

SEPT. 1942

FIVE-NOVELS

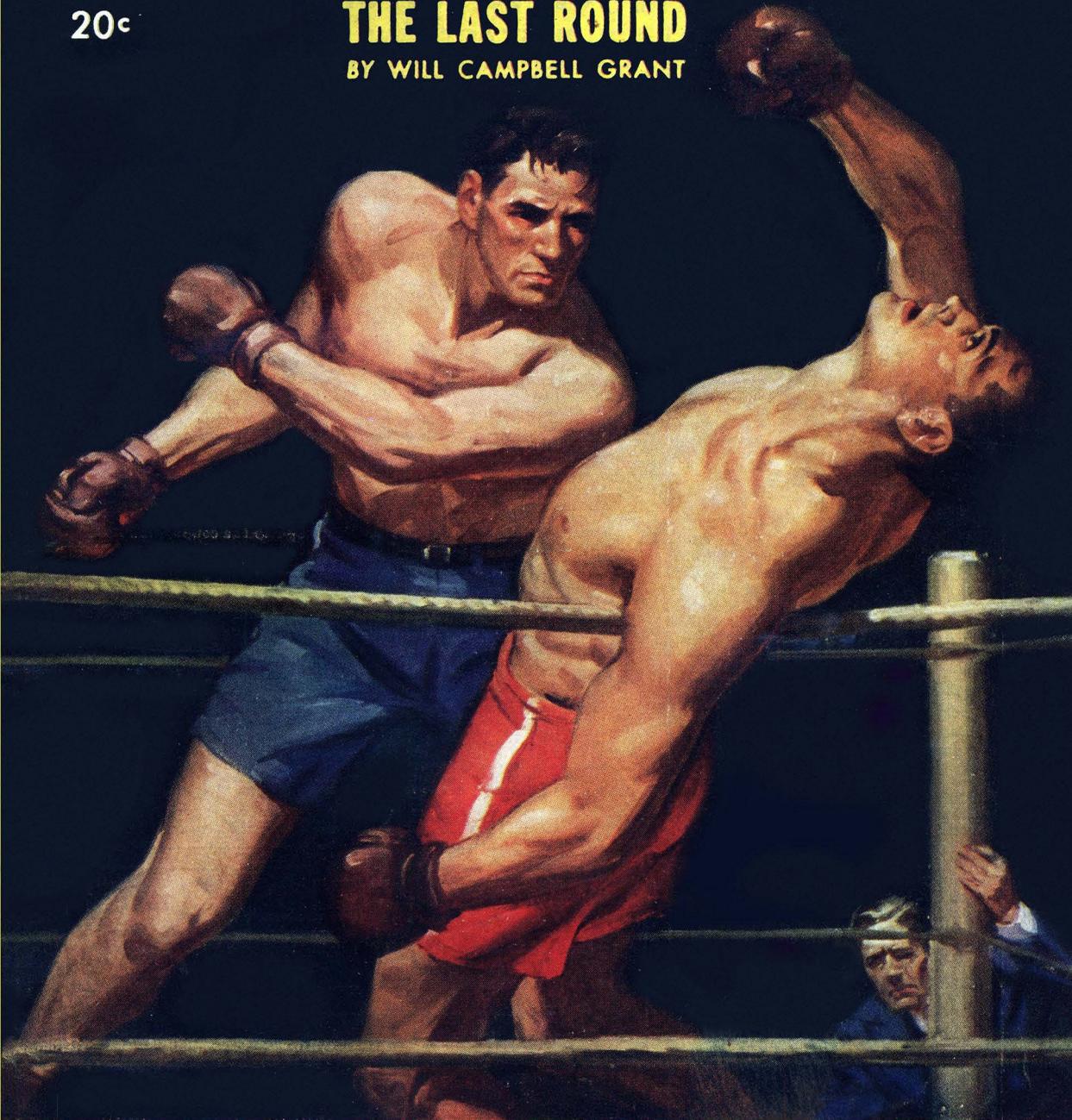
MONTHLY

SEPTEMBER

20c

THE LAST ROUND

BY WILL CAMPBELL GRANT



FIVE NOVELS

MONTHLY

FEAR STREET

BY STEWART STERLING

THE DEVIL SHIPS AS MATE

BY DAVID ALLAN ROSS

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SEPTEMBER

INSIDE DETECTIVE

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FIVE-NOVELS MONTHLY

F. A. McCHESNEY, Editor

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FORECAST

SPORT takes to the diamond in Ben Peter Freeman's new novel, *The Holler Guy*. It's the story of Windy Grant who needed the ball players from coast to coast and made them like it—all but the Panthers. Big league but down-cellar vets, they wouldn't take it from Windy. What the heck! His bones too brittle for the tough going, Windy had been bounced from the Big Time twice, the little sawed-off runt! Manager or no manager, Windy was going to get the works—but Windy had plenty on the ball and when the Panthers got tough, he dished it back to them doubled. A swell baseball novel. Don't miss it!

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ALSO

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Fear Street

By

Stewart Sterling



BRUCE GARRET bent down to tie a shoelace that didn't need tying. The street seemed to be deserted. But he glimpsed a shadowy movement half a block behind him as a stealthy figure melted into the darkness of a convenient doorway. Garret straightened up and continued his apparently aimless stroll along the back street. There was no longer any room for doubt. He was being followed.

He'd spent too many years trailing other men to miss the significance of this skulker at his rear. This was no prowling lush-roller, hopeful of separating a late-hour drunk from his cash. The man had cautiously kept his distance, since Garret left the Rocky Mountain House.

Strange. Garret didn't know a living soul in this mining town. He'd never been in Stope City before. It was extremely unlikely anyone could have learned he'd drop off the Transcontinen-

tal Express here at six-forty tonight. At the hotel he hadn't registered from Washington, D. C., but merely scrawled B. Garret, New York City.

Even if someone had managed to inspect his luggage, after he'd checked into the Rocky Mountain House, all that could have been found would be catalogues and data sheets of the pump manufacturer Garret was supposed to represent as salesman. Nothing to indicate his actual status as emergency investigator for the government.

One possibility occurred to Garret. Could he by chance have run across someone in this hard-rock Montana town who had good reason to remember Bruce Garret from the days when he'd been the Sphinx Agency's most feared nemesis of bank robbers? That was something that could be cleared up quickly enough.

He sauntered past a cafe with a gaudy cerise Neon sign reading:



"Wait, Bill!" Brann cried. But Narriver pulled the trigger of his automatic.

The Big Red Rooster
If it's your night to crow—
Step Right In

THE GLOW of the sign spilled out over the sidewalk like claret; it might also throw a little light on the identity of the person following him.

Abruptly he turned, stepped in toward a store window and looked back over his shoulder. The man behind him couldn't conceal himself this time by ducking into the cafe door. He swung across the curb toward the opposite side of the street. He bent his head and turned his face away, so Garret had only a brief

glimpse of his features. But that was enough. The follower wasn't anyone the investigator had ever assisted to an enforced vacation at the public's expense. That stocky-shouldered frame, the heavy, square-cut jaw and grim slash of a mouth weren't characteristics a detective would be likely to forget.

Garret didn't believe in playing a waiting game. Meet trouble more than half-way was a fixed principle with him. He cut across the street after the man.

The man began to run back in the direction from which he'd come. His heavy mining boots prevented his making speed, but he managed to turn the

corner of the block while Garret was still fifty feet away.

The detective didn't make the mistake of rounding the corner close to the buildings. He kept out in the middle of the sidewalk until he was well past the edge of the wall on the side street. As he expected, the other was crouching up against the bricks, waiting. The man's right hand was up close to his shoulder where metal glinted.

Garret slipped the pistol from his armpit holster and walked in on him.

"What's the idea of the puss-in-the-corner stuff, mister?"

The man lowered the hand gripping the knife. "I thought you was chasing me!"

"Nuts to that!" Garret eyed the knife. It was a long hunting blade with a wooden handle. The sort of weapon that has to be kept in a scabbard because the blade doesn't fold up. Not the kind of thing a person would be likely to carry around—unless he was pretty sure he'd have some use for it. "You've been trailing me ever since I left the hotel."

"Hell I have! Keep away from me or—"

GARRET seized the man's wrist that gripped the knife, threw his weight against him and pinned him to the wall. The other brought up a knee, viciously; wrenched fiercely to free the blade. Garret clubbed him across the side of the head with the barrel of his pistol.

The man's head sagged under the blow, but only to sink his teeth into the back of the hand holding his wrist. The suddenness of the pain made Garret relax his grip for a split-second; long enough for the blade to come ripping up toward his belly!

There wasn't time for anything more than reflex action. He turned sidewise and smashed downward with his left fist. Hot wire touched his forearm as the razor slashed the skin. Then he smashed the gun barrel down on top of the man's skull.

The knife clattered on the sidewalk.

The stocky figure slumped heavily against the wall.

Garret went through the unconscious man's pockets. A little silver, a mashed-up pack of cigarettes, a soiled handkerchief, some matches.

It was the knife that told him. Along its handle, a name had been charred into the wood. J. G. Darcy. The worn place on the man's belt under the leather scabbard indicated the knife belonged there.

Garret slipped the reddened blade back into the scabbard. There was nothing to do now but take this fellow in to the police station, where he could be put through the hoops. Garret didn't care about getting mixed up with the cops. There'd be questions it might be awkward to answer without giving away his hand. But he couldn't let J. G. Darcy loose to knife him in the back some other time.

A SEDAN swerved around the corner. Momentarily, its lights fixed Garret and the slumped figure in a blinding glare. A goggled face was a white blur at the window. There was a sudden, barking cough as if the motor had back-fired. Splinters of brick stung Garret's cheek.

He flattened himself on the sidewalk; jerked out his gun and pumped bullets at the vanishing tail light. The car was swallowed up in a pall of dust that hid the license plate.

So nobody knew he was in town? Apparently Darcy wasn't the only one. There wouldn't be any chance of overtaking the car. But maybe at the police station, Darcy could be induced to tell who was working with him.

As soon as he slipped his fingers inside the stocky man's collar, Garret knew better. The shot from the speeding car had settled that.

The flattened chunk of lead, rebounding from the wall, had gashed an inch-wide hole in the back of Darcy's skull. Short of an autopsy, there'd be no way of estimating the calibre of the bullet now. Probably the rifling marks made

by the murderer's pistol-barrel had been obliterated too. For all anyone except a ballistics expert could tell, the shot might just as well have come from Garret's gun. And the chance of there being a firearms expert in Stope City was zero.

It added up entirely too well. Darcy was dead. There were bullets missing from Garret's gun—the shots he'd pumped after the fleeing car. The blue-coats would be crazy if they didn't detain him. He couldn't afford time out for that. Not if the strange accusation Washington had received from Stope City were true.

GARRET looked around. Amid the rumbling overtones of the mining town, nobody seemed to have paid any attention to the sound of the shooting. The only people in sight were a couple of maudlin drunks squabbling in front of The Big Red Rooster.

Garret moved swiftly up the side street. Twenty feet from the corner was a vacant store. A *For Rent* sign was propped in the window. The door was padlocked, but it took only a couple of minutes with his jack-knife blade for Garret to chip away the putty from a window pane. He pried the glass out far enough to reach in and slip the catch.

He went back and hoisted Darcy's limp figure over his shoulder and dumped him through the window. Then he climbed inside the store and tugged the body under a counter where it couldn't be seen from the street. Two minutes later—with the pane replaced—Garret was striding up the side street.

It led steeply uphill toward the somber, smoke-grimed structures of the copper mines.

Formidable slag mounds loomed above him like giant earthworks. The heavy clank of machinery clattered through the darkness like tremendous tank battalions. The richest hill on earth, they'd called it back in Washington. What he'd seen of Stope City hadn't looked very rich. But he knew that, a mile beneath his feet, sweating

miners were gnawing away at the hill's vitals to add more copper to the half billion dollars worth that had already been ripped from the earth's bowels.

YET IF the word that had so ominously come to Washington were right, there was something else at work down there. Something sinister, threatening to cut down the output of war-precious metal. Something deadly too, if the tragedy of the past half-hour were any indication.

A guard stopped him at the board fence. "Whatcha want?"

"Looking for a guy named Darcy."

"Shift won't be up for an hour yet." The guard squinted narrowly. "He on the twelve-to-eight?"

"Don't know what shift he's on."

"Better find out at the office. And get a pass. Nobody's permitted in the hoist house without a pass."

Garret climbed up past the compression plant to a smoke-encrusted building whose lights glared through uncurtained windows. Brass lettering over the door stated:

Office, Ajax No. 6
The Bender Corporation

None of the half-dozen elderly men in shirtsleeves and eyeshades bothered to glance up from their stacks of time cards. A girl stopped clattering on a typewriter, swivelled around on her chair, and came toward the rail partition.

She seemed oddly out of place in these gritty surroundings. Her linen blouse was cool and crisp in contrast to the wilted collars of the men.

Garret's stare must have expressed some of his astonishment; she colored a little.

"Can you tell me where I can locate a man by the name of J. G. Darcy?"

There seemed to be the faintest tinge of apprehension in her eyes, but it was hard to tell.

"Jig Darcy?" Her tone was coolly

business-like, but her grip tightened on the railing. "What did you want to see him about?"

"PERSONAL matter." One of the clerks raised his head, listening curiously. "Thought you might be able to tell me where I could get in touch with him. He works at Ajax, doesn't he?"

She nodded. "He's my brother's head timber boss. But—"

"I'll wait for him, if he's on the shift coming off."

She moved to a file cabinet. Her frown might merely mean preoccupation. "I don't think he is. But anyway—"

"Or I can drop around to his house, if you'll give me his home address."

"We're not allowed to give out information of that sort. She took out a card. "Jig works on the early morning shift. Four to noon. If you care to leave your name or telephone number, I'll see that he gets it."

"That won't help. It's important that I get hold of him tonight."

"Get hold of who, Shirley?" The voice behind Garret was gruff and curt. The man who had come in so noiselessly was like the voice. There was a certain resemblance between him and the girl, but his close-shaven jowls looked as if they had been hammered out of blue-black ore. His steely eyes were forbiddingly cold.

The girl said, "I'm glad you're back, Ken. This gentleman has some personal business with Jig Darcy." There could have been a subtle warning in her tone, Garret thought. "He says he has to see Jim tonight."

THE MAN came up beside Garret, clamped one hand on the railing, and leaned forward until his face was only six inches from Garret's. "Darcy's doing some special work for me tonight. Very special work. Afraid you won't be able to see him for a while."

Garret eyed him frostily. The man's

antagonism was very plain. There must be some reason for it. Ordinarily visitors to Ajax surely didn't receive this sort of bristling welcome.

Garret accepted the challenge, his eyes cold, his tone brusque. "You're Darcy's boss, then?"

"Right. Ken Brann, super of this mine. What about it?"

"You're the man I want to see."

"You see me."

Garret waved toward the other clerks, all watching. "It'll have to be a bit more private."

The superintendent shook his head. "Maybe you haven't heard. We're working on war tonnage here. The Army needs copper. I've no time to waste fooling around with every Tom, Dick and—"

"Skip the brush-off, Brann. You've time for me." He clicked the catch and swung the gate wide. "You'll have to make time."

Ken Brann's jaw jutted. His hand shot out and gripped Garret's arm as he stepped through the rail-gate. "So you're looking for trouble?"

Garret kept his hands at his side. "Got some you don't know what to do with?"

The superintendent's fist drew back. But Shirley seized his sleeve.

"Ken! Don't!" She glanced quickly toward the other clerks. "Not here."

Brann hesitated a fraction of a second. Garret wrenched free and stalked toward an inner office. Brann crowded angrily at the detective's heels, but made no further attempt to stop him.

THE office was barren of everything except a huge yellow, flat-top desk, a couple of straight-backed chairs and a long row of technical books on a plain pine shelf. Garret beat Brann to the punch again.

"Close the door. Wouldn't want your men to hear what I'm going to tell you."

Brann's neck reddened. "First thing you'll have to tell me is why I shouldn't

run you right out of this town fast.”

“One reason. The last guy who tried it is dead. He was Darcy. If that was the special job you sent him on, it didn’t pan out.”

The super’s face was a frozen mask. “If I had to kill anybody,” he said slowly, “I wouldn’t send another man to do it for me. I didn’t sic Darcy onto you. I never heard of you. I don’t know who you are or what you’re after and I don’t give a damn. But”—Brann reached for the phone on his desk—“nobody can knock off one of our men while he’s on duty and get away with it.” He jiggled the hook impatiently.

“You people have a queer idea of duty, if that’s what Darcy was on,” Garret said quietly.

“Operator! Connect me with the police!”

Garret’s fingers slid into his vest pocket and came out with a bit of bronze. He tossed it on the desk. Brann glared at it for an instant. Then he muttered into the phone, “Never mind,” and hung up. “Why didn’t you say you were from the Sphinx? Your outfit is supposed to be guarding Ajax property. You didn’t have to bull your way into my office like that!”

GARRET picked up his private operative shield. “I’m not working for Sphinx any longer. I’m still supposed to be guarding the Bender Corporation, though. But for our Uncle Samuel. The Office of Production Management sent me out here.”

Brann sat down heavily. “Is it your idea of protecting our interests to knock off one of my key men?”

“I didn’t say I killed him. I said he was dead. He started to tail me within a quarter hour of the time I got off the train. When I let him know I was onto him, he tried to ambush me with a knife. While we were mixing it up, someone drove past in a car and cut loose with a gun. Couldn’t tell whether the slug was meant for me or Darcy. He got it.”

Garret held up a palm as the super started to interrupt. “I came West on the q.t., so as not to tip off the government’s hand. But somebody’s already tipped it off. Darcy knew I was on the way. The man in the car might have known I was here. That means somebody in Stope City was expecting an investigation. Evidently the information Washington received had plenty behind it.”

“What information?” Brann asked as if he knew the answer.

Garret took a cellophane envelope out of his pocket, held it up so the super could see the brown piece of paper it contained. It was half a torn pay-envelope. The message was crudely printed in thick red letters.

Whos stealing the Stope City copper that ought to make another million cartridges a week for our soldier boys?

“There’s a couple of hundred people who know the ore output of this hill right down to the ton.” Brann scowled. “How could anybody steal that much copper?”

“I thought maybe you’d know.”

“I don’t. Only plants working on army and navy contracts are getting Ajax metal. Where’d you get that?”

“The Big Guy in Washington got it. Postmarked Stope City four days ago. It was turned over for investigation as a matter of routine.”

The super chewed irritably on his pipe stem. “You people don’t generally take stock in the drivel anonymous half-wits send in, do you?”

“Didn’t take stock in this, until we checked and found something queer.”

“Who sent it in?”

GARRET turned the cellophane over. “There’s no name. Just a number.” The figure 4227 was stamped in blue ink on what had been the outside of the pay envelope. “I phoned your paymaster from Washington.”

Brann shifted uneasily. “Who’s 4227?”

"He was a driller in Ajax Number Six. Harvey Yault."

The pipe came out of the super's mouth; the stem tapped against his teeth. "Let's see. Wasn't Yault the one—"

"Yeah. He was caught in a cave-in a week ago. Died in the hospital two days before this thing was mailed. Kind of queer, wouldn't you say?"

"If you knew anything about miners and their families, that wouldn't surprise you so much," the super said. "Everytime there's a fatal accident here on the hill, some of the victim's friends send scurrilous letters to the directors or to Mr. Ryder, our GM—even to the papers. Stuff about the criminal carelessness of the greedy mine-owners who don't care anything about the men's safety so long as the profits roll in. It's bunk, of course. Accidents are bad business for us as well as tough luck for the men. But this is probably the work of someone who felt bad about Yault's death and figured that stirring up trouble might pay back the company in kind."

Garret shook his head. "Yault didn't have any family. The hospital says nobody came to see him there, so he couldn't have had any very close friends. That leaves only one conclusion. The girl who sent this half of his pay envelope to Washington must have done it because she wanted us to know Yault's death was connected with the copper stealing. Maybe she didn't think it *was* an accident."

BRANN stood up. "What the devil makes you think it was a girl?"

Garret tapped the cellophane. "Written with lipstick. And it sounds like a girl's way of putting it. A man doesn't usually refer to our soldier boys."

The door from the outer office opened. Shirley put her head in, apologetically. "Captain Narriver's here, Ken."

"Tell him to keep his shirt on, Shirley. I'll see him in a few minutes."

She hesitated. "I thought you'd want

to know right away. There were another half-dozen rails missing from that spur track again, tonight. But this time he found them!"

Brann exclaimed, "Where?"

"In one of our own trucks, Ken. Captain Narriver just happened to notice it because it was parked with the motor running."

The super swore. "Parked where?"

Shirley glanced at Garret, hesitated.

"Never mind him." Brann jerked his head sideways toward the detective. "He hasn't anything to do with this. Where was the truck?"

"Right in front of Jig Darcy's house," she said reluctantly.

Brann closed his eyes, bowed his head and brushed one hand wearily over his face. "You'll have to excuse me, Garret. I'll get together with you first thing in the morning about that other matter."

"I can't wait that long. I'll stick with you now."

The super looked up sullenly. "This theft of company property doesn't have anything to do with what we were talking about."

"No? I'm trying to find who's stealing copper. You've found someone who's been pinching iron. Darcy was tied up in both. Worth checking, seems to me."

But Brann was on the phone. "Rush me through to Mr. Ryder."

The operator's voice came hollowly over the instrument. "I've been trying to reach him at his home for Captain Narriver. Long distance says the general manager's been burning up the telephone wires to Chicago for the last hour."

"KEEP after him. It's important."

Brann racked the receiver. "Look Garret. Shirley'll show you our tonnage records, and any other dope you want. You'll see there's nothing to this stolen copper rumor. Even supposing there was, Darcy couldn't have had anything to do with it."

"Why not?"

"The nearest he ever got to red metal

was the ore he saw in the mine when he was shoring up timbers. He never went near the smelter. Those iron rails, from the slag spur, are a different matter. For some time I've suspected Jig Darcy of getting away with scrap iron that belonged to Ajax. That's why I sent him out to the spur tonight, to pick up some of the timber we'd originally meant to use for railroad ties. I figured maybe the temptation to take along a few rails on his own account would be too strong and we'd catch him. I fixed it so Narriver'd be on the lookout. Apparently Cap got the goods on him."

He spread his palms. "Darcy might have got suspicious. Maybe he thought you'd been imported to trace down the scrap that's been disappearing lately. That would account for his going after you."

Garret scowled. "That leaves a few little items out of account."

"For instance?"

"How'd Darcy know I was in town?"

"Maybe he just happened to spot you as a stranger and jumped to the conclusion you were after him."

"Left his truck motor running? Rushed to the Rocky Mountain house to trail a guy he'd never seen in his life? That's a screwy conclusion!"

Brann shrugged morosely.

"**A**ND what about your timber boss's helper, Brann. Darcy must have had a helper to handle those rails. Where's he fit into this far-fetched picture of yours?"

The super was ready for that one. "Sam Proctor was in the timber truck with him."

"Yeah? I suppose this helper hopped right off the truck into that shoot-and-run car and followed Darcy and me. Do you think Proctor killed Darcy?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Anyway, Cap Narriver probably has Sam safe in the bag. I'll see." He stalked to the outer office.

Garret waited until the superintendent was out of earshot. Then he touched

the girl lightly on the shoulder. "You're Brann's sister?"

She nodded. "The office was terribly short-handed. I took this job to replace one of our Ajax boys who joined the Air Corps."

"You don't look as if you'd been working in a mine office long."

"Long enough to know my way around. Up here on the surface, at any rate."

"What I want to find out might take a little digging, Miss Brann. I need to see the records of that cave-in when Yault was supposed to have been fatally injured."

Shirley Brann tried not to appear concerned. "Ken mentioned tonnage records. He didn't say anything about giving out accident reports. That's against company policy."

"Too bad." Garret's mouth twisted wryly. "The United States Marshal'll have to impound your files then."

Her chin tilted up. "Who are you to threaten the Bender Corporation like this?"

"Name's Bruce Garret. I was sent here by the O.P.M. to find if there's anything rotten at the mine. It's taken me less than an hour to learn there is. Plenty. How long it'll take to clean it up depends on whether your brother is holding out on me, or whether you're covering up for him."

She reddened. "I'm not hiding anything. Neither is Ken. If you realized how hard he's been fighting to keep Ajax over its quota output, you'd be more considerate."

"Sorry I left my kid gloves back East," he said drily. "From the reception I've had in Stope City so far, they wouldn't be of much use here. As far as your brother goes, I don't know anything about him, except he has a nice sister."

Shirley tried a small smile.

"**B**UT he hasn't been playing ball," Garret went on. "I came to his office to find out about Darcy, so he

tried to sidetrack me. He didn't bother to ask what made me suspicious of your timber boss, and yet all the time he knew Darcy was up to some sort of crookedness. Even had your company guard captain watching him. Yet now, when evidence turns up against Darcy, your brother does his best to shunt me away from it. Suggests it's really a trivial matter. I don't like it. I don't understand it."

Her eyes were troubled. "I don't understand what Ken's been doing about Darcy, either. But I'm certain whatever Ken does is best for Ajax, in his judgment. You might at least give him credit for knowing more about the mine, after ten years running it, than you do after being in town only a couple of hours." She turned on her heel, marched with head high into the outer office.

Garret was right behind her, in time to hear the super say to the operator, "Ask C. J. to meet us in five minutes at Darcy's place, will you?"

The uniformed man who stood at Brann's side scrutinized Garret with insolent blue eyes. Captain Bill Narriver had no need of the tightly fitted tunic, the flaring olive-drab breeches, polished puttees and jaunty Sam Browne belt to stamp him as a company guard.

He swung around and headed for the street as Ken Brann hung up. Garret kept step beside the super. On the threshold, the captain pivoted, his eyes narrowed.

"Where you think *you're* going, mister?"

"To Darcy's," Garret said mildly. "Know anyone that wants to stop me?"

NARRIVER'S gaze shifted quickly to the super. But Brann merely gestured impatiently. "It's a free country, Bill. Darcy's shack isn't on company property. You can't stop him from coming."

They walked the quarter-mile to Darcy's place, Brann and the captain ahead, Garret in the rear.

Garret watched the dump piles which

rose on either side of the street like ramparts. It would be hard to find a better spot for a lurking assassin to hide. Garret had no illusions about the dangers of his assignment. One man already had died in connection with this business—two, if Yault's decease should turn out to have been more than a mere accident. But it wasn't the snuffing out of these lives that keyed the government man up to fighting pitch. There were many men who might die, for want of cartridges or shells that couldn't be produced because copper was lacking.

"You find Sam Proctor with the truck, Bill?" Brann asked.

"Sure. He was asleep, full of hootch."

"What'd you do with him?"

"Scared hell out of him. I left him to watch the truck. Sam claims he was acting under Darcy's orders when he helped load the rails on the truck."

"Probably," Brann growled. "He wouldn't have any way of knowing Darcy was intending to steal the stuff."

Garret wasn't so sure about that. For when the grey-haired man they called Sam Proctor climbed down from the cab of the truck, Garret had to catch himself to keep from saying:

"Well, well! Scat Prodger! When did they turn *you* loose!"

Liquor was strong on the man's breath and his eyes were bloodshot, but there was nothing wrong with his vision. He recognized Garret instantly, and signaled a mute appeal for silence.

Garret walked past without appearing to give him a glance.

THERE had been a time when the name Scat Prodger was as familiar on police flyers as that of any 'Wanted' man in the country. But the safe blower must have come down considerably in the criminal scale if he was reduced to stealing old iron. In his prime, Scat would have disdained anything less than gold or greenbacks. Moreover, though Garret was familiar with his record, he failed to recall that Scat had ever been involved in any killings. So,

unless the leopard had changed his spots considerably, this wasn't the man who had blasted at Garret from that speeding car.

In that case—until Garret could actually connect Scat Prodger with the business in hand—there was no point in disclosing the old crook's identity.

They stood at the rear of the big timber truck. A score of rust-reddened rail sections were piled on the floor. The steel derrick and block-and-tackle which had been used to hoist the heavy metal up on the truck were still rigged for use.

Brann snapped, "Sam?"

"Yes sir?"

"Darcy must have told you where to unload the stuff."

"No, sir! He didn't say. I s'pose he was going to dump it up by the hoist house."

Narriver caught him by the back of the neck. "Don't lie, you rat!" He shook the ex-con until his teeth chattered.

"THAT'S the truth," Prodger muttered sullenly. "Jig parks the truck and goes in the house a minute. When he comes out, he says he has a hurry-up job to do, and I should stick around till he gets back. So I grab forty winks. When I snap outa it, I find I've been pounding my ear for an hour, and you're here."

Narriver released him, spun him around and slugged him in the mouth. Blood trickled down Prodger's chin. His red-rimmed eyes glared fiercely, "Lay offa me, or some night I'll cut you proper!"

The guard smashed at him again. Garret stepped in swiftly. "Take it easy, tough guy. Stick him in jail if you want to. But that uniform doesn't give you any license to put him in the hospital."

Prodger wiped his lips with the back of his sleeve. "He's got no call to book me, neither."

Brann put a restraining hand on the captain's arm. "You're involved in a theft of company property, Sam."

"I ain't stole nothing! I ain't done a

thing except obey orders my boss give me. If Jig was pulling anything, I wasn't in on it."

Narriver shook off Brann's grasp; lunged for Prodger. "I caught you, mugg. Right with the rails you stole!" He jerked the smaller man's wrist up back of his shoulder-blade.

Garret cut in sharply. "You'll have one hell of a time establishing criminal intent, Captain. The iron is still on company property, as long as it's in that truck."

Narriver snarled, "I'll worry about that after I take him in. And I can do without any more lip from you, mister."

"Used to shutting people up whenever you don't like what they have to say, aren't you?" Garret put a palm, suddenly, on the guard's chest and pushed him back. "Here's once you don't get away with it."

The captain made an ugly sound deep in his throat. He let go of Prodger and swung a punch at Garret. Garret seized the flailing arm, yanked on it, and stuck out his foot. Pulled off balance, Narriver tripped and sprawled on all fours.

"You're under arrest!" he roared. "Interfering with an officer in the performance—" He broke off, snatched at the leather holster buckled to his belt. Scat Prodger was scuttling off in the darkness, over the mounds of slag.

Brann cried, "Wait, Bill!"

BUT Narriver tugged out his automatic, levelled it, pulled the trigger. Scat's scurrying figure would have been a hard target to hit in the half-gloom under any circumstances; Garret's boot in the seat of the captain's breeches didn't make it any easier.

"Bill!" the super shouted. "You don't want to kill him. Cut it!"

Narriver stumbled to his feet. His mouth worked, his eyes bulged. "I'm going to get him if it's the last thing I ever do." He wagged the pistol at Garret. "Then I'm coming back and take care of you." He turned and made off at surprising speed after Scat.

Brann eyed Garret with distaste. "I don't blame Bill. You're certainly a big help!"

"Never can tell," Garret retorted. "Wouldn't have been any good to have Proctor in your morgue alongside Darcy. That old crack about dead men is on the up and up. They don't testify."

The super rubbed his chin resentfully. "Did you say Darcy was in the morgue?"

"No. He's under the counter in an empty store down the street. Maybe he'll keep long enough for me to get a line on that stolen ore. I didn't want to bring the cops in this."

"You'd certainly have a hard time making our local force believe Jig Darcy could have been involved in any big-scale theft of copper. There wouldn't have been any way for him to get his hands on any poundage," Brann said.

"**H**E GOT his hands on these." Garret touched the rails. "What I can't figure out is why he bothered. Say he got four or five tons there. The most he could make out of it, second hand, would be forty or fifty bucks. That's a hell of a lot of work and risk to run for that dough."

Brann gazed at his shoe-tips for a second. "Might be some more scrap in the shack." He strode across the sidewalk and up onto a tiny porch.

Garret followed. The super put his hand on the knob, was surprised to find the front door open.

The house was small and narrow. There were only two rooms downstairs; above there was a bedroom, reached by a wooden ladder. An unmade bed, clothing strewn carelessly on chairs, dirty dishes in the sink, said Darcy had been a careless and untidy bachelor.

There was no basement; no place in which scrap metal could have been concealed. Nor was there any evidence of affluence to indicate that Darcy had been stealing anything of great value.

Brann peered into closets and under the bed. Garret watched him. He saw

him pick up a piece of paper from the kitchen table, read it hastily and attempt to stuff it in his pocket before Garret could notice him.

"Got something, Brann?" Garret asked.

"Just an old memo."

"Let's have a peek."

Brann was about to refuse, but Garret's insistent palm told the super it wouldn't be wise. He laid the crumpled paper on the table again.

Garret saw that it was a letterhead which read:

Consolidated Reclaimers, Inc.
Stope City, Montana

In the upper left-hand corner was smaller type:

T. Allen Loomis, President

Typewritten in the middle of the sheet were curious abbreviations:

Ar. U.P. w.b. 6:40
med. ht. blk. hr. dk.
sut. Gr. ht. Tn sh.

Garret laughed, shortly. "So this is how he knew I was coming!"

BRANN made no effort to conceal his astonishment. "You know what that gibberish means?"

"Ought to. Part of our job's to know brass-pounder's shorthand. That's the telegrapher's way of saying somebody was due to arrive on the Union Pacific west-bound at six-forty tonight. Meant me. Description was pretty fair, too. Medium height, black hair, dark suit, grey hat, tan shoes. All clear and correct—except who wrote it out for Jig Darcy and gave him orders to get me."

Brann cleared his throat. "The letterhead's plain enough."

"Yeah. Who's T. Allen Loomis?"

"One of the crookedest shysters," the super said savagely, "who ever got into the copper business."

"Now, now, Ken!" The voice startled them. It belonged to a big, florid-cheeked, white-haired man who stood in the kitchen doorway. A fawn-colored ten-gallon hat was tilted rakishly over one eye—a long, thin cigar angled up with equal jauntiness from the corner of a wide and humorous mouth. "You don't want to talk about our competitors that way, Ken."

Brann's lips thinned. "What's the use of kidding, C.J.? You know you hate Loomis' guts as much as I do. And Mr. Garret here ought to, because it looks as if Loomis tried to have him killed tonight!"

The dapper man held out his hand. "Charlie Ryder, Mr. Garret. You a reporter?"

"Federal man," the detective said.

"How'd you happen to tangle with Loomis?"

"I DON'T know that I did. I tangled with someone. Brann thought it was Loomis. I never heard of him until a minute ago."

Ryder's eyebrows went up quizzically. "Lord's sake, Ken! Haven't we enough dirty linen of our own to wash, without looking for more on our neighbor's line?"

The super held out the letterhead. "Seems to be the same batch of linen, C.J. Darcy, on our payroll, must have been working for Loomis too."

"I can't believe that!"

"You'll have to, C.J. Somebody sent a screwy rumor to Washington that a lot of copper's being stolen out of Stope City. Garret got in town tonight to investigate. Soon's he hopped off the train, Jig Darcy began to trail him."

"This notation," Garret held out the letterhead, "was apparently written to tell Darcy where to pick me up, and what I look like, so the investigation could be stopped before it started."

Ryder tilted his head back and squinted at the message. "What's that? Double talk?"

Garret translated, stuck the paper in his pocket.

"Where's Darcy now?" Ryder asked.

"Gone. When I cornered him, he wanted to play for keeps, so I had to tap him hard. While he was out, somebody drove past and let go with a gun. When I picked him up, he was dead."

Ryder whistled. "Did you give the murderer's description to the police?"

"Too dark to get a look at him."

Ryder threw a leg over the corner of the kitchen table, pushed the broad-brimmed hat back off his high forehead.

"How'd Loomis know when you were arriving?"

"Not sure Loomis did know," Garret said. "Somebody knew. The only way it makes sense is to suppose this somebody is involved with the matter I came here to investigate."

The super picked up a stack of dirty beer glass mats from the sink drainboard and began to shuffle them like a hand of cards. "Bill Narriver got the goods on Darcy, C.J. Four or five tons of those rails from that abandoned slag spur. Not much Darcy could get out of scrap iron, unless—" He turned on the sink faucet and rinsed the fiber disks under the water. Garret noticed the red rooster stamped on the mats and wondered what was behind Brann's none too subtle dumb-show.

RYDER took the long cigar out of his mouth and inspected the ash carefully. "Better lay our cards on the table, Ken. Maybe our friend from Washington can tell us how to play them."

Garret murmured, "I was wondering when you'd get around to that."

"It's not the kind of situation"—Brann tossed the dripping disks back on the drainboard—"we want to do much talking about."

"If Washington is interested, it's time to talk. To put it in a nutshell, Consolidated Reclaimers has us by the short hair. We've either got to pay tribute to Loomis on a sizeable chunk of our output or buy him out."

"I'm not interested in your inter-

corporation finagling. What I'm interested in is who's stealing copper that should go to munitions plants?"

Ryder made a placating gesture. "Maybe we can help you find out. It's this way. Under mining law, the owner of a vein of ore at the surface owns it all the way underground—wherever it goes. Get that! Wherever the geological strata may lead. Now, in operations as big as the Bender Corporation's, we've naturally worked *all* the veins that showed up in our shafts. We couldn't go to the expense of tracing every one to the surface to see whether it originated on our property."

"Most of them do, anyway," Brann put in. "But this buzzard Loomis went around buying up ever foot of ground he could get title to. Now he's suing us for enough money to start a mint, on the grounds that we've been mining ore from veins originating on his property. When I first saw you in my office tonight, I thought you were one of Loomis's men."

GARRET made a mental reservation to the effect that Brann's explanation of his attitude didn't cover all the ground at all.

Ryder went on. "We're going right ahead, turning out tonnage at top speed, because the country needs it. But the more we send to the surface, the worse off we are—in certain parts of the workings. On top of that, Loomis has bought up a lot of abandoned workings and is smelting down a lot of low-grade ore we never found profitable to work. What's more, Ken thinks of Consolidated's abandoned shafts open off our own stopes."

"If I'm right," the super growled, "they're taking out a lot of high-grade Ajax ore, along with their own."

Garret's mind was racing. This angle might be the source of the stolen copper story. Suppose Loomis didn't want to let the O.P.M. know how much copper his outfit was smelting for fear it would mean disclosure of where the ore actually came from?

Still, that left a few points to be cleared up. If Loomis had been bribing Darcy to help Consolidated with his knowledge of the Ajax shafts and tunnels, why had the timber boss fooled around with stealing a few bucks' worth of old railroad iron? What had Brann meant by that peculiar gesture of washing off the beer glass mats? Maybe Garret could get those questions answered one at a time. He'd have a look at Consolidated Reclaimers first.

"This Allen Loomis—would he likely be at his office this time of night?"

"Every mine executive is putting in a sixty-hour week these days. I'll go down there with you and find out," Brann answered, moving toward the street door.

"Oh, no! No you don't!" Ryder clapped a hand on his superintendent's shoulder, swung him around. "You'd read the riot act to Loomis and undo all the negotiations with Consolidated backers that I've been working on over long distance tonight. Mr. Garret, I'll run you down to their smelter. But I'd better not try to talk to Loomis with you, not unless you want us both to get bounced out."

"Guess you're right, C.J. Somebody'd get hurt if I went down there. I'll stay here and wait for Bill Narriver."

RYDER'S limousine was parked behind the timber truck. "Copper mining's always been a dog-eat-dog sort of business, Garret. Loomis is only doing what others have done in the past. You don't want to think too badly of him," he said as they started.

"I don't think anything about him, one way or the other," Garret said brusquely, "until I've seen him."

Five minutes later, under the towering stack of the Reclaimer's smelter, he knew he'd been justified in not making a pre-judgment. For Allen Loomis sat on the other side of a chaste, mahogany desk in a handsome, paneled office and pointed the snout of an automatic at Bruce Garret's middle.



Garret seized the man's knife wrist and pinned him against the wall.

"I know who you are." The president kept an amiable smile on his pudgy, wax-skinned face. "I know all about you. You're from Washington, all right. But you're a stooge for Bender. Under the pretext of getting more copper out of Stope City, you're going to try and help the big corporation take over the little orphan company I've worked all my life to build up. But you won't get away with it, my friend! Ryder won't get away with it, either. I'm giving you fair warning. I'll turn my plant over to the government any time it needs it. But before I'll let that chiseling bunch of Bender bandits force me to sell out, I'll pin a few lead buttons on somebody's vest!"

GARRET made a gesture with his palm. "Put the gun away. You've been seeing too many melodramas."

"No." The pistol remained steady in Loomis' hand. "In the old days the two-gun boys never tried to shoot you in the back at night—the way I was shot at, twice, the last week. Next time it happens, I'm aiming to do a little target work of my own."

"Put it away," Garret repeated. "The government hasn't been gunning for you. For the time being, you can consider me as representing the government."

Lomis' smile broadened unpleasantly. "That's what I'm afraid of. You wouldn't be the first official to be—shall we say

'impressed' by the hundred-million-dollar capital of the Bender Corporation."

Garret's lips flattened against his teeth. "If you're saying I've been bought off, I'll slap the words down your throat! If I'd wanted to fill my pockets with that kind of dough, I wouldn't have needed to come West."

Loomis laid the gun down softly. "It won't do you any good to come to me, at any rate. I can't match Charlie Ryder at the game of palm-greasing."

Garret held out his hand. "See any grease on that? What I get, I get from the O.P.M. Right now I'm supposed to be earning it by putting a stop to the theft of copper."

"I wouldn't know anything about that," Loomis said shortly. "If you want to subpoena our records or swear out a search warrant to go through our reduction plant, that's okay with us. Everything we do is according to Hoyle."

Garret tried a shot in the dark. "If you don't know anything about stolen copper, maybe you can steer me right on stolen iron."

"Iron!" The pudgy man opened his eyes wide.

"You know, old scrap. Rails and stuff."

Loomis pressed the switch of the inter-office communicating set on the corner of his desk. "Nels! Nels?"

A rumbling bass answered. "Want me, Mr. Loomis?"

"Step into the office a second, will you?" The president clicked the switch off, leaned back in his chair, clasping fat fingers over his paunch. "What makes you think anybody's stealing old iron?"

"Just saw some that's been stolen from Ajax, by a guy named Darcy. Know him?"

"I seem to recall the name. Maybe Nels Jarnstrom—he's chief in our reduction plant—will remember him. Here's Nels now."

THE man who came in was so gaunt his face seemed to be little more than

sun-burned skin stretched tautly over jutting bones.

"Nels, this is Mr. Garret."

"Howda do." Jarnstrom made no movement to offer his hand.

"Mr. Garret's with the Production Management Office. Out here to locate some missing copper."

"Yuh? Who's missing it?"

Garret said, "The men behind the automatic rifles and machine-guns."

"Oh! I see."

Loomis rocked gently in his swivel chair. "If he can't find the copper, Nels, Mr. Garret might be willing to settle for some old scrap iron."

Jarnstrom blinked stupidly. "Not much scrap around, the way the dealers have been buying it up."

"I saw a little tonight." Garret wondered at the smelterman's apathy. "Old rails. Pinched from an Ajax spur track by a fellow named Darcy."

The president stopped rocking. "Didn't you tell me you were trying to hire a timber boss by that name, Nels?"

"That's right," Jarnstrom agreed impassively. "He's starting to work for us next week."

Garret said, "Not unless you drill a deeper shaft than any you have now."

"No?" The smelterman blinked again.

"He's dead. So I can't find out from him whether he was grabbing off those steel rails for your company, or not."

JARNSTROM scratched his thin nose with a bony forefinger. "For us? Why? What would we do with them? We've got a pile of scrap out in the crusher room now—bits the electro-magnet picks out of ore on the conveyor belt. What would we want of more junk like that?"

Well, I've got you started talking, anyway, Garret thought. This question of old iron seems to be a sensitive spot. Maybe if I prod a little—

"You're using a lot of scrap here now, aren't you?"

"Not that I know of." Nels' voice was pitched a little higher.

Loomis began to swivel his chair from left to right in short, squeaky arcs. "I said you'd have to get a search warrant before you went through our plant, Mr. Garret, but I've changed my mind. Nels will show you around now, if you care to go along. Then you can see everything we're doing." He seemed pleased with his own suggestion.

Jarnstrom remonstrated with his superior. "I'm pretty busy with those repairs on the roasting furnace, Mr. Loomis."

"Won't take you long," Loomis said smoothly, "to show Mr. Garret all he wants to see."

"I don't guarantee that," Garret said. "But I'll give it a quick once-over for a starter."

Jarnstrom waited until they were out of the office building before he asked, "Any place special you wanted to inspect?"

"Want to see it all," Garret answered.

They climbed steadily up the slope of the great hill, past the roaring converters, the ladle-cars teeming with molten metal, the reverberating furnaces with their spouting incandescence, the roasting shells tended by a Frankenstein monster in asbestos armor.

Garret managed to keep a few steps behind Jarnstrom, and to gauge the gaunt man's movements the way a child plays the game of Hot and Cold. It was the same idea, Garret decided. Only it would be very hard to tell when he was getting warm. Because, if he judged the smelterman right, Jarnstrom was being very cagy about giving himself away.

IT WAS in the flotation mill that the bony man made his false step. They had passed the long row of giant, canvas-covered drums revolving in the tanks bubbling with pine oil. To their left, a door opened into a shed. The smelterman ignored it, and moved on toward the crusher building. Garret paused at the open door, as if to inspect the shed.

Jarnstrom strode along steadily, glanced over his shoulder. Garret wasn't looking toward the shed; he was watching the smelterman. Hastily the smelterman turned away. A bit too hastily, Garret thought.

"What's in the shed here, Jarnstrom?"

"Nothing but old machine parts. Pieces that got broke. Waiting to be welded."

A few segments of drum-gears and stirrer-blades were sticking out from beneath stretched tarpaulins. Garret moved into the shed toward them. Jarnstrom didn't follow, suggesting that the stuff under that canvas wasn't worth looking at. Quickly Garret lifted a corner of one of the tarpaulins. The broken machine parts were there, all right. Also a score of tons of old auto bodies, rusty chains, once-galvanized roofing. And a dozen brown-crust steel rails!

Garret dropped the canvas and moved swiftly back toward the mill. Jarnstrom was calling him from somewhere out of sight around the corner of the shed door.

"Telephone for you, Mr. Garret."

The instrument was in a little alcove between two of the flotation tanks. The smelterman indicated the up-ended receiver; displayed his lack of interest by walking away as the detective said, "Garret talking."

"This is Shirley Brann."

"Well, well!" He hadn't expected to hear from her, yet somehow he was not surprised. "How'd you know I was here at Consolidated?"

"KEN called in; he told me." She sounded contrite. "I hadn't meant to let you know I was going to look up that Yault accident, but I did, to satisfy my own concern about it. And you were right. The report certainly sounds queer."

"Don't tell me, let me guess." She had trusted him enough to look up the records, at any rate. And she was fair enough to admit there might be something whacky about the accident.

"Would Jig Darcy have been on the spot when that so-called cave-in occurred?"

"How'd you know that?"

"I didn't know, pure guesswork. Not too hard, though. Darcy tried to put me out of the way because I was trying to find out something about stolen copper. It's not unreasonable to suppose he might have been mixed up in the death of another guy who happened to learn something about the same business. Darcy could get around the mine anywhere he wanted to, being in charge of shoring up the shafts. He would know how to knock out a few timbers so as to make it look like a cave-in, too."

"If you're that smart"—there was admiration in her tone—"perhaps you've figured out that someone notified the hospital Harve Yault's death wasn't an accident."

"No. The hospital authorities told me no one had been to see him there."

"They were right. She didn't actually call at the hospital. She phoned, asking them if Yault had regained consciousness. When they said he hadn't, she swore a blue streak and accused them of concealing an attack on him."

"Who is 'she'?"

"They don't know."

"This is where I came in then."

"Maybe not," she said. "I did a little digging, as you suggested."

"Hit pay dirt?"

"Hard to say. But in Yault's pension compensation papers, I found the name of a girl."

"Ah!"

"The queerest name you ever heard in your life!"

"What?"

"Millie Hippo!"

"Can't be a name, must be a description. Who is the lady?"

"I'M not sure," Shirley laughed, "but from her address, I'd say she's not my idea of a lady."

"What's the address?"

"The Big Red Rooster. It's kind of a—well, a cheap joint."

"Looks like one. Where are Yault's papers?"

"I—I have them, but I'm not supposed to let anyone see—"

"Don't fall down on me now, when you're so close to making a score—Shirley."

There was a little pause. "What do you want me to do?"

"Bring the records to me."

"At Consolidated? They wouldn't let me in the office!"

"No. To the Big Red Rooster."

"Oh, I couldn't go—"

"Right, *pronto!* No time to waste!"

"All right." Her voice was faint on the wire. "I'll be there."

He hung up. Jarnstrom was a dozen yards down the mill, bending over something on the floor. Garret went toward him.

There was a sudden singing as of strong wind through telegraph wires. Garret looked up. A yard-wide length of leather belting slipped off its pulley on one of the revolving tank drums. The loosened loop snaked toward Garret like a mad boa-constrictor.

He flung himself sidewise and crashed into a guard screen. The deadly loop twisted toward him. He dropped to the floor. Hard leather, traveling at a mile a minute, slapped savagely against his head. It sent him rolling over and over on the floor, half stunned. But the next instant it had jerked away, kinked into a monstrous knot, and was flailing violently at a window yards distant. Glass shattered. Men yelled frantically. Someone pulled a lever, and the belt ceased its terrible threshing.

Jarnstrom ran up. "You hurt?"

"Not much." Garret stood up groggily.

THAT had been close, too close. If he had delayed a fraction of a second in diving out of the way, his head would have been twisted from his shoulders.

"Too bad. These belts are always coming off the pulleys. I should have warned you."

Garret's gaze was steely. "If that thing had caught me around the neck, it would be to late for a warning."

"You seen all you want to see?"

Garret answered cryptically, "I'll be back for another look. And I'll make sure no one is monkeying with the pulley-idlers when I come through next time!"

Garret didn't stop at Loomis' office on the way out. He was still dizzy from that smack by the lashing transmission-belt. He needed fresh air. The ten-minute walk down to town might do him good.

Nevertheless, he did ride down the hill in Ryder's limousine. The Bender Corporation's general manager was waiting for him, fifty yards down the street from Consolidated's office.

"Where you want me to drop you now?"

"The hotel." Garret had no intention of letting anyone else in on his Red Rooster appointment. "I didn't expect you to wait for me."

Ryder smiled. "I wouldn't trust those muckers any further than you could spit."

Garret felt of the lump on his head. "Not as far as that."

"Besides"—the big man let the car coast easily down the incline—"I didn't exactly wait for you. I drove back to Darcy's place. Bill Narriver was there, thirsting for your blood."

"Proctor got away from him then."

"SURE. Bill's burned to a cinder. He says if it hadn't been for you, Proctor'd be in the jailhouse now."

"Why do you hire punks like Narriver for company guards, anyway?"

"Bill's just a plug-ugly in uniform," the executive agreed. "But he has his uses. For instance, he has an in with the local police. They just tipped him off there's a murder warrant out against you."

"Darcy, huh? Did they find his body?"

"Bill didn't know how they learned you were in the thing."

"Better let me out right here then."

The car was still a hundred yards away from the Big Rooster, but Garret could make out a slender figure in a sports coat hurrying into the cafe. "They'll post a cop in the lobby of the Rocky Mountain House, first thing."

"You ought to know." The limousine stopped. "I'll have Ken pull a few strings. We might be able to kill that warrant. Anyhow, if the police do pick you up, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing your job's more'n half done already."

"Which half?"

"Why, Darcy's." There was surprise in Ryder's tone. "Doesn't seem to be much doubt he was working with Consolidated."

"Not much," Garret admitted, "but the other half of the combination might not be so easy to work out. I'm busy on that now. Thanks for the lift."

He waited until the limousine rolled out of sight, then came up cautiously on the opposite side of the street from the Rooster. There was no one around who looked as if he might belong to the police force. He crossed the street and went in.

HE DIDN'T see Shirley Brann for a minute. The place was roaring. At an enormous horse-shoe bar, miners in work denims jostled young girls in fluffy dance frocks; slick-haired youths just out from behind store counters reached for their drinks across the shoulders of housewives whose men had just gone down on the eight o'clock shift. Four bartenders in white jackets, with red roosters on the breast pockets, pulled beer taps, juggled shakers, poured from bottles at a furious pace. There was no time for punching a cash register; silver dollars were merely bounced on a marble slab to make sure they rang true, then tossed into a washtub on the back bar.

A double row of red-covered tables ran along one wall; among them, waitresses in knee-length Dutch girl costumes perspired under trays heaped high

with steaks, french fries, hot biscuits. Against the other wall a staircase slanted up to the second floor. Guarding it at the foot was a cashier's booth commanded by a brassy-haired female with a pink complexion, a baby stare and the physique of a wrestler. A neatly lettered placard over the cage stated:

Private Dining Rooms
for Ladies & Gents

Garret looked over the couples milling on the dance floor between the tables and the stairs; he knew Ken Brann's sister wouldn't be with that mob.

She saw him before he located her, called, "Bruce" over the din of the booming juke box and the babbling hubbub at the bar. He found her squeezed in between a middle-aged man and a bald-headed miner.

Garret steered Shirley deftly toward the end tables. "Sorry to get you into this."

She laughed nervously. "It's all right. It's kind of exciting to see it once. Only it's so terribly noisy."

"THAT'S what the customers seem to want." He found a vacant table. "Noise and excitement. But the food will be good, you can bank on that."

"I'm not hungry, though. And I refused three drinks in those few minutes before you got here."

But Garret said, "Two orders of sirloin and french fries," to the waitress who flounced up to the table. "And coffee."

"I understand." Shirley opened her handbag, slid out a packet of printed documents. "So we won't be too conspicuous?"

"That's the idea, sort of." He didn't know how to tell her that nothing could prevent her standing out in this mob like a Powers model at a washerwomen's convention, no matter whether she ate or drank anything or not. But perhaps nobody would notice him, as long as she attracted all the attention.

He smiled with his eyes. "Thanks in advance, for services rendered." He took the packet of papers.

"I hadn't intended to be helpful," she admitted frankly. "But Ken's brought me up to believe that every man at Ajax should be given a square deal, so I wanted to reassure myself that Harve Yault was treated fairly. When I found Darcy's name in the report, I realized you might be right." She leaned over to let him light her cigarette. "But if it does help you, I'm glad."

"It does." He studied the documents. "This pension allotment of his, made out to this Millie, seems to check with an anonymous scrawl sent to Washington a couple of days after Yault's death." He brought out the cellophane envelope. "No way of determining absolutely. But it looks as if a woman wrote this, judging by the use of lipstick and the way she worded it."

"BY THE way she misspelled cart-ridge," Shirley said, "not an especially well educated woman, either."

He glanced up approvingly. "That's Bingo for you. The sort of female who might have a name like Millie Hippo."

There was a little squeal of surprise from the waitress bringing their steaks.

Garret asked, "You wouldn't be Millie Hippo, by any chance?"

"Oh! No!" She giggled. "That's her." She pointed to the brassy-haired cashier at the foot of the stairs. "You must be new around here. Everybody knows Millie!"

Shirley made a confidential appeal. "I don't know her, but I'd like to. Would you mind asking Millie if she'd care to come over to our table and have a bite to eat—"

"—or a drink," Garret amended hastily.

"I'll ask her." The waitress seemed dubious. "I don't know if she can get a relief now."

Garret took the cellophane envelope with the scribbled message on it. He folded it in a bill of fare. "Take this

over to her, sister. Then ask her if she wants to join us."

Millie did. She opened the cardboard menu and started as if she'd seen a mouse. Hurriedly, she called a girl from one of the tables to sit in the booth, and came waddling over to Garret's table. When he saw her lumbering method of locomotion across the floor, there was no necessity of asking where she acquired her nickname.

What he did ask her, after she had sipped daintily at her highball, was, "Millie, I came all the way from Washington because of that note you wrote. You must have been a good pal to Harve Yault."

She surveyed Shirley with skepticism. "What if I was?"

"He left you some money, didn't he?"

"He didn't have much to leave, the poor guy. Miners never have much to leave anybody."

Shirley said, "You're right there, Millie." The cashier relaxed a little.

Garret worked on his steak. "You think Harve was murdered?"

"I AIN'T saying what I think." Millie Hippo drained her glass, started to get up from the table. "Not until I know who I'm talking to."

Garret took out the Sphinx badge again. "I'm a government investigator, Millie. This lady is working with me to see that Yault's murderer is punished—if he was murdered. You told the hospital authorities he was murdered, at the time, didn't you?"

The big woman examined the badge respectfully, but she was still cautious. "Maybe I thought that then. Ain't saying I think the same way now."

"We're not trying to take the pension money away from you." Shirley attempted to soothe her suspicions. "It's just that Mr. Garret thinks maybe we can help square accounts with—whoever was responsible for Harve Yault's death."

The cashier's cupid-bow lips quivered; her eyes filmed with moisture. "If you

really mean that—if you honestly mean it—why, I'll go right down the line for you. Harve—well, he was about the only guy in my whole life who ever actually kept his word with me. I'd cut off my right hand if it would help get the people who murdered him." She gulped at the liquor.

Garret signaled for a refill of her glass. "What makes you so sure he was murdered?"

"He told me so."

Shirley exclaimed, "How could he tell you, when you didn't go to the hospital to see him?"

Tears began to roll down Millie's plump cheeks. "He told me it was going to happen, three or four days before the cave-in. 'Millie,' he says to me, 'Millie, if you hear of me getting stove up or knocked off in an accident, you'll know it wasn't no accident. If they get me, it'll be plain murder!'"

"Who was Yault afraid of?"

"Somebody in the mine. He didn't know for sure who it was."

"At Ajax?" Shirley tried to keep the worry out of her voice.

Millie rattled the ice cubes in her glass. "That was where Harve worked. He wouldn't know about any other mine. He found out something about copper being stolen out of Ajax. A hell,"—she coughed, daintily—"a whole lot of copper. Enough, Harve said, to make maybe a million cartridges a week."

"Did he say how it was being stolen?" Garret was patient.

"No, he didn't. I don't even know if he knew. He kept mentioning something about swapping iron for copper, but I couldn't tell if the swapping had anything to do with the stealing."

That matter of iron again! If I only knew what the rusty iron had to do with it! Garret fumed inwardly.

"Now, listen. If Yault didn't know who was stealing the copper or how it was being taken, what did he know that made somebody bump him off in that fake accident?"

She stirred her drink with her little

finger. "Harve knew where it was being taken from. That's what they were afraid of, I guess. The where of it."

"That might be enough." Garret watched Shirley ball her napkin up into a knot. "Where was it?"

Millie put a ladylike palm in front of her mouth, hiccoughed gently. "Fear Street," she said. "That's what he said. Fear Street."

Shirley looked blank. "I never heard of it, Millie. Where's that?"

Millie Hippo shrugged her enormous shoulders. "I don't get around town very much on my job. I guess Harve thought I knew where it was, or he'd have told me."

Garret gritted his teeth. "Do you think he told anyone else?"

"I don't know, mister. I couldn't say about that." She dabbed at her lips with a bit of musk-scented cambric. "But there was another fella who'd know. He was with Harve just before the cave-in that night."

"Who is this other man? Where is he?" Shirley cried apprehensively.

THE BIG woman set her glass down sharply. "I can't tell you who he is, not unless he says it's okay. But I can take you to him."

"Now?" Garret asked.

Millie nodded. "I guess now's as good a time as any." She stood up. They did the same. "If you'll kindly follow me." She started across the end of the dance floor toward the stairs.

Garret caught Shirley's arm. "Maybe it would be better if you stayed down here."

"No. I'd rather go with you."

"Well—a place like this—"

She smiled. "You forget I've lived in Stope City all my life. I've never been in a place like this before, but it doesn't matter."

Nevertheless, Garret felt as if every eye in the crowd were watching them as they filed upstairs in the wake of Millie's skirts. Somebody at the bar began to chant raucously:

Said the Little Black Hen
To the Big Red Rooster
You ain't been around, sir,
As often as you useter.

Shirley laughed softly. Garret chalked up another credit to her score.

At the top of the stairs, Millie Hippo turned toward the front of the building, and led them down a dark and odorous corridor with closed doors on either side. The doors were facetiously lettered Wyandotte, Barred Rock, Rhode Island Red.

AT THE door marked Leghorn, Millie knocked. There was no answer. Her lips close to the jamb, she said, "It's Millie."

Still no answer.

"Open the door! Friends of mine want to talk to you—about Harve."

Instantly the door swung open six inches or so. The room was dark and the illumination from the fly-specked bulb in the hall was dim, so Garret couldn't see the occupant.

But he could inspect them, without being seen. There was a whispered exchange between the man inside and Millie. Then the door swung wide.

"Go on in, folks. It's okay. I can't stick around, but I'll see you when you come down." Millie pushed Shirley into the dark room. Garret stepped quickly in after her. The door closed gently.

"Got to be careful," the man said, his voice oddly familiar to Garret, "about anybody in the hall getting a peek at me." The light went on.

"Scat!" Garret said in surprise.

The ex-con chortled. "Now you know what it feels like to be in the lineup yourself, where somebody can give you the eye and you can't see him."

"Shirley, this is Scat—I mean Sam Proctor. He works for your brother. Sam, Miss Brann."

They shook hands quite formally. He waved toward one of the chairs at the battered table, but she preferred to stand. There wasn't anything in the

room to look at except a spring-saggy sofa with pink-and-purple cushions. On the table a cracked water pitcher stood alongside a half-empty pint bottle and a dirty tumbler. Shirley smiled uncertainly at Sam. He grinned toothlessly.

"I been holing up here ever since that dimwit Narriver sent out an alarm for me. I did Millie and Harve a few favors now and again, and she don't forget a friend." He indicated the whiskey.

"No great need of worrying. The captain hasn't anything on you," Garret said.

"No." The bankrobber leered slyly. "But a couple of D.A.'s back east have. Old indictments, before I—uh—reformed, you might say. So I don't like the idea of being fingerprinted."

Garret said he understood. "Miss Brann and I won't turn you in. We're after someone else. The parties who rigged up that phony accident to explain Harvey Yault's death."

"Oh-oh!"

"**M**ILLIE HIPPO says you were with Yault a little while before he was killed."

"That's so. I was. And I always had my own ideas about that cockeyed cave-in, but working with Jig Darcy all the time, I didn't want to shoot off my mouth and wind up under a few tons of loose ore myself."

"Millie says Yault told her he might be murdered because he'd accidentally discovered where copper was being stolen from Ajax."

The old peter-man rubbed the stubble of his chin thoughtfully. "Oh! Was that it?"

Garret nodded. "You know where the place is. Yault said it was on Fear Street."

"Yuh. I know." Scat pinched his Adam's apple uneasily. "It's one of the old stopes on the two-thousand-foot level."

"A tunnel in the mine?" Shirley was astonished.

"Yezzum. A bad one. Ore's soft there.

Chalcocite, they call it. Crumbles easy. Lots of good guys did their last mining on Fear Street. That's why it got its name."

"That's where Yault was hurt?" Garret thought he began to see some of the pieces fitting together.

"Yezzir. Him and me and Darcy were looking over the stope to see if we could retimber it, and Jig sends me back to the main shaft for a couple of hydraulic jacks. When I come back, Harve was under fifty ton of rock and Darcy was bawling for the rescue crew."

Garret gripped Scat's shoulder fiercely. "Can you get me down where I can have a look at this Fear Street?"

SCAT PRODGER shook his head slowly. "No sir. Somebody else—not me. I couldn't get even as far as the cage without that dirty slob Narriver putting the arm on me."

"Suppose I could fix it so Narriver wouldn't bother you, and those old indictments would be dropped?"

"No siree. It ain't that I don't take your word, Mr. Garret. You're on the up-and-up. There ain't a stir-bug who knows you would say different. But you know how it is. I saw promises made with the best of intentions, many's the time. Only the guy who made them couldn't carry them out, because some dirty little drip with a tittle and a bellyful of ambition thought he could climb another step up the ladder by slapping another poor sucker in the pen."

Shirley came across the room. "Mr. Proctor—"

"Yezzum? Ain't no use trying to talk me outa it. I had many's the bitter experience with human nature."

"But this is different," she said. "Really different. By doing what Mr. Garret wants, you'll be helping the men in our armed forces to get the ammunition they may need to win a battle."

"Howzatt?"

Garret said, "The copper that's being stolen, down there on Fear Street, ought to be making cartridges. If we can find

out who's stealing the metal, we can help to put more rounds in those machine-guns and—"

"Hold on! Hold on!" Scat strode majestically to the take. He poured out a stiff slug of beady liquor, drained it at one gulp, shook his head and tugged at his coat lapels. "You don't have to go no further. If an old-timer like me can do his bit in this shindig, he'd be a terrible bum if he didn't do it, wouldn't he? A *terrible* bum!" He jerked open the door. "You keep that fink Narriver off my neck and I'll take you to Fear Street or anywhere else you want to go!"

In the corridor, Scat Prodger turned. "I said I'd take you down, Mr. Garret. But how you going to get as far as the cage?"

"That's right. I have to have a pass before they'll let me in the hoist house."

SHIRLEY snapped open her handbag. "Wait." She fumbled with coin purse and compact; found a pad of printed blanks and a pencil. Swiftly she filled in ruled spaces, tore off a sheet. "That's not Ken's signature, but it's close enough. I make out most of the passes for him to sign. Lucky I have the pad with me."

"Saves time," Garret agreed.

She tucked her hand under his arm. The cloth of his coat was sticky. "You're hurt! That's blood!"

"Courtesy of Jig Darcy." They were going down the stairs again; this time no one paid any attention to them. Garret said, "It's not serious, except it'll cost three bucks to have the sleeve rewoven."

"If you'll stop a second, I'll fix it."

"Thanks, no. But if you really want to do something for me—"

"What?"

"See if you can find out the names of Loomis's backers in Consolidated Reclaimers. Charlie Ryder was talking to them on long distance tonight. Might be important to learn who they are. Do it without letting anybody know I'm interested."

"Maybe Ken would know."

He avoided her eyes. "Why don't you ask the phone people?"

She hesitated. "All right." His evasion seemed to trouble her.

They edged through the crowd at the bar. Calloused palms were clapping together in accompaniment to The Heart of Texas. Shirley had to press close against him to make herself heard. "It'll be dangerous, down in the mine."

Garret gestured at the old safe blower. "He knows his stuff."

I DON'T mean danger from cave-ins. Harvey Yault wasn't caught in a rock fall," she said.

"I'll keep my eyes open for the other hazards. And I'll be seeing you."

"I hope—I hope—I hope!" Shirley said.

Out on the street, Garret waited until her trim figure swung around the corner of the block.

"Let's go, Scat."

"This ain't gonna be no picnic, y'know."

"Hey, where you heading? Hoist house is up the hill."

"I'm gonna stop down at my boarding house for a couple of helmets. You'd get your skull stove in before you went a hundred yards down Fear Street, without you had a helmet."

The boarding house wasn't far. Prodger reconnoitered a bit before he decided to go in. "Reckon Narriver's been here and gone." He marched up the steps and came back in a minute with two steel helmets that might have been regulation army issue, except for the electric lamps attached to their fronts. Prodger handed one to Garret, put one on himself, and disposed of other packets in various parts of his clothing.

"I'm set. That thick-neck cap'n better not push me around now." He patted his coat gently.

But Garret, toiling up the steep grade, didn't waste any grey matter on Narriver. Instead, he mulled over the strange activities of Shirley Brann's brother.

Especially, the strange shuffling of those fiber disks under the water faucet in Jig Darcy's house. What was it Ken Brann had said? Darcy couldn't have had any use for those steel rails, unless—

Unless what? Beyond question, the theft of the iron was connected with the stealing of the copper. But how? Why hadn't Brann come right out with it? Why didn't Charlie Ryder make it clear, what the super's curious charade-play had meant? Why had Loomis changed his mind about letting Garret go through the smelter works right after the detective brought up the matter of scrap iron? Strangest of all, why had someone in the Consolidated plant—very likely Nels Jarnstrom—done his best to wrench Garret's head from his body with that belt slipped off the whirling pulley? Just because the investigator had found that pile of rusty chain and smashed-up auto bodies?

MAYBE Scat could furnish him with the key, if he asked. "Scat?" "Getting pooped? This is a tough hill."

"I've got my second wind. Scat, how can a man swap old iron for new copper?"

"Howzatt?"

"Those rails you and Darcy picked up tonight. They were going to be exchanged for copper. How?"

Scat stood still. "Exchanged! Well, for the love—" He resumed his upward climb. "I never figured it might be the old two-for-one. Give you odds that's what it was, though."

"What the hell is two-for-one?" Garret was exasperated. "Speak English!"

They showed their passes at the fence, and hurried toward the hoist house.

"I don't know just how the two-for-one stunt does work." The ex-con called his number to the timekeeper at the hoist-house door. "But it works, all right. You put the iron in the water—" He broke off, began to swear vehemently at a stocky, bull-necked man in a guard uniform. "Lay off me now, Narriver! I'm giving you warning!"

"Why don't you try running away now?" The captain swaggered up with one hand on his pistol holster. "Either run or stand still!"

Garret cut in. "You're a little late, Cap."

Narriver pivoted, glaring. "I thought you'd be in the jug by now."

"No. Not going to be. The only jail I'm going to be in is the one I deliver my prisoner to."

"Your prisoner!" Bill Narriver goggled.

"Sure. Sam Proctor's my prisoner."

"Nuts!"

YEAH? Federal arrests take precedence over local authorities, to say nothing of unofficial company finks like you. Ever hear about that?"

"No." The captain was rattled, but he wasn't going to be bluffed out of the capture. "Proctor's on Ajax ground and he's accused of stealing Ajax property. I'm taking him in, and that's that." He took out the gun for emphasis.

"You'll run yourself into a federal pen first thing you know," Garret retorted. "They hand out stiff sentences these days to guys who impede war production."

The ex-con spat out, "What are you supposed to be arresting me for, anyhow? The company's got the rails. Darcy's a cold turkey. I ain't done nothing except show you up for a dumb, bulldozing—"

"That'll be all from you." Veins stood out on the captain's forehead. "You're coming up to the office. If Mr. Brann wants to turn you over to this Washington wisey, that's his business. Until I find out what he wants done with you, you mosey along and be quick about it, or I'll beat you down to your socks."

Scat licked his lips. "If you try it, it'll be the last beating you'll give! I promise you that!"

Garret saw a group beginning to gather around, men who had come up on the last cage, others waiting to go down into the mine. He wasn't ready for a showdown yet, and this wasn't the place

to have it. So he said, "We can't afford to horse around all night, Narriver. Let's get up to Brann's; he'll tell you where to get off."

The captain sneered. "That's crawling, mister! Wouldn't surprise me if you yelped some more when the Stope City police turn the cell key on you." He herded the Ajax man out of the hoist house, but waited until Garret walked ahead of him before he marshalled them up toward the office.

There were only two clerks busy at the time cards when the three of them filed in. Shirley wasn't in sight.

Narriver called across the railing, "Ken Brann in?"

"Went out about half an hour ago, Cap," one of the elderly men answered. "Said he might not be back for quite a while. Had a suitcase with him. And his briefcase."

NARRIVER scratched his head so the visored cap tilted forward over his eyes. "He didn't say anything to me about going on a trip."

Scat mumbled, "Ain't that too bad! The super can't make a move without asking your advice, huh?"

"Pipe down!" Narriver prodded the peter-man in the back. "Get on in his office. He probably was just taking some papers home to work on. I'll call him up."

He opened the super's door. Garret stared at the desk drawers, open and empty; at the bookshelf with gaping holes where volumes had been hastily removed.

Narriver planted fists on his hips, gawked incredulously. "That's damn funny! Looks as if Ken's flown the coop."

The captain muscled Scat along to the desk, picked up the phone. "See if you can get Mr. Brann at his home, babe."

Garret could hear the phone ring, but there was no answer. He didn't think there would be, not with all the personal do-dads missing from the top of the super's desk. Everything had been taken

away except a brass-mounted memo pad. Why had that been left?

Garret went close, looked at it. A couple of phone numbers had been scribbled on it, and a group of cabalistic figures which the investigator recognized as engineering formulae. Also, across the bottom of the pad, a series of dots and dashes had been penciled in blue:

-.||.-|-|...||-|-||.-||.-|...|-||

Narriver hung up the phone. "Them hen tracks mean anything?"

"They might," Garret replied, "to anyone who knew Morse code." Obviously the message hadn't been intended for Narriver's eye. It read: G wise to Fear Street! Now Ken Brann's sudden departure was understandable!

THE GUARD rubbed his chin, dubiously. "I'm no boy scout. Don't expect me to dope it out. But don't think Mr. Brann's taking French leave is going to set you loose either, Proctor." He shoved the ex-con roughly against the wall. Scat bit his lips as if in pain.

"If you keep that up, Narriver, you ain't gonna last the night," he said roughly.

Garret picked up the phone. "Operator?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Get hold of your nearest United States Marshal."

"Marshal?"

"That's right. Ask him to call Bruce Garret at the Ajax Number Six office."

"Yes, sir!"

"And tell him he'd better get hold of a deputy. I want him to take a guy in custody. Man named William Narriver." He slapped the receiver on the hook.

Narriver began to bluster. "Damn you, Garret! Ain't anybody in Stope City would dare lay a finger on me! You'll see."

Garret stepped to him swiftly. One hand caught the captain's necktie, jerked him forward too close for the man to

use his fists. Garret's other hand closed on the butt of Narriver's pistol.

"Slight error, Narriver," He wrenched the gun out of the holster. "I'm laying a finger on you. If you don't cool off and keep quiet, I'll lay more than that on you. I've got serious business on hand; I can't take time to roughhouse with you every few minutes."

Scat laughed scornfully; his laugh was echoed by a chuckle from the doorway behind Garret.

Charlie Ryder stood there, surveying his dumbfounded guard-captain. The general manager's thumbs were in his vest armholes; he teetered back and forth on his heels, judicially. "I'm much obliged to you, Garret. If I'd known Bill could be bluffed like that, I'd have fired him long ago."

"Listen, Mr. Ryder!" Narriver stormed. "This lousy snooper calls up a U.S. Marshal to arrest *me*. If Mr. Brann'd been here to back me up, I'd have—"

"Shut up, Bill! You've had your chance to speak your piece. You didn't do so well. Where's Brann?" Ryder's eyes went to the barren desk-top; the half-empty bookshelves. "What goes on here?"

GARRET waved a hand. "Man done gone away. Took his belongings with him. Seems as if he didn't intend to come back."

"Lord!" Ryder moved slowly around the desk, slumped heavily in the chair. There was a hurt look in his eyes; his voice suddenly sounded tired. "Didn't he say anything to anybody?"

"No. Just beat it, without a word." Garret put Narriver's gun in his own pocket. "Somehow he must have found out I was getting the lowdown on this copper stealing."

"I'm glad of that," Ryder muttered. "But I'm sure sorry about Ken." He put a clenched fist on the desk. "It doesn't make any difference now. But I put Ken through Tech; I brought him along in Ajax for more than ten years." He stood up, straightened. "I've never known him

to do a dishonest or a disloyal thing." His face clouded. "Surely you won't expect *me* to take any action against him."

Garret said, "I expect you to keep hands off my investigation of this mine, that's all."

Ryder spread his hands out, palms up. "You're the doctor. We'll take your prescription, even if it's going to be bitter."

"That's the idea. Proctor's going to take me down where somebody's swapping rusty iron for copper, according to—"

"It's the old two-for-one, Mr. Ryder," the safe blower interrupted. "I guess you know how it works."

"Two-for-one?" The general manager's eyes narrowed. "But we're doing that all the time! There isn't a chance of anybody's stealing metal that way. Unless—" He stared blankly at the wall.

There was that 'unless' again! "Unless what?" Garret said.

RYDER took a long cigar out of his pocket, bit the end off with a pre-occupied air. "Unless our friends at Consolidated Reclaimers are sluicing off our metal by the gallon. And that's something I can't believe. If it's true, I want to see it with my own eyes."

"You'll come along with us?" Garret was surprised.

"You bet your life I'm coming. Bill?"

"Yes, Mr. Ryder?"

"Get me a helmet and a suit of coveralls. Snap into it!"

"Yes, sir." The guard hurried away.

Ryder paced the office restlessly. "It's possible, just barely possible. They might get away with five or ten tons a week that way, and nobody the wiser. It's the only way in the world you can mine copper without working for it."

Narriver came back. Ryder stripped off his coat, climbed into the coveralls, and slapped the helmet on his head. "Ready."

He didn't attempt any further explanation of the two-for-one on the way to the hoist house. And in the three-

tiered cage which dropped men nearly a mile into the earth and hauled ore out, there were a dozen other miners, so nothing was said by Garret.

The man at the cage controls hailed the chief jocularly.

"Going back to work for a change, Boss?"

Ryder smiled. "Little tour of inspection. Drop us off at the two-thousand-foot level."

They plummeted down into the darkness. It seemed to Garret as if the cables on the heavy elevator car must have snapped and the cage was bound for the very bottom of the mine. But when the air pressure had built up so his ears felt stuffed with cotton and the air in the car became almost unbearably hot, the platform came to a rest opposite a wide, timbered passage in the rock.

A miner, naked to his sweating waist, sat in an ore car piled with blue-black rock. He had a board in his lap, with a paper clipped to it. He recognized Ryder, but he asked the routine question, "Where you going to work, boys?"

Scat Prodger said, "Fear Street, Mac," and led the way along the tunnel.

The miner called after them. "Better watch your step in there!"

THE ONLY light in the tunnel came from the little electric lamps at the front of their helmets. The air was like that of a boiler room.

For a while, the only sound in the stope was the gritting of gravel under their shoes. Ryder followed Scat; Garret kept close behind them. The ex-convict threaded his way through cross-overs and around blind turns without once hesitating. Garret knew there were twenty-five hundred miles of these subterranean catacombs, wondered how Scat could be so sure of the way.

"Somewhere along here," Ryder panted, "there's supposed to be an underground stream. Probably drainage water from the upper levels."

"That would be full of copper, wouldn't it?" Scat called back.

"Might be full of copper sulphate," the general manager corrected, breathing heavily.

"What they call blue vitriol?" Garret shook sweat out of his eyes.

"That's right, blue vitriol. Leached out of the rock." Ryder stumbled over a heap of fallen rubble. The passageway sloped sharply upward now.

Scat shouted back a warning. "Keep away from the walls. Might start the rock. This here's Fear Street."

"Ore seems to be softer here." Ryder stopped for breath. "Probably on account of the water seeping along the vein."

Garret touched the rock overhead. It was dank with moisture.

"Right here—" Scat's words reverberated from the tunnel sides—"is where Harve Vault got it." He stopped and pointed. "The clean-up crew took out enough rock to get at his body. But the tunnel's still blocked."

RYDER halted. Garret came up behind him. Somewhere ahead, in the blackness, was the splash of running water. Between them and the sound, there was a mound of rubble that reached to the tunnel-top.

"Far as it's safe to go." Ryder wiped his forehead on his sleeve. "Ken Brann showed me the report after that accident. We'd have to have double timbering, from here on, to make it safe enough for the muckers to operate."

A chip of rock fell at Garret's feet. "That water I hear—is that the stuff full of copper?"

"Can't tell," Ryder said. "Might be just a flow from ordinary rock strata."

Scat Prodger chuckled. He patted his coat pocket. "I can get you through there, if you want to take a chance."

"How?" Ryder said sharply.

"Dinah." The peter-man took out an object that looked like a chunk of thick candle, wrapped in a piece of old newspaper. "Always carry Dinah with me, just in case there's a cave-in and I've got to get air quick."

Dynamite cartridges! Garret knew Scat had been familiar with explosives for a score of years—had used them professionally—in the days before the Sphinx man sent him away for the stretch. But it hadn't occurred to him the bank robber would be carrying blasting cartridges around in his pockets like so many cheese sandwiches! That was what Scat had meant when he said he was 'set'—when he had warned Narriver not to mess around with him, or else!

"Too risky," Ryder decided. "There's been one cave-in here already. Be just asking for another to blast again."

Garret's eyes strained into the darkness ahead. "What's beyond that rock heap?"

"More trouble, probably." Ryder wagged his head in disapproval. "If there's much water there, a blast might let it right in on us. We'd drown like rats."

Scat held the explosive to his lips, made a loud smacking noise. "Don't you worry! Dinah'll do like I tell her. She'll clear a way through this pile here and not even jar a drop of sweat off the end of your nose!"

GARRET didn't wait for the caution that was on Ryder's lips. After all, Harve Yault had been here, and he hadn't been drowned by drainage water, had he? Jig Darcy'd been here, too, presumably without any fears about the consequence of the rock-fall he'd arranged to cover the driller's death.

He said, Go head, Scat. "Do your stuff."

"Well—" Ryder protested. "See that you don't overdo it!"

Scat went to work. He whittled away with a pocket knife at the chunk of nitroglycerine-in-sawdust. He extracted a percussion cap from a phial stuffed with cotton batting. The whole thing had been tucked in his hip pocket all the while Narriver had been shoving him around. He uncoiled wires from a spool wrapped in a black sock, and attached

the wires to a switch kept in his tobacco pouch. Then he borrowed Garret's helmet and hooked the switch by clips to the battery of the miner's light. It took him no more than three minutes, including packing the charge away under one side of the rubble pile.

He came back down the tunnel to where Garret and Ryder were squatting in semi-darkness. "Stick your fingers in your ears," he ordered. "When I say 'Yell,' holler your heads off!"

Garret nodded. "Fire when ready."

"Okay. One, two—yell!"

Garret shouted. It was like bellowing against cannon-fire. He couldn't hear his own voice against the rumbling thunder of the explosion. The tunnel filled with fumes and dust.

Scat prowled up ahead. The beam of his lamp poked here and there through the cloud of dust.

"Howzat, Mr. Garret?" he exulted. "Clean as a whistle. Don't let nobody tell you old Scat can't still part your hair with a spoonful of 'soup!'"

GARRET crept forward over a yard-thick layer of splintered ore. The splashing of water was clearer now, even though his ears were still ringing.

Scat was still moving ahead along the stope. "Here she is!" he cried. "Here's your two-for-one!"

Garret could make out that they had come to the end of Fear Street. But there was a cross-tunnel, at right angles. This new stope was three times the width of the narrow pasageway along which they had just come. It ran below the level of Fear Street, like the channel of a stream—a fifteen-foot stream of dark and swiftly flowing water whose surface glinted blue-black under Scat Prodder's helmet-light!

At the detective's shoulder, Ryder exclaimed: "By heaven, somebody's turned this stope into a sluice for copper recovery! Look at that scrap iron!"

Scat hopped down onto the bottom of the underground brook. The water came barely to his knees. "She's got a timber

bottom," he called. "That means the stuff can be scraped off. It's kinda slippy'ry."

Garret saw the fender of a junked automobile sticking above the surface like the fin of some subterranean shark. Scat bent down, fished a length of once-heavy iron chain out of the stream. The foot-long lengths had been eaten away until they were no thicker than match sticks.

Garret stepped gingerly down into the water, and was surprised to find it warm as a bath. Soft powder on the bottom made the footing unsteady. He bent down, scooped up a handful. It was fine reddish sludge. Heavier than any mud he'd ever handled.

Was this what Ken Brann had meant by the rinsing of those fibre disks in water?

"Copper?" as asked.

"Pure copper," Ryder answered. "We have our own recovery sluice, further down the hill. Looks as if somebody's taking our copper out before the water gets to us." He rubbed some of the sludge between his fingers. "You see, the copper is like a man who's hungry for affection. It comes drifting along, arm in arm with the sulphate—the girl-friend, so to speak. When this combination meets up with a piece of iron, there's your old eternal triangle, again."

Garret began to catch on. "The sulphate reacts with the iron, eh?"

"**L**IKE A sailor to a red-headed siren." The general manager joined the little procession that began to move slowly along the wider tunnel in the direction of the current. "The sulphate-girl deserts her boy-friend, copper, and grabs hold of her new acquaintance, Old Iron. So the copper sulks. It sinks down to the bottom. The iron mates with the sulphate, forms a new marriage, if you want to put it that way. About two tons of iron are used up for every ton of copper sludge you get. We've been recovering the metal this way at our own sluice for years. Nothing new about it—

except this idea of sluicing off *our* sulphate water to make copper for somebody else. That's brand new!"

There was a wild yell from Scat, up ahead.

"Hold on!" Garret hollered. "We'll get you!" He stumbled over old rails, bits of broken gears.

"I'm all right," the ex-con shouted. "But there's another guy here who ain't."

Scat had stepped on the body, face down in the stream. There was an ugly wound in the man's forehead; the face was clotted with red muck. But Garret had no difficulty in recognizing the corpse. Allen Loomis.

Ryder splashed along the tunnel toward them. "Who is it?"

"Loomis." Garret lifted the man's body half out of the water.

"Must have fallen," Scat said, "over one these hunks of iron. Cut his head open."

"He was clubbed," Garret growled. "Struck with the hot end of a gun. See where the front sight cut the skin, there?"

"Body's still warm!" Ryder exclaimed. "Can't have been dead more than ten or fifteen minutes." He swore fervently. "Maybe I ought to be sorry, but I'm not. I think he got what was coming to him."

GARRET looped a limp arm back of his shoulders in the fireman's carry. "Can't leave him here, whether he deserved it or not."

Ryder sloshed ahead, in the direction of the current. "If Loomis came up this way, we ought to be able to get down. It's the first time I ever was sure there was a connection between our shafts and Consolidated's smelter. He and Darcy must have found a way to divert our drainage; by-passed our own sluice somehow. Then, after the copper'd been extracted, they sent the waste back into our stream so we wouldn't notice any lessened quantity of flow."

"Darcy must have been in it, all right." Garret had to follow Ryder

closely to keep from bumping into old castings, bed-frames, sections of iron fence. "But I'm not so sure about Loomis."

Ryder slogged along in silence for a few minutes, except for cursing at barked shins. Then, "You're right, of course. If Loomis was killed up here, it wasn't by Darcy. You saw Loomis at his office after Darcy was shot, so there must be a third one in on it."

"Must be." Garret had no breath to waste; Loomis was becoming terribly heavy. Once he stepped on an old anvil which crumpled and gave way beneath his weight as if it had been made of *papier-mache*.

The tunnel became wider, its downward slope decreased, the current slowed. A raised path appeared at one side, wide enough for a battery-operated carrier truck. This was how they got the copper sludge out of the sluice then—scraped it up with shovels, scooped it into the truck and ran it—where? The precious sludge must have been dried out and melted down into blister copper somewhere in the Consolidated smelter.

Ryder, in the lead, held up a hand. "The tunnel forks, right ahead. Water goes off into the hill somewhere at the right. This stope swings left—and listen!"

Garret heard it. Above the murmur of the stream, the pounding of an ore-crusher!

"Must be Consolidated," Scat said. "You can hear them 'verbratory furnaces roarin'."

Garret was too weary to lug his burden any further. Besides, he didn't want to be hampered in his movements here at the smelter. He laid Loomis down on one of the carrier trucks, just inside the mouth of the tunnel. In another hundred feet, they were crunching the slag of the flotation-mill yard under their feet.

THERE WAS no moon, yet somehow the night sky seemed luminous to Garret, in comparison to the gloom of

the hill's interior; the air was remarkably cool and fresh.

Ryder stopped to wring out his trouser cuffs. He took off his steel helmet, ran his fingers through the shock of white hair. "Ball's in your court now, fella. I came, I saw and I'm convinced. With what I know now, I can file counter claims against Loomis' outfit that will shut them up in a hurry."

Garret felt of the lumps on his shins. "Don't gamble on it. Suppose it turns out that an Ajax man was in on the deal? What if he was someone who had a certain amount of authority?"

Charlie Ryder made tracks toward the office building. "I know who you're thinking of. But I don't believe—" He broke off, staring up at a rear window of the office building. Silhouetted against the glare of a bright light, with his hands upraised beside his shoulders, was Ken Brann!

Garret sprinted for the office steps, got the door open as Ryder and Scat came slogging along. The Consolidated lobby was empty; there was no one in the outer office.

Garret flung open the door of Loomis' private office. Nels Jarnstrom, sitting back in the president's swivel chair, did not move the muzzle of the forty-five gripped in his bony hand. It pointed straight at the Ajax super's belt buckle.

"I thought you'd be the cops!" the smelterman snapped. "I phoned for the cops to lock this man up for murdering Mr. Loomis."

Brann said nothing. His face was drawn and tense. There was a cut at one corner of his mouth; a little streak of dried blood ran down the cleft of his chin.

RYDER called across the room to him, "Don't talk, Ken old man. I'll get a lawyer for you. Don't open your mouth!"

Brann's lips silently formed the word, "Okay."

"A bad choice, Brann," Garret said. "Now's the time to talk."

"Won't do him any good to keep still,"

Jarnstrom rumbled. "He was seen going into the drainage-water shaft, so I followed him. Quarter-mile up the tunnel I found him bending over Mr. Loomis' body. You don't hear him deny it, do you?"

Brann spoke, with an effort. "I don't deny it."

"Takes more than that to get a murder conviction, Jarnstrom." Garret threw a leg across the corner of the desk, lounged against it. "I was bending over Loomis' body myself ten minutes ago."

The forty-five swerved briefly in Garret's direction. "Keep your oar outa this! I've got enough on Brann to hang him six times."

Garret swung his foot idly, along the side of the desk. "Then there ought to be enough to go around, eh?" He raised his voice. "*Scat!*"

"Yezzir?" Startled, the ex-con made a sudden movement into the room. Jarnstrom's eyes flashed toward him. And Garret kicked out, hard.

His foot caught the arm of the swivel chair, spun it around so Jarnstrom swung toward the rear corner of the room. Garret leaped.

He dived *clear* across the end of the flat-top, plunged into the smelterman, and knocked him—and the chair—over on the floor. It took only a second to wrest the gun out of Jarnstrom's grip and another to drive a savage jolt to the gaunt man's jaw. There was a dull snap of bone. Jarnstrom fell.

Garret hefted the forty-five. "You can put your hands down, Brann. And you can talk up, if you want to."

Ryder cried, "No, no, Ken!"

The super lowered his hands, but kept his mouth closed.

GARRET licked the knuckle he'd split open on the smelterman's chin. "That speak-no-evil stuff won't get you anywhere, Brann. Don't you suppose I can figure out why you cleared the stuff out of your desk?"

The super answered him hoarsely. "I meant to get out of town."

"Yeah. To give everybody the impression you were running away because you thought the law had caught up to you. Not very convincing, Brann. It does credit to your sense of loyalty, but not much to your common sense. If you'd been skipping out because you were guilty, you wouldn't have left that Morse code message saying G is wise to Fear Street."

Ryder roared, "*What* message! I didn't see any message!"

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed!" Garret let the muzzle of the gun angle over toward the general manager. "You saw it, Ryder. Blue pencilled dots and dashes, there on the pad on Brann's desk. You couldn't have missed it. It was the only thing there was to see, and you sat right there with your face a couple of feet away from it. Even dumb Bill Narriver noticed it, though he couldn't read it, as you could."

Brann said sharply, "You've no right to draw conclusions—"

"Hell! You've been drawing them for a long time, Brann!" Garret picked up the chair, sat down in it. "You must have concluded some time ago that Charlie Ryder was getting away with murder. Where you made your mistake was in believing he'd appreciate your loyalty in covering up for him."

Brann pulled down the corners of his mouth, closed his eyes. "I owe damn near everything in my life to C.J. I was ready to pay the debt."

"That might be all right," Garret snapped, "if it didn't affect the lives of other men. Men who are running bigger risks every day than you or I will ever run!"

Charlie Ryder whirled, dived for the door. Garret leveled his gun. His finger tightened on the trigger—but didn't pull it. For Ryder collided with Shirley Brann, coming in at that same moment, and took instant advantage of the opportunity to use her as a shield.

THERE was a gun in Ryder's hand now. He held his left forearm under

the girl's chin, pressing her head back and up so she couldn't struggle without being choked.

He's not trying to get away, Garret thought. He knows that, sooner or later, he's a dead man even if he does escape now. But here in Loomis's office are all those who know Ryder for a betrayer of trust and a killer.

"Drop your gun, Garret!" The command was accompanied by a shot from Ryder's pistol, and Garret didn't dare to fire in return for fear of hitting Shirley. He tossed his gun down.

Ryder fired again instantly. He missed, because the girl struggled violently at that moment. But there was no doubt that he meant to shoot them all.

If Garret could keep Ryder from thinking about it—if the murderer could be stalled long enough—

Garret shouted, "It won't put you in the clear to kill the lot of us, Ryder! Not as long as Washington gets that report I mailed in when you dropped me off near the hotel tonight!"

"What's a report"—Ryder held his gun high, sighted along the barrel—"without any witnesses to back it up?"

"Enough to convict you. Washington can check my suggestion that you would be the most likely person in Stope City to have known I was coming. Some of your big-shot friends in the Capitol might have mentioned that an investigation of raw copper was under way. They'd probably figure, as Brann and his sister did, that you were so important you were above suspicion."

Ryder laughed, pleasantly. "Even if they believed you, they couldn't do anything about it—with you pushing up daisies."

Her voice faint, Shirley said, "They could—check your—Chicago call! Wasn't to—Consolidated backers at all. You talked with O.P.M. Asked about—Bruce Garret."

GARRET began again. "I thought there might be something phony about your talking an hour to Chicago

about Consolidated. Loomis didn't seem to know anything about any negotiations; he didn't mention any to me. It's a cinch he'd have been consulted if a deal was on. For another thing, I'll bet if we check up, we find you had someone at your house on the phone while you were in that Chevvy after me."

The girl was half-strangled into submission.

Garret decided there wasn't more than one chance in a million that Ryder could be prevented from a four-way murder.

He said, "So you learned from Chicago I was on the way West. You tipped off that note to Darcy—I suppose Jarnstrom, here, supplied you with the Consolidated letterhead—telling him when I'd get here and what I look like. Darcy could understand your telegrapher's abbreviations."

Scat Prodder began to sidle, cat-fashion, along the wall toward the door. Ryder couldn't get a good shot at him because of the angle, but he tried.

It won't be long now! Garret thought. He said, "You figured the easiest way to keep out of trouble, Ryder, would be to murder me before I found any incriminating evidence. You must have been right behind Darcy when he trailed me over from the Rocky Mountain House. Only you were in a car, not your big limousine. You drove along behind Darcy so that if he didn't succeed in slitting my throat, you could get a shot at me."

"Kick that gun of yours over to me, Garret," Ryder said. "Be quick about it!"

HE WAS going to have trouble getting them all with the shells in one gun. And he wouldn't dare to try to reload! Garret kicked the gun part way.

"I began to get on to you when you told me Narriver'd heard the cops located Darcy's body. The only person I told about putting Darcy in that vacant store was Brann. So if the cops knew, they'd been tipped off by Brann, or someone he told."

"Boot that clear over here! Hurry, or I'll use one of these cartridges on Shirley," Ryder snapped.

Garret took his time and he was clumsy; the gun bounced away when he kicked it—toward Ken Brann. He said, "But I wasn't sure of you, Ryder, until you told that cage operator in Ajax to let us off at the two-thousand-foot level. Neither Prodger, there, nor I had mentioned Fear Street—or any place on the two-thousand-foot level. But Ken Brann's warning to you in Morse code *had* definitely referred to Fear Street."

Ryder tried to hook Garret's gun nearer to him, with his toe.

"So I knew you'd read the warning and knew what it meant," Garret went on rapidly. "Any man who would know telegraphers' abbreviations—the kind you used to give Darcy a description of me—would be sure to know Morse code."

Brann began to understand that Garret was talking against time. He tried to help out. "The reason I wrote that warning was that Shirley had come back from a meeting with you and told me you were going to investigate Fear Street."

"Sure." Garret knew it was going to be a matter of seconds now. Ryder had the other gun! "And after leaving that warning for the guy you were too loyal to, you took your things out of the office, Brann. You went over to check on Loomis to see if *he* suspected anyone in his outfit of working with Ryder."

"That's right." Brann kept up his end. "I found Loomis was supposed to have gone up in an abandoned stope. So I followed—and found his body. Then Jarnstrom trailed me and found me bending over Loomis' corpse."

"**H**E'D become suspicious of Jarnstrom"—Garret got ready to fling himself prone as Ryder leveled the detective's gun—"when I brought up the subject of old iron. Ryder, you probably went over to Consolidated to see Jarnstrom. He told you Loomis was sus-

picious, and had gone up the drainage tunnel. So you followed, killed him, and left his body in the warm water. When Scat Prodger fished him out, half an hour to an hour later, you tried to pull something about Loomis not having been dead more than ten or fifteen minutes. Though, of course, his body would have stayed relaxed for hours in that warm stream."

Ryder snarled, "Too bad a hard-working fella like you couldn't have made a little something out of all that dope you gathered! What you are going to get you can take with you."

"Offering me a cut of the quarter million or so you and Darcy and Jarnstrom must have been splitting every year from the ten tons of metal you took out of Ajax drainage and melted down into blister copper in Consolidated's furnaces? Plenty of dough for one more—" He flung himself sideways as the gun in Ryder's hand spat flame.

GARRET was rolling on the floor and trying to reach the cover of the desk before the pistol barked again. But there were no more shots. Only a voice with a brogue, saying, "You wuz askin' for cops, Mr. Jarnstrom? Faith, it looks like you needed some!"

Then the office was full of bluecoats and Charlie Ryder was wearing shiny bracelets and Shirley Brann was on her knees beside Garret.

"I'm so terribly sorry!" she cried. "It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't told Ken you were going to investigate Fear Street. You see, I was afraid—"

"—that your brother was mixed up in it some way. I know." He got to his feet painfully. "I figured that. It worked out okay, too. I kind of like the kind of girl who sticks up for her brother."

She went to Ken, looked at the flesh wound in his shoulder.

"But don't get me wrong," Garret added hastily. "That sister stuff is fine, as far as it goes. Only I wouldn't want you to be a sister to me, Shirley. If you know what I mean."

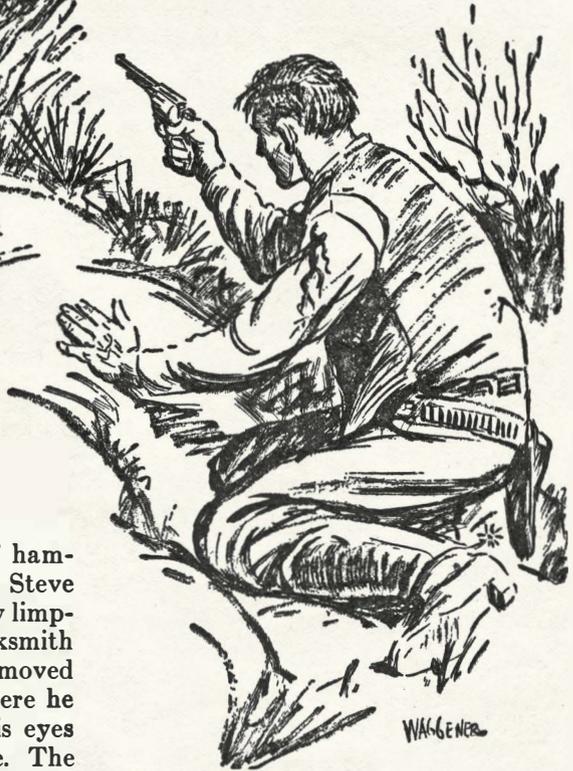
Branded In Gunsmoke

By

L. P. Holmes



The recoil of Steve's gun kicked it completely out of his weakening grasp.



THE MELLOW clanging of hammer on anvil came out to Steve Kirby as he drew the slightly limping roan to a halt before the blacksmith shop. Kirby swung down and moved into the doorway of the shop where he stood for a moment, squinting his eyes against partial gloom of the place. The blacksmith, a broad, squat shape in his leather apron, with brawny arms bared to the shoulder, tucked a horseshoe into the glowing heart of his forge and reached for the bellows handle. He looked at Steve for a moment then jerked a nod. "Howdy."

"I've got a bronc out here with a loose shoe," said Steve.

"Bring it in and tie it yonder," said the blacksmith. "I'll get at it soon as I

put this last shoe on Fay's pony."

Steve brought the roan in and tied it to a wall ring. For the first time noticed the girl who was perched on a nail keg in the corner. She rose and moved toward the wide door. "I'll be back in half an hour, Barney," she said.

The cool, clear melody of her voice caused Steve to lengthen his first casual glance. Against the sunlight beyond the

door she was a straight prideful figure, her every movement easy with a natural grace.

"The pony will be ready, Fay," nodded the smithy.

Steve dug into the saddle bags strapped behind the cantle of the roan's saddle, and produced a folded paper of heavy stock and a small box of tacks.

"No rush on the roan," he said. "I've got a chore to do. How's for the loan of a hammer for a few minutes?"

"Sure," said the smithy. "On the bench yonder. Help yourself. Which one is the roan favoring?"

"The near hind," said Steve, selecting a small ball peen hammer. "You might as well check the others, too."

He went out into the narrow, winding street of Canyon City, whistling softly between his teeth. Roughly, the street ran north and south, following the wind of the canyon itself. And though it was still relatively early in the afternoon, the high, timbered flanks of the mountains on either side were already casting long blue shadows into town.

Steve knew that in a town like Canyon City the general store was pretty much the focal point of activity, and he headed toward it, a big, rawboned figure with a long, sun blackened jaw. There was firm purpose in his step.

TH**ERE** was a low porch before the store, with a railing which served also as a hitch rack. Steve selected a spot beside the door, unfolded his paper, smoothed the creases, and tacked it securely to the wall. The strokes of the hammer echoed sharply and brought a dried up terrier of a man with a wisp of nervous chin whisker, hurrying out.

"What's the idea, mister?" he grumbled.

Steve grinned down at him. "Something for the folks to see. Figured right here by your door as a good, public spot. Any objections?"

"Depends," said the storekeeper, backing away to read. He spelled the words out slowly, with silent, moving lips.

RUSTLED!

On last May 7th, 28 head of Quarter Circle Y cattle, along the drive trail west of Reservation Peak. Also, on last June 4th, along the same trail, 62 head of cattle, same brand. Also, on last August 12th, same trail, same brand, 46 head of cattle. During this raid, two Quarter Circle Y riders were killed.

Therefore, for information leading to the party or parties responsible for the above thievery and murder, the undersigned will pay \$500 cash.

Signed—*Stephen J. Kirby*

The storekeeper gulped and paled. "Take it down!" he shrilled. "You can't put that thing up on my wall. Take it down!"

He reached to rip the notice away, but Steve knocked his arm aside. "No," he drawled. "We'll leave it up."

The storekeeper turned on him, sputtering. "You can't leave that thing on my wall. I tell you it's coming down!"

"It's going to stay," insisted Kirby gently.

The little man began to wave his arms and was about to break into further protest when he caught the glint in Steve Kirby's eyes. His arms stopped swinging and his words died in his throat.

"That's better," drawled Steve. "If you ain't mixed up in that rustling and killing, you've got nothing to worry about. I take it you are for law and order?"

"Sure—sure I am," mumbled the storekeeper. "But I've got to think about my business. They'll all blame me for that notice."

"All?" caught up Steve quickly. "Who do you mean by—all?"

The storekeeper opened and shut his mouth once or twice without saying a word. Finally he mumbled woodenly—"I don't know a thing." And he turned and went back into the store.

Steve set a couple more tacks, laid the hammer on the porch rail and built a

smoke. His eyes were narrowed with sardonic thought. This was the way Hack Yates had told him it would be.

"Maybe there are some honest men in the Canyon City country," Hack Yates had said. "But them that are, are scared to death of the other kind. You'll find crooked trails and blind ones, Steve. You won't be able to trust anybody. You'll be all alone and up against a tough turkey to pick. Sheriff Bill Pendleton gave up trying to keep that Canyon City range in line long ago. He agreed to send in this deputy's badge, but he said you'd have to make it stand up all by yourself. So, there is the chore. You can take it, or leave it—and we'll still be friends."

IT WAS characteristic of Steve Kirby that he had taken the job. For in him lay a deep toughness of mind and body. It showed in the swing of his big shoulders, in the stubborn set of his lips and jaw, in the cool, level remoteness of his eyes. Here was a man who could be utterly ruthless, who held no illusions about the manner of job he was up against, nor the manner of effort necessary to put it over.

He preferred to play a lone hand. That way he had complete freedom of action and method. And this notice he had tacked on the front of the store was his first move.

A light step made Kirby turn. The girl who had been in the blacksmith shop came out of the store and turned to read the notice.

Kirby watched her through the pale cigarette smoke which curled up from his lips. He saw the straight line of her shoulders stiffen, saw her dark, sleek head lift higher, and was not surprised at the glint in her eyes when she turned to face him.

"You're Stephen J. Kirby?" she asked.

Steve inclined his head slightly. "That's right."

"What right have you to put that thing up there when Jimmie Day says not to? It's Jimmie's store."

Steve smiled dryly. "And my notice. It's a perfectly legitimate, honest notice. I can see no reason why anyone should object to it, unless—"

"Unless—what?"

Steve shrugged. "Your guess, ma'am."

That pride, Steve thought, which was in the line of her shoulders, was also in the flashing spirit of her eyes, in the lift of her chin, and the sensitive curve of her lips. A pride which was as tough and unyielding as his own. And a pride with courage to match.

Hoofs pattered in the street. Steve let his glance waver long enough to mark the rider coming down toward the store at a jog, a husky figure of a man, thick through the chest. And when Steve brought his eyes back to the girl it was to surprise a slightly taunting smile on her lips.

"Now we'll see," she said, "whether that notice stays there or not."

The rider swung down, dropped his reins across the porch rail, ducked under it and stepped to the porch, spur chains scuffing. The girl said, "Hello, Jack. Something for you to read."

The rider said, "Hello, Fay." He threw a glance at Steve, stepped over and read the notice. Watching, Steve saw him roll up onto the balls of his feet, as though he had been struck.

He turned and black eyes in a broad, hard, slightly swarthy face, burned angrily. "Who is this Stephen J. Kirby?" he growled.

"You're looking at him," drawled Steve.

With one clawing sweep of his hand, the fellow ripped the notice from the wall and held it out. "Take it with you when you leave, Kirby. We're not interested in these parts."

Steve flipped his cigarette butt out into the street and moved in with short, prowling strides. "You made a mistake there, mister," he said coldly. "Put it back! The hammer is on the rail yonder and here are the tacks. Put it back!"

The eyes of the two men locked and the girl, seeing the chill in Steve Kirby's

eyes, caught her breath. The rider, his sneer a hard line across his swarthy face, spat—"Like hell!" And he knocked the box of tacks to the floor.

Steve Kirby hit him with a short, hooking, powerful punch, driving him into the wall. The fellow bounced back, clawing for his gun and Steve spun him half around with another slashing blow. Steve crowded his man, reached behind him, got that clawing gun wrist and jerked the whole arm up and around and back in a savage hammer lock. The fellow grunted with the swift agony and dropped his gun. Using the same leverage, Steve hurled his man headlong and with a deft boot toe sent the gun skittering out into the street.

"Now," he said with brittle curtness—"now we'll see!"

STEVE KIRBY knew exactly what he was going to do. It was all a part of his initial strategy. He set out to make it good.

The rider's hat was off as he came up and around in a squat crouch. His hair, long and black and ragged, hung over his face and through it his eyes burned with hate. He was whimpering in his throat, like some animal, avid and wild.

"Last chance," said Steve. "Put the notice back!"

Instead, the fellow came for him again. Kirby met him half way, and the shock of their meeting shook the whole porch. For a brief few seconds they were stationary, testing each other's strength. Abruptly the fellow brought up a knee, hard and wicked in intent. Kirby twisted and caught the impact on his hip. The lunge caught them both off balance and they went down heavily. The fall broke them apart, but the fellow came scrabbling swiftly, fingers reaching and jabbing for Steve's face and eyes.

Steve had known no special anger at the start of things. But now it came over him in a cold fire. Kneeing, gouging, clawing—that was what he was up against. The realization made him merciless. He fought loose of those clawing

hands and lunged to his feet. He let the other come upright and then hit him with calculated ferocity, squarely in the middle of the face. He felt the flesh pulp and give under his knuckles and knew that he had hurt his man badly. And he followed his advantage tigerishly.

He roughed his man with cold method. He slammed him into the side of the store, caught him bouncing back and slammed him there again. A wild swing caught him on the side of the neck, and the shock of it ran all through him in deadening pain. He closed in, smashing away with both fists. He drove his man up and down the porch, bulling him this way and that, punishing him as he had never punished a man before.

Remorselessly Steve drove home with every thudding smash of his fists the knowledge that he was master. Making the man in front of him realize it, making the white faced girl who watched realize it. And he put a period with a final crushing blow which sent the fellow reeling back against the porch rail. He swayed for a moment, arms waving weakly, before going completely over, to land on his neck and shoulders in the street.

Steve vaulted the rail and stood over his man. "Get up!" he spat. "Get up and put that notice back!"

The fellow got an elbow under him, but stayed that way, head rolling weakly. Kirby yanked him to his feet, steered his shambling feet back to the porch. The notice had fluttered into the doorway of the store. Kirby caught it up and held it out. "Put it back—or we start all over again!"

The fellow droned thickly, through battered lips, "You can't do this to a man, Kirby—and not pay with your skin."

"Put it back!"

The fellow made a strange, moaning sound. But he took the notice and went to work. And when the notice was in place again he picked up his hat, stumbled out to his horse and went out of town at a driving run.

KIRBY watched him out of sight, bent and picked up the hammer where the fellow had dropped it and turned to face the girl. "Some people," he said quietly, "have to learn the hard way."

He almost winced under the dark loathing in her eyes. She kept her voice steady only with an effort. "I've seen plenty of four-legged brutes. Today I saw the last answer in the two-legged kind. To whip a man is one thing. To make a blind, cowering wreck of him is—is—" Her voice thinned to an emotional bleakness and stopped there. She turned and almost ran for the blacksmith shop.

Steve Kirby watched her out of sight. A long, sighing breath ran through him and his big shoulders slumped slightly, as though suddenly weary. He realized that the girl had not been the only witness of the ruckus. All along the street men stood in the doorways. But as Kirby's shadowed glance swept up and back, the men slipped inside again. Only the little storekeeper, Jimmie Day, remained. His shriveled face, strangely goat-like with that chin whisker, peered from the door beside Kirby.

"I've thought of something I can say," he twanged ominously. "It's this. If ever a man drew a knife, whetted it sharp and cut his own throat, you just did it, Kirby. You made Jack Trent crawl like a whipped dog. And there ain't a man in the Hemet and the Trent families who will rest until they plant you six feet under. You'll be smart as hell if you're plumb out of these hills by sundown."

"Come sundown, I'll be right here in Canyon City, my friend," said Steve grimly. "You can spread the word if you're a mind to."

"I ain't your friend," retorted Jimmy Day acidly. "And I won't have to spread no word. It'll spread by itself."

A pony whirled into view down street. In the saddle was the girl. She passed the store at a gallop, riding straight and firm in the saddle, leaning forward.

The hoofs of her pony beat a rumbling echo through the short tunnel of the covered bridge which spanned the creek at the upper end of the street and faded quickly out on the twisting canyon road above and beyond.

"Fay Hemet," said Jimmie Day significantly, "will see that the folks on the rim hear about it. Old saying in these parts, 'When you hit a Trent, you hit a Hemet'. All one clan, those two families. And when old Josh Hemet hears about it—well, you better drift, Kirby—while you got time."

Steve smiled slightly. If he could just pump Jimmie Day—not telling anything—he'd know plenty. With dry amusement he said, "For a man who you say is no friend of yours, Jimmie, you seem to be putting out a lot of helpful warning."

"I ain't thinking about your hide," admitted Jimmie bluntly. "But you got a tough streak in you, tough as whang leather. You ain't the kind to blow down easy. When you go, you'll take somebody with you. And," ended Jimmie, with grave naivete, "Them's the ones I'm worrying about."

Kirby chuckled. "I hope you change your mind one of these days, Jimmie. I'd admire to have you for a friend. I know there's at least one honest man in this town. And sorry I can't oblige you. But the notice stays—and I stay." He turned and left.

KIRBY went back to the blacksmith shop and returned the hammer to its place on the bench. "Thanks for the loan," he said. "What do I owe you?"

"Nothing," said the smithy slowly. "Not a thing. You paid off when you made Jack Trent crawl. That was a blessing, long overdue."

Steve couldn't read the smithy's eyes, but the man made a square, solid shape in the shadow. Steve said, "There was a purpose behind it."

"Sure," said the smithy. "I figured that. Fay Hemet told me what the notice said. Anybody wanting to earn that

five hundred dollars will feel safer in talking to a man who's proved he's tough. If you can keep your skin holding water, somebody will talk. Five hundred dollars is more money than plenty of folks in these parts have ever seen."

"There's other ways I'd rather work," said Steve. "But sometimes a man can't choose. Not if he wants to get results."

"Any way to catch a wolf is a good way in my book. You don't have to apologize to me."

Steve Kirby built a smoke. Here, he thought, was a man who could tell him plenty about the shape and pattern of things in this hill country, and it was on the tip of his tongue to ask some of those things. But an ingrained sense of fairness stopped him. He had no wish to drag a just man into what he was certain lay ahead. He knew a quick liking for this stocky, brawny smithy.

Steve untied the roan. In the doorway of the place the smithy put out a big hand. "You're Kirby, of course. I'm Lee, Barney Lee. I'm wishing you luck, Kirby—all the way."

The livery barn and stage corrals were at the lower end of town. A faded looking man with a receding chin which gave a fox look to his narrow face, shook his head when Kirby reined in and stepped down before the stable. "No room, cowboy. Full up," he said.

Steve hooked stirrup over saddle horn and began to loosen the latigo. His lips were smiling faintly, but his eyes weren't as he looked across the saddle at the man. "You can tell 'em I threatened to cut your ears off and make you eat them, if you didn't quarter the roan," he murmured. "And I might, at that."

The foxy one licked his lips and shrugged. Steve said, "Two quarts of oats and a good manger full of blue stem for old Sugar. And a box stall. The old rascal hates to be crowded, same as me."

THE HOTEL had a sign proclaiming it the Canyon House. Steve signed the register with a bold, firm hand and looked at the man beyond. "The hombre

at the livery barn objected to stabling my roan. I had to argue him out of it. How about you?"

The man was fat and hearty. He said, "Bus Bolton runs this hotel. That's me. I mind my own business, keep my nose clean. Behave yourself and you can stay here as long as your money lasts. Start a fuss on the premises and I, personally, will throw you out on your ear. Upstairs or down?"

"Up," said Steve. "Front room."

Bolton handed him a key. "Number four. Stair's on your right."

There was a single iron bed, a cheap bureau, a big white wash bowl and pitcher full of water. Steve hung his saddle bags over the foot of the bed, stripped to the waist, shaved, had a good wash and donned a clean shirt. Then he sprawled his big-boned bulk on the bed and did some thinking.

The pot was simmering. The word would travel fast. All through the hill country, men would know that a reward was out against those who had raided the Quarter Circle Y trail herds and killed the two Quarter Circle Y riders. The affair with Jack Trent had been a fortuitous stroke of fortune. That was one angle which Steve had worried about. It was like Barney Lee, the blacksmith, had said. Men with information to sell would come more easily to a man who had proven himself tough and able. And Jack Trent had given Steve the chance to offer that proof.

From here on, he'd have to wait. When Hack Yates had sent him on the job, he had told Steve to work it out his own way. And this was the way. The only way, in fact, that a lone man could work. And while Steve would have preferred a more direct approach, he was not squeamish over this method. For his cause was just.

Hack Yates had said, "Losing a few cows won't break me. In fact, it won't even dent me. But that drive trail past Reservation Peak to the railroad yards at Black Diamond is vital. It's got to be kept open and I don't want to have to

send an army along with every jag of beef I start over the trail for shipping. The Reservation trail gets blocked and I'd have to drive two hundred miles north to Roaring Fork, and I'm damned if I'll do that. And then, I don't take kindly to having two of my boys shot out of their saddles, by any pack of petty larceny thieves."

So that was the way the whole thing shaped up. And Steve Kirby had made his first move and now would wait for a counter.

THE LIGHT in the room began to fade and when Steve roused himself and looked out, he saw that the sun had gone down and early twilight was claiming the world. On the hotel porch a supper triangle jangled musically, and Steve went down into the dining room.

The place filled rapidly and Steve, who had taken a seat at the lower end of the long, oil cloth covered table where he could watch the door, smiled faintly as he watched the other end of the table fill, leaving him apart. But only until the broad, stocky figure of Barney Lee, the blacksmith, appeared. Lee came down and took the chair across from Steve.

Steve murmured, "What will they think, Barney?"

Barney growled, "Who gives a damn? Certainly not me."

A waitress came in, bearing steaming platters. A slim, efficient youngster, scarce out of her 'teens. She had a quick, gay smile and eager blue eyes. Barney Lee said, "Evening, Letty. I finished those spurs for you today. All they need is a mite of polishing. I'll do that tomorrow."

The girl flashed her smile at him. "That means your cut of pie will be double size tonight, Barney."

As the girl hurried to the other end of the table, Barney said soberly, "There's a fine, sweet youngster—Letty Spurlock. To look at her, you'd never think she'd had more trouble thrown her way than all those cringing sour jaws yonder put together. A brother drowned trying to

ford Hell Creek during a spring run-off. And her father gulched back along the aspen benches, some six months ago. Not a soul in the world to claim as kin. But she's full of blessed courage and keeps her pretty chin up. Bus Bolton took her in, gave her a job. Incidentally, Bus is square, Kirby."

"So I'd guessed," nodded Steve.

Silence settled down while they ate. As they were finishing the muffled tempo of hoofs sounded outside. A moment later Fay Hemet came in. With her were three men. One was tall and erect, despite snowy white of hair, mustache, and beard which gave him a rather patriarchal appearance. He looked like a man who would be fanatically proud. The other two were younger, saddle leaned and straight, the darkness of their hair still untouched by age.

Barney Lee said softly, "Behold the sage of the hills, Josh Hemet. His two boys, Hugh and Riley. And, of course, his girl, Fay—the apple of his eye and heart. You should feel quite complimented, Steve. It takes considerable of a man to bring Josh Hemet to town. Most generally he sends for them and they waste no time getting there. He'd be quite a man, Josh would—if he'd only bury his damned, steel-plated pride."

With the upper end of the table filled, the Hemets perforce had to take the middle and they sat down. The old man and the girl sat side by side, the two boys across the table from them. Steve, after a first close scrutiny, paid them little attention. And then he saw something which narrowed his eyes in amusement.

Letty Spurlock, alert to her duties, had come in. And Steve saw her glance and that of the youngest Hemet boy meet and cling. And Letty's lips parted breathlessly, while a slow stain of confusion grew in Riley Hemet's lean young face. And the old man, observing, frowned sternly.

STEVE KIRBY waited for Barney Lee to finish and the two of them rose to

leave together. Josh Hemet stood up and said, his tone deep and resonant, his eyes on Steve, "A moment, sir. You are Stephen J. Kirby?"

Steve nodded. "That's right."

"I want to talk to you," said Josh Hemet.

"I'll wait on the porch," said Steve. "Don't rush yourself. I'm going to smoke a cigar."

In the outer darkness, Barney Lee said, "First he'll try persuasion—then threat. Don't under-estimate the old wolf, Steve."

Barney left and Steve dragged a chair out to the rail and let his big body sag in complete relaxation. Things were beginning to simmer all right. Soon, unless he missed his guess, they would boil.

Men, having finished their meal, trooped out and scattered along the street. Light flares from window and door spattered the darkness with gold. Above, the stars were cold and bright and a slow wind was moving down the canyon.

There was a soft quick movement and Fay Hemet stood beside Steve's chair. He started to get to his feet, but she stopped him with a word. "Please," she murmured. "If it is in you, please find a little patience with an old man whose pride outweighs his head. For his heart is all right."

And she was gone again before the startled Steve could answer. He was still pondering this when Josh Hemet came out and looked through the darkness.

"Over here," said Steve quietly.

Hemet pulled up a chair and sat down. Steve waited. The old man cleared his throat. "You have the authority to post a reward notice which will lace these hills with blood?" he asked.

"I have the authority," said Steve.

"It's a coward's way," said Josh Hemet bluntly. "You offer bait to human greed. Blood money is foul money."

The beat of swift anger tightened the skin of Kirby's cheeks. The old man wasn't sparing the rawhide at all. But remembering Fay Hemet's plea, Steve

kept his voice quiet. "I'm after results. No honest man ever had to fear a reward notice. And I wouldn't be here, nor the reward notice either, if cattle had not been rustled and hard working punchers shot out of their saddles. You wouldn't try to justify those things, would you?"

"A brave man would go after the culprits directly," said Josh Hemet, his deep voice taking on the semblance of a growl. "He wouldn't set afoot suspicion and cupidity, which might harm many innocent folk. You don't know this hill country, Kirby. I do. It's my country. I don't propose to stand aside and see it torn asunder by anyone."

Kirby knocked the ashes from his cigar. "You tell me where to go to round up the men who rustled those Quarter Circle Y cows, and who shot Ford Prentiss and Chuck Arnold, and I'll guarantee to get out of your hill country and stay out. Otherwise, I work the problem out in my own way."

"I dislike threats," said Josh Hemet grimly. "Yet sometimes they have a place. I would suggest to you, Kirby, that come morning you leave Canyon City and take your reward notice with you."

Now the rasp of anger showed in Steve Kirby's tone. "I stay until the job is finished, if I have to bring every one of your damned hills tumbling down! That is a threat a piece. And my last word, Hemet."

Josh Hemet stood up. "You'll wish you'd gone," he growled.

HE WAS turning away when the fast rattle of hoofs sounded well up on the canyon road. They faded out, then came in stronger, to beat hard thunder in the tunnel of the covered bridge. The dark bulk of a speeding rider exploded down the street, and reined up short before the hotel.

A thin voice, hard with urgency called, "Kirby! I want to talk to you. Where are you, Kirby?"

Steve hit his feet. "Right here, friend, right here!"

A figure darted away from the winded horse, and ran for the hotel steps. A thundering blot rolled along the street. In mid-stride the running figure seemed to strike an invisible wall, to hang there a split second and then go down in a crumpled heap. From the darkness above the hotel, harsh and mocking, a voice yelled, "You can spend that five hundred dollars in hell, Rigney!"

Steve Kirby covered the length of the porch in five long leaps. He vaulted the rail at the end, and as he hit the ground he had a gun in his hand. It had been impossible to locate that mocking voice accurately, but it had come from this direction.

Kirby stopped, his breath gusty with cold anger. His senses probed the dark. He was ready to shoot at the slightest move or sound. But sound, when it did come, was too far away to do any good. Just a sudden pound of hoofs across the bridge, fading out along the hill road beyond.

Steve Kirby went back to the crowd that had gathered at the foot of the hotel steps. He heard someone say, "Skip Rigney. He always was a treacherous little rat. He got his needings, if you ask me."

Steve located the speaker, whirled him around and threw him up against the porch. He crowded the fellow, pushing him back and back with a straight jarring arm.

"I'm asking you," rapped Steve thinly. "Why the gloat? Why did Rigney get his needings? Come on—I'm asking you!"

The fellow went sullen. "A man has a right to his own opinion," he blurted. "The Lord hates a squealer. So do I."

Steve fought back the black anger which burned in him. He wanted to rip and tear. But he didn't. He turned and elbowed a rough way into the crowd. A man was on one knee, holding a flaring match. It was one of the Hemet boys. He said, "No use calling Doc Powerman. Rigney's done for."

The deep, rolling voice of Josh Hemet

spoke, filled with a queer, dry bitterness. "This is just the start. Blood money stains deep and reaches far. Too far."

FROM a ridge high up toward the rim, Steve Kirby watched sunrise gild the peaks and drive the shadows out of the canyon. From here he could look down on the frost whitened roofs of Canyon City. The steady rush of Hell Creek echoed up to him from its canyon bed below.

The bitterness of last night's frustration was still on him. The rider, Skip Rigney, had come speeding with a key which might have opened many doors. He had died before he could deliver it. And Kirby, with some knowledge of the way human nature worked, knew that the further chance of getting information, had diminished. Fear was a powerful persuader—in most cases outweighing greed. Others would think long before chancing the fate that had overtaken Skip Rigney.

Anger and frustration had always made Kirby restless. He was restless now, so he set the roan toward the blue line of the rim above. He hit the aspen country and saw cattle along the benches. Swinging west he struck a road and judged it to be the regular town road, which he had left just after crossing the covered bridge that morning. He set the roan to the steady, winding grade and within a quarter mile came upon a side road, drifting off to the right through a stand of timber. It bore fresh signs of travel so he turned into it and soon came out of the timber to look down at a little glade in which stood a weather battered cabin, a feed shed and a skimpy pole corral.

Smoke was climbing straight up to the morning sky from the rusty cabin chimney. There was a buckboard and team pulled up before the cabin and two saddle horses, ground reined, stood nearby. As Kirby watched, two men passed in and out of the cabin, loading things on to the buckboard.

Hoofs pattered softly on the road be-

hind Kirby and he twisted in the saddle, wary and alert. He started with surprise. The rider was Fay Hemet. The crispness of the morning had fanned her cheeks with color. She was wearing a sheepskin jacket, buttoned to the throat and the upturned collar framed her face fetchingly. Her dark head was bare, as usual, and Steve Kirby thought swiftly that there was clean, vital quality to this girl.

At the moment her face was pensive and her eyes darkened at sight of Kirby. She started to ride by him with no sign of recognition, then, as though moved by sudden impulse, reined in and faced him.

"Here to gloat, perhaps?" she said bluntly.

"Afraid I don't get you," drawled Steve. "Why should I gloat?"

"Skip Rigney lived down there. His wife has been ailing a long time. It looks like some neighbors are helping her to move out. She has relatives at Black Diamond. Probably she's going back to them. I'm inclined to think that Skip Rigney's last act was his finest. Your reward money would have enabled Sarah Rigney to have medical attention she never would otherwise. Ugly as all the other angles might be, I like to think that that was what Skip Rigney was thinking of, when he rode into town last night. And he found only death—and no reward. Remember that, will you?"

SHE TOUCHED her pony with the spur and moved on. Steve twisted a cigarette into shape and watched her drop down to the clearing and ride across to the cabin. She swung down, spoke to the two men, then went indoors. Steve smoked his cigarette out, his face solid with thought. Then he rode down to the clearing himself.

A round faced, tow headed man with guileless blue eyes had just brought an old canvas traveling bag from the cabin and tossed it into the buckboard. Now he looked across at the approaching Kirby, his expression neither friendly nor

hostile. Kirby stopped some fifty yards from the cabin and lifted a beckoning hand. The man hesitated, shrugged, then crossed over.

"Skip Rigney's widow moving out?" asked Steve.

"That's right. There's nothing left for her here but the same brand of misery she's endured for years. Skip was a shiftless little devil."

Steve reached inside his shirt, fumbled a moment, then dragged a money belt into view. He extracted a packet of green backs, which he tossed down.

"I'm Kirby, the man Rigney was trying to reach last night when he was smoked down. There's the money he was hoping to earn. See that his widow gets it, will you? And if you're driving her to town, stop at the store and tear down the reward notice I left there. Will you do those two things for me?"

The round face man nodded slowly. "Why yes," he said. "Be glad to. I'm Tod Harvey. I run a little spread over east at Mohawk Glade. Drop in some time and see me." He hesitated a moment, then said softly, "One thing Skip would have told you last night, had he been able, was to ride high, Kirby. For what you seek—ride above the rim." And then Tod Harvey turned abruptly and went back to the cabin.

Steve cut back up to the main road, the words of Tod Harvey ringing in his ears. Ride high, Harvey had said, above the rim. Steve looked up at the line of the rim. Sheer grey rock it was, now tinted to pearly rose by the morning sunshine. Steve nodded and kept to the climbing road as it worked a way along ridge and around slope and across aspen benches.

The higher he climbed the more cattle Steve saw. Triangle Cross. The cattle were mixed stuff, some mongrel, some solid, worthwhile Hereford white faces.

THE ROAD led into a really big bench, running right up to the rim, curving across to where a break in the sheer rock let it through. And Steve, still watching

cattle, saw something that brought him to a grim faced halt. He was sitting there, leaning a little forward in his saddle when Fay Hemet came riding up behind him. Steve, having already identified the gait of her pony by ear, did not bother to turn or look. But as she came even with him he said grimly, "Who owns the Triangle Cross brand?"

She answered him coolly. "Father does. Why?"

"I'll show you," growled Steve, lifting the roan to a run, out across the bench. As he moved he was unthonging the riata at his saddle horn. Now he shook out a quick loop, scattered a little group of Herefords and with a deft throw picked up the speeding back feet of a chunky three year old, threw his dally and set the roan back. The rope twanged and the three year old, with a dismayed bawl, hit the ground. While the roan kept backing up slightly, holding the rope to singing tension, Steve swung down and went along the rope to the struggling animal. He knelt on its neck and called, "Come over here!"

She rode across to him. Steve pointed to the brand on the three year old's flank. "I don't know if you ever saw a worked over brand before," he said gruffly. "But that is one. Once it was a Quarter Circle Y. Now it is a Triangle Cross. Pretty crude running iron work. See how the top of the triangle has been made thick to cover the original Quarter Circle? This Cross was once a Y. See how this leg of the Cross is out of line with the opposite one? And if you want to get down and try, you can feel the old scar under the new one. Whoever tinkered that brand didn't even bother to use a blanket to fuse the scars. So—what's your answer?"

She was silent so long, Steve looked up at her. She had gone slightly pale and Steve could not tell whether it was anger or fear that flickered in her eyes.

"Here's the cincher," Steve said. "The ear mark of Hack Yates is swallow fork right, under slope left. Now it is crop on both ears, which was enough to take out

all the swallow fork. But they were careless on the left ear. They didn't crop far enough back. You can still see the start of the original slope cut."

Fay Hemet said quietly, "I want Dad and the boys to see that. Can we take the animal in to the ranch?"

"How far?" asked Steve.

"About a mile beyond the rim."

"All right," said Steve. "Break out your riata. We'll use a two-rope lead on it."

THE TRIANGLE CROSS headquarters stood at the mouth of a wide gulch which funneled clear back to the final timbered crest of the mountains. When Steve and the girl arrived at the corrals with the fretting three year old between them, they found a silent, stony eyed group waiting for them. Josh Hemet was there, as were the two Hemet boys, Hugh and Riley. There were two others, one a spidery sort of man with a pinched face and eyes as blank and hard as a bird of prey's. The fifth was a big man, swarthy, loose limbed.

Josh Hemet sent his deep voice rolling. "Daughter, what's the meaning of this? This individual is no fit companion for you. And—"

The girl made a weary gesture with her hand. "No time for lectures or preaching, Dad," she said curtly. "Take a look at the brand and earmarks of this animal."

"I see them," boomed the old man. "What about them?"

Hugh Hemet, the eldest boy drew in his breath with a little hiss, stepping closer to the three year old. "Plenty," he said, his voice hard. "The brand has been blotted, and a crude, messy job it is. Sis, where did you find this critter?"

"On the big bench below the rim. He—ah—Mr. Kirby spotted it. Dad, Hugh is right. This animal was once Quarter Circle Y. Now it's carrying our brand."

Steve waited, watching expressions. He saw that the two Hemet boys were tight and angry. Josh Hemet blinked, incredulous.

"I—I don't understand," blurted Josh Hemet, for once his patriarchal dignity thoroughly upset. "No, I don't understand."

And Steve Kirby realized that Josh Hemet was just an old man, trying to hang on to some past glory, stubbornly adhering to an ingrained pride which blinded him to actualities. Hugh Hemet threw aside the cigarette he had been smoking with a quick, violent gesture.

"This is about all I can stand," he gritted. "I refuse to be tagged a coyote to cover up—"

"Hugh," boomed his father. "That will be all! I'll handle this." He turned to Steve. "You, I take it, represent the interests of the Quarter Circle Y. I will pay you a fair price for this animal and call the matter closed."

Steve shook his head. "This is only one," he said drily. "There's a matter of a hundred and thirty-five more critters, which is of some importance. And of two good honest riders who were shot out of their saddles, which is plenty important. This critter is just one sign along a trail, a trail I ride to the finish. Also in the account book is the killing of Skip Rigney. I don't know yet where the trail will lead. But I tell you again, I ride it to a finish!"

He turned away then, caught the full, shadowed glance of Fay Hemet and lifted his hat slightly. As he spurred his roan to a jog, Hugh Hemet's voice came after him in a tight, strangled tone. "And I wish you luck, Kirby. I mean that!"

JIMMY DAY laid out a couple of muslin sacks of tobacco and pocketed the coin Steve Kirby tossed to him. "I hope you noticed that damn reward poster of yours is tore down," snapped the little storekeeper belligerently.

Steve grinned. "Yeah. I told Tod Harvey to tear it down."

"Huh!" grunted Jimmie. "Lost your nerve, eh?"

"No!" murmured Steve. "Not that. I had my reasons."

Leaving the little storekeeper writhing

with curiosity, Steve went out and sauntered over to Barney Lee's blacksmith shop. A girl's voice, bright with happiness reached him as he neared the door.

"Barney—they're wonderful! I don't know how to thank you."

Steve stepped into the shop to recognize Letty Spurlock, the waitress from the hotel. She was staring at the new pair of spurs she held.

"Somebody's happy," drawled Steve, smiling.

"Look!" she held them out for Steve's inspection. "Aren't they beauties?"

"Plumb high class," nodded Steve. "Silver mounted and everything. Any bronc ought to be proud to feel those rowels."

"I won't forget, Barney," cried the youngster, dancing out.

Steve, building a smoke, stared over Barney Lee's head. He said, "I like a man who can take time out to make somebody else happy!"

"For a tough guy," retorted Barney drily, "You got soft spots yourself. Five hundred dollars is a lot of money to fork out to the widow of a man who tried but didn't live to get there."

"Tod Harvey," said Steve, "has been talking. I'll wring his confounded neck."

Their eyes met and both smiled. "With the reward gone—where do you go from here?" asked Barney.

"High," answered Steve. "Above the rim. I found one critter up there this morning. Had been Quarter Circle Y, and now blotted to Triangle Cross. Botchy job."

Barney loaded a stubby briar pipe, lit it and puffed for a moment in silence. Then he said slowly, "Wrong trail, Steve. Josh Hemet is an old fool in some ways—one way in particular. But neither him or his boys are cow thieves."

Steve nodded. "Agrees with my judgment. But the answer is still—high."

"Yeah," puffed Barney. "I'd say the answer was still high. But you got to ride careful, Steve. They're a bunch of vicious mongrels. You saw what they did to Skip Rigney."

"They'll answer for that, too," promised Steve.

"When you riding again?"

"I got a world of time," mused Steve. "Sometimes it pays to let the other fellow come to you. I can see they're worried. They'll hear about that reward notice being torn down. That will worry them still more. They'll figure that somebody peddled me five hundred dollars worth of information. They won't rest easy over that."

"Long headed reasoning," agreed Barney.

STEVE killed time easily. He had that quality, a steady, nerveless patience—the patience of a cougar by a water-hole, or a soaring hawk above a rabbit thicket. He basked in the sun until noon, ate his dinner, then lounged in one of the round backed chairs on the porch of Jimmie Day's store. He smoked innumerable cigarettes, watched the ebb and flow of life about town with lazy eyes.

Around three in the afternoon hoofs boomed on the covered bridge and Josh Hemet came riding in. The old man was in range togs and had a gun sagging at his waist. He seemed to be searching for someone—Steve could guess for whom. Then the old man glimpsed him and rode straight to the store and dismounted.

Steve eyed him guardedly, disturbed by what he saw. The old man seemed to possess a strange hardness. And Steve knew that whatever Josh Hemet was at the present, he had one time been a tough fighting man. And from the glint in his eyes and set of his jaw, Josh Hemet had reached back into his hardier years and reclaimed some of that toughness.

He stopped in front of Steve and his voice crackled harshly. "Stand up!"

Steve got slowly to his feet. "You are in this country to claim recompense for the loss of a hundred and thirty-six cattle—and for the lives of two riders," growled Josh Hemet. "Name your price for the whole thing and I'll pay you. Even though the price runs high."

Steve shook his head. "It isn't a dollar and cents proposition, Mr. Hemet. I thought I explained that up at your ranch this morning. Who can put a price on human life? There's an angle concerned that money can't touch. And why should you pay, anyhow? You're not concerned."

"I'm entirely concerned," retorted Josh Hemet. "To this extent. Either you name your price, take it—and leave this part of the country at once, or—"

"Or—what?"

The old man seemed to tower. He dropped a hand to the gun at his hip. "Or I draw on you—and shoot you dead!"

"That," said Steve quietly, "would be murder. For I won't draw on you."

"Afraid, eh?" stormed the old man. "Wolf on the outside, coyote underneath. I'll make you draw."

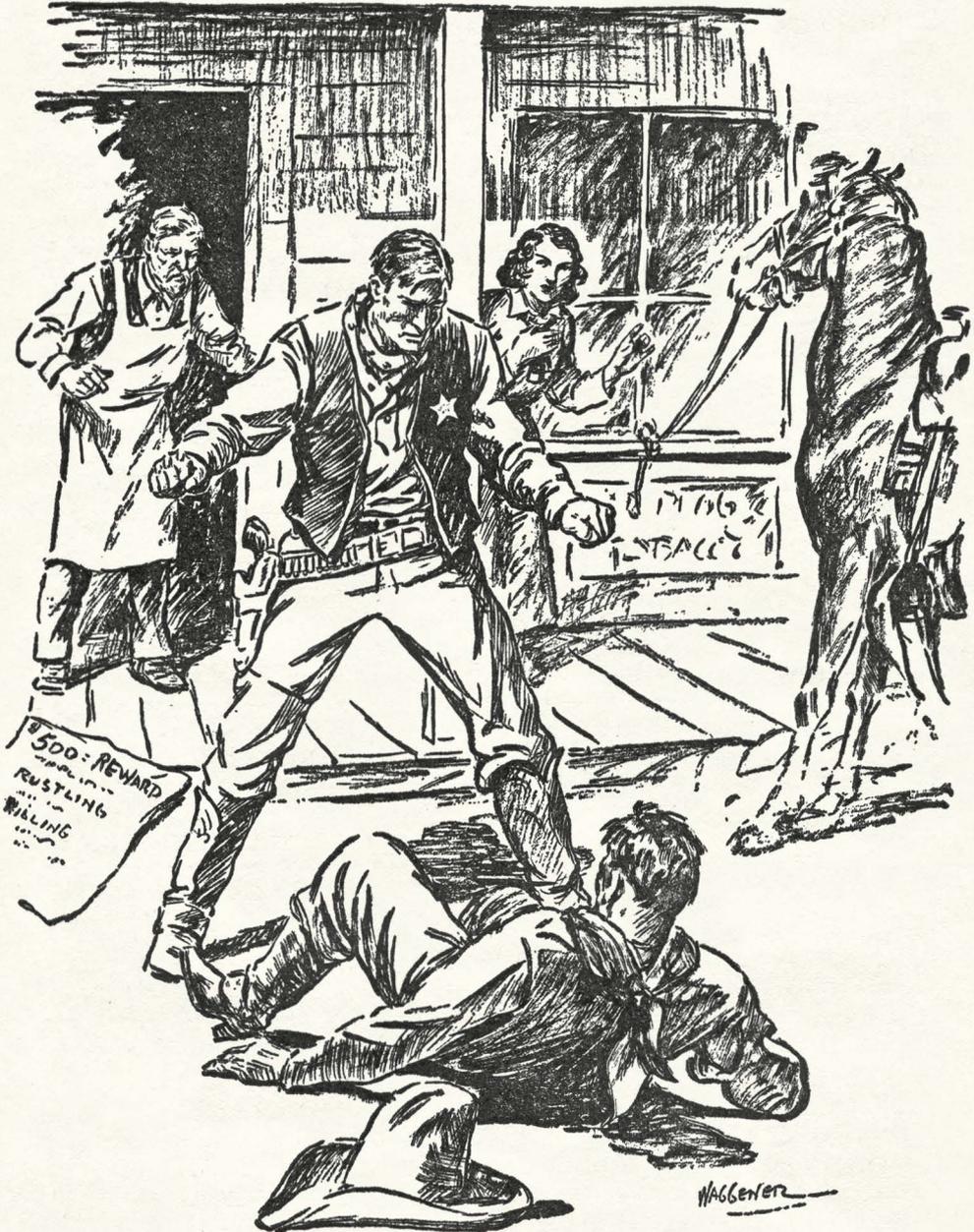
Steve shook his head. "Not afraid—and I won't draw."

"You *will* draw!" snarled the old man. And he swung an open palm against the side of Steve's face with all his strength. The blow spat sharply and the imprint leaped out in angry red. Steve smiled coldly. "It won't work, Mr. Hemet," he gritted.

Again the old man slapped him—a third time. Steve's smile remained, though it was a frozen, fixed grimace, now. Fury swelled in him in a cold, grey haze, so thick he did not hear a second boom of hoofs from the bridge. He just stood there, a big, fixed figure, while Josh Hemet struck him a fourth, fifth and sixth time. And Hemet would have struck again had not a slim, furious figure come racing along the porch to catch the old man's arm and pull it down. It was Fay Hemet.

"Dad!" she cried. "Dad—for shame—for shame! Have you gone entirely crazy? Stop it! Not another blow—or as heaven is my witness, I'll hate you until my dying day!"

THE OLD man seemed to have lost entire control of himself. He strug-



Jack swayed for a moment before landing on his neck and shoulders in the street.

gled to shake her off. "Let go, you fool girl," he squawled. "Let go—!"

He might have shaken her off, but at that moment a stocky, brawny figure charged up and took control in no uncertain fashion. It was Barney Lee. He handled the old man like he would a

child. "Calm down, you old fool!" growled Barney. "Calm down or I'll manhandle you—plenty. I'm not as proud as Steve. You call him a coward—! You're the coward. Steve wouldn't draw on you because he knows, same as anybody else with a lick of sense, that he

could shoot you in half before you ever got your gun out of the leather. Get inside the store and cool off, or I take one of Jimmie Day's new quirts and lather you from head to hocks. Get inside, I said!"

Barney added his tremendous strength to his words and Josh Hemet went inside, whether he liked it or not.

Steve still stood there, motionless, fighting back that grey, surging rage. And when a soft hand fell on his arm, he had to blink several times before he could see Fay Hemet standing there, looking up at him with eyes swimming.

"I—I called you a brute once," she choked. "I could bite my tongue off now—for that."

Steve said thickly, as though to himself, "I wouldn't have taken that from any other man alive. And I don't know now, why I did. I don't know!"

He turned and walked away, lurching slightly like a man half blind. As he passed the door of a saloon a man standing there gave a coarse laugh and said, "Dogged it, by Heaven! Old Josh made him crawl. And he's the guy I'd heard was pure wolf!"

The fellow started to laugh again, but broke it off abruptly as Steve hit him a thunderous blow in the face. The peak of Steve's trapped fury was in that blow and it lifted the fellow completely off his feet and dropped him, a sagging, shuddering hulk. And Steve kept right on walking and never looked back.

By the time Steve Kirby reached the spot below town where Hell Creek swung from the east to the west side of the widening canyon, he had his self control pretty well back. Hitting that saloon loafer had helped, it had released some of the pent up flood of fury. Steve climbed down to the creek bed and doused his head and face in the foaming, icy water. He had mopped his face and head with his neckerchief and was building a smoke when he heard a soft step behind him.

"Go away!" he said harshly. "It's over and done with, and I want no more talk about it."

Instead, the steps came up to his side and it wasn't Fay Hemet's voice which sounded. It was that of Letty Spurlock. "I've something to say, and I'm going to say it."

Steve turned and looked down at the grave faced youngster. "I thought—you were someone else," he mumbled. "What is it?"

She made a soft, pitying sound and reached up to touch soft fingers against the side of Steve's face, swollen slightly now, and darkening with the beginning of bruise.

"Josh Hemet and his stupid pride!" she said fiercely. "He should be horse whipped. That would take it out of him. And then maybe others—might be happy."

"His age was all that saved him—not his pride," gritted Steve.

She smiled gravely. "Plus the plea Fay made to you on the hotel porch last night—to be patient with him. I heard her ask that. You are a very generous man, Steve Kirby."

STEVE inhaled deeply, saying nothing as Letty went on. "The men you are looking for are the Trent boys. Jack, the one you thrashed. Miles Trent and Lear Trent. And the two men who ride for them, Boots Bovard and Leach Hatch. They are the rustlers, the killers, the trouble makers in these hills. They are the ones you want. They are the men who killed my father. They are the men who killed Skip Rigney. And they are the men that Josh Hemet would protect—because of his pride—his stupid pride. He—he looks down on me, because I wait on table for a living. Yet he would protect and shelter thieves and murderers. For his pride's sake!" Her voice was fierce when she finished.

"Why should Josh Hemet's pride cause him to protect these—these Trents?" Steve asked.

"Because they're his nephews. Their mother was his sister. I've heard it said that Josh Hemet came from an old southern family, with a long line of proud an-

cestors behind him. And I think he's half touched on the subject. There's a certain amount of clannishness there, I suppose. And so he would try and cover up the misdeeds of his nephews, even at the cost of—of happiness of his own children. And others—"

The anger was gone from Steve now. He was a cold, alert thinking machine again. Now he understood it all. He understood Hugh Hemet's reaction that morning when he viewed the blotted brand. He understood that shy look which had passed between this slim, sober, youngster at his side and young Riley Hemet at supper last night in the hotel.

"You and Riley Hemet are good friends, aren't you?" he said, smiling slightly.

Letty's honest eyes did not waver. "We'd be better, if Josh Hemet and his pride were dead and buried," she answered quietly.

"I can understand why Barney Lee made those spurs for you, Letty Spurlock," drawled Steve. "You're a mighty fine, brave girl. You deserve a reward for what you've told me."

"No!" she said quickly. "I didn't tell it for that reason. It was just time that someone around here got up enough courage to tell the truth. And—and they won't dare shoot me like they did—Skip Rigney."

"No," said Steve softly. "Because you and I have just been trading secrets and because, from here on out they're going to find out what toughness really is."

Steve took her hand and helped her up the creek bank.

THE NIGHT wind blew down the canyon with a bite to it that kept people off the street. It made Steve Kirby forego the luxury of his after-supper cigar on the hotel porch, driving him to his room, where he paced slowly back and forth, cigar jutting at a hard angle from his bruised lips, brows knitted with thought.

Tomorrow, he decided, he would take

up the offensive actively. There were times to wait for a break and there were times to go out and force that break. Tomorrow he would move.

He heard the faint muffled creak of the stairs and then footsteps along the hall, footsteps measured by the clank of spur chains. The steps stopped before his door, were followed by a knock. Steve had taken off his gun for the night. Now he caught it up and buckled it on before calling, "Come on in!"

The door opened and Hugh Hemet stepped in. He was buttoned to the ears in a fleece lined coat, his face ruddy with cold. He closed the door and moved into the middle of the room, unbuttoning the coat and tossing it on the bed. He spoke abruptly,

"Fay Riley and myself decided the time had come for someone else to speak for the Hemet family besides an old man whose heart has outweighed his head for so long he apparently will never change. I'm sorry for the way he acted today, Kirby, and I'm thanking you for being more generous with him than he deserved."

"It's written," nodded Steve, "and therefore, history. Forget it."

"Dad was very fond of his younger sister," said Hugh Hemet slowly. "And she was a good woman. But there must have been a mongrel streak in the man she married, Husk Trent. And that mongrel strain carried on to their three sons. Aunt Ella died early, from a broken heart, I'd say, brought on by the deviltry of old Husk and the three boys. And—"

"Just a minute," broke in Steve quietly. "You don't have to tell me this. I'm warning you that nothing is going to hold me back from cleaning up my job, wherever it takes me. And there is no reason for you—"

"There's every reason," said Hugh Hemet grimly. "Right here and now I'm washing the dirty linen of the Hemet family. I got my reasons. As I was saying—Husk Trent was killed trying to outrun a posse after a train robbery. His three boys took up where he left off.

Dad, as their uncle, tried to talk sense to them. It did no good. Since then he's been trying to cover them up, claiming that the family honor was at stake, that he couldn't let the sons of his own sister down. He never seemed to understand what that would do to the future of Fay and Riley and myself. That it was inevitable that public opinion would put the three of us in the same class as the Trents. We've had some pretty savage rows, he and I, when I've tried to make him see that. Well, there's an end to everything."

HUGH HEMET paused to build a cigarette. His voice was thick and fierce when he began again. "Those Trents—you saw what breed they are—when you found that three year old with the brand blotted to our Triangle Cross iron. The Trents planted that critter to throw suspicion on us—on the Hemets, who have protected their dirty hides all these years, covered up for them, given them every break. That was the final straw. I'm through being tabbed a coyote, to cover up the real coyotes. Fay and Riley and I want to be free to live our own lives, instead of being the sacrificial goats for those damned, worthless Trents. There's Riley, a good kid. He's mighty fond of Letty Spurlock, and I don't blame him, for she's a sweet youngster. There's Fay, prisoner of her love for an old man, too wrapped up in what he calls his pride to realize what he's stealing from her. And myself—well, there are things I want to do in this world besides covering up the tracks of a pack of worthless relatives. So—the Trents are the ones you want, Kirby. Go get 'em. I wish you the best of luck. And far from trying to put anything in your road, I'm ready to help you get 'em."

Steve had listened carefully as he puffed slowly on his cigar. "I wouldn't allow you to help," he said slowly. "All I ask is that you keep completely clear. After all, they're relatives of yours and I wouldn't have you pack memories that might give you a twinge, later on.

You, your sister and brother hold your father in check and I ask nothing more. You'll be helping plenty—that way. This is mighty decent of you, Hugh."

Hugh made a curt, swift gesture. "Decent of me—! Little enough to repay you. What other man would have taken from Dad what you did today and not have shot him down? I suppose he tried to buy you off—first?"

Steve nodded. "Yes, he did. Told me to name my own price. When I wouldn't listen to him he stood ready to smoke it out. He's got salt in him, the old fellow has."

"Yes," said Hugh fiercely, "plenty of courage and blind, stupid pride, as he calls it. He'd beggar himself and his own children to feed that pride which covers up some worthless relatives. But it doesn't go any longer—it doesn't go!"

Driven by the lash of his thoughts, Hugh Hemet paced up and down. He swung around at the window, to look down across the black gulf of the street. Steve said sharply. "The light's behind you, Hugh. Somebody out there might mistake you for me. Better stay away from the window."

Hugh started to turn. Glass jangled and something thudded solidly in the joist as a gun cracked outside, somewhere down in the street. Hugh Hemet stared a little dazedly at a ragged tear in the sleeve covering his upper left arm.

Steve Kirby caught Hugh and swung him well away from the window. "Afraid of that," he rapped harshly. "You hit?"

"Just a touch," mumbled Hugh, almost stupidly. "Barely burned me."

"YOU STAY here!" With the words Steve caught up his hat and darted out of the room and down to the street. He whipped out of the front door and put the black wall at his back. His gun was drawn and ready in his hand. Along the street sounded the rush and shout of startled men. Steve slid along the porch, dropped off the far end and, clinging always to the deepest shadow, sped toward the upper end of the street.

Once he stopped to listen and heard the tinkle of spurs following him. He flattened against a wall, gun half lifted. The muffled jangle of spurs came closer. Hugh Hemet's voice sounded, guarded but not anxious. "Steve! Oh—Steve—!"

"I told you to stay in the hotel," Steve snapped, relaxing.

"Hell with that," growled Hugh. "This is a rat hunt and I'm in on it. I'm not trying to kid myself. They weren't making a mistake. They knew damn well it was me they were shooting at, and they meant business. If I hadn't made that turn when you warned me—well, you notice that shot was heart high. If that's the way that damned Trent outfit want it—that's the way it will be. Where you heading?"

"The covered bridge," said Steve. "We could run all over town in this blasted dark and never locate 'em. But if its who we think it was, they'll have to leave by way of the bridge. I wish you'd stay out of this, though. It'll only make things toughed in your own family."

"This has been a long time overdue," growled Hugh. "Might as well start right here. Lead on!"

Steve still didn't like the idea of Hugh Hemet getting too deep into the picture. Inter-family trouble was the worst trouble in the world. But Hugh was no child and knew his own mind. So Steve shrugged and went on into the dark toward the bridge.

Down the street the excitement occasioned by that lone shot was already beginning to subside. The absence of a corpse convinced the crowd that it had just been some drunk shooting at the stars. So they scurried back inside out of the chill and the street grew quiet.

Steve led the way into the black tunnel of the covered bridge. Half way across he stopped and flattened against the wall. "We'll wait here," he said briefly.

The old bridge smelled of dust and cobwebs and ancient wood which had been bleached by sunshine, buffeted by storm. A bird, roosting on a rafter,

cheeped sleepily. There was the cold, wet smell of moisture rising from the creek and the running waters in the creek below splashed a steady, murmuring cadence. Somewhere, far back up canyon, a coyote wailed plaintively to break off suddenly as the deeper, wilder howl of a prowling timber wolf carried down on the wind.

The wind blew about the bridge, making the ancient walls and roof creak. Echoing up from town came the patter of hoofs. Steve stiffened slightly, his eyes fixed on the pale, faint rectangle of light which was the open lower end of the bridge. But the hoofs faded away, down the street.

The minutes drifted by until a half hour was gone. The night chill was biting deep. Steve was thinking that it might be hours before anything broke at this end of town. He was about to suggest a canvass of all the saloons and night spots when a horse sneezed gustily just below the open end of the bridge.

IT WAS black, black dark where Steve and Hugh stood. The open ends of the bridge, with the starlight beyond, seemed almost light by comparison. So when two men, on foot, leading their horses behind them, appeared at the lower end, they stood clearly limned.

Two men, one short and spidery in build, the other larger and heavier. And Hugh Hemet breathed softly, "Boots Bovard and Leach Hatch. The Trent outfit's pet hell raisers. The little one—Leach Hatch, is the most dangerous."

Hatch and Bovard were talking, their voices low. They had stopped, seemed to be listening and looking back along the street. And then Hatch said, in a thin, monotonous, deadly sort of voice. "They're holed up, wanting no part of a smoke-out in the dark. And they told me that Kirby hombre was tough! But you botched that try on Hugh Hemet, Boots—you botched it! You had him clear in the window. By this time he's probably told Kirby everything. Lear Trent ain't going to forgive that."

Bovard cursed savagely. "I tell you he moved—moved just as I cut loose—or I'd have got him just right. And if Lear or any other Trent goes to riding me too hard about it, I'll tell 'em in the future to do their own dirty work. Just between you and me, Leach—I don't trust any of the Trents as far as I can spit. Hell knows I'm no soft head, but you got to admit old Josh Hemet has been protecting the hides of those three Trents for a long time. Yet, what do they do? Soon as this Kirby hombre comes along and puts the pressure on 'em, the Trents stand ready to sell out Josh Hemet and all the rest of his family to cover up. They threw that blotted brand on Triangle Cross range for Kirby to find and—"

"I know all that," cut in Leach Hatch curtly. "But the Trents are paying us wages and we knew why when we signed on. Long as they keep on paying, I don't care what they do or how they do it. For that matter, I got no love for any of those damned Hemets, acting so high and mighty and hypocritical. That girl—she looks at me like I was a sidewinder. And the two boys the same. No, I don't love any of them. I wish I'd taken that shot at Hugh, instead of you. I wouldn't have missed."

Again Bovard cursed. "I tell you he moved—"

"What of it?" said Hatch. "You missed. Well, let's ride. I'm freezing to death in this damned wind."

They went into their saddles and headed into the bridge, pony hoofs clumping hollowly on the planking under foot. Steve could hear the hard, angry breathing of Hugh Hemet just beside him. Steve muttered, "When I call 'em, you bust to the far side of the bridge."

Hatch and Bovard loomed strange and distorted against the half light of the bridge end. Steve sent his voice ringing above the thump of hoofs. "You can stop right there!"

Hatch and Bovard came on a yard or two further before the surprise took hold. Then Bovard, with a curse, swung

his horse around broadside, while Hatch pulled up so hard that his horse reared, then began backing up, swinging from side to side, spooked and uncertain.

Hatch's voice came, thin as the hiss of a startled snake. "Show your brands—your brands—!"

"Kirby!" rasped Steve.

"And Hugh Hemet," challenged Hugh, darting across the bridge. "You damned, venomous, 'gulching rats. Hugh Hemet!"

LEACH HATCH could see nothing of either of them. Steve and Hugh were down in the blackness along the walls. But he knew that he and Bovard had ridden into something and it was indicative of the bitter, primitive ferocity of the man that he did not try and temporize. He knew that the issue was set and he played his cards for all they were worth. He dragged both guns and began to search that mocking blackness.

A slug smashed into the bridge wall close to Steve Kirby's face, showering him with stinging splinters. Another whopped into the planks underfoot, sent the dust spraying.

In the hollow, confined area of the covered bridge, the gun reports rumbled like thunder, gushing out the open ends in heavy, staccato echoes. And the glaring flame from Hatch's guns had a blinding, disconcerting effect.

The spidery little gunman was fiendishly clever. As he was shooting he kned his horse from side to side, swinging it, making ready for a dash for safety. Boots Bovard seemed confused, for he cursed and yelled as he began pounding a roll of shots along the tunnel of the bridge.

Steve Kirby hurried a couple of wild shots himself before jerking back to cold, methodical purpose. After that, he began firing a shot after each bloom of flame from Hatch's weapons, shooting a little to one side and under.

A gaspy snarl sounded. It was like an animal that had been hit. And after that gun flame bloomed on only one side of the shifting bulk of Hatch's horse.

Abruptly the horse leaped into full stride and came racing right through the bridge and the whole structure shook and rattled under the pounding hoofs. Ever so dim in outline was the crouched, venomous figure in the saddle. Steve shot twice at the figure as it hurtled down and past him. The first shot was full and round, but on the second try the gun snapped empty.

Yet that last shot was not needed, for the crouched figure slid limply from the saddle as the panicky horse thundered out of the upper bridge end, its reins loose and flying, the saddle now empty. And somewhere there in the darkness on the battered, dusty planks, Leach Hatch lay dead.

Boots Bovard, still spooked, still shooting crazy, yelled, "Leach—Leach! Wait for me!"

And if Leach Hatch waited, or Bovard caught up with him, it was somewhere in a valley of everlasting shadow, for Bovard's frantic call died into nothingness as a bullet from Hugh Hemet's gun hit him full in the mouth.

They heard the soft thud of his body as it met the bridge planks, and then his horse, also with reins flying loose, raced out of the lower end of the bridge and sped down the street where men were once more surging out into the night, drawn by the ominous call of guns.

AFTER ALL the trapped and blaring gun roar, the succeeding quiet was smothering. Steve called, "Hugh! You hit?"

"Nary a scratch," came the answer. "But I got Bovard—and that makes it square for the sneak shot he tried through the window at me."

"You could skin out before the crowd gets here," said Steve. "That might save some—"

"No!" cut in Hugh harshly. "No more sidestepping, no more dodging, no more covering up for me. This issue is way past that stage, now. You heard what Bovard said about the Trents standing ready to sell out and double cross my

family, which, rightly or wrongly, has sheltered and fronted for them in the past. All that's done with from now on, come hell or high water. I'm riding this bronc to a finish, I tell you."

Men came pounding into the lower end of the bridge. Barney Lee's deep voice echoed. "Steve! You here?"

"Yeah, Barney—I'm here," Steve answered. "Boots Bovard and Leach Hatch are here too. They're down."

There were a dozen others beside Barney. They all wanted to know how and why. And Steve told them, tersely. "Hugh Hemet was visiting me in my room. They tried to get him through the window. Hugh and I headed up here and waited for them. We figured they'd be sliding out this way. They did try it, walking their horses until they figured they were clear of town. Then, as they went into the saddle and started to cross—we called them."

The announcement that Hugh Hemet was in on the smoke rolling quieted the crowd. Every man jack of them saw in this the start of a great change. A Hemet had swapped lead with a Trent rider and had downed a Trent rider. It meant the beginning of a breakup in a clannishness that was fabled about Canyon City. Men hungered to ask more questions, but wisely held their tongues. They would have to wait for the answers to a great many things. They were silent, their eyes keen with excitement.

Silently the bodies of Leach Hatch and Boots Bovard were carried away. Steve took Hugh by the arm. "In a way I'm sorry—in a way I'm glad," he said. "I hope this night's work won't cause a rift between your father and yourself, Hugh. But here's what you must do. You must get right home and put the facts on the table. Word of this will probably reach Trent ears before morning. There's no telling what they might do. Your family must be warned. So you get home and see that you all sit tight for a while. I'm going to carry the drive right into the Trent layout. Now git!"

HUGH got his horse and headed out. Steve started back for his room and Barney Lee fell into step with him. And when they were back in the room, Barney said, "This, of course, tears things wide open. I'm fond of Fay and Hugh and Riley Hemet. They're good kids. In a way, despite his pigheadedness, which he calls pride, I like old Josh Hemet too. But he's an old man, near the end of the trail. And if anything happened to him, it wouldn't be near as bad as Hugh or Fay or Riley running foul of bad trouble. To an extent, you're responsible for all this, Steve. Understand, I'm not saying that in criticism. I'm just stating a fact. You came in here on entirely legitimate work, but your coming has set all these fireworks off. So—you've got to see the Hemet kids through. Hugh has taken his stand with you. Riley will follow suit. Fay will be torn between two loyalties. And you've got to see that nothing hurts any of them."

Steve nodded, twisting a smoke into shape. His face seemed leaner, harder, than it had a short hour previous. "You're right all the way, Barney," he said gravely. "I had all that figured out."

"I'll ride with you, if you think I can be of any help," said Barney.

Steve shook his head. "No. All I want from you is direction to the Trent headquarters. I'll be riding before daylight."

Barney laid out the directions but tempered them with a warning. "The Trents won't be easy, Steve. You've seen how ruthless they can be. They'll be desperate now, and twice as dangerous. When you cleaned up on Jack Trent that first day in town here, you were handling the softest of the three. Miles and Lear Trent are older. Lear the boss. Don't spread yourself too thin."

Steve smiled grimly. "I wasn't sent up here because I played too many hands wrong. I know what I'm about."

"Then I'll be on my way," said Barney. "If you are riding early, you'll need some sleep. Good luck, boy."

He left Hugh at the hotel.

THE STARS were still shining when Steve Kirby rode out of Canyon City. Frost lay white on roof tops. The world was still and Steve's breath smoked in the frigid air. He met daylight at the high rim and climbed beyond it. And then he cut west and saw Reservation Peak thrusting cold, black shoulders into the lightening sky.

The rim made a vast circle around the slope of the mountains. The first golden lance of the sun struck across this high world, although Canyon City, down below the rim, still shivered in morning shadow.

Aspen benches and open meadows gave way to timber and Steve skirted the lower edge of this, keeping just inside the sheltering fringe, and off the open trail. In time he came again out over the winding canyon of Hell Creek and saw, where the canyon ran a final snout into the mountain mass, a spreading flat. There were ranch buildings and corrals—Trent headquarters.

Steve twisted a cigarette into shape and smoked it to the final ash while he studied the layout in every detail. The house was on the near edge of the flat, overlooking the canyon. The corrals and feed sheds were in back and above. Steve saw that the only way a man might approach the house with a reasonable chance of getting there unobserved, was from above. In sudden decision he crumpled the cigarette butt to fragments in his fingers, swung his horse deeper into the timber and rode his circle.

At the upper end of the flat he left his horse in the timber and came down on foot. The Winchester rifle he had carried in the scabbard under his stirrup fender, he now held at trail, after levering a cartridge from magazine to chamber.

A tiny, mountain brook, not over a yard wide at any point, seeped out of the timber and angled down across the flat, passing at the lower end within a few yards of the upper corrals. It was thinly fringed with aspens and a straggly thicket or two of choke cherry.

Making the most of this cover, Steve hurried on, with long, low crouching strides. What cattle there were in the flat were hanging about the timber edge and, after a slight restlessness when Steve first appeared, paid him no more attention. But there were horses in the corrals ahead, and these might make things more difficult.

When he arrived at the nearest approach of the brook to the corrals, he made another long, cautious survey. Beyond the feed sheds he could see the roof of the ranchhouse and a chimney which was now sending pale blue smoke straight up into the crisp, motionless air.

His luck seemed to be holding. The Trents were at breakfast. Steve left the shelter of the aspens and crossed toward the corrals. Horses threw up their heads and milled a trifle at sight of him, but Steve knew he had to go through now. So he kept on and took a chance, cutting around the corrals to his right. Here the bulk of a feed shed sheltered him and he drew a deep breath of relief. Here he would be safe for a time, while plotting the rest of his approach.

HE PLAYED with two ideas, trying to figure which would be most liable to work satisfactorily. If the Trents should come out one by one, intent on morning chores, he stood a fair chance of rounding them up one by one. If they came out all together, to ride somewhere, then it would be bad. On the other hand, if he wanted to gamble on making a break for the house now and catching them all unawares at their breakfast table, it would be the strongest hand he could hold.

Cold resolve tightened the line of his jaw. Direct action against odds had never bothered him. Steve Kirby was pretty fatalistic about such things. He knew the advantage of the element of surprise, and he knew that many times sheer boldness alone could carry a man through a tight pocket. So he decided to go right on in now.

He stood his rifle against the wall of the feed shed. In close work short guns were much faster than a rifle. He hitched up his belt and was half through his first stride when, from the corner of his eye he picked up a movement at the edge of the timber above the flat. He took a look and flattened back to the shelter of the shed. A rider had just emerged from the timber, was dropping down to the flat at a lope. The rider was Josh Hemet!

A swift gust of anger ran through Steve Kirby. Josh Hemet, again riding into the picture, just when the stage was set for a final cleanup. The old fool—with his pride and his stupidity!

Steve edged slowly back and well out of sight. Josh Hemet came straight on, his head bowed slightly, as though in deep thought. He swung in at the back of the house, but stayed in his saddle. One after another, the Trents filed out to face him.

Jack Trent was the last. He was the only one of the three Trent brothers Steve had ever seen. But there was no mistaking the relationship of the three. And the older two looked tougher than Jack, the younger.

Low down beside the feed shed, Steve Kirby watched and listened and heard Lear Trent growl, "No time and place to go mealy mouthed, Josh Hemet. You know what Hugh did last night? How he sided that damned deputy, Kirby—how they wiped out Leach Hatch and Boots Bovard. Yeah, your oldest son has turned on his own kin. Now I want to know—are you backing him, or us?"

The old man straightened in his saddle. "You should know what my answer to that is, Lear Trent. I knew you'd want to know. That's why I rode over here. I left early this morning, because I knew Hugh and Fay and Riley would not want me to come. But I slipped away. And I'm telling you—this. For years I've covered up for you. For years I hoped that some day you would see the error of your ways and become decent citizens. I've risked the scorn of good

people, risked the future of my own children, trying to fulfill a responsibility I somehow felt was mine—a responsibility to the sons of my dead sister. I've stood a plenty from you boys. And at long last I've come to realize that there is no hope. There is a mongrel strain in you, a dirty, back-biting treachery. And—"

"GO EASY, you old fool," cut in Miles Trent. "I don't like being called names any better than the next man. Neither do Lear and Jack. You're in no spot to call anybody names. What you better explain, and damned quick, is what you aim to do about Hugh siding with that Kirby hombre last night."

Never had Josh Hemet's head been so high, nor his tone taken on such a deep resonance. "You ask me that. After blotting a brand on a stolen cow critter—from Quarter Circle Y to Triangle Cross and throwing it on to my range to make it look to Steve Kirby as though I and my boys were cow thieves. And because Hugh would no longer stand for your dirty scheming, you sent Bovard and Hatch to town last night to try and stop Hugh from seeing Kirby and putting him right on all things. And they tried to stop Hugh by shooting at him—and shooting to kill. One thing you probably don't know. Before Hatch and Bovard got their just desserts, they were overheard talking, and what they said gave the whole story away. And now, after all that—you want to know what I'm going to do with Hugh.

"Well, I'll tell you. I'm going to be prouder of Hugh than ever before. I'm going to look up Steve Kirby and apologize for the injustice I've done him. And I'm going to give him every aid I can in running you mongrel whelps completely off the face of the earth. Because of what had been in the past, I felt I owed you this warning. Now I've given it."

A long moment of stony silence followed, while Josh Hemet ran contemptuous eyes over the three renegade broth-

ers. Then he lifted his reins. And Lear Trent said savagely, "If that's the way you want it, that's the way it will be, starting now. All right, Jack—get him!"

Since they had recognized their visitor and had been at breakfast, the Trents had not bothered to strap on their guns before coming out to face Josh Hemet. But now Jack Trent, who stood near the door of the ranch house, made a swift jump, stuck an arm inside and brought it out bearing a short carbine.

It was doubtful if, even now, old Josh Hemet fully realized the feral purpose behind Lear Trent's words and Jack Trent's actions. But Steve Kirby knew—knew it as certainly as the fact that he had a rifle in his own hands. Savage now as hunted wolves, the Trents meant to kill this old man.

STEVE'S rifle jumped to his shoulder and his voice rang, harsh and urgent, "Ride, Josh Hemet! Ride for it—quick!"

While he was shouting, Steve's eye was lining up the sights of his rifle for a snap shot. He saw Jack Trent sighting for Josh Hemet's heart and he caught the point of Jack Trent's shoulder through his own sights and pressed the trigger.

The report whipped across the flat and sent booming echoes rolling against the timber. The impact of the slug flung Jack Trent back, spinning him crazily, and he shrieked in agony as he went to his knees, his carbine clattering beside him.

And Steve Kirby yelled again, "Ride for it, Josh Hemet! Ride!"

Startled wolves could not have reacted with more speed and purpose than Lear and Miles Trent. Caught in the open without guns, they showed their desperate intent to play the string out. They raced for the ranch house door, one of them catching up Jack Trent's carbine as he passed. Before Steve could lever another shell into his rifle chamber, they were inside and out of sight.

Josh Hemet still sat his saddle, like a man stupefied, though his bronc was

dancing uneasily. And Steve did the only thing he could do to get the old man on the move and out of danger. He drove a shot into the hard-packed earth under the bronc's belly, showering it with stinging particles of earth and rock.

That was enough for the horse. It reared, took the bit in its teeth and bolted back toward the timber. And then Steve, with swift method, laced the gaping doorway of the ranch house with driving, whining rifle slugs. He wasn't trying to hit anything—he was covering the old man's getaway.

There were windows on the upper side of the house, through which a gunman might draw down on the speeding figure of Josh Hemet, but it was Steve's gamble that the hail of lead smashing through the door would distract the Trents from the old man to their unknown enemy.

The gamble worked. Josh Hemet's racing pony took him safely into the timber without a single shot following him. And then, while Steve plugged fresh shells through the loading gate of his rifle, Jack Trent lurched to his feet and staggered into the house.

Steve let him go, certain that Jack Trent would take no part in the battle coming up, not with that smashed shoulder.

Silence, taut and quivering, settled down.

THAT SILENCE lasted so long it began to pound at Steve Kirby's nerves. True, he had the Trents bottled up. Yet by the same token they had him bottled up too. Retreat to his horse was out of the question. But then, he hadn't come here to retreat. He had come after the Trents. He'd had one break, after the appearance of Josh Hemet had scrambled his original plans. He'd been able to reduce the odds somewhat, by crippling Jack Trent. But Barney Lee had told him Jack Trent was the least salty of the three brothers, and there was nothing wrong with the other two, Lear and Miles. They were hale and hearty enough—too much so.

Steve found time to swear softly over Josh Hemet riding in, just when he had everything set. But there was one thing he had to admit. There was nothing wrong with the old boy's courage, nor his honor either. He had ridden in to warn the Trents that he was done with them, and bluntly told them why. You had to respect old Josh Hemet, even if he had been in your hair.

Steve tensed. There was cautious movement inside that open door yonder. Slowly a hat edged into view. Steve laughed softly. So they thought him fool enough to fall for that old trick—a hat on the end of a gun barrel! Well, it showed that they still did not know exactly just where he was holed up. Let 'em wonder. He'd wait them out.

The sun was climbing higher and its warmth spread welcomingly. The still, waiting minutes became a quarter, then a half hour. Presently a thread of warning came out of nowhere to nag at him. It was like the persistent buzzing of a fly in a still room.

Steve shifted slightly, trying to define that instinctive stirring of his nerves. Things were too still. Those men he was trying to wait out were desperate, savage. They would be figuring on ways of escape, of turning this situation to their advantage. Steve tried to figure it.

Three of them, one wounded—! It came to him with an almost physical impact, for again that hat was stirring in the doorway. Jack Trent was wounded, but he had one sound arm and shoulder. He could be pulling that hat trick, while the others, Miles and Lear, might be sneaking out the front way, circling and coming in behind him! A muffled curse at his own stupidity broke from Steve's lips. At the same moment the bullet hit.

It missed taking off the top of his head by a matter of inches. It tore through the high crown of his hat, and slammed through the wall of the shed into a bucket or metal object of some sort.

Steve didn't wait to give the shooter a second chance from that angle. He bounded to his feet and raced back

toward the corrals, throwing himself down flat behind the fence, as two rifles cracked, one from the canyon side, the other from somewhere out in the flat to the rear. Steve felt the wind of both slugs.

The horses in the corral began to mill, and they kicked up a dust which obscured everything and lay with acrid bitterness in Steve's eyes and throat. There was one blessing, however. The horses made a screen for him and the dust was as great a help as it was a hindrance.

STEVE crawled, circling the corral to his right. That way lay the canyon side of the flat. If he could get over the canyon rim, he'd be out of this pocket in a hurry. But there was a wide stretch of open flat between the corrals and the canyon edge. The nearest real cover lay along the little brook he had followed down when he had first come in on the place. From the far side of the corral to those aspens was but a few short yards, but he knew if he tried to cover that space without some sort of distraction he'd be shot to ribbons before he'd gone three steps.

A rifle snarled over at the canyon edge and a burst of splinters leaped from the lower corral rail a yard away. It was a chance shot, fired into the dust, probably hoping for a betraying answer.

Steve Kirby did not try to kid himself. In time, the horses would weary of their milling about. Then the dust would settle and leave him an exposed target. He couldn't hope to wait this thing out. He had to act.

A solution of sorts finally came to him. It was the most desperate kind of a gamble, yet it might work and he had no other choice.

Wriggling forward on his stomach, Steve crawled under the lower rail of the corral and into the enclosure itself. He kept on crawling, straight across the corral. The horses, nearly a score of them, went into faster action, circling round and round. There was always the

chance that in some sudden surge of fright, they might charge right over Steve, trampling him. But he kept on, crawling faster.

As he neared the upper side of the corral, the horses bunched behind him, swinging back and forth. They were no longer a screen now, but the dust still hovered. Steve's objective was the corral gate. The dust was thinning. If he was going to make the try, the time was now!

He came up in a low charge, racing for the gate. The post gave him meagre protection as he reached for the slide bar. A bullet chunked into the post, ripped an angling way across and wailed away in ricochet. Another stung his hand as it splintered an end of the slide bar. Steve rammed the slide bar clear and gave the gate a swing, whirled and dove back toward the horses. A bullet fanned his face so close it left a distinct sensation of heat. Then he was down flat, and the horses, splitting into two groups, raced on either side of him, toward the now open gate.

Steve came up again, racing with the horses. As the two surging groups of animals met at the open gate and sped through it to the freedom of the meadow beyond, Steve followed them out, straining every nerve and sinew to keep as close to them as possible, using the screen of their whirling, charging bulk and the shifting dust, as long as possible.

This screen lasted but a little way, then dissolved as the horses scattered in all directions, leaving Steve in the clear for the last few yards of his desperate try for cover. Instantly lead was flailing at him. He knew he'd never make it untouched. And he didn't.

HE FELT the first bite of lead in his hunched shoulders, burning like white fire. It seemed only a touch, yet it staggered him and broke his stride. Savagely he recovered and drove on. The fringe of aspens was just ahead. He gathered himself and dove for them. While he was fairly in midair two vicious

blows struck him, one at his waist, the other pounding his right leg, half way between knee and hip. Then aspen branches whipped across his face and he crashed down, rolled over and felt the icy water of the little brook sopping through his clothes.

For a moment Steve lay there, dazed and numb. He heard shouts, calling back and forth, one above him, another below, toward the canyon. The import of those voices jerked him back to clear thinking. He tried to struggle to his feet, but his right leg doubled under him, letting him down into the water again. Like some stricken animal, he crawled clear of the brook, dragging his numb and useless leg. Warm wetness was running down his shoulders, more of it oozed clammy about his waist.

Right ahead, aspen and choke cherry intermingled in a fairly dense thicket. Steve crawled into the middle of this and then, driving the foggy mists from his mind, took stock.

He still held his rifle, full of water. He shook the moisture from it, depressed the barrel to let it drain. He was bleeding about the shoulders, his waist and right leg. He could do nothing about the first two, but he ripped the neckerchief from his throat and knotted it tightly about the soggy hole in his pants leg.

The first shock was wearing off a trifle. His head became clearer. He was conscious of a slowly mounting weakness, due to loss of blood. It was a hopeless situation, if the Trents decided to move cautiously. Loss of blood would get him very shortly.

So this was to be the finish! Failure. The Trents would still be alive and free to carry on. They would be against the Hemets, now—as well as all other men. His planning, it seemed, had not corrected anything, only made it worse. It looked as though Jimmy Day, back in Canyon City, had been right. He had started something he couldn't finish.

Steve Kirby shook his head grimly. As long as he had to go out, he wouldn't go this way, holed up and bleeding to

death. Better have it over with quickly, than to lie here like some mortally wounded animal. He called on the deep springs of strength in his rawboned, powerful body. If he could just draw some more fire and locate the position of the Trents—

Using the brush to help him, he pulled himself up until he stood balanced on his sound leg. He was still crouched, but he knew when he straightened up fully his head and shoulders would be in view above the brush. With rifle balanced and ready to his shoulder he went fully erect.

For a moment nothing happened and Steve swung his head from side to side, his eyes searching desperately. He could see nothing below him, toward the canyon, but above him, up meadow along the aspens, he glimpsed a movement. It might have been made by a cow, a horse—anything. But such was the desperate strain of the moment, Steve could not afford to be positive. He dropped his rifle sights in line and cut loose.

ON THE heels of the ringing, crashing report sounded a harsh yell, a burst of wild cursing. There was a thrashing in the aspens and the lurching, floundering, figure of a man broke momentarily into view. The lever on Steve's rifle swung forward and back and he drove a second shot squarely into that lurching bulk. Arms tossed wildly and then the figure was down and out of sight. And soundless.

Steve knew a bitter, savage satisfaction. The way to his horse was open, now—providing he could make it, against the handicap of his wounds and the hovering threat in back of him, down toward the canyon rim.

Steve started up the flat. It was a terrible, death-like business. His right leg would take no weight at all. He began to hop, but the tangle of brush stopped this, tripping him and letting him down on his face. He began to crawl, throwing aside his rifle, pulling himself forward with hands and straining arms.

It was slow, ghastly progress. As the first numbing shock of his wounds passed, the pain increased stronger and stronger until it ran over him in sickening waves. Leg and waist and shoulders. Agony unspeakable. His face was a white, drawn mask, bathed in cold sweat. His eyes were sunken pits of dull, glazed sickness.

It made no sense, what he was trying to do. Even should he reach his horse, he'd never have strength enough to mount. A demon began to shout in his brain, telling him to let go, to quit, to call the deal closed. To rest and let that mocking, ever increasing weakness wash over him and wipe out the agony which movement was causing.

But the instincts of a fighting man would not be lulled. Steve Kirby didn't know how to die supinely. He had to fight on to the end. He would fight on to the end! As long as he had an ounce of strength, of consciousness left.

On and on, yard by yard—blindly on. He stared, shook his head, blinked the glaze of pain from his eyes. Here was a man's boot, right before him. And beyond the boot—the body of a man. A Trent—Miles Trent. Dead. The man he had just shot—!

Steve crawled past him, forgot him. It was like a game. You knew you couldn't make another yard, yet you tried. You grabbed hold of gnarled aspen trunks and you dragged up then reached for another hand hold for another pull. And pretty soon that mocking yard was behind you. And another was in front of you. Always more yards in front of you. And you fought them and mastered them, one by one and pushed them behind you.

Steve felt that he had been doing this for years, for ages, for eons of time. And then the dazed conviction that he was doomed to go on doing it, forever and ever, time without end.

His clothes caught on snags and held him back. He cursed weakly and dragged harder. Tough cloth tore and ripped and let go. His shirt hung about

him in tattered rags. One jean leg ripped from hip to boot top. Every force on earth, it seemed, was fighting the indomitable will of this creeping, crawling man thing which did not know how to quit.

A WHICKER, a stamp of restless hoofs came faintly, from a distance. Steve lay still, blinking numbly at the earth, trying to think. Thought came hard. Why was he crawling—and where to? That restless whicker came again. A horse. His horse!

Sure, that was it. The horse he had been trying to reach. And the sound had come from this side—to his left. Yeah—it was a game, some crazy, hell spawned game. He was trying to crawl as far as his horse—

His clawing, reaching hands broke into the clear. There weren't any more aspens to grab at and pull. He was in the open and up there, just inside the fringe of timber, was his horse. It was going to be tough, getting that far, with no aspens to offer hand holds.

Something threw dirt in his face, hard, stinging particles of dirt. And a blast of rolling sound bludgeoned his ears. A gun! Somebody was shooting at him—!

But why? Why should anybody shoot at him? Wasn't he having enough hell, trying to crawl all those damned yards—and to lick this damned racking pain at the same time?

A blind, numb rage surged over him. Somebody was trying to spoil his little game, trying to stop him from crawling as far as his horse. He'd show 'em. Where were they—where were they—?

He pushed himself up to a sitting position with a jerking, rolling motion. And where his head and shoulders had been a moment before, another bullet struck, gouging a shower of earth.

Steve's fumbling hand found a belt gun and he dragged it free and shoved it toward the figure just at the edge of the aspens. The recoil of Steve's gun kicked the weapon completely out of his **weakening grasp.**

Steve wanted to laugh. Maybe he was laughing. By glory, it was funny the way that hombre by the aspens had acted! As if he had started to dance a jig, then had got his feet tangled up and fallen down. Well, that was what he got for trying to stop a man from crawling—crawling—

And Steve Kirby was still trying to crawl, up the slope to the timber where his bronc was waiting—when a long, shivering sigh went through him and all movement ceased as he lay there, sprawled and bloody and still, in the bright mountain sunshine.

STEVE KIRBY was crawling again. Through a queer, dim world. Crawling away from a deep, black pit which opened just beyond his feet. At times a demon would reach out of the pit and grab at his feet and try to drag him over the edge. Steve would kick and swear and fight the demon off and start to crawl again. Once he thought he was a goner, sure. The demon had him in a good grip almost over that fearsome edge. But in the nick of time a hand reached out and took hold of one of Steve's and pulled him away from the demon. Funny it was a strong hand, for it was such a slim, soft little hand. But it did the trick.

And after that, though the demon would peer out of the pit and gibber at him, it never got close enough to grab him by the leg again. And finally, as though thwarted and disgusted, the demon went about other business, probably chasing some other poor devil—

Steve Kirby opened his eyes to blink weakly at sunshine, a sort of soft, filtered sunshine. He rolled his head weakly, for the sunshine hurt his eyes. He heard a sound. It was like a soft sob of relief. But he was too darned weary to investigate. So he went back to sleep.

In the Triangle Cross ranchhouse, Doc Powerman led Fay Hemet away from Steve Kirby's bedside. She was pale and thin, with shadows under her eyes. And Doc said firmly, "He's going to live. I

don't know why he should. I thought he was dead when I got out here. I thought he was dead half a dozen times since. But now he's going to live. Maybe there are such things as miracles. I don't know. I'm too tired to know anything. Except that he will live. So you can sleep, Fay child—and I can sleep."

It went on for weeks. Steve would wake, swallow a few mouthfuls of broth and then sleep again. But one day he woke and stayed awake and recognized those who came to look down at him. White haired old Josh Hemet. Hugh and Riley Hemet. And Fay Hemet. And one day there were two feminine figures in the room. Fay Hemet and Letty Spurlock. They were talking and laughing softly together, like the best of friends.

Finally a day came when Steve took solid nourishment and was propped up in bed, while Hugh Hemet came in with steaming water basin to flourish a razor before Steve's eyes. "Ill probably scar you up some, old war horse. But I got to bring you out from behind that brush."

And then, while Hugh lathered and shaved Steve's gaunt and sunken cheeks, he told Steve the story. How Josh Hemet had ridden furiously home from the Trent headquarters and led Hugh and Riley back with him, armed and purposeful. Determined at long last to settle all accounts with the Trents. And how they had gotten there just in time to hear the final shot Steve had fired.

"YOU WROTE the finish with that shot, Steve. You got Lear Trent. We found Miles down in the aspens, along the little brook. And we found Jack Trent in the house with a smashed shoulder. He'd passed out from shock and loss of blood. We found you and figured you dead. And brought you home across your own saddle, still thinking you were dead. And then Fay looked at you and said that you still lived. And Riley near killed a horse, getting Doc Powerman out from town. Doc was ready to quit half a dozen times, saying you were through. But Fay wouldnt let him. She

drove him like a slave, wouldn't let him quit. And Doc swears Fay dragged you out of the grave by sheer will alone. However she did it—she did it. And here you are."

"Jack Trent," mumbled Steve weakly through the lather. "Where is he,"

"Gone," said Hugh.

"Gone? You mean—he died?"

Hugh shook his head. "No. He's well enough, except that he'll always pack a stiff shoulder. But Dad told him he had to leave—to get out of this country for good and all—to ride and keep riding. There's been a big change in Dad, Steve. He's older and gentler, somehow. He can't do enough for Fay and Riley and myself. It's as though he's trying to make something up to us. Like he figured he owed us some debt and was trying to make it good. Why he even rode to town and brought Letty Spurlock out here to live. You know, she and Riley—well—"

"Yeah, I know," murmured Steve. "I'm glad for the two kids. They're both—swell."

Hugh finished his job and stepped back, grinning. "Well, well," he chuckled. "The wild man is gone, and here's old Steve Kirby himself once more. A little gaunt around the edges, maybe—but the old horse thief himself."

As Hugh went out, Josh Hemet came in. There was a change in the old man. Now he truly was a patriarch. His puckered eyes were gentle and kind and full of dignity. "I'm very happy, Kirby—to see you looking so well," he rumbled. "I have something on my conscience I must be rid of. That day in town—when I struck you—that is one of my deepest shames. You showed yourself a finer man than I could ever be. I ask your forgiveness—"

"History—and forgotten, Mr. Hemet," said Steve. "And nothing to forgive. And, seeing what it has led to—more than worth it."

"Changes have taken place," said Josh Hemet slowly. "Great changes. All for the better. And your coming to these

parts brought those changes. It is good. I am happier than I have ever been. Will you shake my hand?"

"A privilege, sir," said Steve.

The old man smiled. "You're a good man, Steve Kirby—a good man."

He went out and Steve relaxed, queerly content. More content than he had been in a long, long time. Strange how life pulled the strings. A man might try and frame his own destiny—but it was Life which always had the last say.

A SOFT step sounded at the door. It was Fay Hemet, slim and cool and faintly shy. She came over to Steve's bedside and looked down at him. She tried to speak lightly, "Thank goodness. Now I can see you again."

Steve grinned and rubbed a hand across his newly shaven jaw. "Hugh said I was a wild man."

She smiled. "A positive bear."

"Let me see your hand, Fay," said Steve. "And sit—there."

She hesitated, then perched on the edge of the bed and let Steve take her hand. He examined it with great care, then nodded. "The very same one," he said slowly. "You know, there was a deep, black pit. And there was a demon in that pit, a regular old hell raiser of a demon. And he kept grabbing at my feet, trying to drag me into the pit. I fought him off for quite a while, but finally old demon he got a good holt on me and set back to pull. I thought I was a goner. Old demon had me just about into the pit. And then, here came a little hand for me to grab hold of and hang on. A little soft hand, just like this. And strong—stronger than the demon. And that little hand pulled me clear—pulled me plumb away from old demon and left him there, making faces. And he never did get hold of me again, after that."

Color was in Fay Hemet's throat and face now—softly glowing. She was smiling faintly, her lips tremulous. And she made no effort to withdraw her hand. She left it there, right where it was—a promise—

Danger Rides the Oasis



By Paul Selonke

"Does the jackal flee unless hunted?" Menhalid asked. "You fled to Ridris."

BERT WELLS made the startling remark that last night he was in Kourgazi. He and Doyle had been celebrating Doyle's return from the Niger Territory—squatting on the dirt floor of the noisy camel drivers' tavern off the market place, side by side with jabbering Arabs, suspicious Haussas, and fierce, freedom-loving Touaregs who were plainly constrained by the four mud walls of the crumbling, sun-bleached building. Doyle drank slowly for the enjoyment of the liquor. Wells, a long, lean redhead, was drinking swiftly, for the kick.

Wells was ugly-tempered when drunk, and heavy drinking in this mixed crowd made Doyle nervous. He talked him into returning to his room in the Hotel Paris, the only place in town that boasted of European furniture. And it was after Doyle got him in bed that Wells said it, suddenly, so seriously that he almost seemed sober in that moment.

"Jim," he said, "I'm sure I'm never going to see New York again. Something tells me that I'm going to die a violent death here in Kourgazi."

It was one of those queer, illogical remarks men occasionally make when they are drunk—and Wells dropped asleep just after making it.

Ordinarily Wells never talked about dying, but about living as recklessly as any man could. Which, perhaps, was why the remark clung to Doyle as he left the hotel, and he found himself wondering how he might get Bert Wells back to the States, where he belonged. The refusal of a spiteful woman had driven the redhead to Africa to seek consolation from his old-time buddy. Unfortunately he was finding most of his solace in the potent native liquor of Kourgazi.

Jim Doyle had gone to school with him, back in the States. He remembered how the redhead's father had once told him, "The Wells family is good solid stock, but we're reckless, especially when we've been drinking. If you ever see Bert going off the deep end, take care of him. He's a good kid, but a little wild."

The memory of this was what made

Doyle consider Wells his personal responsibility.

When Doyle returned to the tavern, Tamina dropped to the mat beside him, smiling. She was a slim girl, with a dusky young beauty that is so rare among Arabian women. Her dark eyes disturbed him with their deep, barbaric fire of the desert.

"Now that you have gotten rid of the red-haired one," she said, "you can pay me homage—yes?"

"It is written so in the Koran," Doyle grinned, answering in Arabic. He was tanned to the color of copper; only his bright blue eyes betrayed that he was not an Arab. Lean, wiry, impulsive, he had searched the world for adventure, finding it here, finally, in the Sudan, guiding caravans through the wilder sections of the Sahara.

He ordered some *fatta* and shared this Arab dish of carrots, bread and eggs with Tamina. For the better part of two hours, they drank and ate and exchanged the rather risque stories desert people are so fond of.

Then a Beri-Beri door porter from the Shobo caravanserai came into the tavern. Doyle felt uneasy as the porter came directly over to him. The Beri-Beri was one of the few who knew him as an unofficial guardian of Bert Wells.

"Allah shi taimakemu! Allah aid us!" the porter cried. "Sidi Doyle, the red-haired one has but now killed an Arab at the Shogbo!"

JIM DOYLE was on his feet in an instant, his brown hands shaking the porter. "You are mad! You are lying!"

"By the Prophet, Sidi, I swear it is the truth!" the porter wailed. "There was trouble between them and—"

Doyle did not wait to hear the rest. He flung the porter aside and rushed out of the tavern, heading for the Shobo caravanserai on the other side of the desert outpost town, and as he pounded up the dark crooked alleys he called himself a fool for not having locked Bert Wells inside his hotel room.

It took ten minutes to reach the Shog-

bo caravanserai. Doyle entered the humped gate, crossed the courtyard, threaded his way between bedded-down camels, boxes and bales, and entered the long, low, balconied building in the rear.

As he stepped into the Shobo, the music and laughter and customary noises were blanked out by a tomb-like quiet. This was a better class tavern than the one he had just left, and the sheiks, expensively dressed merchants and travelers who had been entertaining themselves here sat silent and passive, in the undemonstrative manner of their race.

A number red-fezed policemen, bustling around importantly in the center of the big low-ceilinged room, seemed to ignore the dead body of the Arab that lay on the floor. A pair of brown bare feet protruded grotesquely from beneath the mat someone had thrown over the corpse.

Doyle saw no sign of Wells. He asked of the policemen, "Ekhwan—brothers—what has happened here?"

The officers turned upon him suspiciously. One, a stocky Arab with brows as bushy and black as his thick beard, scowled at him, apparently unsure of the foreigner's status. "There was an argument, and the Mirrican—Wells, he is called—struck with his fists. O good Sidi, this poor unfortunate man here on the floor fell and hit his head against the corner of the wall, cleaving his skull. The Mirrican fled away, for, verily, the craven jackal knows he will be condemned for murder."

"Accidental manslaughter, you mean. Wells—" Doyle stopped short, realizing that these Arabs could never comprehend his meaning. When a man is the cause of another's death, there is only one kind of desert justice—death for death. Desperately, he said, "I know Sidi Wells. He would not hurt even a flea that is torturing a camel's back, so good-hearted is he."

"You are his friend?" The officer lifted his bushy black brows archly. "Sidi, you know—perhaps—where the jackal is hiding from us?"

"Mismillah, I wish that I did!" Doyle answered, and went out, heading toward the heart of the city.

THE THING he had warned Wells of over and over again had come to pass. There was little he could do except try and get him out into the protection of the desert before the ruthless police of Kourgazi could locate him.

But he searched all that night and did not find Bert Wells, nor did he find him in the ensuing days. And because he was convinced that he would have gotten news of it if Wells had managed to escape into the Sahara, he was haunted by that remark Wells had made about being sure he would die a violent death here. He was beginning to suspect that some of the dead Arab's friends had got to Wells first.

The thought chilled him. Native revenge would demand more than simple death. The Arab's friends probably had given Wells a brutal taste of the *crapaudine*—using agal cord to tie his hands and feet together in a bunch in the middle of his back. Likely then, Wells had been left to die horribly somewhere out in the desert, his eyes and mouth stuffed with sand.

Feeling that he had failed his old friend, Doyle left Kourgazi for good, taking a traveling job he had heard of with a Moorish merchant far north in Tripoli.

All this happened in that unusually hot summer of 1934, and three years rolled swiftly by.

JIM DOYLE was thinking about these things as he rode a camel back into Kourgazi. He had been wrong about Bert Wells. Though he had not seen him in these three years, he knew the red-head was alive and—with careless regard for his own life—was back in the isolated desert city again.

Doyle had written Wells' sister in New York, telling her about what had happened—and recently she had replied saying that she had heard from Bert. She wanted her brother to return home

and take charge of the family business, as their father had died. She begged Doyle to persuade Wells to return.

And so Doyle had come back to the Kourgazi section of the Sudan. The year, so far, had been marked with many Touareg uprisings, and quarrels between sheiks and the French. Though he had been told things were quiet again, Doyle had heard the rumor that desert tribes were still exchanging caskets filled with gold—a secret way of asking each other to carry out murderous raids on the French. Any foreigner was French to them, and Doyle had no desire to die with a knife through his throat.

But a personal reason motivated Doyle's return here. He was angry that Wells was back in Kourgazi, and determined to drag the redhead out of Africa, once and for all—by the ears, if necessary.

On this particular night—for darkness had already fallen—Kourgazi seemed more lightless, more lonely and forbidding than ever before. As Doyle entered and moved slowly toward the suq (market place), the stillness, marred only by the muffled thud of his camel on the soft sand, seemed like a grim warning. It made him remember stories he had heard of these secret native uprisings, and of brutal massacres of the infidel white merchants.

Suddenly, almost as though in reply to his thoughts, there came a sharp, muffled scream—a woman's voice, crying out in English, "Take your hands off me! You"—but her words were lost in thick native oaths and the sound of fierce struggle.

Doyle jerked his camel to a halt, for he now got a glimpse of what was taking place in the dark ahead of him. Three men, apparently robed desert men of the Sudan, were striving to drag a woman away with them. She was fighting them, biting and scratching.

Doyle sent his mount forward swiftly, straight at the milling group.

The hard bone and muscle of his orange-pelted camel smashed two of the

attackers aside. Doyle leaped from his hajin's back to the pock-marked native who held the woman, and they crashed to the sand in a churning scramble. They were on their feet in the next instant, with Doyle using his fists like mauls.

Slamming the pock-marked native back against his two cursing companions, who were struggling to regain their feet, he sprang back and whipped out his Colt automatic.

"Get gone, desert carrion," he belittled at them in Arabic, "lest I shoot the hearts out of your cowardly bodies!"

At sight of the leveled weapon, the men bumped against each other in frantic haste to get away, racing into the black maw of a nearby alley. Doyle holstered his weapon and turned to aid the woman.

SHE was an American girl, wearing tan whipcord jodhpurs and a man's khaki shirt, open at the throat.

"You all right, miss?" he asked.

"I'm all—all right." Her voice was low, breathless because of her exertion. "Lucky you got here when you did, or they'd have taken me heaven knows where!"

"It isn't a good idea for women to wander around after dark, considering what's been going on in this district lately," Doyle remarked. "Or was there some other reason that these Arabs attacked you?"

"I don't know." She answered a bit too anxiously, too quickly; and it seemed obvious to Doyle that she *did* know why these Sudanese had attacked her and she was lying to keep the reason from him.

Scowling, he said, "There's a tavern near here. Let's go. A drink will brace you up."

"No. I want to get back to my hotel—the Hotel Paris. I—"

"I'll be glad to see you there safely," he broke in, his voice crisp. He left his camel standing there in the market place, cupped his brown fingers to the girl's elbow and began leading her away.

As they walked, he said, "My name is Jim Doyle. I came from New York—ages ago, it seems. I suggest that you stay close to your hotel. With all these uprisings going on, it's dangerous around here."

"The uprisings are under control," the girl said. "I spoke to Captain Vail last week. He commands the fort at Mahmadou and says the desert is safe for whites again. I'm Jean Holmes."

"Holmes? Your father is the man who—"

She nodded, smiling. She had regained her composure now, and Doyle became conscious of her natural courage and self-reliance—that of a girl who was no stranger to danger and adventure.

"Yes," she said, "my father is the explorer who mapped all those remote corners of the French Sudan a few years ago. Did you know him?"

"Only heard of him. Come to think of it, I've heard of you too—how you frequently travel with him. What's your father in this vicinity for now?"

"My father is still back in Chicago, Mr. Doyle. He was dangerously ill when he left here. He's not well yet. He sent me here on a mission."

"What kind of mission?"

"A simple, personal matter, Mr. Doyle."

Doyle frowned, annoyed by her brief finality. What kind of mission would bring a mere girl into a wild part of the Sudan when dangerous uprisings were in progress? What simple, personal matter would account for the attack of the Sudanese tribesmen, who obviously had intended to kidnap her?

PRESENTLY they drew abreast of the Hotel Paris, but on the opposite side of the crooked, silent street. A block of yellow light shafted out of an open doorway nearby, splashing over them as they crossed over to the hotel.

The hotel was a two-storied, mud-constructed building as were all the native buildings of town, and loomed up in

the dark like a grimly quiet, forbidding fort. The long narrow lobby was empty, the ceiling fans droning monotonously, as Doyle and the girl entered. He took her up the narrow stairway to her room on the second floor.

The girl turned to face him, her wide, intensely blue eyes steady and expressionless. She said in a low voice, "I appreciate what you've done for me, Mr. Doyle—you've been a brick," and immediately went into her room, closing the door behind her.

Jim Doyle stared at the abruptly closed door, startled. He pushed his sun helmet back to scratch his head in perplexity. Was Jean Holmes afraid of him?

Shrugging his shoulders, he returned to the lobby, searching for Fochini, who owned the hotel. The smell of food, the sizzle of a frying pan doing duty drew him into a little back room. Fochini was there, hunching over a small oil stove.

Fochini was fat, heavily bearded, as truly French as Doyle looked American. He flung his arm around Doyle's neck with a howl of delight and cried, "M'sieu Doyle! To think after all this time you come back here! It is like a gift from heaven!"

"Cut the mush!" Doyle grinned and pushed him away. "I want three things of you. Send your boy to the market place for my camel. Second, give me a good room here. Third, tell me where I can find Bert Wells. The redheaded devil's back again, isn't he?"

Fochini nodded, his heavy brows knitting in a frown. "He's back—but he is no redhead. Mon Dieu! His hair now is dyed black as soot, and he call himself M'sieu Smith!"

Doyle's sun-browned face turned sober. A disguise was sensible enough, seeing Wells had returned to Kourgazi. But considering all the trouble that demanded, why had the crazy fool come back at all? Doyle felt there was some sinister reason behind it.

"He stays in this hotel?" he asked.

"No," shrugged Fochini, "I seldom see him. He's taken a house somewhere here in town."

That struck Doyle as queer too, and he asked, "Where can I find him, Fochini?"

"I do not know." The Frenchman hitched his shoulders again. "The only time I see him, he is with a girl—Jean Holmes—who stays here in my hotel. He came back to Kourgazi with her."

Doyle's frown deepened. He sighed, "Well, I think I know where I can find him. I'll be seeing you later, Fochini—probably lugging his drunken carcass over my shoulder," and he went back into the deserted lobby, harassed by conflicting thoughts.

HE DID not like it that Fochini—who was better posted on local happenings than anyone else in town—had linked Wells with Jean Holmes. Since coming to Africa, Wells had carefully avoided women, and it worried Doyle that he had recklessly returned here with a girl who was on a mysterious mission that concerned the wild Sudanese tribesmen. He suspected that Wells was in much deeper trouble than the redhead himself realized.

He stiffened as he stepped out of the hotel. A blue-robed native was standing in the light of the doorway across the street. It was a hard-eye Touareg, a type common to the Niger Territory, and by the way he ducked out of sight, it was obvious that he had been stationed there, waiting for Doyle to come out.

Doyle acted as though he had not noticed the Touareg. With his brown fingers resting on the butt of his automatic, he walked slowly away into the darkness.

The man did not follow him.

That struck Doyle as odd; as odd as the fact that a Niger Territory Touareg should be interested in him.

He found no sign of Bert Wells in the noisy, crowded camel drivers' tavern off the market place. His inquiries re-

garding a dark-haired white man named Smith brought him only shrugs.

"Sidi Doyle, you are the first rumi who has been seen in this tavern for many months," he was told. And that seemed queer, for this had been Wells' favorite drinking place.

Doyle went on to the Shogbo caravanserai. And as he strode through the dark courtyard, past the grunting, resting camels, the bales and boxes, he was reminded of the last time he had entered here—the red-fezed policeman, the corpse of the Arab—and his anxiety increased.

But his spirits were lifted the instant he walked into the building, for the door porter greeted him with a happy smile. The Beri-Beri brought hands to breast and mouth and said, "It is the infinite grace of Allah that has brought you safely through these years!"

"Verily, and you also," answered Doyle. "Tell me, have you seen a dark-haired Mirrican frequenting the Shogbo—one who answers to the name of Smith?"

The porter shook his black head gravely. "I have seen no white man like that, Sidi. Rumis have been rare in this district since trouble has risen—except for those soldiers in the uniform of France."

Doyle muttered, "I can't understand it," and made a move to enter the tavern room. But the porter caught him by the sleeve, flashed white teeth in a broad smile and said, "Is it, Sidi, that you forget so easily?"

"What do you mean?" Doyle asked.

"Wait—I will show you," chuckled the porter, and made an elaborate ceremony of inserting a key into the huge padlock that hung on a palm-planked door to one side of the arched entrance. He swung the door open at last and brought forth a battered jaafa which Doyle recognized as his own.

Doyle laughed as he remembered that he had left this leather sack of clothing and personal papers here upon his departure three years before. He took the

jaafa and dropped some coins into the porter's grimy palm.

"You have stood excellent guard over my possessions," he said. "May the seven blessings be forever yours," and he stepped into the low-ceilinged tavern.

THE ROOM was noisy with the chatter and laughter of sheiks and merchants, while above it all was the nasal sound of a single-stringed *amazad*, whining out a love tune. Doyle's heart warmed to all this. He was like a wanderer come home again, for in Tripoli they do things differently than in Kourgazi.

He heard squeals of delight the moment he settled himself on a mat in a quiet corner. Tamina ran toward him, crying "Ulla-la een! Sidi Doyle!" Her many bracelets jingled as she dropped breathless and excited beside him.

"My beating heart, Sidi, told me over and over that you would come back! Verily, it is truly written that you never will desert Tamina!"

Doyle grinned. "Yes—it is written," he said, and ordered drinks for the two of them.

Once more with Tamina, delighted by her child-like enthusiasm, he forgot about Wells for the moment, chatting with the dark-eyed Arabian girl. He told her about Tripoli—of the fertile Mediterranean country where corn and millet and luscious fresh fruits are in abundance—of the cool winters, and of the snow that can be seen on the high mountains. And he teased her about the beautiful Moorish women he had met.

"That hurts me, Sidi," Tamina said, her lips drooping. "You paid homage to other women when you knew I was here, wasting with thoughts of you?"

Doyle laughed. "I thought you had forgotten me, and by this time had married some rich sheik and had lovely brown-eyed children."

She sniffed. "Sheiks are but little to me. Tamina has given her heart to only one man."

A shadow fell across them in that moment, and Doyle saw a lean, dark-haired American standing at their side. The stranger was dressed in white linens and spotless kepi—a ruddy, healthy-looking man with a black, close-cropped beard. The man said, "You are Mr. Doyle?"

"Yes." Doyle was puzzled until he saw the stranger's eyes. He'd have recognized Bert Wells's eyes anywhere, despite the quiet soberness in them.

"I'm a novelist here to get local color," Wells continued. "I heard that you had just come in and I've been hungry for a chat with an American. Is there somewhere we can—?"

Tamina's eyes flashed angrily at Wells. She got up, tossed her little black head, and went away.

WELLS sank down on the mat beside Doyle. In a tight whisper: "Damn it, Jim, you sure are a welcome sight! I never figured you'd come back here."

Doyle studied him intently, aware of how Wells had changed. It was more than the disguise, for Wells looked healthier, more virile. There was something else Doyle noticed, and it bothered him—a gun in a shoulder holster beneath his old friend's coat. Wells had never been one to go armed.

"Your sister wrote me a letter," Doyle said. "She wants you to come home and take over the family business."

"But I thought Dad—" Wells' eyes went round. "Good Lord, do you mean he—?"

Doyle nodded. "Your father is dead."

Wells tried to say something, but it choked in his throat. All his grief became manifest in his eyes. "Jim—Lord! He wrote me begging me to come back. I thought it'd be time enough when—"

Doyle laid his brown hand on Wells' knee. "You've got to go back—right away, Bert. They need you there."

"I'll go—after a little while."

"Why wait? Look, Bert. You were a fool to come here again. You don't seem to recognize your danger, even in this disguise. A night is bound to come when

you've taken too much liquor and your tongue gets loose—"

"I haven't had a drink for over three years, Jim," Wells said in a grim voice. "Not since—that night."

Doyle looked at him in sharp surprise. Again he noted Wells' healthy color, his clear, penetrating eyes, and he was glad. Yet he could not forget the gun Wells was carrying.

"It was an accident—that night I killed that Arab," Wells went on, his voice low. "It shook all the stupid drunkenness out of me, and I knew I had to get out of Kourgazi. I couldn't find you, but I ran into a caravan that was leaving for Porto Novo and I joined it. I've been at the Coast ever since."

"And yet you came back," said Doyle. "Why? Because of Miss Holmes, Bert?"

Wells looked up, a little startled, then relaxed and nodded. "We're to be married soon."

"Which is all the more reason why you should get out of this desert. Take her away from here before something happens. I'm afraid—"

"I'll be taking her back to the States after I complete the job I've in front of me," Wells said.

"What job?"

After a long silence, Wells said, "Jim—have you ever heard of LaTour?"

Doyle's eyes narrowed. Everyone in Upper Africa had heard of LaTour. LaTour was almost a legend; a French jewel thief who cleverly preyed on rich sheiks and gullible foreign traders. He had an organization that reached out to all corners of the Sahara, and yet no one knew what he was like because they had never met him face to face.

"What about LaTour?" Doyle demanded.

Wells leaned toward Doyle to unbutton his coat and shirt. He was wearing a money belt. His fingers fumbled the belt pocket open, and he held it so Doyle's eyes alone could see the emeralds that lay inside—huge, glittering stones that must have been worth a great fortune.

"Those," sighed Wells as he buttoned himself up again, "are what LaTour is after. And he won't be afraid to commit murder to get them."

Doyle was shocked at finding Wells in possession of such gems. Something seemed wrong about it—something that needed explaining.

"Miss Holmes' jewels?" Doyle asked abruptly.

"They are from the Sudan interior," Wells replied evasively. "They won't be safe until I return to Porto Novo, on the Coast."

WELLS obviously was mixed up with Jean Holmes, who was doing some dangerous inter-tribal work, and it angered Doyle that his old friend was keeping the details from him. Doyle growled, "By rights I ought to take those emeralds away from you and kick you out of Africa. For heaven's sake, Bert, why haven't you used your head and contacted the French Legion? They'd be glad to arrange protection for you."

Wells' face crinkled into a grin. "I'm one up on you on that score, Jim. A camel corps will be here in the morning from Ridris. They will escort me to Porto Novo—that is, if I can keep LaTour and those damned Sundai tribesmen off my neck tonight."

"Oh, so that's how all this monkey business fits together!"

If the Sudanese were working for LaTour, then the attack on the girl made sense. Doyle said abruptly, "Swing me in on this, Bert—perhaps I can help you."

Wells shook his head. "I wouldn't want to expose you unnecessarily to danger. However, I'd like it very much if you'd go with me to the Coast tomorrow."

Doyle was silent. Something was warning him that he should get Wells out of town tonight, for his own good. Still, he realized he would have trouble if he attempted that. Wells was changed; no longer an irresponsible kid, but a mature man who could not be ordered

around. In the circumstances, there seemed nothing Doyle could do but play along with him and hope for a lucky break.

"I'll go with you," he said at last.

Wells smiled and said, "I'll see you in the morning then." He shook Doyle's hand, and as he walked out toward the courtyard, Doyle followed him with his eyes.

Eyes that narrowed suddenly, as a Touareg slipped from the noisy crowd on the opposite side of the room and quietly followed Wells out of the door. It was the same Touareg who had been watching Doyle at the Hotel Paris!

Doyle sprang to his feet and followed the two men out into the courtyard.

There was no sign of Wells, nor of the Touareg. Threading a way through the stacked bales and boxes and the bedded-down camels, he went to the gate. Still no sign of either man. Grim and puzzled, he went back into the tavern and got the battered leather jaafa which the door porter had returned to him.

Tamina ran to him, her bracelets jingling. She said in dismay, "Sidi Doyle, you are not leaving me now? We are such old friends and have so much to talk about! I—"

Pushing the Arabian girl aside gently, he said, "Tomorrow perhaps, Tamina. I have business to attend to before morning," and strode into the courtyard again.

He set out toward the silent and eerie heart of the lightless desert city.

A SICK, worried feeling gripped Jim Doyle as he strode quietly along the dark alleys. White-shrouded figures now and then padded by him, whispering, "Bismillah!" and he answered each time with an "Allah akbar!" But he was going over in his mind the details of the strange situation that confronted him here.

The "simple, personal matter" of which Jean Holmes had spoken obviously concerned the emeralds now in Wells' possession. She wanted to get them safely to Porto Novo, and LaTour

wanted them. The notorious jewel thief apparently had the Sudanese tribesmen working for him, and they had probably intended to kidnap the girl, meaning to hold her until Wells handed over the emeralds as ransom.

These parts of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place easily enough. The piece that did not fit was that lone Niger Territory Touareg. He had been standing watch at the hotel; he had spied on Doyle and Wells as they talked secretly together in the tavern room of the Shogbo, and he had followed Wells out of the place. Why? What was behind the Touareg's behavior?

Doyle drew abreast of a low, small, square-built mosque, its outlines desolate against the starlit sky. And as he walked past, it was as though the holy buildings collapsed on his head, so sudden and unexpected was the attack of the robed figures who fell upon him.

With a curse, Doyle flung his jaafa aside and struck at his shadowy assailants with his fists. Outnumbered, he had no chance to do them damage. They clubbed him to the sand and trampled him under their feet. He lost consciousness, and when he regained his whirling senses the robed figures were gone.

The battered leather bag he'd been carrying and his Colt automatic were gone too. The pockets of his clothing had been turned inside out.

The fact that he hadn't been stripped of his clothing was proof that this attack had not been merely for robbery. One conviction took root in his mind; that his attackers had been the Sudanese who had attacked Jean Holmes. And the thing they were after? That too was plain: the emeralds.

They had seen him with Wells and believed Wells had given him the gems. They had stolen the jaafa to search it at their leisure. And given the opportunity, any native would appropriate a Colt automatic.

Still, it was strange that the tribesmen hadn't murdered him. He'd foiled them in their kidnapping attempt of the

girl, and the Sudanese are a proud, ruthless people. The only probability, Doyle imagined, was that they had orders from LaTour not to attract attention by killing him.

Did they have the some orders in regard to Wells? Was that the reason Wells was still alive? Or were they unsure whether he had the emeralds in his possession?

Doyle decided to go directly to where Wells lived and stay on guard until morning. And then he realized he didn't know where Wells lived.

Well, Jean Holmes could give him that information. He brushed himself off and headed swiftly for the hotel.

HE THOUGHT he now had the mystery of the Niger Touareg figured out—undoubtedly that fellow was acting as a lookout for the Sudanese.

The Sudanese, finding that the emeralds were not in the jaafa they had stolen, might still believe he had the gems and come seeking him.

Yet he reached the grim, fort-like hotel safely. Fochini was alone in the fan-cooled lobby, sprawled indolently in a rattan chair as he sipped at a glass of palm wine.

He started to his feet the moment he saw Doyle. Splashing his wine as he gestured, he cried, "M'sieu Doyle—what has happened to you? Your clothing—so smirched with grime—"

"Forget it," growled Doyle. He started up the narrow staircase that led up to the second floor. "I've a date with Miss Holmes."

Fochini's heavy beard cracked in a wide grin as he set his wine glass on the table. He looked at Doyle, slyly. "Ah-ha, so our cold-hearted desert man has at last been caught! And she is so beautiful—"

"You're crazy!" Doyle flung over his shoulder.

"Please, M'sieu! One moment!"

Doyle turned questioningly as Fochini came toward him.

"There have been changes in this plan

of a—a date, as you call it," the Frenchman said.

"What do you mean?"

Fochini reached into a grimy trouser pocket and produced a sealed envelope. "The mademoiselle went out a few minutes ago. She told me to give you this when you came in." He chuckled, kissed the letter and waved it over his head, grinning.

Doyle tramped back down the stairs and ripped the envelope from Fochini's hand. "You fool! Miss Holmes isn't writing me any love letters!" he said, and tore the envelope open.

The letter, written in a neat Spencerian hand, read:

Dear Mr. Doyle—

I want to apologize for treating you so shabbily when you bravely helped me out of a dangerous predicament. I was rather upset at the time and a trifle short.

Perhaps over a few drinks at the Shogbo caravanserai, I can more suitably give you my thanks. You will find me waiting there.

Jean Holmes.

Fochini said over Doyle's shoulder, "I can't exactly make out that fourth word. Starts with an A, doesn't it? Apol—apol—"

Doyle shoved him away and thrust the letter into his pocket. Without a word, he went into the back room and began cleaning the sand and grime from his face at a small washstand.

Fochini followed him. He leaned against the door jamb, watching him, chuckling. "She is one handsome girl too, M'sieu. Golden hair—a divine figure. Ah, if I were only a younger man—"

"Will you shut up?" snapped Doyle, water dripping off his nose. He grabbed the roller towel and began drying himself. "The girl means nothing to me," he said, combing his hair. "It's strictly a business matter."

Fochini grinned again. "Ha! Why is

it then you are shining yourself up?"

"A man's got to have a clean face, doesn't he?" Doyle snorted, and strode out of the hotel.

As he covered the distance back to the Shogbo, his brain was crowded with thoughts of Jean Holmes. Her quick turnabout struck him as being a bit illogical. But perhaps Wells had contacted her and told her who Doyle actually was. Still, that didn't explain why she had asked to see him at the caravanserai. There was something queer about that . . .

HE FOUND the girl waiting in the noisy, crowded tavern room. She was wearing neatly pressed nankin shirt and trousers. Her golden hair framed her sun-tanned oval face. Her eyes were a vivid blue. She had a kind of flawless beauty that impressed Doyle as being dangerous, though he couldn't have said why.

She smiled when she saw him, though her eyes seemed rather wary. She said quietly, "I'm glad you've come, Mr. Doyle. I've felt guilty over the way I treated you."

He smiled back, studying the old-fashioned gold locket that hung at her throat. The locket had the initials JB engraved in script upon its face. He said, "You were under a nervous strain, Miss Holmes."

"Even so, I needn't have been so abrupt. I do hope you accept my apology."

"There's no need to apologize, Miss Holmes. You didn't know then that I was a friend of your fiance."

Her brow wrinkled. "My fiance?"

"Bert Wells." Doyle studied her wary eyes. "You see, I came here on the insistence of his family. They want him to return to New York and take over the family business."

"He should go," she said.

"I think I could talk him into it—if it wasn't for your emeralds."

"Emeralds? Why—I haven't any emeralds!" She tried to laugh, as though the idea were a joke, but her laugh

sounded hollow and strained. An intense desperation joined the fearful caution of her eyes. "I don't see where you got the idea that I—that he—" Her voice broke off and she looked away.

His thin lips tight, Doyle said, "Look. You can trust me. And I've already been attacked because there are those who believe Wells placed those emeralds into my keeping. That makes me realize the grave danger he must be in now. I think I should stay with him for the night. He needs a guard."

"Guard! What do you mean, guard? Why should he have a guard?"

Doyle made a growling sound deep in his throat. "Okay—skip it. Only—I want to have a little talk with Bert. Where is he living?"

"I don't know where he's living," she insisted. "That's the truth."

"Don't give me that!" Doyle retorted. "You two are in love. You came here together. And now you try and tell me that you don't know where he's living! Miss Holmes, I know that he's doing this job for you—risking his life for these fool emeralds. Think of Wells, and forget whatever selfish, personal motives you have. If you want to help him—"

The girl stiffened. Angry lights swept the wary expression from her eyes as she said, "I don't like your tone, at all, Mr. Doyle."

"And I don't like what you're doing to Wells. It's your duty—the respect you owe him—to tell me all that is behind this. Can't you see—"

"But there is nothing to tell! I had a little errand here for my father. That will be finished tomorrow, and Bert and I will leave. Wherever you got those fantastic ideas about emeralds—"

Doyle scowled. "Then you won't tell me where he's living?"

"How can I, when I don't know?" She got to her feet angrily. "I expected a pleasant visit with you here, Mr. Doyle. I see I was mistaken. Perhaps Bert has been mistaken about you too. Good evening!" She went striding away to the door of the tavern room.

Doyle called after her. Then, seeing the grins of the sheiks and merchants near him, he shrugged and gave up.

THERE seemed no logic behind the girl's behavior. The emeralds obviously were hers, but she antagonistically refused to admit it—and she refused to divulge where Wells was living. Why had she invited him here in the first place if she didn't intend to—?

Then cutting through his bewilderment came another thought—a hunch over where she might be heading now. Angered as she was she might go straight to Bert Wells. If he followed her—

Doyle saw Tamina, her dark eyes flashing, coming toward him from across the crowded tavern. He avoided her and legged it out into the courtyard. In the starlight he saw Jean Holmes hurrying through the humped gate. She did not turn in the direction of the hotel!

Here was the break he had hoped for. He began trailing her. The mood he was in now, he wanted to get face to face with Wells again and have this whole business threshed out. They were both in it now, along with the girl.

Suddenly he heard the jingle of bracelets behind him. A strong slim hand caught his arm and turned him around, insistently.

It was Tamina.

Her whole body seemed to tremble as she blurted at him. "So—the moment a golden-haired foreign girl comes to Kourgazi, Tamina is not good enough for you! You throw her aside. It hurts me!"

Something about the way she spoke touched Doyle. He put his hands on her slim shoulders and pulled her near to him. "You little fool, I have no designs on this girl," he said. "She is promised to another—that black-bearded man who accosted me tonight. They are my friends, and in deep trouble. As sure as the Fatha is the first sura of the Koran, I am only trying to help them, even as you would help your friends. Do you not see?"

THE gentleness in his voice seemed to affect her, and in a very chastened spirit she answered, "Tamina is a little fool. I should not have followed you. But, Sidi, if there is any way I could help too—"

"You're sweet, Tamina," he smiled. "You see, I mean to locate the black-bearded man, who has disappeared from me. If you would stay near the Shogbo and watch for him, I will be grateful. If you get the least glimpse of him, hurry to the Hotel Paris and tell me. Will you do this, Tamina?"

"I am always glad to serve you, Sidi." She ran her cool fingers caressingly over his cheek, and then slipped away into the darkness.

Doyle quickly turned his thoughts back to Jean Holmes. This delay might have been costly, affording her a chance to get away. He began running swiftly.

Presently he saw Jean Holmes ahead of him, walking at a brisk gait. He began following her cautiously, at a safe distance, trying not to think of how she had treated him in the Shogbo. He didn't like to think of the suspicion she roused in him.

Jean Holmes led him first to one end of town, then back to the other, and it angered him to discover that she was aware he was following her and was leading him on a wild chase that had neither rhyme nor reason. It sharpened his suspicions and he hurried to catch up to her.

As though she read his intentions, she began running also. Then, startingly, she vanished, as if the ground itself had swallowed her up.

He searched the vicinity, but did not find her, though he was sure she hadn't gone into any of the grim, lightless buildings that bordered the crooked alley. There was nothing left for him to do but go back to the hotel.

As he walked, he puzzled over the mad, unbelievable business. The longer he pondered over it, the queerer it seemed that Wells was in possession of those emeralds. Also, he was suddenly

convinced that Jean Holmes might not be all that she represented. That locket at the girl's neck, for instance, with the initials JB instead of JH. He had no way of knowing if she really was the daughter of the American explorer. And if she were not—

Doyle didn't like to think that she might be working for LaTour, the famous jewel thief—that she had deliberately made a play for Wells in order to get him to protect stolen gems until she could get them safely to Porto Novo. The way she had acted at the Shogbo—and the way she had lured him about town—

Abruptly, he woke up to the ghastly truth. Jean Holmes apparently had been taking up his time on purpose—*so he could not get to Bert Wells tonight!*

In these circumstances, Jean Holmes might now have returned to her hotel. If she had, he knew he wasn't going to be gentlemanly when he rejoined her.

A filth-covered native, dressed in ragged jelabia, crouched against the front of the hotel. Doyle ignored the beggar's plea for alms, legged it into the building and up to the girl's room on the second floor. With satisfaction he saw the light that slivered beneath the heavy door, and he kicked the door open and entered.

JEAN stiffened when she saw him. The lamplight turned her hair into spun gold. Her voice was shocked. "Mr. Doyle! Why—"

"Shut up!" he snapped. He locked the door and tossed the key on the bamboo table that stood in the middle of the room. He remained between the girl and the door. "I want a straight answer now, sister. "What's behind all this insanity?"

"What insanity?"

"Why did you invite me over to the Shogbo caravanserai? And why did you lead me from one end of town to another? I'm here for an explanation."

Her intense blue eyes turned frightened and then hardened. She said airily, "You're being silly, Mr. Doyle. In the

first place, I invited you to the Shogbo so I could apologize. If you followed me after I left, that's no concern of mine. You upset me with your remarks and I felt that a walk would do me good."

"I don't believe you."

She picked up the key from the bamboo table, fingered it. "You understand, Mr. Doyle, this is a private room."

"I won't leave here until you give me a decent explanation," Doyle said bluntly. "I don't care if I have to stay here all night."

Her lips curled. She said quietly, "In that case we probably won't need this," and stepped to the open window and flung the key down into the street.

Doyle shoved her roughly away from the window. "What in hell—? What's the big idea?"

Her smile was maddeningly innocent. "You said you were staying here all night. I just want to be sure of it."

"Oh, so I was right—and I fixed up a nice little trap for myself here!" He glared at her. "You don't want me to contact Wells. That's why you invited me to the Shogbo and led me all around town. But this trick isn't going to help you. I'm going to get the truth out of you if I have to slap it out of you."

"You're being melodramatic. What's this truth you want so desperately?"

"The fact that you're working for LaTour and using Wells as your tool. Do you deny it?"

Her brows arched, she studied her fingernails. "Why should I even bother to speak, when you seem to know everything?"

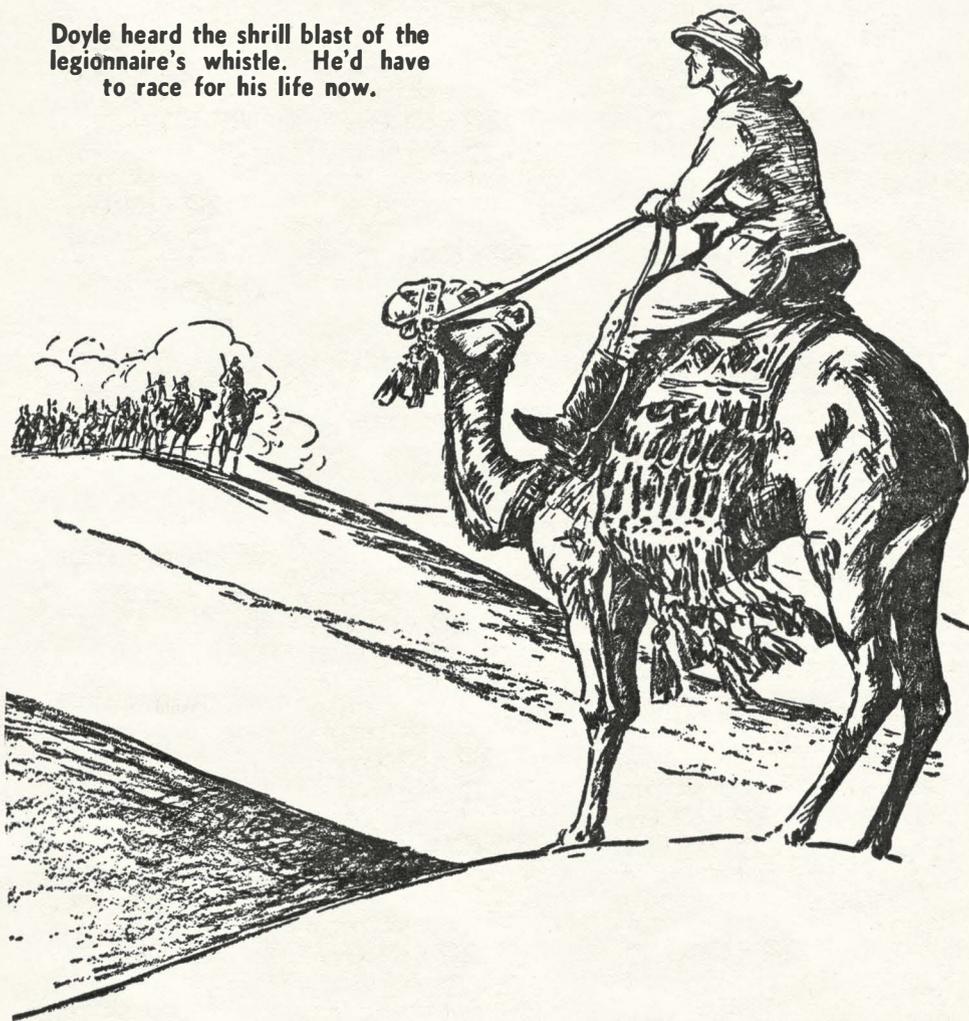
Doyle snarled, "You're going to tell everything, Miss Holmes, or by heaven I'll—" And then he stopped dead, staring at her.

"Don't move, Mr. Doyle!" The girl waved the small flat automatic she had expertly flipped from the back pocket of her trousers. "I shoot accurately."

"You wouldn't dare," he sneered.

"Don't be too sure. There's one justifiable crime in this desert town. A woman can kill to save her honor. If I am

Doyle heard the shrill blast of the legionnaire's whistle. He'd have to race for his life now.



forced to kill you, no one will doubt my explanation."

Something in her steady gaze warned him that she wasn't fooling. He muttered, "You devil!"

Her lips were set in that maddening smile. "Don't waste your breath. Just relax in that chair beside the door. I'm afraid you're in for a long, uncomfortable night."

Doyle stood rigid, studying her. He was wondering how a girl could be so

beautiful—and so vicious and deadly.

"Is it that you prefer to stand, Mr. Doyle?"

Growling under his breath, he went to the chair and sat down. He had been fooled by a beautiful face. And it was plain to him now that the emeralds had been stolen—probably from the emir of those Sudanese natives. They and the police were seeking the gems, knowing the girl was mixed up in their theft, though they had no proof against her.

There was nothing he could do now but sit here.

A HALF HOUR passed, then the full hour. Shouting, he knew, would not help any—even if he dared it—because these heavy mud walls made the rooms practically soundproof.

Then abruptly knuckles rattled on the door, and the voice of Fochini came: "Mademoiselle Holmes, have you seen M'sieu Doyle?"

"I'm in here, Fochini!" Doyle yelled. "Open up! We've mislaid the key!"

He half-expected the girl to shoot, but she had sense enough to withhold her fire. And when Fochini unlocked and pushed open the door, Jean Holmes had put her gun away.

Nothing was said, and Fochini's beard cracked in a sly grin as he glanced from the girl to Doyle.

Doyle said hotly, "Look here, Fochini, if you think—" But he broke off as he saw that the door porter from the Shogbo was with Fochini. The Beri-Beri had a note in his hand.

"Aselamu, Alaikum, Sidi!" the porter said. "This message is for you, and greatly urgent."

Doyle took the message and opened it. It was written in Arabic. It read:

Sidi Doyle:

I have but learned of a small house behind the old mosque that is guarded by a policeman. I went there and inquired of the guard about who lives there. He spoke of a rumi called Smith and said that this person has valuable emeralds in his possession.

Tamina

He smiled thinly and thrust the message into his pocket. Without a glance at the others, he rushed out of the hotel, colliding with a wild-eyed, excited Arab as he plunged out of the door. He took no notice of the man, but kept on running.

A feeling of satisfaction gripped him,

for now at last he could get to the bottom of this business and save Wells from getting too deeply into a criminal situation which was not of his own making. After Wells heard how this woman who called herself Jean Holmes had acted, and what she had said, he would see that he was being used as a pawn. Perhaps together they could trap the elusive La-Tour, who had a big reward on his head.

Doyle came at last to the little lighted house behind the old mosque—and then stopped short, his face grim with shock.

He saw the policeman guard lying dead in the sandy dirt in front of the house, a dagger protruding from the breast of the corpse. And swinging his startled gaze to the open door of the house, he got a glimpse of the red-fezed officers who were inside. As he hurried through the door to join them, his heart turned cold.

A drunken prediction, uttered three years before, had finally come to pass. Bert Wells lay on his back in the center of the floor. He was dead, a pistol shot through his head. His clothing had been all but ripped from his body.

And the money belt lay beside him, empty. . . .

THAT SAME heavy-bearded, bushy-browed Arab Doyle had met that time in the Shogbo was in charge here. Not recognizing Doyle, he turned on him suspiciously and said, "I am Senussi, Wazir of the Police. Who are you, Sidi?"

"Sidi Smith told me to come and visit him tonight," Doyle answered in a hoarse voice. "I did not dream I would find him dead. What villain took his life?"

"Do you know of a rumi called Doyle?"

Doyle's eyes narrowed. "No, I am but new here. Was this Doyle a friend of Sidi Smith?"

The Wazir's bushy brows wrinkled. "The jackal killed Smith and our fellow officer who was standing guard over this unfortunate rumi tonight," he said, and displayed a Colt automatic which had

the name *Doyle* engraved on the grip. Also, he had a torn fragment of a jacket pocket upon which the Arabian version of the name *Doyle* had been stitched.

"We found the gun—one bullet discharged—at the dead man's feet," the officer went on. "The fragment of the garment was in the dead man's hand. It is evident that Sidi Smith ripped the bit of cloth from the murderer's breast pocket before the jackal shot him."

"Why was the officer guarding Smith?"

"Hassan, Sidi Smith's personal servant, and this officer were guarding the rumi against the theft of some valuable emeralds which Smith had in his possession. The officer and Smith were killed when the emeralds were stolen. Hassan, the servant, was kidnapped."

Doyle burst out in wrath, "Bismillah, I will make inquiries about this jackal called Doyle! As a rumi, I perhaps can befriend him and put him off guard so you can easily capture him," and he ran swiftly out of the house.

"Wait, Sidi!" the Wazir of the Police shouted, but the darkness had swallowed up the foreigner before the officers could halt him.

Doyle was in a half-panic as he realized how mercilessly Wells' enemies had involved him. They had stolen his jaafa and gun. They had used the automatic to kill Wells for the emeralds, planting a fragment of one of Doyle's garments—the one the wife of a desert sheik had once stitched for him—in Wells' hand. Now, unless he did something at once, he would not only be doomed for the murder of his old friend, but blamed for the officer's death as well!

It was plain now why Jean Holmes had led him on tonight, finally locking him up in her room. It was so that he would have no defense against this murder charge, and the real killers would be free to go their own way.

Reaching the hotel, Doyle hurried past the wailing beggar who still hunched beside the door, and when he met Foch-

ini in the lobby he said *breathlessly*, "Jean Holmes—the girl—is she still here?"

The fat Frenchman smiled, but lost his smile when he saw the desperation that whitened Doyle's face. He answered, "No—she left a moment after you did. An Arab came and she left with him. They both seemed very excited, M'sieu."

"Where did they go?"

Fochini hitched his shoulders. "I do not know. They merely left here in a rush. I—"

Doyle hurried out of the hotel and held a large coin in front of the beggar's dirt-grimed face. "Did any persons leave this hotel directly after I did?"

The beggar pulled his ragged *jelabia* about his skinny body and nodded. "An Arab and a golden-haired rumi esa did so. I heard them speak as they fled away—something about the Bir Farig camel trading camp."

"*Inshallah ma temut illa Islam,*" breathed Doyle. He threw the coin at the beggar and went hurrying away.

THE obvious conclusion was driving him a little mad, for he was reluctant to consider this beautiful American girl as vicious a person as seemed. Still, it was apparent that she had known of the emeralds in Wells' possession. Because she wanted them—either on order of LaTour or for some other reason—she had let him make love to her and so had won his confidence. She had arranged that he get a personal servant who was her accomplice. The servant now had killed both the police guard and Wells to get the emeralds, and having gotten them had joined Jean Holmes and had gone away into the desert with her, leaving Doyle to be accused of the crime!

Doyle was almost beside himself with fury when he finally reached the Bir Farig camp on the edge of the desert city. But his heart sank as he drew up to the glowing campfire in the center of the camp. Bir Farig and four of his men were lounging around the fire, talking.

"Where are the golden-haired rumi esa and her Arab companion?" Doyle demanded. "Did they come here?"

Bir Farig was a tall, hard-looking man, wearing a wide-bladed knife in the belt of his burnous. He said, "It is so, Sidi. They but recently left for our neighboring city of Ridris."

"The curses of Allah on the golden-haired one!" Doyle snarled. "She is a thing of evil!"

With a growl, Bir Farig sprang up, sweeping his wide knife from his belt. Cunningly, he pinned the point to Doyle's throat. "Put another curse on the head of the daughter of the great explorer and it will be the end for you, rumi!"

"You have been deceived!" cried Doyle. "She is not the daughter of the great explorer, but a wily tool of that accursed thief, LaTour!"

"You are mad!" Bir Farig retorted. "As sure as the sun rises and sets, I know her as the great explorer's daughter. So does Senussi, Wazir of the Police. Years back, we were both part of Sidi Holmes' caravans."

Doyle fell back, startled. "In that case, O Bir Farig, I wash the curses from her with the seven holy blessings. Yet if she is in truth the child of the honest, upright explorer, why has she fled into the desert?"

"I do not know," Bir Farig replied, lowering his knife. "It is no affair of mine that—"

Red-fezed policemen suddenly swarmed into the camel camp. They fell upon Doyle and knocked him to the ground. The Wazir crouched over him, a French Army pistol gripped in his hairy paw. His heavy beard and bushy brows seemed to bristle as he said, "So it is you who are Doyle, the foul murderer of your own countryman. We learned that when we inquired at the hotel. A beggar told us of the direction you had taken."

"But I am innocent!" Doyle cried.

"Faugh! I do not care to hear the braying of a trapped jackal!"

"But you must, illustrious Wazir!"

Doyle scrambled to his feet and swiftly related all his experiences since his return to Kourgazi. "You yourself know that Smith was dead when I arrived at his house. Therefore, I could not have killed him. I swear by the Prophet that I was at that time locked in a room in the hotel with Miss Holmes!"

The Wazir lowered his weapon, undecided. "If I hear that from the lips of the daughter of the great explorer, I will believe you innocent. Where can I find her?"

"That is my misfortune," growled Doyle. "She has but now ridden out into the desert."

THE Wazir cursed him angrily and raised his weapon again. "Oh, so that is it! Your clever trick will not work with me, rumi. By telling lies about one who has just departed, you cannot free yourself."

"Ask Fochini!" Doyle cried desperately. "The hotel owner opened the door of the locked room for us!"

"I would not believe anything of Fochini," the Wazir replied. "He is a lying, rascally French dog."

Doyle began, "I tell you no lies—" But his voice was blotted out as the police officers again fell upon him and began dragging him away.

Yet even as they did so, there was the thud of fast-approaching camels. Dust rose like a fog, and there were shouts and the rattle of gunfire as a half-dozen riders streaked into the camp. The surprised police were driven back—and as he lay fallen on the sand not far from the campfire, Doyle saw the leader of this attacking band—a pock-marked Sudanese tribesman!

These attackers were the same desert men who had attempted to kidnap Jean Holmes earlier that evening!

As the men drove the police back, the pock-marked man unloosened one of Bir Farig's camels and motioned Doyle over to it, gesturing belligerently with his rifle. "Climb on and ride with us, dib. One false move and you will die!"

Doyle did not attempt to understand the man's motive. Here was an opportunity to get away from the police of Kourgazi, and any chance was worth taking. He climbed up on the kneeling camel, cried "Oosha, baba," to the hajin, and rode swiftly away with these half-dozen fierce Sudanese.

They swept back through the city, and by a wide circle began swinging out into the desert in the direction of the neighboring city of Ridris—the way Jean Holmes and the Arab had fled.

Fully three kilometers were traversed before the pock-marked man signaled a halt, and Doyle was surprised to find that they had entered the dark encampment of more than fifty other Sudanese tribesmen, obviously warriors, all heavily armed. After he dismounted from his camel, Doyle was kept apart from them, a prisoner. . . .

THE pock-marked leader went to these men and issued orders, and soon the warriors began leaving in small groups. Then the pock-marked one came striding back to Doyle.

Doyle now saw how handsomely the man was dressed, a black jelabia beneath a white jerd, and a white turban. The pock-marked one looked like a wakil or some other such tribal dignitary, but his voice was unfriendly and cold as he said, "Now you have your opportunity to talk, rumi."

"About what, Sidi?" Doyle asked.

"About where the golden-haired rumi esa has gone with the emeralds."

Doyle stared at him steadily, beginning to realize why he had been kidnapped from the police. These Sudanese wanted to capture Jean Holmes. In other words, it was from these tribesmen she and Wells' Arab servant were fleeing.

"You should answer when I speak to thee, infidel!" grated the pock-marked one, and slashed the back of his bony hand hard across Doyle's face.

Doyle did not flinch from the blow, but continued to gaze steadily at his

captor. He realized what these men intended, once they caught up to Jean Holmes. They were worked up now, apparently sure of themselves for the first time. It was likely that they would murder the girl, whether she had the emeralds or not.

And he knew what that would mean to him, for it was only the girl's evidence that could free him from suspicion in the eyes of the Kourgazi police. Doyle purposed to clear himself, if it was the last thing he did.

"I do not know where she has gone, Sidi," he said at last. "I, too, wish to find her, so that I may be freed of an assassin's trick."

"You lie!" spat out the angry chieftain. "You know she has fled for Ridris, even as our spy saw with his own eyes. That is why you hurried to Bir Farig's camel camp. You are one with her and that murdered rumi dog who called himself Smith. You intend to join her—and so I demand that you tell me where that meeting place is. Is it in the desert stronghold of the accursed Rahid ag Haali?"

"In the name of the prophet, I swear I know no more!" cried Doyle. "Neither do I know of anyone by the name Rahid ag Haali."

The pock-marked one sucked in a breath noisily. "And that is your answer, rumi carrion?"

Doyle saw how many of the Sudani men had gathered around them. He could hear their angry muttering and was afraid of what the outcome of this might be. But there was only one answer he could make: "Bismillah, it is all that I know."

The men shrieked curses at him and surged upon him like a wall of stone. He struck out with his fists, knocking some of them back, but they overwhelmed him with their numbers. And as he was smashed down to the sand, he heard the pock-marked chieftain shout, "Yield and give me the truth, dog!"

"I do tell the truth!" Doyle shouted through bruised, bleeding lips, and only

brought louder curses upon his head. He was trampled cruelly, until the butt of a rifle caught him a glancing blow on the temple and that kind unconsciousness blotted out his senses. . . .

AWAKENING to an aching throb in his head, Doyle found that he was alone. His body was twisted into an arch, so cruelly tight were his hands and feet tied in a bunch behind his back. His captors had left him to die the horrible death of the *crapaudine*. In the blaze of tomorrow's sun, first would come the torture of thirst, then ghastly desert madness, until life slowly fled from his body.

In the struggle against his bonds, Doyle rolled face up, and he saw that a huge yellow moon had risen up from the east and was wanly lighting the desert with silver. It exaggerated the boundless solitude about him, chilling his body as he fought ineffectually against the agal rope that restrained him. Hopelessly, he was reminded how this part of the desert was off the beaten routes. There was no chance of—

But now he heard the soft tread of camels beside him. As if in a sudden dream, he heard the cry of a familiar voice. Before he could turn, someone was kneeling at his side. Cool fingers brushed his hair from his eyes, and he saw Tamina hunching above him.

"Tamina!" he gasped in surprise. "How—"

She chattered, her voice high-pitched and tense, as she gave quick orders to the doorman from the Shogbo, who had come with her. The Beri-Beri brought out his knife and slashed the ropes that held Doyle.

Doyle rose and impulsively caught the slim Arabian girl in tight embrace. An uncontrollable emotion thickened his voice as he whispered to her, "Allah is all-powerful, Tamina. He sent you to me when I lay helpless in the desert."

She clung to him and said excitedly, "After I heard of Sidi Smith's death, we hurried to the hotel. We saw you

hurry to the camel camp, but we did not reach there until the police were arresting you. Then these desert men raided there, snatching you away. We stole two of Bir Farig's camels, which stood to one side, saddled and provisioned for travel. We followed those evil tribesmen all the way here and watched from a nearby draw. We waited until we were sure the men were far away, and then we came here to succor you."

"You have been kind and faithful, Tamina," Doyle said gratefully. And after he related how he had become treacherously involved in the death of his old friend, the girl cried out.

"Sidi, you must go away then and hide from the police! I know of a sheik not far from here who will be glad to take you into his roving tribe."

Doyle shook his head. "No," he said, "I must press on and find the golden-haired girl so I can bring her back here to speak to the Wazir of the Police. I cannot live with an assassin's blot on my name."

"But, Sidi, if you should meet those cruel desert men again, it will be your end!"

"I will find the girl before they do," he told her grimly. "Allah will grant me that."

"And if she goes beyond Ridis and into that wild Niger Territory?" Tamina asked nervously.

"I will follow her and bring her back."

"Sidi Doyle," spoke up the Beri-Beri door porter, "the travelers who stop at the Shogbo speak of new dangers in the Niger. They are afraid it will soon be unsafe for rumis, for it is said the tribes are exchanging caskets of gold once more. Yet if your mind is made up, it is best that you take one of our camels and be gone at once. I will return on foot. *Bismillah arahman arahmim*, I wish you success and a safe journey."

Doyle solemnly brought his hands from his chest to his mouth and said, "It is through the infinite grace of Allah that I have friends such as Tamina and thee."

He turned to the resting camels and chose a powerful-appearing hajin (trotting camel) which wore a silver-embossed rhala saddle. But before he could mount the animal, he felt Tamina catch at his arm. He could feel how her fingers were trembling.

"I too pray you a safe and fruitful journey," she said, her voice low. "But—but you will return to Kourgazi afterward—yes?"

Doyle gripped her hand tightly for an instant. Gravely he replied, "You remember, it is written so in every sura of the Koran," and he mounted the camel and began riding away.

He turned and waved when he heard Tamina desperately shout the seven blessings after him. And the odd, sobbing tone of her voice chilled him. It was as though some instinct was telling the Arabian girl that she would never see him again—that he was riding away to his death. . . .

IT WAS not many hours before El Fagr (dawn) brought its heat and dazzling light to the desert, and by that time Doyle was not far distant from Ridris. Though a strong wind had arisen, whirling clouds of sand that stung his face, he gave it little concern as he urged his camel on. His brain was crowded with thoughts of this strange intrigue of murder and emeralds and ruthless Sudani desert men. Very little seemed to fit together, and the more he pondered over it, the more troubled he became.

Apparently Jean Holmes had actually been an enemy of Bert Wells. She had pretended to love him for her own reasons. Wells' Arab servant, with whom she apparently was in league, obviously had murdered his master for the emeralds, and then fled with the girl.

Was she a tool of LaTour, the mysterious jewel thief? And was the elusive LaTour waiting for her at Ridris?

That seemed impossible, considering that Bir Farig had claimed she actually was the daughter of the famous Ameri-

can explorer. In view of what Doyle had heard of the real Jean Holmes' reputation, she surely would have nothing to do with anything criminal!

Still, if her motives were honest, why had she treated him as she had? If her association with Wells had been friendly, why had she fled to the wilder, more remote part of the desert, instead of to the Coast?

Doyle believed he would find the answer to all this at Ridris. He was well acquainted there, from the barracks of the French Legion to the stalls of suq, and in the caravanserais. Because this city was much smaller, a friendlier city than the sprawling, crowded Kourgazi, he was sure he would soon learn where the American girl and the Arab could be found. He urged his hajin to greater speed, for he felt that he had the advantage over the Sudanese, who probably would camp some distance outside Ridris so as not to attract the attention of the Legion.

Gradually he drew abreast of some palms, above which hulked the crumbling tower of an ancient morabit (holy tomb) that stood just outside of Ridris. After he rode beyond it and passed over the brow of another mountainous dune, the stretched-out jumble of mud houses, with the occasional towers of mosques, lay before him. And in the sand-blurred sunlight, he saw the tri-color of France flapping furiously at the slim lookout tower of the Legion barracks.

DOYLE had no way of knowing if Ridris had been notified of Wells' murder and of his own plight. If the news had reached here, his position would be tenfold more dangerous than back in Kourgazi, for the Legion would be searching for him. Therefore he was watchful as he entered the crooked, teeming streets of the city, his nerves alert and tight-drawn.

He rode in the direction of the Marhaba caravanserai. Even as Fochini was an information bureau to the happenings in Kourgazi, so was the overseers of this

caravanserai in regard to the doings of Ridris. It was at the Marhaba that Doyle expected to find news of Jean Holmes and her Arab.

Yet as he drew farther into the heart of the city, his eyes suddenly narrowed. He saw a Touareg hunching in the niche of a wall at a street intersection, and recognized him as that same strange Niger Territory Touareg who had been spying on him in Kourgazi!

Doyle cursed and urged his camel toward the man. But the Touareg saw him in almost the same instant and darted through a narrow between-building passageway. There was no opportunity for Doyle to follow him without deserting the camel to the dangers of the thieving populace, so he merely continued his slow way toward the Marhaba.

Worried, he knew now that the Sudanese were already in Ridris, because he was convinced that this Touareg was one of their spies. Worse, the tribesmen would know that he was still alive and in the city.

Doyle at last drew up to the Marhaba caravanserai. He avoided the courtyard and guided his hajin into the narrow, dung-smelling alley that ran along the rear of the long, two-storied building. The muffled sing-song of voices raised in a bawdy desert ditty came to him as he squatted his camel. He dismounted and knocked on the heavy closed door in the long, windowless wall.

The muffled sing-song of voices inside the building ceased; an excited chattering took its place, and someone began calling a name. Doyle knocked again. Even as he did so, there was the clash of drawn bolts and the door creaked open.

The overseer of the caravanserai stood there, a huge, bearded man nearly seven feet tall, wearing a blue jubba and a striped jerd. He grinned and bowed when he recognized Doyle. He invited him inside, saying, "Aselamu, Alaikum, Sidi! I felt sure that time would bring you back here!"

The overseer pushed the door shut quickly behind Doyle, bolted it again, and began leading his guest hurriedly through the natives who were tidying up the big room. As Doyle was led up to the second floor, the natives resumed their singing.

THE mysterious manner of the huge overseer bothered Doyle, and once they were upstairs in a room that overlooked the now-deserted courtyard, he asked, "I do not understand all this. Why did you bring me up here?"

The overseer's heavy-featured face turned grave and troubled. "Sidi," he said, "I know you for a good man who always heeds the haya alla Salat. Few rumis give reverence to the Moslem call to prayer, and it makes me doubt what is sworn to be true. You see, but a few moments ago I heard that the Kourgazi police want you for two murders. You have been seen in town, and I am already told that the Legion searches for you."

"I swear by the Koran I am innocent of these crimes!" Doyle answered fervently, and gave a swift account of all that had happened.

"Inshallah!" burst out the overseer. "So that is why this golden-haired rumi esa appeared in such haste."

"Then you saw her?"

The huge man nodded grimly. "Shortly after dawn. She asked for fresh camels and a guide to take her far into the Niger Territory."

"Niger!" Doyle said, bewildered. "That's one of the worst sections of the Sahara. Did she say what her intentions are?"

"No, Sidi—though she spoke vaguely of Agades. I offered her the camels and provisions, but I could not give her a guide. Our guides are shunning the Niger at present. Though the Legion has heard none of it, it is rumored that the Touareg tribes are exchanging caskets. Of course, Sidi, this may be just talk that has no real basis. Yet our guides do not care to chance . . . *Allah shi taimakemu!*

Allah aid us! Look out the window, Sidi!"

Even before he turned to the window, Doyle tensed to the muffled beat of approaching camels. A camel squadron was swinging through the gate of the courtyard, a gaunt, hard-visaged Legionnaire in the lead. The others were untamed tribesmen who had been recruited into the service of France. Obviously they had traced the American fugitive to this caravanserai.

Doyle swung to the overseer, his lean face bleak. "There is no chance for me to get out through that rear door, the camel corps will be inside before we even reach the ground floor. I have but one chance left—" He ran to a window that faced the alley in the back of the second floor.

He glanced outside and saw that the alley below was still deserted. As he climbed over the wide sill he said, "I say hamdulillah for thy kind aid and will surely sometime repay you." Then he dropped down.

A rush of air, the jarring thump as his feet landed hard in the sand-floored alley, and then he was on the back of his waiting camel. In the next moment, he was streaking away like a bullet.

But as he got himself clear of the Marhaba caravanserai, he heard the shrill blast of the Legionnaire's whistle and realized that he had been sighted. He'd have to race for his life now.

HE POUNDED like a madman through crowded streets, sending cursing, shrieking natives leaping out of his path. It was here that he had the advantage, for one camel could make better time than a squadron. By the time he reached the north gate of the city, he was far ahead of his pursuers, and he set out at fast pace into the desert, heading toward the wild Niger Territory.

Yet when he was many kilometres away and ascended a high dune to look back through the swirling eddies of heat haze, he saw the distant figures of the

camel corps riding swiftly in pursuit. It brought a scowl to his face. He had not believed that they would follow him, but apparently they would not give up until they captured him.

Why? . . . That became plain too. Doyle was charged with the murder of a native policeman. In the face of the recent uprisings, the Legion likely feared further trouble if they did not bring this foreigner to justice. And the thought struck fear into Doyle as he recalled the grim relentlessness of the Legion.

More than ever now, he must find Jean Holmes. It was the only way that he could save himself.

As he rode on, he saw the peril of the journey ahead. It was years since he had last traversed the Niger trail to Agades, he had insufficient provisions and water, and no weapons. Eerily the sobbing tone of Tamina's voice came back to him, and he wondered if in truth he was riding to his death.

He pressed on throughout the day, with the untiring camel corps close behind him. In spite of overpowering weariness, he drove his hajin on long after darkness had fallen, striking out in another direction. At last he struck camp in a small hatia—a brushwood-dotted depression between high dunes that offered his camel a little food.

After bedding down the animal, Doyle dropped to his face in the sand and slept like the dead.

AT DAWN, when he continued on his way to Agades, Doyle was relieved to find no sign of the camel corps, nor did he see any trace of them throughout the rest of this second day. It cheered him to think that he had outwitted them.

Yet as the day drew to an end, new worries assailed him. For one thing, he didn't like the strange peace that hung over the desert. The late afternoon sky glowed red, cloudless. Not even a breath stirred the hot sea of sand, and through the heat haze the dunes stood like the huge swells of some stark-

white ocean mysteriously petrified to immobility. Somehow it seemed like a grim warning of danger—a danger that he could not see.

Also, the water skin hung empty from his camel's saddle. The Ourassa water hole was somewhere in this vicinity, and he realized he must find it before dark, or else, on the next day, his fate might be even worse than the one from which he had fled.

"Halt, rumi, or it is your death!"

Doyle jerked to the unexpected sound of this sharp voice above him, and lifted his blood-shot eyes. Two mounted men had drawn up atop the nearest dune—tall, veiled figures framed against the glowing sky. Touaregs, and they were covering him with rifles.

Desert raiders! Doyle drew a sharp breath in the face of this new menace. Even if he came out of this alive, the delay might be costly. He had no way of telling how near the camels of the Legion were behind him.

"In the name of mercy, I come in peace!" he shouted through parched lips. "I'm but a poor man—"

"Keep your belongings, dib," the speaker said as they rode down to him. "You are coming with us to our camp at the Ourassa."

Doyle submitted without a word, knowing the danger of arguing with quick-tempered desert men, and rode away between the two Touaregs. But he was puzzled, for it was queer that they should take him to their camp.

THE camp was small but typical of a roving Touareg band, the domed huts of grass matting and tanned skins pitched beneath the flat-topped baobab tree beside the water hole. The people of this tribe stood sullenly apart and watched as the men rode up to their chieftain, who waited alone next to the well. It seemed to Doyle that these people, by some odd clairvoyance, had been aware of his capture long before he was brought in.

Doyle squatted his camel, dismounted,

and strode to the chieftain, a man wearing a gown of sun-faded blue, and a cluster of leather wallets that contained the Blessings of Allah. The litham veil hid all of his face except his eye—dark, crafty eyes that smouldered with arrogance.

"I, the powerful Menhalid, have awaited your coming, Sidi Doyle." The chieftain spoke in tamasheq, but his accent and manner did not seem true Touareg.

Doyle was startled that the man knew him, but was wise enough in the ways of the desert not to betray his surprise. He kept his blood-shot eyes on the arrogant eyes of the chieftain.

Menhalid continued: "You met a rumi called Smith in Kourgazi—one who carried in a belt around his belly a fortune in emeralds, which he had procured from the Sudan. You murdered him for the emeralds and fled."

"That is untrue," Doyle replied in a restrained voice. "That my pistol and a piece of my wearing apparel were found near the body is false evidence. Allah's curse on the assassin who stole these things from me so that I should be falsely accused!"

Menhalid asked, "Does the jackal flee unless hunted? You fled to Ridris. To escape the accursed French, you entered this desert. Yes?"

"Is it because of these emeralds that you had your men bring me here, O great Menhalid?"

"Inshallah! I care not if the emeralds are on your person. That is no concern of mine. This news came to me from travelers who tarried here today for water."

DOYLE saw that Menhalid was playing some queer game, and in a desperate gamble, he appealed to the man, reciting his entire story. He concluded, "So you see I did not come here to hide, but in pursuit of this girl of my own race. If you want justice done, I beseech you to help me find her. She is a lovely flower, with hair as golden as the round

locket at her throat. O Menhalid, have your brave followers perhaps seen her?"

"I care not one way or the other, but only about you, Sidi," Menhalid answered coldly. "I have heard that truly you are a rumi son of Islam. Therefore, when I learned that you had fled in this direction, I sent men out to intercept you. Sidi, help me in my own difficulty and I will see that the French never find you again."

Without waiting for a reply, he slipped a ring from his finger and placed it in Doyle's hand. "You will leave at dawn for the Oasis Buchi. You will present this ring and a letter to Rahid ag Haali, who will give you a sealed casket which has to do with the dealings of our tribes. Take the casket to Agades, where more of my men are stationed. Do this and I promise you that the golden-haired rumi esa will be found before the French get within fifty kilometres of you."

Doyle pondered a moment, trying to think of where recently he had heard mention of Rahid ag Haali. Also, it wasn't to his liking to be a casket bearer for these wild desert tribes.

He asked point-blank, "Why is it, O Menhalid, that you do not order your own men to do this task?"

"Shall I send my own people out to their deaths?" Menhalid answered. "Tribes who are in league with the French dogs know that the casket is already at Buchi, and I only pray the fortified position of the oasis can hold them back. These tribes are now under orders of the French, who suspect that we are about to petition the men of Agades to join us. I believe that a solitary rumi can get the casket through. Understand me, Sidi?"

Doyle regarded Menhalid steadily, without speaking. It was on his lips to refuse to league himself with these Touaregs against the French. Yet, at the same time, he knew that if he did not accept, these clever desert men would find some other way to deliver the casket to Agades. Moreover, if he refused, he would never leave this camp alive.

But was this odd Touareg chieftain worthy of trust? Would he abide by his promise to find Jean Holmes.

Still, it was a chance worth taking. If Menhalid did keep his promise, Doyle's worries would be at an end, for all the tribes of this part of the desert would search for Jean.

He said at last, "You have said it, and it will be done. All I ask is a fresh, fleet camel, water and provisions, and I will be off to the task before daybreak."

Menhalid bowed. "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet. May the eternal blessings keep your every footstep. . . ."

THE bargain worried Doyle after he left the presence of the chieftain and he spent the night restlessly. All too soon the stars overhead indicated about two hours before dawn, and when he crawled from his blanket on the sand, he saw dark figures moving about him. Camels began grunting and bellowing as they were head-roped, and shortly Doyle found himself surrounded by armed Touaregs.

"Here is the message, Sidi," one of them said, proffering him a heavily sealed parchment. "We will escort you a short distance from here."

Doyle pocketed the letter. He grasped the halter hanging from the nose-ring of the camel they brought him, forced the animal to squat down, and mounted. They offered him weapons, and eight fierce-looking warriors led him out of the camp. Almost soundless, the company moved into the great empty desert.

Time passed swiftly. The endless ocean of sand gradually became visible in a misty grey, which was magically swept away as the sun blazed up on the eastern horizon. It was time for prayer. But when Doyle halted beside the Touaregs, one of them pointed grimly ahead.

"Do not tarry, Sidi," he said. "Get to Oasis Buchi—and may Allah protect you!"

Doyle nodded and rode away, leaving the Touaregs, with sandals removed,

praying reverently to the east, where lay the far-distant Shrine of the Prophet.

All depended on his finding Jean Holmes, if he were to save himself from a murderer's grave. He was past trying to reason out why she had fled into this hellish desert. His only hope was that he might overtake her at the Oasis Buchi.

Gradually his thoughts became deadened by the overpowering heat of the sun. He pulled covering about his face to protect his aching eyes from the dazzling glare of the sand. His camel slackened its pace. And it was then that he heard the drone of an airplane overhead.

It made him tense, for this was one of the reconnoitering ships from the French Fort at Mahmadou, fifty miles west of Oasis Buchi. The plane did not circle, and he felt sure that he had not been recognized.

Strangely, as he plodded onward, he did not trouble himself over the French, nor over the desert enemies of Menhalid. He was thinking of the pock-marked man and his horde of Sudanese warriors. They too, desperate to reach Jean Holmes, were probably in this desert now. And he had a queer, disturbing premonition that he would meet them.

Nevertheless, the long day passed without incident. . . .

ANOTHER day passed, and still another. And on the afternoon of the third day Doyle was filled with uneasiness. First, the sign of ill weather brought him a sense of foreboding. The wind had risen sharply and black clouds were churning at the horizon.

But that was swept from his thoughts a few minutes afterward when, in horror, he saw many men, in the familiar garb of Sudanese warriors, stretched out in a great semi-circle across the shifting restless dunes, urging their camels toward him. At their head rode the grim, recognizable figure of their pock-marked chieftain.

His premonition had come to pass!

Jim Doyle was caught in a fury of despair. Now, when he was almost to his destination, this full company of Sudani warriors had come upon him from nowhere. The very directness of their advance boded no good. They swept toward him, swiftly as the flames of a prairie fire.

But they were not so lightning fast as the black storm that he had seen at the horizon. His camel staggered as flying columns of sand rode upon the violent wind, and he fought the animal's instinct to squat to the ground, urging it forward without mercy. Dazed, blinded, they floundered, struggled, advancing in a darkness of seething sand.

How far he advanced, Doyle did not know. The camel dropped down as the fury of the storm increased, and no effort could force it to move again. Almost at once, both man and beast were literally buried in sand.

With sand stinging his eyes and mouth, filling his nose and throat, Doyle wondered about the Sudanese and how near they were. He could not know the truth for a long while, for the sand-choked gale was a boiling maelstrom that turned the day into night.

As suddenly as it had begun, the storm ended. After he dug himself out of the upheaved, altered landscape, it cheered Doyle that he saw no sign of the Sudanese. Yet he'd have to move swiftly to avoid them. Checking his position by the sun which had climbed out of a churning cloud-bank, he mounted his camel. With a crisp "Oosha, baba," he was on his way again.

He was not convinced that escape would be possible. His desert attackers must still be very near. . . .

But joy lifted his heart as he climbed the first dune, for below him he saw the low, black shape of a fortified desert oasis. Towering above the walls were tall palm trees—the Seven Palms of Buchi.

He was safe. Blundering in the storm, he had come to rest at the very gate of his destination!

HE RODE down to the heavy palm-planked door in the grim exterior wall of the strange oasis. Buchi, with its well, its few palms, and its pits of salt, had fortified itself against desert raiders by walling the settlement with the only material it had. The walls were thick barriers of *salt*, blackened with dust and age, hard and impregnable as stone.

The door opened and Doyle was admitted into the tiny court that stood between this and another inner barrier wall. Through another door, and he was in Buchi: a maze of alleys that twisted and turned, closely lined by black house-high walls. It was a dark, mysterious community, even by day, with heavy doors leading into low, den-like dwellings, also constructed of salt.

It was the first time Doyle had been at this oasis, which was off the Agades trail, and he saw that the inhabitants were all Beri-Beris—sullen-eyed, heavily armed natives who did not conceal their distrust of him. They escorted him into a dwelling next to the fort, and he found himself before the headman himself.

Unlike the Beri-Beris, Rahid ag Haali was an Arab, and very handsomely garbed. His purple jelabia was richly embroidered, his jubba of the finest white silk, while his purple kufiya (head dress) was stitched and tasseled with gold. His face was uncovered; a cruel, hawkish face which Doyle could not trust. Nor did he care for two of the chieftain's women — Arabs — who hunched beside Rahid. Their eyes glowed with open, suspicious hate upon this foreign man.

"Salamou R'likoum, O Rahid ag Haali!" Doyle said, and presented the letter and the ring.

Rahid broke the seals and read the letter carefully. A hard, inscrutable expression lurked in his heavy-lidded eyes as he raised them to Doyle. In a queer-sounding, high-pitched voice, he said, "It is good, rumi. I harbored the fear that we could never get the casket

away, with our enemies watching us so closely. You leave by night—this very night. It will not take long for you to reach Agades."

"I am glad to get away so soon—" Doyle broke off as he stared at a locket which hung at the neck of one of Rahid's women. He covered up swiftly. "I need rest only till sundown. Then I will be fresh again."

Doyle was taken to one of the low dwellings; a bare, smoke-blackened den that boasted no more than an uncomfortable sleeping mat. He remained at the door as his native escort departed, suddenly convinced that neither Menhalid nor Rahid ag Haali had the least intention of keeping the bargain with him. That locket on the neck of Rahid's woman betrayed the chieftain—the same gold, old-fashioned locket which Doyle had last seen at the throat of Jean Holmes.

Jean obviously was being held prisoner here. Or—worse—these desert men had killed her.

There was a chance, though, that the girl was still alive. If Menhalid ruled this oasis too—as it seemed—probably nothing would be done to the girl until he could be consulted.

Regarding himself, Doyle had no illusions. Once the casket was delivered to Agades, his usefulness to these merciless Touaregs would be at an end, and their hate for all foreigners might get the better of them. That would mean sudden, bloody death. . . .

DOYLE saw two armed men file down the shadow-black alley to a door farther down, one that was barred from the outside by a palm beam set in salt-rock. They opened the door and threw a handful of dates into the den. Barring the door again, they departed.

In the brief instant the door was open, Doyle had heard something that filled him with sudden hope. The pitiful sound of a woman weeping. . . .

He did not rest during the hours until sundown, but wandered the fortified

oasis, memorizing the lay of the town, the various exits into the desert, and when darkness fell, he was again taken into the chieftain's house.

Rahid was alone, a sealed leaden casket in his skinny hands. He said in his eerie, high tones, "According to the letter, rumi, you have been promised that we will search and find one certain Mirican esa for you. You need but remain in Agades while we locate her in this desert."

The hard gleam in Rahid's eyes made Doyle shiver. He hardly heard the chieftain continue: "A camel is ready for you, provisioned, and carrying your arms. The seven blessings be upon thee, Sidi! Abka ala Kheir!"

Three Beri-Beris led Doyle out of the main gate, where a camel waited. The casket was placed into a jaafa that hung at the saddle. No words were spoken, and with a glance at the stars overhead, as if to check his route, Doyle mounted and set forth on this journey—not to Agades, but to his desperate attempt to save two lives.

He rode beyond the first dune and tethered his camel to a scraggy acacia that grew there. Then, casket in hand, he stole back toward the oasis, keeping to the hollows so the sand could not betray his dark figure.

When he gained the shelter of some squat, sand-beaten palms, he dug a hole at the base of one of them, buried the casket and smoothed away all signs of it.

The hard, black salt wall was his next objective. He followed the wall toward the rear, until, after some two hundred meters, he came upon a side door. He pushed at it. Despair assailed him as the door did not budge. Yet in the afternoon exploration of the oasis, he had unbarred this door!

Frantic for fear it had been refastened, he crashed his body against it. When the door gave slightly, he shouldered it again, until it opened, snarling loudly on sand-clogged, little-used hinges.

He stood still an instant, afraid that he had been heard. Presently he mustered up the courage to shove through the door in the inner wall—and he cautiously re-entered the black, mysterious oasis, his rifle tight-gripped as he crept along one of the crooked alleys.

Drawing near the place where he thought Jean Holmes was being held, he saw the white figure of a native gliding toward him. The alley was so narrow and dark, they brushed elbows as they met, and Doyle smashed his rifle barrel to the startled man's head.

The Beri-Beri fell. Doyle dragged him into a wall niche and stripped him, using the fellow's hezaam sash to bind and gag him. Slipping the native robe over his own clothing, he began advancing again. He felt safer in this disguise and crept like a silent ghost to the lonely den-dwelling he sought.

His swift fingers unbarred the door and he went inside. Arrested by a sudden stirring in one corner of the black cell, he whispered:

"Miss Holmes—it's Jim Doyle!"

A low cry rose from the girl as she leaped up, and he felt the quivering warmth of her as she clung to him. She whispered, "Doyle—oh, I never thought help would come for me! How many are with you?"

"I'm alone," he said.

She caught her breath sharply. "You shouldn't have come alone. Rahid is merciless!"

"I came to save myself," he growled. "I'm not going to let you frame me for Wells' death."

"Frame you!" she gasped. "What—?"

"You alone can clear me, Miss Holmes. So if I bring you before the proper authorities, will you—"

"You know I will do anything!" she cried.

"Good," Doyle snapped. "I've a camel outside. We'll ride for the fort at Mahamadou, fifty miles west. Rahid will suspect that, when he finds us gone, but we'll be safe if we get a big enough start. Come on!"

Together, they hurried outside. And as Doyle re-barred the door and began leading the way, his heart hammered in triumph. It was only a matter of getting the girl to Mahmadou, and her story would clear him!

But when they reached that niche in the alley wall where he had hidden the bound, gagged native his heart missed a beat. The Beri-Beri was gone!

"What's wrong?" the girl whispered.

He didn't reply, but quickened their pace. His apprehension did not lessen until they reached those side doors which led to the freedom of the desert. New hope cheered him as he hurried Jean Holmes through the inner door—only to have Beri-Beris leap abruptly upon them from the between-wall court.

Doyle slugged with his rifle, but at last he was disarmed, trampled and pinned to the ground. He and the girl were dragged down alley after alley, and taken into the house of Rahid ag Haali.

RAHID stood in the center of the taper-lit room, his hawkish face twisted in anger. The Beri-Beri who had been stripped and stuck over the head hunched, moaning, on the floor beside him. Rahid gritted thickly, "We were fools to trust you, rumi dog!"

"You did not intend to keep your bargain," Doyle answered. "The fact that you did not reveal to me that you had the girl here is proof of that."

"Silence, thou spy of our enemies! I am sure now that you planned to give them our casket."

"That is untrue, O Rahid!"

"Where *is* the casket then?"

Doyle tightened his sun-raw lips. He realized that the longer he kept these tribesmen from finding the casket, the longer he and the girl would live.

Infuriated by his silence, Rahid shouted orders to his men. Jean Holmes screamed as the Beri-Beris fell upon Doyle and beat him into unconsciousness. . . .

Doyle awakened in utter blackness. His head was pillowed on the warm soft-

ness of Jean Holmes' lap. Without moving, he asked, "Where are we now?"

"Back where I was imprisoned," she replied, her voice shaking. "We can do nothing now."

Doyle's bruised body ached, yet it did not match in agony the dread he had of the immediate future—the horror of the torture he knew would be their fate. He pulled himself to a sitting position beside the girl and told her bitterly why he had followed her out here, of his many experiences.

She answered bleakly, "I'm sorry now that one of Rahid's women stole my locket—the old locket of my mother. It told you I was here, and now you will die too."

"Yes, we both will die," he said slowly. "It's ironical that a tribal casket—"

She gasped. "Mr. Doyle, don't you know that the casket actually contains the emeralds which were stolen from— from Bert Wells' body?"

Doyle caught his breath, amazed. He said, "But you told me, in Kourgazi, you know nothing whatever of the emeralds!"

"Perhaps it'd be better if I told you everything," she said, and began explaining how her father, while mapping in the Sudan a few years back, had come into possession of emeralds worth a fortune. Because of his illness, the gems were left in the custody of a friendly, pock-marked sheik. Recently, Holmes had sent his daughter back here to recover the jewels.

SHE met Wells in Porto Novo and he promised to aid her. They went into the Sudan with native warriors and learned that this sheik intended to keep the emeralds. Through old friendships with some of the Sudanese, the girl learned that LaTour, the jewel thief, was in the vicinity, posing as a Touareg. Having heard of the emeralds, he decided to get possession of them.

One night Wells returned to camp with the emeralds, which he had stolen. He and Jean returned to Kourgazi, with

both the Sudanese and LaTour close on their heels. They had to hole up there, knowing that both their enemies would watch for their departure for the Coast. In an effort to make it look as if Wells had vanished with the jewels, he disguised himself as an American writer named Smith. Meanwhile, they notified the Legion to send a camel squadron to escort them to Porto Novo.

"Were the Sudanese fooled?" Doyle asked.

"Only at first," was Jean's reply. "LaTour wasn't fooled at all. The Sudanese got wise when they saw his Touareg spies watching both Smith and me. They—"

"And I imagined that Touareg was spying on me. But the strange way you acted toward me—"

"Bert felt he owed you a lot for the way you cared for him when he was trying to drink himself to death. This last night in Kourgazi, he knew, was going to be dangerous, and after he told me who you were, he suggested that I try to keep you out of the mess. I'm glad I did. If you'd been guarding Bert, LaTour would have killed you too. This way, I feel that Bert would—"

"So LaTour was the one who killed Wells!"

"Yes." Grief shook the girl's voice. "Hassan, Bert's Arab servant and an old friend of Dad's, escaped when Bert was murdered. When he came to me, I decided all I could do was hurry here to Buchi. I learned in Sudan that LaTour often poses as Menhalid, a Touareg chief. Buchi is his permanent headquarters, too."

"That explains Menhalid's odd accent," Doyle remarked. "I suppose LaTour's spies told him the Sudanese were heading here to raid Buchi, and he decided it would be safest to transfer the emeralds to Agadas—a pretty dangerous stunt, with the Sudanese already in this desert. But after his spies notified him I was riding in this direction, he saw how to pull the trick. Because of rumors of exchanges of war caskets, I'd never sus-

pect—" He paused. Then: "Why did you come out here? How in blazes did you ever expect to get the emeralds?"

"My father and I once lived with a strong Touareg tribe near here for almost nine months," she said. "They're my close friends. Because I knew I had to get the emeralds before the Sudanese did, I hoped to have this tribe raid Buchi. But LaTour's men trapped me. Hassan was murdered, and I was taken here."

The door of the den-dwelling opened and three Beri-Beris, armed and bearing palm torches, strode in. One said, "It is time now. Arise, rumis!"

This was the end. Doyle went cold as he thought of the torture that lay ahead of them, but the quiet bravery of the girl beside him made him forget his fear. He took her by the hand and led the way outside.

THE prisoners were taken to the open square in the center of the fort, which was lit by torches. The Beri-Beris were all assembled there, shouting and jeering at Doyle and the girl. Rahid stood to one side, his heavy-lidded eyes steady, unblinking, like an animal's.

"Where, rumi, is the casket?" he asked.

When Doyle did not answer, Rahid signaled, and some of his warriors roughly grasped Jean Holmes and began dragging her to the center of the multitude. Doyle shouted a curse, but as he attempted to follow the girl, other Beri-Beris pinned him against a wall.

Rahid stepped close to Doyle and said, "Rumis worship their women, and that fact is my weapon. She will be submitted to the disgrace of being stripped to the eyes of the whole camp. Next, she will be subjected to the utmost humiliation that can befall a prisoner. This, rumi, continues until you speak."

Doyle leaned against the wall, his face starch-white in the torchlight. He stared at the tense figure of Jean Holmes, knowing that he was powerless, regardless of his decision. If he did reveal where

the casket was hidden, Rahid would still make vile sport of them.

His silence was read as defiance. Rahid nodded to the men who held the American girl. As one of them reached his black fingers to the throat of her shirt, wild cries burst upon the oasis from without the barricaded front gates, and a fusillade of rifle shots. Doyle realized the men from the Sudan had attacked at last, having waited until after dark to attempt to storm Buchi and recover the emeralds.

Cursing, Rahid cried to one Beri-Beri, "Remove the rumis! We will tend to them after we lay low these accursed Sudanese," and shouted orders to quell the confusion that had been born of this unexpected attack.

Doyle and Jean Holmes were taken back to the prison hut. With his rifle muzzle thrust into Doyle's side, the guard said, "Unbar the door, dog!"

Doyle obeyed. But as he lifted the palm-beam, he moved swiftly—elbowed the rifle muzzle from his body and crashed the end of the beam into the Beri-Beri's face. The guard dropped without firing his weapon, and Doyle snatched up the rifle, turning to the wide-eyed girl. "We've got to get out of here fast! No matter who wins this battle, we'll die. Both factions intend to possess the emeralds, and they hate us bitterly!"

Leaving the Beri-Beri fast in the cell, Doyle led the way toward those side doors from the oasis.

Upon reaching there, he heard a grating beyond the inside wall, and looking up he saw notched palm poles appear at the top of the wall, and then the faces of Sudanese warriors! The intense battle at the front gate was a ruse to distract the oasis from these men who were scaling the side walls!

Doyle grabbed Jean Holmes and raced away, reaching a niche in the wall as the silent horde entered the town. But in horror he saw that some of the warriors had remained behind to cover the rear! They were cut off.

THE fugitives were quickly discovered, and Doyle had to fight his way from alley to alley. All Buchi was in an uproar, a wild din of shouts and gunfire. Gaining the cover of an empty dead-end alley, Doyle stood with his back to the wall, a hot, empty rifle in his hands and the fear-taut girl beside him. He could hear Sudanese warriors searching the adjoining alley.

And then through all the din of battle came a startling, unexpected sound. It was the sharp blare of a bugle sounding a bayonet charge! Doyle heard the nearby Sudanese shout and race to the fort to aid their companions. Jean shouted joyously, "The Legion!"

Machine-guns began rattling inside the oasis. The Sudanese must have opened the gates for their followers, and the Legion had charged in, bayonets clearing a space for their gunners. A bloody, effective business, because all firing ceased at once.

Doyle led Jean Holmes through the maze of alleys to the fort and saw sullen, disarmed natives of both factions herded in one end of the square. The camel corps, which had been pursuing him was there, in addition to full companies of French foot-soldiers. Bronzed little Captain Vail, who commanded the Mahmadoou outpost, was in charge.

Vail drew his revolver when he saw Doyle and said, "You are at the end of the trail, M'sieu. I suggest you submit quietly."

Jean Holmes cried, "Doyle is innocent! LaTour is the one who killed and robbed Smith!" and told her story.

After Doyle added his part, Vail's little eyes grew excited. "*Sacre!* We knew Buchi was a queer place, but didn't dream it was LaTour's headquarters! This about his being in disguise at the Ourassa water hole makes me eager to get there. We have been searching for years for that too-clever countryman of ours."

"Then your p'one *did* discover me in the desert!" Doyle said. "But how is it that you joined the camel corps in the

search? *Mon capitaine*, did they need your companies, too, to subdue me?"

Vail smiled. "Our plane discovered more than you, M'sieu. Strange groups of tribesmen were seen moving in this direction, and it smelt of trouble. We came out to investigate and met the camel men on the trail. We were near enough to overhear this battle."

And so it was, the following morning, that Vail and his men headed out to surprise LaTour at Ourassa. Jean Holmes and Doyle—with the recovered emeralds—left with the camel squadron. And it gave Doyle a hollow feeling to see the girl sobbing softly as she rode beside

him, for in her final victory she was grieving over the man she had loved—Bert Wells, who had made a man of himself in spite of his past weaknesses.

Doyle turned his eyes from her and tried pondering over other things. A smile crept over his lean face as he anticipated the cries of delight Tamina would utter when she saw him again.

"My beating heart," she would say, "told me that you would come back!"

And he knew he would answer, "It is truly written so in the Koran."

Strangely, for the first time, his own heart was telling him that there was a lot of truth in that old saying.

Bookworms in the Army

One of the most interesting libraries in the Army is the one (there are two branches of it) in the Tent City of Kodiak, Alaska. The men stationed there, largely from West Virginia, Indianapolis, Tacoma, and Seattle, have received three thousand books from the folks back home. There is a wide range of fiction and nonfiction, and a popular collection of biography and history. The two favorites are *You Can't Do Business With Hitler*, and *Berlin Diary*.

More than a ton of magazines has been sent this library. These are not charged out to any individual. Anyone may take them from the racks with the stipulation that when he is finished with them he pass them on to another. No magazine must ever be destroyed or thrown away.

Magazines are popular favorites with all the camps. But the home-town paper comes first, and is eagerly sought after. The libraries are unable to subscribe to papers from the home towns of all the soldiers, and are pleased when such subscriptions are generously given their reading rooms.

"Oh, go read the telephone book!" is no longer a joke. It is very real. When the Service Club library at Camp Roberts opened, there was such a steady call for telephone directories of the larger cities along the West Coast, that the librarian sent out an SOS. Within a short time directories were being sent from virtually all of California, as well as from Seattle, Spokane, and Tacoma, Washington; Portland, Oregon, and Chicago.

The first library on wheels was tried out by the Army last summer when it followed the 38th Division into maneuvers from Camp Shelby, Miss. The literary truck was filled with 1,500 books and magazines.

Once in the field, two library-trained enlisted men set up a tent, put thirty chairs in it, and invited the soldiers to come in when they could. During the afternoons when the men had free time, the truck circulated up and down the company streets, peddling novels as if they were peaches. In the first experimental week, not a book was lost or damaged.

Adventure Cove

LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

by Gene Smaltz

I WAS a flyer in the last war, but they want youngsters like Bing to fly the planes in this war, so I'm a lighthouse keeper now. No, not the kind you think. My lighthouses are in the Rocky Mountains instead of on the coastline. They consist of a string of nine steel skeletons jutting into the sky with huge rotating beacons atop them. My job is to keep them all in good working order to guide the airplane pilots safely on their way at night.

Bing is my boy and he's in the thick of this fight we are into now, but about a year ago he was a transport pilot. His route lay over my "beat" and it gave me a good feeling to know I had a small part in making the airplanes safe for him. At night I used to lie awake waiting for ten o'clock and his plane going overhead, knowing the beacons were all shining to guide him home in case his instruments ever went on the blink. I still break out in a cold sweat when I

remember the only time I came near to failing him.

One crispy, cold morning in November I got up at daybreak to begin my check-up job on the string of beacons. I packed my lunch and a kit of emergency rations which I always carried with me. Then I rang the nearest radio communications stations to see if anyone had reported a light out.

"G'mornin', Andy," the operator said in answer to my ring. "Somethin' is wrong over on Bald Mountain. Better check it."

"O.K., Jim. I'll head for there first. It *would* have to be that one. It will take me the best part of the day to get there!"

"Good luck, Andy. Keep an eye on the weather and," he added, laughing, "don't let a cat tree you."

"So long, Jim, I'll bring you a cat's meow or a bearskin rug."

I hung up, grinning, and went out to take a look at the clouds forming in the west. They didn't look ominous, but I was well aware of what a difference a few hours could make in the weather.

I loaded my supplies on Pet, a scrawny, lop-eared little burro who had seen me through many adventures in



these wild mountains, and started the long trek up Bald Mountain.

"Well, Pet," I said, "here we go again. You are practically the only female I could get along with for a week."

I grinned again, thinking of Jim's warning. I always carried a gun on my rounds, but had never had occasion to use it except to shoot rabbit or game birds. Sometimes in fine weather, instead of putting in to a town at night, I slept in the open, bedding on fragrant pine needles and roasting rabbit or fowl over glowing coals.

IN MID-AFTERNOON the sky was overcast and a few soft flakes of snow began falling. I said, "Pet, old girl, it begins to look as if we won't make it to the village tonight, but we'll easy get that light going before dark."

A short time later we arrived at the foot of the trail where I always left Pet and made the rest of my way upward on foot. By this time the storm had begun in earnest and it was difficult to see more than a few yards in any direction.

I staked Pet where there was a sparse growth of winter grass and, taking my tools, began the short climb to the lighthouse. Since the big lights automatically overcome most difficulties themselves when kept properly oiled and cleaned, I reasoned that a short had probably caused a fuse to blow.

I was preoccupied with these thoughts and had my head down against the wind so I did not see the great shaggy menace directly in my path until I was a bare ten yards from him. A huge black bear was coming slowly toward me, his little yellow eyes fixed steadily on me.

In the next few seconds I knew fear—absolute, devastating fear. This was the first of these huge beasts I had ever met face to face, but I had heard stories of their fierceness and had even seen the remains of a man who had been attacked by one.

Quickly I looked around for a way of escape. As usual, I had left my gun in

the pack on Pet's back. The bear was directly in the path to the beacon tower. To the left was my only chance—a tall, branchy tree. It didn't look very promising, but it would have to do. I took a look at the bear and sprinted.

Perhaps the grizzly was astonished at my sudden maneuver, or perhaps he simply wasn't hungry, but he didn't, as I fully expected, make a dash for me. He just continued ambling toward me. But he was anything but friendly, as I discovered when he tried climbing the tree. When he found he couldn't reach me, he emitted short, vicious growls.

After I reached the safety of the tree, my fear of the bear left, but as the grey afternoon paled into dusk, a deeper fear gripped me. If I didn't get rid of the bear, I couldn't fix the light—and any night could be the one when a pilot's instruments became faulty. No. Not a pilot—but Bing! Bing would be flying this route tonight. And in this storm—

PRESENTLY Bruno ceased his growls and attempts to clamber up the tree, but he showed no inclination to leave and tumbled about in the snow, stopping now and then to look at me.

I made such childish attempts to get rid of him as talking and begging and scolding, and minute by minute it was getting darker. I felt impelled by a sudden urgency. I *had* to get to the tower. I was drenched in a cold, sticky sweat.

Finally I became aware that I was hungry and absently took a sandwich from my pack. Then I finally had an idea—not much of a one, it is true, but I hoped it might work. I threw the sandwich to the bear. When he had finished it, I threw another one, farther away, and another one on still farther. I even opened my emergency rations and, giving it all I had, I threw the last of it as far as I could beyond where the bear was feasting.

While he was so occupied, I scrambled down the tree and took it in double quick time through the thickly falling snow to the beacon tower.

My surmise about the fuse had been correct and I soon had the beam sending out its cheerful light through the blackness of the stormy night.

Afterwards I scrambled back down the mountain and found Pet patiently waiting. Later, in my sleeping bag in the lee of an overhanging rock and with my rifle close beside me, I heard the familiar droning of the transport's motors.

Smiling drowsily, I whispered, "That's the boy, Bing. Keep 'em flying!"

I probably couldn't have slept so peacefully had I known then what I learned days later when I returned home. Bing was in that snow storm above Bald Mountain that night—and his radio was dead!

A DEAD MAN SPEAKS

by Capt. S. James Lynch

I WAS making my way through the driving blizzard that swept down the country highway to report for duty at the State Police barracks where I was due at midnight. It was close to eleven-thirty, cold, and the snow had drifted high on both sides of the road.

Fear had seemed to grip me without explicable reason. There was something foreboding in that screaming wind, which seemed to carry with it an insistent warning.

When I reached the hilltop I could make out a hazy light through the blinding storm. I knew it came from a farmhouse I had seen many times, though I never had heard who occupied it.

Above the wind that sounded like a siren, a voice called to me from out the shadows of the trees.

"Beastly night to be out, stranger. Better step in for spell." His voice was unfamiliar but cheerful. I could discern a rugged-looking man standing near the house. When I came up to him I could see that he was tall and thin, in manner and appearance a woodsman. I judged

him to be about my age, thirty. He led the way to the old farmhouse and we entered by the rear door. I could see his hatch-face twitch in the glow of the lantern he carried. I was glad to accept his invitation, though his actions were a bit screwy. I thought it would be a good idea to thaw out a little before going the other mile, on such a night as this.

We went into the parlor and were met by a very attractive woman. She seemed dressed for the theater, rather than the farm, and I noticed the agitation with which she paced the room. She stared at me a little before she spoke.

"Tell me, are you afraid of the dead?" she asked.

It was like a bolt from the sky. The question was as unexpected as it was astonishing. In my work I had run into every sort of situation. Nothing, I believed, would frighten me, but there was a queer sort of intensity in her voice that made me uneasy. Still, I told her I had no fears of the dead.

"Then will you remain here while my brother and I go to see the mortician? We have some further arrangements to make for the burial. The dead man is in there." She pointed toward a bedroom. I noticed a slight hoarseness in her voice. A savage look shot into her eyes as she focused them on me. She saw me looking at the several pieces of luggage on the floor under the table and said in explanation:

"The dead man in there was my husband. He died of typhoid, so you had better not go near him." She paused. Then: "My brother is driving me to Wakefield in his car. We will be gone only a short while. Keep the fire going till we return, and—" She did not finish. It was a pretty queer situation, but I thought it wise to play possum.

When I noticed the telephone, I wondered why they had decided to drive on such a night when they could have phoned the undertaker. But I was determined to see the outcome.

(Continued on page 162)

The Last Round

By William Campbell Gault



"I'm going to throw in the towel. He's too much for you, kid," Crag said.

JIMMY looked at the front tire ruefully, and then his gaze shifted to the two-hundred-fifty pound occupant of the front seat. "It's ruined," Jimmy said, "and the spare isn't much better. We can't buy new ones and second-hand ones are sky high."

Crag smiled. He stretched his bulky arms and looked at Jimmy smugly. "So?"

"So we'd better get a different jalopy or a couple of bikes."

The smugness left Crag's broad and ugly face. "Bikes? Are you nuts? Do you know what bikes would do to our leg muscles?"

"You haven't got any muscles," Jimmy told him. "You're just a mess of beef."

Crag grunted contemptuously. "If you weren't a puny middleweight, I'd slap you around a little for that remark. You're always taking advantage of my good humor."

"I'm taking advantage of your laziness," Jimmy corrected him. "You wouldn't hit a fly unless you had a guarantee. Now you can come out and lift this front wheel up, so I can slide the jack under."

The heavyweight lifted himself out with a grunt. "I don't know why you don't get a jack that goes down low enough to get under the axle." He shook his massive head. "You're a puzzle, Jimmy Moynihan, in more ways than one."

"If I got a jack that worked," Jimmy said, "you'd never get any exercise. And about the rest of it, I thought that even you could understand that by now. Haven't you been enjoying yourself?"

Crag admitted that grudgingly.

"Haven't you learned a lot about people? Haven't you met some nice folks, made some good friends?"

Crag nodded.

"Don't you feel healthier, and ten years younger?"

"All right," Crag said. "For me, then, it's been a good thing. I got some fights and saved a few dollars, and made friends, and saw the country, and feel

healthier and ten years younger. For me, maybe I shouldn't kick! But how about you?"

Jimmy paused, jack in hand. "What about me?"

"A top middle. A ranking middle, you should be. In there, in the Garden, fighting those good boys for heavy sugar. So your ma could live like she oughta. So you could be where you oughta."

"I send my ma over thirty bucks every week," Jimmy said stiffly.

"All right," Crag grunted. His big back arched, and the front wheel of the flivver lifted about five inches off the ground. "The only arguments you ever listen to are your own anyway."

JIMMY slid the jack under and rose. His face was faintly colored. "I'm always willing to listen to reason," he said.

"Huh!"

"If you'd rather go it alone—" Jimmy said heatedly, then he stopped. "I'm sorry, Crag," he said self-consciously, "it's the Irish in me."

"This is a hell of a place for the Irish."

"I don't get it," Jimmy said.

Crag seemed to be speaking from some inner compulsion. His eyes avoided Jimmy's and his words were labored. "Australia would be better, or England, or China. That's where we belong."

Jimmy's color was coming back again. "For twenty-one bucks a month? Ma sure could live well on that."

"That's what I'm talking about," Crag said..

"Oh," Jimmy said. "I should make a lot of hay, so Ma could live on the interest. Then I should join up. That's a new angle for your old argument."

"It's new," Crag said. "But it's no angle."

Jimmy was losing control of his temper again. It was in the ragged edge of his voice, in the flashing eyes. "How about you, man mountain? Where's your musket?"

"I'll sign up, when you do," Crag said.

"What kind of patriotism is that?" Jimmy asked.

Crag was looking at the ground. "Not so good, maybe. But I—I kinda wanted to be where you were."

There was a silence, a long and embarrassed silence. Then Jimmy said, "Why don't you ever hit me? Why do you let me act like a seven year old half-wit? Why don't you hit me; you're big enough."

Crag smiled. "I only hit for money."

Jimmy tried a smile; it was flat. He went around in back to get the spare. His eyes were thoughtful and troubled.

Crag said no more, but there was a twisted smile on his battered lips, and a knowing gleam in his faded eyes.

All the ride into Westmore, Jimmy was silent. And he looked uncomfortable. Crag had finally advanced an argument that carried logic. This two-man barnstorming tour had been Jimmy's idea. Jimmy disliked big towns and the people in them. Jimmy had more than a touch of wanderlust in his make-up, and a way with second-hand cars. What better life could a young middleweight lead than driving from small town to small town, fighting the easy fights they offered, making friends and seeing the country?

Crag had acquiesced, because his chances for the important fights were all in the past. But ever since the heavy-weight had watched Jimmy, he had heckled him about the big time.

In Westmore, they drove the flivver over to the matchmaking establishment of one Abner Smith. Abner smiled when he saw them, held out a calloused hand. Matchmaking wasn't quite a paying business in Westmore, and the callouses were caused by that.

Abner said, "I got a purty good card lined up for Saturday night, but I need you boys. That's why I wrote."

"Who you got for me?" Crag asked.

"Farmer Burke."

Crag smiled. "A set-up. Money in the bank."

Abner turned to Jimmy. "I've got

something special for you. If you want it."

Jimmy nodded. "Anybody my size. That's my motto."

"TEN rounds, half the receipts to the Navy Relief," Abner said. "Even in the sticks, we're doing what we can. That'll cut your purse in half, but it should be pretty good anyway."

"Who's the man?" Jimmy asked.

"An old home-town boy," Abner evaded. "He's really just doing us a favor. A Westmore boy who made good."

"Oh-ho!" Jimmy said. "It sounds like you're leading up to something."

"It'll really be only an exhibition," Abner went on. "You won't have to mix too much. This guy is no brawler."

"Look," Jimmy said, "give! Who is this superman?"

"Vance Morrow," Abner told him, and waited for the reaction.

Jimmy's eyebrows lifted, and Crag grunted in surprise. Jimmy said, "I'm in no shape for that sharpshooter. He's almost ready for a title shot. He's too good for me."

"He's your size," Abner reminded him.

Crag said, "You would be doing your bit, as they say. And he ain't so far above you, Jimmy boy. You ought'a last a couple of rounds."

Jimmy looked at the heavyweight. "Thanks." He turned his gaze to Abner. "Okay. But if that Fancy Dan gets cute, I'm going to try one for the button. I've heard some stories about him."

Abner nodded. "So have I, and I wouldn't have matched you in anything but an exhibition. You—ah—will wear the light gloves, though."

Jimmy shook his head. "And I thought all the angle-shooters were in the big town!"

Abner looked pained.

Jimmy said: "How much?"

Abner hemmed and hawed a little. "About a hundred and fifty, clear, to you."

Jimmy sniffed. "You can give it all to the Navy Relief. If there was some money in it, maybe not. But a hundred and fifty for fighting that boy is an insult."

Abner looked even more pained. "Jimmy—and I thought I was doing you a favor."

Jimmy looked at the promoter for a second. Then he said, "I'll make you a proposition. Nothing—if I don't go the ten rounds. Three hundred if I do. And the Navy gets their cut, either way."

Abner was thoughtful. "That might make it a different fight. I'd have to tell Vance that."

"YOU do that. And tell him if he tries any of his cute tricks, I'll sic Crag on him."

They went out then, and Crag looked doubtful. "This is maybe not so smart. That Vance Morrow is a good boy."

Jimmy looked up wonderingly.

Crag continued. "You got a clean record. You ain't got any kayos against you, and only one bad decision, which you took care of in a return match. If we're going to start hitting the big towns, a perfect record would help."

"You're taking two things for granted," Jimmy said.

"Meaning—"

"That we're going to hit the big towns, and that his Vance can take me."

There was a newsstand on the corner here, and Crag pointed at the headline. "Gas to be Rationed" it read. "There's the answer to one of those things I was taking for granted. We won't be doing much touring from here in."

"That leaves only one," Jimmy said.

"Yeh," Crag agreed. "Only one—a tough one."

Jimmy was nervous and irritable in the two days before his fight with Vance Morrow. For one thing, he knew now that Crag was right. He had to take a crack at the big time now. Much as he hated cities, much as he hated the politics of the big bouts, he would have to go to town and play that game. And,

to add to his headache, he knew that Vance Morrow was going to be a very stubborn customer for a man who had been fighting in the small clubs.

Crag had a breather and couldn't see why Jimmy worried as he did. "You'll lose, sure. But he probably won't mark you up much, and a decision from him won't look too bad on your record."

"You and Abner should get together," Jimmy said curtly. "You'd think I was a round-heel. Have you ever thought that I might win?"

"Not now," Crag said. "With a smart manager, with the best trainer, with a little more experience, I'd back you. But not now."

Jimmy decided, then and there, that he was going to try and get to Vance Morrow. He was going to try and get to him early and land heavily. It would answer a lot of problems in his mind.

He thought, I've never fought a really good man. I don't know what I can do. If I can step in that company, maybe the city won't be too tough.

Strangely, Jimmy had always somehow feared the big towns and big men. Perhaps because his youth had been dominated by both. By the racket and scramble and dirt of the slums, and the ceaseless bullying of boys who were always a little bigger.

And again it was strange that he should have chosen fighting as a profession. Excepting that he had this stubborn core in him that refused to be dominated. He couldn't have analyzed it if he tried, but his youth had put its stamp on him. Perhaps now he was ready for the big towns and sharp men. And perhaps not.

Crag had the semi-windup, so Jimmy didn't see him. The big heavyweight came into the dressing room just before Jimmy went out, and his smile told the story.

Then Jimmy was marching down the aisle with one of the handlers supplied by Abner. Crag would be out after his shower to help.

Vance wasn't in the ring yet. There were a couple of photographers there, however, and Jimmy realized that this was an important fight to the papers. But only because of Vance. Vance was a title contender.

Jimmy got a fair hand. He had fought here before, and most of the crowd knew him. But it was Vance who got the real reception. The house rocked as he came down the aisle. This was the home town boy, and it was the first time many in the crowd had seen a near champion.

Vance had his own trainer with him, one of the best in the country. He had a very fancy silk robe and a smile of complete confidence. Jimmy began to get that feeling again, that stifled feeling of inferiority, and his quick temper began to stir.

He resolved again to get to Vance quickly, before the sharp-shooter's dancing could weary him.

They went out for the instructions, and Vance said, "Abner tells me you've got some ideas. Don't over-reach yourself."

"I won't," Jimmy promised. "I'm not fighting the champ."

"You never will," Vance told him.

Jimmy went back to his corner, and there was a faint trembling in his conditioned young body. He knew that the ring was no place to lose his temper. But the knowledge wasn't an antidote.

He flexed on the ropes, stretching the long muscles of his arms and legs. He saw a huge bulk coming down one of the aisles. It was just a big dark blob, but he knew it was Crag, coming to his corner for the beginning of the next round.

The bell, and he turned to face Vance Morrow.

He knew how Vance would come out. He had watched him before. Vance came out in that light step of his, his left moving like a cobra's head, his right up under his chin, swaying slightly. This Vance was like a ballet dancer, but more dangerous.

Jimmy tried to crowd in under the left, tried to land a hook, and Vance tied

him up almost instantly. Then Vance stepped clear, his left smacked into Jimmy's face.

Jimmy retreated, half-crouched, ready to try the hook again. Vance circled him, that left reaching, and Jimmy rushed. Again, Vance tied him up, and this time Vance scored with a right as they broke.

THE anger in Jimmy was mounting. He rushed in again, his chin buried, and his hook finally found Vance's midriff. Vance's hands came down, but Jimmy was inside of them, pounding away with both gloves.

Then Vance brought his hands up again, and the lacing of one glove scraped Jimmy's eye. Jimmy's eyes smarted terribly, and he broke, trying a whistling right for the button.

It was wide by a foot, and Vance slammed a straight left to his mouth. Jimmy tried to close again, and Vance's right found the mark.

Shaken, Jimmy retreated, stealing a glance at the ref. But Vance was a home town boy.

Jimmy moved in again, under the left, twisting away from the right, pounding the hook home. But Vance faded like a fog, and Jimmy found himself in a corner, blocked.

Vance moved in now, and his left was swift and punishing. Jimmy went into a shell, but something slammed into the back of his neck.

Again the referee hadn't seen it. Or didn't want to see it. A red mist filled Jimmy's mind, and he tore into Vance with both hands pumping. But Vance wasn't there. Vance chopped him as he sailed past, and when he turned, Vance threw a sizzling right.

Jimmy saw it coming, and tried to duck. Too late. It exploded on the button and Jimmy felt the marbles beginning to roll in his head.

A split-second he stood, dazed and unprotected, and then another bomb went off at the side of his head. The arcs whirled, and the hammering noise

of the crowd was like a tidal wave. Jimmy crumpled, and slumped to the canvas. He heard every member of the ref's count, but his legs were weak and rubbery, and his brain seemed to be whirling in his head. Then, at the count of 'eight', the bell rang.

He could feel Crag's big hands under his arms, then he was on his feet, Crag was guiding him to his corner. Crag was saying, "I'm going to throw in the towel. He's too much for you, kid. Too smooth, and too dirty."

Jimmy shook his throbbing head stubbornly, and slumped onto the stool. "No," he managed. "No towel."

Crag's hands were digging into the back of his neck, and the handler was working on his legs. Crag said something unprintable.

The ref was there, wanting to know if Jimmy was able to continue, and Crag told him a few things, still unprintable. Then, almost immediately it seemed to Jimmy, the warning buzzer sounded.

The bell, and Vance moving lightly across to meet him. Jimmy waited, his legs still shaky. Vance seemed to drift in, and that left reached out to flick Jimmy's nose. Jimmy retreated, circling away from that left, and Vance connected joltingly with the right.

Jimmy went into a shell, and closed. Vance tied him up, and it was Vance who draped his weight on the trembling Jimmy.

Then Vance broke, and that left began to dart out again. A feint, a jab, another feint. Jimmy tried to get the rhythm of it, but Vance slipped in a stinging right, and landed with a straight left.

Jimmy thought of the three hundred he stood to lose. He thought of the double foul Vance had committed in the first round. But what resolve he could summon, what courage he garnered, was melting under the steady, drumming punishment of Vance's machine-like blows.

Jimmy began to retreat again, and Vance stalked him, landing tellingly, monotonously, maddeningly.

TWICE, it seemed to Jimmy, Vance had a clear shot at his chin. But neither time did the sharpshooter take advantage of it. Jimmy was out on his feet at the bell.

Crag said, "That guy is killing you, kid. Slow. He coulda put you away. He's showing off for the folks. That guy ain't human in his head."

Jimmy nodded dizzily.

"I'm going to toss in that towel," Crag said.

Jimmy shook his head.

The third was unvarnished hell. In the clinch, Vance said, "This could have been fun. But you wanted to play for keeps. It's your funeral." Then he stepped clear and plastered Jimmy's mouth with a right.

Jimmy felt his mouthpiece fly, and Jimmy charged with all the fury he had left. But Vance seemed to evaporate, and Jimmy sailed into the ropes.

Vance landed to the mouth again, and Jimmy's lower lip wedged over his teeth. He could taste the warm and salty blood in his mouth, and his stomach began to pitch.

Weakly, he stumbled into a clinch, trying to ride, trying to hang his weight. But Vance was a phantom, melting in his grasp, and Vance shook him with a right to the side of the head.

The crowd was screaming now, and to Jimmy it was like a distant siren, rising and falling in pitch, piercing his befuddled brain. Nauseated, thoroughly beaten, he staggered into the ropes.

He saw Vance close in, but it was Vance who went into the clinch, and Vance seemed to be supporting him, and Jimmy tried to clear his fuzzy brain.

The butcher! Jimmy thought. Trying to make it last, so he can dish out some more. Se he can show the home folks what a really tough guy he is.

But the thought only served to stir Jimmy's contempt. All the fury, all the anger in his fighting heart had been hammered out by those drumming, sodden gloves.

Jimmy lasted through the fourth, and

the fifth. Vance carried him through the sixth.

And in the seventh, Jimmy began to feel better. His head began to clear, his vision was better. He thought, if I can protect myself for three more rounds, I'll get that three hundred. That'll help, if I have to go to New York.

So, he went into his shell and let Vance come to him. He managed to survive the seventh, and the eighth. His legs were gone in the ninth, but his heart wasn't and his chin was buried deeply. Vance didn't look too worried.

THEN the bell was ringing for the start of the tenth, and Jimmy went out on his weary legs, with hope high in his heart. Vance began to mix.

He came in close and tried a hook, his first of the fight, and a good one. It landed dangerously low on the tired Jimmy, and his whole body seemed to wilt. Vance tried another, and this one was low, and what strength was left in Jimmy's legs evaporated.

Vance brought his shoulder up into Jimmy's chin, and then Vance stepped clear and threw a short and jolting right. Jimmy stumbled sideways from that one, right into a smacking left.

Jimmy's knees buckled, and he saw Vance's Sunday punch riding toward his chin. He closed his eyes. He had only enough strength for that.

The blow landed like a demolition bomb, and Jimmy felt like he was falling apart as he crashed. Lights, blinding and whirling, flashed through his brain, and then the darkness came. . . .

The flivver coughed a little, and then throbbed into a steady rumble. Jimmy put the car into low gear and edged out onto the main street. His eyes were straight ahead, squinting into the morning sun, and his lips were tightly compressed.

Crag, on the seat beside him, was silently morose. Neither of them said a word as they left Westmore behind. For almost twenty miles, neither said a word.

THEN, as they passed a roadside stand, Crag said, "I could eat any time now. I got the smell of that town out of my nose now, and my stomach's growling."

Jimmy nodded, his eyes never leaving the road.

Crag shook his big head. "It was murder," Crag admitted. "It was just like that butcher. But that's no reason for quitting. I never figured you'd do that."

Jimmy said curtly, "You told me I should be in the army. You're changing your story."

"No, I'm not," Crag said heavily. "And you know I'm not. I want you to go in the army. But you could make some money for Uncle Sam's boys first. That's more important, right now. A guy should do the most he can. You could donate most of your purses. You could fight some of those good boys, like Joe Louis is doing."

"I fought a good boy," Jimmy said. "Last night—remember?"

"You weren't ready for him," Crag said stubbornly. "And he was practically a cousin to that ref. You were robbed."

Jimmy sniffed. "Sure, by a yokel. What do you think would happen to me in town where the guys are really sharp, where the super-duper angle shooters grow on bushes? I've had enough of this rotten racket."

"It ain't rotten," Crag said. "Some of the guys in it are, but a lot aren't. You're just letting your temper think for you again. For a smart guy, you're dumber than I am, at times."

Jimmy's bruised face was fixed in a cynical smile. "Forget it, Crag." He pulled the flivver over, and braked in front of another stand. "You can stick to this game. I'm going to do my fighting with a gun."

They pulled up to a diner.

"You'll be no good to anybody in that frame of mind," Crag told him. He led the way into the diner.

THERE, as they waited for the cook to broil them a pair of steaks, Crag said, "A long time ago, before the boys found out I wasn't the white hope, I had a good manager. Barney Lucas, his name is, and I'd like you to talk to him. After you get through doing that, if you still want to sign up right away, I'll go with you. If you don't, we'll wait until Uncle Sam puts us where he really wants us. Okay?"

"Okay," Jimmy said wearily. He knew that if he didn't agree to that, Crag would argue all the way to town. And he didn't feel like talking this morning.

He was bitterly quiet all the rest of the way into town. He had decided to say 'no', regardless of what this Barney Lucas had to offer.

Barney Lucas had a little office not far from the stem, a second floor walk-up, and the walls were covered with pictures of fistic gladiators from way back.

Crag bellowed, "Barney!"

A man came out of the other room in this two room office. He was thin and slight, and his hair was streaked with silver. He said mildly, "You were always so well bred, Crag."

The heavy blushed, and stammered an introduction. Barney's cool eyes ran the length of Jimmy's frame, and his hand was cool in Jimmy's grasp. He said, "I'm always proud to meet any friend of Crag's. Even though he is a lug, I love him."

Crag said, "This kid is a darb, Barney. A regular Mickey Walker. He hasn't got any manager, and—"

Barney began to smile, and Jimmy said, "This wasn't my idea. I told him last night that I was through with the game. I've been telling him that all morning."

Barney's shrewd eyes fastened on Jimmy. "Through with the game? You look pretty young for that."

"Oh, that Vance Morrow gave him a pasting last night," Crag explained. "And he's a hot-head, and he got sore about it, and—"

Barney raised a restraining hand. "Maybe he'd better tell me about it."

Crag subsided, and Jimmy tried to put into words the emotions that had prompted his decision of the night before. He told about their barnstorming tour that was now doomed. And he finished, "I've always hated the big towns, the racketeering and politics around the ring here. I've seen enough of it to give me a bellyful! This trimming I took last night was just the straw that broke the camel's back. I know the upper crust of the game is filled with guys like him."

Barney shrugged. "Wherever there's money, there are racketeers. I—" He paused. "I can't see that a fighter who doesn't want to fight would be much use to me."

JIMMY reddened, and Crag said quickly, "He likes to fight, Barney. He'd rather fight than eat. He's just sour right now."

"I like to fight," Jimmy admitted, "but I don't like the rest of the game. At any rate, I'm taking a vacation from it for a while."

Barney nodded. Crag looked crestfallen as they left the manager's office, but he had nothing further to say. Jimmy drove him over to the small hotel he lived at while in town, and then headed for the lower east side.

There, he braked the flivver before a weather-beaten brick structure, a former home that had been subdivided into furnished rooms. He climbed the steps to the first floor. The hall here smelled of cooking, dampness and decay. Jimmy moved up another flight of steps and paused before a room near the front. He put his biggest smile on and opened the door.

A thin, finely featured woman sat near the window in the room, placidly knitting a shawl. She looked up, as the door opened, and then her faded blue eyes brightened.

"Jimmy!" she said. "Jimmy, darling."

Then her arms were around his neck,

and Jimmy lifted her high. "Knitting!" he said. "Like an old woman, like you weren't the best dancer in the block." He was grinning, an entirely different Jimmy from the morose lad who had left Crag downtown.

But he didn't completely fool his mother. She saw the bruises on his face, and her faded eyes looked deep in his. "What happened, Jimmy boy?"

He tweaked her nose. "I forgot to duck."

"You must have forgotten more than once," she said. She shook her grey head. "Jimmy boy, you were over-matched."

Despite the bitterness in him, he was forced to laugh at that. "It doesn't matter. I'm quitting anyway."

"Because you took a licking, Jimmy?"

"No," he said. "That's—only part of it."

She was studying him. "Some times, I don't understand you. You're like your father in a lot of ways, and I never understood him, though it didn't stop me from loving him more than my life."

"There's nothing to understand," he said. "I won't be able to travel to the small clubs any more, and I'm—I'm not ready for the good boys."

"You sound like your father now," she said. "It's what kept him poor. He had a lot of ability, that man, but he never felt he was ready for the big chance. And how he hated this town, any big town." She paused, her eyes ruminative. "But he had a job here, and he didn't want to take a chance. He didn't want to move, unless he had another one waiting."

Jimmy felt vaguely uncomfortable. "Look, Mom, you're not balling me out, are you? Because maybe you'll remember you weren't so hot about this boxing business, right from the start."

"But you were," she said.

"Yes," he admitted. "Yes, I was. But—let's not talk about it any more. I'll think it over."

"Do that," his mother said. "And maybe a vacation will be good for you."

BUT it wasn't completely a vacation. Because Jimmy's mother had stirred up a lot of questions in his mind, and he was having trouble with the answers. He didn't want to think himself yellow, but some of the answers seemed to indicate that. The least they indicated was that he was quitting at a very suspicious time. If I were really yellow, he thought, I'd have quit, back there at Westmore. I'd have let Crag throw in the towel.

The next day, he phoned Barney Lucas. "If you're interested in me, I'm ready to fight."

"I'm interested," Barney told him. "Go over to Hillman's and take your ring clothes along. I'd like to see you work out."

Jimmy threw his togs into his little grip, and hustled down there. It was a huge gym, Hillman's, and filled with pugs. There was the smell of sweat and rubbing alcohol, and the constant pounding of gloves. It was a hangout for all the ring habitués, from the flashily dressed gamblers to the seedy Punchinellos. It was the kind of place that Jimmy didn't like, but he would be seeing a lot of it now.

Every few minutes a gong rang, and the pugs who were sparring timed themselves with that. It was a monument to the art of swat, Hillman's, and its disciples lived for their art.

Lucas was there when Jimmy arrived. And so was somebody else. Vance Morrow. Vance was sparring with a plug-ugly, and there was quite a crowd watching him.

Jimmy felt a strange hollowness in his stomach, a feeling he couldn't define, and then Barney Lucas was talking. "I've lined up a brawling middle I'd like to see you mix with." He introduced Jimmy to a battered gent at his side, one Spoiler Burke.

Jimmy looked at the pug's scrambled features, and shook the huge paw. Then he went into the dressing room to change his clothes.

In there he was still trying to define the feeling that had come over him at

the sight of Vance Morrow. He didn't want to believe what it seemed he must believe. Because he had a score to settle with that boy.

Barney had arranged for a ring, and Jimmy climbed between the ropes. The one minute bell had just rung, so he stretched and limbered for the brief rest period. Spoiler looked a little heavy for a middle, and he had a pair of shoulders that were really impressive.

The bell rang, and Spoiler came out in a crouch, both big arms low and bent, his chin buried. A sucker for a boxer, Jimmy thought, but Jimmy was no boxer. Jimmy circled away from the right hand, and studied this ring-weary veteran.

Spoiler closed, swinging his left in like a club, and Jimmy side-stepped nimbly. Jimmy chopped him on the whiskers, and half turned him. Jimmy tried a hook as Spoiler twisted, and he felt it sink into the soft belly. Then Spoiler landed a hook.

JIMMY stepped clear, and tossed a right for the mouth. It landed flush, but the Spoiler didn't even slow up. He came in clubbing.

Jimmy felt the power of those hairy arms now, and it shook him. But he backtracked, pumping his left, landing almost at will on that battered face.

And Spoiler kept coming. Like a tank, like some pre-historic animal hunting down a prey. Jimmy pumped lefts and rights into that ugly face, but he was retreating as he did, and the other man came on. Jimmy transferred his attack to the stomach.

Again his gloves went in to the laces, and he could almost feel Spoiler slow up. But these were the heavy gloves they wore, and it was hard to punish a customer like Spoiler with those.

Jimmy was beginning to get arm-weary at the bell.

The crowd that had circled Vance's ring now circled this one, and Vance himself was standing near one of the corner posts.

He had a superior smile on his face. Barney, in Jimmy's corner, said, "Don't mind him. We'll get a shot at him again, if we're lucky."

Jimmy realized then that he wasn't looking forward to that.

In the next round, Jimmy stuck to battering Spoiler's midriff. It was more vulnerable than his face, he found, but still the Spoiler charged, and his heavy hands still carried power. Jimmy began to get nettled.

This Spoiler was strictly a has-been, and still he could keep coming, absorbing Jimmy's heaviest artillery. Asking for more and dishing it out.

Jimmy stood his ground, and put his weight into a left for the chin. Spoiler tried to ride the punch, as Jimmy hoped he would. Jimmy's right came whistling around to meet that moving jaw.

It staggered the Spoiler. He took a backward step, looking even more dazed than normal, and Jimmy began to pour them in. He landed high with another right, then fainted, trying to set up a button-shot.

Spoiler went into a shell, and Jimmy brought him out of it with a stinging uppercut. Now it was Jimmy who was moving in, weaving, crouching, ready for a shot with either hand. Jimmy was dishing it out at the bell.

Barney said, "That guy isn't called Spoiler for nothing. He's slow and punchy, but's he's never been knocked out. So, don't try it. Stick to his stomach."

A voice called out, "If the kid would like a little faster competition, I'll take over!"

The crowd laughed, and Jimmy reddened. He looked up to see the grinning unmarked face of Vance Morrow.

Barney shouted, "Your time will come, Vance. But we don't fight for charity."

"The kid did," Vance answered, "just the other night."

Jimmy felt the rage boiling in him as the bell rang. He gave the Spoiler a very stormy session for the next three

minutes. At the end of the round Barney called a halt. And he said crisply, "You'll do. You've got some things to learn, but the best place to learn them is in the ring." He looked at Jimmy squarely. "But before we sign any contract, I want to be sure you don't get a change of heart again."

Jimmy was silent for seconds before he answered. Then he said, "I won't. That's a promise."

BARNEY lined Jimmy up for a fight in one of the smaller local clubs that very week. His opponent was a cutie, of the Vance Morrow type, but without either Vance's polish or his right hand.

Because one of Barney's other boys had a tough fight that same night, Barney couldn't be in Jimmy's corner. But Crag went in his stead, and Crag was a ringwise ally. And Crag's blunt and prodding fingers were unbelievably skilful.

This cutie's name was Danny Baker. He evidently believed that you can't be licked if you can't be caught, and he made a foot race of the early rounds.

Then the fans began to boo, and in that section of town a pug can fear the fans as much as his opponent. Danny came in to exchange a few.

Jimmy put his number one weapon, the hook, deep into Danny's tummy, and Danny decided that was enough. He sat down on the canvas, and looked up at Jimmy painfully.

The crowd shrieked ominously, and Danny got up again. He put his left hand in Jimmy's face, and kept it there for the remainder of the round.

In the corner Crag said, "You'd better put this Fancy Dan to sleep early. A long bout with him is going to look bad to the fans. And they're the guys who put the bread in your mouth. Or the cake."

So Jimmy went out in the next round with determination in his heart, and lightning in both gloves. He carried the fight to Danny and landed him, eventually, in a corner, where all the not-too-cuties wind up. Then Jimmy let him

taste the hook again, and, as Danny doubled, a hundred-sixty pounds of right hand. Danny went to sleep.

In the dressing room Crag said exultantly, "See what you can do to those boys when you make up your mind?"

Jimmy looked at him suspiciously. "What's the angle?"

"I mean those cute guys," Crag explained. "You can take them if you're on your toes, and if the ref's honest—"

Jimmy smiled. "Don't bother to explain any more," he said. "You mean I shouldn't be afraid of Vance Morrow."

Crag's mouth was open, and his bleak eyes were blanker than usual. "Yeh," he said, "that's what I meant."

"It's early. What do you say we drop over to Kelley's for a bite, and see all the people."

"See all the people?" Crag echoed stupidly. "You?" And then, "Oh, yeah. Light's beginning to dawn. You are going to cure yourself. You are going to become a good-time Charley."

"Not quite," Jimmy admitted. "But you've got the general idea."

KELLEY'S was a hangout for the more socially minded of the town's sport set. The cover charge wasn't too high, and the band wasn't too bad, and some of the entertainers were really good.

Kelley greeted them at the door. He was an amiable Irishman with a broken nose and one faintly cauliflowered ear. He led them to a floorside table.

Crag said, "As long as we were going out for a good time, I'd rather go down to Harlem."

But Jimmy wasn't listening. His eyes were on a table across the floor. Vance Morrow sat there with his manager, and a girl. A very, very pretty girl, dark, and about shoulder high—so far as Jimmy could determine.

Crag saw Jimmy's glance, and remarked, "I've heard him called 'The Ghost' but you're the first guy he ever haunted, that I know."

"Who," said Jimmy, "is the girl?"



Then Jimmy's good hook came crashing through, and Vance was at his mercy.

"Mike's sister," Crag said. "I hear Vance kind of sails for her." Mike Allen was Vance's manager. "She sings here."

"What's her name?" Jimmy wanted to know.

Crag scratched his shaggy head. "It starts with 'A'. Not Alice, it's a funny name. 'Amber', that's it. Amber Allen."

"That isn't a funny name," Jimmy said. "That's a very pretty name. And she's a pretty girl."

Crag looked over suspiciously. "Look," he said, "you can carry this cure business a little too far. Fooling around with Vance's girl is just asking for a punch in the nose."

Jimmy nodded agreement. "But she's still a pretty girl."

She came out into the spotlight about twenty minutes later and sang a song. Jimmy saw that she *was* about shoulder high, and her beauty was even more evident. And she had something besides her beauty.

He was still clapping when the rest of the applause had subsided.

He could sense that Vance Morrow hadn't missed that clapping, and Vance's eyes met his across the floor. Vance wasn't smiling this time. Jimmy stifled a faint whisper of apprehension. His gaze didn't waver, as Vance tried to stare him down.

Crag whispered, "Cut it. Look at me."

Then Crag's eyes went past him, and his eyes widened. Jimmy heard a voice at his shoulder.

"I should think you'd learn, after the licking I gave you."

Crag said quickly, "Don't start anything here, Vance. We don't fight by rules here, and I'd break your back."

Jimmy looked up in time to see Vance's eyes shift to Crag. There was a silence. Jimmy didn't rise, and hated himself for it. He tried to believe that he didn't want to cause a scene, but it was only something he tried to believe.

Then he heard Vance say, "I'll be seeing you, sonny, some day when King Kong isn't with you." He heard Vance's heels clicking back toward his own table.

There was, strangely, no rage in Jimmy. There was only this frightening emptiness, and he thought of Baer before the Louis fight. His eyes didn't meet Crag's.

CRAG said finally, with the wisdom born of a thousand battles, "Sometimes a guy gets the Indian sign on you. It's not being yellow."

Jimmy looked up, and he had the humor to smile at himself. "I wonder where my terrible temper's gone?" he said.

But despite Vance's having the 'Indian sign' on Jimmy, Jimmy couldn't forget Amber. Amber Allen, the name was a sing-song in his mind. He reasoned that she must have been with her brother; no girl as pretty as that would need to go out with Vance Morrow.

He slept late the next morning, and his mother had breakfast ready when he got up. "It's been a long time since you talked in your sleep, Jimmy boy."

Jimmy colored, for no reason that he knew.

"Amber, you were saying," his mother went on. "Would it be some kind of a stone, or a girl?"

"It might be a girl," Jimmy admitted. "I heard a singer by that name last night." Then he buried his head in the morning paper.

There was one item of particular interest on the sport page. Vance Morrow was to get a title shot. Red Barton, the champ, was completely a mixer, and Jimmy knew that Vance had better than an even chance to get the crown. Jimmy turned to the comics.

Barney lined him up with another sharpshooter in Philly, the following week. This time Barney came along with Crag.

The sharpshooter was named Charley Voltz, and he was a step above the boy Jimmy had flattened in New York. He had a right hand, for one thing, and he put it into Jimmy's face in the first round, just so Jimmy would know.

Jimmy kept away from it after that. He kept circling away from it, trying to hammer that hook in there, and once in a while he did.

But Voltz was nimble and Voltz was quick, and he kept peppering away at Jimmy's face until Jimmy lost his temper. Then Jimmy sailed in, and Voltz let him have the right again.

Jimmy went back and over, and he skidded along the canvas on the seat of his trunks. He was dazed a little, but not as he should have been by a clear right hand shot, so he got up at '5' and sailed in again.

Voltz tied him up at the bell.

Barney said, "That hook of yours is a good one, but there are some other blows in the catalogue. You might try one or two, just to see if they work."

So Jimmy went out in the next round and tried a couple of rights. He tried a straight left, then he tried the hook. And as Voltz rode away from it, Jimmy brought his right around sharply.

VOLTZ stumbled into the ropes, and Jimmy piled in. Jimmy set him up with a left feint, and then put his moxie into a right. Voltz crumpled like a deflated balloon.

On the trip back, Barney said, "I can see why Vance took you. He knew what to expect. When in doubt, try a hook, that's been your policy. By the way you

handled Spoiler, I knew you could mix with any brawler. But the boxers—you're going to have trouble with them, lad."

"I'm willing to learn," Jimmy said.

"That's what I've been counting on," Barney said. "And it might work out all right. About ninety-eight per cent of the young kids are right hand crazy. It's refreshing to have a change."

Over at Hillman's the following week, Barney had Jimmy work on both the light and heavy bag. Then he fastened his left hand behind him, and let him pound the big bag with his right. Then, with his hand still fastened, Jimmy tangled with a stepping lightweight.

It was murder at first. Then, under Barney's coaching, Jimmy learned to weave, to keep his head moving, riding with the blows. He learned to move his right hand through a shorter arc, and to put his weight into it with the proper timing. The lightweight was still scoring at the end of the session, but not so often.

He had more of that the next day, and a lot of two handed bag work. That night, Barney took him to see a real two-fisted brawler, a man with dynamite in both hands, Slugger Jackson.

Slugger was fighting a cutie named Larson, and Larson kept the Slugger busy for the first two rounds. Larson's left hand was a thing of beauty, and his footwork was worthy of Astaire. He must have connected fifty times with that left in the first two rounds. But Slugger didn't seem to mind, and Jimmy saw why.

Most of those left hands were landing high on Slugger's head, failing to strike vulnerably at that moving target. And Larson's hand couldn't be feeling too well by now. Larson began to throw his right, a swift and accurate weapon.

But they, too, landed high, or hit a retreating target. Larson began to get desperate, crowding, throwing leather indiscriminately. That's when Slugger went to work.

Slugger came in low, and his hook

smashed the dancing Larson into the ropes. Slugger hooked again—and brought up a sizzling uppercut for the button.

Larson seemed to fold in the middle, and Slugger tagged him with the finisher, a screaming overhand right that could be heard in the dollar seats.

Jimmy was impressed.

As they walked out slowly, with the milling crowd, Barney said, "Too many of the so-called 'experts' think that a slugger is a round-heel, who's right hand crazy, with marbles in his head. A fast brawler, who can use both hands, will take any Fancy Dan in the business. But he's got to be good, damned good. You'll maybe remember Jack Dempsey."

"And Tunney," Jimmy kidded him.

"You're remembering an old man," Barney said. "I mean the Dempsey who fought Carpentier. I mean the Dempsey who used to be over in the other guy's corner before the guy was off his stool. You mustn't get him confused with that later guy, that old man."

"I still think Tunney would have taken him," Jimmy said. "And I think Louis would take—"

"Look," Barney said, "if we're going to argue, let's go over to Kelley's and argue in comfort."

Jimmy felt a little tingle chase up his spine. "Let's," he agreed.

SHE WAS singing when they arrived. It was an old number, Night and Day, but she made it seem like a new tune. Jimmy stood next to the hat checking room, his eyes never leaving her face, until she finished.

"Oh," Barney said then. "Like that."

"Like that," Jimmy said.

Barney shook his silver head. "Vance Morrow—"

"I know," Jimmy said. "But she probably doesn't like him. She couldn't. Look, do you know her?"

Barney nodded.

"You'll introduce me then?"

Barney nodded again. "I suppose that

argument's out now. Maybe, after I introduce you, you'd like me to fade?" Then, "No, there's Mike Allen over there. I could talk to him."

Both of them walked over to Mike's table, and Barney introduced Jimmy. Mike said, "Vance will be along any minute now." He was looking at Jimmy.

Jimmy tried a grin. "Vance sure hates my guts."

"Maybe he's afraid of you," Barney said. "Or maybe he's just jealous."

"Jealous?" Mike looked puzzled.

"Jimmy is smitten," Barney explained. "He's got a case on your sister."

Jimmy could feel the color flooding his face. He looked at Barney wrathfully.

Mike and Barney laughed. Mike said, "Well, you and Vance can fight that out, but not outside the ring. I might add that Vance's campaign isn't doing so well."

Jimmy felt better then.

She came over, after her number, and Mike said, "Amber, this is Jimmy Moynihan. Barney says he's impressed by your beauty. He's the boy Vance warned you about."

Amber smiled, held out a slim hand. "He doesn't look dangerous," she said smilingly.

Jimmy felt a sudden unexplainable weakness.

Mike said, "He isn't dangerous, yet. But he might be."

Jimmy found the courage then to say, "If we danced, we wouldn't have to listen to these insults."

"That might be a good idea," she admitted.

JIMMY had spent or (misspent) a large part of his early life in the dance halls of the lower east side. He danced with an easy grace, and Amber followed him intuitively.

They talked little, but Jimmy sensed that she was enjoying this moment. He said hesitantly, "I hope I didn't embarrass you by clapping so much the other night."

She looked up and mischief danced in

her eyes. "I think you embarrassed Vance more than you did me. Applause never hurts an entertainer."

"This Vance," Jimmy said, "is he—I mean, do you—"

She was smiling at his discomfiture. "No," she said.

"Oh," he said. "Well, that's—that's just swell."

Again thoseimps were in her eyes. "What is?" she asked in mock innocence.

But he matched her smile. There was too much elation in him for any embarrassment. "I'm glad you're not his girl," he said bluntly.

"I'm nobody's girl," she said.

"Not until now."

And it was her turn to flush.

Vance was there when they returned to the table. Jimmy felt that hollowness in him again, and his jaw set rigidly. But Vance was under control. He rose, nodded to Jimmy. His eyes avoided Amber.

There was a half hidden smile on Amber's face, and she winked at Jimmy.

Mike said, "Well, Vance, we'd better be getting home. This is the big one coming up now, and you've got to be right."

"He's got to be better than that for Red," Barney said.

Vance looked at Barney contemptuously, and the contempt was still in his eyes when he looked at Jimmy. "This will be the champ, I'm fighting," he told Barney. "Not that powder puff of yours."

He left them with that.

Barney looked at Jimmy, and Jimmy could feel Amber's eyes on him, too. Barney asked gently, "Has that guy got the sign on you?"

Jimmy looked down at the table.

Amber asked, "What does he mean, Jimmy? What does he mean by the 'sign'?"

"He wants to know if I'm afraid of Vance." Jimmy looked up and his eyes met hers squarely.

"Are you?" she asked.

"I think I am," he said simply.

She said, "Oh," and the way she said it was like a knife in his heart. Then, "I've another song in a few minutes. I'll have to leave now."

Jimmy rose, as she did, and watched her disappear toward the dressing room. He knew she wasn't due to sing for another two hours.

Barney said, "Maybe we'd better be getting home, too."

"I'd like to get drunk," Jimmy said, "but it probably wouldn't help."

"After you fight Vance next time," Barney said, "after you lick him, I'll let you get drunk. I'll even go with you."

Jimmy worked out at Hillman's all the rest of that week, and then Barney told him about his next fight. It was Slugger Jackson. "It's the biggest one you've had so far," Barney said. "And the toughest. If you get by this boy, you're ready for the big time."

But the big time meant Vance Morrow.

JIMMY was still working his right hand overtime as he prepared for the joust with Slugger Jackson. He realized that his early training had been meagre, and that even two months ago he was a long way from a bout with the Slugger.

Crag told him, "This Slugger's got title ideas, and he's really going to be steamed for this one. You'll have to step."

Jimmy trained with a couple of fast welters and found he could move right with them. He remembered Barney's words regarding a fast slugger, and he knew that he had the advantage in speed. But he also knew that Slugger's well trained right hand was better, and that more than made up for the advantage in speed.

And he thought of something else, though he was ashamed to admit it, even to himself. If he lost to Slugger, he wouldn't have to fight Vance Morrow.

He was preoccupied that week, and his mother noticed it. She said, "You're either in love, or sick. It's hard to tell which."

"Maybe, it's both," he said. And then, because she was the one person in the world he could talk to, and because he had to talk to someone, he told her about it. About Amber and Vance Morrow, and his decision to join the army if he could earn enough in the next few months to guarantee her support.

"It's quite a load you've been carrying, Jimmy boy," she said sympathetically. "But you mustn't think about being a coward." She put a thin hand on his arm. "Would you be joining the army, if you were a coward? Would you be fighting for a living? It's only this complex of your father's you have. It's this inferiority thing, and you'll lick it."

He knew her words made sense, but still the feeling persisted, and he remembered Amber's sudden coldness the night Vance had said his little piece.

Jimmy went over to Kelley's again that night. He sat at a floorside table, where Amber couldn't miss him, and he crossed his fingers and waited.

She saw him the instant she came out. Her eyes held his for a fraction of a second, and then she looked away. There was no sign of recognition on her face.

Jimmy waited for her to finish her songs, and when she had, she looked again in his direction. He beckoned and rose.

She seemed to hesitate, an eternity it seemed to Jimmy, and then she was walking over towards his table. She said "Hello" and took the chair he held for her.

JIMMY sat down. He looked across the table at her and didn't know where to begin. She wasn't helping any. She sat rigidly in her chair and said nothing.

Jimmy said finally, "We were getting along swell the other night, until—until you asked me about Vance."

"Were we?" she said.

"You know we were. And after that you—you acted like some school kid, some kid whose hero was bluffed by the school bully."

She looked up, and her firm little chin lifted. "Well?"

Jimmy's voice dropped to a lower note. "I thought if anybody could understand the way I felt, you could. I hoped for a little more understanding than that."

"It's an emotion I don't want to understand," she said. "It's an emotion there's no place for today."

"Haven't you ever feared anything?" Jimmy asked.

"Not without reason. I've never avoided anything just because I feared it."

"What Barney said, about me being—being in love, that was all true. I'm sorry now. I thought you were somebody that I see now you aren't. I thought you were human."

He rose then, knowing he was rude, knowing he was saying things he would regret. But his temper held. "I won't bother you any more," he said, and left.

He walked all the way home, and under the fury and disappointment in him was a hollow, lonely emptiness.

His mother was still up, and Jimmy looked around the shabby, comfortable living room. "After this fight with Slugger," he said, "after I lay him among the daisies, we're going to get an apartment. You deserve something better than this."

Jimmy's right hand began to shape into a weapon. He had learned to shift, so that his weight was behind it. He learned to cross it over an opponent's left, and he learned that a right cross can do a lot of damage. Because, like a hook, a cross connects from the side and all the shock is absorbed by the neck muscles. It was a devastating blow. And Slugger would be vulnerable to that; Slugger carried his left low.

Under Barney's tutelage, Jimmy picked up some pointers on infighting, on breaking up a clinch, snapping a punch across in a voluntary break-up.

He learned to use a lot of tricks he had only heard of before, and he began to realize that Crag had been right about Barney.

But these were all tricks that Slugger had been practising for years. With Slugger they were automatic. Jimmy's speed was still his best weapon.

A couple days before the fight, he and Crag went through a two round session at Hillman's. Crag's two hundred-fifty pounds was like a brick wall, and Jimmy's gloves seemed to bounce off that solid midriff. But Crag's chin was vulnerable; it had kept him from the big money, and Jimmy took a couple of shots at that.

They wore heavy gloves, and a knock-out with those was impossible. But, twice, Jimmy staggered the man mountain with his newly developed right.

At the end of the session, Crag said, "You're a hundred per cent niftier than you were that night in Westmore. You're going places now."

Then they both looked over, to see Vance Morrow standing at the ringside with his manager. Vance was smiling, the same superior smile he wore that night at Westmore.

Crag said quietly, "He sure keeps an eye on you. Maybe he's worried."

But Jimmy didn't think so.

THE BOUT with Slugger was slated for twelve rounds, a wind-up to a Navy Relief show, and a good share of Jimmy's purse was to go for that. But it still left a heartening sum for a boy who was used to small town purses. And it made him resolve, more than ever, to win—to get a crack at even bigger purses and better men. He didn't think beyond the general term 'better men.'

Crag was in his corner that night. Jimmy realized how much that meant to him, now that he had a real test. Crag's voice was soothing, and his big bulk was like a familiar landmark.

Across the ring, the Slugger looked bigger than he was, and his face uglier. Crag kept standing in front of Jimmy, blocking his view, until Jimmy told him, "It's all right, Crag. He doesn't scare me." But he wondered if another face across the ring from him would.

They went out for their instructions, and Jimmy got a close-up of that rocky face. There was scar tissue over the eyes, and both lips were battered. One ear was faintly thickened. But the rippling muscles in the Slugger's shoulders were what really drew Jimmy's eyes. That and the size of those dynamite-laden hands.

The bell! The concentration of light over the ring, and the hush that fell over the noisy house. The Slugger coming out flat-footed, like a stalking tiger, intent on finishing his prey quickly and savagely.

But Jimmy took the offensive, closing immediately, and landing the hook to the stomach heavily. Slugger was a little surprised; he had always carried the fight to his opponent. But not for long. The Slugger tied up Jimmy expertly, and then broke, trying a chop.

Jimmy closed again, landing twice with a left, and then Jimmy broke. He broke, stepping out fast, and Slugger followed him. Jimmy put the new straight right in his face, and Slugger slowed. Jimmy tried again, and was short.

Jimmy saw then that Slugger's low left dropped even lower when he threw a right hand. He filed that away for future reference.

They came together again, swinging, throwing leather in a flurry that had the fans howling. What the fans didn't see was that both men were riding with the punches, weaving, offering a moving and hard-to-hit target for their opponent's gloves.

They finished in a whirlwind of gloves to a standing house.

Crag said, "He can't keep up that pace. Mix with him, Jimmy boy, but keep that chin buried."

JIMMY kept his chin buried. He went out for the second, and gave Slugger an opening for a right hand. Slugger took it. And when he did, Slugger dropped his left even lower, and Jimmy countered with a right cross that carried his weight.

Slugger slowed, and Jimmy moved in, pouring leather. He could feel that battered body give before his drumming blows, and he stepped clear to try a shot for the chin.

But the wily Slugger brought up an uppercut that nearly tore off Jimmy's head. Jimmy stumbled back, dazed and shaken, and now it was Slugger's turn to pitch. Jimmy felt a smashing blow land on his ribs, and then the Slugger's heavy right hand landed to his neck.

Jimmy tried to tie him up, but the Slugger was no tenderfoot. Slugger kept his hands pumping, at least one of them was dangerously low. Jimmy was being crowded toward a corner.

Then he could feel the ropes at his back, and he used their tension, to come in, covered. But the Slugger had smelled blood, and he was living up to his name. He was pounding them in from all angles, hoping for an early victory, knowing Jimmy's legs would win over a long route.

Somehow Jimmy rode the storm, his chin buried, his shoulders hunched. He rode out the round, but he was still shaken when he went to his corner.

Crag said, "That was his best round. He shot his wad that round."

Jimmy hoped so.

Slugger came out fast for the third round. His hook came pounding in low, and his right was ready for a button shot. Jimmy tied him up successfully, draping his weight, and Jimmy landed heavily to the heart.

Slugger kept coming in, forcing the issue, keeping Jimmy on the defensive. Then Slugger connected with a heavy, looping right.

Jimmy's brain seemed to rattle, and he stumbled forward into a clinch, shaking his head savagely to clear it.

But Slugger stepped clear of his groping hands, and for thirty seconds Jimmy got a pasting. Then another right hand found the button, and Jimmy hit the canvas.

He was not completely out, but he was dizzy and sick as he watched the

referee's white arm rise and fall. At '7' he climbed to one knee, shaking his head gingerly. At '9' he was up.

The Slugger came in again, clubbing, full of battle lust, looking for a button hole. But Jimmy's arms were up, and Jimmy's head was buried. Jimmy waltzed out the round with Slugger.

Crag was saying soothing words, and Crag's big hands were massaging Jimmy's neck. Then Jimmy felt a cold wetness on his face, and the edges of things looked less fuzzy.

"Stay away from him," Crag was saying. "Stay on your bike for a while until those old legs of his curl."

Jimmy danced through the next round, forcing his shaky legs to carry him clear of that swinging right hand, those savage rushes. He used his speed plenty that round, and finished without catching anything damaging.

"Another round," Crag advised. "Another round of bike work and you can go in there and take him."

Jimmy wished he felt like Crag talked.

But his legs held up for the next round. In fact they got better as his head cleared, and his second wind came back. The fans were booing and restless, chanting for the action that had filled the first round.

THEN, at the start of the sixth, Slugger ripped a glove lacing across Jimmy's face. The temper, the long suppressed fury of Jimmy Moynihan was born again, and he charged in, swinging.

Slugger retreated before that furious assault. He went into his shell, and most of Jimmy's blows landed on his forearms or his hunched shoulders.

Again Jimmy got reckless, left an opening for a right. And for the second time that evening, Slugger swung his right, dropping his left.

The cross Jimmy threw this time had a part of his fury in it. It twisted Slugger's head savagely sideward, and the veteran, for one split second, was unprotected.

Jimmy slammed a hooking left in

there, and then that new straight right. Slugger went crashing to the canvas.

Resin dust swirled and the crowd noise rose to a crescendo as Jimmy walked to a neutral corner.

He didn't believe that Slugger could get up from that one. It didn't seem possible. As the referee's chant marched on towards ten, Slugger still lay inert.

But he was up, somehow, before the fatal count, and retreating rapidly before Jimmy's charge. And Jimmy learned how a ring-wise veteran can string it out.

For the rest of that round Slugger clinched and wrestled, retreated and blocked, half out on his shaky legs, but foiling every effort of Jimmy's for a kayo shot.

For the entire next round he played the same record. Jimmy landed every place but the one that counted, and Jimmy went to his stool, arm and leg weary, nervously frustrated.

"Easy does it," Crag told him. "It's just a question of time now. That guy's out but too punchy to lay down."

Jimmy relaxed completely on his stool, taking in big gulps of air.

Slugger carried it to the tenth, and then began to falter. Jimmy poured leather in, his battle-weary arms aching with the shock. Like some weather-worn oak, the Slugger stood, taking them all, refusing to go down.

Jimmy stormed him into the ropes, and then Jimmy saw an opening for a right hand. He put all of his moxie, and all of his weight into that do-or-die shot.

It caught Slugger square on the button, and he fell back against the ropes. His hands were down, his eyes closed; but still he stood erect.

JIMMY hadn't the heart to blast another punch at that unprotected chin. He looked at the ref, while the crowd tore the house down, while Crag screamed at him from his corner. He turned back just in time to see Slugger fall away from the ropes that supported him.

The battle-torn body crashed, face down, at Jimmy's feet.

And as he walked to a neutral corner, knowing the ref could count to a hundred, Jimmy's mind went back to Westmore and Vance Morrow, and his heart went out toward the valiant Slugger Jackson.

Crag had his arm around him, and Barney was in the ring patting his shoulder. Another step, Jimmy thought. Another step on the ladder that could lead only to Vance Morrow.

The fight had been broadcast, and Jimmy's mother was up to meet him when he came home. Her eyes were faintly shadowed. She said, "It's a rough and cruel business, isn't it, Jimmy lad?"

He admitted that with a nod. "Would you want me to quit?"

She shook her head. "I'd want you to do what you thought best. A man's a man only when he does what he wants to do."

He had enough reason to quit now. He could join the army after another fight. He knew his mother would like him to quit. He had enough reason besides the big reason. But it was the big one that kept him from quitting.

He carried the torment of it through the quiet days that followed his fight with Slugger. Barney was angling for something big, and told him to take a complete rest for a week.

But there was no rest for Jimmy. He and Crag went to Kelley's one night, and Amber cut him dead.

Crag saw the look on Jimmy's face, and told him, "Women can put a guy in the nuthouse. They're poison."

"This isn't women," Jimmy said. "This is a woman. This is the one for me, the first one, and the only one. I'm only half a man without her."

"That would be different," Crag admitted. "I never had the urge, myself, but I've been told it's hell." He shook his big head. "As long as she ain't got anybody else on the string, she sure oughta give you a tumble."

"She's always got Vance," Jimmy pointed out.

"That drip," Crag scoffed. "Don't tell me he's playing in her league?"

"He's the fair haired boy. Especially since she's seen he's got the Indian sign on me. She likes the Lancelot type, I guess."

"If she'd have seen that fight in Westmore," Crag said. And then his brow wrinkled and his eyes were thoughtful.

"What if she had?" Jimmy asked.

"If she'd seen him foul you, if she'd seen what that butcher did to you—"

"But she didn't," Jimmy pointed out. "And I don't see how it makes any difference."

"That's because you don't know women," Crag said smugly. "I got an idea."

BARNEY didn't seem to be having much success in landing another bout. Most of the ranking middles weren't too anxious to mix with a newcomer, a dangerous one like Jimmy. They argued that the gate wouldn't be too good, and there was always the chance that Jimmy would put the dimmer on any title aspirations they may have had.

Jimmy went back into training the second week, sharpening that right hand of his, trying to concentrate on anything but the troubles that plagued him.

He went with Barney to see the title fight. Crag backed out at the last minute, and Barney sold the extra seat at a profit.

It was almost a repetition of the Westmore brawl. Red Barton, the champ, was a lot more polished than Jimmy had been that night, but Vance was razor keen.

By the end of the fifth round the issue was no longer in doubt. By the end of the seventh Red was completely at Vance's mercy, ready for the finisher.

Vance danced on, sliding easily through Red's pitiful defense, cutting him to kraut with those lancing, accurate blows. Jimmy shook his head and looked away. "I don't get it," he said.

"Exhibitionism," Barney said. "And sadism. He's got a lot of both, that boy. He should be working for Hitler."

It went on. Into the tenth, the eleventh. The fans were restless; even the most bloodthirsty were rebelling at this senseless pecking away at a beaten man.

The twelfth, and somebody started the booing that spread through the hall. The ref was looking at Red's corner.

Then, from Red's corner, somebody threw in a bloody towel.

Jimmy was silent as he and Barney walked out with the vast throng. Barney said, "Maybe you shouldn't have come along."

Jimmy said nothing, but he knew the spectacle he had just witnessed didn't help to ease his phobia any. Then he caught a glimpse of a firm little chin in the crowd, and his heart did a flip-flop. But she was lost immediately in the tightly packed crowd.

Barney got his match finally. He told Jimmy the next day, "Red Barton, for twelve rounds, at the Stadium."

Jimmy looked up in surprise.

"He claims he had a bad hand last night. He claims his right wasn't worth a damn. He figures to climb over you on his way back to Vance."

"So—" Jimmy said.

"So if he doesn't, you get the shot at Vance. You get the title go."

Jimmy said nothing. He was looking down at the floor, and he could feel that emptiness growing in him again.

"Well?" Barney asked.

"Okay," Jimmy said finally. "I never expected to get a crack at Barton this soon."

They moved out of town to train this time. Barney found a farm upstate that a lot of managers recommended, and Jimmy went into a really intensive training. The change from the city, the return to the kind of environment he and Crag had enjoyed, seemed to ease him, and he put a new zip in his workouts.

Barney noticed it, and looked pleased. He thought that Jimmy was forgetting Vance, or losing his fear of him.

Crag came up from town with some interesting information. It was true, he said, that Red had gone into the fight with a bad right hand. He had gone into the fray with a 'coked' hand, and the effects of the anesthetic had worn off in that crucial fifth.

"I figured this Red wasn't that bad," Crag said. "And you'll remember he didn't use his right at all the last half of the fifth."

Jimmy nodded. Then he looked up at Crag sharply. "You weren't there. How do you know what he did?"

Crag looked flustered for a moment. Then he said, "That's what the guys all told me," and promptly changed the subject.

The knowledge that he would have to fight a better man than he had seen that night failed to frighten Jimmy. He had seen enough of Red in the early rounds to know he was beatable, and it wouldn't take a Mickey Walker to do it.

But it didn't lessen the strictness of his training regime. There was a man beyond Red who would need Jimmy's best—maybe more than his best—and it was toward that goal that Jimmy was training.

He forced everything from his mind but the daily routine. And during the days that was possible. But at night, as he sat on the front porch chinning with the boys, the thought of Amber filled his mind, and with it the dominating remembrance of Vance.

Crag stayed at the camp with him, and Jimmy realized that Crag hadn't had a fight in months. Crag was subordinating whatever chances he had to make some money in an effort to help Jimmy. Jimmy remembered the day Crag had said, "I kinda wanted to be where you were."

Jimmy asked him, "Aren't you ever going to fight again?"

Crag nodded, his big face wreathed in what he probably assumed was a smile. "Sure," he said. "You and me together. With guns, remember? As soon as you

get that brawl with Vance. Then you'll be champ, and your ma will be okay, and you and me can go out for Togo and that Man with the mustache."

"And what if I don't lick Vance?" Jimmy asked.

Crag screwed up his face. It was obvious he was giving the matter a lot of thought. He said slowly, "That won't matter, either. Because next to the big fight—the one we're going to join—this fight with Vance is nothing. It's only important that you put up a good fight. And that's only important to you."

Jimmy grinned and for some reason felt better. "You should have been a philosopher," he said.

"Yeh," Crag admitted modestly. "Only I shoulda started early. Before I got my brains all scrambled."

Jimmy was as right as he would ever be the day they rode into town for the weighing in. He had more peace of mind than he had known in months, and the country air and food had toned every cell in his conditioned body. He had developed his right hand at camp, developed it to a point where it was a weapon as potent as his hook.

RED was in the commissioner's office when they arrived. He was looking fit and confident, and he greeted them cheerfully.

He said, "I hope you don't mind that I'm using you for a step back to that butcher."

"I don't mind," Jimmy assured him. "Just be sure you don't stumble."

Red grinned, and it was obvious to Jimmy that Red thought no more of his prowess than he thought of Red's. It should be a good fight.

Jimmy tried to nap that afternoon, but he had too much energy. He wasn't nervous and he hoped that his confidence wouldn't turn out to be overconfidence.

Crag called for him that evening in a cab. Barney had gone ahead to the Stadium and was waiting for them in the dressing room.

Barney had a new handler as Crag's assistant, one of the best in the business. Barney told Jimmy, "The odds are nine to five, favoring Red. It's supposed to be smart money. Don't ask me why."

Crag said, "You guys got this Barton wrong. He was champ for five years, don't forget that. And he had a bum flipper in that brawl with Vance. This is going to be Jimmy's toughest fight."

The new handler, a veteran, agreed with Crag. "Vance could maybe take Red, even if Red was right. But you didn't see the real champ in that last fight."

Jimmy just grinned.

Crag said, "This guy fights your way, that's why you ain't scared of him. But don't forget he put Slugger away in three rounds, and Slugger was in his prime then."

"So was Red," Jimmy said.

Crag shrugged his huge shoulders. "Okay. I'll let Red convince you."

They went out up the aisle, under the stars. There was a record crowd, and Jimmy, figuring his percentage, realized that from a financial standpoint he would never have to fight Vance. But he put that thought aside firmly.

He climbed up under the ropes, and relaxed on his stool. The ex-champ was coming down the aisle now, getting a big reception. Jimmy's hadn't been too big, but Jimmy was comparatively new to this town. He resolved to make this fight something that would stick in their memory.

Red was grinning as he climbed through the ropes. His manager was talking to him earnestly. Barney went over to examine his gloves, and then they both came over to examine Jimmy's.

The introductions, and then the instructions. Red looked in the pink, his half naked body fairly glowing with health.

The bell. Two of the best mixers in the business walked out to meet in the ring center.

Jimmy got in the first blow, a solid

hook that landed just above the belt. Red tried a hook, too, but it was short as Jimmy retreated. Then they closed again, both wary, and clinched.

Red was an infighter, Jimmy learned. Red's gloves were slamming into Jimmy's stomach in the clinch, and Red roughed him into a corner. Jimmy broke then and shot a short right for the chin. It landed, but Red shook it off and bored in again.

For the rest of the round, Jimmy relied on his speed, circling always to his left, and using his right swiftly and tellingly. It was Jimmy's round at the bell.

Crag said nothing, but Barney was up there and said, "Keep stepping. I guess he never figured you for a right hand. Don't let him know too much about it. Keep going to the left."

JIMMY stepped. He moved swiftly and constantly to the left, his right hand began to land in Red's face. Then Red charged again, and Red's hook went singing into Jimmy's stomach. Jimmy tried to climb his bike, but Red was on the hunt. Red was a shifting target.

Jimmy put the right into moth balls for a minute, and his own hook began to pound in there. Red tied him up and roughed him. It was Red's round.

The third was Jimmy's. And the fourth, Red's. And the fifth, Jimmy's. Jimmy was panting when the fifth ended, and Crag was looking smug. Jimmy felt a wave of annoyance sweep through him.

He went out in the sixth, and closed immediately. He hooked twice to the belt, and stepped clear for a right hand shot.

From nowhere, Red hooked a slamming left to the jaw.

The lights began to falter, and Jimmy took a faltering backward step. Then a right came whistling home, and Jimmy hit the deck.

He could see something white moving in the black clouds that flooded his brain, and he saw, at '6' that it was the ref's arm. He rolled over on his stomach

and his eyes opened wider. They focused on a ringside face.

He was very sick and he thought he must be delirious, for the face was Amber's. Then he heard the '8' and he struggled up to one knee. He was erect and wavering at '9'.

Red came charging in, swinging lustily, and Jimmy collapsed all over him. Red's hands were pushing, rather than hitting, trying to break clear for a button shot.

That was Red's mistake. A solid drive to the stomach would have won it for him. Jimmy put a shoulder block on him when he got clear, and Red was wild as a rookie pitcher. Jimmy draped on him when Red closed again.

Red was furious, frantic, throwing leather wildly and not well. Jimmy was moving on his instinct, dodging, weaving, riding the blows, hanging his weight when he could.

The bell was like a reprieve from prison, and he staggered gratefully toward the solace of Crag's big hands.

There was the chill and clarifying effect of ice on the back of his neck, and the handler was massaging his stomach. Then Crag's digging hands were waking him up, taking the soreness out of his battered muscles. Smelling salts drifted under his nose.

Jimmy said dazedly, "Amber, I thought I—"

Crag put a sponge in his mouth to shut him up. "Save your breath," he said. "Yeh. She's there. Her honey boy is fighting, why not? Her honey boy is getting his can knocked off."

Jimmy managed a grin.

RED came charging out for the seventh, and he was wide open. Jimmy put his remaining shreds of moxie into a twisting hook that nearly tore off Red's head.

Red was very cautious after that. He went into a shell to recuperate, and Jimmy could almost have taken him then. But Jimmy had shot his wad in that hook. It was a cautious, crowd-displeasing round.

The eighth was faster. Jimmy's legs were nearly normal now, and that was enough for the aging Red. Toward the close of the round Jimmy was scoring sharply.

On his stool, he grinned up at Crag. He said, "Here's where your wonder boy gets off. This is the round."

"Don't do nothing foolish," Crag said. "You've got a chance to win this on points if you use your head."

"Amber's out there," Jimmy said. "I want to show her that she made a mistake."

"You're punchy," Crag said. "You're walking on your heels."

The ninth round, and Red coming out a little slower. But still a very dangerous man. An ex-champ, and with a right hand that spelled curtains for the foolhardy.

Jimmy met him in the center of the ring, and Jimmy put that hook solidly to the belt. Jimmy put it there again, and then broke clear. Red came cautiously forward, his left up, higher than usual, his eyes speculative.

Jimmy put a straight left in Red's face, and fainted with another. Jimmy tried a right that was short. Red tried a right, too, and Jimmy's cross smacked to the button.

Red stumbled sideward, his guard up, and Jimmy came in with the hook. Red doubled, and Jimmy put zip into a swinging right. Red was groggy now, his legs rubbery.

Jimmy thought of Vance briefly. He thought of what Vance had done to the beaten Red. Jimmy wasn't Vance. Jimmy set up the kayo shot with a left feint. Then Jimmy shifted and slammed the Sunday punch home.

He stood there in the neutral corner, listening to the crowd thunder, watching the ref, thinking of Amber—and of Vance.

Then the ref came over to lift his arm high, and the well-wishers poured into the ring.

He kept thinking of Amber. All through the lightning of flash bulbs, the

scribes' bantering questions, the back slapping and shouted encouragement and congratulations, he kept thinking of Amber. And like a pool of poison in the back of his mind, Vance kept recurring.

In the dressing room he said to Crag, "If she was there, I wonder if she changed her mind. I wonder why she—"

Crag said sheepishly. "I don't know about the 'if'. But the 'why'— Well, that night I backed out of going to the title fight, I went. I took Amber, and I showed her why you were afraid of Vance. I showed her each foul. I told her how cruel he was, but I didn't know if my spiel worked. You'll have to find that out for yourself."

JIMMY looked at Crag affectionately. "If you were prettier, I'd marry you," he said.

Jimmy spent a long time in the shower. And he took a lot of care with his hair. He had worn a good suit, and he was thankful for that now. Crag, watching him, shook his head. "Love," he said. "And it ain't even spring!"

"Would you like to go over to Kelley's with me?"

Crag nodded. "Maybe she's got a friend."

The band was playing Tangerine, and the floor was crowded with dancers. At a table near the stand Mike Allen sat, alone. Crag and Jimmy went over there.

Mike greeted them genially, congratulating Jimmy. He said, "I suppose you'll be wanting another crack at Vance now?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Barney would know about that. He's the boss." He had the feeling that both Crag and Mike were watching him closely. "Amber around?"

Mike nodded. "She's due on the floor in about two minutes." He was looking at Jimmy thoughtfully. "I hear you're going into the army?"

Jimmy nodded. "I was 3A until now. I've cleaned up pretty well this summer, and Mom'll have enough to get by on.

I figure it's the place for me—me and Crag."

Mike said slowly, "I was there, myself, back in '17." He paused, looking at Jimmy. "Just so you won't put me on the wrong side of the fence, I'd like you to know I'm all for you, kid."

Jimmy said, "Thanks," and felt better than he had for months.

"Ain't everything going your way, for a change? I hope it ain't a bad sign," Crag said.

Then the baby spots were lighting up the now deserted floor, and the orchestra was playing softly. Jimmy got that old lump in his throat.

She saw him the moment she came onto the floor, and she lifted a hand slightly in greeting. She smiled, and went into her song.

To Jimmy, it was all a little confused, and he wondered if this was what was meant by 'punch drunk'. If so, it was all right.

They danced, after she finished singing, and she told him, "I want to apologize first. Crag told me about that first fight you had with Vance, and how you wouldn't let him throw in the towel." She seemed to steel herself. "And then I saw what he did to Red Barton, and—"

Jimmy said nothing, but his arm around her tightened.

SHE looked up, her eyes luminous in the dim light. "Jimmy, if you don't want to fight Vance now, I'll understand."

"I'll let Barney decide that," Jimmy said.

She shook her head. "I can't say that I know why, Jimmy, but I think it would be better if you were to decide."

He knew she was right, but, like her, he didn't know why. He said, "Let's not talk about it now. Let's be happy for tonight."

They danced a lot that night. Jimmy took her home. "After this war, I'll be coming back. I'd like to know I was coming back to—"

"I'll be waiting," she promised.

To Jimmy Moynihan, all the rest of his life would be anti-climax after that.

He went down to the draft board next morning, and explained that his mother was no longer dependent on his current earnings. He said he would like to be transferred as soon as possible.

The man behind the desk took it all down.

Jimmy said, "I've got a chance to fight for the middleweight championship, I think. If I take it, I'd like to donate my purse to the U.S.O."

The man smiled then and looked at Jimmy more closely. "I should have realized who you were," he said. "I saw you fight last night." Then he paused. "You said if you take that championship fight?"

Jimmy nodded.

The man said quietly, "There's been some rumor in the papers about this Vance Morrow having a jinx on you. Is that why you're undecided?"

"I—guess so," Jimmy admitted.

The man was silent for a few seconds. "It would be for you to decide, of course. But I think you'd be a better man for us, if you did fight him. It'll take a little time to reclassify you."

Jimmy left, and all the way home the old spectre haunted him.

He had lunch at home, then walked downtown. He walked slowly and stopped at Barney's office.

Barney was sitting behind his desk in the other room, and he looked up when Jimmy entered.

"When do I fight Vance Morrow?" Jimmy asked.

"Any time they say," Barney answered. "I've been waiting for you to ask."

"Make it soon," Jimmy told him.

It was scheduled for the Garden, in a month. Jimmy went back up to the same farm for this one. He worked out every day, worked hard, until Barney had him cut it down.

"We don't want you over-trained. You can be too fine for that boy, but not too rough."

THAT WAS Barney's mistake, though a natural one. But as soon as Jimmy cut down on his training, he cut down too much. He became listless and that was only natural. Deep within him he didn't figure to win this one, and his heart wasn't in it.

Nights, when the early darkness came, he would sit quietly on the front porch in the chill air, and his thoughts would go back to Westmore.

He thought, maybe I was a fool to agree to this. Maybe I should have gone right into the army. That would be a good reason for ducking out. And I'd still have Amber. I've got everything I want now.

But he knew that wasn't true. He wouldn't have the one thing he had to have, his self-respect.

Crag saw him lose interest in his training and tried to stir him into anger, into anything but the lethargy he was in. He failed.

Barney said finally, "I'll call it off if you want. I can understand a normal fear, but this thing you've got is for a psychiatrist to handle. And I'm not one of those."

"I'll fight him," Jimmy said. "I'll fight him until one of us goes down."

"You won't fight him long," Barney said, "unless you get the lead out of your pants. Don't forget this boy thinks you've stolen his girl. He isn't going to be very friendly in there."

Jimmy tried after that to put some zip into his work-outs. But it was all physical. He stepped faster and landed heavier. But his mental outlook remained the same.

The scribes saw and wrote. The odds went to two to one on Vance, then three to one. Amber wrote him a letter, and so did his mother. Nothing worked.

He went into town that crisp fall morning, and his eyes were the eyes of a defeated man. Luckily, he didn't see Vance at the weighing in.

He went home to take a nap, and his mother read his mind the moment he opened the door. She told him, "You

can't get any more than a licking." Her voice was strained, forcing the words it must have nearly killed her to say. "He can't do to you what those other men can, those men you'll face later, with guns."

"That's right," Jimmy said.

She put a thin hand on his arm, and he saw it was trembling. "Jimmy lad," she said. "I'll be listening. And it won't be any fun for me, even if you win. But if he does to you what he did last time, it might be too much."

He stared at her, and he could almost hear his heart pound in that quiet room. "Do you know what you're saying?"

SHE nodded, and there was something in her eyes that sent a chill through Jimmy. He said hoarsely, "Don't listen! I won't be responsible! Mother, I won't have you listening, if—"

"I'll be listening," she said firmly. "There's nothing you can do to prevent that."

"But I might lose," he said. "I might lose any fight."

"You won't lose this one," she said. "He's too evil, that man. You can't lose this one."

Jimmy stared at her. He knew there was nothing he could say to change her mind. He knew that too well. And deep within his tired being, something stirred. Rage was a part of it, his good Irish temper, and pride, and his love for her. It was a strange and varied mixture, but it was like a tonic.

He thought, I've come a long way from Westmore. I've got a right hand now, and more stuff. I've got a little sense, I hope. And that guy is a Fancy Dan.

He remembered Barney's early confidence, and Barney's beliefs regarding the brawlers. And he remembered the first fight, and all the opportunities he had had in that fight came to him now.

"All right, Ma," he said. "You listen."

Barney noticed his confidence in the cab that night. So did Crag. "You had a drink?" he asked.

Jimmy shook his head.

Barney tilted his head. "Something happened."

"Maybe," Jimmy said. "Quit heckling me."

They both looked at him. Crag said, "Owly. That sounds all right by me."

"And me," Barney assented.

The Garden was a sell-out. Fifteen rounds for the middleweight championship of the world. The dressing room was packed. Barney shooed them all out, and Jimmy tried to relax on the rubbing table.

But his muscles were like steel, taut and hard, and he kept fidgeting nervously. Crag and Barney said nothing more until just before it was time to go out. Then Barney said, "I'm glad you're mad, but don't let it spoil your fight. This lug is poison for a hot-headed attack."

"I'm not mad," Jimmy said.

Jimmy got the hand this time. Vance had soured even the scribes by his last fight, and the fans took their prejudices from the sport page.

Jimmy scarcely noticed the noise; it was like a background for the tumult within him. He climbed up under the ropes and kept his eyes away from Vance's corner. Even during the instructions he kept his eyes on the canvas.

The glare was hot on his bare skin, and the smell of bodies was heavy on the warm air. He could feel a part of his tightness melting as he went back to his corner.

Directly behind the radio announcer in front of him he saw Amber. He waved and a part of his fury melted. But his confidence remained.

The bell! Vance moved lightly across on those nimble legs, his left snaking, a strange light in his deep eyes.

Jimmy just waited. He didn't take a step, and for a second it looked as though he were in a trance.

Vance smiled, and moved in as Jimmy crouched. Vance put that left into Jimmy's face, and it stung. Jimmy moved around him slowly—and then Jimmy charged.

He charged in, expecting a right to the face, and he got it. But Jimmy's hook landed with all the force of his muscular body, and it sank deep into Vance Morrow's stomach.

Vance expelled plenty of air along with his mouthpiece, then he climbed onto his bike. But Jimmy caught him in a corner, and Jimmy's pumping hands smashed away furiously. Jimmy stepped clear, and his right hand slammed to the chin.

Vance crashed.

From that point on it was a fight. But Jimmy had only to fight his opponent, not his fear. Because now he knew that Vance could be hit, and any man who could be hit could be licked.

Vance got up from that one. He danced clear of the slugging Jimmy for the remainder of the round.

He was fresher the second round, and he still stayed clear. But Jimmy didn't mind. Jimmy had fifteen rounds, and Vance couldn't waltz forever.

In the fifth, Vance began to land again with the left. The light came back to his eyes, and he moved swiftly and beautifully around the crouching Jimmy, peppering him from all angles.

At the end of the eighth Barney was worried. "That guy's the champ," he said. "You've got to press this fight to win it. He can take you on points."

"He'll never see the day he can take me," Jimmy said.

Barney shook his head, and Crag looked puzzled.

THE NINTH round was Vance's. And the tenth. The eleventh. Barney was looking sick now for Jimmy wasn't marked, and he wasn't tired, but he *was* losing.

In the twelfth, Jimmy gave Vance another pasting with the hook, just to let him know he was still in there, and then Jimmy retired into his shell again.

Vance was more cautious again at the start of the thirteenth, but that wore off as he scored repeatedly, and the look in his eyes wasn't a pleasant thing to see.

In the fourteenth Vance was the master, the smooth and cruel craftsman. But, for some reason, his blows didn't affect Jimmy as they should. And toward the end of the round Jimmy clinched.

He clinched and told Vance, "Next round is mine. In the next round, you go down."

In Jimmy's corner, Crag looked sick. Barney had nothing to say, but his eyes did a lot of talking. Jimmy said cheerfully, "He's got a minute or two yet, then I put him in dreamland. He let me ride until the last round. I was just returning the favor."

Jimmy moved out slowly for the fifteenth, and Vance came sliding in with the left again. Vance's eyes were sharp, and Jimmy knew he'd try for a knock-out if he saw an opening.

But Jimmy gave him no opening. He moved away from Vance's right, kept his chin protected, and he took all the jabs and straight rights Vance had to offer.

The minutes ticked away, and the fight was all Vance. Some of the crowd was getting up to go.

Then, with a minute to go, Jimmy gave Vance his opening.

Vance threw that short, sweet right hand of his.

But it never landed. For Jimmy's newly developed cross landed first, and Vance seemed to jerk convulsively sideways. Then Jimmy's good hook came crashing through, and Vance was at his mercy.

This one's for Mom, Jimmy thought, and he threw it. It started from somewhere near the floor, and it swept up like a sky rocket until Vance's jaw got in the way.

Jimmy's right hand ached horribly, but that didn't matter because Vance was flying through the air. Even a fall from that distance would knock him out. He landed cold, and inert on the canvas.

Before the ref could come over to lift Jimmy's hand, he was already planning the words he would send his mother over the radio, and the words he would save for Amber. But from the look in her eyes as she smiled at him from the ring-side, Amber didn't need many words.



Put Them Up, Soldier!

THE sit-by-the-fire civilian may doubt that any soldier, after a day of drill, could possibly want any more exercise. But many of them do want it, particularly if the exercise is disguised as a fast game of handball or a vigorous boxing match.

Boxing is popular with the men because it is a sport in which one amateur can compete with another on an individual basis. Boxing is popular with the athletic director because it is a sport

which, because of this individual competition, allows for large scale competition. The Army is rapidly equipping all camps with boxing rings and platforms as well as an assortment of gloves.

In the summer there is always an outdoor arena for sports. In winter there is the Field House. These standard type buildings, each with 18,000 square feet of hardwood playing floor space, are already in some forty camps, and more are being erected.

The Devil Ships as Mate

By David Allan Ross



CAPTAIN ABNER ROWNTREE took another turn, from the taffrail to the break, and lighted a stogie deliberately. There were only two days left—forty-eight hours to make his fortune or ruin his career. Major Lindsey had given him seven days—until midnight Saturday—to find a crew and get under way. Now it was Friday morning, and Rowntree knew that, as the other captains had warned him, he was licked.

Gradually Rowntree and Franken managed to drive the crowd forward.

He had been a fool to make the agreement. An irresponsible fool. Some of the other ships had been lying here in San Francisco Bay for weeks, and even months, trying to get a crew together. And he, a newcomer, had hardly discharged his cargo before he had been button-holed by Major Lindsey, signed the agreement, and calmly put up a



\$5,000 cash bond to insure its fulfillment. The money belonged to the ship's owner, Colonel McFarlane.

He wondered, as he eyed the *Pluto's* cockbilled yards, whether Lindsey had deliberately hooked him into it, to get the five thousand. The man had a slick, shifty look, and his tongue was a little too smooth. He, better than anyone else, ought to have known the sheer impossibility of getting a crew together in this gold-crazy madhouse of a town. But it

didn't seem likely Lindsey wanted the money. He had much bigger fish to fry, and he was getting desperate. You could hardly blame him for that. In a town that knew no law and order other than force and Judge Colt, he was sitting on top of something like five tons of gold bullion, with no safe place to put it and no way of getting rid of it. His insistence on the bond, Rowntree guessed, had only been a desperate attempt to compel him to find a crew somehow.

LINDSEY was head man of a syndicate that, smarter than the immigrants and the miners who sweated blood and risked their lives to dig up gold, then spent it crazily in a few hours, was quietly gathering in the nuggets. They operated bars, gambling houses, restaurants, hardware stores, even laundries.

In a place where money could be had for the digging, but where everything else from pins to buggies had to be brought by ship from the East, they got three dollars for a cake of soap, five dollars for a dish of ham and eggs, fifty dollars for an axe. So now they had a cellarful of gold hidden somewhere, and no way of getting it to the money markets in the East. Sending it overland was too hopelessly risky, between bad trails, Indians, and the gangs of desperadoes who would certainly try to intercept it. The only safe way was by sea. And though the bay was full of ships, there was no one willing to man them.

The captains of the vessels stranded in the bay had stopped listening to Lindsey's desperate offers of fantastic bonuses long ago. Not that they were disinterested in the idea of making enough money to retire on in a single voyage. They knew from bitter experience that getting a crew in San Francisco was a physical impossibility. Some of them had given up hope so completely that they had abandoned their ships and gone off to the diggings themselves. One had drunk himself crazy. The rest had formed a sort of unofficial club at Mama Tamale's, one of the more respectable waterfront saloons, where they simply sat back and waited, and hoped.

Captain Rowntree had not understood this situation when he accepted Lindsey's proposition so off-handedly. He had never yet known a seaport of any size where the makings of a crew could not be rounded up between supper and sunrise, if necessary. But then, he had never before known a town where money meant nothing—the sort of money he was used to, anyway. Offers of double, triple, quadruple wages were laughed at.

Even the saloonkeepers, best friends of a short-handed master anywhere else, were not interested. Why drug and ship out good customers?

Men not familiar with Rowntree's habits might not have suspected that he was in a rage. His steps were even and unhurried. The puffs of smoke from the stogie came with spaced regularity, like those from the funnel of the steam tug chuffing sedately by. His face, square, stubborn, weathered but still youthful—he was not yet thirty-two—was calm, at least externally. As usual, he was aware of his ship. The wash from the tug made the boat, moored alongside at the gangway, nudge herself against the ship's side. He stepped to the rail to look at it, opened his mouth as though to give an order, then closed it again, remembering that there was no one left to give orders to, and resumed his pacing.

The only outward sign of his inward fury was the fact that his black silk tie, usually neatly knotted, was pulled loose, and his shirt collar was open at the neck. There were only two people aboard to observe this phenomenon. They were the mate, Joe Fraken, and the Chinese cook, Ah Li. The mate was lounging against the rail amidships, staring idly at the California shore. Ah Li was busy with his pans in the galley. Both of them glanced occasionally at Rowntree.

After a further quarter hour of pacing, Captain Rowntree went below, reknotted his tie, brushed his hair, and prepared to go ashore again. He was going to try once more to pull off a miracle. The thought of the five thousand dollar bond lay on his mind like Ah Li's duff on his stomach. As he was about to go topside, the mate stuck his head down the companionway.

"Shore boat coming alongside, sir!" he called.

The boat carried a messenger with a note from Major Lindsey. Would Captain Rowntree be good enough to meet him at Mama Tamale's as soon as convenient, to discuss important business? Rowntree would.

He was glad of the boat, which saved him the trouble of sculling his dinghy over. He wondered what was in the wind now, and felt a sudden spark of hope at the thought that Lindsey might have decided to call the deal off. It was the only thing that would save his bacon.

MAMA TAMALE'S was not a desirable place, judged by Eastern standards. Like most of the buildings in this mushroom San Francisco of 1849, it was hardly more than a large, hastily erected shack, all but windowless, and lighted by half a dozen smoky oil lamps. There was a long bar on the right, and a few tables and chairs in the center.

Behind the saloon, Mama Tamale had her private quarters, where she lived with her husband, a stocky, swarthy Mexican known only as Aguila. What Aguila did for a living no one quite knew. He came and went mysteriously and silently. He seemed to have a certain amount of influence in the town, and he was quick with gun and knife as well as temper. He might be seen hurrying through the muddy streets at night, or he might be seen, as he was now when Captain Rowntree entered, sitting at a small table hard by the doorway to his wife's apartment, a glass of whiskey before him, his small black eyes constantly flickering back and forth over the crowd.

He rarely spoke to his wife; then it was only a muttered word or two in passing. With the captains, who always sat at a certain group of tables near the outer door, and with Lindsey and the other 'gentlemen' of the mushrooming town, he was polite but never talkative. The only person to whom he ever spoke more than half a dozen words was Florida, a buxom, handsome Mexican girl who served partly as maid to Mama Tamale, partly as official hostess in the saloon. Mama Tamale allowed no goings-on in her place, no drunkenness, no shooting, no gambling, and no women. She kept her trade and her place high class, and profited by it. Half the important business in the town was transacted across

her tables. None of her customers realized that Florida, moving gracefully among those tables with her flashing smile, heard most of what was said and relayed it to Mama Tamale, who relayed it to Aguila, who put it to his own uses.

MAJOR LINDSEY was sitting by himself when Rowntree entered. He looked nervous and irritable, and his long, hollow-cheeked face was made more cadaverous by the bristling little goatee beard he wore. He waved to Rowntree, who had paused for a word with Captain Leslie and Captain Wilmott, both of whom had watched his efforts to raise a crew with the sardonic humor of men who know better.

"Sit down, Captain," Lindsey said with a considerable effort at cordiality. "Have you a crew yet? Are you ready to load?"

Rowntree studied him with narrowed eyes. He said shortly, "You should know, sir. When I signed that agreement with you, I had no idea that it would be impossible to come by a crew in this God-forsaken place. Neither love nor money will hire a hand here. I consider that you tricked me into that agreement."

"Damn it, Captain!" Lindsey exploded. "I don't want excuses! You undertook to sail from here not later than midnight of Saturday with my go—my cargo. There must be *some* means of getting hands. I tell you, the stuff is piling up there and it *must* be got out! If it can't be taken by sea, I mean to call for United States troops to escort it overland."

"Which will be expensive—and partly paid for with my bond money," Rowntree grumbled. "You're a man of influence around here. I've gone as far as I can in wages and bribes. Isn't there *something* you can do?"

Florida brushed by the table, smiling warmly.

"*Buenos días, Señors!*"

The two men nodded to her. Lindsey said angrily, "If there was anything I could do, wouldn't I have done it al-

ready? This town is full of desperadoes and outlaws. Everyone knows that I and my—my colleagues have a considerable store of—stuff hidden somewhere. If its whereabouts was known, a company of militia could not defend it. I tell you, Captain, I live in a sweat over it. I—I'll double the bonus I offered you, if you can manage to get enough of a crew to get it away."

Rowntree shrugged. "I have until midnight tomorrow. Nothing would please me more than to get my ship away from here, and to save my bond. Take care of your business, Major. I'll do my best with mine."

LINDSEY muttered something and got up, stalking out, while Rowntree continued to sit disconsolately at the table, drumming his fingers. The *Pluto* was a full-rigged ship of nine hundred tons. It would be possible to handle her with as few as twelve men—the mate could be a driver when it was necessary, and knew how to whip green men into sailors. But it was as impossible to get twelve men as twelve thousand, as far as Rowntree could see. He wondered whether it would be feasible to hire the steam tug to tow him down the coast, possibly even as far as Callao, where he could probably pick up a sufficient crew. But the tug was not built for deep water, and could never carry enough fuel or provisions for such a run. The whole problem was hopeless.

Florida came toward him. She stooped to wipe the table and picked up Lindsey's empty glass.

"Señor Capitan," she said rapidly, "Señor Aguila would consider it an honor if you would take a drink with him."

She nodded toward where Aguila sat, at the far end of the smoky room, idly staring at the floor.

"Aguila?" Rowntree exclaimed. "What the devil—"

"It will perhaps be to the señor's advantage," Florida murmured, and moved away, the set smile on her face.

Rowntree glanced around. The inci-

dent had happened so casually and swiftly that no one had noticed it. He took out a stogie, trimmed and lighted it, then got up and casually strolled toward the back of the room. He resented the idea of a clipper captain going to a man such as Aguila. Properly speaking, Aguila ought to come to him, if he had anything to say. But Florida's manner had suggested something of importance, and it might concern the ship, or even a crew. No chance was too slight to be passed up.

Aguila rose and bowed slightly. "It is a great pleasure, Captain. You will join me in a drink?"

"Your servant, sir," Rowntree muttered.

Seen at close quarters, Aguila was not a pleasant looking specimen, but Rowntree had done business with worse, in his time. He was prepared to be cautious. And he was aware that as they went through the formality of drinking, Aguila was sizing him up.

"You want a crew," Aguila said.

"The captain of every ship in the bay wants one," Rowntree returned non-committally.

"But you have a special reason, Captain. Let us talk as man to man. It is important that you get away by tomorrow night. It is also important that I get away."

ROWNTREE glanced at him sharply. His conversations with Lindsey had been confidential, but this swarthy gent seemed to know all his business. A curt retort rose to his lips, but he held back. After all, it *was* important to him. There was no harm in hearing what the man had to say.

"You are wondering how I know this, and how much I know, Señor," Aguila added with a slight smile. "I will tell you all I know—that Major Lindsey has some—freight, shall we say, he wants moved at once. So have I. Also, I want to take passage to New York. And you have given a bond that you will sail by tomorrow night. Are these facts correct?"

"They are," Rowntree admitted grudgingly.

"Then I can get you a crew, provided only that you give me passage, and that you take a small packing case containing my own—cargo—at a reasonable freight rate."

Rowntree's heart leaped, but he veiled his eyes. There was something very queer about this! He poured himself another drink, to give himself a chance to think it over.

"If you can get a crew, how does it happen you didn't get it for one of the other captains who have been waiting so long?" he demanded.

Aguila shrugged. "I was not yet ready, Señor. I am now ready."

"Then why choose me?"

Another shrug. "Your ship has just come in. The others have been lying here a long time. Besides, I am, after all, a sporting man. I knew—never mind how—of your wager, as it were. To be frank, sir, it would please me to see that Major Lindsey does not add your money to his pile, which is already big enough for one man."

Rowntree thought it over. He had already decided to accept the offer—had decided almost the moment Aguila made it. He was still trying to guess what was behind this offer, but he couldn't find anything substantial. He nodded.

"Come back tonight," Aguila said. "I will be here. I will tell you how many men I can get. You can assure Major Lindsay that you will sail by midnight tomorrow."

ROWNTREE had plenty to do for the rest of the day. He wished that he could have a crew aboard for twenty-four hours, to put the ship in shape. He'd like to get the rigging set up, sailing preparations to make. He checked the stores and fresh water with the mate, and was relieved to find that with care they would last until Callao, when he could water and provision for the run around the Cape.

He knew the condition in which the

men would come aboard—stupefied with liquor and drugs. They would have to be watched every instant, and beaten into submission. He could trust himself and the mate to do that, and no doubt Aguila would help, as it was to his interest. But he hoped for a few days of fair weather, to lick the crowd into shape. It was the season for the southeasterly gales that periodically plagued the California coast, but with any luck he would be well clear of the coast before he ran into weather. Once he was well off soundings and with plenty of open water around him, he feared nothing.

It was eight o'clock when he returned to Mama Tamale's. The place, quite crowded, was thick with smoke. A little group of captains sat at the usual tables near the door, and Rowntree could not help a quick glance of triumph as he passed them. Aguila was sitting at his own table at the far end. He glanced at Rowntree and away again, as though he had never seen him before. Rowntree's heart sank. Possibly something had gone wrong. Perhaps the man had been overconfident, or perhaps the whole thing was a scheme to trap him into disclosing facts concerning Lindsey's gold hoard.

Rowntree sat down at a small table. In a few minutes Florida came over with a bottle and a glass. As she placed them before him she murmured, "Twenty-six men—eleven tomorrow night."

It was all he wanted to know. He downed a couple of drinks and started back for his ship.

As he went out he almost bumped into a thin, pale-faced lad in ragged clothes, who jumped back with a mumbled apology. Rowntree nodded and went on. The lad stared hungrily into the steamy bar, and Captain Leslie, of the *Racer*, glanced up and saw him.

"Come here, my lad!" he called jovially. "Why hang outside when its warm and cozy in here? Come and drink a toast to Mama Tamale's, where the sun's always over the yardarm and the wind's always fair!"

The boy hesitantly went in. The cap-

tains were all half seas over, and this looked like a bit of sport. They called for food and more whisky. The lad wolfed the food, but refused the whisky.

"A milksop, damn it!" Leslie shouted indignantly. "We'll have no bloody milksops aboard this ship! Drink your liquor like a man! Stand up, boy! That's orders from the quarter deck! Stand up and drink to us!"

Bewildered and frightened, while the men crowded around laughing and shouting, the boy stood up and took the glass with a shaking hand. Mama Tamale arrived just then, her two hundred pounds sailing through the crowd like a frigate. She had seen the boy come in and didn't object as long as he amused the gentlemen. But if he was going to make trouble—

AGUILA had been watching too. A boy is a hand, too, and always useful around a ship. He signaled to Florida, who ran after Mama Tamale. Mama shrugged, and Florida, with an apologetic smile to the captains, took the boy's arm and led him to where Aguila sat.

"What is your name, boy?" Aguila asked.

"Kim Lathrop, sir." The voice was thin, almost girlish.

"Well, Kim Lathrop, what are you doing here? Are you alone?"

Lathrop's lips quivered. "I went into the mountains with my dad, sir. He—died. I managed to get back here. I have no money. Nowhere to go. I—I didn't mean anything wrong, sir."

Aguila peered at him intently. "When did you eat last?"

"I don't remember."

Aguila chuckled. "Well, don't look so unhappy. Go into the back. Florida will bring you some food and show you a place to sleep. In the morning, perhaps we can find something for you to do."

Almost too exhausted for thanks, the boy stumbled after Florida into Mama Tamale's quarters. He ate some food, and drank the hot black coffee Aguila brought him.

"There's rum in it," Aguila said kindly. "It will drive the chill out of your bones."

The boy nodded. In five minutes he was in heavy, drugged sleep.

"See that he gets some more of the same dose tomorrow, when he wakes," Aguila said curtly to Florida. "He's thin and weak, but an extra hand is always good, on a ship."

Florida caught his wrist. "Aguila!" she whispered fiercely. "You are really going to New York? You are going to leave me here, after all your promises?"

Aguila laughed. "Don't be a fool! I am going just as far as I wish. In a few weeks, *cara mia*, I shall be a very wealthy man, thanks to the dear, kind Major Lindsey. I will send for you from Mexico, and you will live like a queen, in the biggest hacienda in all Mexico!"

"But is it safe?" Florida insisted anxiously.

Aguila laughed again; a sound that would have curdled Rowntree's blood if he could have heard it.

"Safe? Aguila is no fool, my dear. Do you think I have planned these things for so long, and waited until just the right moment, without knowing what I am doing? From what you tell me, Lindsey is growing desperate. He will try to send his gold overland, with troops to guard it, if this Captain Rowntree cannot take it. Having waited as long as possible, so that there will be as much gold as possible, I now arrange for Captain Rowntree to take it. It is safe—and very simple."

"And you will not forget me?" Florida asked. "When you have all this gold, and you are safe in Mexico and a great *caballero*, you will not forget about me?"

Aguila pinched her cheek, chuckling. "I shall send for you at once. But remember to come secretly. We must not let Mama Tamale know of it, or my Florida will be one very dead little pigeon!"

THE *Pluto* was anchored in the roadstead, with the tug standing by. On

the quarter deck Rowntree paced nervously, his cigar making a waxing and waning glow in the purple darkness that was relieved only by the glow from the cabin skylight. He moved over to the skylight to glance at the chronometer, set on the forward bulkhead of the saloon where it could be seen by the helmsman, and grunted. It was three minutes past eleven. He wondered again if Aguila had been fooling him. Lindsey had told him that Aguila was "generally respected," although when he checked up on his impressions, he could find little either for or against the Mexican, save that he minded his own business and had never, as far as Lindsey knew, made any trouble.

Rowntree's own impression was that Aguila would bear watching. He was always suspicious of quiet men.

It had astonished Rowntree to discover that it was possible to get anyone to do an hour's work in San Francisco. Lindsay had found them—enough to bring his gold down to the Embarcadero and fetch it aboard in a number of small, extremely heavy wooden boxes, and even to replenish the *Pluto's* water casks. Lindsey himself was ashore now, probably watching the *Pluto's* riding lights through his telescope.

The mate hailed softly from somewhere forward, "Two boats coming alongside, sir."

Rowntree breathed a sigh of relief. He went forward to the break of the poop and stood by the ladder as the boats fetched alongside. Aguila came up first, dressed in a nautical-looking blue reefer and cap. Rowntree could tell, from the assured manner in which the man skipped up the ladder and came aft, that he was familiar with ships. His respect for him went up a notch.

"They're not in good shape, Captain," he said immediately. "I've some men in the boats who will help to bring them aboard. There's twenty-seven all told. I picked up a homeless lad last night and thought he might as well be here as anywhere else."

"Good," Rowntree said. He raised his voice. "Mr. Fraken—tell Ah Li to light the lanterns. See to getting the men aboard."

LANTERNS had been strung along the deck, but not lighted, since Rowntree did not wish to attract any attention. One captain who had attempted to shanghai a crew had given himself away prematurely, and friends of the victims had boarded the ship and all but killed him. In San Francisco more than anywhere else, shanghai-ing was considered an improper practice.

Now, as Ah Li hurried along with his taper, the lanterns glowed and Rowntree could see the two shore boats. Some of the men were half conscious, others were out cold. That didn't matter. The ship would be too far out for any attempts at swimming ashore, by the time those men realized what was going on. Aguila's men were shoving and heaving them aboard none too gently, and dumping them down on the deck around the main hatch. Two or three of them, not out but drug-hazed, clung dizzily to the main fife-rail and retched miserably.

Someone came aft to Aguila and said, "That's all of 'em."

Aguila nodded. The shore boats cast off, and Rowntree called, "Mr. Fraken, get for'ard. Tell the tug to go ahead. Ah Li, douse the lanterns. I'll take the wheel."

"Beg pardon, Captain," Aguila broke in smoothly. "I'm a pretty good hand aboard ship. In fact, I've commanded my own schooner before now. I'll take the wheel if it suits you, sir."

"Right," Rowntree's estimate of the man went up another notch.

The anchor had already been weighed with the help of the tug's crew, and the ship slid silently ahead, the tug chuffing and threshing and blowing off clouds of sparks and smoke. They chugged past the bark *Clifton*, and Rowntree heard Captain Moresby's startled hail: "*Pluto* ahoy! What you doing? Takin' her out for exercise?"

Rowntree could not restrain his elation. He cupped his hands and yelled back, "See you in New York, Moresby—if you ever get out of this hole!"

He laughed silently as he heard a string of lurid, astonished oaths.

The *Pluto* was well out to sea and dawn was breaking when the tug cast off and left her rolling heavily in an offshore breeze. The coast was barely in sight astern. On deck the soggy figures of the crew stirred. Leaving *Aguila* at the wheel, Rowntree went forward to watch while Fraken and Ah Li pulled up buckets of cold sea water and sloshed them over the sprawling, miserable figures.

Both Rowntree and Fraken were armed, for this was the dangerous time, when the men became conscious and realized what had happened to them. That was when they were likely to attempt to rush the officers, and try to put back. It was the time Rowntree disliked, because brutality was essential in order to establish some sort of discipline. Besides their guns, both he and the mate had a handy length of knotted line ready, and kept one eye on the pinrails. Rowntree felt as a man might when he first steps into a cage full of wild animals.

UNDER the sloshing, the men stirred, groaned, began to sit up, staring blankly around. One of them, a large Irishman, stood up, and suddenly realized what had happened. With a tremendous roar he headed directly for Fraken, who sidestepped and cracked him on the skull with a pin. Another, a small, ratty-looking man with a stubbly beard, suddenly scrambled to his feet and, either uncaring or not realizing that the shore was five miles distant, sprang for the side with the obvious intention of leaping over. Rowntree collared him just in time, flung him to the deck and gave him a smart crack across the shoulders with his line. They were all up then, howling, cursing, struggling, swarming over the ship in a dozen different directions.

Ah Li had taken up a post on the foc'sle head with a meat cleaver and was dancing up and down like a little monkey, screaming at the top of his voice to scare the men off from there. Gradually Rowntree and Fraken managed to drive the bewildered, half-stupid crowd forward, using pins, handspikes and rope's end unmercifully. When they were all there, cowering and sullen and still half ready to leap aft again, Rowntree faced them.

"Now, my men," he shouted, "you have all shipped for a passage to New York."

There was a howl of dismay, and an ominous surge that made Fraken reach for his gun. Rowntree waited for the noise to subside.

"You are too far from land to do anything about it, and we will not be touching land again until we tie up in New York. If you are wise, you will make the best of it, and we'll all get along fine. You will find this an easy ship for those who do their duty and obey orders smartly. Those who don't, those who are disobedient, will find it hell afloat. You'll get plenty to eat. Those who need clothing can get it from the slop chest, to be charged against their wages at the end of the voyage. The pay will be good, and there will be a bonus at the end."

He stopped. There was silence, followed by a low muttering. But the men were cowed by their beating, and their minds were still blurry from the liquor and the drugs with which *Aguila* had liberally fed them. Satisfied that he had them under control for a time, at least, Rowntree went aft, leaving it to the mate to take their names. After that there would be coffee and food, then the real business of mustering watches and getting under way would begin. It wouldn't be easy, but Rowntree no longer cared. He was out of the bay, in the open water, and he had a crew. He and the mate could handle the rest between them.

AS HE went aft, Rowntree stopped. A figure lay limply against the coam-

ing of the main hatch. It was a slight figure and had evidently been overlooked in the half light of the dawn. He grabbed an ankle and yanked, and the figure slid out onto the deck, moaning. Rowntree stirred it with his foot. This must be the boy Aguila had spoken of. He caught him by the shoulders of his jacket and shook him. The head lolled back and the greasy cap fell off. A wealth of gold-brown hair fell out. Rowntree gasped.

"Damn it, Aguila!" he shouted. "You've brought a fool girl aboard!"

For a moment he suspected deliberate intention on Aguila's part, but the look of astonishment on the man's face was clearly genuine. He explained how Kim Lathrop had come in, and how he had included him—or her—in the crew, not suspecting for an instant that he—she—was a girl.

"Well," Rowntree said irritably, "she's here now, and I'm certainly not going to put back and lose the rest of 'em again. She'll just have to come along."

He picked her up and carried her down to one of the spare cabins, where he dumped her unceremoniously on the bunk and flung a blanket over her. Then he went out, slamming the door.

THE SOUTHEASTER came the following day. It would not have bothered Rowntree if he had had a trained and willing crew—in fact he would have made use of it. But the men in the foc'sle were not only untrained, but sullen. Most of them knew something about ships, and about half of them had served before the mast, coming out from the East by ship. It was not so much that they did not know what to do or how to do it, but that they simply refused. Fraken had "persuaded" them to sign on, and they had been mustered into watches, but it needed constant driving, and the fact that there was no second mate made things more difficult. Aguila, seeing that, volunteered to act as second, and Rowntree was surprised to discover that the stolid Mexican not only knew

his way around, but could navigate, handling a sextant as competently as Fraken or Rowntree himself.

The men were not a particularly inviting-looking crowd. Four of them were Mexicans. One was a vicious-looking Chinese. The others were scrapings, the kind of hangers-on too lazy to go out to the gold diggings themselves, but hanging around the saloons for whatever they could pick up. Some undoubtedly had made a practice of spotting drunken men with a pocketful of gold, following them and slugging them. They would do for the present, but they had to be constantly watched, and Rowntree knew he would not dare try to round the Horn with them. He would have to put in either at Callao or Valparaiso and take on extra men.

The girl, Kim Lathrop, was another trouble. She was desperately ill for a couple of days, probably from the drugs Aguila had fed her. Rowntree had left her to the care of the fatherly old Ah Li, who fed her black coffee and made special stews for her.

On the second day, while he was eating supper, she emerged from her cabin, somewhat wobbly and bewildered, and hesitated, staring at him awkwardly. She still wore the clumsy shoes, the mud-stained pants, shirt and reefer coat she had come aboard in. Her hair was wild and her face dirty. She looked so woe-begone that Rowntree would have laughed if he hadn't felt sorry for her.

"**SIT DOWN**, young woman," he said. "I suppose we ought to apologize to you for the way you came aboard. Fact is, I had to get a crew any way I could, and Mr. Aguila mistook you for a lad."

She sat down across the table. "Where are we going?" she asked in a soft, rather husky voice. When he told her, she brightened. "I have an aunt in Brooklyn. I'm glad you took me aboard. I didn't know how to get out of that awful town."

"Neither did I," Rowntree answered

dryly. "How did you happen in such a state?"

She told him a story of an irresponsible, widowed father, unable to make a success in the East either as farmer or business man, seizing on the chance, like the rest of them, to make an easy fortune in the gold diggings.

"He wanted me along," she said. "I guess he didn't realize what it was like. He planned to make a fortune and then settle down out here. But—well, he was just the kind of man the world is too much for, I guess. He got a little gold, and then he started gambling and drinking. We kept getting lower and lower, starving half the time. He sold all our things, one by one. He kept saying that tomorrow he would go out and dig up a fortune, but it got so that after a while he wouldn't even try. He thought he could do it more easily with cards. He got into some sort of argument one night about a month ago, and someone shot him."

Rowntree studied her. There was suffering in her eyes, but not so much as you might expect in a girl so recently orphaned. He guessed that her father had not gone out of his way to make her happy.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "in another three or four months you'll be back in Brooklyn, so you just take care of yourself and stay out of the way of the men, and your worries'll be over."

He was more cheerful about it than he really felt. A lone woman is always a nuisance on a ship. She expects considerations a man wouldn't think of, and if she is young and pretty, she is apt to make trouble one way or another. Besides, a lot of sailors consider a woman bad luck aboard ship. But she was here, and there was nothing to be done about it.

He overhauled the slop chest that afternoon, provided her with a length of white calico, some checkered shirts, a pair of white duck pants, needle and thread. After that he saw little of her for a time, although he noticed that

the saloon and the cabins suddenly began to look much cleaner and neater than before.

THE SOUTHEASTERS off the California coast are usually violent while they last, but blow themselves out quickly. This one was different. It blew hard and steady for five days, setting up a heavy sea that kept the ship laboring heavily and always wet. The crew didn't like it, and because they were so slow and clumsy at handling the gear, Rowntree felt it best to continue on a long southwesterly reach while the southeaster held, giving the hands time to shake down and become accustomed to the work, which they obviously had no desire to do. Nevertheless, as the ship drew farther and farther away from San Francisco, and as the mate continued to be just as tough and lively with his rope's end, they began to realize that it was better to make the best of it.

Rowntree was something of a psychologist. When they did good work they were rewarded with an extra round of grog, or something extra for their supper. When they were stubborn or insubordinate, they got a good dose of "belaying pin soup," and they soon saw which was the best for them.

"They're like any other animals," Rowntree remarked. "They have to be taught what's good for 'em."

Ah Li, usually cheerful and grinning under all occasions and conditions, had become unnaturally solemn since the voyage started, and Rowntree wondered what was wrong with him. He asked him one morning at breakfast.

"Chinaman feller, Tom Sing, come along same other crew," Ah Li said gloomily. "Number one bad feller, sir."

Rowntree had noticed the man. He was vicious-looking, with a scarred face and a slight limp, and there was a faint aroma of opium, among other things, about him. But he was in the mate's watch, and Fraken had said he was the most useful of them all. He knew his way around, and he seemed willing.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked rather impatiently.

"Him not belong shipside," Ah Li said emphatically. "Ah Li know. Him Tong man. Number one hatchet man, Hip Sing Tong. When him belong ship, come for bad reason. Ah Li know."

ROWNTREE shrugged. He passed the information on to Fraken for what it was worth, telling him to keep an eye on him. He had faith in Ah Li's judgment, for the little Chinese had been with him a number of years, and was loyal and faithful. And Ah Li was plainly worried. Rowntree wondered how Aguila had got such a man as Tom Sing among his crowd. Chinese—Tong men especially—are usually cunning enough to spot a trap such as Aguila must have set. The rest of them were drunks and bums, easy prey for Aguila's purposes, but when Rowntree thought about it, it did seem odd that Aguila should have caught such a fish. He spoke to him about it.

"This Chinese you brought aboard, Aguila—my cook tells me he's a hatchet man for the Hip Sing Tong. How'd you happen to get him?"

Aguila looked startled. "I didn't know you had a cook, sir. That was why I brought him along originally. He's been to sea before. I didn't know about any Tong, but I don't see that it matters. They're only dangerous among themselves, and when they're in a gang. He's harmless enough aboard ship."

Rowntree nodded. "How'd you get him doped?"

"Opium, sir."

It sounded reasonable. Rowntree still did not trust Aguila completely, but he had to admit to himself that there was no logical reason for any suspicion. The man had got him a crew, had proved himself a competent sailor and a useful second mate, and since he had his own little nest egg stowed aboard, Rowntree could see no reason why he should be interested in anything more than getting to New York as speedily and safely as

possible. There was no reason to suspect anything else.

Aguila added, "As long as you've told me he's a Tong man, sir, we can keep an eye on him. But he can't have any schemes up his sleeve, for he certainly had no intention of becoming a sailor when he took that opium. He did me a small service not long ago, and I told him the opium was part payment."

To Rowntree's relief, the wind shifted to northwest the following afternoon. He was able to get all sail on the ship and make up for lost time. He felt, as the ship leaned to the beam wind and went racing down for the Line, that things were shaping up pretty well after all. The crew had shaken down. Aguila was a good second mate. Even the unexpected passenger, Kim, had proved more of a blessing than anything else.

She had made herself a very attractive dress out of the calico, although when she was on deck she preferred the pants and shirt, which she had cut down. She had learned to steer and read the compass, and she kept the saloon and the cabins far neater than they had ever been before. Rowntree was amused to notice that even Fraken paid more attention to his clothing and his table manners when she was around. There are things to be said for a woman, even aboard ship. For the first time, Rowntree turned in for a good night's rest.

HE WAS aroused shortly after midnight by a sharp rapping on his door. It was Aguila. "Captain Rowntree," he said nervously, "I wish you would come on deck."

"Eh?" Rowntree said, heaving his legs over the side of the bunk. "What is it, Aguila? Something wrong?"

"It's Mr. Fraken, sir. He seems to have disappeared."

"Disappeared!" Rowntree repeated incredulously. "What in the world are you talking about? A man doesn't disappear in the middle of the Pacific!"

"Mr. Fraken seems to have, sir," Aguila retorted. "I went topside five

minutes before midnight to take over. Mr. Fraken wasn't on the poop. I thought he might be for'ard and waited. I mustered the watches when eight bells were made and waited, but he didn't come. I asked if anyone had seen him. The Mexican, Del Rio, had the wheel. He said Mr. Fraken had gone forward about fifteen minutes earlier. None of the watch had seen him. We searched the ship and I looked in his cabin, but there's no sign of him."

"All right," Rowntree said shortly. "Get back on deck. I'll be with you in a minute. Keep Mr. Fraken's watch topside until I come."

He pulled on his clothes hastily and went out. Fraken's cabin was orderly. There were no signs that he had been drinking, and nothing was out of place. Rowntree went through the empty cabins without success, looked in the lazarette and everywhere else he could think of. He had known Fraken a long time, and he knew Fraken was a man of orderly habits, as well as an excellent seaman. Seamen don't fall overboard from a steady ship, and there aren't many places to which they can disappear aboard the ship. As Rowntree continued his search, the idea became set in his mind that if Fraken was not aboard, the only thing that would account for his disappearance was foul play.

He went topside. Save for the lookout forward and the man at the wheel, the watches were still mustered around the mainmast. Aguila was pacing the weather gangway nervously. Rowntree called for a lantern and searched the deck from taffrail to knightheads, even sending hands aloft to cover the remote possibility that Fraken might have gone up and fainted on one of the tops, or injured himself. There was no sign of him.

Rowntree had a sick feeling in his stomach. He called the Mexican, Del Rio, and questioned him. Had the mate been upset, or seemed different in any way? No, he had been the same as usual. At about fifteen minutes to twelve he

had remarked that he was going forward to see if Ah Li had the coffee hot. He went down the ladder, and that was the last Del Rio had seen of him. No one else in the watch had seen him at all, so they said.

Rowntree noticed the Chinese, Tom Sing, and called him over. The Chinese had nothing to say, but only looked stolidly at Rowntree. There was nothing for Rowntree to do but abandon the questioning, for the time being. He sent the mate's watch below.

"Keep your eyes open, Mr. Aguila," he said. "There's something funny going on. I'll take over Mr. Fraken's watch."

KIM WAS in the saloon. She had been aroused by the noises overhead. Rowntree told her briefly what had happened.

"I was awake before eight bells went," she said. "I heard a sound above my cabin—a shuffling sound, almost as though it was a scuffle. It happened very quickly."

Rowntree pricked up his ears. "Did you hear anything like a splash, Kim?"

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No, I don't think so. There are so many noises on a ship—even if I had heard a splash, I'd have thought it was just a wave slapping against the side, or something."

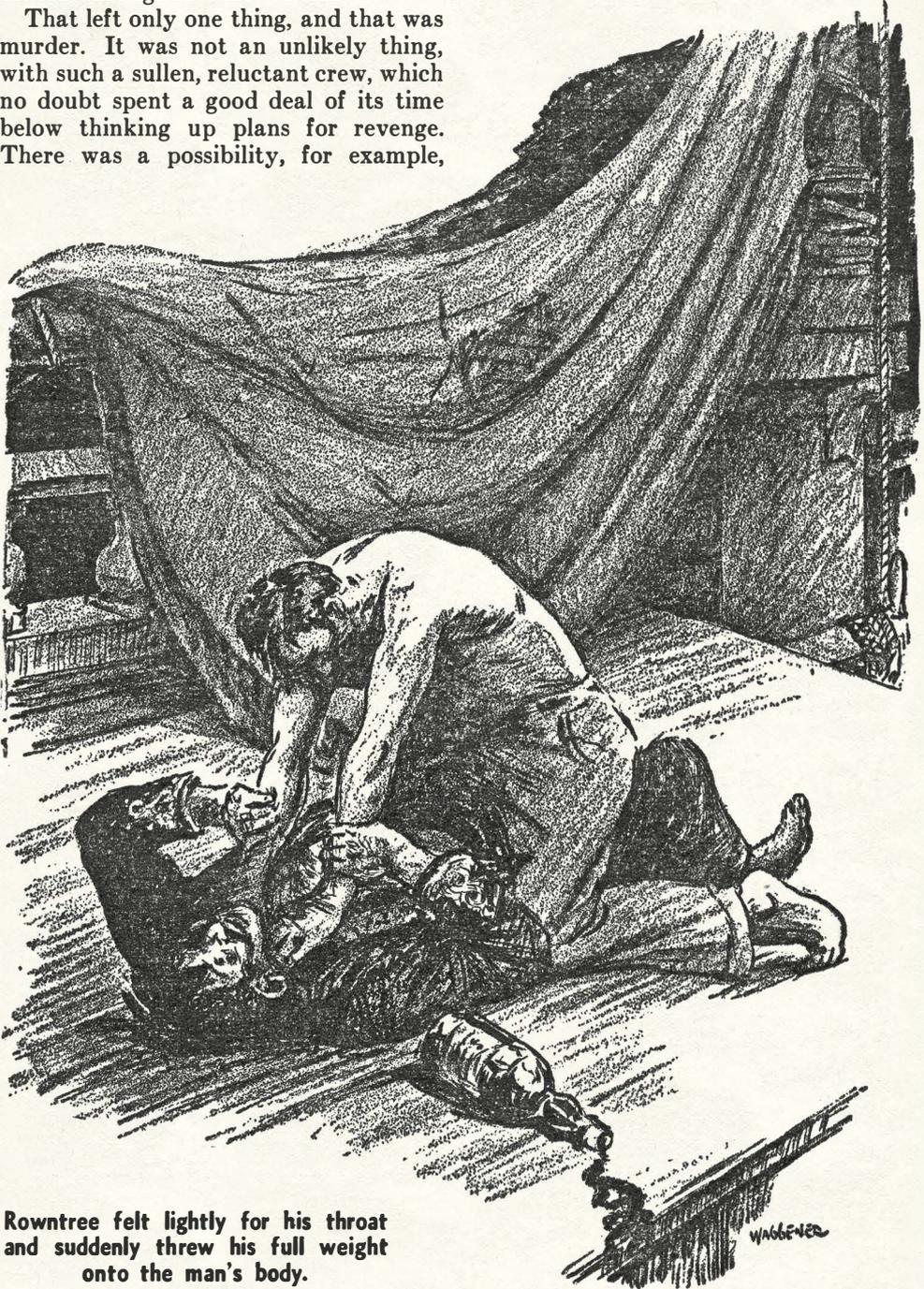
"Well," Rowntree answered moodily, "you run along to bed."

He sat down gloomily at the table. He was pretty certain that whatever had happened to Fraken had not been an accident. The mate was not on the ship—of that he was certain. Either he had jumped overboard, fallen overboard, or been thrown overboard, dead or alive. Jumping meant suicide, and Fraken was the last man in the world to do a thing like that. He was too phlegmatic to get upset emotionally. Besides, he had a wife and two kids back in Yonkers to whom he was devoted. As for falling, an experienced seaman just doesn't do it, unless he loses his hold while aloft, and Fraken had not been aloft. He was nei-

ther required nor expected to go aloft save in an emergency, and there had been no emergency. The ship had required no more than an occasional touch to the braces throughout the watch.

That left only one thing, and that was murder. It was not an unlikely thing, with such a sullen, reluctant crew, which no doubt spent a good deal of its time below thinking up plans for revenge. There was a possibility, for example,

that they proposed to take over the ship by eliminating the officers in this stealthy fashion, one at a time. Shorthanded as the after guard was, it was hard to keep



Rowntree felt lightly for his throat and suddenly threw his full weight onto the man's body.

more than one man on the poop at a time. It would be easy, if you relaxed your guard, for a man to slip up behind you. But Rowntree knew Fraken, and it was unlikely that he would be caught off guard. None of the crew was allowed abaft the mainmast save for ship's work, and he would watch anyone who did come aft. The only other man on the poop would be the helmsman, and with the ship running as she was, it would not be possible for him to let go of the wheel for a moment without the ship and the sails announcing the fact. Nothing seemed possible, yet Rowntree was certain that his mate had been deftly murdered.

He remembered that, shortly after dawn and as he was preparing to take over the four-to-eight watch, Fraken had had a gun. He and the mate had both carried guns because of the crew's temper, and they were the only ones aboard with weapons, for Fraken had searched the crew and even Aguila, just to make certain. There was a chance that the mate had been murdered for the gun. In that case neither Rowntree nor Aguila would be safe from attack. Not that he trusted Aguila any more than he had to, but the man had acted capably and apparently sincerely so far, and there was no reason for distrusting him.

SHORTLY before eight bells, he aroused Kim and Ah Li. They were the only people aboard he could trust implicitly now. He told them to watch the deck from forward and aft, to see that no one tossed anything overboard or attempted to conceal it—a gun, for instance. Then he mustered both watches, lining them up along the weather gangway so that they were under the constant surveillance of his two assistants, and went through the foc'sle.

He knew, from long experiences, all the places where sailors hide things, and one or two most of them had never thought of. But there was no sign of a gun. He had the covers removed from the boats and searched them on the

chance that the pistol might have been slipped into one of them as a temporary hiding place. There was no chance that any of the men had the gun on them. They wore only singlets and pants, and a bulky weapon would be easily seen.

By the time he was through, Rowntree had to admit that he was licked. Either the gun had gone overboard with Fraken, or whoever had hidden it knew one more hiding place than Rowntree himself. He dismissed Aguila's watch, and spent his own moodily pacing the poop, his tie pulled loose and its ends fluttering in the wind.

Only twelve hours ago he had thought his troubles were over! It made him feel no better to note that the mate's watch seemed as puzzled and gloomy as he, whispering together when they got the chance, and staring nervously aft as though they expected to see a ghost loom over the rail at any moment. That had all the earmarks of innocence, but Rowntree remained convinced that there was a murderer aboard, and an exceedingly cunning one.

THE LITTLE Englishman, Archie Lester, came aft the following afternoon. Ashore he had been a carpenter, so Rowntree had appointed him ship's carpenter, one of his tasks being to sound the well twice daily.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said to Rowntree, "but there's better'n a foot of water in the well. She was dry this mornin'."

A foot of water was nothing to worry about. The working of the ship's seams, as she slogged along with her masts and gear straining against the hull, always made her leak a little. But that a foot of water had appeared suddenly, when the ship had been dry in the morning, did mean something; probably that she had started a seam somewhere below the water line. It would mean more pumping for the crew—one of the most disliked tasks aboard ship—either until they could locate and plug the leak, or until they reached Callao and could have it attended to.

Rowntree ordered the lee bilge pump rigged, and watched until it sucked air. Three hours later he ordered the well sounded again, and Lester reported it dry as a bone. That was mysterious. Leaks don't usually come and go within the space of a few hours. You either have a leak or a tight ship. Rowntree had never known a ship that leaked occasionally.

He went below with the carpenter to see if he could locate any leak by its sound, but the ship seemed as tight as a drum. He went to his cabin to consider the matter, and had not been there long when one of the hands came down.

"Mr. Aguila's compliments, sir, and would you go on deck?" the man said.

Aguila was looking disturbed. He took Rowntree aside, out of the helmsman's hearing. "Captain Rowntree," he said, "I sent the men down to fill the scuttle-butts as usual. They reported that someone has bored holes in all the fresh water casks, and they are dry."

For a moment Rowntree didn't answer. That explained the water Lester had found. It did not explain why anyone aboard the ship would deliberately destroy the fresh water supply, on which their lives depended. Whoever had done it would suffer from thirst as much as the rest of them. It was the most stupid and illogical act Rowntree could imagine—so much so that he went down himself to inspect the damage before he would believe it. But there was no doubt about it. Holes had been deliberately bored in the casks, and they were bone dry. That left only the water in the scuttlebutts on deck, and there was not more of that than enough to serve for twenty-four hours.

ROWNTREE called for Lester, the carpenter. The job had probably been done with a brace and bitt, and the only such tools in the ship were, or should be, in the carpenter's gear. The two men went to the carpenter's shop, which Lester unlocked. The brace was in its proper place, and Lester was will-

ing to swear that it had been there since the ship sailed.

"You can see for yerself, sir," he said, pointing to the tallow with which all the tools were liberally annointed to protect them from rusting in the damp, corrosive sea air. "If any bloke 'ad used it, 'is 'ands woulda smeared the tallow. If 'e 'ad put fresh tallow on, we'd know, 'cause this ain't fresh tallow."

That was true enough. And there were no other drilling tools big enough to make the holes in the casks. There were large augers, but they were too big to have been used. Rowntree sent Lester below to repair the casks. Whoever had done the job, and for whatever obscure reason—it seemed as stupid, to Rowntree, as the apparent murder of the mate—the main thing now was that they must refill the casks before they could go on.

He went aft, not bothering to question any of the crew, and went into his cabin to enter the incident in the log. Kim came in, rather hesitantly. He noticed, in spite of the problems bedeviling him, how the fresh air and ample food had filled her out and brought color to her cheeks. For the first time it occurred to him that she was a singularly pretty girl, even in her pants and checkered shirt. He asked abruptly, "Kim—how old are you?"

"Twenty," she answered. "Why do you ask?"

Rowntree smiled. "Nothing but curiosity."

Kim said, "Ah Li just told me that all the fresh water is gone. Is that true?"

"Yes," Rowntree said. "I'm afraid it is. For some reason or other, there's someone aboard this ship who seems determined to make mischief. First the mate, now this. The trouble is, I can't understand what the reason is. It doesn't make sense."

"But there must be a reason," Kim answered. "People don't commit murders without any reason at all. That's why I came to see you."

Rowntree glanced up sharply, "Well?"

"I've been thinking about the time poor Mr. Fraken disappeared. I didn't think of it particularly until Ah Li told me about the water. I thought it was too much of a coincidence. When would the casks have been drilled?"

ROWNTREE thought for a moment. "It's hard to say when exactly. They were all right yesterday afternoon when the scuttlebutts were filled. They were presumably all right early this morning, when the well was sounded, for the ship was dry. I had the watch from midnight to four this morning, and I told Aguila there was no necessity to pump ship. So it must have been done sometime between then and now. But when, or by whom, I haven't the slightest idea—and I've little chance of finding out."

Kim was biting on her lower lips, her eyes half closed in thought. She said abruptly, "Did you ever suspect Mr. Aguila? You don't know much about him, do you?"

"No," Rowntree admitted. "But he has less reason than anyone else aboard to make trouble, since he is chiefly interested in getting himself and his fortune to New York as safely as possible. Also, I searched his cabin after Mr. Fraken was killed—or disappeared—and not only was there no weapon, or anything else suspicious, but nothing that he or anyone else could have used to bore holes. Of that I'm certain. Why do you ask, anyway?"

"Nothing, I suppose," Kim answered. "Except that I don't like him, and I can't help thinking he was the one who made the footsteps."

"Footsteps?"

She nodded. "Maybe you'll think I'm silly, but—are you a sound sleeper, Captain Rowntree?"

"All sailors are, I guess."

"Do you lock your door when you're asleep?"

"No. Only when I leave the cabin."

"Well, I remembered afterward that the night Mr. Fraken disappeared, I

heard that scuffling on deck, right over my cabin. A minute or two later I heard quick footsteps past my door twice, going and coming. I thought it was someone calling you—that's why I didn't think anything about it. Then I heard the footsteps again. They sounded like the same ones, only this time they were slower and louder. The first had been very light, like someone running on his toes, only I'm sure they were both made by the same person. The second time it was Mr. Aguila, to call you."

"Well?" Rowntree said, puzzled and a little impatient. "What has that got to do with Mr. Fraken, or Aguila, or the water casks?"

"This morning," Kim answered, "while you were asleep in your cabin and Mr. Aguila had the watch, I heard the footsteps again, the same way. I was half asleep, and they didn't rouse me at first. When they did, I got up and looked out. There was just the one lamp, turned low, in the saloon, and I couldn't see anything, but I'm sure someone was around. It wasn't Ah Li, for I knew he'd gone to bed a little earlier."

Rowntree frowned. "But I don't see what all this has to do with the mystery. You think you may have heard Aguila slip below for a minute while he was on watch, but how does that make Aguila suspicious, or connect him with the mystery?"

"I don't know," Kim admitted. "I just have a feeling that it has something to do with the mystery, I'm sure it was Mr. Aguila, and I think he wanted something in your cabin, while you were asleep, because that's the only time he could get into it. Anyway, I thought I'd tell you. Maybe you'd better lock your door when you're sleeping."

ROWNTREE thanked her, pulling the chart toward him as she went out. He had too many problems on his mind at the moment to take her suspicions very seriously. She might have heard the footsteps or she might have dreamed them, but whichever it was, he

couldn't see that they had any bearing on the case.

There was something sinister going on aboard the ship, and more might happen before they were done, but he had to have more practical grounds for suspecting, much less accusing, Aguila of such crimes than a girl's stories of mysterious footsteps. Besides, he needed Aguila until the ship reached Callao and he could get regular officers. There was no other man aboard the ship competent to serve. Possible—even probably—the murder of Fraken and the water cask business had some strange connection, but he could not see what it might be. He thought impatiently that he was a ship's captain, not a bloody detective. Until they could get the American consul aboard at Callao, and turn the business over to him, he could do nothing but keep his eyes peeled. The thing that disturbed him most was the possibility that among the rag-tag crowd Aguila had brought aboard there might be an insane man. As far as Rowntree could see, only an insane man would commit such deeds.

The nearest land to the *Pluto*, as Rowntree knew without looking at the chart, was the small group of islands known as the Revillagigedos, four specks of land scattered over the ocean, the nearest to the ship some six hundred miles off Mexico. He had never sighted them, but captains who had told him that they were volcanic, uninhabited, but with good water. If the wind held, he might make the nearest one by the following noon. If it didn't hold, they would have to go thirsty until they made it. He marked off his course and went topside to supervise as the ship was put on her new course. It would mean a delay, for it would take some time to fill the big casks, but he meant to take aboard only enough water to see him safely into Callao.

Aguila came over to him as he watched the men coiling down the lines after the change of course. The wind was holding steady, and the shift had only brought it onto the port beam.

"You know of some place where we can get more water, sir?" he asked anxiously.

Rowntree nodded. "The Revillagigedo Islands. I've heard there's fresh water there, if nothing else."

"I've heard of them," Aguila answered. "Our Mexican fishermen sometimes go that far. I have heard them say that the best water is to be found on the one farthest out from the mainland. Clarion is the name."

"I hope so," Rowntree said. "The next one, Roca Partida, is a good two hundred miles east, and I've no desire to waste another day's sailing. By the way, Mr. Aguila, you might pass the word around among the hands that if anything else mysterious happens aboard this ship, or if anything is tampered with, I shall have every man jack of the crew whipped raw as soon as we reach Callao."

"Would that be advisable, sir?" Aguila said doubtfully. "They are sullen and discontented now. Such a threat might drive them to some sort of desperate act—even mutiny, perhaps."

Rowntree did not like having his officers give him advice, particularly those who had come to the position accidentally, as Aguila had. He snapped, "See that the word is passed. I'll have no more nonsense aboard."

CLARION ISLAND was not an inviting-looking place. Approached from the west, it looked more like a rubble heap than anything else, but as the ship neared, Rowntree could see a sparse fringe of green along the shore, and presently made out, with his telescope, that the lower parts of the island were well covered with vegetation, and that there were convenient coves and beaches for landing. The chart showed deep water almost up to the shore, as is often the way with volcanic islands, but Rowntree did not believe in taking chances, and had a man in the chains with the lead when they were two miles off, while the hands rigged the fish tackle and got the anchor ready.

As the land drew closer, Rowntree studied it carefully through his glass, looking for a good anchorage near water. He felt a hand on his arm, and started.

"Didn't you say the island is uninhabited?" Kim asked. He had not heard her come up, bare-footed, behind him, and cursed his jumpiness. "I'm sure I saw something move, on those rocks above the trees."

He swung his glass in the direction she indicated. The ground above the tree line was rocky, and tangled with scrub and grass thickets. For a moment he thought he saw a movement among the rocks, but he could pick up nothing definite.

"There are probably mountain goats," he said. "Some kind of animals, anyway. Or maybe a fisherman who stopped for some purpose."

The leadsmen was getting bottom now. Rowntree knew from experience that such shores shelved steeply, and ordered the mainsail aback. The ship drifted gently into a small cove, and when he was a half mile from the shore, Rowntree signalled to let the anchor go. A cloud of birds wheeled up from the trees along the shore as the anchor cable roared out.

The cove was an ideal spot. It was deep, and the two points were rocky and forbidding, with surf breaking over them in great clouds of milk-white spray. Toward the center of the shore, the rocks turned to sand, making a steep beach against which the surf broke gently, losing its force as it swirled up the sand. That would make it simpler for the men, who were not experienced at handling boats. Toward the southern end of the beach a stream ran out, cutting a gully in the sand. It would be necessary for the men to take their casks a short distance up the creek, where there would be fresh pools. At its mouth the water would probably be brackish from the salt.

THE WHALEBOAT was swung out. Rowntree was uncertain whom to

send with the men. He decided on twenty of the strongest, four to pull the boat while the others filled and trundled the casks. Two of the four Mexicans, the Chinese Tom Sing, and the carpenter, he kept aboard where he could watch them, and where the carpenter could keep watch on the casks below to see that his repairs were sound.

After the things that had happened aboard, Rowntree had no intention of leaving the ship himself. He sent Aguila off with the boat.

"Keep 'em together, Mr. Aguila," he warned. "I doubt whether any of them would try to escape on this forsaken island, as they'd only be marooned here, but you never can tell. Keep four men at the boat, and bring off the casks as fast as you have a load, while the rest keep on filling and sending down the empty casks. Understand?"

Aguila nodded. "You need not fear, Captain. I shall handle them without difficulty."

Nevertheless, Rowntree felt nervous as he watched the boat ground on the beach. The men swarmed out, shouting and cheering to find themselves on dry land once more, and it seemed to take Aguila some time to collect them. Presently all but the four boat tenders moved off up the creek, disappearing in the woods, and Rowntree could hear them hollering and yahooping like a bunch of kids.

"I wish I could go with them," Kim said. "It would be a pleasure just to walk on dry land for an hour."

"You're safer here," Rowntree said. "Safer? Do you think there's any danger of—of anything?"

"After what's happened," Rowntree answered irritably, "I don't know what there's danger of. I don't want you sculling around alone with that bunch of hoodlums loose."

He kept glancing impatiently at the time. Aguila had been gone much longer than should have been necessary for him to find a suitable spot and start the men to work

Presently two of the Mexicans, who had been left with the whaleboat, went off up the stream. Rowntree thought he heard distant sounds of shouting. He was almost ready to go ashore himself when Aguila appeared, followed by several men scurrying casks in slings. In a short time the boat was loaded, and it shoved off.

“TELL Mr. Aguila he'll have to look sharper than this!” Rowntree called down to the Mexicans in the boat as the casks were swung aboard. One of them shrugged.

“Hard to find good place,” he answered as the boat shoved off for the return trip.

There were no more signs of Aguila or anyone else ashore. The shouts came again, distantly. Rowntree stormed impatiently back and forth, fuming.

There were heavy clouds to windward. If the wind shifted southeasterly, as it very probably would, they would be on a lee shore, for the cove was not deep enough to protect them from a gale, and it would be a difficult job working the ship out. They might even have to ride it out at anchor, rather than risk being blown ashore.

Kim called to him, “Captain—we've got company!”

He swung around. A small schooner was appearing over the northern headland, sliding slowly across the wind. He put his glass on her. She seemed to be Mexican, a fishing craft from one of the villages along the western Mexican coast, possibly. They sailed considerable distances. He could see only three men on her deck, but he watched her as she sailed, holding her course straight past the cove while the men aboard her studied the *Pluto*. The man at the helm waved, and Kim waved back.

“What is that little ship doing out here?” she asked.

“Fisherman, probably.” Rowntree was still examining the schooner. He noticed that she had gun ports, and that on the deck around two of them there were piles of fishing nets and gear that might pos-

sibly conceal guns. His own ship had mounted half a dozen twelve-pounder smooth bore guns while on the China run, and still carried boaring nets. But he had sent the guns ashore for the run to San Francisco, for though the China coast swarmed with pirates, piracy was unheard of along the western coasts of America, and the guns were heavy and interfered with the handling of the ship.

The schooner, however, did not appear to be interested in the *Pluto*. She crossed the mouth of the bay and presently disappeared, heading southwesterly. Rowntree breathed a sigh of relief and turned back to the beach.

He saw Aguila come running down to the boat and climb in, motioning to the four men to shove off. The boat carried no casks, and there was none on the beach. Rowntree waited anxiously until the boat was alongside. Aguila clambered up breathlessly.

“IT'S TROUBLE with the hands, sir!” he panted. “They've quit. They won't handle the casks, and they say they are not going back to the ship.”

“What the devil do the fools want to do?” Rowntree roared. “Stay ashore and rot?”

“They've found wild fruit—cocoanuts, bananas, yams—and the woods are alive with game. They've decided that they'd rather stay here. You'd better go ashore and put some sense in them, sir. I can't handle them. They're all up the stream, in a pool, bathing.”

He added, as Rowntree cursed, “It was not advisable to threaten them yesterday, as you ordered me to, with the whipping. They are afraid they will all be lashed anyway, when they reach Callao, and they're determined not to return to the ship and give you the opportunity.”

“The fools!” Rowntree snarled. “Take the deck, Mr. Aguila. I'm going ashore to put some sense in their heads!”

He went below, beckoning to Kim to follow him, and led her to his cabin. Anything said in the saloon was audible on deck, through the skylight.

"Can you use a gun, Kim?" he asked abruptly.

"A little," she answered uncertainly. "I learned up at the diggings."

"I've got to go ashore," Rowntree said. "It's the only way to get the hands back. I don't want to take a chance with Aguila. As far as I know, he's all right, but I want someone I can trust to watch the ship. The only people I can trust are you and Ah Li. He's handy enough with a knife, but he's afraid of guns—won't even touch one. I'm going to tell him to keep watch with you. If the slightest thing suspicious happens, I want you to fire the gun three or four times—understand?"

She nodded, taking the weapon he offered her. He had an extra gun in his desk, which he took. He hesitated a moment, looking at the girl. It seemed unfair to place so much responsibility on her shoulders.

"You don't mind?" he asked. "You're not scared?"

She grinned a little. "Not too much, and as long as it's light. You won't be away very long, will you?"

"A half hour—an hour, perhaps. No more. I'll be back long before dark."

He patted her shoulder and followed her topside, to speak to Ah Li, who grinned and fingered his knife. It was, as Rowntree knew, a deadly weapon, up to thirty feet or so. Then he slid into the boat, and was pulled ashore.

He noticed, as he reached the beach, that the weather was becoming more threatening. They could certainly look for a southeasterly gale before morning.

HE HAD no need to ask directions, to find his crew. He could hear them yelling and cat-calling a short distance up the stream. He followed it through the cool, fragrant tropical woods—the island was close to the equator—and came out at a place where the stream foamed over a ten-foot cliff and made a deep pool. In this the men were splashing and paddling, or lying along the bank.

Rowntree saw immediately what was the real trouble, and realized that Aguila had not spoken the truth. The men were not mutinying, they were drunk. There were empty bottles scattered around, and Rowntree recognized them as a brand of cheap rum popular at Mama Tamale's. So the liquor had come from there!

It was a safe bet that Aguila had brought it with him, and had brought it ashore. Rowntree even saw how that had been done. The top of one of the water casks had been knocked off, and there were some full bottles still in it. At some opportune time, Aguila had gone below, taken the liquor from the large chest he had brought aboard, and stowed it in one of the water casks to be taken ashore. That meant, of course, that Aguila had known the casks were to be used. It meant a lot of other things, all hinging on Aguila, and all obviously part of a large-scale plot. As these things flashed through Rowntree's mind, he was tempted to race for the ship. But the ship was no use without the crew.

He had a gun in his pocket, a handspike, and a length of cord. He strode in among the men, slashing at their naked bodies right and left, making them howl and hop. He was between them and their clothes, and like most civilized—or at least semi-civilized—men, they were at a disadvantage without their clothing. They jumped frantically around, stumbling on thorns and sharp stones and yelping as they tried to avoid the lash. When Rowntree had them ready to listen to him he said, "Well, men? What's all this about?"

No one answered, at first. Then the Irishman, O'Brien, muttered, "Mr. Aguila gave us the rum and told us we were to take our time. 'Enjoy yourselves, men,' he says, 'for 'tis precious little enjoyment ye will get aboard the ship, or when ye reach Callao, for the captain intends to have every mother's son o' ye locked up for the rest o' your natural lives.' So he said, sir, and so we believe."

"Then you're stupid fools!" Rowntree

snapped. "Aguila's got a little scheme up his sleeve. He's after the ship and what's aboard her, and if he has his way, you'll all stay here and rot for the rest of your natural lives!"

They didn't believe him. Aguila, having provided the liquor, was a pretty good fellow. Anyway, they were all half seas over, and too drunk to realize the truth if they saw it. Rowntree cursed them and argued with them, but he could not move them. There was only one thing left, and that was to force them aboard at the gun's point. That meant no more water. He told them so.

"You're going back aboard," he said grimly. "We haven't taken more than a few gallons of water yet, so you will just have to go thirsty until we reach Callao. That's your fault, not mine, and you remember it when your throats stick together from thirst. Now come—"

HE BROKE off. From seaward came three sharp reports, followed by three or four more and a shriek. Rowntree hesitated a moment. Then he turned and ran for the shore. The men would have to wait. They could not go very far, on the island, in any case. What was happening on the ship was the most important thing.

He reached the beach and stopped short. The whaleboat was gone. Sprawled on the beach were the bodies of two of the tenders, knifed to death from behind. The other two—the Mexicans—had evidently taken their comrades by surprise, killed them and made off with the boat. Another part of the plan.

On the ship he could see a figure running and waving, and halfway between ship and shore the head of a swimmer bobbed. Someone—it looked like Aguila—appeared at the rail and fired a few shots at the head, missing. The running figure started up the main shrouds, and Aguila shot at it. It toppled off into the sea. Beyond the bay, the schooner had reappeared and was coming in fast. Instead of three men on her deck, there were fifteen or twenty. Aguila had

sprung a nice little trap, and it had all worked out perfectly.

There was nothing Rowntree could do, for the moment. The ship was far out of pistol range. He waited for the swimmer, and presently recognized Kim. As he ran down to meet her she pulled herself ashore and collapsed, gasping. Blood ran from a wound in her arm. Rowntree carried her up the beach and made her comfortable.

"What happened?" he asked when she could speak. "What's going on?"

"Aguila's taken the ship," she answered breathlessly. "He had a gun. He took me by surprise. First he went below for a moment. Then he strolled up behind me and suddenly pushed the gun against me and took mine away. He was too quick for me. Ah Li saw him and came running, and Aguila shot him dead. Then the little Englishman, Lester, came up and tried to help me, and Aguila and one of the Mexicans started to chase him. The Mexicans were all in with Aguila. He shot me when I jumped."

Rowntree nodded. "So I see. Well, I've been a fool, I reckon. It's all as simple as daylight now. He had the whole thing planned even before he came aboard."

"He told me a few things," Kim said, becoming more composed. "I was right about the footsteps. He didn't dare to bring a gun aboard, but he did bring a tool to make holes in the water casks. He hid it in your cabin—in one of the drawers under your bunk. Tom Sing killed Mr. Fraken by slipping up a half hour before he was due on watch, twisting a thin cord around his neck from behind. He took Mr. Fraken's gun before he dropped him overboard. The only one near was one of the Mexicans, at the wheel. Then Aguila slipped below, into your cabin, and hid the gun in the drawer, too. He figured that would be one place you wouldn't look if you searched for it. Those were the footsteps I heard. The second time I heard them, he must have gone down to get the boring tool and the gun."

THE MEN appeared just then. They stared at Rowntree and Kim, and at the bodies of their comrades, and the sight seemed to sober them somewhat. Rowntree glared at them disgustedly.

"Well, men," he snapped, "Aguila's taken the ship, thanks to you. And he hasn't any intention of sending you a polite invitation to go back aboard for a pleasure cruise. He's brought his own crew with him."

He pointed to the schooner, which was rounding to under the stern of the *Pluto*. She moved inshore of the larger vessel and anchored. Then a boat put off, carrying a jabbering crowd of tough-looking bandits across to the *Pluto*.

It was hardly necessary to argue with the men. They could see for themselves, and they set up angry shouts as they realized what the so kindly Aguila had done.

"It'll do no good to curse," Rowntree growled. "We're all in a fine pickle. We've no boat, and no tools to make ourselves a raft. Even if we had, those cutthroats are armed with rifles and would drop us all before we could board the ship."

"We'll do anything you say, sir," O'Brien said with much more deference than he had yet shown. "And if I ever git me mitts on that scalawag Aguila, he'll regret the day he was born, he will that!"

"All right," Rowntree answered shortly. "We can do nothing until it gets dark. Unless I miss my guess, they'll plunder the ship before they leave her. They'll probably be drunk most of the night. That's the time we will have to do whatever we can. Now the first thing is to build a fire on the beach here."

IT WAS nearly dusk. The breeze had died out, but the weather was ominous. If Aguila noticed the danger, he did nothing about it. The pirates were already at work. They had, as Rowntree expected, broken into the lazarette, and were drinking down his rum and whisky as fast as they could gulp it. Aguila, a hard-headed man, would probably re-

main sober himself to see that nothing went wrong, but he undoubtedly realized that he would get no work out of his confederates until they had had their fun. He was probably planning to sail at dawn, and was content to let them make the most of the night.

The whole scheme, as Rowntree now saw it, was absurdly simple, and logical. Aguila knew that Major Lindsey and his associates were gathering a huge store of gold. He knew that they would try to ship it by sea, and only by land as a last resort. He also knew that they could not send it by sea as long as there were no crews to be got. Aguila himself could round up a crew, by his own devious methods, whenever he wanted one. But it would naturally suit him to wait until the last possible moment. That moment would be when he knew that Lindsey was desperate and intended to send the gold overland if he could not get a ship.

Rowntree remembered the girl Florida, slipping so silently among the tables with her broad smile and pleasant words. No doubt she had been his spy, taking back to him the crumbs of information she gathered. She had been there when Lindsey told him that, if the *Pluto* did not sail, he would send the gold overland. Right after that, Aguila had offered to get a crew for Rowntree—provided that he was taken along. The rest was simple enough, for a man who knew something of ships and the sea.

To include his own accomplice among the crew was easy. To kill the mate in order to get a weapon would be easy, too, when the only other witness would be one of his own men. The idea of hiding the boring tool and the stolen gun in Rowntree's own cabin was ingenious, but not particularly risky for a man who is gambling for millions. Any seaman knows that the average captain leaves his cabin unlocked when he is sleeping in it. He knows that captains, like other sailors, have a stock of shore-going clothes which they never touch aboard ship. Hiding the gun and the drill among his shore going clothes would make them

safe enough as long as the voyage lasted.

NO SHIP can go without drinking water. Provided Rowntree suspected nothing, Aguila could compel him to land at the nearest point of land he chose, by selecting the proper time to empty the fresh water casks. As long as he knew where the ship was in relation to Clarion Island, it was only a matter of timing, to insure having the ship put in there for more water. No doubt the schooner, warned by land couriers, had been lying around Clarion Island for days—possibly weeks—awaiting the *Pluto's* arrival. The rest—putting the men ashore for water, getting them drunk, and getting Rowntree to go ashore—was merely a logical sequence of events. If anything had gone wrong, no doubt Aguila planned to make a stand right there, with the aid of the schooner, and take the ship by force if necessary. This way was simpler and safer, that was all.

Simple enough all the way through, if you had the key to it. Rowntree guessed that Aguila planned to transfer the gold to the schooner, and scuttle the *Pluto*. It occurred to him that Aguila might not want to leave him, Kim and the crew alive, as witnesses—in which case he would come back and hunt them down like so many wild hogs. The more Rowntree thought about it, the more certain he was that Aguila would not permit the chance of some vessel putting in and rescuing them. His own neck would not be safe as long as they lived, and they could live indefinitely on the island, with its abundance of food and water.

The wind began to rise, toward midnight, as Rowntree had expected. The swells breaking on the beach got heavier. There were plenty of lights aboard the *Pluto*, but only one aboard the schooner, although there was at least one watchman aboard. It was possible to hear the shouts and laughter of the pirates as they looted the ship. Rowntree wondered whether it would be possible for him and some of the crew to swim out to the

Pluto on the chance of recapturing the ship while Aguila's gang was celebrating. But he felt that Aguila was too smart a man to allow all watch to be abandoned, and when he questioned his crew he found only two of them capable of swimming more than fifteen feet. Kim was the exception, but he had no intention of putting her into any more danger.

There was only one possibility, and it was a very slim one. He was pretty certain that the schooner carried guns. If they could win the schooner, they might retake the *Pluto*. The more he thought of that, lying in the sand beside the blazing fire, the more it seemed to him that that was the only plan with any chance of success. The problem was, how to capture the schooner.

He glanced doubtfully at the men. They were sprawled around the fire, hungry and tired. They were obviously dismayed by the turn of events, and would have little love for Aguila after what he had done to them. But they had no reason to love Rowntree either, as he had forcibly removed them from where they wanted to be, compelled them to work hard, and was taking them to a place where they had no desire to be. He wondered how far he could trust them.

“DO YOU men want to stay ashore here, either for the rest of your days or until Aguila comes hunting you down like hogs—as he certainly will?” Rowntree asked. There was a growl among the men. He went on: “I’ve a plan that may possibly regain the ship for us. But you men will have to fight, and you will have to use your heads as well as your fists. And let me say right now that anything Aguila said to you about being jailed or whipped in Callao was part of his scheme. I give you my word that when we reach there, I will try my best to recruit a new crew, and see to it that you are shipped back to San Francisco, if that is where you want to be. You’ve no cause to like me or help me, but right now it’s your cause as much as mine, so make your choice.”

"You may count on us, sir," O'Brien growled. "Just pass the word, and tell what it is you're after wanting."

Rowntree nodded. He said, "The wind is blowing hard, toward that point of land to the north. I propose to swim out and cut the schooner's anchor cable. I have noticed that it is rope. I don't think there's more than one man aboard, possibly two or three. But there might be more, and if those aboard the *Pluto* notice the schooner drifting, they are likely to take after her in boats. The schooner will drift aground, and you are to board her at once, and as quietly as possible. Knock anyone you see on the head, but see that there's no killing, unless they start it first. After that, we'll see. With luck, we'll be able to get her off the shore, and then we shall have a fair chance of retaking our own ship—or if not, we shall at least have a vessel under us with which to escape. Is that clear to you?"

When they nodded, he turned to Kim. "Stay clear until you see that the schooner is ours," he said.

"Then come aboard. Understand?"

"Yes," she answered, and thrust her hand out. "Good luck, Captain. Good luck!"

Rowntree stripped off all but his pants, made sure that the sharpest knife among the crew was secure around his neck by a lanyard, and moved up the beach a short distance, so that he was out of the glow of the fire. Then he slid into the water and began to swim. He was a good swimmer.

The water was warm enough, but there was a heavy swell running which sometimes made him swallow salt water, and he knew that there were sharks, stingrays and other unpleasant forms of sea life abounding in these waters. The presence of the ships, with their inevitable garbage, would attract such creatures. He thrust the thought away, setting his teeth, and swam on.

IT WAS a moonless night, with heavy clouds. Outside the bay he had no

doubt that a considerable sea would be running. It would be no easy task to work the *Pluto* out, even if the wind did not increase, as it probably would.

He was pretty winded when at last he reached the barnacle-roughened side of the schooner. Like all her type, she had a low free-board, so that he could reach up to the chain-plates, if he wished, and swing himself aboard. He hung on for a while, getting his breath, and then pulled himself up, squatting on the channel and supporting himself against a backstay. He raised his head cautiously above the bulwark and looked about.

The schooner was flush-decked. Forward of the tiller there was a companion-way hatch and a small skylight, and a lantern was hung in the main rigging by way of a deck light. In its glow he could see a figure stretched out on a blanket by the skylight. He had a bottle at his side, but he appeared to be sleeping. Beyond the schooner loomed the black shape of the *Pluto*, with several lights along her deck, and in the cabin ports. The noises of singing and shouting were dying down, and he supposed that the pirates were sleeping off their celebration before getting busy at dawn transferring the gold.

Rowntree hesitated. It might be a good idea to put the sleeping watchman out of commission and douse the light before he carried out his plan. But the man might not be sleeping, and he wanted the cable cut before anyone aboard the *Pluto* knew there was anything wrong. He slid back into the water and swam alongside the ship to the bows. At one point, as he struck out, his leg scraped along the side and was gashed by the razor-sharp barnacles, though he hardly noticed the pain at the time.

The anchor cable, when he found it, was slimy and hard, but there was a considerable strain on it as the wind and tide pressed against the ship. The tide, as he knew, was coming in, so that there would be a fair chance of getting the schooner off again before she got too hard aground. He sawed at the rope cable, hanging onto the part above the

cut to prevent it from whipping too much. It parted suddenly, almost tearing his arm loose, and he felt the ship swing, and begin to drift.

It took a good deal of strength to swing himself up to the bobstay. His ears were pricked for possible shouts of alarm, but none came. The parting cable had seemed to make a great deal of noise, but he supposed that the noises of the ships, with the wind and the working rigging, had drowned it.

C LIMBING cautiously to the jibboom and on to the foc'sle, Rowntree kept his eyes glued on the man aft. He had his knife ready—he had left his gun with Kim, partly for her protection and partly because it would be nothing but a nuisance while he was swimming—and he crept soundlessly along in the shadow of the high gunwale. The man stirred. He half sat up, rubbed his eyes with his forearm, and took a long pull at the bottle. Then he lay down again, rolling over on his belly. Rowntree reached up for the lantern and put it out. He set it down gently, and worked his way by feel to the skylight.

His fumbling hand touched the man's foot. The man reeked of fish, sweat and some kind of powerful liquor, but it was no time to be squeamish. Crawling on hands and knees until he was alongside the sleeper, Rowntree felt lightly for his throat, and suddenly threw his full weight onto the man's body, and all his strength into his hands.

The man surged and thrashed under him, choking and gasping. After a while he went limp, shuddered convulsively, and was still. Rowntree got up. He hoped he had not killed the fellow, for he had no desire to kill men in their sleep, but he was not too worried. The man would have killed him, in his sleep or at any other convenient time, without the least hesitation.

He was startled, when he stood up, to find how far the schooner had drifted from the *Pluto*. Pushed by the wind and the tide, she was sliding along so fast

that she almost seemed to be under sail. Ashore, he could see the fire blazing. He hoped that the men had obeyed his instructions and were waiting for him. He hoped also that the schooner would drift ashore where he expected her to. If any chance current drove her toward the point, she would go on the rocks and pound herself to pieces.

He went to the waist, where the piles of nets and canvas were, and investigated them. They were, as he had suspected, guns. As far as he could tell by the feel, they were ancient, muzzle-loading affairs of brass, fired by flintlock and lanyard, but they would be fairly effective against a vessel entirely unarmed save for rifles and revolvers.

The schooner grounded with a grating noise that set his teeth on edge. Her masts creaked, and she swung around somewhat, so that her starboard quarter was to the beach and her bows pointed almost directly at the *Pluto*.

Rowntree whistled softly, and heard an answering whistle. Then he heard splashing, and figures loomed, swishing along shoulder deep. One of them stumbled into a hole and went under. He came up choking and yelping. One of the others grabbed his wrist and pulled him upright.

"Quiet!" Rowntree growled. He counted the men as they clambered aboard. When all sixteen were on the deck he whistled again, and in a moment Kim appeared, swimming sturdily. He reached down to help her, and she scrambled up, laughing.

"**A**LL RIGHT, men," Rowntree said. "Search the ship first. And remember to be quiet. Bring me any firearms you find."

He himself went down to the after cabin with Kim. It was very dirty, having a filthy plank table amidships and settees along the sides. There were no separate cabins. A door in the forward bulkhead was locked. He found an axe and forced it. There was a keg of powder inside, a keg of old-fashioned musket

balls, and some other odd gear, including wads and rammers. These he sent up on deck, but he found that, with the ship settled on the sand, the swells were breaking over her side, so he kept the powder in the cabin for the time being.

There was an arms rack on the bulkhead with one rifle in it, but he could find no cartridges and the gun was of poor quality and doubtful safety. No doubt the better arms were aboard the *Pluto*. As he was completing his investigation of the cabin, with Kim, someone came clattering down the companionway ladder.

"There's a lot of shouting and huller-ballooin' going on aboard the *Pluto*, sir," he reported.

Rowntree hurried up. The wind carried the sounds down to the schooner, and he could hear the shouts of alarm. He doubted whether *Aguila* would immediately suspect what had happened. Probably he would think that the schooner had parted her cable and gone ashore by accident. Certainly he would not be able to see her, but he would have a boat out before long, to search for her. There was no time to lose.

A small dinghy was chocked up forward of the mainmast. Rowntree had this put over, and loaded the other anchor into it. He selected O'Brien and another man for the task of rowing it out as far as the cable would reach. When they returned to report that it was placed, he put the others on the capstan, to heave it around. The schooner shifted a little, but not much. He had the cable brought up as tight as it could be made, and held it so for ten minutes. With the tide rising, the wind piling water into the cove, and the schooner prevented from driving further up the beach, it would not be long before she could be kedged free. But the *Pluto's* boat might find her in the meantime, and even though the pirates might be outnumbered, they had firearms.

While he was waiting, Rowntree set two men to keep a watch for the boat, and got the others busy clearing away

the nets and debris from the guns. He examined the tackles as well as he could by feel, cast the lee gun loose and had it run inboard and loaded. No one, including himself, knew much about laying such old weapons, but at close range not much skill would be needed, and he saw that plenty of musket balls were rammed into the muzzle.

By the time that was done, he could notice a perceptible motion to the schooner, which meant that she was lifting from the sand. He sent the men back to the capstan to heave it around, and felt like cheering as the schooner slid off the beach and came up to the anchor, pitching gently in the sweeping swells.

IT HAD been Rowntree's plan, if the schooner's loss was not discovered by *Aguila's* men, to remain at anchor and on guard until dawn, so that he could see how the land lay and have a better chance of standing clear of the bay. But by the confusion of sounds and bobbing lights aboard the *Pluto*, he knew that they were searching for the schooner. It was a risky chance, to try to get under way and stand out of the cove when he was almost on top of a lee shore, but he had no other choice. Fortunately, he reflected, a schooner is much handier in such matters than a square-rigged ship, and her big fore-and-aft sails would give her a better chance of slipping out from under the lee.

He took the wheel himself as he ordered the jib, flying jib and mainsail run up. The headsails went up quickly and almost soundlessly, save for a light fluttering, but the mainsail made an unearthly screeching as the gaff slithered up the mast, and the canvas made a thunderous racket as soon as the wind began to fill it. The schooner began to dance and swing. Rowntree turned his face to the wind, moving it from side to side like a hound sniffing a scent, to get its exact point. It was about south-southeast, and he thought there would be a fair chance of making it.

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There was a shout from forward. "Boat close aboard, sir! Close on the port bow!"

At the same moment there was a confusion of shouts and hails from out of the darkness. Rowntree cursed, cupping his hands and bawling against the wind,

"Sheet home your headsails, there! Look lively! Bring 'em up short as you can! Tail onto that mainsheet, the rest of you! Run her aboard lively now! Lively does it!"

As the sails were sheeted hard up, the schooner heeled, payed off, swinging her bows in toward the shore, and surged ahead, breaking out the anchor. The cable had already been shortened, and it was run up to the hawsepipe, ready to let go instantly in case of an emergency. This was the worst and most crucial part of the maneuver. Rowntree had to let the schooner's bow pay off toward the shore until the wind took hold of her sails and gave her headway. If he tried, as instinct made him, to steer her away from the shore as soon as she began to

move, she would merely come up to the wind, get in stays, and drift stern-first onto the shore.

He held his breath, feeling the ship by the pressure on the wheel, balancing in his mind her forward speed against the nearness of the shore, and expecting every instant to feel her grate on the beach. She did grate, but at that moment he spun the wheel, bringing her head up, and with steerage way on and the sails closehauled, she slid splendidly across the wind and away from the shore.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rowntree caught a momentary glimpse of the *Pluto's* white-painted whaleboat, jammed with men. He saw a red spark, and heard a cry from somewhere forward, but he had no time to worry about casualties. The schooner was fast picking up speed, and heeled over to the wind in fine shape when her fore sail was set. Rowntree let her come up a little, setting his course by the *Pluto's* lights, and sent her surging out of the bay.

When he was two miles out, and well

to windward of the bay, he put her up into the wind and let her drift. The water was too deep for anchoring. He sent the hands below, then, to get whatever food and drink they could find, and some sleep. They would need it in the morning. He himself stayed by the wheel, where Kim brought him some cold meat and hard bread and a bottle of thin red wine.

He could see the lights of the *Pluto*, and he watched them grimly. He wondered whether Aguila would try to run for it now, or wait until morning. He was prepared for whatever the man might do.

IT WAS shortly after dawn when the *Pluto's* sails showed. Rowntree watched anxiously, afraid that Aguila might bungle the job of bringing her out of the bay, but Aguila knew his job and handled her as well as Rowntree could have done. At any other time, Rowntree would have admired a nice piece of seamanship, but he was not in the mood for it now.

He glanced over the schooner. She was considerably lower than the *Pluto*, which meant that it would be easy for those aboard the ship to fire down on him. But the schooner was more handy than the ship, especially close-hauled. Both the antique guns were loaded and ready, and Rowntree had given the men what instruction he could in handling them. Rested and fed, and with some of the potent liquor under their belts, the men were ready for anything. Kim, who had brought off the revolver with her, was sitting cross-legged on the cabin hatch, cleaning it. When she was through, she handed it to Rowntree.

"You'd better get below," he said.

She looked up at him, laughing a little, her hair windblown and her cheeks flushed. "Can't I stay and watch?" she begged.

"You can not, young lady," Rowntree answered. "Skip below—and stay there until I tell you to come up. That's orders."

She went reluctantly, and he watched her go with a grin. She was a fine, brave girl, he thought. The sort that would make a good wife for a sailor. But there wasn't much time for such ideas just then. The *Pluto* was coming up fast. She was a fine sight, even with only her courses and topsails set. Rowntree had never seen her like this before, under way in a stiff breeze. He had not realized what splendid lines she had. He hated the thought of firing at her. The musket balls could do no harm to her hull, and he had ordered the men not to fire at that, but at her rigging. The only hope was to cut up her rigging and bring her to with as much confusion as possible.

He was astonished, a few minutes later, to see her suddenly go about, heading almost due north and running free, while the topgallants were set. Aguila was afraid of his guns, and was going to run away from him. That was something Rowntree hadn't thought of. He had taken it for granted that Aguila's first idea would be to run him down and destroy him and the rest of the crew. Before the wind, the *Pluto* had much the advantage, and she would soon outsail the schooner.

Rowntree spun the wheel and sent the schooner boiling in chase, setting gaff topsails and every staysail he could, but it was clear that the ship was making the better of it.

THREE hours later, again to Rowntree's surprise, the *Pluto* shifted due east. She was about five miles ahead of the schooner by then, and apparently Aguila thought he was safe in heading for the Mexican coast, but Rowntree knew better, for now the schooner had the advantage again. He changed course to intercept the *Pluto*, and began to draw up on her.

In another hour Aguila saw his mistake and headed north again. But the wind was becoming lighter, and shifting towards the west, so he returned soon to the easterly course and crowded on more sail. He had made too many shifts,

however, and the gap between the two vessels was closing fast.

Rowntree saw a puff of smoke from the *Pluto's* stern. Something slammed into the deck near him and sent a chip of wood flying. A few minutes later there was another puff. One of the hands groaned and fell on his back. Rowntree yelled to his men to take cover, and crouched down behind the wheel. The *Pluto* was beyond revolver shot, and he had only six bullets, so that there was no sense wasting ammunition.

Aguila's crowd evidently had plenty of it. Bullets came pattering over, and two of Rowntree's men were wounded. Rowntree shifted course to bring the port side against the *Pluto*, and ordered all his men over to the shelter of the port bulwarks. That gave them protection, but it also concentrated the pirates' fire on him. A bullet winged him in the calf of his leg, and another creased his shoulder, but he held on grimly. He could see the usually stolid Aguila shaking his fist and all but dancing with rage on the *Pluto's* poop, and he grinned.

"You'll dance on the end of a rope, if I get my hands on you!" he roared, although Aguila couldn't possibly hear.

Aguila and another man began to talk together. The shooting stopped, and Aguila waved something white. A flag of truce, which might mean he wanted to parley, or might mean some sort of treachery—most likely the latter.

Rowntree called down to O'Brien, who was in charge of the port gun, "Stand by, there. Give her all the elevation you can and try to aim at the poop."

"Ay ay, sir," O'Brien answered, and spat on his hands.

Rowntree conned the schooner in closer. He did not want to get too close, for if he did, the gun would not elevate high enough to shoot above the *Pluto's* hull. The two ships were drawing together. Aguila cupped his hands and shouted something, but Rowntree could not understand it. Aguila motioned for the schooner to come alongside, but Rowntree held his course and waited.

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Aguila shouted again, and this time Rowntree caught a few words that sounded like "Share the gold!" Almost at the same moment a man suddenly appeared beside Aguila and raised a rifle, aiming at Rowntree.

It happened too fast for Rowntree to duck. There was a thunderous roar and the schooner reeled. Something slammed into Rowntree's shoulder like a hard fist, turning him half around, and a great cloud of smoke drifted around him. He cursed savagely, clinging to the wheel for support. When the smoke blew away he saw that the poop rail of the *Pluto* was shattered. Aguila was shrieking and clutching at his wrist, and the *Pluto's* helmsman was draped over the splintered wheel, while the ship was falling off.

"Let 'em have another, O'Brien!" Rowntree yelled.

The gun was already run in. It was loaded and run out again. Painfully Rowntree spun the wheel to bring the schooner up a point, and the gun belched again, making an ear-splitting racket. Yard and sail came thundering down and Rowntree could hear screams and curses from the *Pluto* even before the smoke cleared. When it did, he saw that the ship was in hopeless confusion, and that someone else was waving a white cloth frantically.

There was no mistaking the sincerity of the gesture this time, but Rowntree did not want to take chances. He waited until the gun was loaded and ready again before he ran in close, and yelled across for the pirates to line up at the rail with their hands up.

IT WAS two painful weeks later that the *Pluto* worked her way slowly into Callao. Captain Rowntree was a gaunt wreck, hollow-cheeked, unshaven, bandaged and patched. He had been on deck practically constantly throughout the two weeks, for there was no one to replace him, and he did not dare to go below. He had had a chair lashed to the deck near the wheel, and he had practically lived in it for fourteen days,

while the injured rigging was repaired.

The surviving pirates he had put aboard their schooner, after heaving the guns overboard and taking all their weapons and ammunition. The dead ones he had heaved overboard, along with the guns. Well, he had made it, and the gold was safe. Now he craved forty-eight hours' sleep before he took up the business of finding a new crew and starting off once more for New York.

As the ship crawled toward her berth, in tow, O'Brien and the others came cautiously aft and gathered around the mainmast. Kim had brought up a tray of food for Rowntree, and she hesitated beside him, half scared.

"Well, men?" Rowntree said irritably. "What is it? You've nothing to worry about. I gave you my word you'd be taken care of. You've served me well, and I'll see that you go back to San Francisco in style, with gold in your pockets. What do you want?"

O'Brien touched his forelock. "Beggin' your honor's pardon, sir. Me and the boys have kind of been through the mill with you and the lady, one way and t'other. We came aft to say that we'd be proud to stay aboard and finish the job, sir."

"Eh?" Rowntree exclaimed, astonished. Then he grinned a little. "Well, men, all I can say is that I'll be proud to have you, and you won't regret it."

He nodded, and they shuffled forward, talking among themselves. Rowntree glanced up at Kim, whose eyes were very bright.

"Well, Miss Kim," he said, "you were included in the offer to be shipped back, you know. What do you have to say,"

"I—I think you're insulting, Captain Rowntree," she answered in a low voice. "You know what I wish?"

"No," Rowntree said. "But I know what I wish. I wish this damned wing of mine wasn't crippled. I have an idea it would fit around your waist like the parrals round the mast."

"Eat your dinner and hush up!" Kim laughed.



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(Continued from page 101)

The woman tucked her titian locks snugly beneath her blue velvet turban. When the man donned a heavy overcoat they departed without further talk. I could hear the car leave the garage.

THE face of the man who lay in the casket was as white as chalk. The feeble, flickering light from the lamp played across his pallid features. His countenance wore a mask of death!

Slowly, his eyes began to open! I stood almost petrified, staring. Then my feet carried me back automatically.

"Ye gods!" I said.

To my further amazement, the man sat up, bracing himself with his hands.

"Don't be alarmed, please," he assured me. "It's the living you've got to watch. Anyway, I'm not as dead as I look." After a pause, he said, "Let me explain. That woman is my wife. The man is not her brother, as I heard her tell you; he is her boy friend. He wants her—and my money!" He laughed. "He can have her, but not the money. They really think I'm dead, because I fixed it with Ed Ritner, the undertaker, who is a good friend of mine. He brought the casket, fixed me up, put some dope on my face, and told Ella—that's my wife—that I was a goner. He told her I died of typhoid, so that no one would come too close. I wanted to see just what would happen if I was to die.

"No, friend, that bird is not her husband. He works at the Wakefield Bank, and he has the key to my deposit vault. Got it from Ella. They've gone for my money now, but they're coming back for their suitcases. They also had a scheme worked out to tack the murder on the first person who came along. You were that one!" He gave a chuckle. "We'll see what happens when they come back. Just make out you skipped, and we'll catch them carrying out their plan. Will you do as I suggest?"

I nodded.

"You write a note telling them that you had to go," he said, "and leave

it on the stand in the living room."

I did as he requested.

"When they come, I'll lie down, and you hide in that clothes closet. That man is a scoundrel! His real name is—"

The crescendo of a motor interrupted him. The man settled back in the casket, and I hid myself in the closet.

VOICES told us when the couple had entered the house.

"Russ! The man has gone!"

The man came in. "Maybe it's for the best," he said. "Now we can take all the money. We're safe now."

He walked into the bedroom and, standing before the man in the casket, lit a cigarette from one of the candles.

"There's twenty thousand berries you'll never see again, Ked Burton," he exclaimed.

Like a flash, the man in the casket sprang up, snatching the money and covering the thief with a revolver.

"You rat! I knew this was coming. You can have her," he pointed to his wife, "but not this money!"

Ked Burton's wife stood speechless, horror-stricken. Burton leaped out of the casket, but I slipped in front of the man who called himself Lynch. He was unaware that I had heard his wife call him Russ. I held my gun leveled at him.

"I heard all you said, Buddy," I began. "I've spent a rather interesting evening—at your expense."

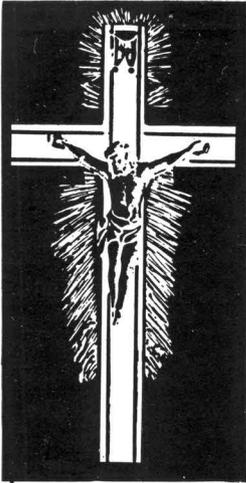
The astonished pair drew back in speechless amazement.

Burton, who was standing behind me with his gun also pointed at Lynch, whispered. "His name isn't Lynch—it's Eric Thorpe!"

"What?" I stammered. "Just the bird I want—for the murder of his wife!"

Thorpe's beady eyes darted from me to the woman, then back. "You're mistaken, brother," he said. "My name is Lynch—Sergeant Lynch of the State Police. Don't believe Burton, because—"

Not until I had him safely manacled in the car he drove did I tell my prisoner that I was Sergeant Lynch!



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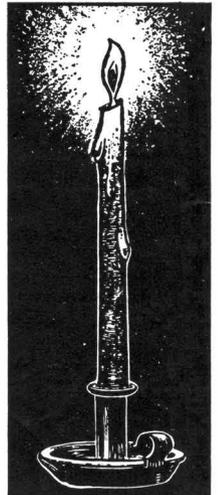
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Fig. 4. Seal of Love Believed to make owner much beloved and defeat enemies.



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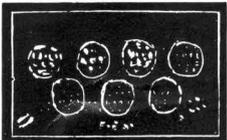


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