without finding the right answer.

And then it was that Jim Conaster made his report to Scotty McVey, while Sylvia watched and listened from a shadowy corner of the room.

Outside, Nib was telling his brother about Jim's strange remark on leaving the Butcher Block. "Sounded to me almost like he was figuring on pulling out," said Nib, "and I don't want him to. How can we hold him, Sam?"

Sam frowned anxiously, then brightened. "There's one chance. I've kinda had the hunch. Now I'll know for sure."

Sam hung about the house anxiously, while the afternoon dragged to an end. And presently he got hold of Sylvia Morrison and drew her aside. He pointed. "Look at Jim down there by the corrals, just staring across country. He's thinking of hitting distant trails. He made a funny crack to Nib today and Nib and me've figured he intends to pull out. I thought you might like to know."

Wise old Sam saw the color come and go in her face, and chuckled when she set sail for the corrals, her head high, her chin at a determined angle.

Jim turned slowly as she came up, facing him with level eyes. "Endless trails can betray a man, Jim," she said. "In the long run they're very lonely."

Jim nodded soberly. "I had that figured, but I don't see any other out. You were right. I can't take half of Scotty's ranch at the price he offered. I see now that I'd have figured this way even if you hadn't said what you did that night when I was seeing you home. So—what does it leave?"

She smiled. "Many things, Jim. I've changed my mind. I think it is Scotty who got the bargain."

He looked at her, a sudden glow in his eyes. "If I thought that you—and me—"

"I'm asking you to stay, Jim."

He took her by both elbows, his face alight. "After what happened in town today?"

She didn't flinch. She said steadily, "Sam Leland is old and very wise, Jim. His philosophy is good enough for me."

Nib and Sam Leland, watching from the corner of the house, were startled half out of their wits by the approach of the horse Solo Slade was riding.

"I'm looking for Jim Conaster," said Solo. "He said something about heading out on new trails and I aimed to jog along with him."

"Light down and stay awhile, Solo," invited Sam. "Jim, he's busy just now." Sam pointed.

Solo looked and grinned. "Hell!" he observed. "That son-of-a-gun juniper ain't hitting no long trail. He ain't hitting no trails at all. He's sticking!"

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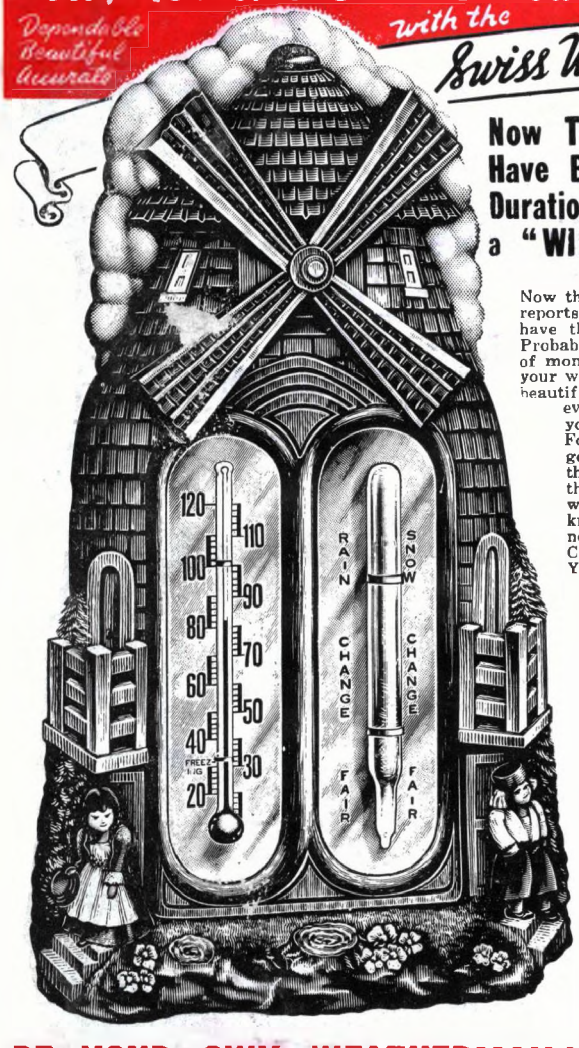

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